

Partnerships between special and mainstream schools

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Mainstreaming and inclusion of students with special educational needs in regular education, challenge traditional concepts and common practices. Traditionally, special education has been a parallel yet separate educational system. Even though there is almost universal agreement on the goals of inclusion and mainstreaming, special education schools have proved to be resilient and still exist in many countries. One approach to promoting the goal of inclusion is the establishment of collaborative partnerships between special and mainstream schools. This paper will discuss models of such partnerships based on a literature review and visits to partner special and mainstream schools in Israel. Positive elements of these partnerships as well as challenges involved are presented.

Introduction

Many view the educational provision for students with special educational needs (SEN) as a continuum of services with the special school at one end and the mainstream school at the other (see for example: Farrell, 2010; Day, Prunty and Dupont, 2012). A continuum is a line with two ends. As we move along this line, the exact point at which one thing is transformed into something else is unclear. In a national review of special schools in Ireland (Day and Prunty, 2010) the authors support this position: ‘...special schools are an important part of the continuum of educational provision for students with SEN’ (Day and Prunty, 2010, p. 7). Similarly, there is a common understanding that there will always be students with SEN whose learning needs cannot be appropriately met in a mainstream school. These students require the provision of specialised education and resources to support their needs. Norwich (2008) points out that, apparently, special schools are here to stay as ‘...since in the year 2000 the percentage [of children attending special schools] has remained at around the 1.2–1.3% level’ (p. 136). McMenamin (2011) offered a closer look at the tenacity of special schools in New Zealand and claims that: ‘...this type of educational provision has proved to be resilient even though, with reference to children and young people with SEN, there is almost universal

acceptance of the principle of inclusion’ (p. 97). A somewhat different perspective is offered by Forbes (2007), Vice President of ASEPA (Australian Special Education Principals’ Association). She points out that mainstream schools are not necessarily the desired placement for some students with SEN and they are not necessarily best served there, but rather in a special school. A ‘specialist school’ as Forbes calls it, is a school catering to students with difficulties or disabilities that affect their learning and who cannot be provided for in a regular or mainstream school. These schools may be specifically designed, staffed and have the resources to provide appropriate education for children with additional needs. Their primary aim and responsibility is for: ‘...teaching that will result in improved student outcomes across a rich and diverse curriculum, thereby preparing students for inclusion into the broader society’ (Forbes, 2007, p. 68).

Michael Farrell, Educational Inspector with the London Borough of Hillingdon Education services in England, suggests replacing the term ‘mainstream inclusion’ with the term ‘educational inclusion’ ‘in order to avoid the implication that venues other than mainstream schools are inferior’ (Farrell, 2000, p. 35).

The idea that special schools are here to stay despite the arguments against their very existence is in the background of this paper.

Special schools in the current inclusive era

More than two decades ago, the Salamanca Conference on Special Needs Education endorsed the idea of inclusive education (UNESCO, 1994). This idea has become a key international educational policy. The debates over inclusive education usually focused on mainstream schools, whereas special schools were often ignored.

Evidence obtained from surveys of special schools in Ireland and in Scotland (e.g., Head and Pirrie, 2007; Male and Rayner, 2007, 2009; Ware et al., 2009) points to fundamental changes that have taken place in special schools in several areas: (a) changes in the pupil population, namely, a perceived increase in the range, severity and complexity of conditions of the youngsters; (b) the composition of the

school staff, including a change in the ratio between teaching staff and therapists in favour of therapy provision; (c) teaching styles and teaching resources and (d) increased links with mainstream schools.

Different forms of collaboration and partnership have been described over the past three decades (see e.g., Mittler, 2002; Norwich and Evans, 1994; Stainback and Stainback, 1984). More recently, multidimensional models of providing services have been highlighted as the future of special schools (see e.g., Muijs, West and Ainscow, 2010; Norwich, 2008) as well as partnerships where special schools establish themselves as support hubs for partner mainstream schools (Forlin and Rose, 2010; Rose, 2012). Tutt's (2011) book, *Partnerships Working to Support Special Educational Needs and Disabilities*, addresses how schools in the United Kingdom have creatively transformed the structure of their schools in order to meet the needs of diverse learners. Central throughout the book is the idea that effective learning for all students requires personalisation and collaboration. Partnerships, as a form of collaboration between schools, can be in the form of schools located within the same physical space or the pooling of resources such as staff and facilities. Many of the case studies presented below are specialised schools partnering with mainstream schools for the benefit of all students.

