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Reflections on Irish Special Education over Four Decades

This paper is based on the keynote address delivered at the opening of the annual conference of the Irish Association of Teachers in Special Education at St. Patrick's College in June, 2003. It does not aim to provide a history of the period in question but rather to indicate some important factors which may be considered to have facilitated or limited the development of services. The major expansion of recent years may be better understood against this background.

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INTRODUCTION

The major expansion of Special Education in Ireland, which dates from less than 50 years ago, began with a period of relatively rapid development between the late 1950s and early 1970s. We are now conscious of having experienced in very recent years an extraordinary growth in the number of pupils served and the number of personnel employed in special education. I believe that a consideration of the earlier period and of what happened or did not happen in the intervening years may help to inform our understanding of recent developments.

In 1967, when I returned to St. Patrick's College to work as the first full-time staff-member in special education, the first, rapid phase of expansion was already under way. It was occurring alongside considerable other significant change. Ten years earlier when I had begun teaching, Ireland was a much less agreeable place. Indeed, I and my peer group in teaching were relatively privileged for, while we were poorly paid and, in larger schools, we had classes of 50 or more, we had secure, permanent employment whereas up to half of our age group had emigrated.

THE 1960s

The 1960s, as is widely acknowledged, were different and in Ireland many of the differences were important for education. The economy grew significantly, the country was better off and so were individuals, there was optimism and confidence around and an openness to examining issues that had previously been simply accepted. These were factors which disposed people to look more closely at, among other things, education and, when they looked, several issues came into focus.

There were issues about standards in education, especially in relation to literacy. I had been involved in research in this area with the Teachers' Study Group and our results, published in 1967, showed that Dublin City 11-year-olds had reading comprehension levels just over 2 years behind their counterparts in England and Wales (Kelly & McGee, 1967). John Macnamara, who then worked in St. Patrick's College and positively influenced a lot of lives, had shown that over 40% of the primary school day was devoted to the teaching of Irish (Macnamara, 1966); the place of the language in education was a very contentious issue in those years. In primary schools,

classes were still very large: close to one-third of all pupils were in classes of 45 or more. At second-level only about 10,000 out of an age-cohort of 55,000 went on to the Leaving Certificate Examination and only about 2,000 went to university.

As frequently happens, movement in the economy coincided with change in other areas. Indeed, the economy was an important consideration in the establishment by the Minister for Education, in conjunction with OECD, of the group which produced the very influential report, *Investment in Education* (Ireland, 1965). In 1967 free post-primary education was introduced and in the same year the Primary Certificate Examination was discontinued. There was talk of a new curriculum, which in fact materialised a few years later; there was debate on how teachers should be trained and, in the early 1970s, Colleges of Education linked with universities and the B.Ed. degree was introduced. Parenthetically, one of the main factors that brought the Teachers' Study Group into existence was the perception that, with very few exceptions, the most notable being the journal *Studies*, Dublin in the early 1960s was a dialectical desert in terms of debate or discussion on education. By the late 1960s and early 1970s that had changed and important educational issues were now seriously discussed in the press. In this regard, that is, in relation to genuine, accessible, independent, public debate about educational issues and developments, I believe that the public and the general body of teachers are now less well served.

Special Education as we know it had begun to grow from the mid 1950s. The push had come from outside the system, from parents, a small number of interested professionals, some concerned citizens and, one should also say, the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) and in particular its General Secretary, Sean Brosnahan, who was very active in promoting a new awareness of this issue around the country in the 1950s. While the initiative may have come from outside the system, quite soon the system was prepared to respond. As is often the case, the system in this instance meant a very small number of people in key positions, although not the most senior positions in the Department of Education. New special schools began to be sanctioned. By 1967 there were 19 schools for pupils with mild general learning disability and 20 for pupils with a moderate level of disability. By 1993 when the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) reported, these figures were 31 and 33 respectively, but, in fact, the expansion of special school provision had continued apace after 1967 and was very largely complete by 1975.

Recognition of the inadequacy of the response of the State and of the education system to disability issues over the 40 years following independence had come with the establishment of the Commission of Inquiry on Mental Handicap in 1962. Their report (Ireland, 1965) was of major importance; it largely shaped policy up to the 1990s. While the report did not see children with severe or profound learning disability as coming within the remit of education, it was forward looking compared with many other countries in supporting education for children with moderate general learning disability, something which was already under way in Ireland. The Report leaned towards special schools as the desirable form of provision for children with general learning disabilities although it also saw a place for special classes in mainstream schools for children with mild general learning disability. For this latter group, the Report suggested that the system might aim to provide special education suited to their needs for 1% of the school population by 1975, that is, within 10 years of the publication of the report.

