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Feature: Special Education and the White Paper *Charting our Education Future*

The White Paper: Perils of Ideologically Driven Changes

Will the changes relating to the delivery of special needs provisions proposed in the White Paper actually improve the quality of education for those concerned? The compromises which will be made in order to establish an administratively neater and more flexible service should, it is argued, be closely considered in terms of losses as well as gains.

FRANK M. FLANAGAN is a former principal of a special school. He is a lecturer in Philosophy of Education at Mary Immaculate College of Education, Limerick

QUALITY AND EQUALITY: MORE THAN ASPIRATIONS?

The aims of education set out in the White Paper on Education *Charting Our Education Future* include the aim of promoting 'quality and equality for all, including those who are disadvantaged, through economic, social, physical and mental factors, in the development of their full educational potential'. There is also the commitment that the State 'should serve the educational rights of its citizens to participate in and benefit from education in accordance with each individual's needs and abilities'. These are noble aspirations and worthy of the support of all sectors in society. It is important that they become more than noble aspirations, however, and it is with the hope that this will be so that one turns to the details of the provisions of the White Paper for special education.

AN ALL-INCLUSIVE CONTINUUM

The section on "Students With Special Needs" begins with the definition of students with special educational needs from the *Report of the Special Education Review Committee* (1993) Students with special educational needs include:

all those whose disabilities and/or circumstances prevent or hinder them from benefiting adequately from the education which is normally provided for pupils of the same age, or for whom the education which can generally be provided in the ordinary classroom is not sufficiently challenging.

This definition clearly embraces those who are usually referred to as 'gifted' as well as those considered to have a disability. Both groups are handicapped by the failure of the mainstream educational system to make specific allowances and provision for their ongoing special educational needs. It is reassuring to see this attempt to acknowledge a "continuum" of special educational needs: once such a continuum is acknowledged then much of the isolationism associated with the idea of special education can be eliminated.

PROMOTING ASSESSMENT OF POTENTIAL

The White Paper reasserts the rights of all to access and participation, 'according to their potential and ability'. It promises a flexible 'continuum of provision' for special educational needs ranging from occasional help within the ordinary school to full-time education in a special school or unit. Among the duties which will be required of individual schools is the development of a policy on student assessment which will 'focus on the identification of the student's potential rather than on his/her perceived limitations. Such a policy 'will provide for the identification of students with special needs (presumably from both ends of the ability continuum) and will describe the school's proposals for helping them'. An expanding school Psychological Service will support teachers and schools in the task of 'identifying and responding to learning difficulties'. The co-ordination of the school Psychological Service, the school Health Service and clinic-based assessment services 'will be the responsibility of the education board'.

RESPONDING ONLY TO DISABILITY

Of course we do not yet have Education Boards but that is only a minor difficulty at the moment. We have not got a comprehensive psychological service either. When such Education Boards are set up they will take on a statutory responsibility for all students in their respective regions who have been entered on the national data base of pupils with special disabilities; they will designate certain ordinary primary schools as "centres where students with particular disabilities may be educated"; they will assign students with special needs to particular schools, designate special schools as regional resource centres, co-ordinate support services, make arrangements for the writing (by whom?) 'of a statement of special

educational needs for (the small minority of students with significant learning difficulties) on an individual basis'. There is no mention of special abilities only of special disabilities; what a pity the White Paper does not remain true to the inclusive definition from the Report of the Special Education Review Committee and follow its own counsel and concentrate on students' potential.

RESOURCES: IS THERE A 'WILL' FOR THE WAY?

Yet for all that, at least part of its heart appears to be in the right place. The White Paper's contribution to Special Education might be summed up by the old saw: "Live horse and you'll get grass". Everything that it says is attractive and desirable in the circumstances but all is subject to two provisos or contingencies.

The first of these contingencies will be familiar to anyone who remembers the 1980 White Paper (there's one horse that got little grass): the recurrent refrain "as resources permit" (or "within the constraints of available resources"). Now of course there must be fiscal restrictions on what can be, and will be, done in the matter of special education. But "can be" and "will be" are not the same. It is possible to cost "can be" quite accurately so that we know the likely financial cost of the various alternative proposals which might be put forward. "Will be" then becomes a matter of the political will to raise, and spend, the money necessary to transform "can be" into "will be". A task force has been set up "within the Department" to implement the findings of the *Report of the Special Education Review Committee* "as resources permit". But we have been given no costings. How are those outside the Department to know, from time to time, what resources are needed and whether available "resources permit" or not?

TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY: SOME OMISSIONS

Whatever has happened to the much vaunted principles of transparency and accountability on which the current debate in Irish education is supposed to be based? The general philosophy of the White Paper stipulates "a number of key considerations which should underpin the formulation and evaluation of educational policy". This number includes partnership and accountability. We are assured that the philosophical rationale is important because it "promotes transparency and greater accountability". Effective partnership, we are told, requires "increased transparency and accountability, in order to allow the partners to exercise their rights and to be accountable for their responsibilities".