Policy and practice of inclusive education in Israel

In Israel, a centralised dual system of 'special' education' and 'regular' or mainstream education serves over two million school-age children. Education services for pupils with disabilities are provided in accordance with the principle of a 'continuum of services', from enrolment in a mainstream class with provision of support services at one end, to a special school placement at the other. The integration of students with SEN in mainstream schools in Israel has been practiced on a voluntary basis since the mid-fifties of the last century and became mandatory in the early 1990s following the passage of the 1988 Law of Special Education (Al-Yagon and Margalit, 2001). The latter was amended (2002) to emphasise the mandate to include children with SEN in general education settings. During the 2014/2015 school year, there were 2 228 266 pupils in the Israeli education system. Special education services were provided to 186 000 pupils, approximately 8.5 per cent of school age children. Of these, nearly two-thirds (58%) were enrolled in mainstream classes at all levels of education. The rest, 42 per cent, were enrolled in special education facilities – either in special classes within regular schools or in special schools (The Israeli National Council for the Child, 2015). In accordance with the Law of Special Education, education is provided for youngsters from age three to 21, whereas mainstream education is provided until age 18.

Over the last three decades, the Israeli education system has undergone a process of increasing autonomy and decentralisation of its schools. This has led to a gradual

shift in decision making from the Ministry of Education to the school districts and to the schools themselves, enabling the latter to exercise their own educational initiatives in a variety of areas (Volansky, 2007). Partnerships between special and mainstream schools in Israel reflect these local initiatives and are rooted in societal ideologies – an inclusive pluralistic philosophy; a humanistic approach to educational provision; education towards recognition, tolerance and acceptance of the 'other' and the aspiration to cultivate a democratic and heterogeneous school community (Vogel and Avissar, 2009).

The aim of this research was to examine partnerships between special and mainstream schools formed for the purpose of promoting inclusion and to learn about the positive elements and challenges involved. Understanding such partnerships may contribute to comprehending the essence of the special education school in the current era of inclusive education and assist in making the mainstream school even more accessible to students with severe SEN.

Method

This study was commissioned by the Ministry of Education. The method of inquiry included gathering data with regard to existing partnerships and types of collaboration between special schools and mainstream schools from several sources:

- (a) A literature review of models of collaboration and existing partnerships: Several on-line data bases such as: Academic Search Premier – Ebscohost, ProQuest Central, ERIC, SAGE Premier, Science Direct and Google Scholar were searched, using the following key phrases: partnerships between special schools and mainstream schools; the/a new role for special schools; collaboration between special education and mainstream education; networking for collaboration in inclusive education; cluster schools and inclusion; partner schools and inclusion. The search was limited to articles published between 1995 and 2013 and yielded 70 items, representing different countries including Australia, England, Hong Kong, India, Ireland, New Zealand, Northern Ireland and others. Of these articles, 37 (53%) included case studies and research based evidence. About half of the research focused on teachers and students, whereas the other half focused on principals and staff of special schools; 27 (38.6%) were general articles offering different meta perspectives and 6 (8.6%) were national reports about the educational provision for students with SEN, including information about special schools.
- (b) Personal correspondence with colleagues: Requests for information about partnerships were e-mailed to colleagues, some of whom were personal acquaintances of the authors, as well as others who participated in international conferences during the year of the study (The 6th TEPE conference, Warsaw, Poland, May, 2012; The European Conference on Educational Research -

ECER. Cadiz, Spain, September, 2012) Authors of the articles found in the literature review were contacted as well. We received responses from Cyprus, Germany, Greece, Hong-Kong and Portugal.

