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The Special School in an Age of Inclusion

The author was invited by the Irish Association of Teachers in Special Education (IATSE) to deliver the closing address in the plenary session of their Sixteenth Annual International Conference at St. Patrick's College, Dublin, in June, 2004. Reflecting on his many years' experience teaching pupils with special educational needs, and reminding his audience that the policy recommendation is a continuum of provision for pupils with SEN within the education system, the author presented a thought-provoking paper, opening the door to much needed debate on the question of the providing the best, most appropriate education for pupils with general learning disabilities.

PAT O'KEEFE has been principal of St. Francis Special School in Portlaoise for the past 31 years. He will retire in August, 2004.

"My name is Pat, and I worked in the Irish Special School System during the second half of the 20th Century."

It may well be, Madame Chairman, that some such cathartic statement will need to be made by people like me, as members of some self-help group in the future. Or it may be that the role of the Special School, and indeed those of us who see it as having a value, will simply be airbrushed from the history of the Irish educational system. But one thing is clear – as of now Special Schools are certainly not the flavour of the month.

WORKING IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

And yet, it was not always so. I would like to give you a brief picture of my journey in special education over a period of almost 40 years. I began my teaching career in 1966, in St. Augustine's Special School in Blackrock. The school was part of the St. John of God Services, as it still is. There were 15 teachers, five of whom, including the Principal, were St. John of God Brothers. Only boys attended the school, and 98% of them were in residence. They came from all over Ireland, literally from Antrim to Kerry. The pupil-teacher ratio was 20:1 and the boys were all described as being 'mildly mentally handicapped'. The campus was identified on the Ordinance Survey Map of South County Dublin as 'St. Augustine's Colony.' It was, for me, the first of many occasions when the problematic use of language would become an issue in special education.

It was a wonderful time to work in special education. The year before I came to St. Augustine's, the Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Mental Handicap, was published in 1965. It had reported that "whatever may be the merits of the arguments advanced for and against the segregation of handicapped pupils we are convinced that for the following practical reasons it is essential in this country to provide education for mildly handicapped pupils mainly in special schools" (p. 76). Many years later I appreciated how important it is, at a human level, to know that your work is positively endorsed by the system.

It was not, however, solely because of endorsement that the work was wonderful. It was exciting, challenging and innovative work. Can you imagine what it was like for a young teacher leaving this College in 1966, having been grounded in the limited curriculum which

had preceded the ‘new curriculum’ of 1971, to be introduced in St. Augustine’s to concepts such as *Social and Personal Development, Health Education, Relationships and Sexuality Education* (even though it was not called that) and *Work Experience*, together with a wide range of practical activities and an equally wide range of leisure activities? Curricula and services were in place specifically to meet the needs of the children. It should never be forgotten that many aspects of the modern curriculum, now commonplace in general education, owe their origins to insights which emerged through special education.

FURTHER TRAINING AND SUPPORT

In 1969 I attended the diploma course in special education in this college. Again it is difficult to appreciate now what little opportunity there was then to engage in further study in education. To be able to do so as a full-time student, while still drawing a salary, was an exceptional privilege. At that time the National Association of Teachers in Special Education, now known as the Irish Association of Teachers in Special Education (IATSE), was formed. And what a marvellous support, both at a professional and personal level it has been to so many of us over the years. It gave a voice to teachers in special education, who had no other for their particular concerns, and it enabled us to meet and share with some highly gifted colleagues. I have always considered it a privilege to have shared work with many colleagues who had been educated and trained outside the confines of the Irish system. Many of those teachers came to Ireland with qualifications in special education. Their description in some quarters as being “not fully qualified” simply because they were not qualified to teach Irish was particularly difficult to understand.

In 1973 I became principal of St. Francis Special School in Portlaoise – a school for children also described as *having a mild mental handicap*. In the late 60s and early 70s such special day schools were built throughout Ireland, as parents became more vocal and the move away from residential schooling for children who merely had a mild general learning disability rightly accelerated. Our school, which was built for 80 pupils, with 5 teachers, was extended twice in subsequent years as demand grew. I recall there being waiting lists in excess of 20 in the month of September, and as many as fifty applications for a teaching post within the school.

