



South Ayrshire  
Council Provost  
*Liz Foulkes* visits a  
class in the  
Support for  
Learning  
Department

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### "Department of Support for Learning: Developing Inclusion."

#### Summary

A reflective account  
of including pupils  
with SEN and  
ensuring a positive  
ethos for all

*'Visions' can take many different forms  
– and can be induced  
by a variety of causes!  
The 'vision' that is Mainholm Academy  
Support for Learning Department  
came about for a number of reasons –  
educational philosophy and principle  
played a significant part but so also did  
fortune and pragmatism. Its  
development required sensitivity,  
perseverance and hard work, three of  
the prerequisites for  
any school's positive ethos.*

**Report by  
Coral Bell and Jane Sibley  
(previous and present  
Assistant Headteachers and Heads of  
Department of Support for Learning)  
and John H. Happs (Headteacher)**

In May 1996 the newly formed South Ayrshire Council Educational Services Committee agreed the closure of the secondary department of Rosebank School and its transfer to Mainholm Academy. The background to this change was complex. Rosebank School was a school for primary and secondary age pupils, primarily with moderate learning difficulties, located on the south side of Ayr, while Mainholm is a secondary school – at that time with significant surplus accommodation – located in north Ayr in what was a Strathclyde 'Area of Priority Treatment'. The proposal also provided for the transfer of Craigpark School for pupils with severe learning difficulties from their temporary accommodation in the Mainholm Campus to the accommodation vacated by the secondary pupils at Rosebank.

Various proposals had floundered in the face of strong opposition, mainly from parents of Rosebank pupils, but also from their staff, who were extremely concerned about the effect on their pupils of 'throwing them into the deep end' of a mainstream secondary school. Fears of name-calling and other bullying were widespread. The special schools' senior manager posts were also at risk under the earlier proposals.

The reorganisation of local government and the birth of South Ayrshire Council

allowed proposals to be considered afresh. It was decided to retain Rosebank as a special school for primary children under its existing head teacher. Likewise, Craigpark would continue to exist as a separate entity under its existing head teacher. Importantly, Rosebank's secondary department's transfer to Mainholm was now seen as a valuable educational development – not an answer to a logistical or funding problem – and would be managed accordingly. South Ayrshire Council committed itself to inclusive education, especially through its Leader, himself a teacher and the parent of a child with special needs, and through its vice-convenor of the Educational Services Committee, a former lecturer in special education. The Authority's recently appointed Head of Quality and Service Development, in charge of the project, was a consummate diplomat and a patient and articulate advocate of the Council's proposals.

The Council embarked on a programme of informal consultation in advance of the formal consultation process. This involved lengthy discursive meetings with all the groups affected by the proposals. By the time the formal consultation process took place, there were still a few critical doubters, but no one could claim that their views had been ignored.

## Mainholm's responses to the proposals


The Headteacher had met with Mainholm staff in departmental meetings to discuss the original Strathclyde Regional proposals with them. The response was largely positive. Staff in general accepted the philosophy of inclusion. Genuine concerns were expressed about the ability of 'ordinary' secondary subject teachers to teach children with special needs. *(It would, perhaps, be appropriate to say at this point that I believe that the staff at Mainholm Academy are far from 'ordinary', having amply demonstrated their professionalism, resilience and flexibility in many situations before. These are strengths happily shared by our colleagues who have joined the school from the special school sector – J.H.H.)* It was, however, accepted that staff would not be precipitated into teaching children with special needs and that the process of inclusion would be handled gradually and sensitively.

An advisory group of staff was set up within Mainholm Academy to identify the main issues for the school. This group drew on, and benefited greatly from, contact with other schools where similar initiatives had taken place: Inverurie Academy, Cumnock Academy, Uddingston Grammar, and Claremont High School. Reassuring reports indicated that pupils responded much more naturally than staff to the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs. At the same time the importance of appropriate planning and in-service training was stressed. The significance of terminology was also noted – the department should be seen as just another department of the school, not as a 'unit' or 'base'. Likewise, 'inclusion' was preferred to 'integration', the former implying a systemic whole school approach in line with the school's pre-existing ethos and experience.