The other remarkable happening in the 1960s was the establishment in 1961of the post-graduate Diploma Course in Special Education in St Patrick's College to complement the recently established Diploma for Teachers of the Deaf at University College Dublin. It was remarkable in that in 1961 a specialist course, with one-year, full-time release, was light years away from any other continuing professional development opportunities available to teachers. By 1967 there had been 70 to 80 graduates, mainly from special schools, mostly for pupils with mild general learning disability, although there were quite a few teachers who worked with pupils with physical disability. In 1967, the number of places increased to 25 and teachers of pupils with moderate learning disability became an important group. Incidentally, about one in four of the graduates of those first six years were religious, almost all of them sisters, a reflection of the importance of religious orders in both the recently- and longer-established special schools.

A further critical initiative on the part of the Department of Education was the development of a specialised Special Education Inspectorate and, in the 15 or so years from the mid 1960s, the secondment of some of their ablest people to take the Diploma in St. Patrick's College. This group was vital to the consolidation of the new discipline as a serious branch of education.

Also of enduring importance was the founding of the Irish (originally National) Association of Teachers in Special Education (IATSE), largely by the Diploma class of 1968/9. This was another indicator of the professionalism of this new body of teachers: their raison d'étre was and steadfastly continues to be the enhancement of the learning and the lives of their pupils.

The points about those early years which are pertinent to this discussion may be briefly summarised. It was a period of great expansion, from a very low base, with enormous growth, mainly in the area of general learning disabilities. By far the greater part of the expansion was outside the mainstream school system, in special schools with parallel management. The mainstream system, initially, was little interested; in fact, many schools were more concerned with having a child with problems placed elsewhere and, for their part, the voluntary organisations which sprang up around the country saw the national school system, funded by the State, managed by the Church, as largely impervious to what parents would wish.

I do not propose to elaborate on the history of the 25-30 years between the first serious expansion of special education and the much greater and much more rapid growth in provision which became discernible in the last years of the century. However, an outline of key elements is warranted because the similarities and differences between the two periods are instructive and because some of the features already apparent in the earlier period are of considerable relevance. So too are the decisions which were made or not made and the issues addressed or not addressed in the long period between.

THE 1970s

The 1970s is the most reasonable point at which to locate some assessment of this early period, to comment briefly on what was and was not achieved and on how well

the process was managed. By the middle of the decade, as indicated earlier, most of the eventual network of special schools had been established. In the 1960's there had been a handful of special classes in city schools and a number of others in certain towns where the voluntary association in the area had been unable to identify pupils meeting the relevant criteria in sufficient numbers to warrant the sanctioning of a special school (usually, the association would have been disappointed with this outcome).

In the 1970s many more such classes were set up, largely in Dublin, and mostly in schools serving disadvantaged populations. Almost all of these classes, both in Dublin and elsewhere, served pupils considered to have mild general learning disability. The large majority of special schools served pupils with either mild or moderate degrees of general learning disability. Services, some very long established, for groups having other disabilities such as impaired hearing or vision, physical disability or emotional/behavioural disturbance were all provided through special schools based in Dublin and to a lesser extent in Cork, Limerick, Galway or Kilkenny.

If the Minister for Education had invited the OECD to evaluate the provision at this point I believe their report would have been highly positive. It would have pointed to major progress in a short time, to attractive new schools, a cohort of very able and committed teachers, many of whom had availed of generous inservice arrangements to acquire specialist qualifications, a sense of purpose and optimism in schools and classes and a group of able, well qualified and well regarded inspectors who had stayed quite close to the system as it had developed. Their summary statement might have referred to "a very good standard of provision" but would almost certainly have added a phrase such as "as far as it goes".

The import of this phrase would have been that the service was not available to all who required it. It would have been expected that some 2-3% of the school-going population had special needs of the types served by the existing special schools and classes; however, total provision came to less than half of this figure. This situation had two dimensions. Firstly, in national terms, there were thousands of pupils still in mainstream classes who should have qualified for special education provision. Secondly, at the individual level, the chances of a particular child gaining access to special education varied with circumstances such as the part of the country in which he/she lived or the school attended.

