

The making of the inclusive school

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Special schools on special measures

For full reference see:

Thomas, G., Yee, W., & Lee, J. (2000) 'Failing special schools – and their recovery from special measures assessments' *Research Papers in Education*, 15, 1, 3-24.

'FAILING' SPECIAL SCHOOLS: THE ROLE OF ACTION PLANNING IN RECOVERY FROM A SPECIAL MEASURES ASSESSMENT

ABSTRACT: Special schools are four more times more likely to receive a special measures inspection assessment than are mainstream schools. In this DfEE-funded research the action plans of all 60 special schools which are or had been on special measures were analysed. Relationships between the quality of the action plan and subsequent progress (as assessed by HMI ratings) were then sought. One in four of the total cohort of special schools were visited for further information from staff, governors, parents and pupils. Good progress following a critical assessment was found to be related to certain processes adopted in action planning, such as the adequacy of specification of responsibility for undertaking certain tasks, for monitoring progress and for planning a realistic timescale. These in turn depended on the quality of leadership (often effected via a change of headteacher) and on the quality of support received from outside the school, for example from local authority advisers.

Designing inclusive schools

DESIGNING INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS: A PILOT PROJECT ABOUT CHILDREN'S INVOLVEMENT – A REPORT

Rationale and aims

This pilot project was premised on the notion that there is little work which can guide the researcher on means of ascertaining children's honest and open opinions on matters which involve environmental and spatial awareness and imagery – particularly when thinking of those at the margins. There were a number of specific

objectives in undertaking both this pilot project and the longer project which we expect to stem from it ...

1. to inform and improve the design of inclusive schools, placing the focus more on children's views on the 'legibility', understanding and attractiveness of design than on accessibility;
2. through inter-disciplinary partnership, to develop new methodology which enables access to children's constructs about the design of the school, and in particular to develop methodology which gives access to the ideas of those with disabilities, learning difficulties and emotional and behavioural difficulties with a view to enabling their effective participation in design;
3. to stimulate inclusive policy and practice in environmental design.

Plans for carrying out the work

Two central research foci were planned ...

Research focus 1: Place and Space

The aim here was to determine how far school environments are 'imageable' for our children, how they navigate using mental images and how far the school environment creates vivid and appealing physical settings in which children can feel at home and at ease. Do they feel comfortable – or do they feel disorientated, 'disabled' and lost – and what are the differences between non-disabled, learning disabled and physically disabled children here? For this element, children were asked to focus certain parts of their school environment, to draw and describe these, and to engage in various kinds of visual and non-visual imaging exercises.

Research focus 2: Key environments and key apparatuses

We identified a set of *key environments* (for example, school entrances – which are frequently visually confusing and/or off-putting, providing few place-cues – and school toilets, which often, even if accessible, present a source of fear) and a set of *key apparatuses* (for example, playground apparatus) for analysis. Interview sessions included a range of activities and focused especially on aesthetic features (judged via a range of sensory experiences) but they also aimed to discover what children want from these settings, and what they find difficult, or frustrating. A central objective ultimately will be to help transform materials, buildings or facilities currently regarded as ugly, difficult or embarrassing for children to use. A central feature of this pilot was to establish the strengths and weaknesses of the methodology before a larger project.

Methods

For this pilot project, we proposed to use semi-structured individual interview sessions in which we would ask children to engage in a number of activities: question and answer; drawing; identifying good and bad design; discussing focus materials which include visual materials (eg photographs and drawings, models, plans and maps), taped sounds, and samples of smells which may be associated with aspects of school; providing accounts of their own experiences in the built environment of the school.

Methodological issues for further study

Presentation of photographs

The number of photographs used was cut down numbers as pilot progressed. It was found that 5 sets of up to nine 'key trigger' photographs is enough to stimulate detailed discussion. The discussions indicated how such groups of photographs could be designed in future. It will be preferable in future investigation to present a single photograph, within the group of eight or nine, which highlights one or two specific characteristics of a space and a contrasting photograph. These

characteristics could be determined from the pilot interviews. For example, within a set concentrating on entrances to school buildings, a possible photo set could consist of one photograph showing steps and one showing a ramp, one with a door painted a pleasing colour and one painted grey, one with the entrance in shade one in sun, one with the entrance shaded by trees another shaded by a covered walkway, etc. Although the photographs used did manage to bring out and show many of those contrasts, such contrasts would benefit by being specifically highlighted for comparison.