There were also other factors which enabled parents, pupils and staff at Mainholm to express support from the beginning and which allowed the process of inclusion to develop faster and further than might have been possible under different circumstances.

- The school possessed ample accommodation which could be adapted fairly easily.

- The relatively small size of the school roll (444) and the fact that many of our pupils live in difficult social and domestic circumstances meant that staff had already become particularly sensitive to individual needs. The 1992 Report from the Quality Assurance Unit made specific reference to the 'atmosphere of care and concern'. The staff of Mainholm Academy are, we believe,



**Tony and Cherie Blair visit the Support for Learning Department in December 1996 with local MP Sandra Osborne**

justifiably proud of the school's reputation as a caring school.

- The school houses a number of other units, services and organisations, allowing staff and pupils to become used to working in a more varied environment than most secondary schools. The school was already well on the way to being a Community School. In addition, pupils from the Rosebank Post 16 Unit regularly visited the school and pupils from Southpark School were attending classes in the Art and Home Economics Departments. Including Rosebank pupils and staff would be seen as less of a major upheaval than might be the case elsewhere.

While we recognised and respected the natural concerns of the parents of pupils then attending Rosebank School, the Mainholm school community envisaged many benefits that this process would have for all pupils and staff:

- Pupils with moderate learning difficulties would benefit in social and curricular terms from inclusion and would be better prepared to meet the challenge of living in a wider society.

- Pupils currently in mainstream education would benefit from becoming more aware of the needs of other members of their peer group. In the long term it is only through such inclusion that human commonality can be recognised and prejudices and fears overcome.

- Staff in Mainholm would benefit from having the opportunity to work in close co-operation with staff from Rosebank and would gain from their expertise in teaching children with moderate learning difficulties.

We hoped other gains would also be experienced by Rosebank staff in the coming together process.

We were convinced that, in the longer term, the proposals would benefit all pupils, in the diversity of their abilities, interests and difficulties.

## Beginning to come together

The transfer of Rosebank's 39 secondary pupils was to go ahead as early as possible in session 1996-97. However, the adaptations required for the Mainholm building took longer than anticipated. With hindsight and despite the resulting frustration, this was probably fortunate. Instead of the 'big bang' transfer that was envisaged we had a 'drip feed' enrolment. The rooms to accommodate the Rosebank 'Post-16 Unit', previously in a hut in the playground of Ayr Academy, were finished first. This allowed these older students to transfer first and to establish 'base camp'. The superb behaviour, courtesy and good humour of this group, under the leadership of an excellent member of Rosebank School staff, did much to reassure Mainholm staff that the new pupils would in fact be an asset to the overall already positive ethos of the school. This group were also able to act as hosts to the first of a number of 'celebrity visitors' the department has attracted since its establishment. In December 1996, a few months before the general election, the school was visited by the then leader of the opposition, Tony Blair, and his wife Cherie, who had tea with the youngsters in the Lifeskills room and tried their hands at icing biscuits. (Photo above)

Prior to the transfer in January 1997 from Rosebank to Mainholm, regular weekly visits were arranged for the S1 to S4 Rosebank pupils, allowing them to become accustomed to the much larger school building, building their confidence and whetting their appetite for the move itself. Staff of both establishments were able to meet and plan and parents were reassured by the positive feedback they got from their children after the visits.

A new Assistant Head Teacher with drive, determination and clear vision took charge of the Support for Learning Department at Mainholm. She acted as a major catalyst in the development and success of the department over the next three years. An important feature of this appointment was that the Assistant Head Teacher was also a full member of the school's Senior Management Team with a number of whole school responsibilities as well as Support for Learning. An inclusive school needs to model inclusion in its management and staffing strategies.