- (c) Visits to different sites in Israel where partnership schools are located: The Ministry of Education granted permission for these visits. The sites were selected following an informal survey among school supervisors that took place during a national conference. The supervisors were asked to recommend, special education schools that partner with mainstream schools. Nineteen such partnerships were recommended. In order to narrow down the number of sites to be visited, the author compiled a set of criteria that were based on (1) the concept of best practice as presented by Gibb, Tunbridge, Chua, et al. (2007), (2) the ideas presented in 'Good schools for children with disabilities' (Schulte, 2002) and (3) the suggestions raised in 'Special and general education collaborative practices in exemplary schools' (McLaughlin, 2002). The criteria included: physical proximity between schools; scope of involvement of school staff and students; and the type and nature of involvement (social only; academic only; social and academic).

Six partnerships were found to meet the criteria established. These included three partnerships between mainstream primary schools and schools for children with autistic spectrum disorders (ASD); two partnerships with schools for children with intellectual disabilities (ID); one partnership with a school for children who have multiple disabilities including learning, behavioural and emotional difficulties (MD). Three of the sites are part of a regional education centre that serves students from several rural area settlements, both Jewish and Arab, including collective settlements (kibbutzim), villages and small towns; two are in mid-sized towns and one is in a large city. The average number of students in the special schools included in this study is 86 and the average number of students in the mainstream primary schools is 407.

The following table presents the data with regard to the partnerships visited (Table 1).

Due to ethical considerations, the pupils and their parents were not part of this study. The visits included a tour of the each school and focus group discussions, as well as in-depth individual interviews with members of the school staff, including the teachers, the school's principal and others in leadership positions. The data gathered included a description of partnerships derived from the texts of the articles, the e-mail correspondence and the texts of the interviews held at the partner schools. The texts were analysed using Creswell's (2008) six steps for qualitative data analysis. Special emphasis was placed on the thematic analysis of the texts (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Initial findings were shared with the participants for the purpose of member-checking.

Table 1: Partner schools in Israel

	Partner schools	Location
1	A special school (ASD), ages 3–12 A mainstream primary, ages 9–12	A regional school centre
2	A special school (ID), ages 6–15 A mainstream primary, ages 6–12	A quiet neighbourhood in a large city
3	A special school (ASD) ages 6–12 A mainstream primary, ages 6–12	A regional school centre
4	A special school (MD), ages 6–21 A mainstream primary, ages 6–12	A large school complex in a mid-sized town
5	A special school (ASD), ages 6–21 A special school (MD), ages 6–12 A mainstream primary, ages, 6–21	A regional school centre
6	A special school (ID), ages 6–12 A mainstream primary, ages 6–12	A mid-sized town

Findings

As mentioned earlier, the aim of the research was to learn about the positive elements and challenges involved in maintaining partnerships between special and mainstream schools. Content analysis of the different texts revealed four different models of partnerships between special and mainstream schools: (a) One campus; (b) Neighbours; (c) A cluster of schools; (d) A school within a school;

- (a) The term 'One campus' refers to a partnership between two or more schools where each of the partners is an independent educational entity with its own administrative and teaching staff. However, all are located in one physical space, that is, one campus. The architectural design of such a campus is pre-planned to accommodate several schools for different ages including a special education school. Sometimes, there is a joint school yard or a pathway between the different school buildings and the students are able to move freely from one to the other. Mittler (2002) and Tutt (2011) add that partnering schools located on one campus tend to share resources such as a gym, library and the like.
- (b) The model called 'Neighbours' refers to two self-contained schools that are located in close proximity to one another, so much so that the students can walk safely from one to the other for classes or social activities. This model enables inclusion on an individual basis. It enables the use of communal learning areas and necessitates pedagogical flexibility (Day, Prunty, and Dupont, 2012; Day and Prunty, 2010; Hunter and O'Connor, 2006; Tutt, 2011). Although collaboration or a partnership was not planned in advance, the close proximity and the changing views towards inclusion have led to this type of partnership.
- (c) The third model is that of a cluster of schools where the special school serves as a professional resource centre. Norwich and Evans (1994) were among the first to recommend this type of partnership, as it

recognises the resilience and tenacity of special schools and is not dependent solely on physical proximity. Special school staff members provide mentoring, consultation, professional guidance and counselling to staff members from the mainstream schools. This model has become a national practice in Australia, Ireland and Hong Kong (Forbes, 2007; Forlin, 2007; Merrigan, 2011; Forlin and Rose, 2010).

