

GUEST EDITORIAL

**BUILDING BRIDGES BETWEEN SPECIAL
AND MAINSTREAM SERVICES**

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ABSTRACT

Many countries in the Asian and Pacific Region and in developing countries throughout the world, are changing their schools to make them more inclusive. In this process, clear policies need to be developed concerning the role of special schools in a more inclusive system. How can special and ordinary schools work together in a closer partnership? How many children now in special schools could be satisfactorily educated in mainstream schools with individualised support, possibly from staff of special schools? What is the role of local and national government in bringing the two systems together?

Countries with well established special school systems, whether run by the state, the private sector or non-governmental organisations, need to develop clear plans and targets for the future role of such schools. This applies to richer countries such as Japan and the United Kingdom which have many special schools but also to developing countries where a small number of special schools, sometimes run by parents' organisations, are the sole providers of education for children with disabilities.

This paper outlines some possible frameworks for collaboration between special and mainstream systems. Although drawn mainly from UK practice, some examples may be relevant for other countries and communities. These include children from special schools spending planned periods in a neighbouring mainstream school; dual registration; clusters of schools working together; special classes in ordinary schools and step-by-step individual inclusion plans for all children in segregated provision.

Despite enormous variation between and within regions, many countries and communities face similar challenges in moving towards the goals of Education for All and the United Nations Millennium Targets. Is there scope for the Asian Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons to provide a framework for progress?

In contrast to most writing on inclusion which is concerned with the reform and restructuring of ordinary schools, this article considers ways in which countries like the United Kingdom

and Japan with well established systems of publicly funded special schools, can develop more inclusive practice by changing the role of special schools and special services.

The challenges will be different in other countries - where for example, special schools are run by non-governmental organisations or the private sector, whether or not financial support is provided by the state. This article therefore, begins by considering what we can learn from developments in other countries and above all, how we can work within the major United Nations programmes on inclusion and disability.

GLOBAL NEEDS AND CHALLENGES

During the last 20 years, and especially since the International Year of Disabled Persons and the subsequent UN Decades for Disabled Persons, we have much more information on what is happening in other countries and also at the global level of some major United Nations programmes and the possibilities which these present, to national governments and to regional groupings.

Some global figures, from UN statistics and estimates:

- 125 million children throughout the world are denied access to primary education - two thirds of whom are girls. This is equivalent to all children aged 6-14 in North America and Europe combined.
- Another 150 million start school, but drop out before they can read and write.
- In the 40 least developed countries of the world, only 21 per cent of males and 12 per cent of females enter secondary schooling.
- 872 million adults in the developing world cannot read or write: two thirds are women.
- Only 1-2 per cent of disabled children in developing countries attend any form of school.

UNITED NATIONS INITIATIVES

The United Nations has provided exemplary leadership in creating a global framework to encourage governments and communities to face up to these challenges. These include:

The **Education for All** initiative, first launched in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990 and at a world summit on children, in the same year. This encouraged each government to set targets to increase the number of children completing four years of free primary education. The education of girls was strongly emphasised. The global initiatives to which most national governments are committed involve children living in poverty and disadvantage, children who are working or living on the streets or in grossly overcrowded homes, as well as children who are dropping out of school after only one or two years of primary education.

Although children with disabilities are meant to be included in the Education for All targets, they are often overlooked and forgotten, unless voluntary organisations and parent groups insist on their inclusion.

Progress in achieving these targets has been very slow, but some very poor countries have made striking progress. Perhaps the most dramatic is Uganda, where the government is implementing a guarantee to provide primary education to four children in every family. Disabled children and girls were given the highest priority - a good example of a truly inclusive policy.

Priority for children

A major obstacle to reaching the Jomtien targets, has been the crippling burden of debt owed by many developing countries to rich countries and to the World Bank. For example, Africa is spending \$US13 billion on debt repayments; Zambia spends four times more on debt repayment than on education.

Ten years after Jomtien, the world's leaders met again in Dakar, Senegal, to review progress and set new targets for 2015. Disabled children were barely mentioned.

It has been estimated, that \$US 8 billion a year would be needed to meet the Education for All targets. This sum is equivalent to:

- four days of global military spending.
- half of what is spent on toys in the USA.
- less than what Europeans spend on computer games or mineral water.

