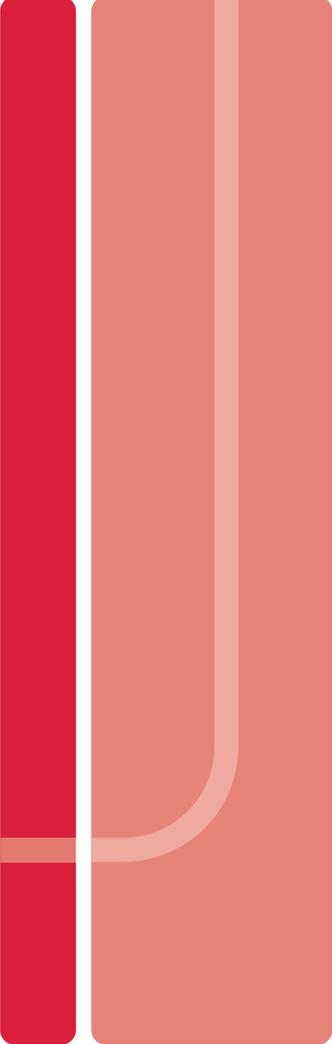


21st century special education – the journey and the mission

At the heart of education is the capacity to transform a child's life for the better.



At the close of the first decade of this 21st century, it is timely to take stock of special schools and their position within our education system.

The last four decades in special education have been characterised by rapid change, growth and development. In some areas of the country, special schools have been significantly restructured or have even closed. We can recall the introduction of the national curriculum, its assessment, the integration/segregation debate, and the evolution towards inclusion. We have witnessed the revolutionary impact of ICT on the teaching and learning of children with a whole range of special educational needs.

In the 21st century, the contribution of special schools within an inclusive education system needs to be fully recognised. They are a part of the education system, not apart from it. Their role should be ground-breaking, innovative and creative.

So what is the mission and purpose of special education? The overriding purpose is still societal. At the heart of education is

the capacity to transform a child's life for the better, and equip them to enjoy active citizenship in 21st century society.

The 1970 Education (Handicapped Children) Act gave education as an entitlement to all children, regardless of ability. 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'. As Hartley (2010) writes:

'Providing [children with special educational needs] with an education that gives them the greatest chance to fulfil their potential should be the index of a healthy and socially just society.'

Research and practice have shown that where a child experiences educational success, their self-esteem is raised, enabling them to develop a level of emotional resilience (Gilligan, 1999; Scottish Executive Education Department, 2002). This, in turn, increases their opportunities in life.

The new generation children

Children with complex learning difficulties and disabilities (CLDD) have been described as a 21st century frontier for education. As one school governor reported: 'The diverse range of children... is causing us to restructure our school.'

Although these children are not a homogenous group, their unifying factor can be described as 'pedagogical vulnerability' (Carpenter, 2010), which may manifest in complex learning patterns, extreme behaviour and a range of socio-medical needs which are new and unfamiliar to many schools.

The population of these children in our schools is increasing. The numbers of children with severe and complex needs in one local authority more than doubled between 1981 and 2001 (Emerson and Hatton, 2004). Between 2004 and 2009, there was a 5.1% increase in children with severe learning difficulties, and a 29.7% increase in those with profound and multiple learning difficulties. (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2010). From the Family Resources Survey, Blackburn et al (2010) found there were 950,000 families in the UK with a disabled

child, and suggest this is a 250,000 underestimate. Blackburn attributes the rise to 'intergenerational poverty and modern medical progress' (Ramesh, 2010).

The learning patterns of children with CLDD are different to those we have previously known. 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 that has genuinely broadened and enriched the learning framework for children with special educational needs. This will form the bedrock upon which to build, but the time has come to refocus on learning and the learning context.

We must strive to capture a pedagogy for our new group of learners. Do we have the same depth of understanding of learning style, or appreciation of learning need, for the child with fragile X syndrome, the infant born premature, or the young person with foetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) as we have for children with more established and well-researched disabilities (eg visual impairment, Down's syndrome and cerebral palsy)?

Special schools as pedagogical think-tanks

The place of special schools in aiding society to meet the challenge of supporting children with CLDD is vitally important. This demands inquiry-based reflection from school leaders who:

- support investigation
- aid the process of inquiry
- do not know all the answers
- see their school as a research organisation.

As places of learning, 21st century special schools should be about evolving a framework for teaching and learning for these children which is relevant and realistic. Special schools need to become pedagogical think-tanks – nurturing, shaping and framing approaches that are dynamic and innovative, and that transform these children into active participants in the process of learning. As Hargreaves (2006) suggests, schools need to:

‘...transform their response to the learner from the largely standardised to the profoundly personalised.’

Children’s engagement in learning will be the benchmark for assessing whether we have achieved this goal.

Case study: a shared vision

Beaucroft Foundation Special School in Dorset educates 150 children with moderate learning difficulties. The increase in staff numbers – from 24 in 1997 to over 60 today – is evidence of their students’ increasingly complex needs.

Although judged outstanding (Ofsted, 2009), Beaucroft continually reviews its curriculum and pedagogy, and seeks collaboration with other schools. The headteacher, Paul McGill, says, ‘It is vital to have an open mind to change, to be prepared to look closely at current practice. The 21st century special school will be significantly different to the present one to meet the needs of the children and their families.’