With excellent progress having been made, good standards established and much greater awareness and goodwill in the community, why was such incompleteness and inequality of provision allowed to stand? The almost reflexive but unfortunately simplistic response of many people in education is to blame the entity we now call the Department of Education and Science (DES).

Although the system depended largely on voluntary associations to establish and manage the newer special schools, the DES had limited control over these bodies. The DES was also well aware for decades previously that it had delimited powers in relation to mainstream schools. It did not establish schools or manage them. It did not have authority to require schools to make provision for pupils with special educational needs. It could lay down criteria for provision, it could facilitate and encourage it but

as in the case of special schools it had to wait for such a proposal and then - to quote a phrase I have used previously - allow itself to be persuaded of the need.

This depiction of the situation is not intended to imply preciousness on the part of the DES but rather to reflect reality. Of the elements contributing to this reality the two most important would seem to be, firstly, the largely private complexion of the national school system which had been carved out over more than a century and secondly, the lack of either legislation specifying the right or a statement clarifying the entitlement to special education of the child with a disability.

A further structural impediment to progress centred on the assessment process, without which the pupil could not gain access to special education. Responsibility for the process had been given to the Health Services; there was no educational psychological service (except in the case of City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee). Delays, sometimes amounting to years, were common and there did not appear to be a statutory duty on any person or agency to ensure that the situation would be otherwise. In addition, availability of these services varied substantially between areas. Thus, many children either had no chance of receiving special education or were denied the opportunity until it was, in practical terms, too late. An unfortunate macro effect of inadequacy in this area was that individuals or groups who were disposed to challenge government on the partial and unequal character of special education provision had their case made much more difficult by the absence of the hard evidence which a comprehensive assessment service would have provided.

Ireland is highly unusual in Western Europe in the extent to which administration of the education system has been centralised in a single bureaucracy. I believe that the lack of devolved, intermediate or local structures in primary and secondary education has been – and remains – a serious impediment to the development of effective services in the area of special education and also in learning support. It is an issue too large for elaboration in this paper but it can be argued that many of the obstacles referred to already would have been avoided, overcome, moderated or at the very least highlighted had such structures been in place.

Readers who came into special education not in the immediate past but not very many years ago may have to some degree a sense of *déjà vu* in reading the preceding paragraphs pertaining to 25 years ago: the issues do not seem to have gone away. Were they not addressed in the 1980s?

THE 1980s

The 1980s were not a good time for special education in Ireland. One positive feature was a Report (Ireland, 1983) which recommended that children having severe/profound learning disability (S/PLD), up to then excluded from schools, should now have access to special education. However, a pilot project introducing teachers was initiated, faltered and provision did not expand further.

Across countries, the world of special education had moved on. The concept of special educational needs, taken up in the Warnock Report (Department of Education and Science, 1978), was proving influential. Britain had passed important legislation in 1981 and we, on this side of the Atlantic, were also conscious of the ground-

breaking nature of US legislation in 1975. Across Europe, from Spain to Scandinavia, the right to special education had been enshrined in law. In Ireland, integration as a desideratum had become part of policy and Ministers reiterated this stance at international meetings. However, principals asserted that if they took a pupil with a serious level of disability into their school they had no assurance that appropriate resources would follow.

While the 1980's had some economically very stringent years it should have been still possible to think ahead, especially with several key parameters now clearly etched. I believe the more important problem with the system at this period was a failure of imagination. Some examples follow.

There was still no psychological service to schools at primary level. It was surely possible to envisage that this situation was not indefinitely sustainable and that there was grave danger that, at some point, a service would have to be developed at a speed which would place quality at very serious risk.

The special education inspectorate was allowed to run down because of a new policy position that all general inspectors were capable of inspecting special education effectively. It is hard to see what special education landscape was envisaged that would render this decision other than seriously injudicious.

Thousands of children with special educational needs were not receiving appropriate education while children with similar needs in other areas or other schools were. Was the structural status quo so far beyond question that no proposals could be developed to eliminate or at least minimise happenstance in children's access to a service so critical to their lives?

In the matter of learning support also the throw of the dice was evident as a factor. Although this service was well established in larger schools, in many instances for 15 years or more, virtually none of the country's smaller primary schools had such provision; this amounted to approximately half of the country's schools and one-third of the pupil population. Even if resources were finite – and they were – what sort of education system, indeed, what sort of democracy, could continue to acquiesce in such a distribution? The problem clearly lay in the lack of any local or regional structure which could employ and deploy resources on a supra-school basis. But would the problem be allowed indefinitely to pre-empt the solution?

