

## **Towards A New Era: A Review of Policy Documents**

**In the past decade, there have been significant changes in the area of special education, particularly in policy and provision. Careful consideration of past policies and developments should help to shape a more positive and inclusive learning environment for pupils with special educational needs in Irish schools.**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The turn of the century and the dawning of a new millennium witness the emergence of a new era in special education in Ireland. Commitment to and interest in special education is currently at an unsurpassed level. Policy statements and the provision of services have changed dramatically during the last four decades. Changes have been stimulated and maintained by the dedication and stamina of concerned parents, educationalists, health personnel and officials of the various State Departments. The volume of policy documents and the increased incidence of policy implementation illustrates sustained commitment and intense interest.

As we emerge into the twenty-first century, it is worthwhile to contextualise current change by chronologically reviewing some of the more momentous and far-reaching policy changes in special education since 1960. Such a review will also provide us with a framework of reference from where we can pursue further change and development. For the purposes of this article, the author will concentrate on policy changes and the emerging trends in the area of general learning disabilities.

### **1960s**

Evidence suggests that from 1960, there was an upsurge of interest and progress in special education. Developments in special education appear to have been led by parents, teachers and teacher unions and accelerated by government initiatives. At

that time, parents began to form themselves into groups and associations to offer mutual support and to act as a lobby movement. Teacher awareness of general learning disabilities was promoted by INTO courses and lectures. Policy documents issued in the 1960's with relevance for the development of services for children with general learning disabilities include the 1960 White Paper, *The Problem of the Mentally Handicapped* (issued by the Department of Health) and the 1965 *Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Mental Handicap*.

The 1960 White Paper was primarily a health document and conveyed the prevailing contemporary perception that the care and training of persons with a general learning disability was the responsibility of the Department of Health. This document testified to the limited educational potential of children with a mild or moderate general learning disability and to the ineducability of children with a severe general learning disability. The White Paper recommended the review of the facilities for diagnosis. This was the first of repeated calls for a psychological service. The White Paper indicated that the Minister for Health proposed to establish a Commission of Inquiry to examine learning disabilities. It is evident that there was an awareness of the need to increase research and study in this field. Without the willingness to respond to this need, developments would have been delayed. However, the willingness was there and the Commission of Inquiry was duly established in 1961.

The 1965 *Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Mental Handicap* was a comprehensive document which helped to provide a framework for developments in the subsequent three decades. Its central concern was the care and treatment of persons with a general learning disability. One of the report's most significant proposals was the establishment of a Diagnostic, Assessment and Advisory Service which it envisaged would operate on the basis of two teams; school teams and general teams. Unfortunately, school teams were never established.

The Commission of Inquiry advocated the segregation of the various grades of general learning disability; an attitude which was to be challenged within a decade. The Commission explored the provision of education for children with a mild or moderate general learning disability in separate schools. Care units were to be established for some children with a moderate general learning disability and all

children with a severe general learning disability. The ineducability of children with a severe general learning disability was not questioned by the Commission.

The importance of linkages was emphasised by the increasing responsibility of the Department of Education for the educational input to children who had been previously provided for by the Department of Health. However, it was not until the nineties that inter-departmental linkages became a reality.

During the sixties, the Department of Health led the reappraisal of general learning disability. Prior to 1959, the Department of Education did not have an Inspector for Special Education. Although developments in education was relatively slow during the fifties and early sixties, it appears that special education was particularly low on the list of priorities for the Department of Education. With the establishment of a Special Education Department in St. Patrick's Teacher Training College in 1960 and the official recognition of schools for children with a moderate general learning disability in 1965, the Department of Education became increasingly involved.

### **1970s and 1980s**

In 1977, the Department of Education issued a circular indicating that many children with a mild general learning disability would be suitably placed in special classes in mainstream schools. This was the first concrete move by the Department to promote integration. It was reflective of change in societal and educational attitudes; in a period of twelve years, the opinion that children with a mild general learning disability were appropriately provided for in a special school was modified to provision in special classes.

Some curriculum guidelines for children with a moderate general learning disability were issued in the period from 1978 to 1987. Thus, the pressure on teachers to structure and plan an individualised curriculum for their children was alleviated.

The Department of Health published a report on *Services for the Mentally Handicapped* in 1980. The report explored the question of employing teachers for the education of children with a severe and profound general learning disability. It stated

that the extent of teacher involvement was a matter for consideration by the Departments of Health and Education. The report did not indicate the feasibility or otherwise of teacher involvement and hence avoided tackling the issue.

Also in 1980, the Department of Education issued a White Paper. This White Paper proposed that integration was to be the first option in placement decisions. However, it did not explore the manner in which mainstream schools would be adapted to meet the challenges of integration.