EARLY DEVELOPMENTS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

As these events were unfolding in the quiet rural Irish backwater of Portlaoise, dramatic change was occurring elsewhere. It is very interesting now to trace this development. Words such as *normalization, mainstreaming* and *integration* began to gain currency. The term *inclusion* came much later, and even now one hears a new phrase, *supportive learning*. Any apparent segregation came to be seen as a denial of civil rights and an intolerable injustice. The seminal Warnock Report of 1978 in the U.K., which examined the education of handicapped children and young people, reported as policy that “no child should be sent to a special school who can be satisfactorily educated in an ordinary one.” Warnock also had much else to say, not as frequently quoted, such as “we cannot envisage any substantial move towards the integration of children with disabilities…unless…conditions, which we discuss in greater detail…are satisfied” (p. 106) and also that “greater discrimination in favour of children with special needs” (p. 102) was needed. These and other caveats were often ignored as the integration movement abroad gathered pace and the fact that “discrimination” could be a positive thing, if it worked in favour of an individual or group, was conveniently either forgotten or ignored.

The stated Irish provision was much more cautious. The *White Paper on Educational Development* (Government of Ireland, 1980) in its consideration of special education, reported that “many of the arguments which favour segregation still retain their cogency. Among these is the quality of the service provided by way of separate provision over the years in Ireland. The issue of integration is a very complex one which cannot be fully discussed in a White Paper” (p. 29). Ten years later, the *Report of the Primary Education Review Body* (Government of Ireland, 1990) recorded that “the official policy of the Department of Education is now one of integration of children with handicaps while retaining the option of segregation where necessary” (p. 60). It went on to recommend that a “special committee or commission…be appointed to examine and report on the whole problem” (p. 60). One detects almost a note of exasperation encapsulated by the phrase “the whole problem.”

By 1993, that Committee, the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) (Government of Ireland, 1993), had not only been appointed, it had reported. Outlining seven broad principles for the system of special education in the 21st Century, it went on to state that the Committee “holds no entrenched doctrinaire position regarding the integration into the ordinary school system of pupils with disabilities and/or special needs,” and that its “philosophy could best be summed up by saying that we favour as much integration as is appropriate and feasible, with as little segregation as is necessary” (p. 22). It also reported that “it will be necessary to establish a continuum of service to match the continuum of special needs” (p. 22). Inherent in such a policy is the acknowledgement of the right of the parent to choose. And, of course, choice can only occur if there is a range from which one can choose.

Both of these issues were taken up two years later in the White Paper *Charting our Education Future* (Government of Ireland, 1995). On the envisaged future role for the special school, it stated, “Existing special schools will fulfil an expanded role, as schools dealing with a variety of disabilities and as regional resource centres. Each student with a disability will be assigned to the nearest appropriate special school in the region, whether or not s/he attends the school” (p. 25). And with regard to the role of the parent in the placement process, it said, “The decision making process, in relation to the placement of a student in an ordinary and/or a special school, will be a collaborative one, made by the parents and professionals involved, with the objective of providing what is best suited to the child’s development and needs” (p. 25). Neither of the above embryonic statements succeeded in ever being birthed into reality.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

In more recent years, policy became less apparent through reports and commissions and increasingly one needed to look to court decisions and/or legislation. Interestingly, this is precisely what the *Cromien Report* (DES, 2000a) criticised when it examined the working of the Department of Education of Science (DES). It noted that in the area of special education, policy often emerged not through strategic planning, but through negotiations with interest groups, under national agreements or in the courts. Almost simultaneously however, a Planning Group was set up within the DES in October 1999 with the following terms of reference, “To make recommendations to the Minister on the arrangements which should be put in place to ensure the most effective provision of a high quality co-ordinated service at all stages of the education system for students with disabilities.” Its report, known as the *Stack Report* (DES, 2000b), was the stimulus for the establishment of the National Council for Special Education and its concomitant services.

In the introduction to the *Stack Report*, the planning group noted that the Minister announced on 26th January, 2000, an initiative to create a national support service for special education for students with disabilities. Seven guiding principles were put forward at that time as a basis for the new service. The second of these principles was headed *Inclusion,* and it states, "Special Education services should promote the inclusion of all with special educational needs, regardless of disability. The aim of special education provision should be for students/young people with disabilities to share with their peers, as complete an educational experience as possible." The sixth of the seven principles is headed *Continuum*, and here, using almost identical phraseology to the SERC Report, it states, "As most disabilities encompass a continuum of needs, there should, therefore, be a continuum of special educational provision in relation to each type of disability, ranging from normal school provision to long-term intensive support." Whether or not such 'support' encompasses special schools is not clear. And, not for the first time, the potential for tension between the concepts of inclusion and continuum is apparent. Interestingly, when outlining existing services, the *Stack Report* identifies three models of provision for students with disabilities:

- **the student may be enrolled in a mainstream class with additional support from a resource teacher and/or a special needs assistant;**
- **the student may be enrolled in a special class in a mainstream school;**
- **the student may be catered for in a special school which caters for the student's category of disability.**

Is it significant that in the first two instances reference is made to the student being "enrolled" whereas in the special school, Stack sees the student as being "catered for"?