In the last few years, several of the richest countries (including the UK) have reduced or cancelled the debt of some of these countries, on condition that the money saved is invested in education and health. Uganda has shown that even a very poor country can bring education to all its children, including those with disabilities. We can only hope that other countries will follow its example.

Salamanca Declaration and Framework for Action (UNESCO 1994)

The importance of including children with disabilities was strongly reaffirmed at the UNESCO World Conference on Special Needs Education in Salamanca (1). This conference has been very influential in encouraging governments to adopt inclusive policies and in giving examples of progress, in reforming schools to respond to a much greater diversity of need in their local communities.

The UN Standard Rules (UN 1993)

Another UN initiative is reflected in **Standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities for Disabled Persons**, adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1993. Rule 6 is concerned with education:

“States should recognise the principle of equal primary, secondary and tertiary education opportunities for children, youth and adults in integrated settings. They should ensure that the education of persons with disabilities is an integral part of the education system”.

This is then followed by nine more specific recommendations. The UN has appointed a rapporteur to monitor the extent to which national governments are adopting this and 21 other Standard Rules. The most recent development is the possibility of an international legally binding United Nations Convention to promote the rights of persons with disabilities. There is a role here for parents’ organisations, advocacy groups and movements to work together to remind governments of their commitments to these international initiatives.

Lessons from ISEC 2000

‘Including the Excluded’, was the over-arching theme of ISEC 2000, the 5th International Special Education Congress which was held at Manchester University, from July 24-28 2000. Over 1000 people came from 99 countries to share their ideas, experiences, dreams and frustrations. There were 44 symposia and around 800 individual papers and posters. What lessons can we learn from this wealth of information and experience?

Despite enormous differences in background, culture and economic conditions, some common themes can be traced.

- First, there can be no doubt that the movement towards inclusive education is world-wide and knows no boundaries.
- Second, some of the most innovative and radical developments can now be found in some of the poorest countries of the world, where there is political will, leadership and a commitment to give first priority to children. Uganda, Laos and Lesotho are just some examples. In reconstructing its education system, South Africa is building inclusion of children with disabilities into its foundations.
- Third, there is already a lot of good practice on the ground, much of it taken for granted and not reported. Many teachers are already teaching inclusively; it is easy to exaggerate how much additional training they need.
- Fourth, the biggest single obstacle to progress is not money or lack of legislation but negative attitudes on the part of many parents, teachers, community leaders and politicians. Although there are major obstacles and uncertainties, the evidence suggests that the doubters become much more committed and positive once they have experience of teaching children with special needs in ordinary schools.
- Fifth, more and more parents are insisting on the rights of their children to attend ordinary schools and to receive the necessary support. Parents’ organisations are pressing for change at local and national level and calling for legislation and resources to make this possible.

NEED FOR CLEAR NATIONAL POLICIES

What implications do these international developments have for countries like Japan and Britain, with a strong special school tradition but with a new commitment to inclusion?

The fundamental foundation for progress is that clear policies should be worked out and agreed at the level of central government, local government and above all, by each regular and special school. These policies should result in clear plans for implementation, with target dates for the achievement of goals and sub-goals.

Can we define inclusion?

In order to develop clear policies, it is first necessary to try to clarify what is meant by inclusion and how it differs from integration. Although there is no agreed definition, there is consensus that inclusion calls for a fundamental reorganisation of regular schools and classrooms, in order to cater for a greater diversity of children's needs in the community. Inclusion involves changes at three levels:

- **all children** attending their local school, in the regular classroom and with appropriate support.
- **all schools** restructuring their curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and grouping arrangements to ensure access and success for all children in the community.
- **all teachers** accepting responsibility for the learning of all children, receiving continuing training, support from the Principal, from the governing body of the school, from their colleagues and from the community.

Inclusion and integration are different. Integration assumes that some children have difficulties which require special measures - maybe special environments, special teachers, with specialist training. It is the child who must adjust to the school.

In inclusion, the emphasis is on the changes in the environment of the school and the educational system as whole. These include reform of the curriculum and the methods of teaching, the nature of the interactions between teacher and child, ways in which children are grouped and provided with opportunities to learn together. The active involvement of parents is also essential.

