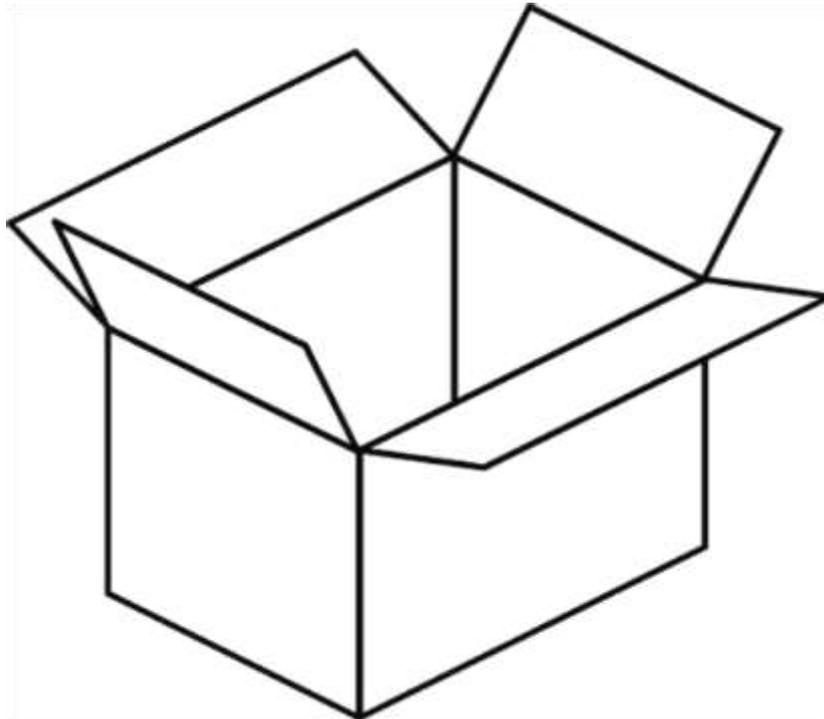# Getting the *Special* out of *Specials*

Sharing from special schools - a short report

Anita Kerwin-Nye – October 2019

AKN Consulting

NASS

1. About this piece of work

It is well rehearsed that individual special schools have a considerable bank of knowledge and practice in improving outcomes for children and young people with SEND and that this is of value to the wider education sector – including other special schools, mainstream and alternative provision.

This short report reflects a wider piece of work called *getting the special out of special schools* which looks at how collaboration between special and mainstream schools can improve outcomes for all children and young people and was part funded by *NASS* to look at how the innovation potential might be released from the non-maintained and independent special school sector.

It contributes to wider thinking on collaboration between mainstream and special school provision and school to school support and is intended as a starting point for discussion rather than a complete evaluation of the knowledge and practice that exists in special schools.

It considers:

- the imperative for supporting non-maintained special schools to share their innovation with their peers across the school system
- current mechanics for sharing and scaling 'innovation'
- barriers to sharing and scale
- emerging solutions

2. What is innovation?

We refer to knowledge and practice as a series of 'innovations'.

Innovation is defined in this context as: the process of translating an idea or intervention into a good or service that creates value or for which customers will 'pay'. Payment may be in cash i.e. a mainstream school may buy a service from a special school, or it is just as likely to be in time e.g. giving up time to learn about and them implement the intervention in own school. To be called an innovation, an idea must be replicable at an economical cost and must satisfy a specific need. Innovation involves deliberate application of information, imagination and initiative in deriving greater or different values from resources and includes all processes by which new ideas are generated and converted into useful products.

This report is particularly interested in time limited interventions, that are separate to school places, that could potentially meet the requirements about replicability and meeting specific need.

3. What is the imperative for sharing learning from non-maintained and independent special schools?

For the system?

"*In its latest pupil number projections, the Department for Education indicated that it expects there to be an increase in special school places of 13,000 over the period 2017 to 2026, reflecting an upward trend in the special schools' population of 29 per cent since 2007.*

However, currently there is not enough additional capacity being created, which is likely to result in a greater number of children who would ordinarily access specialist provision being unable to do so.

