



Presented at ISEC 2000

Saints in Service - What Makes a Difference?

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Abstract

The saints are talented dedicated professionals who teach the 'rejects' of the system, the difficult to educate. They not only reach them but they teach them!

I will discuss the most effective provision for some of the most difficult pupils and students in the education system. I will highlight the factors that make for some the best provision for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties at both primary and secondary. Examples will be drawn from extensive knowledge as a national adviser and inspector from a number of interesting effective projects across the country.

I will also discuss some of the best features of Pupil Referral Units, will describe interesting LEA initiatives to prevent exclusion which enable mainstream schools to be more inclusive. I will illustrate from real experiences the best of the most recent research in this area, drawing out the most important factors. I will also stress the necessity of working with other agencies and will emphasize the importance of achievement self-confidence and a rich, relevant and practical curriculum for these learners.

By analysing the factors that are successful when pupils are educated effectively out of the mainstream, it is hoped that mainstream schools and LEAs will be able to learn important lessons. Pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties challenge our education system. Making it better for more, so we can mostly be successful is urgent!

Oh when the saints, go marching in . . . I'll have met, and will know, more than a few!

These are talented, dedicated professionals who teach the 'rejects', the 'hard to teach', the 'hard to reach', the very challenging and the difficult to educate. These teachers not only reach them but they teach them!

They are resilient, hard working, have skill and determination. They have a strong and relentless belief in the power and importance of education.

Come with me as I describe what I have seen as a full-time educator for nearly 30 years. I am in the extremely privileged position of spending several hours in a large variety of schools, colleges, pupil referral units and other educational settings. I have tried to use examples from a wide range of provision to demonstrate the continuum of settings in which really good education is actually happening. Trying to concentrate on the positive and some of the best examples I would like to start in the most inclusive primary schools in some of the inner cities I visit.

From my eyes to your ears

I start in two primary schools in Peterborough where every effort is made to keep pupils in, this is what I call STAY(IN) power. It is due to the skilled teachers, the dedication and persistence of the heads, the belief in the basic goodness of children and realistic recognition of the needs of the most difficult pupils. These schools have a very positive range of behaviour management strategies to support the most difficult and often aggressive pupils (and sometimes parents/carers). What I often think of as a layer cake!

First lesson - STAY(IN) POWER - if most teachers knew where and what they were condemning most of the excluded pupils to - they would think twice! Prevention is better than cure (some cures work, that is the message of this paper, but it makes it much harder to get back in, once the mainstream placement has broken down.

Another amazing primary school in Leicester not only mainstreamed their own inner city pupils in this very successful, mainly Asian community, they integrated six pupils from a closing school for pupils with Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (EBD). They gave these pupils and their parents a second chance, 'A NEW START' by moving Years 4 and 5 pupils, 8 - 10 year-olds, back into mainstream and by transferring specialist expertise to facilitate the move.

It wasn't easy, but they had open-minded class teachers who were willing to give it their best. They also had an extremely talented SENCO who supported and encouraged the highly experienced specialist from the EBD School who assisted their transfer and inclusion. The vision, compassion and managerial skills of an exceptional headteacher enabled this to happen. The project was significantly influenced and supported by the regular and valued help from a very good, local education authority Special Education Adviser.

The result - new hope, improved achievement, improved behaviour management for all, boys that have started to work and are learning to read, write and succeed. The parents are delighted. Problems are tackled and a keen sense of humour and proportion have to be maintained through the teamwork, strong beliefs and the bruises along the way. It wasn't an easy option, or less expensive, or less time consuming - but with a strong sense of belief, respect, integrity and humanity they made it happen.

