

Time for change

At last education has recognised the individuality of special needs pupils - but do teachers have time to adapt, asks Sylvia Edwards



The DES booklet *From Policy to Practice* refers to the 'very wide scope' which the national curriculum framework offers 'for teachers to deal with the full range of individual needs'.

The implications of this are enormous.

For the first time, not only are pupils with special needs in mainstream schools to be given access to the full school curriculum but that access is to be made accountable (apart from the stated 'modifications').

At last education seems about to respond to the individuality of pupils.

Raising standards

The intentions are that standards are about to be improved - they need to be.

If ever education needs a shot in the arm, it is now, at a time when many believe that morale has reached its lowest ebb.

Over the last 30 years or so there have been many changes but however threatening the change, teachers have adapted.

Education is a dynamic process in which the notion of progression is fundamental. This is strongly felt within the field of special educational needs.

Never before have so many teachers found themselves involved in this sector of education - which is largely a result of the 1981 Act.

The Act specifically included, for the first time, children with special needs in the ordinary school as far as was compatible with the efficient use of resources.

Yet the 1981 Act contained only implicit mention of curriculum change, by reference to the need for 'adequate provision'.

The act followed in the footsteps of Bullock, Plowden and later the Court report in its recommendations of increased parental involvement in education, together with the increase in the educational rights of parents.

There have been many school-based developmental curricular projects since these reports. The picture seems considerably brighter now.

But where, you may ask, is all of this leading to?

In spite of much effort and many steps in the right direction why has education been brought to its knees?

The missing element is one of time - or lack of it. Teachers need time to accommodate recent accumulated changes.

On a recent course for the teaching of children with special needs HMI suggested the following as a check-list of positive responses to the 1981 Act:

- whole school policy for special needs
- teacher designated to co-ordinate that policy
- links with other stages of education, for example, primary with secondary
- contact with parents
- monitoring of pupil progress as a continuous process
- degree of individualised teaching with clearly defined programmes
- records of set teaching objectives and monitoring of progress
- appropriate use of support agencies and clearly defined roles
- resource base for use by all teachers to facilitate their whole school approach.

Now when have teachers ever had time for such idealistic practice?

Teachers need time for individual attention to reading and maths problems. They need time to teach skills where

necessary, in addition to 'working through the scheme'.

In addition, teachers need time to assess children properly and to act positively on the results.

The way forward

A recent survey by HMI proves that there is confusion as to the best way forward for special needs.

Schools cater least well for pupils of 'just below average' ability. The quality of oral work is reported as disappointing. Writing is limited in range and few schools have a policy for reading development.

Clearly the time is right for positive change.

The new national curriculum is to be 'balanced' and 'broadly based' and is to promote 'spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development' and 'preparation of pupils for the opportunities and responsibilities of adult life'.

If all of these aims are actually achieved for all pupils, it will be the first time in the history of education.

However, if Mr Baker wishes teachers to be 'at the heart of his reforms' then he must realise that they must work with him rather than merely for him.

Teachers need the time and the opportunities to perform the tasks Mr Baker has set them.

Education has lost its heart. Mr Baker has the chance to pump new life into the system.

This time we must get it right.



Sylvia Edwards is an outreach teacher at Crosshill Special School, Blackburn.

The views expressed in this column are not necessarily those of Junior Education.

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