REACH Journal of Special Needs Education in Ireland, Vol. 11 No. 1 (1997), 43-53.

Integration in Norway of Children with Special Educational Needs

In May, 1996, twelve representatives from six European countries - Ireland, England, Netherlands, Belgium, Germany & Austria - participated in an ARION study visit to Norway. The purpose of such EU-funded study visits is to allow participants to compare educational systems while also having an opportunity to visit schools and centres in a host country. Maura Sharkey was Ireland's representative on this visit and her report highlights the current special education situation in Norway with a particular focus on integration.

MAURA SHARKEY is a Resource Teacher based in St. Pius X Boys' National School in Terenure, Dublin.

EDUCATION SYSTEM IN NORWAY

Compulsory education is from age 7 - 16 years (this will change to 6 - 16 years in 1997), with most children attending private, state supported kindergartens. All students also have a statutory right to full time education to age nineteen. Responsibility for the administration of Primary (age 7-13 approximately) and Lower Secondary (age 13-16 approximately) rests with the local municipality. Upper Secondary (age 16-19 approximately) is usually administered at county level, while the Ministry of Education, Research and Church Affairs is directly responsible for third level institutions. Eighteen regional offices act as a link between the ministry and local government and every municipality has, or shares, an Educational Psychological Office. There are 30 such offices throughout the country.

LEGISLATION AND FUNDING

Since the mid 1960s Special Education has been part of a general movement to ensure equality of education for all citizens. The word "normalisation" appears in reports on Special Education published around that time.

The Basic Education Act of 1975, which included a repeal of the then Special Education Act, decentralized education administration, making municipalities and counties directly responsible for schools. One of the stipulations of the act was that education for all pupils should take place in the pupil's ordinary local school, and that all pupils would have the right to a suitably adapted learning programme for their needs. Following this Act there was a gradual increase in the numbers of children with disabilities attending their local schools and many special schools closed or were changed into Resource/ Competence centres. Today, only 0.5% of elementary school pupils are in special classes or schools.

Individual educational programmes are planned and devised by the Educational Psychological Service . These programmes outline special provisions to be made for the pupil in both physical and educational terms and may include such needs as extra staffing, curriculum adaptation, etc.
The programmes form a legally binding document between the pupil and the municipality or county responsible for the pupil's education.

PROVISION FOR PUPILS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS IN NORWAY

- **1992 Twenty Resource Centres were set up at national level.**
- **1994 *Reform '94* - Reforms within the Upper Secondary system brought positive discrimination for pupils with special needs.**
- **1997 Compulsory education entry age will be lowered to 6 years. A review of Special Education will take place to assess the effectiveness of the system which has developed since the 1975 Act.**

Approximately 25% of funding for Elementary and Lower Secondary education goes to Special Education provision, amounting to an annual allocation of £250m. At Upper Secondary level, approximately 8% of spending is on Special Education, amounting to an annual allocation of £100m. It is estimated that the annual spending on Special Education from kindergarten to the end of Upper Secondary level comes to £400m.

The National Resource Centres are heavily resourced financially. The total annual costs of the centres comes to £55m. Two such Resource Centres were visited in Trondheim. One of them, Moller Resource Centre for the Deaf, has an annual budget of £4.5m., with a major part of this sum designated for travel to schools and for families supported by the centre. In 1997 construction will begin on a new building for the centre at a cost of £5m.

KINDERGARTEN

Provision

Kindergarten pre-schools are privately run with state support. Fees are low and almost all children attend from about 2 - 6 years of age. They provide a creche type facility for working parents as well as early education.

Observations

St. Sunniva Kindergarten/Childcare Institution, Molde

This Kindergarten has 25 pupils. Two Special Education teachers work at the centre in addition to the rest of the staff, to cater for the needs of two pupils with disabilities. One teacher works solely with a boy with Down's Syndrome and the other teacher works with a girl with autism. They follow highly structured individual programmes. A special room is provided for these pupils where they work with their special teachers. No other pupils use this room and the two pupils do not use it at the same time. The pupil with autism is due to transfer to a special school in September. After long deliberation her parents have agreed to this on condition that her Special Teacher moves with her, and this has been allowed. A room will be adapted to her needs when she transfers, similar to the one at this kindergarten.

ELEMENTARY/ LOWER SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Provision

The average pupil-teacher ratio is 10:1. Pupils with special needs have individual programmes prepared by the local Educational Psychological Service in conjunction with the school. This is a written programme of provisions needed as well as course content, and forms a legally binding document. Programmes are reviewed every six months or every year. Usually a class teacher moves through the grades with his or her class. Almost all schools have teachers with Special Education training. Special Education is a non-compulsory elective in teacher training courses.