A number of innovatory educational projects, in addition to the widely accepted five supportive roles of Scottish support for learning staff, were developed which helped to establish more firmly the Support for Learning Department in the school. The Garden Cafe project (photo below), part funded jointly by South Ayrshire Council and the Ayrshire EBP, was set up shortly after the establishment of the Support for Learning Department to allow 'in-house' work experience, particularly for older students. Under the supervision of a member of staff from the Home Economics Department, students in S5 and S6 run the Garden Cafe on a regular weekly basis. They gain experience of serving customers and handling money and also gain in confidence and communication skills in

dealing with the many visitors that the Department has attracted. The Cafe is completely self-funding. Each week students plan, shop, budget, prepare and serve in the Cafe. In 1998 the project was awarded a South Ayrshire Council Quality Award and represented the Council at the Success in Education Exhibition in Dundee.

## Reflections on the reality of inclusion

### Peer inclusion at a functional level

There is good reason for believing that the benefits we initially envisaged have already become a reality to a significant extent. Indeed, we were surprised at how quickly the pupils who transferred to us began to adapt to the new surroundings and developed in confidence and maturity. Many of Mainholm's staff had underestimated the major boost to self-esteem that pupils would gain by attending the same 'mainstream' school as their peers. Parents reported that other children, who had previously shunned or mocked their sons and daughters in the wider community, now accepted them because they attended the same secondary school. Former Rosebank pupils were clearly proud of their new status as Mainholm pupils.

In the initial stages, the main forms of inclusion were 'social' and 'locational'. From the start, pupils had the same intervals and lunchtimes, used the same facilities and were involved in the same extra-curricular activities as the rest of the school. However, most of the children in the Department were taught for most (or all) of the time in small class groups – a maximum of ten pupils – separately from other pupils. All children were, and are,

able to take the full range of practical subjects in the appropriate areas of the school. This was made possible for pupils with mobility difficulties by the installation of two lifts. Pupils with moderate learning difficulties are taught these subjects by 'ordinary' secondary school subject specialists. While this degree of inclusion is limited it is important not to underestimate the significance to the children who transferred from a special school environment of simply being in a mainstream school and going to subject specific and well-equipped laboratories and workshops.

The way the Support for Learning Department has developed is very much in line with the definition of inclusive education set out by the Beattie Committee Report, *Implementing Inclusiveness: Realising Potential* (Scottish Executive 1999), rather than with an alternative definition which envisages all age-peer pupils from any locality being taught at all times in the same classrooms with appropriate support. According to Beattie, the individual child's needs are paramount. Beattie asserts that an inclusive organisation is one which, 'puts the individual at the centre of its policies and practices' (Paragraph 2.7) and that such an approach, '... does not, therefore, remove the option of a separate learning environment where it is offered in response to the needs of the individual' (Paragraph 2.3).

However, within the first year after transfer, our pupils with moderate learning difficulties started to be included on an individual basis in mainstream classes in Art, Mathematics and English. These were decided in full consultation with all concerned, including the pupil, using the review process. The next phase was for all pupils in First and Second Year to be together in a Personal and Social Education class. This was staffed on a co-operative teaching basis and proved beneficial to peer relationships. All S1 and S2 pupils also started sharing the computer suite for SuccessMaker, an individualised learning system used throughout the school in S1 and S2 and not previously accessed by the pupils with moderate learning difficulties.

In 1998/99 groups – rather than a few individuals with learning difficulties – were identified to attend mainstream Mathematics and English, again staffed using co-operative teaching. Other pupils attended different subjects according to their interests, strengths and ability to cope with a mainstream setting. This ranged from Home Economics and Technology to Standard Grade German and Higher Art and Design.

Some individual pupils from 'mainstream' have received support in the Support for

**The Garden Café in full swing**



Learning Department for some core subject areas. We would hope to develop this practice and the potential of the Department as a widely based support service to *all* students whose learning, regardless of the student's level of ability, needs short or longer-term support. Next year more pupils with moderate learning difficulties will be attending the wider peer classes for Standard Grade subjects than ever before and many entering S1 in August 2000 will only be in the Department for a few subjects in which they would be at too great a disadvantage in the main classes. The emphasis is shifting to more inclusion for every year group as they enter the school. Hopefully this will continue throughout the school.