The common thread running through many of these issues was a special education administrative system which, in simple language, allowed and facilitated but normally could not require good and necessary things to happen in the interests of the child. In a system which was now relatively mature this was a major flaw. In many instances, for the good and necessary to happen it had to coincide with the interests of persons or bodies who were critical agents in the process. The persons could include professionals and professionals could include teachers.

In the 1980's when rolls were falling, people who worked in the field were aware of a disinclination on the part of some schools, especially smaller schools, to be pro-active in initiating a referral process for a pupil if the subsequent assessment might lead to the pupil's placement in another school. In the reality of school life this was a

complex situation since it had the potential to impact on many lives, but a solution in which all of the burden was placed on the life of the one who could least afford to carry it was surely not defensible.

RECENT TIMES

Early in the next decade the logjam was finally broken with the establishment of SERC (1991-1993). Because of its size and composition it was not the vehicle to examine radically the structural elements which appeared to impede the development of effective and comprehensive special education services. However, it aimed to look across the whole of special education – the first such group with a brief to do so. It produced an extensive range of recommendations, many of them on issues which were quite urgent for schools and it was an important catalyst for change.

In the same year that SERC reported (1993) there was the landmark judgement in the Paul O'Donoghue case. The case was not based on law – we still had no relevant Education Act – but on what had seemed the very unlikely ground of the Constitution, written in the Ireland of the 1930's when special education impinged on the consciousness of very few people. This could also be said to represent a breaking of a logjam because, as we know, that there have been hundreds of High Court actions in this area since then. For several years – and to a lesser extent still – DES personnel, both professional and administrative, have had to seek resolutions to these cases against a background in which the structural dysfunctionalities which had given rise to the case in the first instance were still present. This situation appears to have been an important factor in triggering the Minister's famous press statement of November 1998 which used the word 'guaranteed' in relation to special education provision. No such term had been used previously and the statement had at least some of the effect which might have been achieved by a special education act.

We know that there is now considerable system-alarm about what has happened since 1998 but it is important to say that it was a brave and imaginative step by the Minister. It should be the case now that no child who has a special educational need, except unfortunately, some children with S/PLD, is without the appropriate resources – if appropriate resources are defined in terms of access to a teacher and/or special needs assistant.

Why then is there alarm? Because we seem to have ended up making very expensive and relatively intensive provision for many pupils other than those for whom this provision was envisaged, broadly, the 2-3% of the child population for whom the system was aiming to provide in that first expansion in the 1960s. How have we now arrived at this unexpected place?

When those charged with delivering on the Minister's commitment addressed the task they would have had some reason for concern as to whether it could be achieved in a manner that was orderly and fair and to a level that would be sustainable. It seemed very unlikely that sufficient assessments of high quality could be conducted. It should have been clear, and clear to all the partners, that there would be a shortage of teachers and, in that event, it was easy to predict which children would be without qualified teachers. It should have been seen to be impossible for the existing special education inspectorate to monitor the likely expansion and perhaps there was not an

appreciation of the unreasonableness of expecting the general inspectorate to do so. At the time, it was difficult, and as events showed, not possible, to estimate the extent to which principals and teachers genuinely sought the opportunity to include pupils with special needs with their peers while also providing them with appropriate education. And few people then adverted to the possible influence of a factor which operates widely in human services – the degree to which the proposed arrangements were consonant with the interests of principals and staffs.

In the event, the number of resource teachers grew quickly to 1400 and is now probably double that figure. At the 1400 point we had probably enrolled in special education double the number of pupils who had been receiving special education before the expansion began. We presume that the review at present being conducted by the DES will reach a judgement on issues such as how fairly, justifiably or responsibly these resources have been deployed.

Should these questions be raised now? Were our mainstream schools not starved of this designation of resource for too long? If we find that 6% or 8% or 10% of pupils in a school in an advantaged area are enrolled in special education why should we cavil? Are we not a rich country? I would suggest that these questions bring us into terrain where it is wise to look around corners. To whatever extent special needs provision is made there is always an interface between that provision and that of the mainstream class. The farther special needs provision reaches towards the milder end of the continuum of need the more blurred this interface is likely to be. We wish our legislators to enshrine the right of the child with special educational needs to an appropriate education but should appropriate education not also be the right of *every* child? And does this not imply differentiation to a greater or lesser degree?

