

Report on HMI Invitation Conference: Access and Achievement in Design and Technology for Pupils in Special Schools

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'HMI organised an Invitation Conference on 20-21 November 1992 in order to acknowledge and share developments in the management and planning of the design technology curriculum in special schools.

A prime objective of the conference was to enhance communication between teachers in special schools and Local Authority Inspectors and Advisers, voluntary organisations and local and national businesses and industries. HTs of special schools and LEAI from 47 local authorities were represented, together with representatives from a selection of the aforementioned bodies.

The focus of session ranged over management issues in DT, planning and evaluating the curriculum, assessment of pupils' capability and achievement, the context of the review of the NC statutory order for technology, regional activities and development planning.'

In her introduction to the conference, HMI Margaret Brookes offered participants the opportunity to share examples of how networks, local partnerships and individual schools are working in the area of Design and Technology for pupils in Special Schools. She expressed her hope that examples of good practice by teachers who have found successful ways of working would help provide a foundation for future development. She promised that her colleagues would share their views on these developments, particularly in the area of assessment.

After the introduction, colleagues looked at development in planning and managing design and technology, the assessment of capability, the use of information technology and discussed existing network support. Rather than reviewing these sessions, I feel that it would be of interest to point out some of the generally agreed focus points for the future that were voiced after HMI Vic Green's evening presentation.

In reflecting on the revision of the National Curriculum Technology orders, he sympathised with the fact that there were shortages of published teaching materials and praised the hard work put in by many special school staff in that curriculum area. He explained that of the 39 school samples reported on in the 1991/1992 HMI survey, 78% were deemed satisfactory or better in their delivery of the subject whereas only 59% of mainstream schools were seen to be satisfactory, or better.

However, planning was generally seen as short term in many schools at a time when an on-going team approach was needed. He felt that assessment in special schools was often too complex and that the manageability of many schemes needed to be reviewed. He saw the role of the school's Technology co-ordinator as central to future improvements. He went on to explain that the rewrite of the orders must be seen in the context of the HMI remit. Part of the requirement was to review Programmes of Study to ensure that pupils worked with construction materials, components and systems. Another part was to help the assessment of performance through a range of activities. As a result, level-specific knowledge will be tied to Programmes of Study in Maths, Science and Art. The current 11 or 12 strands of progression has been rewritten into 5 without loss, in his opinion, in order to simplify tracking and assessment. He assured us that the basic conceptual approach of Technology within the National Curriculum will be maintained. Design and Technology, he assured us again, will continue to involve the application of knowledge and skills when producing good quality products, but that there is nothing wrong with making and remaking in order to produce a design fit for its purpose.

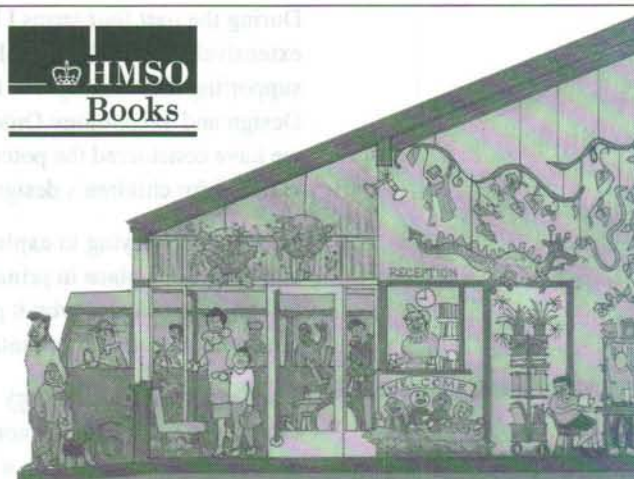
That presentation helped focus discussion and development planning for the rest of the conference but I feel that it was the delegates based in schools who gained most from the regional groupings when planning future cross-institution links. Although much good work has been done, as we saw from colleagues presentations and discovered in conversation with other delegates, it was clear that some of us need to review the focus of design and technology activities in order to ensure a worthwhile learning experience for all pupils. Access to the curriculum area has been improved where the school co-ordinator has come to terms with the tensions between National Curriculum expectations and operating level. We know that the majority of published material is not suitable. We know that cultural expectation puts undue pressure on pupils when taking home work centred on 'construction materials', but we also know that there is a way for a flexible recording and assessment process to support and encourage pupils who are involved in genuine design and make activities in which they share ownership.

Delegates reminded the conference that much National Curriculum documentation is inaccessible for the nature of children at or below Levels 1 to 3. The absence of documentation, however, has led to high quality developmental approaches in some schools. One example of such an approach demonstrated work done by colleagues concentrating on the notion of cause and effect in pupils. Care had been taken to create a balance between active and reflective activities within the short concentration spans of pupils. Non-statutory guidance had been of little help in such developments. It is to the credit of individual teachers that such schemes, in many cases whole school approaches, have been developed.

In all these developments, time has been the key element. Some felt that there had been a general expectation to move too quickly. It was felt that the common route for the future lies in clearer team development planning, taking into consideration the organisational balance between pressure and support. A common model used to feed that team approach started with drawing up a list of skills with a view to establishing a base line of quality in the professional judgement of the teachers. It was felt that it would help if NCC were to state what they saw as historical skills in this area. Guidance was needed but so far we have not seen a paper on Level 1 and many were unsure how receptive NCC have been to the flow of information being generated by practitioners, particularly in areas of assessment. Teachers in special schools know how demonstrated capability is tied to language capability. They

understand from experience how children learn and they are constantly constructing steps to recognise a change in the child's performance, respond to that change and then illustrate positive change in a record of achievement.

Teachers know how to develop a programme of study from the unexpected responses of pupils and focus on areas of concern. Sharing experiences of such responses enables us all to reflect on our teaching and ways of celebrating pupils' achievement. The variety of approaches is bound to depend on the history of each school but many delegates felt that more experience of alternative approaches within the National Curriculum framework will improve procedures throughout the curriculum area. It was also felt that regional and local networks are the best way of taking the work of the conference forward. Sharing good practice can help colleagues to prove rigour together with the need for flexibility that they understand in our curriculum area. A united front may give weight to feedback to NCC and help improve access and achievement in Design and Technology for pupils in Special Schools.



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