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From Training to Education: Third Level Needs for People with Learning Disability

Placement for 18 year olds with learning disabilities usually means transition to a Training Centre where basic vocational skills may be imparted. Does education - as distinct from training - end at eighteen? With commitment in the White Paper to a feasibility study for the establishment of a National Institute for Mental Handicap Studies associated with a major university, the further educational needs of people with a learning disability may be addressed in a more systematic way.

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AFTER SCHOOL - WHERE TO ?

As parents of two young adults with Down's Syndrome, just like other parents of young people of this age, we are conscious of the question: what are they going to do when they leave school ? As for every other 18-year old, it is an extremely important time in their lives - that is, the transition from childhood to adulthood. However, for our children, it is usually the transition from school to training - or all too often, from school to nothing at all.

What about education? Do we really believe that our young adults with disabilities or otherwise have had enough education by the time they reach 18 ?

VOCATIONAL TRAINING OR THIRD LEVEL EDUCATION ?

We believe that it is about time we started talking about third level education for young people with a mental handicap. Training is the imparting of skills, and education is the imparting of knowledge. People with learning difficulties need

both - just as "normal" people do. The old cliché - they train horses, they educate people - may not apply, but maybe the emphasis on imparting very basic vocational skills betrays something of a particular mindset among the imparters.

The concept of education and mental handicap is still relatively new. As yet, it is not fully understood and recognised among parents and professionals. The notion that people with a mental handicap have as much right to an education as anyone else is still all too often ignored. In our view, they do have that right - a right to a proper education that suits their particular needs and abilities, and that will develop their potential to its maximum. If it is going to be a token gesture, their needs are not being met as of right.

SPECIAL EDUCATION: PROMOTING ABILITY AND POTENTIAL

People still do not associate education and mental handicap - because our education system is so academically-oriented. Any child who has to learn how to live, how to socialise, and how to fulfil his or her potential is a child who is being educated in the truest sense of the term. We must be mindful that our understanding of the abilities and potential of people with a mental handicap is still evolving.

Over the last 25 years, our teaching and caring methods have improved beyond all recognition, and as children with a mental handicap have been given greater opportunities and experiences, their abilities have become more apparent. We have not yet reached the stage where we can put absolute limits on what people with a mental handicap can achieve.

How should education be defined? Can we say it is a process which helps students to be good at languages, good at maths, good at gaining points and passing exams? That is not what special education is about. It is concerned with helping young people into adulthood, helping young people to live full and independent lives, and drawing out their potential to its maximum. Maybe, in fact, when it is seen in this light, special education is much closer to the true definition of education than "normal" education is, as it is currently practised.

RELATIONSHIPS AND SEXUALITY EDUCATION: THIRD LEVEL GOALS

There is a tendency to recoil from the issue of sexuality among people with a mental handicap. That does not make it go away. In any elaboration of rights

based on the principle of equality, the right of people with a mental handicap to the same degree of fulfilment through relationships as is afforded to anyone else, must be included. This has immense implications for the providers of services; education, training, counselling are all involved. Just as families have to learn to cope with emerging sexuality, so do young people and society in general.

For many women with a mental handicap - especially teenagers - sexuality makes them especially vulnerable. They are, often, unable to employ the same degree of discrimination and discernment as others, and can be prey to sexual exploitation.

If the principle can be easily stated - that is, the right of people to enjoy relationships, and to be protected from exploitation - the implications are less easy to address. That is why, when we talk about third level education, we argue that one of the most important components of any third level programme for people with learning difficulties will have to be the development of individual programmes for sex education, sexuality, and relationships.

LIMITED OPPORTUNITIES IN TRAINING CENTRE PROGRAMMES

In an attempt to research what would happen to our children when they left school, the authors travelled around Ireland, and wrote a detailed report about what we found in training centres and workshops, both in Dublin and around the country. What we discovered, essentially, is that some centres offered a very high level of service in training and educating our young people - and some centres did not. Most of all we were surprised that there was no set standard in the centres - the programmes and the services depended entirely on the skill and enthusiasm of the staff, and often, on whatever contract work was available from local industries. There was no curriculum, no requirement, no standard of achievement. The only rule seemed to be that training was to be geared towards open employment - in fact, European funding for most of the centres depended on that rule. That funding is now beginning to disappear.

This is not a criticism of the management or staff of training centres - far from it. None of the centres could survive without the amazing dedication of the staff who work in them. The system has never been based on a recognition that our children with learning difficulties are entitled to the same standards and methods as any other student of the same age. One of our ambitions is to change this. With other parents, we campaigned to try to secure recognition by the Government of the need for standards throughout the service.