- (d) The term ‘a school within a school’ was coined by Forbes (2007) when describing the West Australia model of service delivery for students with SEN: ‘It is based on a co-principalship model, which is based on a philosophy of shared management, collective power, shared responsibility and accountability, and consultation and collaboration’ (p. 70). Both schools are under one roof; the principal of the special school is subordinate to the principal of the mainstream school. This model is characterised by concurrent separation and collaboration, that is, separate facilities, mutual resources, separate as well as shared staff and the like (McMenamin, 2011).

Partner schools in Israel

The following table presents the models of the partnerships found in Israel. As mentioned previously, these were recommended by school supervisors and met the criteria set by the researcher (Table 2).

The more prevalent models of partnerships between special and mainstream schools in Israel are ‘one campus’ and ‘neighbours’.

The ‘one campus’ model necessitates pre-planning. In Israel this model is more prevalent in regional rural education centres where the students are bussed daily from different settlements in the vicinity. In urban environments in Israel, it is possible to allocate enough space for a large

educational complex in new neighbourhoods within existing cities or in new cities, as is the case in site # 4. Partnerships based on the ‘resource centre’ model were not found. This can be explained by the fact that the function of professional resources in Israel is generally provided by local resource centres for special education services. These centres were created by the Ministry of Education in the 1990s in accordance with the Law of Special Education.

The model called ‘a school within a school’ was part of the history of one partnership, but has not been replicated elsewhere. We suggest that this has to do with the fact that at the present time, nearly 10 per cent of the student body in every mainstream school in Israel is made up of pupils with SEN. The ‘school within a school’ model increases the percentage of youngsters with SEN to 20 per cent or more. Consequently, this model became unappealing to teachers and principals of mainstream schools, as it made the daily burden even heavier.

We have chosen to describe three partnerships in detail in order to gain a better understanding of how they were established and how they function.

The case of partnership no. 1 – ‘One Campus’. The partner schools are located in a regional education centre that was established in 2008. There are four schools at this centre – a special education school, two mainstream primary schools (one for children 6–9 years old and the other for 9–12 year olds) and a high school. The students are from 24 different rural area settlements. The partnership is between the special school (80 students with ASD) and one of the primary schools (550 students). Building the special school on this campus was the initiative of the head of the regional administrative authority. The partnership primary school was established in 2008 soon after this education complex was built. However, by 2010 the number of students in the primary school grew to over one thousand and the decision was made to divide it into two schools (ages 6–9 and 9–12) and to continue the partnership with the older children.

Upon graduation, the students from the mainstream primary school move on to the high school, whereas the graduates of the special school attend either special schools or special classes within mainstream high schools in the area.

The mission and vision of this special school is based on the ‘Theory of Social Thinking’, developed by Michelle G. Winner, which focuses on developing basic functional communication and social skills using behavioural approaches (see e.g., Winner, 2003; Winner and Crooke, 2011).

The partnership primary school includes:

- (a) Integrating nearly 30 pupils (~40% of the student body) from the special school on an individual basis in

Table 2: Models of partner schools in Israel

	Partner schools	Model
1	A special school (ASD), ages 3–12 A mainstream primary, ages 9–12	One campus
2	A special school (ID), ages 6–15 A mainstream primary, ages 6–12	Neighbours
3	A special school (ASD), ages 6–12 A mainstream primary, ages 6–12	One campus*
4	A special school (MD), ages 6–21 A mainstream primary, ages 6–12	One campus
5	A special school (ASD), ages 6–21 A special school (MD), ages 6–12 A mainstream primary, ages 6–21	One campus
6	A special school (ID), ages 6–12 A mainstream primary, ages 6–12	Neighbours

*This partnership began as ‘a school within a school’ and evolved to a model of ‘one campus’.

