

In my view...

...should children with special needs be thrown headlong into a mainstream system that is presently ill-equipped to deal with them? asks Sylvia Edwards, an outreach teacher

...it is not enough to lump children of all abilities together in one classroom and teach to the average...

Children already integrated cope on a variety of levels. Some progress. Many don't. The essential differences between 'coping' and 'progressing' in mainstream education have been overlooked in attempts to comply with the integration principle. The least able are failing to reach their potential in mainstream schools through the DES failure to back policy with adequate resources.

The 1988 Education Reform Act also ignores the problem. The Government should be encouraging schools to make the necessary changes that will allow all children access to the National Curriculum.

Schools have jumped on to the integration bandwagon with scant regard for the implications. The change from 'streaming' to 'mixed-ability' organisation is one example of the purely social integration that has taken place. However it is not enough to lump children of all abilities together in one classroom and teach to the average, expecting to catch those at either end of the ability continuum in the net. Children do not convert to averages.

True functional integration makes enormous demands on mainstream schools, implying as it does, that a child with an identified special need must function adequately in an ordinary environment.

A positive attitude to the principle of integration is essential to its success, as is a willingness on the part of the receiving school to adapt its curriculum content, delivery and approach accordingly.

The advantages of integration are many. Parents of children with special needs point out the benefits of their children learning by 'modelling' from others. Being taught in the same community encourages friendships that can continue out of school (although the practice of 'bussing' children from wide areas prohibits this).

Integration also breaks down barriers. Children without special needs learn to accept those with handicaps or learning difficulties.

In addition to the wider range of options available in the ordinary

school, pupil expectations may be higher.

There are also disadvantages to integration. Parents of 'ordinary' children may resent the presence of those with difficulties, fearing that the slower pace of learning may hold their children back. With individual or grouped classroom approaches, this need not happen.

Services that exist in special schools, such as speech therapy, are not available on the same scale in mainstream. We can all lobby for improvements.

Some children need the cosiness of a small learning environment, and are unable to concentrate in a large, often noisy classroom.

The integration of children with physical handicaps has resulted in improved resources to meet their needs, for example ramps and special equipment. Unfortunately, the majority of children with special needs have learning difficulties. These have not been given the same consideration by schools, LEAs or the Government.

Integration is every child's right. We need to research ways of making the National Curriculum truly accessible to all. We must teach for pupil diversity. Children's individual work programmes need to be continued within the context of the mixed ability classroom.

Outreach provision is not sufficient to enable as many children as possible with special needs to progress in an integrated environment. By being more involved, outreach staff can take on a valued role in curriculum development.

Do we continue to throw children with statements in at the deep end, and let them flounder as best they can, or do we leave them in a protected environment where intensive training facilities are more available?

There is a third alternative. We can equip schools with enough 'buoyancy aids', such as suitable materials and adequate staffing to allow special needs children to swim independently, at their own pace, towards mainstream goals.

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