GOVERNMENT FUNDED FEASIBILITY STUDY

A start was made in the Programme for Government in 1993, when that Government provided a grant of £50,000 to conduct a feasibility study in this whole area. The grant was provided by the Departments of Education, Health, and Equality and Law Reform, and all three Departments are awaiting the results of the study, which is being carried out by a steering committee under the auspices of Trinity College Dublin. It is our hope that the study will recommend the establishment of a National Institute of Mental Handicap Studies, and that it will lead to people with learning difficulties receiving further education and training appropriate to their needs on the campus of Trinity College, and ultimately, on the campuses of other third level colleges.

As it says in the White Paper on Education (Ireland, 1995): "the feasibility study is reviewing existing provisions for, and needs of, mentally handicapped persons. It will recommend whether an Institute will be established for Mental Handicap Studies and review resource requirements and other implications" (p.102).

INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HANDICAP STUDIES: A NATIONAL RESOURCE CENTRE

It is our hope that the Institute, when it is established, will serve as a centre of excellence and that it will contribute to the development of a standard education and training curriculum. Eventually, we would like to see developments in the area of curriculum being of great benefit to both primary and second-level special education.

It is hoped that the Institute will offer back-up resources to training centres around the country, so that similar standards and curricula will be used in every training and education centre, no matter where it is; and that there will be a flow of information back to the Institute of the best practices that exist already in different centres in various parts of the country.

Also, such an Institute could develop new methods of teaching and training, new ways of motivating our children to learn new skills, new products for centres to manufacture, new ways of making and marketing those products, new opportunities for our young people. In addition to the normal range of disciplines found in any third-level setting, Trinity College also has disciplines appropriate to the development of people with learning disabilities - for instance clinical speech and language schools, occupational therapy and physiotherapy.

A CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE NOT A LABORATORY

Some people have expressed the concern that this project could result in people with a mental handicap being treated as guinea pigs for the purpose of examining and practicing new methods. As parents, that is the last thing we would cooperate with. Also as parents, we have seen our young adults being mistreated because of inadequate or inappropriate funding, or misplaced academic theories which tell them what's best for them and which force them to fit into inappropriate surroundings.

That is why we see the importance of our 18-year olds having a centre of excellence, based in Trinity College, so that they - the students - for the first time would be doing what *they* want, with self-directed learning through motivation and personal aspirations, and a curriculum developed appropriate to their specific needs.

It is hoped that one of the results of this will be extra status for the training our young people receive, and above all a better mix of education and training. Our young people with mental handicap have the same rights to aim high as other teenagers. The training and education they get is never recognised. Until it is, they will not have the same rights as other students of their own age.

NEW DEVELOPMENTS - NEW POSSIBILITIES

Already, partly as a result of the campaigning of parents, some exciting things are beginning to happen apart from the project in Trinity College Dublin. The School of Clinical Speech and Language Therapy in Trinity College has begun a project involving children with Down's Syndrome; the Department of Occupational Therapy will be starting another project; and University College Dublin may be about to set up a University Affiliate Programme, which would offer a range of services to people with learning difficulties within the College, together with further education opportunities for professional people to have a better understanding of the needs of people with learning difficulties.

Another programme, known as Work Options, offers a two-year course to people with learning disabilities in mainstream settings, in a variety of subject areas such as Catering, Information Technology, Retailing and Childcare. The Springboard Project in Northern Ireland has introduced, in Newcastle College, the first full-time course for adults with learning difficulties in an integrated setting. The success of this project so far, in broadening the choices available to

people with learning difficulties, is another pointer to the direction we need to follow. There is also a pilot project on integration at University College Limerick.

AONTAS, the organisation which specialises in adult and second-chance education, is developing a range of day-time courses for people with learning difficulties, to help them overcome literacy and numeracy problems, and to have an opportunity to enjoy art, drama, music and craft-work. Four pilot projects are taking place in VEC colleges in Dublin, and they hope to encourage VECs all around the country to make these courses available, so that adults can go from their workshops and enjoy these classes two or three hours a week.

NEED FOR SYSTEMATIC PLANNING

However, much of the development that has been described, in relation to new, innovative and third level projects, is taking place in an ad hoc and unstructured way. As a result, access may only be available to clients of particular agencies, or to those who have happened to hear about them, or the select few. There is a real need to ensure that future development takes place in a more cohesive and systematic manner, and in a way which is responsive to the needs of a wide range of students of varying abilities. In our view one of the key roles of the Institute for Mental Handicap Studies would be to draw all this information together.

In the whole area of training and education, there is a lot happening. Ultimately, new ideas to advance the future prospects of our children will require resources, and will place demands on the Government of the day. It is exciting and positive now that there are so many people who recognise that there is a gap in standards of education, and they are almost in competition to be the first to fill the gap. It is our hope that within a few years, every centre will be as committed to education as it is to training, and that every centre will have the programmes, the curriculum, the skills and the resources to meet that commitment.

REFERENCES

Ireland. (1995). *Charting Our Education Future: White Paper on Education*
Dublin: Stationery Office.