

SPECIAL NEEDS IN ORDINARY CLASSROOMS

From Staff Support to Staff
Development

Gerda Hanko

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SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS



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SPECIAL NEEDS IN ORDINARY CLASSROOMS

From Staff Support to Staff Development

Third edition

Gerda Hanko



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For simplicity alone (with no sexist implications) teachers and children alike are referred to by the masculine pronoun.

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this understanding of all children's needs being special, but of some children needing extra attention at some stage during their life at school, to promote fullest possible participation in an educational enterprise worth their while.

Preface to the third edition

Much has happened in the special needs field since the first edition of this book and its six enlarged re-issues (then entitled *Special Needs in Ordinary Classrooms: Supporting Teachers*) have been welcomed as a model for in-service staff development support systems, assisting teachers and their supporters within and across schools and school services in *joint problem-solving approaches* to meeting pupils' special behavioural, emotional and learning needs. Each re-issue had been in response to the multiplying demands for teachers to receive the kind of school-based support that would enable them through staff development initiatives to respond appropriately to the many emotional, behavioural and learning difficulties they meet in their classrooms, and that such initiatives must address themselves to the professional needs of all teachers as much as to the special needs of any of their pupils.

A challenging new Code of Practice and DfE circulars on Pupils with Problems (Department for Education 1994a, b) now postulate such staff development as an integral part of a school's SEN policy, to include training provision for Special Needs Co-ordinators themselves to be able to help all staff to teach effectively also those pupils who have special needs. Aware of how frequently special needs specialists have in the past been left wastefully stranded and even 'resented as unwilling bearers of answers to problems which the rest of the staff could be helped to resolve for themselves' (Sayer, 1987), this new update aims further to assist them and their colleagues now planning their SEN staff development and training policies, in 'using their best endeavours' to do so in the light of the new Special Needs Code.

Gerda Hanko
London, 1995

Introduction

A seven-year-old attends a new school, hates everybody and is in trouble every day. A nine-year-old's behaviour changes 'out of the blue' from an ideal pupil to an unmanageable trouble-maker. Fifth-form Teresa's provocative rule-breaking gets worse the more she is reprimanded for it, and 15-year-old John's does not improve even when his teachers bend over backwards to give him another chance. When asked to stop it, he dares his teachers to hit him and threatens to thump them if they do. Six-year-old Michael panics at everything that he is asked to do for himself; so does eight-year-old Don but, when Don is helped to improve, Martin takes over. Nothing can get Ivan, ten years old, out of his shell. Dave, eight years old, is 'an infuriating boy who never listens and can't even copy from the board'. Nine-year-old Jeanie's 'fussy, attention-seeking helpfulness' is so irritating that no one wants to work or play with her; and Dipak, 14 years old, waylays staff at every corner with requests. His teachers have tried to help but 'lost all sympathy' when he started lying to them.

The twin themes of this book are the increasing number of children in need of extra attention for emotional, behavioural and related learning problems and the support that is owed to their teachers. Teachers are faced with the task to respond instantaneously to situations such as the above, but are also confronted with numerous obstacles to doing so appropriately. They cannot be expected to meet such children's needs if they get no support with their own.

Teachers may find exceptional behaviour disturbing to varying degrees and may respond to it in a number of ways without fully understanding what special needs it expresses. They may see a problem as located in the child, in his family and home or in the child's situation at school, in conflict with what is expected of him. They may not recognise those special needs which do not lead to behaviour problems, and consequently these may remain unmet and worsen. There are also general behaviour problems, not themselves expressive of special needs but related to those of individual children, which teachers

need to deal with in order to benefit the personal development and educational progress of both the individual child and the other children.

This book is concerned with such dimensions of need where teachers need most support. It has been written in response to growing demands from three main directions.

- 1 Teachers across the whole range of mainstream schools feel that they need support for their work with pupils – seen as disturbed and disturbing – whose special emotional and resulting educational needs they fear they are failing to meet.
- 2 There is dissatisfaction among those specially qualified to alleviate the emotional needs of individual children. They are conscious that they are able to assist only a very small number of children when many need help and that they provide this assistance away from the classroom, where the problems occur.
- 3 Culminating in a new Code of Practice and DfE circulars related to Pupils with Problems (Department for Education 1994a,b), there is at last official acceptance of the need for the kind of professional development of all teachers designed to enable them to respond appropriately, as an integral part of their professional task, to the exceptional needs they encounter; while a new Children Act (1989) has advanced the paramountcy principle of the physical, emotional and educational welfare of the child, making effective collaboration between fellow professionals from the education, social and health services a duty.

The documents cited above have increased awareness of what is really involved in *Making INSET Work* (DES, 1978) and manifest a growing understanding of a number of issues. It is these issues which are addressed in the approach to teacher support described in this book. They are concerned with what is involved in professional development and what obstacles militate against this, the difficulties that teachers experience in identifying their professional needs or in using the provision offered to meet them, the difficulties that providers have in gearing their provision to the context in which teachers work, to be of both *immediate* and *long-term* use in the classroom and school setting, and how to offer this in such a way that it is usable and acceptable while maintaining teachers' autonomy.