I believe that this issue may lead us to another interface, that between two concepts that have become prominent in Irish life recently: *rights* and *equality*. It does seem that we have been gradually discovering that *equality* is quite a complex idea and it may be that in the area of special needs, *rights* will prove equally so. If the system as a whole or a particular school is perceived to be cavalier in the allocation of resources, on the basis of rights, to a child with special needs the allocation may raise questions about equality in the minds of parents of children in the same class. If we were to reach this point the road beyond would be difficult to read.

It is hoped that the DES review will lead to clarification as to which pupils in mainstream schools will qualify for what additional resources. We may then be better able to concentrate on the role and work of the resource teacher. It has been disturbing to watch an enormous expansion of provision, with the system's energies largely monopolised by matters concerning numbers, ratios and time. Of course, these matters must take priority in one sense since they must be settled before provision is made but while they may be a necessary, they are certainly not a sufficient, condition for quality special education. In terms of capacity to make a difference to the life – the entire life – of a pupil with special needs, none of the operative variables compares with good teaching. There is a real loss in the fact that large numbers of teachers new to this work have not had the opportunity to observe what high-quality teaching for such a pupil entails. There is a danger – already, I believe, apparent in some discourse – that we may drift towards defining special education, implicitly perhaps, in terms of variables for which we can vouch, such as teacher numbers, ratios, time and inclusion.

If naïve notions were to become established regarding the expertise, the intensity of work and the continuing professional development required in special education, the implications would be disturbing for all of the pupils concerned and potentially devastating for pupils with special educational needs of a very serious or very complex nature.

The Minister's statement, which generated so much growth in special education, also has the potential to create casualties. One of these is the special class. 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. Some highly effective principals, who would testify strongly to the excellence of their special class, seem strangely disempowered in this situation. They would need to appreciate that the system has not taken any position on the relative merits of these forms of provision; no doubt a very hard-pressed system will get around to addressing the issue but by that time some very fine services may have been lost. In the circumstance it behoves the principal to be much more pro-active in relation to the assessment process; he/she may find that dialogue on an issue of principle is warranted or simply that the psychologist needs to be educated on the issue.

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. If there were a policy vacuum regarding the place of the special school in the new dispensation some justification might be claimed for the professional concerned being more or less strongly directive in advice, although surely not to the point of counselling the parents of a child with serious disability against even visiting the local special school. There is certainly not a policy vacuum: SERC saw the special school as one element in a continuum of provision. However, there is urgent need to decide on the role of each special school in its own geographical area and on issues such as the extent to which it will develop exclusive skills for particular groups of pupils. Some special schools appear to consider themselves the forgotten element in the system and, in the absence of affirmation, feel uncertain about their future. Prolonged uncertainty may damage many of the schools; they need clarification on where they will fit in the scheme of things in their own region and validation of the contribution which they will be expected to make.

Finally, I would propose two statements which are certainly relevant to the resolution of many systemic issues but, more particularly, have pertinence to the work of each person involved in arranging or delivering or supporting those who deliver special education. The first is that, in the child's education and decisions pertaining to it, his/her interest should have primacy. The second is that the learning of the pupil with special educational needs depends, to an exceptional degree, on relevant teacher expertise. The first of these may be called a principle and it has universal application; however, the child with special needs has little scope to deflect damage arising from any violation of the principle. The second derives from a long-standing conviction which grew constantly stronger over many years' work with experienced special education teachers. Skilled and conscientious teaching in this area is highly demanding work but the logic of the situation is that the pupils concerned cannot

afford less. In this context, since, in the medium-term at least, it does not seem possible that substantial inservice support can be delivered to so many teachers, I would suggest two other avenues for development: effective sharing within schools of specialist knowledge and skills (including the learning support area) and recourse by teachers or study groups of teachers to the very much greater and much more accessible range of specialist literature now available on each aspect of special education.

CONCLUSION

This paper has aimed to sketch important aspects of the development of Irish special education over four decades, from the period of early expansion to the exciting but less ordered period in which we live. Throughout the account there has been reference to structural issues, which, of course, are fundamentally political. It is hoped that a better understanding of where we have been may help in reading the happenings of our own time. At the end, the paper briefly drew nearer to the classroom, to matters of enduring centrality, which most of us have the capacity to influence and, hopefully, to change if necessary. Through bad times and good, whether the system moves at a headlong pace, progresses sedately or stalls, the quality of teaching remains, for the child with special educational needs more than for any other child, the pre-eminent influence on the educational outcome.

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