Sounds

Youngsters found these difficult to identify and despite being reassured that the task was not to identify them correctly but to use them to create an image of a place in their mind, it was clear that they still saw the task as something of a challenge. This led to cases of youngsters becoming rather frustrated with their difficulty in identifying the sounds accurately. Maximum attention span listening to sounds was very important. Sounds lasting any more than 10-15 seconds led to loss of interest. There was no marked difference between the different groups of youngsters in response to sound. The blind, surprisingly, were no more or less successful using sounds as a stimulus to discussion. Those with hearing impairment also had very similar responses. Sounds gave most information about how children felt in small or large, cluttered or uncluttered classrooms and in outside play spaces – whether they preferred small or large spaces and sometimes how they felt in play situations.

Smells

Smells had a similar effect. The smells used were quite difficult to identify, but nevertheless the children were well able to create a picture in their mind about the environment they were in (most commonly the lavatories) and talk about it. In some individual cases youngsters found it very difficult to conjure any image from the smell and the data was of little value. But, on the whole, they found it an enjoyable exercise.

Drawing a map

Youngsters were asked to imagine that someone was coming to visit them and wanted to meet them in the classroom where they are most often to be found. There was often difficulty in identifying a classroom, but that was usually overcome with encouragement. They were encouraged to talk through their map as they were drawing it and write details on the map which might make it clearer. More detail was encouraged by asking about how a visitor would know they were in the correct place as indicated on the map. Young children did not have the concept of using diagrammatic representation to depict a place and found the task difficult. The notion of a 'mental map' is perhaps too sophisticated with these children and needs to be revised.

Findings

One of the main objectives of this pilot project was to investigate the most effective way in which children and young people with special needs could be encouraged to express honest and understandable opinions about their school. Consequently, a major part of this pilot project involved the development of materials and schemes for interviewing children and young people about their experiences of their school environment. Photographs, sounds and smells were gathered to act as stimuli to discussion about school. The sounds and smells, in particular, required the children and young people to create an image for themselves of an environment in school, whether somewhere pleasant or unpleasant that they had experience of, or somewhere that they would like to be, while still in the school environment. The

photographs generated much detailed discussions about the children's likes and dislikes relating specifically to the photographs and to their school in general. In addition the youngsters were asked to draw a map for a visitor to their school which would show how the visitor would move from the main school entrance to the room where the child was most often to be found. Those with sight impairments were asked to describe the route verbally. These maps highlighted what were the important landmarks, in school, for each child. As they drew, they often discussed further factors of the school they liked or disliked or found helpful or challenging. A couple of them found this a strange exercise and were initially reluctant or unsure about involving themselves.

Interviews were conducted with a total of 13 children and young people – 3 hearing impaired, 3 visually impaired, 2 with emotional and behavioural difficulties, 1 physically disabled and 4 with no disability. The attitude of specialist teachers or advisors to us contacting these children for interview varied greatly and access proved variable. Some were extremely supportive and helpful; others, while reluctant at first, eventually helped us to contact the numbers of children and young people we were hoping for; yet others were more protective and suspicious about the desire to ask children rather than professionals.

Differences between groups, while they existed, were not as great as anticipated and in many ways this validates the inclusive framework within which the work was set up. The greatest difference arose from discussion with one child with a physical disability necessitating the use of a wheelchair. Generally children and young people were keen to talk about the importance to them of colours, light and space. This youngster, however, was less motivated by these aesthetic considerations and much more by the practical aspects of his school life. His drawn map did highlight strongly how those with physical disability are likely to be much more aware of the physical attributes of the route which they will travel, than they are of the impact of any of the surrounding buildings or spaces. The difference in attitude was so marked that a further study would be of interest.

