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Outreach: A Future Role for Special Schools in Ireland

Special schools in Ireland are currently operating within a political and legislative environment which promotes the inclusion of students with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream school settings. In light of current trends, the special school sector is now challenged with examining and re-defining its role within education and therefore must be at the forefront in contributing to the discourse on a model of inclusive educational provision for students with SEN. Following the recent publication of the Research Report on the Role of Special Schools and Classes in Ireland (Ware, Balfe, Butler, Day, Dupont, Harten, Farrell, McDaid, O’Riordan, Prunty and Travers, 2009), commissioned by the National Council for Special Education, this article discusses the development of outreach programmes between special and mainstream schools and outlines the Outreach Educational Support Programme that has been established by Marino School, Bray, Co. Wicklow. The article also illustrates the findings of a research study regarding the effectiveness of this programme in supporting inclusion in the local school community.

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INTRODUCTION

Despite recommendations from the Report of the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) (Ireland, 1993, p. 22) for greater connectivity between special and mainstream schools and the establishment of “a continuum of educational provision to meet the continuum of special needs”, the recent drive towards inclusion in Ireland has left special schools somewhat isolated and has often failed to recognise the valuable contribution that special schools can make in supporting inclusion. As highlighted by McCarthy and Kenny (2006, p. 7), special schools are “suffering from a bunker mentality brought about by their position on the side-lines during the expansion of the policy of inclusion. They feel that they have a contribution to make towards constructing new practice, but have largely been bypassed”. However, internationally an important role currently envisaged for the future of special schools is in the area of supporting mainstream schools (Day and

Prunty, 2010). According to the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education Report (Meijer, 2003, p. 137), there is a movement across European countries, which have a clear two-track system of special needs education, i.e. a special education system beside the mainstream education system, in developing “a continuum of services between the two systems. Furthermore, special schools are more and more defined as resources for mainstream schools”. Norwich (as cited in Ware, Balfe, Butler, Day, Dupont, Harten, Farrell, McDaid, O’Riordan, Prunty and Travers, 2009, p. 185) argues that “in the future, special schools should only exist where they are linked to mainstream schools”.

The UK Department for Education and Skills (DES) (2003), in its report of the Special Schools Working Group, echoed the principle that special and mainstream schools must work together collaboratively for the mutual benefit of all students stating that:

Special schools have a vast wealth of knowledge, skills and expertise which if harnessed, unlocked and effectively utilised by mainstream schools, can help ensure that inclusion is a success (p. 8).

In a study conducted by the Education and Training Inspectorate (2006), on behalf of the Department of Education in Northern Ireland (DENI), a number of special schools were surveyed regarding the future role of the special school in supporting inclusion. The key findings of this study also indicated that:

Special schools have an important role to play in raising standards of achievement of pupils with SEN in mainstream schools [and] currently insufficient use is being made of the range and quality of expertise and knowledge within the special school sector (p. 7).

Outreach Support Programmes

Recommendation four of the Research Report on the Role of Special Schools and Classes in Ireland (Ware et al., 2009, p. 185) states that:

One aspect of the future role of some special schools could be to provide Outreach and Inreach support for mainstream schools to enhance the provision these schools are able to make for pupils with SEN.

Previously, in the UK, the DES (2001) suggested that outreach programmes are a specific way in which special schools may support mainstream schools. The Research Report on the Role of Special Schools and Classes in Ireland (Ware et al., 2009) highlighted the fact that outreach programmes need to be formalised and resourced in Ireland in order for special schools to act as outreach centres. Training and expertise amongst staff in special schools are essential components to the success of

such programmes. Ware et al. (p. 185) also noted that “...not all special schools currently have the capacity to fulfil this role...” and that if teachers from special schools are to advise and support mainstream colleagues, they will need more “opportunities to develop specialist skills appropriate to particular groups of pupils and collaborative working skills” (p. 187).

Central to the notion of outreach support is the linking of teachers and the sharing of expertise across the boundaries of segregated, specialist and mainstream educational provision, in order to support the inclusion of students with special educational needs (SEN) (Day, 1989). While it should be viewed as “a valuable opportunity to display expertise and show the rest of the educational world what is possible”, it is no coincidence that the development of an outreach support service by special schools may be viewed as an attempt to combat the “threatening situation” (Day, 1989, p. 63) of falling enrolment numbers.

According to Day (1989), the essential features of effective outreach provision include regular visits by a special school outreach teacher to discuss the curricular needs of the student and to monitor the student’s progress, the delivery of a constant supply of material resources and regular review of on-going objectives for the students concerned.

