

Account of Purley on Thames

Brookfields Special School

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Brookfields School by Valerie Compton

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Stand outside any school at home time and its much like watching champagne bubbling from a bottle. Brookfields School is no exception and yet it is a quite exceptional school. Brookfields caters for children whose needs are at variance with standard education. It educates children on a very individual basis and tries to fill all the requirements of children with special needs, tailoring a curriculum to each child rather than fitting a child to a set curriculum.

Brookfields was built in 1974 and started with 6 members of staff and 36 pupils. It grew very rapidly to overflowing point, now having 24 teachers and 12 Nursery Nurses and Assistants. Space has already run out for the 216 children and the school borrows one classroom from its next door neighbour.

Brookfields is divided up into two sections, one which caters for slow learners and the other which caters for more severely or multiply handicapped children. The age range goes from two to sixteen years. They come into the school having been referred by a doctor or Educational Psychologist. When an assessment shows that a particular child needs some form of special help, Brookfields has to decide if it can benefit and assist that child. Decisions to accept children are taken after much discussion and with great care.

Once the child is accepted and has settled in to his new environment, the class teacher must make a 'base level assessment' or find a jumping off point from which the education can begin. This obviously varies tremendously with such a wide age and ability range. At two years, the learning, as with any child of that age, is all through play. Indeed, learning through play can continue for a good many years after that - a game of bingo is an excellent way of sharpening up your concentration and number recognition at any age!

As there are so few schools catering for children with special needs, the catchment for Brookfields is enormous. It extends from central Reading, west to Woolhampton, north to Upper Basildon and along the Oxfordshire border to Caversham.

The extensive transport facilities required to ferry children are organised by the Education Authority who themselves provide an ambulance bus equipped with hydraulic lift. Journey time in coaches mini-buses or taxis vary from a few minutes to about an hour, which make the school day quite lengthy. Escorts are provided on most buses to supervise and to rescue the odd traveller who may have got onto the wrong bus.

The large catchment brings its own special set of problems for all involved. It effectively isolates parents who would normally be getting acquainted at the school gate. In my experience many friendships are made here. To combat this problem the school holds monthly coffee mornings and has an active PTA. This serves the dual purpose of all important fund raising activities and provides the opportunity to socialise. Parents also come into the school to help with trampolining or minibus driving and occasionally to help on an individual basis, such as acting 'shadow escort' to an older child needing to practice travelling independently.

Individual attention is of course always a great advantage to any child and Brookfields is able to provide more than most. Its classes vary from 6 to 14 pupils. Many of the teachers have special education qualifications, having taught in other schools. They are helped by qualified Nursery Nurses and Welfare Assistants - the latter having a major qualification of being 'an exceptionally sensible mum! Her time may be allocated to a class or to an individual child. Obviously, being able to offer this kind of facility is of tremendous benefit to the children. Not all the children at Brookfields stay for their complete school life, all make progress - a few to the extent that they are able to return to their local schools.

Like any modern school, activities at Brookfields are many and varied. The school's own minibus is in constant use for swimming, outings, camps etc along with the ambulance bus which is used for the less mobile children.

This can for instance be seen ferrying the children back and forth regularly on a Thursday when several groups go horse riding. These activities are of vital importance - swimming helps greatly with co-ordination, mobility, confidence and is of course especially important from the safety angle. Horse riding likewise gives help with co-ordination and confidence, it also has an unexpected beneficial spin off with speech and language development. The children become very enthusiastic about riding and judging by the glowing faces I saw when I peeped around the barn door one afternoon, it does nothing but good.

Outings to museums, farms and other such places of interest are of great importance. Learning by seeing things 'for real' often has a far greater impact than 'book and blackboard' learning. Similarly, outings to town or even to the Overdown Road shops are very useful to a child's future independence and not to be underestimated. I have dealt with just a few out of school activities because what can appear as 'just good fun' or 'a bit of a waste of time' to the casual observer is more often than not a very necessary part of a child's education.

The children are encouraged in many ways and that ominous term 'Go and see the Head' can often turn out to be rather a treat! The younger children are sometimes rewarded with Smarties for a special effort that has been made - and the effort is the all important part. Extra good work naturally results in praise, but for some children fastening buttons, tying shoe laces or simply sitting still for a time can be a major achievement, and is deservedly rewarded. Friday afternoon is 'showing off' day when displays of good work and such like are presented in assembly for all the school to see and special achievements are acknowledged. This seems to give Friday homework an added air of excitement.

The Community around Brookfields is of course vitally important. The school has been delighted with the support it has received for all events and hopes this will continue and grow. On the fund raising front, the possibility of installing a swimming pool is being explored which would be a tremendous fund raising challenge. The benefit to the children and local community would of course be enormous. Local people can help in many ways, apart from supporting functions. The school welcomes certain items of good quality children's clothing, clothes for dressing up, camping equipment and more specifically very waterproof wellies!

There are times when an extra pair of hands are needed, maybe to "man the edge" of the trampoline, to help with riding (under some circumstances three adults are needed per child) or even to drive the ambulance bus. Prospective volunteers may ring the school on Reading 9421382 their calls will be welcomed.

The advantages for children attending a special school are fairly obvious. Apart from the few things I've mentioned there are all the back up services on hand - ie speech therapy, physiotherapy, medical assistance etc. Special education deals with a child as a whole, using the broadest possible guidelines. It also accepts the child as he or she is, not striving so much to change as to develop every

aspect to its full potential.

I feel this acceptance of people, be they handicapped or not is an all important key. Maybe we could all make an extra effort in this, the Year of the Disabled, to try and accept our fellow men for what they are and as they are. It is often easier said than done, there are few of us who can honestly say we're not guilty of "putting up the shutters" to those we find difficult to accept. I know I am. But if we start making the effort this year - well, who knows where it might lead.