The current pipeline of schools is 19, creating around 1,600 places. If this is indeed the total additional capacity being created then we are looking at there being a significant shortfall"[1]

Special school capacity – the amount of places, skill set, geographical spread and staffing continues to be a system wide issue. This is for multiple reasons including parental demand, challenges of an increasingly 'exclusive' mainstream setting and rising number of children and young people with disabilities.

In addition, there is growing evidence across the system about children and young people being in the wrong place; with strong links to the growing concerns over an agenda of exclusion in schools. Are there children in special schools who would be better in mainstream provision – who have been pushed out of provision that would be their ideal placement? Conversely are their children in other provision – including alterative provision – who would be better at special schools?

Understanding the answers to these questions, and meeting the capacity challenge, will draw heavily on the need for greater collaboration between both special schools themselves and between special schools and their mainstream colleagues. This collaboration appears essential, both in order to help the creation of new specialist provision that is focused on geographic and demographic need (and supports parental choice) and to build the capacity of existing mainstream and special schools to support a wider group of children and young people.

Finding ways to package the 'innovations' - knowledge, experience and practice, from special schools has the potential to be a key contribution to improving system wide provision for all children and young people.

4. For children, young people and their families?

The initial analysis in this paper – combined with a top-level review of the outcomes in special schools – supports an emerging position that special schools have some high-quality innovation that could be taken to scale. This across both across special school colleagues and into mainstream.

In its 2017 State of Sector Report NASS reflected the following priority concerns for children and young people in its member schools:

- Accessing external mental health support for students – 62% concerned or very concerned
- Supporting students' mental health needs in school – 51% concerned or very concerned
- Managing students' transitions post school – 48% concerned or very concerned[2]

These reflect concerns in the wider special and mainstream sectors and it is clear that individual NASS schools have intervention focused around Adverse Childhood Experiences, family support, life skills,

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[1] https://www.tes.com/news/send-special-school-places-will-be-more-oversubscribed-mainstream-needs-be-ready
[2] NASS State of Sector 2017

mental health and transitions that – with support – could benefit a wider group of children and young people.

In addition, many of the respondents spoke to the wider societal issue of ensuring that children and young people without disabilities worked, socialised and engaged with their disabled peers.

Talking point

Is collaboration between mainstream and special schools and between non-maintained/ independent and mainstream or maintained provision a stated value for the education system? Should it be a principle for the system as a whole?

5. Are there innovations and interventions in special schools that could be shared more widely?

This is not a review in depth, but indicative findings are that special schools have work to share across the following 5 key areas:

- **Traditional models of school improvement -**Many special schools are part of local Teaching School arrangements and others local communities of practice providing school improvement support into the local infrastructure.
- **Approaches to teaching and learning/pedagogy** – both directly relevant for particular groups of children and young people with more complex needs but with wider application into mainstream practice

- **Curriculum design and models** – this includes developing supported models for GCSE/A-level/vocational qualifications but also curricula that support wider life skills and preparation for adulthood (with a particular focus on how to develop a curriculum that is 'both/and' in terms of academic v 'soft' outcomes)

  Swalcliffe's Independence Curriculum is an evidence informed progressive framework for a 'life skills' curriculum that has potential application across maintained and mainstream sectors as a framework for Preparation for Adulthood.

  *Chailey Heritage CHILD[3] system provides a curriculum framework that allows each child to develop their skills and desired outcomes. "It is **broad** in that it covers all aspects of their development and it is **balanced** in that it weighs up, specifically for them, the input that is needed. Above all, it is **meaningful** to each child and their family. The CHILD Curriculum consists of totally personalised learner profiles detailing aspirations, strengths, needs, skills, long-term outcomes and next steps."*

- **Care models and support services** – this includes both direct 'selling out' of care and support models e.g. offering educational psychologist assessments etc. and sharing expertise on particular models of care.