Observations

Nordbyen Skole, Molde

This is a large new school in a developing area of the town of Molde. Class size is 13 pupils approximately. The school has 4 pupils with significant special needs but many pupils also have remedial needs. The school has two special teachers and assistants to support the special children in class. We observed two pupils. The first is a girl who is deaf. She is in a class of 12 pupils. Her teacher is learning sign language and uses a little in class. A translator works all the time in the classroom to translate into sign language for the pupil. We saw the other pupils having a sign language lesson and singing songs while using signs. The pupil is very much part of the class and works on the same curriculum as her classmates. She receives support services from Moller Resource Centre in Trondheim.

The second pupil is a boy with mental handicap and a muscular disorder. We saw him working with his class assistant on a topic unrelated to the Maths class which was taking place. The class has 13 pupils, a class teacher, an extra teacher who is shared between classes and a special needs assistant, so there were 3 adults working with 13 pupils. The Special teacher was not in the room at the time. We later saw this teacher and another assistant working with two pupils in the Special teacher's base room.

UPPER SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Provision

Reform '94 brought huge changes to Upper Secondary education in Norway. It tightened up the course structures reducing over 100 courses into 13 study areas and amalgamated academic and vocational types of schools in an effort to eliminate some of the perceived elitism of the system. Upper Secondary is not compulsory but pupils have a right to three years education at this level. This can be either 3 years of academic courses or 2 years of theory followed by one year of vocational training. Pupils with special needs can extend their right from 3 years to 5 years if recommended by the Educational Psychological Service. Work experience and apprenticeships play an important role in vocational courses. Pupils with special educational needs apply for special status on a detailed application form, through the Psychological service. If successful it gives them their first choice of course as well as the right to extra provision such as transport. In some cases this transport may even be a car for the pupil's family if no other provision exists. In classes with pupils with special needs an extra teacher is provided, usually with special education training. Programmes are adapted, course duration can be flexible, exam times can be extended and, for pupils with Dyslexia, exams may

be taken orally or taped as recommended. Some taped versions or computer disks of school texts are also provided for pupils with Dyslexia.

Observations

Romsdal Vinderegaende Skole, Molde (urban area)

The amalgamation process of Reform '94 means that the school is spread over three buildings in different parts of the town, leading to administrative difficulties. Class sizes vary from 15 to 25 pupils, with two teachers being assigned to any class with a pupil with special needs. Of a staff of 142 teachers, 25 are Special Teachers. Pupils with profound learning disabilities, Down's Syndrome, psychiatric illness and deafness do not attend this school but transfer instead to special schools after lower secondary.

Most of the pupils with disabilities tend to apply for Health and Social Studies courses, but this is not always a good choice for employment prospects. Staff at the school told us they find that integration is difficult at this level, particularly social integration, or if a pupil has behaviour problems. Recently they have introduced special (A.P.O.) classes to try to overcome these problems, and this system is being constantly reviewed as an alternative. Drop out rates are high. There is a follow up service as a right to all pupils who do not attend, or who drop out of Upper Secondary schooling. It is noticeable that female students tend to follow traditional gender based courses and teachers find it difficult to get them involved in using computers.

We also visited a rural school where pupils with special needs participate in courses related to the local fishing industry. Courses related to the local rural economy are common as part of the drive to keep rural communities vibrant.

THIRD LEVEL EDUCATION

Provision

No real provision exists for integration of students with disabilties at this level, although colleges try to accommodate them. At universities in Oslo and Bergen, students have a Special Education Office to assist them. Also the Resource Centre for the Deaf at Trondheim has close contact with the local third level college which caters for students who are deaf and hard of hearing.

Observation *(based on a presentation and discussion with staff of Trondheim College of Education)*

This college, which has a teacher training section is just beginning to develop as a college of competence for deaf students. The teacher training course aims to provide modules on sign language and Special Education. There are currently 180 deaf students attending the college, mainly in the departments of Health and Education. The college faces difficulties in providing enough sign language interpreters to cater for all of these students and also in recruiting suitably qualified staff to carry out the courses planned. At the college, deaf students tend to stay together in class groups not only because this makes provision easier but also because it is their choice to do so.

SPECIAL EDUCATION IN NORWAY: PHYSICAL AND POLITICAL INFLUENCES.

Special Education in Norway is hugely influenced by the country's unusual topography and its small scattered population (4 million). In the past, with a Residential Special School model many children had to travel long distances, often in difficult travelling conditions, and home visits were few. Integration was a practical solution.

