

S U M M E R 2 0 0 3

Special Leadership?

What are the implications for the leadership of special schools of potential changes to the special school system?

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Rationale and methodology

“The only way to predict the future is to invent it.”

Alan Kay quoted in Vos and Dryden (1998)

The focus of my research was to identify the implications for the leadership of special schools of the potential changes to the special school system.

I believe those of us working in special education have a responsibility not to just sit back and wait for the inclusion agenda, or other changes, to impact on us but to be at the forefront of the changes.

“There are three categories of people: the ones that make things happen; the ones that watch things happen and the ones that wonder what the hell is happening.”

Barbara Prashnig (1999)

The full research report has been written as a result of undertaking a range of enquiry activities:

- wide-ranging reading
- discussion with two regional focus groups
- interviews with headteachers of seven special schools in England
- email conversations with academics
- an interview with a representative of Education Leeds
- a study visit to Australia and visits to five special schools there
- discussion with other NCSL research associates and attendance at NCSL Leading Edge seminars

The special school of the future

What do leaders of special schools need to consider if they are to make their schools outward-looking centres of excellence?

I believe the role of the special school of the future will be multi-dimensional, depending on the particular circumstances that surround the special school. Special schools might be:

- operating as training centres, providing training and assessment opportunities which lead to recognised accreditation for support staff and teachers
- supporting other professionals who work with individuals with special needs, enabling their delivery to become more effective through SEN awareness and/or training
- enabling greater access for pupils with special needs within mainstream settings by providing assessment and advice regarding the use of ICT
- operating as assessment centres where pupils may come to have needs assessed prior to attending relevant educational establishment
- giving support to parents – developing greater support for them but also facilitating support groups of parents
- operating as centres of information – a significant resource in terms of specialist knowledge
- managing dual placements – greater flexibility of placement will become a feature of many special schools and this will require careful management to ensure that pupils receive the educational provision that best meets their needs
- operating service level agreements – ie arrangements that will be put into place between special schools and mainstream partners and other partners (including mainstream schools and LEAs) in order that established partnerships are not lost when key players move on

The evidence gained from reading, interviews and visits to many special schools in England and in Australia suggests that the model that is best placed to take special schools into a confident future would involve:

- a main site which is located near to mainstream sites for all age groups that the special school is serving
- a number of satellite classes within mainstream schools, which have a separate class base for the times when it is not appropriate or suitable for pupils with special needs to be in the mainstream class
- opportunities for team teaching to take place either in the separate class base or within the mainstream class, including pupils with special needs

The special school leader of the future

“If schools are to be that different, there will be a radical shift in the challenges faced by their leaders and in the qualities needed for such a role.”

David Bennett (2002)

What qualities does the special school leader of the future require?

It is clear that in order to redefine what role special education plays in our changing education system, and to allow for the innovation described earlier, there needs to be a systematic and creative abandonment of old ways.

Change often leads to conflict. The ability to resolve that conflict will be a key quality of the successful special school leader of the future. The need to bring about necessary changes and to challenge long-held beliefs will not meet with success if leaders do not display inner strength and courage. Strategy will remain important, but, I suggest, it is through relationships, and not plans, that it will be exercised. It is the nature and quality of leaders' relationships, both internal and external, that will be crucial to the success of the school. Clarke and Cohn (2002), suggest that there are three essential elements to the transformational reform: restructuring, re-organising and re-culturing.

Restructuring includes looking again at learning and teaching practices and at the policies and procedures that govern the school. Re-organising includes looking at roles of leaders and staff within schools, the size and purpose of schools and how the school is measured. Re-culturing means looking at the beliefs, values and assumptions that shape the behaviour of members of the school community.

My enquiry leads me to suggest that there are a number of key areas the special school leader needs to pay attention to in developing the special school of the future. The headteachers and principals I have met have taken the following approaches:

■ **Change** – Blackfriars School, Newcastle-under-Lyme is:

- extending staff knowledge and understanding of inclusion and supporting their professional development in this field through the Developing a Resource for Inclusive Practice Project
- providing a specialist outreach and support role to physically/medically impaired pupils in mainstream schools
- work shadowing with mainstream colleagues

■ **Partnerships** – Leeds LEA:

- has partnership schools - groups of pupils go with teachers, teacher assistants and resources into mainstream schools
- uses shared planning time between special school and mainstream teachers of a minimum half day per half term
- aims to base 50 per cent of SEN pupils in partnership schools with the remaining 50 per cent having some inclusion opportunities
- is in discussions with the health authority to develop a health audit for pupils in special schools

■ **ICT** – Crosshills Technology College has a new building which will include:

- work bases with pods for laptops
- interactive whiteboards in many classes
- an e-library
- very large video screens with the ability to video conference
- a media studies centre

- **Innovations** in the areas of Leadership, Curriculum, Design, Funding and Professionalism:

Port Phillip Specialist School

- has implemented the 'fully serviced school' concept with a head of integrated service, a professor with expertise in all aspects of paramedical service delivery, and staff with extensive experience in the use of ICT to optimise outcomes for pupils with special needs.

Severndale School, Shrewsbury

- has become a teacher training base, setting up management modules in partnership with HE, in response to a recognised need to develop middle and senior managers

Addington School, Wokingham

- has become an accredited NVQ training and assessment centre in order to develop own staff competencies and also as a centre for mainstream training

Ballajura Community College

- has established an inclusive learning team to meet the needs of all pupils within their community

Acknowledging diversity as reality means that differences should be recognised and celebrated. As I hope the examples in this study show, special schools in many circumstances are taking the inclusion process forward in imaginative and adventurous ways.

References

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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the following headteachers for giving so willingly of their time to help me with my research:

Clive Lilley, Blackfriars School, Newcastle under Lyme; E Jordan, Mary Elliot School, Walsall; M Johnson, Northcott School, Hull; Chris Davies, Severndale School, Shrewsbury; Paul Donkersloot, Holyport Manor School, Holyport; Oliver Caviglioli, Essex LEA; Mike Hatch, Crosshills Technology College, Blackburn; Sylvia Robertshaw, an adviser from Education Leeds

In Australia, thanks go to:

Roger Smalies, Principal of Castlereagh Special School, Perth; Lee Sutherland, Team Leader within Ballajura Community College, Perth; Bob Meenan, Principal of a Secondary Education Support Centre, Perth; Marlene Brown, Principal of Gladys Newton Special School, Perth; Bella Irlicht, Principal of Port Phillip Specialist School, Melbourne

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