### Peer relationships

While our pupil behaviour generally is improving and most pupils accept very naturally the diversity of which they are part, we have not totally eradicated negative behaviour towards youngsters with special needs. While the expectation might have been that it would be the pupils without difficulties in learning who might stigmatise or bully those with SEN, the reality is that many incidents take place among the pupils supported by the Department itself. However, some of the older students with SEN have learned ways of addressing unacceptable behaviours from others and there is also no doubt that many mainstream youngsters with little previous direct contact with people with SEN have developed an understanding and sensitivity to the needs of others. A large number of senior 'mainstream' pupils have volunteered to take part in paired reading schemes in the Support for Learning Department.

### Staff confidence and co-operation

Subject specialists are more confident now of their ability to teach children with special educational needs and the same parents who a few years ago were anxious that their children should not be 'thrown into the deep end' are now keen that their children should have the maximum opportunity to be taught alongside their peers. However, the individual child's needs are paramount and we have no intention of sacrificing the interests of any child in pursuit of superficial 'integration'. Inclusiveness must be a process which suits individual children, offering them both educational progress and positive social relationships as outcomes. Even where pupils are still taught in separate classes it has been easier within

the context of a mainstream school for staff in the Support for Learning Department to develop a curriculum which closely matches and parallels that of mainstream pupils, thereby optimising the chances for subsequent fuller inclusion. In S1 and S2 the pupils in the Department follow the 5-14 curriculum with an emphasis on a broad and balanced educational experience. Pupils study the same subjects and topics as their peers in other classes. Departments work closely together to develop differentiated teaching materials to be used across the school. Developments have been made in the introduction of National Testing in Mathematics, Reading and Writing which has been phased in during 1999. This

pooling of teaching resources and differentiated materials to be used across the school, especially in English and Mathematics – demonstrates a level of co-operation and sharing that is entirely beneficial to all pupils and staff. For a small number of pupils in S3 upwards for whom Standard Grade does not offer a likelihood of success, curricular developments have been in line with Higher Still and Access 2 materials are being developed for pupil use, opening the way to them having their hard-earned achievements recognised by national certification.

## Parents' comments

In early April, 2000, a survey was carried out of all the parents of children whose education is enabled by the Support for Learning Department. Parents were asked to comment on the positive and negative aspects of their child's experience. The response was overwhelmingly positive.

'My son has come along in leaps and bounds and we are very proud of his achievements.'

'More confident and willing to try things for herself.'

'The Learning Support Department at Mainholm was by far the best choice for my child's needs, he has developed at a most encouraging rate. Any blips that have happened have been quickly dealt with and used as a learning process. The young people have learning difficulties but in this department they are learning how to cope in a fast changing world.'

'Our son is more motivated. He is kept busy and interested in activities organised by the Support for Learning Department. Socially he is more confident, having a larger peer group.'

'I had great reservations when X left Rosebank where I felt he was protected and safe but he has coped (with support) and on the whole has been very happy. Thank you to the staff.'

'X seems to have gained more self-confidence since he moved to Mainholm. He certainly seems to enjoy P.E., Technical and Home Economics. We are pleased to see a considerable improvement in his basketball and tennis skills. It's nice to know that he is 'included' in P.E. activities.'

'My son has improved beyond belief! He is more confident and eager to go to school. He has been getting 'credits' and this was something completely unheard of at any of his other schools. He has made friends and attends clubs - something else that was unheard of before. My son has matured from a scared newcomer into a confident young man.'

'X at the beginning of his school years couldn't handle mainstream. He has actually grown up to more of his own age. He has now got friends at home, especially from Mainholm, and other children see him as someone who can be talked to'.

## Looking ahead and conclusions

A significant amount of progress has been achieved. The Department is widely seen as a success story. In October 1997 the pupils, parents and staff of Mainholm Academy received the Leader of the Council's Award at the first ever South Ayrshire Council Quality Awards ceremony for 'the greatest contribution towards achieving the key strategic aims of the Council'.

Mr. and Mrs. Blair have been followed by a succession of other visitors – the Local Government Subcommittee of the Scottish Executive, HMI, colleagues from other schools across the country. Most leave apparently impressed by the very positive ethos in the department. There is no doubt that, in general, pupils are happy (most of the time), that parents are happy (most of the time) with the progress that their children are making and that staff are happy to come to their work (well, most of the time)!