In some ways, we can think of integration as based on a medical model in which the aim is to identify deficits in order to try to remediate them. Inclusion is based more on the social model of disability in so far as it is concerned with ways in which the social and educational environment can be modified, to enable children to participate fully in the life of the school and of society.

For the present purpose, we can assume that a government has made a commitment in principle to promote inclusion, perhaps with reference to the Salamanca Declaration (1), or other international instruments, but that progress towards inclusion is slow and fraught with dilemmas and difficulties.

In the UK, there is now a strong policy framework based on inclusive principles and values, together with some additional funding (2). Furthermore, all mainstream and special schools and colleges of further education have had some 8 years to develop their inclusion policies. On the other hand, there is a great deal of variation among the 200 or so Local Education Authorities who have to administer complex special needs legislation and continue to provide specialist services (such as educational psychology), while delegating some 80 per cent of their funding direct to schools. There are also great variations between schools within the same Local Education Authority (LEA), sometimes in the same neighbourhood or street.

We can consider examples of possible changes under a number of inter-connected headings. These are not mutually exclusive, nor are they in order of priority.

REMOVING OBSTACLES TO INCLUSION

Assessment and decision making procedures can be firmly based on the initial assumption that all children will be educated in regular schools. The aim of assessment is to identify obstacles and difficulties for each child individually and then try to agree on a programme of action to address these.

Individual Inclusion Plan

An individual inclusion plan is not the same as an individual educational plan which is normally concerned with helping children to reach specific developmental and educational targets. Drawing up an individual inclusion plan goes beyond traditional assessment of the child's needs and difficulties, by asking what kind of **environmental** changes would be needed to enable the individual needs of a given child to be met in the regular class of the local mainstream school. This needs to be followed by a decision on the removal of these obstacles and a time table for doing so.

For example, some children will need wheelchair access to classrooms, recreational facilities and toilets; others will need modifications to the curriculum, supported access to the curriculum through computers and communication and information technology; others will need the personal support of a teaching assistant in certain classes or activities.

Reviewing all children in special schools

A similar approach can be applied for all children now in special schools or segregated provision. Many children were sent to special schools at a time when it seemed impossible

for regular schools to meet their needs. Today, many more regular schools are educating children who would have been rejected without consideration ten years ago.

All children in special schools should therefore be regularly reviewed with a view to exploring all possible means of meeting their needs in more inclusive settings. This again, assumes the preparation of an individual inclusion plan. Some children may already be ready for planned transfer to a mainstream class, provided the appropriate supports, the necessary funds and staffing resources can be made available. Others may need a longer period of preparation.

DEVELOPING INCLUSIVE POLICIES

Developing policies for the future of special schools

Although there is general agreement that the work of special schools is changing and must change much further, there is considerable uncertainty in most countries about the future role of special schools. Some argue for a policy of phasing out all special schools over a period of time, on the grounds that the continued existence of special schools is inconsistent with inclusion. In the UK, the government is committed to retaining special schools as part of a broad spectrum of provision and in order to enable parents to choose a special school placement for their child, if that is their considered opinion.

The number of special schools in the UK fell by some 15 per cent in the period 1986-1996 (from 1405 to 1191), though the number of pupils attending special schools has remained at just under 100,000. One LEA has closed all but one of its special schools (the London borough of Newham) and there are very large variations in the proportion of children in special schools, even between adjacent LEAs. In England and Wales as a whole, some 1.2 per cent of all pupils of school age are in special schools, but the figures vary between 0.32 and 2.6 per cent between LEAs in different parts of the country.

In contrast to these figures, some 60 per cent of all pupils with 'statements' of special educational needs, are now in mainstream schools. These pupils are guaranteed additional resources by the LEA after a full multi-professional assessment. Many of these children would undoubtedly have been sent to special schools in the past, but their needs are now met in mainstream schools, with the help of additional funding provided by the LEA through the statement.

These huge variations reflect the lack of clear policy leadership by the government on the role of special schools in the future. Even so, the government has required all LEAs to clarify their inclusion policy as part of their overall Education Development Plan. These plans are subject to inspection by the Office for Standards in Education. A similar requirement is placed on all schools, whether mainstream or special.