A study carried out by Her Majesty’s Inspectorate (HMSO, 2005) regarding the impact of outreach programmes in the UK to date highlighted that most outreach programmes provide “very high quality advice and support based on extensive specialist knowledge otherwise unavailable in the mainstream school” (p. 2), as outreach staff are currently-practising teachers who give advice “rooted in practical experiences” (p.11). The type of outreach provision that was found to have had the greatest impact included advice and support in the areas of assessment, team-teaching, feedback to teachers, identification of appropriate resources and “time for teachers to reflect on their teaching, share their concerns and plan more successfully for individual pupils” (HMSO, 2005, p. 12).

Marino School Outreach Programme

Marino School, Bray, Co. Wicklow is a special school for students with physical disabilities. Since 1993, Marino School has developed an extensive Links and Dual Placement Programme in conjunction with local mainstream primary and post-primary schools. As a further development of this programme and in response to demands for advice and support from local mainstream schools, an Outreach Educational Support Programme for students with physical disabilities in local mainstream primary and post-primary school settings was established in 2004 as a pilot programme.

The Outreach programme involves two essential components: 1) regular educational support for students with physical disabilities and 2) advice and support for principals, class teachers, resource teachers, special needs assistants and parents of students with physical disabilities. The Outreach programme is available to all students with a diagnosis of physical disability attending mainstream primary and post-primary schools within the catchment area of Marino School. When a student with a physical disability in a local mainstream school is identified as needing additional educational support, the school or parent may contact the principal of Marino School in order to avail of the Outreach programme. Following written request, a consultation meeting is set up involving the student's school, parents, the Outreach co-ordinator and principal of Marino School in order to discuss how support may be provided. Outreach support sessions may take place within the student's mainstream school or alternatively at Marino School and are scheduled on a weekly/fortnightly/monthly basis according to priority of need. When a school avails of outreach support, the resource hours allocated to the student in his/her mainstream school are not affected.

Specialist advice and support are provided to mainstream schools through the Outreach programme across the following range of areas:

- Educational implications of physical disability and disability awareness
- Targeted intervention in priority curricular areas of need
- Assessment of learning needs and assistance with planning of individual education plan goals
- Advice regarding the use of specific teaching methodologies, programmes and resources
- Advice regarding application for 'reasonable accommodations' in state examinations
- Use of assistive technology
- Transition from primary to post-primary school settings and post-school options.

The role of the outreach co-ordinator/teacher is fulfilled by one member of the teaching staff at Marino School. The Outreach programme for the current academic year (2010-11) supports twenty-seven students and nine schools within the local catchment area and continues to expand on an annual basis as demands from local mainstream schools for assistance in supporting inclusion continue to grow. It is interesting to note that the Outreach caseload has increased from three students to twenty-seven students since the initial pilot phase commenced in 2004.

Research Regarding the Marino School Outreach Programme

In 2006, a Master's Research study was carried out by the outreach co-ordinator/teacher at Marino School in order to examine the effectiveness of the Marino School Outreach Programme to date (Merrigan, 2006). The sample population contained a total of fifteen participants who were involved in the Outreach programme – three parents of students with physical disabilities; three school principals (one primary, one post-primary and one special school); three class teachers (two primary, one post-primary); three resource teachers (two primary, one post-primary) and three special needs assistants (two primary and one post-primary). The research design was qualitative in nature, involving the use of semi-structured interviews which explored key elements such as a rationale for the Outreach programme, features of provision, role of outreach teacher, greatest impact to-date, concerns and future developments. Each taped interview was transcribed for the purposes of analysis and a list of generic themes was subsequently identified with the aid of the MAXQDA text analysis software package. All names were anonymised and changed to protect the confidentiality of participants. In conducting this research, the interviewer was aware of the limitation of this study, in that her role as outreach co-ordinator may have had a positive influence on the responses of participants. Two central themes emerged within the findings of this study. For the purposes of this article, particular attention has been paid to the responses of school principals and teachers.

1) Role of the Outreach Teacher in Supporting Inclusion

Essentially, the outreach teacher was viewed as having a multi-faceted role involving a continuum of provision ranging from an advisory consultative role to actual educational intervention. Emphasis was placed on the central and diverse role of the outreach teacher in supporting students, staff and parents in a climate of inclusion characterised by challenges such as large class size, extensive curricular programmes, lack of training, limited resources and time constraints. In particular, the outreach teacher was seen to have a significant role in supporting and advising staff who found themselves “torn between the needs of one versus the needs of many” (John, primary class teacher), those “who had kind of come to a dead end” (Christine, primary resource teacher) and those who were overwhelmed by “the breadth of what [they] have to deal with” (Vanessa, primary resource teacher).