Norway's oil industry has led to prosperity. Education is very highly resourced. Unemployment is low, so apprenticeships and employment can be realistic options for people with disabilities.

SPECIAL SCHOOLS

Provision

Although the reforms of 1975 and further reforms in the early 1990s have promoted mainstream education for all, special schools are still part of the education system in Norway, serving the needs of mainly older pupils with Down's Syndrome, pupils with severe or profound levels of mental handicap and pupils with psychiatric illness. Also, special schooling is still an option for children who are deaf. There are no longer any special schools for pupils with visual impairment. Places in special schools are "bought" by the municipalities from their education budget. At primary school age the majority of pupils with special needs attend their local school and transfer to special schools tends to happen at the end of elementary schooling.

Observations

Tondergard Skole (Special school for pupils with learning disabilities), Molde

The school serves pupils from ten municipalities. It has a residential section. It

caters for pupils from 7 to 20 years but the majority of pupils tend to be in their teens. It is run by a ten member committee and has 43 pupils, 15 school staff and 17 staff working in the residential houses. The teachers here also act as advisers to teachers in mainstream schools particularly in the area of Information Technology (I.T.). This was developed on the school's own initiative in 1985. During our visit we met a group of teachers from local schools who had been released to attend I.T. training at Tondergard. In the 1970s, with education reform, the school's population had dropped dramatically, but has now built up again, mainly with pupils who have attended mainstream schools and now need more supported learning. On transferring, the school encourages a flexible system with pupils attending both schools on a part time basis until a final decision is made. It is a well equipped school, although the principal said that their funding is much less than for Resource Centres. We saw pupils performing in a well equipped music room, a group studying Norwegian and a pupil with a visual and language disability using a specially designed computer programme which had been provided through the Resource Centre for pupils at Trondheim with visual impairement. We also saw a group engaged in vocational training. The bright, homely residences are an integral part of the educational and social lives of the pupils.

RESOURCE CENTRES

In 1992, twenty Resource centres were established throughout Norway by reorganizing some of the former special schools run by the state. The centres specialise in different areas of special education, eg. visual impairment, hearing impairment, speech and communication disorders, reading and writing difficulties, social and emotional disabilities, behavioural difficulties and learning disability. Pupils are legally entitled to the following types of support services from a Resource Centre:

- Information regarding specific disabilities.
- Training for the pupils and their families.
- Training courses for the pupil's teacher (usually a residential 2 week course).
- Advice to the staff of the school attended by the pupil.
- Research into aspects of the disability.
- Residential courses/holidays for pupils to provide them with an opportunity to meet others with the same disability.
- Out-reach visits to the pupil's own school, family or community (usually 3 to 6 times per year).
- Development, and in some cases provision of, special materials.

Education of Pupils with Visual Impairment: Visit to Tambartun Resource Centre, Trondheim.

The centre does not have a school, as all children with visual impairment as their sole disability are attending mainstream schools. The centre provides all the facilities outlined above to support these pupils and their teachers. Staff are involved in preparing programmes for these pupils which are then carried out by the class teachers and special teachers in the child's school. Such programmes include extra lessons in mobility and daily living skills. The centre also supplies Braille text books, computer programmes and taped books. Tamburtun has a Visual and Light Laboratory which is used to diagnose light detection levels, visual fields, etc. This information can then be used in planning individual programmes for children from a very young age. One area of concern at present is the physical fitness of pupils with visual impairment in mainstream schools who cannot follow the regular P.E. programme in these schools. This issue is the focus of research being conducted with a view to providing better programmes to schools. A member of staff who is visually impaired and who had experienced education in both segregated and integrated systems gave a presentation. He described the advantages and disadvantages of both systems for him. While he preferred integrated education he is very concerned for the well being of blind students, particularly in the areas of self esteem and loneliness. The residential courses at the centre are very important for pupils to meet others with visual impairment and to relax in an environment totally adapted to their needs.

Education of deaf pupils: Visit to Moller Resource Centre, Trondheim.

The development of Special Education for deaf students differs from other areas of Special Education. In the early 1990s the deaf community campaigned vigorously against the closure of schools for the deaf, given that sign language users are members of a minority language community with their own unique culture. Today deaf pupils either attend special schools or attend their local school with support and regular residential courses at Moller Resource Centre. Many pupils actually choose to transfer to the special school when they are old enough to live away from home, having had experience of the special school through the residential courses. Adult deaf people also tend to move to cities when they leave school because of the close community aspect of living near other deaf people. All deaf children, regardless of the type of schooling they follow, are taught through signs. This is not combined with oral communication, the theory being that signing is a complete language in itself. Norwegian is taught as a second language. Deaf chil-

dren in mainstream schools are entitled to a sign language interpreter in the classroom. There is however a severe shortage of such teachers and this is proving to be a major problem for successful mainstreaming. More courses are now being offered at universities and teacher training colleges.