In 1983, the Departments of Education, Health and Social Welfare collaborated to produce a report examining *The Education and Training of Severely and Profoundly Mentally Handicapped Children in Ireland*. This report was the first Irish report to articulate the educability of children with a severe and profound general learning disabilities and to acknowledge the need for appropriate education and training. It is ironic to note that within ten years, the Department of Education found themselves in court, being sued on an argument to which they had already conceded. The report made proposals to establish a system of education for these children. The most significant recommendation was that the Department of Education should employ teachers to work in the care units. This recommendation represented a victory for those who had been campaigning for the rights of these children to an appropriate education.

In response to the recommendation made by the 1983 report regarding teachers, the Minister for Education, in the *Programme for Action in Education, 1984-1987* (1984), proposed to appoint and train teachers for children with a severe and profound general learning disability. In the context of children with a mild general learning disability, the Programme for Action stated that integration was being facilitated by the establishment of special classes in mainstream schools. The question of integration into mainstream classes had yet to be addressed formally, although some schools had taken the initiative to integrate their pupils with special educational needs for some subjects.

#### **1990-1994**

The formulation of Irish policy in the nineties occurred in a context of increased European awareness. The 1989 UN Convention was an important treaty to ensure the rights of all children, including those with a disability. Ireland ratified this treaty in 1992. The EU Resolution in 1990, proposed and signed by Ireland, governed the integration of children and adults with disabilities into the ordinary education system. Ireland's future policy was obliged to reflect the philosophies expounded by the international agreements.

There were a number of developments at national level at the beginning of the nineties which are important to contextualise subsequent events. These include the establishment of a pilot psychological service and the publication of a Department of Health report, *Needs and Abilities*, in 1990 and the establishment, in 1991, of the Special Education Review Committee, the first independent body to comprehensively examine special education. Special education was being addressed in a serious and committed manner.

The Green Paper of 1992 proposed an equitable and devolved system of education. Its policy on integration was in line with the EU Resolution. However, the Green Paper failed to address existing deficiencies in the process of integration. It proposed to develop the assessment structure. The pilot psychological project was not referred to and there was an absence of comprehensive proposals regarding the exact manner in which the assessment service would be developed. The Green Paper was important in that it formed the basis for a consultative process which was intended to lead to legislation.

The 1993 *Report of the Special Education Review Committee* (SERC Report) was an encompassing and authoritative document addressing an issue which had been neglected for too long. Seven core principles were identified by the committee to act as the foundation of the report and of future developments. The range of recommendations made by the committee was broad and challenging. It was stated in the report and recognised in education circles that the implementation of these recommendations would require substantial resources. The report made important recommendations regarding integration, teacher education, linkages, curriculum, pupil-teacher ratios and assessment. The SERC Report was critically important in an

education system which continued to operate in the absence of legislation. The report formed a framework for the development of special education and continues to exert an influence on policy decisions.

The 1994 National Education Convention proposed to explore a number of issues pertinent to the development of special education. The consultative process was deepened and enriched by the Convention. The inclusion of a wide range of educational partners in the Convention facilitated genuine dialogue. In their discussions, it was apparent that there were gross reservations regarding the existing psychological service. These reservations were a reflection of the reality at root level. The Convention demonstrated an awareness of the complexities of the integration process and identified choice and flexibility as two core aspects. It helped to refine proposals made in the Green Paper and as such was key precursor to the 1995 White Paper.

### **1995-1999**

The later half of the nineties has been dominated by the achievement of a legislative basis for the Irish educational system. However, this achievement must be contextualised in a long process of development led and carried by consultation and participation.

The 1995 White Paper incorporated changes and refinements to policy in relation to special education. Chief among these was the proposal to establish Regional Education Boards which would respond to local needs and co-ordinate support services for special education. The proposal to establish curriculum development projects was important for teachers who previously had been obliged to develop their own adapted curricula. The White Paper stated that a task force had been established to implement recommendations made in the SERC Report. In 1996, *Implementing the Agenda for Change* assured the partners in education that proposals made in the White Paper were being implemented. The move to publish this document maintained confidence in government commitment to change. The National Intellectual Disability Database (proposed by the 1995 White Paper) is currently being used to assess service provision and to address identified deficiencies.

Information is a basic requirement for planning and co-ordination. The database provides the necessary accurate information.

The *Report of the Commission on the Status of People with Disability* (1996) was an authoritative document which was well-informed by people with disability. The Commission invited responses and participation from a sector of the community which has often been left voiceless. The report identified barriers which hinder the movement towards an inclusive educational system. The accurate identification of barriers indicated the direction in which educational change should be moving. It is reassuring to observe that a number of these barriers are currently being tackled.

The Report of the Planning Group on a National Educational Psychological Service in September 1998 paved the way for the establishment of such a service. This report was both timely and pertinent. It provided a framework for future implementation of its recommendations.

Two Education Bills were drafted in 1997. The first was a controversial Bill and evoked numerous responses. The second was less so and reactions were less emotive and negative. The enactment of the Education Act in December, 1998 was a momentous occasion in Irish educational history. However, reactions to the Education Act were slow to be articulated. One explanation can be that relevant groups required time to peruse and investigate the finer details of such a legal document. Alternatively, it can be suggested that little of a controversial or novel nature was evident in the Act to warrant a rapid response. The Education Act is vitally important in Irish education, not because it legislates for dramatic reforms in the education system; rather, it gives a legislative basis to the process of change and gradual development which has characterised the nineties.