specific subject-matter classes such as mathematics, English as a foreign language, physical education, art and music. At the beginning of the year, the scheduled curriculum is planned jointly by both staffs and the students walk over accompanied by a teaching assistant;

- (b) Joint committees of pupils from both schools that are involved in planning social activities and social activism projects;
- (c) Pairing classes from the schools for the purpose of joint activities, both academic and social. Since all classes are paired, all of the students from the special school take part in some form of inclusive activity. The location of the activities alternates between the two schools;
- (d) The special school's therapeutic facilities are open to mainstream students and joint school celebrations are held at either school. These help to make the partnership mutual and reciprocal;
- (e) In addition, students from the high school can opt to fulfil their 'social involvement' curriculum requirement by volunteering with the students of the special school.

Facilitating aspects include joint staff meetings for planning and ongoing evaluation of the joint activities; the cultivation of relationships with the mainstream school's staff; and the support from the head of the regional authority.

Barriers include the need to keep on working on strengthening positive attitudes of students and staff of the mainstream school and the difference in the number of students at the two schools. The special school population is much smaller, as is its class size (the average number of pupils in the classes at the mainstream school is 36, whereas the average number in the special school is 10). This makes pairing the classes very difficult. In addition, the severity of the 'different' behaviour of the students from the special school can be challenging for both teachers and pupils of the mainstream school.

The case of partnership no. 2 – 'neighbours'. The two partner schools are located across the street from each other, about 500 m apart, in a quiet neighbourhood of the third largest city in the country. The students move, with an escort, from one school to the other. There are 90 students in the special education school and they are bussed to school from several different neighbourhoods. The mainstream elementary has 180 students from the immediate neighbourhood including two self-contained special classes. Both schools were built in the 1950s.

These two schools are unique in terms of the number of pupils they serve. The special education school is considered a mid-sized school, larger than most special education schools, and the mainstream primary school has 180 pupils which is nearly 50 per cent less than the average primary school in Israel.

This partnership was initiated several years ago by the principal of the special school. She succeeded in recruiting the former principal of the mainstream school as well as the current one. The mainstream school was in danger of being closed because of the dwindling number of pupils. By agreeing to the partnership, it became part of a prestigious educational experiment endorsed by both the Ministry of Education and the local municipality.

Academic collaboration is at the core of this partnership. Joint elective classes are offered on a weekly basis. Both schools have set up specific study areas for these joint classes so that it is possible to alternate the activities between the two schools. The benefits are mutual – the students from both schools get a chance to interact on an equal basis academically.

The underlying educational theory is based on the humanistic approach and the pedagogy utilises the 'Circle of Internalization' methodology (Reiter, 2008). The basic unit of reference is the group, the idea being that only through group experience can students internalise and be motivated to take an active part in the learning process (Reiter and Schalock, 2008).

Facilitating aspects included the deep commitment of the staff from both schools, the driving leadership of the principal of the special school, and the recognition and support of the Ministry of Education and the Municipality.

The main barriers have to do with issues of budgeting extra teaching assistants and the need for adaptation of the existing school buildings. In addition, concerns were raised about a lack of sufficient well-trained staff capable of teaching the combined classes.

The case of partnership no. 3 – 'one campus'. The two partner schools serve students from six kibbutzim in the area. During the year of the study, the special school, opened in 2011, had 55 students and the mainstream primary school, built in 1989, served 400 students and had three self-contained special classes. The special school evolved from a unit of several classes within the mainstream primary school, which functioned as 'a school within a school'. The unit was established in 1991, when the mainstream school was in its second year of operation. It kept growing and eventually, after 20 years, was granted administrative independence. Since then, the students placed in the special school are considered to be low-functioning with ASD, whereas those with ASD assigned to the mainstream school are considered to be high-functioning. Currently, about 30 students with SEN (~10% of the student body) are enrolled in the mainstream school in self-contained classes or are individually included in mainstream classes with support.