INCLUSION – OFFICIAL POLICY?

Should we now take it that the official policy is one of inclusion and does that mean that no child with a disability should be educated in a special school? Or does it mean that some children with some as yet undefined extreme form of disability or special need should attend a special school where they will be "catered for"? Is the "policy vacuum" to which McGee (2004) referred a real one? He was of the view that there is no policy vacuum, in that "SERC saw the special school as one element in a continuum of provision" (p. 78). But is the SERC report still policy? There is little doubt as far as the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) is concerned. In the introduction to its *Task Force Report on Special Educational Needs* (2002), it states "the DES espouses the principle of inclusion as does NEPS. It is now time for the practical implications of the inclusion of students with significant special educational needs in mainstream schools to be identified and addressed, for inclusive practice to be both academically effective and personally beneficial" (p. 5).

As a final indicator of what now may be policy, there is the *Education for Persons with Disabilities Bill 2003*, or to give it its newly amended title, *Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Bill*, recently passed by the Dáil. Section 2 of that Bill reads as follows, "The provision of education to a child with special educational needs shall take place alongside the provision of education to children who do not have such needs unless that is 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" (p. 7). It may well be in future years that a High Court challenge under 2(b) will occur, with some interesting consequences. In Section 18 of the

same Bill the functions of the National Council for Special Education are outlined, one of which (1g) is "to ensure that a continuum of special educational provision is available as required in relation to each type of disability" (p. 18). Is the special school to be part of that continuum? Once again I don't know – but there does not appear to be any reference to "special schools" in this Bill. If it is envisaged that they be part of the continuum, it seems to me that it is only as a last resort, almost as a means of containment, rather than by providing an appropriate and worthwhile education.

IS THERE A ROLE FOR THE SPECIAL SCHOOL?

So, clearly, in the Ireland of 2004 we are in an age of inclusion. And this paper is to ask if special schools have a role in such an age. Let there be no doubt about where I stand on the principle of inclusion. Inclusion is a most positive, welcome and just principle. It is clearly intolerable that society should attempt to exclude any of its members, on any grounds. To fail to recognise and acknowledge the shared humanity of every human being on this earth is reprehensible. But – and there is a "but" – and a "what if" – what if the educational process is recognised for what it is, a process? And what if a particular type of educational process were to lead to the desired good of inclusion? Would that process then be condemned? If it were so that a child who attended a special school was better equipped to participate fully, and be included, in society, would the value and worth of the special school be acknowledged? Are these questions even being asked? Well they are, but it seems to me, not very often and not by many, certainly not in Ireland.

As far back as 1986, Stobart, in the Bulletin of the British Psychological Society 39, pp. 1-3, wrote, "Psychologists should not be party to sloppy theorising which leads to wishful laissez-faire policies and even to the uncritical support of abolishing special schools." In more recent times, Hornby (1999) analysed the theory and practice of educational inclusion and concluded as follows, "policies of working towards including all children with SEN in mainstream schools and classes should be abandoned. Instead, the level of inclusion…should be decided on the needs of each individual child and the exigencies of each situation…then the focus of special educators can return to that of meeting the individual needs of pupils with SEN rather than attempting to make 'one size fit all' " (p. 157). And, writing in collaboration with Kidd (2001), Hornby reports on a study of pupils who transferred from their special school for pupils with moderate learning difficulties (corresponding to the Irish category of mild general learning disabilities) into mainstream schools.

The findings showed that there were high levels of unemployment among these young people and indications that the quality of their adult lives is less than satisfactory. They concluded that "unless all that is best about special schools is transferred into mainstream schools, including specialised curricula and specialist teachers…young people with learning disabilities will be included in mainstream schools for their school lives, only to be excluded from the mainstream of society as adults" (p. 17). And Tod writes (O'Brien, 2002), "Inclusion is about human rights, equity and participation. While there is a consensus that continued developments in special education should support these ideals, there remains doubt about the philosophy, theory and practice behind current initiatives for inclusive education" (p. 34).

