

SPECIAL FEATURE

Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 – Response

Educating a child with special needs in an ‘inclusive environment’ may not always be the answer. Does this new Act limit a parent’s right to choose, if necessary, a special school as the most appropriate educational option for their child?

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INTRODUCTION

I am the mother of a child who has a number of special needs including intellectual, physical and medical needs. He is thirteen and has attended both mainstream and special schools. He is currently in a special school in his first year of the senior cycle. He attended a mainstream school for the first two years in junior and senior infants and he was utterly miserable. He operates in the mild/moderate spectrum of ability and it was not the academic learning that caused him as much difficulty as the social isolation he experienced in the classroom because he was different from other children.

INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT OR MAINSTREAM ISOLATION?

This new act, *Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004*, which has just been introduced as legalisation by the Dail causes me much concern. It speaks about how a child with special educational needs should be educated in an “*inclusive environment with children who do not have such needs unless the nature or degree of those needs of the child is such that to do so would be inconsistent with- (a) the best interests of the child as determined in accordance with any assessment carried out under this Act, or (b) the effective provision of education for children with whom the child is to be educated.* (Section 2, p. 7)

Yet my family’s experience of mainstream education was one where my son was far more socially isolated in mainstream school than he is now in a special school. I feel that spending his formative years in mainstream school fundamentally affected his self-esteem and the development of his identity.

HAVE PARENTS THE RIGHT TO CHOOSE?

This new Act also illustrates how a child with special educational needs will be allocated a placement in a school. In section 10 it states that “*The Council may – of its own violation...designate the school which a child with special educational needs...is to attend...*” (p. 15) and will take into regard the needs of the child, the school capacity and the wishes of the parents. I am very concerned that the right to choose what I, or any other parent, might consider the best educational opportunity for my

child is now, at best, a decision which we may only have an input into and if we are not happy with will have to appeal. Yet all parents currently exercise the right to choose the best educational opportunities for their family with many choosing to send their children to Educate Together schools and Gaelscoileanna. I feel that this bill is infringing on the parental right to decide what we believe is the best educational option for our children.

RESOURCES AND THE CASE FOR SPECIAL SCHOOLS

In a special school you generally have access to a staff who are experienced in working with specific special needs, many having post-graduate qualifications in special needs education and an accumulation of many years of expertise. You also have substantially smaller class numbers, with specific specialised equipment, both recreational and educational, and a suitable physical environment. Many of our existing schools are two storey buildings which have facilities and classrooms that a child with a physical disability cannot access. Mainstream schools are already under pressure with numbers in class over the recommended level, poor physical environments and a distinct lack of resources. This is as a result of the shortfall between the money provided by the Department of Education and Science and the actual money required to run our schools.

In the special school sector you generally have access to a multi-disciplinary team of professionals such as speech therapists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, psychologists and nursing staff who form part of a united approach in setting and achieving goals for our children. These facilities are just not available in mainstream schools. Children who present with special needs may not have the same learning opportunities in a mainstream class with over 30 children competing for the teacher's attention. Even with the allocation of a special needs assistant (who presently is not required to have any formal qualification) and some resource hours from a resource teacher, a child will not obtain the level of resources available in a special school.

DECISIONS BASED ON INDIVIDUAL NEEDS

A child's educational, social and emotional needs are what should be the deciding factors when making a decision about their education not the dominant ideology or current social policies decided by civil servants and legislators. This Act also categorises all special needs children together, but they are all unique individuals who will present with many different needs and challenges.

I do accept that sometimes a special school can mean that a child is isolated from their community as in many cases they need to travel to their special school. They do however get an opportunity to mix within the school environment where they are accepted by their peers who experience many of the same challenges they do and they experience less discrimination. I do believe that integration within mainstream school has a role to play in our education opportunities for our children but it should be a choice, not an obligation, based on an individual learning programme devised for each child.

SPECIAL SCHOOLS: NOT A LAST RESORT

In a special school environment more time can be allocated to a FETAC programme or the JCSP or the Applied Leaving Certificate in subjects that are relevant to the child's needs. In my son's school they focus on the holistic development of my son and teach him appropriate life skills. In mainstream school it would be presumed that he would already have these skills. Special schools should not be a last resort. They are a huge asset to our educational system and I for one will be strongly advocating that they are here to stay.