With the departure to more northerly

pastures new of the Assistant Head Teacher responsible for the Department's first years, a new AHT with a background in learning and behaviour support has been appointed. Her remit is to bring together 'pupil support' in all its forms in the school into a single, efficient service.

The school and its partner primary schools have just been awarded 'New Community School' status, a recognition of work and ethos already developed and a further incentive to maintain and develop them further. South Ayrshire Council has also recently set up a Support for Learning facility in Dalmilling Primary School, one of our partner primary schools, for primary pupils currently attending Rosebank School. This should allow the inclusion process to start earlier and smooth the transition process between primary and secondary. This is a difficult time for all pupils but it is also recognised as the time when many pupils with moderate learning difficulties find coping *really* hard and when feelings of failure and disaffection may set in. We believe we can offer support to prevent this happening to our pupils.

An unexpected 'problem' is that the success

of the Department appears to have attracted pupils with SEN from beyond its own catchment area of Rosebank and Mainholm's own feeder primaries. From an initial 39 pupils in 1996 the Department's roll in August, 2000, will have reached 81 pupils from Rosebank Primary Department, from other special schools and, increasingly, pupils with Records of Needs from mainstream primary schools across South Ayrshire. It has become apparent that there is a latent demand for a secondary school department/support service that will cater for pupils who have managed to cope with primary school (with support) but who would find the larger and more complex environment of most secondary schools very daunting. Our overall roll has also risen but, nevertheless, the 81 pupils in August will represent nearly 13% of the whole school population. While we welcome them and will meet their needs, one of the aims of inclusion is that it enables more, or even all, children with SEN to stay and be educated within their *own* local communities to their mutual benefit.

In an ideal world, therefore, every secondary school should have the accommodation, the facilities, the equipment and staff expertise to cope with the whole range of learning needs. Arguably, a balance may have to be struck between what is educationally and socially desirable and what is cost-effective. It may also be true that, in order to create a centre of excellence in any field, a 'critical mass' must be reached to bring together sufficient staff expertise and experience.

It would be dishonest to pretend that the process of inclusion is easy. Nevertheless, the benefits for all concerned and the returns on all the work and hope put into the development by pupils, parents and staff are considerable. To anyone who is unconvinced we would extend a warm welcome to visit the school. In very many years in education it is, without doubt, the single most worthwhile initiative we have ever been fortunate enough to be associated with. We have seen the future – and it does work!

## Pupils' comments

A group of senior pupils in the Support for Learning Department who had experienced the transition from Rosebank in 1996 were asked how they felt about their experience at Mainholm.

R: 'I thought the school was a bit frightening at first. I thought I was going to get bullied. Since three years have passed it's OK It's excellent.'

A: 'I was a wee bit worried in case I got pushed about or called names. Now I feel great. I like the atmosphere, the way the teachers treat you. I'm not too happy about leaving but if I need to leave I'll have to.'

A: 'I wasn't too worried about coming. My two brothers are here. It was strange because I was at primary school and then went to Rosebank then came here. I left my friends at primary school and then I met them again when I came here. When I went to Rosebank some of them made a fool of me. I was glad to be going to the same school as everybody else and it was strange to be able to speak to my old friends. I used to have to go to school by minibus but it is better now that I can walk. Mainholm has made me more independent.'

L: 'I like travelling to school by bus and visiting my gran after school. This is my local school.'

P: 'I came here on work experience from my last school. It was frightening. Now I've been here for a year I'm not frightened, it's good. I've got lots of friends here now.'

J: 'When I first came I was going to say "Can I turn back?" I met new friends. I feel good. I don't like walking up to the top floor for Art though - can you not cut the stairs down a wee bit?'

B: 'Discos are excellent and the S5/6 Dance in the Caledonian Hotel was great.'

# Notes

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**Vision & Action** is edited by  
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It is a series which runs alongside our general  
Case Studies and documents the way a school  
rises to a specific challenge.

**We would welcome contact from  
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