THE INCLUSIVE SCHOOL

One now regularly hears the phrase *the inclusive school*, and this is put forward as such an article of modern faith that it takes courage even to ask people to pause and think about it. Wilson (2002) did so in the *European Journal of Special Needs Education* (2000) and sparked some heated response. He examined the definition of "the inclusive school" which was provided by the Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education. That definition suggests that an inclusive school contains the following elements: "It is *community based*; an inclusive school reflects the community as a whole. Membership of the school community is open, positive and diverse. It is not selective, exclusive or rejecting; it is *barrier-free*; an inclusive school is accessible to all who become members – physically in terms of the building and grounds, and educationally in terms of curricula, support systems and methods of communication; it promotes *collaboration*; an inclusive school works with, rather than competitively against, other schools; it promotes *equality*; an inclusive school is a democracy" (p. 298).

Such a school would certainly have a place in More's Utopia. But is it real? In a searing analysis, Wilson describes the above definition as either vacuous or mistaken. He says, "Any school is 'selective' if only by its locale or catchment area;" and it cannot "reflect the 'community as a whole'. It is also restrictive by the criteria of age and size." (p. 298) And in Ireland he could have added 'religion' and 'gender'. He continues, "Certain parts of the school," (e.g. the Principal's Office) "are not accessible to all, even 'physically'; some parts of the curriculum will not be accessible to those without the ability to access them (I cannot play in the school orchestra if I have not the skill); and there will be private 'methods of communication' (between teachers, for instance) not open to all pupils" (p. 298). Wilson acknowledges that schools do compete with each other, not only on the sports field but also in terms of external criteria for success, such as exam results, third level entrance, etc. And rather than being a democracy, "all schools are governed by a hierarchy of authorities not appointed by the pupils" (p. 298). Yet it may be because of some such unreal expectations that parents are encouraged to ensure that their child with a general learning disability attends an *inclusive school.*

A further paradox, it seems to me, is that at precisely the same time that parents of children with general learning disabilities are advised to choose an *inclusive school*, and not a special school, other parents are literally queuing up to have their child enrolled in schools that are quite expressly exclusive. The growth of Gaelscoileanna and the Educate Together schools at primary level bears testimony to this, and the competition for places in fee paying schools at second level becomes more intense year after year.

PLACEMENT OPTIONS

And let there be no doubt that parents are advised/encouraged not to enrol their child with general learning disabilities in a special school. While I realise that the plural of anecdote is not data, I have spoken to parents who have told me that they have been advised by the assessing psychologist not to seek admission to a special school, even though their child is eligible for such admission. I have seen psychological reports, where the child is assessed as having a learning disability, and the only written recommendation by the psychologist is that the child is entitled to the services of a resource teacher and/or a special needs assistant. McGee (2004) also identified this issue as being a cause for concern. He writes, "There are special classes, with a track record of excellence over many years, whose continued existence is in question, not because of any policy decision, but mostly, it would seem, because the psychologist, who may or may not be knowledgeable about special education and who may

not have any measure of the quality of the special class, automatically refers pupils assessed to resource teaching…Many special schools have also been made to feel vulnerable by recent developments. Assessment service issues similar to those pertaining to special classes feature here too" (p. 77).

It seems to me that psychologists who identify only one option to parents when discussing the results of an assessment which had indicated that their child has a general learning disability, are treating those parents with an appalling level of disrespect. If they really acknowledge the role of parents as the prime educators of the child, surely they will acknowledge the right of the parent to make the choice, if a range of options is available. If there is a 'continuum of provision' should not all parts of that continuum be brought to the parents' notice? It has been my experience that the vast majority of parents who visit our school accept the offer of a place for their child. It is particularly galling to learn later from other parents that they had been advised against even visiting the school by psychologists who themselves had never visited the school either. And yet they purported to advise parents on the content and nature of the school's programme.

CURRICULUM

And what is the content and nature of the special school's programme? Well like any school, it is about learning and teaching and the obligation to ensure that both are of the highest quality. But what to teach and how to teach it? If those involved in an American election some years ago were able to say that the key issue was "the economy, stupid" equally it can be said that the key issue in special education is, and always should be "the curriculum, stupid." Writing in *Enabling Inclusion* (O'Brien, 2002), Rose and Howley state that "if the curriculum provided in special schools is not to differ from that provided in the mainstream, where is the justification for retaining special schools? After all, in terms of subject resources, a small special school cannot hope to compete with a large secondary school. The justification for the current retention of special schools must reside in their ability to provide an education which in complementing that of the mainstream, recognises that pupils need a curriculum which does not merely mimic that provided by the ordinary school" (p. 74).