Drawing from a wealth of specialised expertise, the outreach teacher was unanimously seen to provide invaluable advice, guidance and feedback. The role of the outreach teacher was also considered to be broad, all-encompassing and far-reaching:

It's like the pebble in the pond, what you say filters out without you being aware of it, the contact that you have with the child, the direction, the

specialism...you're a kind of a one person encyclopaedia and you're the point, if you like, where if we need to know something then you're there and you know us personally (Sean, principal of primary school).

The central features of outreach provision were identified and acknowledged as the regularity of teacher-to-teacher contact, collaboration and communication. As recognised by one resource teacher:

The key word is link and liaison and I think bringing people together and I think the one thing you have done as outreach teacher is made us feel very comfortable, very confident. In no way do we feel isolated (Hannah, post-primary resource teacher).

This statement emphasises the critical role of the outreach teacher in affirming and supporting staff members, in relation to their competence and ability in accommodating the needs of students with SEN effectively. Inherent in this, the outreach teacher holds a pivotal role in addressing important elements such as the knowledge, skills, understanding, awareness, and expectations of all staff, with regard to the inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream schools. Communication was also viewed as a critical role of the outreach teacher, in terms of the capacity to act as a key point of contact in communicating with a range of multi-disciplinary professionals. The outreach teacher was viewed not only as a co-ordinator and teacher but also as someone to collaborate with in relation to the “clinical jargon” (Bridget, principal of post-primary school) found in multi-disciplinary reports and “the protocol in addressing some of the issues that need to go further afield” (Hannah, post-primary resource teacher).

2) *Outreach as an Emerging Role for the Special School*

Outreach as an emerging role for the special school in supporting the inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream education was clearly evident throughout this study. The special school was essentially viewed as a centre of excellence containing a wealth of expertise and as a valuable resource for other schools in the community. However, it was felt that at present the expertise of special schools is under-utilised and that by opening the door of communication between mainstream and special schools, a wealth of knowledge, skills and expertise could be shared for the mutual benefit of all involved. This notion was captured by one class teacher who stated that:

You have one school that has a huge amount of experience in one area of education, you've another school that has another huge amount of experience in another type of education and you have this individual that you're trying to include. Of course they have to work together (Andrew, primary class teacher).

By recognising the role of the special school in accommodating inclusion in the community, meaningful support and valuable teacher-to-teacher liaison could be created and provided to mainstream colleagues, through initiatives such as outreach provision which were viewed by teachers as “breaking new ground” (Hannah, post-primary resource teacher).

Moreover, emphasis was placed on the role of the special school in providing a continuum of provision, parental choice and flexibility of options in accommodating meaningful inclusion, by “breaking down the two parallel structures” of mainstream and special schools (Bridget, principal of post-primary school).

It was felt that this critical role of the special school should be acknowledged by the DES in order to allow for the expansion and replication of initiatives, such as outreach provision, at a national level. By affording the special school this valuable position in the continuum of provision, “there would be an expertise and professionalism and specialism available on tap in a peripatetic way” (Sean, principal of primary school). Similarly, it was felt that outreach provision should be expanded to provide for a range of students with SEN in the school community. Emphasis was placed on maintaining the quality of outreach provision through prioritising manageable caseloads, as demand for the service increases. The notion of clustering mainstream and special schools was also suggested in order to share best practice through other outreach initiatives such as workshop provision, awareness courses and parent support groups, thereby accommodating the needs of a wider community.

CONCLUSION

As the special school sector in Ireland enters a new era, progressive initiatives such as outreach programmes must be acknowledged and fully supported by the DES. In light of recommendations made by both the SERC Report (Ireland, 1993) and the Research Report on the Role of Special Schools and Classes in Ireland (Ware et al., 2009), the Marino School Outreach programme illustrates the potential that exists within special schools to develop their role as resource centres in supporting the mainstream sector in embracing inclusion, as illustrated in the research study outlined in this article. Outreach programmes, as a future role for special schools at national level, are currently being explored through a PhD study being undertaken by this researcher in conjunction with the School of Education, University College Dublin. The findings of this study will undoubtedly be pivotal in the on-going debate regarding the future role of special schools in supporting inclusion.

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