

Tribute to Páid McGee - A True Champion of Special Education in Ireland

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Last November we lost a champion of IATSE, REACH and special education in Ireland following the death of Páid McGee. He was the former Director of the Special Education Department in St Patrick's College, Drumcondra from 1967 to 2003. Páid played a key role in the development of teacher education and wider policy and practice in the field of special education in Ireland. He was synonymous with the Diploma in Special Education, instigated in 1961. This was a very significant development as hitherto teachers had to seek such training and qualifications abroad.

The Diploma in Special Education represented an unprecedented investment in teacher education by the State as teachers were released for a year on full salary, course fees were paid and an annual allowance was given to teachers who qualified for the Diploma at the end of the programme. Griffin and Shevlin (2011, p. 41), in *Responding to Special Educational Needs - An Irish Perspective*, state that this course was given a “rather exceptional privilege.” Graduates of the programme have gone on to fill key positions in Irish education as teachers, principals, inspectors, academics, researchers, curriculum developers and administrators.

Until 2003 the Diploma remained in the above format as the only such diploma for Irish teachers. Páid Mc Gee was appointed the first full-time Director of Special Education in St. Patrick's College and served from 1967 to 2003. The development of the special education programme and its strong reputation among teachers owed a huge amount to Páid's leadership. In what was a new field of study in Ireland, Páid pioneered a model of professional development for teachers which had a strong emphasis on the application of theory in practice.

Páid was a passionate believer in and advocate for the power of quality teaching and learning in making a difference in the lives of children with special educational needs or who experience educational disadvantage. This belief, rooted in the research literature, informed his life's work and led to an emphasis on one-to-one critical and formative feedback for practising teachers on their planning and

teaching. This was extremely rare, if not unique, in programmes of professional development for teachers.

A native of Aughnaclyffe, Co. Longford, Páid graduated from St Patrick's College as a National Teacher in 1957 and subsequently completed a B.A., H.Dip in Ed., and M.Psych degree in UCD. He was a founder member of the influential Teachers' Study Group in 1961. Under the direction of Páid and the late Seán Kelly, they conducted the first survey of reading comprehension in Dublin primary schools. This survey established the baseline data for comparative surveys for the next twenty years. One of the issues on which The Teachers' Study Group promoted debate was the necessity for curriculum change in Irish schools, which subsequently occurred in 1971 with the publication of the "New Curriculum."

Páid was also a founding member and president of the Psychological Society of Ireland. He was joint author with Fr. Paul Andrews of its policy document *A Psychological Service for Schools* (1975) and, on behalf of the society, was involved for many years in seeking to have a Service established. Eventually, a Pilot Project for a Service was established in 1990 and Páid was appointed the Project's external evaluator. The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) was subsequently established as an agency of the Department of Education and Skills.

He was involved in all the major policy developments in the field of special and inclusive education in Ireland in his years as Director of Special Education. Páid played a key role as a member of the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) which reported in 1993 and paved the way for radical changes in policy and practice. Its key principles have been enacted in legislation, including the *Education Act 1998* and *Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004*. He was also a member of the Dyslexia task force.

In the 1970s, Páid was a founding member of CARE, a campaign for the care of deprived children. An active committee member into the 1980s, he served as part of a multi-disciplinary team to raise awareness of the multiple challenges facing deprived children and to devise policy approaches that would integrate the somewhat disparate approaches of the Departments of Justice, Education and Social Welfare.

Páid served as a judge and highly regarded member of the Social and Behavioural Science panel of the annual Young Scientist Exhibition from 1986-2013. For almost all those years he chaired that group, a testament to his leadership skills. Tributes were paid to Páid at this year's BT Young Scientist and Technology Exhibition.

Páid was ‘Country Briefings’ editor of the *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, former joint editor of the *Irish Journal of Psychology* and former Editorial Board Member of *Oideas*. He formed many international linkages with the US, UK, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden in the interests of special education at a time when there were few such contacts between educationalists.

He developed the Special Education Department, which grew from one full time member to eleven while he was Director, introducing many new programmes such as a Diploma in Learning Support, a Master’s programme, in-service courses for resource teachers, for teachers of children with autism and children with severe and profound learning disabilities as well as introducing input on special educational needs at initial teacher education level. He also played a major role in the life of St. Patrick’s College and was elected by his colleagues as Dean of the Joint Faculty of Education of the College and Dublin City University.

TRIBUTES AND AWARDS

The former president of St. Patrick’s College, Fr. Sam Clyne, paid the following tribute to Páid on the occasion of his 25th year as Director of Special Education at the conferring ceremony in 1992:

Páid’s years in St. Patrick’s have been characterised by his stunning and complete integrity - what you see and hear is always the same. One of his great gifts is his huge and ready generosity. He gives of himself and of his time to anyone who has any claim whatsoever on either and without counting the cost.

Páid is one of the most experienced persons engaged in in-service education in Ireland. He has shown remarkable capacity to understand teachers and to remain young in mind and enthusiasm whilst always keeping a sure grasp on how best to guide them in work. This involvement with serving teachers made his membership of College Committees so valuable especially during the development of the B.Ed at pre-service and in-service levels.

One of the first lecturers on the special education programme, Sr. Gertrude O Callaghan, has written that “*One of the best things that happened was the appointment of Páid as Director. He managed to blend the original impetus and charisma of the course with his own outstanding creativity and genius.*”

In 2003 Páid received the Allianz/Scoil Treasa Naofa Annual Award for Services to Education on the Island of Ireland presented by His Excellency Mr. Stewart Eldon, British Ambassador to Ireland. His citation read:

Your voice has been strong, clear, visionary and influential in the educational cause of those with special needs. Through your endeavours you have improved the intellectual and social lives of many people with special needs, championed their cause and developed specialised programmes for teachers. The above bears witness to your true legacy as an educationalist.