And, may I suggest the key area of that curriculum is, particularly for those with a learning disability, what we now call SPHE, and what we called in St. Augustine's almost 40 years ago, *Social, Personal, Vocational and Health Education*. Byers (cited in O'Brien, 2002) writes that "for teachers in special schools the need to maintain a focus upon personal, social and health education remains a priority" (p. 73). It is right that it does so and there is much evidence to support the need for it. I will refer to one such piece. In 1996 the Vocational Officer of the National Rehabilitation Board (NRB) (and I for one very much regret its disbandment), who provided a service to our school, completed a follow up study on some of our past pupils. He discovered that within the six domains of McNamara's Life Skills Network (p. 67) our past pupils had deficits in four of them – Community skills, Interpersonal skills, Leisure skills and Home skills (p. 99). And he paid us the compliment in his study of saying that "the group being studied are from a particular school where interest in the personal effectiveness element is quite good" (p. 37). In this context it is worth noting that the time to be allocated to SPHE in the primary school curriculum is 30 minutes per week. In schools such as ours it may be given as much as six times that.

BEYOND THE CURRICULUM

If the area of SPHE is not treated as **the** priority area of the curriculum, I believe that pupils with general learning disabilities at primary and post primary level are being badly served. And I do not believe that this bad service occurs in special schools. But special schools are not just about one curricular area; they are about the totality of curricular experiences provided to the pupils, and their sole focus and ethos is concerned with the special needs of those pupils. Is there an awareness of how much is available for pupils in special schools? Are those who advise parents against considering the special school as an option, even aware of its curricular range? Do they know that in some special schools pupils may have the option, at post primary level, of studying for certification at Junior Cert Schools' Programme, Leaving Cert Applied, or FETAC level? Do they recognise the great achievement that success in these programmes provides for so many pupils? This, I might add, when almost 25% of pupils drop out of mainstream schools without having completed their Leaving Certificate, and, in some schools, fewer than 60% of students take the Junior Certificate. These figures refer to the year 2000, and are the first published figures on school retention in Ireland. This is happening while there continues to be an exceptionally high level of attendance at special schools, right up to the age of 18, and beyond.

And are they aware that the special school is first and foremost a school – a school that has a totally focused purpose, not just in curriculum but also in extra curricular areas? Here I would like to pay tribute to so many teachers in special schools who give voluntarily of their time to organise activities under the auspices of the Irish Special Schools Sports Council (ISSSC). Is it known that pupils of special schools for those with a mild general learning disability, compete enjoyably at Provincial and All Ireland Level, in a variety of sporting and other activities ranging from soccer, basketball and swimming, to rings, draughts, table quiz and choral singing? I have seen the joy on pupils' faces, and those of their parents as they watched their child participate in such activities, while representing their school. Would those children have such experiences otherwise? Or can you imagine parents saying "thank you" to the producer of the school concert, as they watch their child carry off a lead role with great style?

A VALUED PLACE WITHIN THE CONTINUUM OF PROVISION

So yes, Madame Chairman, I do believe that the special school has a role, and a very worthwhile one, in this age of inclusion. In the school year 2001-02, the last year for which statistics are available, there were 125 special schools in Ireland, with 6982 pupils enrolled. (Ten years earlier, 1991-92, there were 117 with 8163 pupils). I believe that if these special schools are to be effective, staff must have a sense of belief in the value of the work that they do. Such belief is influenced by many factors, not least by the public acknowledgement of the worth of such schools. If special schools are part of the continuum, and are in place in order to allow parents make an informed choice, then they should be recognised and valued as an integral part of the system.

And let there be no doubt that to work in a special school, while it does bring its rewards, can also be very difficult – additionally so if its role is not valued. I am sure that those of us who work in special schools wonder, from time to time, why we do so, when sometimes we can be abused by some children, both verbally and physically; when we never share the highs experienced by teachers of the successful students, using the modern criteria of success; when some parents make inordinate demands on us; and, most tragically, when we cope with attending the funerals of our pupils, or past pupils, probably to a far higher degree than our other teaching colleagues.

Might I suggest that the reason we work in such schools is that we love the children – and even in these days of political correctness we should not be ashamed to say so. A further reason is that we really believe that we can deliver an appropriate and relevant education to our pupils. I salute those teachers who teach and who have taught in special schools. I encourage you to continue to believe in the worth of your work, and I exhort you to be pro-active about the role of your schools. You owe that to yourselves and to the children you are privileged to teach.

Finally, I would like to thank my colleagues in St. Francis School Portlaoise, many of whom are here today, for their marvellous commitment to the work of our school and their loyalty to me personally. To my colleagues in the wider field of Irish special education, thank you for your support and friendship; I will miss you. Thank you, Madame President, for your invitation to deliver this closing address; thank you all for your attention and let me conclude by saying,

"My name is Pat and I am proud to have worked in the Irish Special Schools system in the latter part of the 20th Century."

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