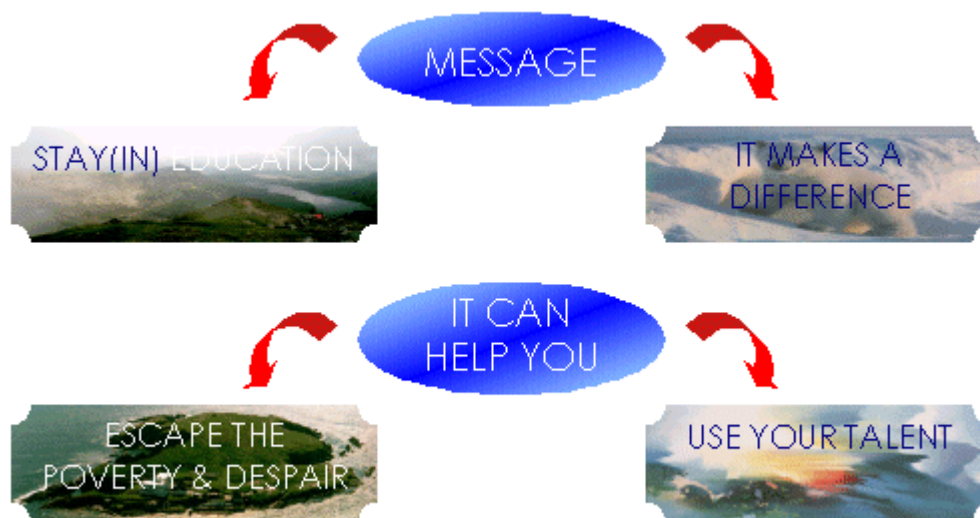
Working hard in South Wales

Next we travel to South Wales to a secondary school in an extremely poor area. There are high levels of deprivation, poverty, unemployment and disrupted schooling. (I mean nothing in the charity shops worth buying, impetigo and ingrained attitudes of despair that says 'why work at school because there are no jobs anyway'.)

Schools in the area work hard on attendance levels and alternatives to the usual

curriculum. They do their best to keep pupils in class. The curriculum is put under the spotlight to ensure it is interesting, relevant, as practical as possible and it is planned at various levels to match the different needs and abilities of the pupils (well that is the aim and has been the focus of professional development for several years). Staff observe and support each other, literacy levels are known, readability and support for pupils with difficulties has a very high profile. Information and communications technology is used daily to support literacy, numeracy and to assist in research and the presentation of work. The SENCO has high status and is part of the Senior Management Team. The powerful driving force is a headteacher who takes a direct interest. He encourages self-reviews in school - usual for many good secondaries - what makes this one so good is the way they work with all other providers in the area. They have a raft of initiatives to keep young people learning both full and part-time in school and off site. They work with youth workers or in the local colleges of further education.

Lesson - keep them in! Staff bend over backward not to exclude. They develop alternatives, stress education matters - reward attendance, celebrate small successes on the way to big successes and work with the police, education welfare officers, the LEA, the Youth Service, the Probation Service, the FE Colleges and voluntary agencies - indeed anyone and everyone to make it work. They attract funds from whoever will give them - European Union, Lottery, DfEE - anything going - to make it work.



Young mothers in the North

Now to North Tyneside to the best Mother and Baby Unit I have ever been in or am likely to be in. What made it so special? Everything! The Units location and new building, as a part of an urban renewal grant, was the result of riots, disruption, abject poverty and unemployment. The parking is still within a security fence with CCTV cameras and security guards - otherwise your car radios and wheels go at best - or at worst the whole car!

It is special, as the component parts are so unusual. I have been in some of the worst provision in England for pregnant school girls and here I saw: a new, purpose-built, class base next to a commercial nursery, in the setting of a nursery nurse training centre, with 'adult' based cafe. Reserved places for the babies of the mothers in the Pupil Referral Unit, with talented teachers, especially the teacher in

charge, who says your future is what matters now, get a good education, a good job, grow up and get wise. Show your child you can provide.