On the occasion of his retirement Pat Lynch wrote a wonderful editorial in REACH in which she outlined the major role Páid played in shaping special education in Ireland: “*His first concern has always been to give teachers the necessary knowledge and skills to help them in the most demanding of teaching situations as well as, where called for, to shape the attitudes of teachers*” (Lynch, 2004, p. 66).

Pat highlighted how a professional approach was always a hallmark of Páid’s work and defines this in his case as his concern for quality, rigour and for research-based practice but combined with the values of compassion, humour, humanity and wisdom. Pat, who worked longest with Páid in the Special Education Department, recalls his kindness, humour, leadership, positive influence, commitment and dedication.

Pat O’Keeffe maintains that “*the totality and professionalism of Páid McGee deserves to be enshrined in the history of Irish Education*”. Paul O’Mahony described Páid as “*the ultimate model of commitment and dedication*” and as having “*great humanity and generosity of spirit*” (IATSE, 2013).

Retirement in 2003 did not mean the end of his commitment to education. He served with his late friend, Dr. Tom Kellaghan, on the Secretariat of Minister Noel Dempsey’s initiative, YES – Your Education System – when he travelled the country taking submissions. Subsequently, he was appointed by the former Minister for Education and Science, Mary Hanafin, to the inaugural three persons Special Education Appeals Board. This Board was established under the *Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004* (EPSEN) to hear and determine appeals under the Act. He continued a role of active support and mentoring to the Special Education Department in St. Patrick’s College until recent years.

Páid was conferred with an honorary doctorate by Dublin City University in 2012 in recognition of his services in the field of special education in Ireland. This also coincided with the 50th anniversary of the Diploma in Special Education, through

which his impact was so far reaching. He was made an honorary life member of the Irish Association of Teachers in Special Education (IATSE), which was formed by a group of teachers from the 1969 Diploma Course in St. Patrick's College. Páid supported and facilitated the Association throughout his career. Páid always executed his duties with integrity, humility and honesty. He was so generous with his time and expertise, which will be sorely missed.

IN HIS OWN WORDS

Páid was noted for his insightful, perceptive commentary on special education in Ireland. Included below are examples of his deliberations:

On teacher professionalism:

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 (McGee, 2004, p.79).

If teachers bring to class the philosophy they surely profess, that each person is of unique value, based not on his or her status or ability but on his or her humanity, then practice has a chance of matching rhetoric (Mc Gee, 2000, p.318).

On the 1960s:

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 imperious to what parents would wish (McGee, 2004, p.70).

On Fr Cregan (President of St. Patrick's College, 1957-1976):

During his tenure, he changed the face of St. Patrick's. He brought vision to the Presidency and his conduct of affairs was marked by a determination to move forward; judgement supported by careful research; graciousness; and, exceptional style. He had a leading and a hands-on role in the foundation and development of the course (McGee, 2012).

On challenges in the 1970s:

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 (McGee, 2004, p.74).

Understanding the pre-REACH periods will suffer greatly from the paucity of written material. Indeed, in the absence of such sources, future students may have difficulty in appreciating that the 1970's was a very vibrant decade in special education in Ireland. (McGee, 1997, p. 67).

On the Constitution and the DES:

The DES

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 (McGee, 2004, p.72).

On research:

“Progress does not necessarily have to wait for specific research evidence, and research evidence does not guarantee progress.” Páid was commenting on the evidence being available in Ireland on the extent of the needs in relation to severe and profound general learning disability and nothing being done for 30 years (McGee, 2000, p.319).

On assessment and his oft referenced Wild Boy of Aveyron:

If teachers can accept Itard's assertion (in his report on the boy with whom he began to work exactly 200 years ago) that evaluation of progress should be (in the language of today) self-referenced rather than norm referenced (Humphrey & Humphrey, 1962)...” (McGee, 2000, p.318).

On professional literacy for teachers:

It would seem that most teacher-educators fail to appreciate the uniqueness of the teacher's opportunity to engage in long-term observation in a naturalistic setting; hence they do not convince their students of the importance of observation and they also fail to equip them with the relevant skills (McGee, 1986, p.169).

On clarity in debate:

There must be very many people who have participated in or observed unsatisfactory debates or projects which pivoted around something “child-centred”, a label used to refer to an attitude, an approach, a condition, or, apparently a consummation so devoutly to be wished that it could not possibly require definition (McGee, 1986, p.172).

On the relationship between parties in the education system:

Over more than a century the main characters have developed a slow, but very deliberate dance through which action is regulated and they do not always take readily to having their choreography disturbed (McGee, 1990).

Páid’s voice did disturb and highlighted many truths that helped to instigate action in the field. However, my personal favourite is the below deliberation on the possibilities for IATSE on the occasion of their 25th anniversary. To me it sums up what Páid offered to many teachers through the programmes delivered by the Special Education Department in St Patrick’s College. They are inspiring words that give a sense of the rich legacy that Páid leaves behind:

It can provide a forum for new ideas and a stimulus for change, an exchange mart for effective practices, an opportunity to influence others, an ear for those who need one, renewal for weary spirits, reassurance for those who are uncertain of their worth, perspective for those who live too near the wood, a touchstone for those who may have forgotten that they need one, inspiration for those who do not find it nearer home, optimism for those in danger of losing it, a jolt for those who may not have noticed prejudice slipping into the place of truth, satisfaction for those who help to make good things happen, affirmation that membership of the human family endows each person with unique and equal value and confirmation that there is no member of that family whose life cannot be changed by good teaching (McGee, 1994, p.6).

Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam dílis.

A shorter version of this tribute was published in the *Irish Times*.

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