

A vision for special education in the 21st century

The last four decades in special education have been epitomised by rapid change, growth and development. In some areas of the country, there has been significant restructuring, or even the demise, of special schools. We can all recall the introduction of the National Curriculum, its assessment, the integration/segregation debate, and the evolution towards inclusion. We have all witnessed the revolutionary impact of ICT on the teaching and learning of children with a whole range of special educational needs.

So as we progress through the first decade of this 21st century, it is timely to take stock of where special schools are at this point in time. It would be heartening if the complementarity of special schools within an inclusive education system could fully be recognised. Special schools are a part of the education system, not apart from it. Indeed, this has been recognised by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) (2008) who say that 21st-century special schools should be:

‘ground-breaking, innovative and creative; enabling society to meet its responsibility of delivering high quality education to all children, even its most vulnerable and complex’.
[DCSF, 2008]

So what is the mission and purpose of special education in this 21st century? You will each have your own distinctive views on this, but, for me, the over-riding purpose is its societal role, just as it was 40 years ago. The 1970 Education (Handicapped Children) Act gave education as an entitlement to all children, regardless of ability. On 8 June 2009, the UK Government ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. This was nearly three years after it was unanimously adopted by the UN General Assembly. One of the reasons the UK Government delayed ratification was that it sought to maintain an education system that involved both mainstream and special schools, allowing parents to express a preference for either option.

Society has a duty to discharge high quality services to its most vulnerable children. A key part of this duty is delivering an education that is matched to need and which is genuinely (as the

1988 Education Reform Act exhorts) 'a preparation for adulthood'. At a time when we are seeing significant changes in the pattern of childhood disability, we need to revisit what this may actually look like.

We have spent the last 20 or more years focusing on the delivery of a curriculum. There has been some wonderful innovation in this time which has genuinely broadened and enriched the learning framework for children with special educational needs.

However, the children attending special schools have changed. (This will be a topic for the second think-piece in this series.) Their learning patterns are different to those previously known. Indeed, do we know how some of these 'new' children learn? Moreover, what are their metacognitive processes? How do they learn to learn?

The current richness of the curriculum in many special schools will be a bedrock upon which to build, but the time has come to re-focus on learning, and on the learning context; a context that is technologically rich, and where, after years of debate about transition, we can genuinely look at a lifelong learning trajectory.

Let me illustrate this through personal experience. My daughter, Kate (who has Down's Syndrome) is now 25 years old. She was educated in her early childhood/primary years in resource-base classes in mainstream schools, which were part of an outreach programme from a special school. During the secondary years, as the curriculum pathways diverged more and more, she attended a special school full time, where the excellent vocational programme prepared her for further study, post-school, in Hospitality. Throughout, she experienced teachers who had a thorough understanding of the learning pattern of the child with Down's Syndrome. They equipped her with functional literacy skills (she texts frequently), basic numeracy (she operates a till in a Charity shop), good personal care and domestic skills (she lives in her own home, shared with two other young women with learning disabilities), and great social skills (she is keen on drama, and has joined a theatre group).

Could we say now that we have the same depth of understanding of learning style, or appreciation of learning need, for the child with Fragile-X syndrome, the pre-term infant, or the young person with Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)? We must strive to capture a pedagogy that will do for this 'new' group of learners what we have done for children with more

established and well-researched disabilities in the past (e.g. those with hearing and visual impairments, cerebral palsy, etc.).

Ponder point 1:

In which areas of complex learning difficulties does your school need in-depth pedagogical understanding?

In so doing, the societal advocacy dimension of the special school comes into play once more. 21st-century causes of disability (e.g. maternal alcohol abuse leading to FASD) lead to social consequences (e.g. children with FASD are the largest single group entering fostering and adoption services). The economic consequences of, for example, the increased survival rates of premature infants are considerable. Many of these children require ongoing medical intervention, lifelong therapeutic input, and 24-hour care from their families and others, with little realistic hope of achieving personal autonomy in later life.

The place of special schools in aiding Society to meet the challenge of this group of children is not only vitally important but crucial. As places of learning, 21st-century special schools should be about evolving a framework for teaching and learning which is relevant and realistic to these children with complex needs and disabilities. Special schools should now become 'pedagogical think-tanks' – nurturing, shaping and framing approaches that are dynamic and innovative, and which transform these children into active participants in the process of learning. Their engagement (the measured participation of the child in learning) will be the benchmark for assessing if we have achieved this goal.

Ponder point 2:

In which areas of complex learning difficulties could your school already begin to develop new pedagogy?

Families are key to our ability to achieve this (and later in this series of think-pieces, the role of families, communities and Society will be explored more fully). For at the heart of this process of defining and shaping learning for children with complex needs will be families. It is a collaborative venture. The parent is the child's first educator, as any parent would unequivocally

maintain. So, the parents of the child with a rare chromosomal abnormality, by the time their child enters school, will have researched, inquired, visited and discussed with everyone and anyone who can shed light on their child's condition and future development. Together, parent, teacher and other professionals can illuminate the learning pathway for the child, using a combination of acquired information, applied wisdom, previous experience and new approaches, devised directly in response to the child's needs, to ensure that learning is a valuable and dignifying experience.

Ponder point 3:

How does your school harness your parents' collective knowledge of complex learning difficulties?

This approach is the epitome of personalised learning, for it is well-researched, carefully thought through information about the individual child. The approach demonstrates deep and meaningful collaboration that can be shared in creating a team-around-the-child; a team rich in disciplinary knowledge and with a range of practice perspectives, but without artificial and unhelpful disciplinary boundaries (a topic for consideration in the seventh of these think-pieces).

Ponder point 4:

Does your school benefit from a multidisciplinary system (eg wrap around care)? How does this impact on staff understanding of your students' needs?

To summarise, I would conjecture that in this 21st century, special schools (as ever) need the three Rs!

1. **To Re-vision** – What is special education about in the 21st century?
What is its mission and purpose?
2. **To Re-align** – Within an inclusive education system, what is the value of special schools to an holistic education service?
3. **To Re-discover** – Who are the children requiring special education, and by what principles should we evolve our practice for and with these children?

The SSAT invites you to join in this debate, whatever your position and perspective (e.g. as a headteacher, senior leader, class teacher or teaching assistant). In the latter part of 2010, we will summarise all of the contributions submitted against the original think-piece, and incorporate school-based case studies to illustrate the issue under debate.

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