The idea of 'a school within a school' was rooted in the personal belief of the first principal of the mainstream

school who felt that every child should have an equal opportunity to go to school with his or her peers, no matter what. She was the driving force behind the efforts to integrate children with ASD and for 20 years this partnership was run according to this model. The number of students with ASD integrated into the school kept growing until they comprised over 20 per cent of the student body. Even though their special classes were located in a separate building, many pupils were integrated on an individual basis. Some of the facilities such as the library and the music room were shared by both as were the administrative offices. The buildings of both schools were built on a large plot of land, a two minute walk from each other. Students from the special school, escorted by a staff member, walk to the mainstream school for joint social or academic activities. Similarly, students from the mainstream school walk over to the special school either for music classes or to use the school yard equipment during recess. In addition, all holiday and school ceremonies are jointly planned and celebrated. Some students from the special school are included in mainstream classes on an individual basis. The class schedules are coordinated and there are joint planning and periodic staff meetings. Therapeutic group work aimed at issues of attention deficits is held at the special school for small groups of four and includes two students from each school. One of the highlights of this partnership is the joint school choir that is conducted by music teachers from the special school.

Both schools advocate a humanistic approach with integration and inclusion based on mutuality, awareness, structured activities and cooperation.

Facilitating aspects include the shared humanistic approach, the joint history of the two schools and the deep commitment to maintain the collaboration for the purpose of inclusion.

Barriers include the need to overcome beliefs and negative attitudes of staff, parents and students. The teaching staff of the mainstream school felt that having to cater to more and more students with SEN was ‘too much’ and that the separation was needed. Parents of students with SEN do not react favourably to the division between the two schools based on level of functioning.

In summary

Partnerships between special education schools and mainstream schools can and do promote inclusion of students with SEN, especially those with more complex conditions. Despite the changes reported to have taken place in special schools (see e.g., Head and Pirrie, 2007; Ware et al., 2009) the youngsters referred to them can be characterised as having more severe and complex difficulties. This in itself can make establishing partnerships more difficult, as a partnership involves not only collaboration between staff but social/academic interaction between

youngsters as well. Among the common features of these partnerships, we found: (a) a deep commitment of all involved to advance inclusive education; (b) close proximity that makes it possible for students to attend less than a full day of classes or to spend recess together, and eliminates the need to bus students from one school to the other (c) a high level of cooperation between teachers and teaching assistants from the partner schools and the necessity and willingness to share resources and professional knowledge; (d) structured and pre-planned activities including coordination of academic timetables, school ceremonies, field trips and the like, joint academic as well as joint social activities; (f). Shared ideology and educational philosophy that bonds the partner schools.

Several factors affecting the partnerships were identified: (a) the support of the local authority is most important, as very often it leads to preferential funding; (b) the presence of a leading figure within the school or within the local authority who is the ideological and the practical driving force who can influence decision-making processes and budgetary actions; (c) the school ethos, vision and mission statements which have a bearing on the attitudes and conduct of school staff, students and their parents as well as on other local stake-holders; (d) mutual understandings among all those involved is necessary to advance collaborative activities and (e) precise and structured planning and implementation affect the level of satisfaction of all involved. Additional aspects to be considered with regard to such partnerships are: the difference in size, that is, number of students, between special and mainstream schools and classes, and the fact that special schools serve youngsters from a larger geographical area in comparison to mainstream schools which serve children from the immediate neighbourhood. These two aspects may influence the possibilities for social integration and inclusion in extra-curricular and after-school-hours activities.

Crucial elements in an effective partnership are: location, resources and planning. As mentioned earlier, close proximity between the schools makes partnering easier to manage; effectively using existing budgets and making a case for increased resources make it possible to support a variety of needs that arise in a partnership; joint planning is at the core of collaboration between schools.

We recommend that (a) special schools be part of a mainstream campus or in close proximity to one, (b) vision and mission statements should promote collaborative practices, and (c) budgeting partnership schools should take into account additional needs that arise from collaboration, such as having to employ co-ordinators, extra support staff for escorts, and the like. In addition, it is important to remember that theory and ideologies can provide a sound basis for action.

This study focused on the perceptions of staff and on the physical conditions of successful partnerships. It is

important that future research also consider the viewpoints of the pupils and their families.

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