Links between special and mainstream schools

The UK government also strongly supports collaboration between special and mainstream schools. A CD ROM has been produced with useful examples of different types of collaboration by the Department for Education and Employment in 2000.

In fact, collaborative links between special and mainstream schools can be regarded as a distinctive feature of the UK practice over the past 20 years. Well over 80 per cent of special schools are currently involved in link schemes. These have been well researched by the National Foundation for Educational Research in a series of reports over a long period (3,4,5). These reports would repay study in countries such as Japan with a strong special school system, since they go beyond mere description and include critical evaluation of the limitations of the link systems that have been developed.

In a typical example, a special school with under 100 pupils with severe and profound learning difficulties, will arrange for some 8-10 pupils to attend classes in a neighbouring primary school for an average of three hours a week. The pupils are accompanied by a teacher, or more probably by a teaching assistant. They usually go individually rather than as a group and are likely to attend classes in literacy and numeracy, physical education and dance, art and social activities. Special schools also use sport and swimming facilities, as well as curriculum materials, especially computers. Some mainstream pupils also spend similar periods in special schools.

The most recent evaluation (5) concludes that the more successful link schemes reflect positive attitudes on the part of both sets of teachers, resulting in joint planning and clear thinking on the nature and aims of the links and whose needs were being served. However, they conclude that:

“ the scope of the activity was relatively restricted in terms of time and numbers of staff involved. So long as links are regarded as optional extras and are not embedded in the plans of every special school and every relevant mainstream school, there will continue to be a divide between two forms of provision and dialogue will remain at the level of counting pupils on roll, rather than discussing effective case management” (5).

This research also confirmed earlier studies which showed that a typical special school in the UK only returned one child a year to mainstream provision. Although there are many reasons for this, it seems likely that numbers could increase if the annual review of each child's progress involved representatives from mainstream schools and included an analysis of the changes that would be needed to enable individual children to be satisfactorily educated in mainstream schools.

Dual placements

One possibility is to **register all new children with Special Educational Needs (SENs) on the roll of a mainstream school**, even though they may need to attend a special school temporarily. This can be the child's neighbourhood school. The aim is to develop an individual inclusion plan which is tailor-made to the needs of the individual child, in relation to the stage reached by the local school in meeting his or her needs and, indeed, those of others in the community.

Special schools as resource centres

As long ago as 1978, the Warnock Committee referred to special schools becoming 'resource centres' (6), but the concept of the resource centre is not well understood or defined.

In addition to the link schemes already described, a school can act as a resource centre by **recruiting staff for outreach work**. This might involve supporting their own pupils in spending an increasing period of time in mainstream schools, or supporting mainstream pupils who are in danger of exclusion to special schools. In either case, they are using their experience in special education, to support inclusive practice. Their very presence in a school can help to create positive attitudes to inclusion, by reassuring their mainstream schools that specialist support is available. On the other hand, the presence of specialists can have the opposite effect to what is intended, if such staff act as 'experts' and leave other teachers with the conviction that special training and special school experience are necessary to teach children with special educational needs.

The point to stress here, is that special school staff may be competent in their own setting, but may lack the tact, sensitivity and consultancy skills needed for working with colleagues. Training, supervision and support are essential.

Similarly, special schools can act as resource centres to mainstream schools in demonstrating specialist equipment, curriculum materials or particular methods of teaching - eg small steps, curriculum adaptation or differentiation.

School clusters

In a densely populated area, schools can benefit by creating structures and mechanisms for collaboration; this is often described as 'clustering' (7). A typical cluster may consist of ten or more primary schools, at least one secondary school and one or more special schools. The schools can agree to work together, to improve the quality of provision for all pupils with special educational needs within their catchment area. For example, they can join forces on school-based training, share ideas on individual educational planning and in general, on moving forward to more inclusive practice. Clearly, the presence of one or more special schools can greatly increase the scope for sharing specialist skills.

Special classes

Many mainstream schools, especially in the United States, have special classes, often containing children with learning difficulties or behaviour problems. Such classes have been heavily criticised for some time, mainly on the grounds that they contain a disproportionate number of Black and Hispanic children, that they provide an inferior education and that their pupils lack opportunities for inclusion into ordinary classes (8). What was once seen as an opportunity for integration is now under criticism for providing an unnecessarily restrictive environment for children whose needs could be met in regular classrooms in a more inclusive system.