Such provision rules out prescriptive advice and intrusive exhortations on what a school or a teacher should do, as fundamentally ineffective. Instead, it recognises, appreciates and builds on teachers' existing strengths and expertise. Ultimately, it creates conditions favourable to finding workable solutions and produces a climate of commitment and mutual respect in which the teachers themselves, as individuals and as a genuinely collaborative team, implement their conclusions and observe and consider what needs evolve.

This book introduces teachers to the potential of special needs related school-based staff development work which many schools already find not

only valuable for meeting the needs of their most 'difficult-to-teach-pupils' but also enhancing the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom and school as a whole. It also looks at the possibilities, principles and practicalities of initiating staff development groups by those who might be encouraged to do so. These may be the school's own special needs support or pastoral teachers and counsellors, or they may come from outside, such as members of the support and psychological services, tutorial units, special school staff engaged in outreach work with advisers, or tutors of professional training courses. All these would be capable of sharing skills and understanding in a way that can be applied within the teacher's remit.

While it has been stressed that all children's educational needs are special and require individual responses in the educational process, varying figures are given of children who need special assistance in school lest the severity of their needs should impair the quality of their education. These figures depend on the criteria used to define and identify such special needs, on what we define as special support and on whom we envisage in the role of supporter. Warnock (1978) gives an overall figure of 20%, composed of 2% now educated in special schools and 18% in ordinary schools who are likely to need special help at some time. Kolvin *et al* (1982) identified 25% of children between seven and eight years old as needing treatment for behavioural, emotional and relationship difficulties. Daines *et al* (1981) ascertained nearly 30% of third-year children in four comprehensive schools as having relatively severe problems. These figures give further weight to the demand that provision should be made to enable *all* teachers to become responsive to children's special needs. It is clear that neither internal pastoral care and special needs support teachers nor external specialists can possibly meet the needs of such a number of children by dealing personally with one case after another. They can, however, hope to meet the need by augmenting the ability of teachers to help such children and, in the process, many others. As Kolvin *et al* (1982) stress, teachers need both professional and emotional support in this area; they need to be helped, 'interactionally' to adapt their approach to these children's individual needs if educational gains are to accompany any success in the relief of their emotional problems.

Without such support the difficulties for teachers and some pupils can seem insurmountable. Teachers often feel ill-equipped to respond to this range of emotional and behaviour difficulties of 'disturbed' children, although many of these may be only slightly more severe than similar problems experienced by the many 'normal' children who manage to cope with them without displaying 'abnormal' behaviour. Moreover, such difficulties can provoke reactions in teachers which increase rather than reduce the problems, further endangering the prospects of already disaffected or emotionally damaged children. As the Elton Report (DES, 1989) has shown, many teachers battle on without the professional and emotional support which they could receive from those with special expertise.

Teachers are deeply concerned with their pupils as people. They may feel

committed to develop the interests and to respond to the needs of all their pupils but may at the same time feel unable to do so in many cases which they find baffling and stressful. The children whom they are trying to help may seem to obstruct their efforts and to make them feel useless. Teachers may blame the children and their background for this, or they may feel that pressures in the school system are interfering with their ability to respond adequately to such children's needs. Either way, they may feel that they have to handle the difficulties predominantly in terms of control and that they can give little help to the pupil. As Medway (1976) convincingly described, they may feel compelled to resort to merely 'coping', which they may themselves despise but which allows them to keep going, albeit at a reduced level of functioning and a high level of stress. They may fall back on defensive encounters with disaffected children, whose needs become ever less likely to be met, until they become excluded from the school as 'unmanageable'. Thus, children with special emotional, behaviour and learning difficulties, whom teachers could in fact help within their educational remit and the normal constraints of the system, tend not to receive the early help to which they would in all probability have been able to respond. Such children may then continue to indicate their needs in ways which educational institutions, and indeed society, must find unacceptable, thereby worsening their difficulties and later prospects, in what may seem to them an ongoing war.

Teachers are also often hindered by some unhelpful beliefs and myths in their profession regarding 'special needs' children: that children deemed to be maladjusted are of a different kind and differ qualitatively from 'normal' children; that teachers' professional skills are inherently and unavoidably insufficient for dealing with them (despite evidence to the contrary (cf. Quinton (1987), Rutter *et al* (1979) and Rutter *et al* (1985) who cite evidence that good experiences at school can at least partially compensate for difficulties at home); that salvation can come from special needs experts (to whom one may therefore send the children if they are within the school, or to whom, if they are external, one may resort only in desperation and when the stigma can no longer be avoided).

The specialists' skills, however, and the principles and practices with which they relieve emotional problems are as yet only rarely conveyed to teachers. These specialists increasingly agree that children and teachers may be spared much distress and that much waste of emotional energy and educational potential can be prevented, if some of the knowledge and skill is made available to teachers in general. A growing number of professionals now attempt to help teachers to respond better to their pupils' special needs, deepening the teachers' understanding, and optimising and maximising their educational skills and resources.

Joining their expertise across the traditional boundaries of apparently conflicting professional orientations and expectations, such professionals can base their approach on principles formulated by pioneers of group consultation such as Balint (1957), Caplan (1970) and Kadushin (1977), and