The parents of these girls said they were glad they got pregnant because the PRU's education was so much better than they were receiving previously. The curriculum was well matched to their needs; there is a heavy emphasis on the girls' responsibilities to look after their child. The pregnant girls were helped enormously by those who already had had their babies. They had good role models and talked regularly about the issues that were important to them. Best of all they got daily childcare, daily education, excellent teaching and very good links with the college. They were not interested in going back to school. They were interested by the time the staff had taught them for a few months, in learning, in succeeding and in going on in further education. It wasn't a cheap option - in one PRU I have been in recently they bought a posh thick carpet for the pregnant schoolgirls who met for three hours on a Thursday afternoon. Why? Answer - because they had to have somewhere for the babies to play. Chalk and cheese - it is not a level playing field, it is a lottery on what provision you get - depending on luck and where you live.

This PRU worked so well because of the talents, facilities, and good management of a dedicated Education Welfare Officer of the LEA and multi-agency support - saints in service! These ingredients allowed learning to continue; indeed learning went up several gears! These girls in less time (as they had to look after their babies and feed themselves at lunchtime) learnt much more. They built up their personal learning habits, raised their personal expectations and many were planning to go on to college to study.

Special schools

We move on to a series of very special schools who include the excluded, who educate some of the most difficult, such as -

- An EBD school in Oxfordshire that provides high quality education for their Key Stage 2, 3 and 4 pupils by impressively focussing on progress every six weeks with pupils, parents and personal tutors. So what happens in school is targeted but they also reintegrate a high proportion of pupils back into mainstream schools with extra support - the amount depends on the individual. The reintegration leads to inclusion in several cases.

- Another day EBD school in Camden has improved significantly over the last four years through skilled leadership, sheer hard work, excellent team building and the daily grind to challenge extremely difficult behaviours, attitudes and social problems. Many pupils come from dysfunctional families, lone mothers who struggle to cope, some are rent boys, and many are on drugs. The school is a rough and tough place but it is improving all the time. The staff meet daily after school. At the briefing they discuss each class, pupils and agree action. They tackle the behaviours and support each other. Facilities are not good, the building is old and inadequate, but it is worthy of mention because of the hearts, spirit and sheer determination - the belief, vision, integrity and perseverance in the face of adversity of the headteacher and the staff.

- Lastly, we go to some of the most special schools in existence - those for extreme challenging behaviours associated with their autism and severe learning difficulties. Staff take the 'windows of opportunities' between unsettled behaviours. I liken it to skipping. When to run in and when to wait! Talented staff find and develop ways to interpret wants and needs in non-verbal pupils, they forgive the bites, scratches,

kicks and worse they receive and they build positive relationships, trust and confidence. Their prime purpose is learning - be it in very small steps and they include these young people in the local community - some are placed for 52 weeks, 365 days, 24 hours a day at the school, some less - all are very demanding. Every effort is made to include them in the education system and in their locality - to provide them with appropriate, stimulating learning experiences - very special schools indeed. Provision is very expensive.

So you can see through my eyes there are saints in service, those who push the quality of education ever onwards and upwards - what are the characteristics of these special educators? What makes them so special? For my personal analysis see Appendix 1. This paper does not have a bibliography as it is based on personal experience and the analytical observations of the last four or so years of a very experienced educator. I hope you have found them valuable. We have 'Saints in Service' - I bear witness!

Appendix 1

When collecting the ingredients it helps greatly if you have these key success factors:

- Leadership
- Vision
- Belief
- Emphasis on self-esteem
- High expectations to improve standards

- Genuinely positive relationships
- Teamwork
- Expectations to complete work
- Achievements celebrated
- Nationally recognised 'worthwhile' accreditation
- Multi/inter agency support
- Supportive Governors and LEA

- Relevant and highly practical curriculum
- Very good teaching
- Very good support staff
- Very good relevant resources
- Effective and regular use of information and communications technology
- Regular self-review with the pupils

- Respect
- Humanity
- Integrity
- Perseverance

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