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[3] https://www.chf.org.uk/purposeful-learning.html

- **Models around management and structures** – while the 4 areas above seem to form the basis of what is shared in some away across most schools what became clear is the many particularly non maintained special schools have been grappling for some time with the areas of work that free schools, academies and increasing LA schools are now having to deal e.g. fundraising, direct employment of specialist clinical staff etc. It may be that business systems another area to consider when looking at what special schools can offer.

Alongside these general 5 headings it became clear that there are some very specific areas that special schools may have to offer the wider sector:

- evidence informed behaviour interventions and policies
- new approaches to safeguarding
- work around family support

6. How are schools sharing to date?

Most school have an active programme of sharing with mainstream and maintained colleagues.

These included:

- visits to the school
- training days
- professional development programmes
- information on websites

A brief Review of websites across a wider group of NASS schools showed huge variations in the use of digital as a tool for sharing innovation, learning and practice. This varied from those whose host charities had very well structured whole sites dedicated to information for professional in other schools e.g. Brain Injury Hub[4] run by The Children's Trust and Talking Point[5] run by I CAN to those who had no information on how other schools could access other information.

- peer reviews
- local networks
- consultancy
- presentation at conferences

Schools reported presentations at a range of conferences – in the main these were in the special school arena both in the UK and overseas.

What was less common was special schools presenting at events for mainstream and this is an area for development.

- tapping into existing school improvement functions

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[4] https://www.braininjuryhub.co.uk/
[5] www.talkingpoint.org.uk

Interviewees and wider input suggests a desire to share learning and all interviewed schools had a programme of sharing innovation – rightly with some pride in what they had developed.

Sharing learning – either on traded basis or as part of wider community of practice approach – featured in the strategic plans of interviewees and this reflects practice cross wider mainstream and maintained schools. It is line with the position that 'outstanding' schools face outwards in both sharing their own learning and learning from others.

However, schools reported having to work out solutions to sharing themselves – navigating how to run a conference for example or working out approaches to using fundraising.

7. What are barriers to sharing and scale?

While these areas were highlighted by the interviewees many of these were not specific to NASS schools or indeed even to education. The author's experience and expertise in scaling suggests that there are common issues for anybody attempting to move from a single practice example to wider uptake. This is borne out by the work of social enterprise incubators such as the Young Academy [6] and UnLtd [7] TeachFirst [8] and the early work by Education Endowment Foundation into knowledge move research knowledge around the system [9]

All of the barriers to scale require some degree of resource to address – either to support development and testing costs before trading services or to subsidise models to sharing. Some schools and their host Charities/Trusts had addressed this with the use of grant funding, use of internal reserves or partnership working.

None of the respondents appear to have leveraged investment funding. This is an area worth further exploration. Many of the innovations observed within this brief piece of work appear to at least the equal of many that have received significant funding from social investment programmes and there is ongoing funding available for such investment. [10]

However, within this the challenge that traditional investment approaches from bodies such as Social Investment Business [11] requite the potential for a return. The likely purchasers of services from special schools are mainstream and maintained sector, potentially LAs, parents and maybe central government contracts. None of these – particularly the first 3 – are 'cash rich' in the contemporary context.

This does perhaps suggest approaches that are both more grant funded and/or based around communities of practice might be a more logical step for getting investment into scale.

However, there might also be a case for working on models that can demonstrate how effective delivery of services from special schools and collaboration with mainstream and maintained

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[6] http://www.theyoungacademy.org/

[7] https://www.unltd.org.uk/

[8] https://www.teachfirst.org.uk/stories/your-innovations-are-making-a-difference

[9] https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/the-literacy-octopus-communicating-and-engaging-with-research

[10] https://www.the-sse.org/resources/starting/what-funding-is-available-for-social-entrepreneurs/

[11] https://www.sibgroup.org.uk/

colleagues saves money from the public purse and creates an income stream that could repay investors. NASS' own 2012 work on Social Return on Investment[12] gives rise to the possibility that this might be an area for potential exploration.