## **EMERGING TRENDS**

Having reviewed the more significant policy developments from 1960-1999, it is pertinent to identify important trends which have emerged from these policies and which provide an outline map of the future of special education in the twenty-first century.

In the early nineties, the courtroom was the arena in which the right to education, of children with a severe and profound general learning disability, was debated. In the coming years, legal battles to secure basic educational provision for children will probably be replaced by court cases regarding the quality of provision.

Teacher education is in the process of being examined by review bodies. Special education was specifically included in the remit of the review bodies. The reports of the review bodies will potentially change teacher education in the years to come. Training for teachers involved in special education is also in the process of change, particularly with regard to the geographical availability of courses, the access to the courses for teachers of children with severe and profound general learning disability and the provision of post-diploma modules.

Pupil-teacher ratios have been brought into line with the recommendations made in the SERC report. This is a welcome development which has been pressed for since 1993. The role of special needs assistants has been acknowledged by the increase in the number of posts. Integration is being facilitated by the creation of fifty-one additional posts for Special Needs Resource Teachers (May 1999).

Changes in special education inevitably result in changes for all schools. An examination of statistics in Government statistical reports (Ireland, 1985; 1995; 1998) suggest a changing clientele in special schools, special classes and mainstream schools. Changes occurring across the spectrum of education providers indicate the need for appropriate training for all teachers, irrespective of the nature of the institution in which they teach. The most effective approach to responding to these changes is the creation of practical working linkages between mainstream and special schools.

Linkages are also vital between the various state departments involved in providing for children with special educational needs. The Interdepartmental Co-ordinating Committee (established in 1995) is responsible for liaison and co-operation to ensure smooth operation and planning between the Departments of Education and Health.



Curriculum development projects are continuing; work on these is expected to be complete in the near future. The development of the new curricula involves a number of educational partners and incorporates a significant degree of consultation.

Assessment and referral continue to be a problematic aspect of special education. The existing assessment process involves long waiting lists. The 1998 publication of a report on the establishment of a national educational psychological service suggests that a service may be established in the near future. The establishment of such a service would ease pressure and anxiety for teachers and parents. It would also alleviate the heavy workload of existing psychologists.

Evidently, change is the fundamental feature of special education as the twenty-first century begins. Given the commitment and dedication of all the partners in the process, it is likely that developments in the future will reflect a more positive and equitable system of provision and service.

## **TOWARDS A NEW ERA**

“Education for people with a disability is an integral aspect of our educational system at all levels” (O Murchu, 1997, p.77). As such, it demands and deserves our attention. During the past forty years, the education of children with general learning disabilities has been the focus of significant attention. A heightened public and political awareness of general learning disabilities is evident in today’s society. Much of this awareness has been generated by the publicity which surrounded legal cases in recent years. Pressure groups have also engaged the public’s attention. Attitudes are changing on an on-going basis and in a multitude of ways.. The educability of all children, irrespective of their ability, is almost universally accepted and is endorsed by policy. In many countries, education is considered a right not a privilege. Linkages between mainstream and special schools are helping to build bridges of understanding and mutual valuing. Research and publications promote awareness and understanding. The increasing participation of people with disabilities in society and in education facilitates dialogue.

Recent developments, such as the National Education Convention and the publication of *A Strategy for Equality* (Department of Education and Law Reform, 1996) have been based on consultative fora. Individuals with disabilities and parents of children with disabilities have been encouraged to participate and engage in genuine dialogue. Consultation has reduced the isolation and helplessness experienced by individuals with disabilities and parents of children with general learning disabilities. The participation of government officials in consultative fora testify to the current partnership approach. The financial commitment of the government to the improvement and extension of services for individuals with general learning disabilities was highlighted by the 1st of December budget 1999 which allocated £28 million to these services.

The provision of special education has surmounted many difficulties and appears to be entering a new era -- an era of social and educational equity, social awareness and inclusiveness, and a greater commitment to consultation and consequent implementation. Much has been achieved but there are many aspects that continue to require attention and increased resources. To avoid complacency, it is necessary to temper pride in the level and quality of what has been achieved with commitment and dedication to a continued demand for a high quality and equitable system of education for all children. For many years, special education and mainstream education developed as parallel systems. At the beginning of a new century, the two systems of education are drawing closer together and hence becoming more inclusive. While some differences will continue to exist, linkages and open channels of communication will cultivate mutual understanding and appreciation. Societal and government commitment is necessary for future progress. To ensure this commitment, philosophies propounding equality of access and participation must be nurtured. Special needs must stay on the agenda, not as a matter of benevolence, but as a matter of right (Hegarty, 1993, p. 188).

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