Moller Resource Centre serves the six northernmost counties of Norway. It serves 85 deaf and 200 pupils with hearing impairment throughout that area. Forty pupils attend the school at the centre full time, most living in the houses on the campus. There is a staff of 103 in three departments, Counselling, Research and Development, and Education. About half of the staff in the Research and Development Department are deaf. In 1995, 3500 people attended courses at the centre and 250 children availed of residential courses of one week or more. Members of staff also travel out to the homes and schools of pupils, often over very long distances. The building itself is very impressive, having special lighting, acoustics, flooring, loop systems and an auditorium and sound room specially designed for Rhythmics . Also the standard of accommodation is very high. The pupils live in groups of 6, in a mix of ages and sex to provide a family atmosphere, each child having his/her own room. A very relaxed, sociable atmosphere prevails. Older teenagers are allowed to socialise in the town with their friends at night. One of the pupils spoke to us through a sign language interpreter about her life at the school. She enjoys being in an atmosphere where she can study and relax with other deaf friends but also has hearing friends both in Trondheim and in her home town. Some of these friends have availed of sign language courses. She hopes to move on to the local third level college which has facilities for deaf students.

OBSERVATIONS ON THE NORWAY EXPERIENCE

It was very interesting to observe developments in a country which 20 years ago began a restructuring of Special Education which is similar to that envisaged in Ireland's White Paper on Education. Integration in Norway was a physical necessity as well as a human rights aspiration. When introduced it was highly resourced financially, Norway being a wealthy country. Teachers who have children with disabilities in their classroom have the assistance of a special teacher, a class assistant, back up and advice from the local Educational Psychological Office, a pupil teacher ratio averaging 10:1, specially adapted texts, equipment and materials and access to in-service training. Integration is not as successful at second level as at Elementary level and some schools are now returning to a Special Class model at this level. Special schools continue to be an integral part of the education system, both as centres for schooling and also as centres of advice to mainstream schools. Resource Centres are very highly funded and in general the mainstream schools

seemed satisfied with the service provided by them. The Educational Psychological Service appears to be a very powerful body in education, having a great influence on the types of services to be provided for children. Its recommendations form a legal contract between the child and the municipality or county, and recently, court cases have been taken in instances where the Municipality has failed to meet these requirements.

Perhaps Norway provides us with an opportunity to look to our own future. As a teacher of pupils with special educational needs, I would see that Norway's successes have been based on:

- Excellent resourcing in terms of personnel, in-service training, back-up materials etc.
- Low pupil - teacher ratio.
- Constant review and reform of education in general and a willingness to address problems if a system is not as successful as hoped.
- Flexibility in the system, for example co-operation between mainstream and special schools when a child is due to transfer.
- Recognition of the continued need for well resourced special schools as part of the full educational choice and provision for pupils with special educational needs.

LEARNING FROM THE NORWAY EXPERIENCE

In my opinion, some areas of reform which Ireland might consider more closely before pursuing such a model would be the following :

- The integration model which operates well at primary level may not suit second level. A special class system in currently being tried in Norway.
- Introducing a full integration model, as was initially envisaged in the 1970s in Norway, was found to actually reduce choice, e.g. Deaf Education.
- In some cases children who attend their local schools are isolated from their peers, e.g. where special rooms have been set up for them. Although this allows the child to live at home, it cannot be regarded as integrated education.
- The Educational Psychological Service provides a very comprehensive and valuable service to its clients. However some schools and local administrators expressed concern during our visit that its recommendations are sometimes unrealistic and cannot be met. As the recommendations form a legal contract this has begun to lead to increasing levels of litigation, which is expensive and time consuming. This has also been the experience in other countries where

this type of legal contract has been introduced.

- I feel that the teacher's role in programme planning in this system has been diminished. My impression is that the teacher is the one who carries out the programme, but no longer has the decision making role that his/her training and experience merits.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, a lasting impression which I have from this visit is of a generation of children who have grown up in an environment where it is completely natural for children of all ability levels to sit side by side in a classroom. This can only auger well for the future of all people with disabilities in Norway. But the system is constantly under review . There is a huge commitment to provide the best form of education for every student, but there is no complacency as they strive to build on what has been achieved and to continue to review and improve areas where difficulties still exist.