Resourced mainstream schools

In some areas, LEAs select a small number of mainstream schools who are given additional financial and staffing resources, to include a number of children with special educational needs who would in other circumstances, be sent to special schools. In general, these children attend the regular class, though they often have a resource room for specialist work or one to one teaching. Additional members of staff are appointed to support mainstream staff as well as the child, in accessing the curriculum and participating in the whole range of school activities.

This model can provide good quality education and support, but has the obvious disadvantage of distance. A child not attending the neighbourhood school, is missing out on social opportunities of going to school together with other local children; furthermore, a disproportionate amount of time may be spent in travelling between home and school.

One version of the resourced school model involves closing all special schools and relocating all special school pupils to carefully selected mainstream schools. A model along these lines, was proposed by Mittler and Farrell (9) some 15 years ago, but can be criticised as involving unnecessary segregation.

The proposal involves closing a special school and relocating all pupils in special classes of up to ten children, together with their teaching and support staff and equipment, to carefully selected and resourced primary and secondary schools, in different areas of a town. The head teacher and deputy head teacher would play a key management role in coordinating the work of teachers, support staff and links with mainstream provision and other agencies, such as health and social services. For example, out of 80 children in a typical special school for children with severe learning difficulties, 40 could be transferred in classes of ten to four different primary schools; another 30 to three secondary schools and ten older students to a college of further education.

Although some of the children would initially be in their special class, each child would have an individual inclusion plan involving increasing periods of contact with the rest of the school.

Some children might be ready to spend a substantial amount of time in mainstream classes, provided they and the class teachers had appropriate support. Others might need more time. On the other hand, some mainstream schools may not be ready for more inclusive practice.

CHANGES IN MAINSTREAM SCHOOLS

The most fundamental pre-requisite for inclusion is reform and restructuring of ordinary schools and of the education system itself. This involves a reform of the curriculum, so that it becomes accessible and relevant to the whole range of pupils in the community, not only those with disabilities. Since the Salamanca Declaration of 1994, this process is better understood; moreover, as we have seen, the education of children with disabilities is increasingly seen as an integral part of the Education for All movement, which aims to improve the quality and accessibility of schooling to all children who are in any way excluded or marginalised. An excellent international resource is provided by the UNESCO **Open File on Inclusive Education** (10) which consists of support materials for managers and administrators and draws on the experience of a range of countries, in moving towards inclusive practice.

The restructuring of regular schools involves change at a variety of levels. In the UK, these include:

- reform of the curriculum with a view to widening access and participation of all pupils.
- reviewing pupil assessment and consequent decisions concerning the grouping of pupils.
- delegating responsibility and funding to all schools, including special schools.
- introduction of an obligatory special needs Code of Practice into all schools, facilitated by the appointment of a special educational needs coordinator to every school.
- provision of detailed guidelines on school-based identification and assessment of pupils at an early stage, with a view to supporting as many pupils as possible within the school and reducing inappropriate segregation and exclusion.
- mobilising a range of support services for schools and pupils.
- recruiting large numbers of teaching assistants for literacy and numeracy, as well as SEN.
- allocating earmarked additional funding for pupils with additional needs in mainstream schools.
- ensuring that inclusion issues permeate staff development at every level.
- ensuring that parents are involved and supportive of change.

Some of these initiatives are still at an early stage; some have been in place for some years; others have hardly started (2). An **Index for Inclusion** has been sent to all schools to enable them to carry out a self-evaluation of progress and problems in developing inclusive practice (11).

It is difficult to assess the strength of either the support or the resistance to inclusion. Although many more children with special needs are being educated in mainstream schools, it is clear from research, that many teachers have serious reservations about accepting children with intellectual disabilities and strongly believe that children with difficult behaviour should be sent to specialist provision (12). This view also finds expression among educational psychologists (13) who express doubts about the ability of regular schools to meet the whole range of educational needs in a neighbourhood.

Inclusion is a long process, a road to travel rather than a destination, but much can be done at every level to work to develop more inclusive practice at every level. Clearly, the classroom of the regular school is the starting point and end point for such a journey.

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