

CREE Research – Including Disabled Children in the Early Years

Description of the Centre

Rowland Hill Nursery merged with a local day nursery for children with complex special educational needs in 1998. It joined the Haringey Early Excellence Network in 1999 to develop an 'inclusive education' for young children.

The Centre is situated in an area of social deprivation with high unemployment and offers a range of services to families including nursery education for children aged three and four years. There are up to 65 full-time places for children in the nursery, and 17 of them are for children with special needs and those referred by social services.

Families come from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds and most of the children who speak English as an additional language are bilingual.

In addition to nursery education the centre also provides: a parents' and carers' toddlers group; a toddler opportunity and parent support group (TOPS), that includes children with identified special needs; and before and after school care for children up to the age of 8. The centre also offers an Advisory Service for Inclusive Education' for children with special educational

needs, and disseminates information about its work by providing training and receiving visitors.

A recent Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) report of the centre stated that *“the Centre very successfully includes children with a wide range of complex special needs and provides excellent support for their families”*. The report went on to say that *“ through the excellent work of the advisory team and staff the centre ensures very effective support for children with special needs so that they make very good progress”*. The aim of this research was to establish the factors in the management and organisation of the Centre leading to the successful inclusion of disabled children.

The Centre became part of the Borough Early Excellence Network alongside two other nursery centres in 1999. The Network aims to build on the strengths of the three centres, making links between them and other providers in the maintained, voluntary and independent sectors. The centres all serve areas of high social disadvantage and unemployment. In each centre the families come from a diverse range of ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, and a higher than usual number of children speak English as an additional language. All three centres fully include a substantial number of children with special educational needs.

Equal Opportunities and Inclusion at Rowland Hill Centre for Childhood

Rowland Hill Centre for Childhood has an inclusive purpose and vision which are supported by the clearly stated values.

The purpose of the Centre is:

“Rowland Hill is an inclusive supportive Nursery Centre in which all children and their families can make positive relationships, learn together, grow in confidence and self respect and be happy”.

The vision for the Centre is to:

- Be seen as a centre of excellence thus: providing children with the highest quality nursery curriculum and giving staff the opportunity of career development and satisfaction;
- Be recognised as a major influence within the Local Education Authority as a model for inclusion; and
- Represent all that is best about multi-agency working so that Health, Education and Social Services together respond to local community needs.

The final strand of the Vision links with the current Government Green Paper “Every Child Matters” which aims to promote multi-agency working within and around schools.

The values are what drive the Centre and creates its community atmosphere. They are reflected in the curriculum, planning and policy as well as staff and pupil attitudes. Whilst the ‘equal opportunities’ and ‘positive impact on society’ sections appear to be the most relevant to the study of inclusion the teamwork, professionalism, curriculum and partnership strands are crucial to the overall work of the Centre and ‘making it happen’.

The values agreed upon by the Centre are:

“Equal Opportunities – children have the right to learn together; all children are unique and should have the opportunity to celebrate and value their own and others endeavour; and all children should have equal access to resources.

Positive Impact on Society – recognising each child has the right to be valued for whoever they are; each child’s contribution is essential for the enrichment of the community; children are encouraged to understand each others feelings and to help one another; and we aim to help each child develop a sense of self-respect, self confidence, self discipline and an awareness of, and a sensitivity to, the needs and beliefs of others.

A Quality Child-Centred Curriculum – children learn best through play, talk and meaningful first hand experiences; and through play a child can explore, imagine and socialise.

Partnerships – education is a continuous process that starts at birth and involves the home, the community and the school; and we work with parents and carers, valuing their knowledge and expertise.

Professionalism – respect for each other; support all colleagues; and recognise each person’s unique qualities and maximising them.

Teamwork – respect for each other; support all colleagues; and recognise each person’s unique qualities and maximising them”.

Research Project

The importance of effective leadership, methods for including disabled children and those with special educational needs and the important work carried out by the Centre in the transition between Nursery and Infant school for these children, were chosen as the key research areas. To fully analyse all aspects of the Centres work with regard to equal opportunities and inclusion would entail a much longer research project in order to do it justice.

Methodology

The investigation in the school took place in January 2004. During the investigations interviews were conducted with the Headteacher, the Deputy Headteacher, Area SEN Advisory Teacher, the transition co-ordinator and the parent of a child with special educational needs at the centre. Observations of pupil learning were also carried out within the Centre on two separate occasions.

The evaluation of the research findings was carried out with the purpose, vision and values of the Centre firmly in mind.

Research Findings

Leadership and Staff Involvement

Staff were proactively recruited on the basis of attitude rather than simply knowledge. They were encouraged to work inclusively with each other as well as with the children. The teams working within the Centre are not overly hierarchical and a culture of asking for help from each other is positively encouraged.

An induction process for staff had been developed by the Centre which focussed on team support in creating a circle of support for all staff. A staff relationships policy has also been developed at Rowland Hill. Staff receive five full days training and three half days training throughout the year. A morning briefing also takes place each day.