In response to its new generation of learners, the school is shaping a ‘fusion’ curriculum based upon its specialism plan, the five Every Child Matters outcomes for children and the new dimensions of curriculum. Using a ‘task and finish’ approach, seven staff groups – with foci of communication, community, culture, well-being, economics, physical development and global development – discuss, recommend and implement necessary changes.

The 21st century special school – four key themes

Research suggests that engaged behaviour is the single best predictor of successful learning.

As the SSAT's Department for Education-supported research into the learning needs of children with CLDD progresses, four key themes are emerging :

1. The dialogue with neuroscience

Research insights from neuroscience may provide new platforms for teachers to plan creative and innovative learning pathways for children with CLDD. For example, neuroscience highlights the compromised sensory pathways of premature infants (Champion, 2005), indicates a neurological basis for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (O'Malley, 2007), illuminates the difficulties of learners with autism (Carpenter, 2007; Ramachandran and Lindsay, 2006), and offers new perspectives on language functioning for children with fragile X syndrome (Hayashi and Tonegawa, 2007). Such information could shape teaching approaches that are better matched to learning styles, thus raising these vulnerable children's attainment, and resulting in lifelong benefits (Goswami, 2008).

2. Transdisciplinary approaches

Children with CLDD will usually be involved with professionals from more than one discipline (eg education, speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, psychology). Working together with the child's family, these professionals can operate as a Team Around the Child (TAC; Limbrick, 2009). This team will be rich in disciplinary knowledge and with a range of practice perspectives, but without artificial and unhelpful disciplinary boundaries. Targets will be shared, and may be delivered by any of the team in consultation with the others. This prevents conflicting targets being set for the child, and increases the effectiveness and sustainability of their programme.

3. Student engagement in the context of personalised learning

Research suggests that engaged behaviour is the single best predictor of successful learning (Iovannone et al, 2003). Unless a child is engaged in learning, there can be no deep learning, effective teaching, meaningful outcome, real attainment or quality progress. Children with CLDD need a curriculum which is wrapped around them in order to engage in learning (Cartwright, 2010).

4. Partnership with families

Families are key to our ability to achieve effective educational approaches for children with CLDD. They are at the heart of this process of defining and shaping learning for these children. Educating a child with CLDD is a collaborative venture.

The parent is the child's first educator, as any parent would unequivocally maintain. 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 and previous experience. New approaches, devised in response to the child's needs, ensure that learning is a valuable and dignifying experience.

This approach is the epitome of personalised learning, for it is the result of well-researched, carefully thought through, applied information about the individual child. It demonstrates deep and meaningful collaboration.

Case study: looking back to go forwards

Tor View School is an all-age, generic learning difficulty school (MLD, SLD, ASD, PMLD). Our pupils often struggle to learn spontaneously, so we balance the variety and richness of the content-based national curriculum with a skills-based additional curriculum (incorporating communication, motor skills, cognition, play and personal development). In doing so, we have revisited skills and knowledge from the 'lost' foundations of excellent practice:

- Developmental psychology and relative stages in child development (Piaget, Uzgiris and Hunt)
- The Derbyshire Language Scheme (Knowles and Masidlover, 1982) which supports early communication skill assessment
- Education of the Developmentally Young (McBrian et al, 1992) which builds staff skills in planning and supporting individual targets
- Makaton Sign Vocabulary
- Passport to Progress: our developmental assessment checklist which complements the PIVATS assessment programme, but ensures staff are guided to the 'next step to teach'.

However, at Tor View, we do not just look backwards. We recognise the massive contributions made by the national curriculum, ICT and knowledge of aetiology. We aim to embrace the best of the past, as well as the current, in searching for the pedagogy of the future.
(Andy Squire, Headteacher)

New generation schools – the challenge

The journey of special education in this 21st century is now in the hands of the new coalition Government. At the time of writing, the Green Paper on Special Educational Needs is eagerly anticipated. The Government has already stated that 'supporting vulnerable children is a priority' (H M Government, 2010). Certainly vulnerability is the thread that unifies this rapidly emerging group of children and young people with CLDD, whether the source is disability, deprivation, disadvantage or a combination of any of these 'three Ds' (Carpenter, 2010).

This Government is looking at a major educational transformation for special schools in enabling them to acquire academy status. However, as John Truman, Headteacher at Exhall Grange School and Science College, and a former local authority education officer, notes, the 2002 Audit Commission highlighted the inconsistency of the special educational needs statutory framework with current practice (para 138). He continues:

'If the development of academies is to be the kind of transformational moment in history last seen in the 1944 settlement, then only fundamental, radical and innovative change will effectively guarantee the quality of provision and support for vulnerable learners that we all want to achieve and the learners and their families deserve.' (Truman, 2010)

To summarise, I would propose that in this 21st century, special schools (as ever) need three Rs! Our challenge is to:

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

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Booklets in the complex needs series

- 1 A vision for the 21st century special school
- 2 Children with complex learning difficulties and disabilities – who are they and how do we teach them?
- 3 Curriculum reconciliation and children with complex learning difficulties and disabilities
- 4 Mental health and emotional well-being
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