Interviewees reflected the following challenges:

- **Creating an evidence base for impact**. While special schools have some considerable expertise in assessing the impact of practice on individual children and young people the nature of current education research approaches (as promulgated by the Education Endowment Foundation etc.) rely on a scale of practice that is not possible in many areas of SEND.
- **Time/skills to 'manualise/codify' approaches.** In order to take interventions out of an individual school some capacity and skill is required to 'package' the approach in a manner that allows others to test it/replicate it in their own contexts. The time issue in special schools is a particular challenge. Children need and rely on a continuity of provision – the flex to release staff relies on this building built in, often a whole school year basis. This investment to over staff is needed up front of any potential return on investment but most schools cannot take this risk.
- **Skills/time/networks to share.** While this is a core part of networks such as NASS and a substantial aim of the work of Whole School SEND not all special schools are either a part of such networks or have the time and skills to share e.g. lack coaching skills, confidence in speaking at events, approaching to peer review, lack of marketing skills etc.
- **Skills/time to approach commercial issues** While many approaches to sharing might be free to the recipient there is still a cost attached to the those who are packing up solutions and taking them out to the wider sector. Moreover, many will have interventions that could command a price in the marketplace (and this funding could be usefully reinvested in the host school to support further development). These issues take consideration of matters including IP, licensing, business development and marketing for trading activity
- **Charitable purpose** several respondents reflected that charging to share learning and innovation felt counter their charitable mission; but then went on to explain how they were also struggling with resources to continue to invest in development. This is a clear tension that needs further exploration.
- **Who would pay?** While traded models not only solution they clearly present a potential route to building capacity. However, who would pay? The most likely purchasers of any of the 5 areas of support are schools, Academy Trust and LAs – none of which have funding.
- **Building up the competition** One of the questions to tackle and a potential barrier is a belief that building capacity of other special schools and mainstream schools may potentially take away from school places. This is in part a moral question and is not a new question in education being the subject of ongoing debate in an increasingly competitive and league table driven sector.

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[12] https://www.nasschools.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/2014/08/Social-Return-On-Investment-report.pdf

8. What are some emerging solutions?

When building in support the following challenges with scale need to be considered (with thanks to the Young Foundation for their succinct summary):

People love reinventing wheels – The energy and enthusiasm that comes from responding creatively to a particular issue is very powerful. This energy and creativity is not always so abundant when 'handed' a solution to implement.

Hi Fidelity – The crucial need to allow for local creativity and adaptation of an approach needs to be finely balanced with understanding what the core components that give the model fidelity.

Funding rarely supports or rewards replication – There is an almost universal focus on funding the originating body in any effort to scale and spread initiatives, rather than incentivising those wishing to adopt/absorb an innovation.

Optimism Bias – Just because 'we' think something is a game-changing, brilliant idea (because we invented it, probably) does not mean that others will; whatever the level of evidence of impact. Market testing and an honest appraisal of results is vital.

Not always high levels of confidence within organisations to absorb new ideas. Where the desire to absorb an idea exists, it won't always be the case that an organisation has the confidence and capacity to do so.

Lack of capacity within the originating organisation to respond effectively to demand.

Developing 'how to share' guides

Given how often schools are reporting that they have had to 'figure it out themselves' short updates on information that can help schools to share e.g. currently policy in mainstream that specials could support; how to use Eventbrite to run a conference etc. Much of this exists in other contexts or sectors and this exercise is potentially more a matter of curating and contextualising some existing content.

Shared principles and structures for some of the 'how to' share e.g. best practice in how to run events etc. The interviewees all reflected how they have had to learn these things as they go along – some economies of scale possible by sharing learning centrally.

Using networks such as NASS and Whole School SEND as route to scale

This is a longer-term piece to explore. At one end this might include having central services in, for example, marketing, business development, fundraising, conference organisation etc. that members schools can buy into. Providing a route to both economies of scale and the development of a coherent approach. across network schools.