The headteacher believes that the 40 Nursery staff thrive and are energised by change and as such the Nursery is able to successfully initiate and develop new processes of promoting inclusion with the full support of the staff. She believes that it is the ability to manage the constant change which makes Rowland Hill Nursery unique. The headteacher does not see any particular member of staff as being the expert but rather that all staff learn together. The deputy headteacher further emphasised the wealth of experience of the staff within the Centre.

Rowland Hill Special Educational Needs Policy states that:

“Every child has a right to attend the centre irrespective of the nature of their particular needs. The centre will adapt and be flexible in order to respond to those needs”

“All educators are educators of SEN”

The headteacher said of staff training:

“How we work with children is what we need to know. How they learn, grow and develop is important to us and we believe that theories of development and learning are applicable to every single child”.

This was further supported by the deputy headteacher who said that:

“We train staff to treat children as a whole person and not see a child’s special educational needs/disabilities separately just as part of that whole child.”

It was clear from my research at the school that the statements made in the SEN policy were used in practice by both the management team and other staff at the Centre. Some examples of good practice are outlined below.

Inclusion for all

The ethos of inclusion is obvious throughout the Centre. The setting welcomes all parents and children, no-one is refused admittance for reasons other than number of allocated places.

These are the key elements of good practice found at Rowland Hill:

- Leadership (See above)
- Resources- A makaton sign of the week is on the wall of the cloakroom for all parents to access. They are encouraged to practice this with their child so all children in the setting become familiar with a range of different communication methods. Books include children with disabilities and there are pictures of children with disabilities

around the Nursery. Understanding of difference is effectively discussed with the children through the use of such stories.

- Objects of reference are used as a communication tool for all children in the nursery but are particularly effective for children with speech and language delay. As I was standing by the hanging pockets containing the objects of reference a boy stood beside me and told me what they were without prompting, showing that their use is embedded in the practice of the Centre.
- A sensory path has been planted in the outdoor play area which is sponsored by the Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) providing sensory experiences for those children both with and without visual impairment.
- Outdoor Play equipment is fully wheelchair accessible and the intention is to plant a tree within the climbing frame to increase the sensory experiences of the children. Toys in racks are placed at different levels so as to be accessible to all children whether standing, standing in a walking frame or sitting in a wheelchair. On one of my visits it was a windy day and the staff had strung a parachute between two trees which provided visual and aural stimulation for the children. Visual and aural stimulation were also provided in the form of old CD discs being hung on string from the roof of the outdoor area. Children

were able to touch the shiny discs as well as hear them banging together. The large outdoor sandpit was also wheelchair accessible.

The whole outdoor area is ramped so that every child has independent access to all the activities.

Transition

Staff at Rowland Hill are aware that whilst they welcome and actively promote inclusion within the Centre and have done so since opening in 1998, some of the primary schools to which children go after leaving the Nursery are just beginning to become more inclusive and require varying degrees of support in making the transition process as smooth as possible for children and their parents.

The Borough Advisory Service for Inclusive Education is attached to the Nursery. The beliefs of the Advisory Service include:

- all children with additional needs can access early years mainstream provision with appropriate support; and
- early years is a fundamental stage in establishing good inclusive practice that can then be built upon in subsequent stages.

The transition worker is a member of the Advisory Service for Inclusive Education. The 'transition support for inclusion' project started in 2002. The Project offered support to schools, parents and children with SEN or

disabilities involved in the transition process. The key element of support offered is the familiarity of the transition worker to parents and child who can provide the receiving teacher and school with relevant information about the child's requirements. Support is provided by means of regular visits from an Advisory Service Practitioner who shares information and skills with the school staff and works collaboratively with the other agencies involved in supporting the child. The support is ongoing for the first year of transition to infant school.

The responses from parents in the evaluations they were asked to complete after a term of transition included:

"She [the transition worker] gave me back my dignity and pride. At times one feels alienated by the system and lost within the bureaucracy. She gave me hope courage and the strength to believe things would work out."

"Reassurance of a familiar person who knew my son and was fully aware of his problems was invaluable. My son has gained so much confidence at what, for him, was a difficult time. If he had not had the input at this crucial time I believe he would have been statemented. This means more time and more money spent."

The programme recognised that the support required would be very different for each child. The role of the transition worker was to work with the headteacher of the receiving school to create a whole-school approach to

inclusion. The transition worker outlined the key to a smooth transition as including: good leadership, inclusion, a whole school approach and a priority to include the child. In discussion the transition worker said that she had been surprised by the impact which her supporting role had had on parents in particular and had been both surprised and moved by the comments parents made in their evaluations.

Conclusion

Rowland Hill Centre for Childhood offers an inclusive supportive environment for all children in the community it serves. It offers a wealth of examples of good practice in terms of staffing policy and training, resources, planning and evaluation of children's learning, supporting transition and promoting parental involvement.

The staff at Rowland Hill recognise the continued need for change and improvement within the setting in order to improve the learning experiences of the children who attend.