The strength of comments across the interview group about certain attributes of their environments was very strong. Without exception all interviewees mentioned colour, light and windows, cluttered classrooms, size of outside spaces and differences between sun and shade outside, as being factors which they would notice in their environment. It did not seem that any of these aspects were linked to a particular disability, but were purely what made them comfortable. Obvious aspects specifically linked to disability – and often noted in reports such as that of the Elton Committee (for example, carpets and low ceilings for both those with behaviour difficulties and hearing impairments) – were mentioned less often. Even when they were prompted about these aspects, the children and young people did not appear to rate them as being of the same degree of importance as the way the aesthetic aspects of the building made them feel.

All children and young people identified as having some kind of disability were from the secondary age group. (These were the children and young people identified to us by the specialist advisors as most suitable for interview.) The interviews with primary children were from amongst those with no recognised difficulty. All age groups seemed equally able to participate in discussions prompted by the same stimuli equally effectively. Amongst the younger children the map-drawing exercise indicated that they might pay less attention to how they move around outside compared to inside a building.

One variable which it became clear could be of importance and which was not considered before this pilot was the way in which inclusion had taken place for different children. As an example, all of the children with hearing impairment experienced a high degree of inclusion and support and none of them were using sign language. Amongst those with visual impairment it was less clear that they were receiving a similar level of support specifically aimed at inclusion and there was large variation amongst the group interviewed. Responses were probably highly influenced by the way in which they were assisted with the inclusion process. From different LEAs, where the policies dictating the style of integration might be different, there would be an expectation of a variation in the responses of interviewees.

The findings gave two broad strands of information for further study. The first is that there were far fewer differences between sub-groups than had been anticipated, and this in a sense validates a non-categorical approach to research in special needs: children's difficulties are problematic to categorise, and the expectation that supposed categories will behave similarly for research purposes is usually confounded. The implication is that further work should be guided by ideographic rather than categorical considerations in selecting children – that is to say, children may be selected broadly to encompass any major kinds of disabilities but there should be no expectation about exactitude in stratifying or otherwise making representative the sample of children worked with. Rather, the aim should be to gain as clear and rich a picture from each of the children as possible and to draw themes from this information which are contextualised as clearly as possible in their own situations, their own abilities and disabilities.

The second is that the general thesis on which the work was premised – that is, that aesthetic rather than functional considerations are likely to be prioritised by children – has been validated, albeit with a small sample of children. This clearly deserves further study, to determine the characteristics of the aesthetics of school which make those characteristics pleasant, unpleasant, fear-invoking, calmness inducing, or whatever. There is scope for a great deal of work here.

One of the intriguing features to emerge from the data gathered to date is that children seemed to have little of a sense of place, and used few of the markers which we expected them to use in their movement around school. The ways in which they determine their 'home' and their directionality clearly 'exist' in the way that they behave, but they do not seem to be accessible to the children themselves in their discussions with others. Their understanding of place and direction seems to be a form of 'tacit knowledge', which it perhaps requires field examination (as distinct from direct questioning, or work with focus materials) to discover more about. That is to say, the most productive methodology for future work may be to 'shadow' children as they move around schools, asking and noting where and how they are finding their way, noting their movements, actions and interactions with others. An ethnographic study, in other words, may be the most appropriate addition to any set of methods being used to further this work. Such work would make for an innovation in the way that data about cognitive maps is sought and would provide interesting information for planners, perhaps introducing new concepts about the likely kinds of materials, events or stimuli by which children orient themselves.

Extending the pilot project

In this pilot project we proposed to develop method concerned with some of the problems which have surrounded working with children with different needs in relation to questions of design. It is expected that this small project will in itself inform practice and a paper on the results is currently in preparation for *Support for Learning*

(the major professional journal for special educational needs in schools). The ultimate aim is to undertake a much larger project with a minimum of 150 children. Having learned from the ideas of the young people involved here it will be possible to develop research design, to refine method, to use new research techniques and ultimately to draw robust, generalisable conclusions about design for inclusive schools. We are hopeful that the advice which ultimately emerges will be relevant to a variety of user-groups: planners, voluntary organisations, schools, local authorities and central government.

Essex Teaching Assistants

See: *Teaching assistants presentation.ppt*

Theory and non-theory in education

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