At the other end this could be around building a delivery model that runs members programmes and services through one central point and behaves to the target audience in mainstream and maintained as trading body e.g. co-ordinating all conferences run by members schools through one centralised booking system with payment running to centrally out to schools.

This is a complex area and not without areas for significant discussion e.g. the strengths of shared costs/learning/routes to market v loss of local identity/brand; the change from a membership body to a potential trading service etc.

Creating an incubator programme for special school innovations with potential

Incubators are a well understood and tested model in other areas of education and wider social entrepreneurship.

Innovations with the potential to scale are identified – often though open application – and am small cohort identified to work together on a programme of training and development.

This would comprise a curriculum tailored to the needs of each approach ready to be scaled, but likely have core components of:

- Improving the evidence base if needed
- Determining the theory of change & business model and the assumptions that underpin both
- Testing and prototyping the idea with other schools before committing to scale - and using this as a route to building 'demand side' entrepreneurship and thinking about innovation
- Understanding the levers and barriers to scaling the approach
- Building capabilities and capacity (and incentives) for people wishing to take the approach into new schools
- Codifying/Productising the approach in a way that's useful for teachers and schools

Research

As an aside from these 3 potential solutions there is clearly a need for significant consideration of how we support schools with research on what works.

9. Conclusion and top-level recommendations

Special schools appear to have innovation – programmes, services and products beyond school places that could support mainstream and maintained colleagues to improve outcomes for children and young people.

There is an appetite to share and some examples of emerging good practice in sharing.

There is some question around whether we best research the impact of these innovations within both their host schools and wider sector. That is in common with mainstream and maintained sector colleagues and is a challenge within the SEND community – particularly in field of low incidence/high need.

There are several barriers to sharing. Part of this is how to bring in the necessary investment to support sharing. Others are cultural, skill based or resource focused.

There are some easy wins existing plans that can support sharing of innovation and the potential to explore both an Incubator Programme and Social Investment and other funding routes.

Ultimately special schools have innovation and practice that – if shared across the wider system – stands to support inclusion and improve outcomes for all children and young people.

This report has been produced by Anita Kerwin-Nye drawing on work over the last two years with NASS schools and is part of the author's wider work on system development in Special Education Needs and Disability. It was based on short desk review, interviews with six special school leaders and a review of current approaches to sharing and scaling 'what works'. It also draws on the author's experience as Founder of both The Communication Trust and Whole School SEND and as a leader in scaling change. It is based on both the expertise of the NASS staff team and the leaders of the its member schools.

Twitter: @anitakntweets   Web: aknconsulting.uk

NASS are The National Association of Independent Schools & Non-Maintained Special Schools (NASS) is a **membership organisation working with and for special schools** in the independent, voluntary and private sectors within the UK. NASS is proud of its role in **improving opportunities and standards** for special schools outside of Local Authority control.

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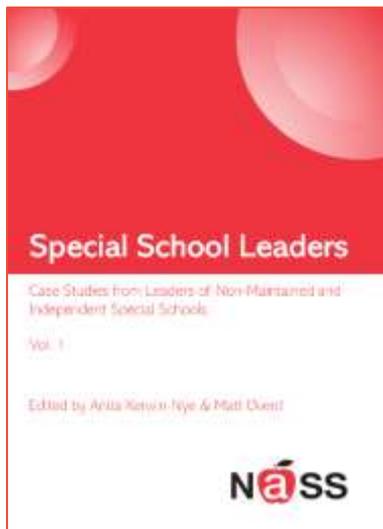
Special School Leaders

A collection of case studies from special school leaders. This book is the result of a year long leadership programme delivered by NASS and AKN Consulting for leaders of independent schools and non-maintained special schools. As part of the programme participants designed and implemented leadership projects within their schools and these are their stories. The eight case studies within cover structural changes, staff re-organisation, implementing new initiatives and new approaches for assessing and improving outcomes for children.

Edited by Anita Kerwin-Nye & Matt Overd. Foreword by NASS Chief Executive Claire Dorer

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