Presumably if transparency and accountability are to apply equally to the

Department of Education as to other partners in the system then monitoring bodies “within the Department” are not sufficient to implement transparency or to guarantee accountability. This is not a matter of not trusting the Department: it is a much simpler matter of consistency. If transparency and accountability are to apply to all the other partners then let them equally apply - and be seen to apply - to the Department itself. Internal monitoring on the basis of no published costings is not sufficient.

DANGERS OF DEPARTMENTAL SELF MONITORING

But what if resources *do not* permit? What if the Department decides to spend our money on something else? Then Special Education will have to go without. What the phrase “as resources permit” really means is: Whenever Special Education happens to be high enough on the Department’s list of priorities or whenever the courts force the Minister to do something in the area of special education.

This is not just a cavil from someone who is suspicious by nature. Far too frequently these kinds of qualifications mean that intra-departmental secrecy will remain. That being so then no one other than the Department will know the full story. The Department will retain a position of total control, not just over policy for action but, equally importantly: over the explanations for inaction. But perhaps, in the event, the task force “within the Department” will do an excellent job in ensuring that the Department (a) will acquire sufficient funding to enable it to implement the Special Education proposals, and (b) that they will use such resources to actually do that.

ARE EDUCATION BOARDS THE ANSWER?

The second proviso or contingency to which I alluded above is the repeated references to what the various ‘Education Boards’ will be empowered to do if and when such boards come into existence. It is proposed to establish ten education boards which will operate concurrently with the existing Vocational Education Committees. Decentralisation of discretionary power over quotidian arrangements to individual schools does not necessarily require the creation of an entirely new intermediate layer of structures. It is important that this be understood for the developments promised in special education are mostly contingent on the establishment of the intermediate layer. If this intermediate layer is not put in place then most of the special education developments will not happen. Yet none of the proposed initiatives actually require the setting up of Education Boards. There is no logical or administrative reason why the necessary reforms in special

education could not be introduced within the present system under the control of the Department of Education itself.

TEACHERS, RESPONSIBILITY AND IN-SERVICE NEEDS

A greater difficulty is that there is the expectation that mainstream schools and teachers will undertake a central responsibility for the identification of special educational needs and for much of the concomitant service without any consideration as to whether such schools and teachers (however well-disposed they might be) are qualified to undertake such a responsibility without substantial in-service training. We are assured, of course, that "appropriate in-career development for the teachers of students with special needs will be organised". Assured, but not reassured: one would expect a White Paper to be a little shorter on the rhetorical flourish and a little firmer on the specifics. There are no specifics. The entire section is an exercise in wishful thinking. The trouble is that promising vague alternatives to present provision under the guise of Government Policy undermines confidence in the present provision and commitment to its future: if they are going to change it anyway then what is the point in doing anything until they do so?

SYSTEM FLEXIBILITY - MORE THAN JUST LOGISTICS

The general objective is "to ensure a continuum of provision for special educational needs, ranging from occasional help within the ordinary school to full-time education in a designated centre or unit, with students being enabled to move from one type of provision to another as necessary and practicable". How practicable is this, even in principle? If flexibility is to be a reality then it must be recognised that flexibility is more than an exercise in logistics: moving bodies back and forth between institutions. While what happens to the children in the alternative situation is crucial, equally crucial is what happens in the mainstream classroom while they are not there. This is already acknowledged as a perennial problem in remedial provision even within a single school. How much more problematic it might be for children who would be even more vulnerable - moving between schools within a region - is not even addressed. It is relatively easy to (re)move a child from mainstream to special provision; the move back is fraught with difficulty. It is not just a matter of removing a child for "routine maintenance" as it were. Time lost in the mainstream is extremely difficult to make up subsequently. It is the welfare of the child, not a commitment to a new administrative order which must take precedence. There is nothing in the White Paper to reassure us that this will be so.

The principles set out for primary schools will continue to be applied “as appropriate” to students in second-level schools. The Education Boards will be responsible “for designating ordinary second-level schools to meet the range of special needs of students in its region”. Such schools will also have a role as regional resource centres.

DANGERS OF IDEOLOGICALLY DRIVEN CHANGES

In all of this there is a major gamble being taken. The special education sector has not been unsuccessful: far from it, it is characterised by high levels of expertise, commitment and enthusiasm which lead to a very significant and high quality service to those children and young people who are dependent on it. In addition the *esprit de corps* of those professionals working in the area of special education, which provides a model and an inspiration to those of us in other areas of the educational system, could be severely jeopardised by the maladroit imposition of ideologically driven changes. Such things should not be undervalued; the compromises which will be made in order to establish an administratively neater (dare I say, cheaper?) model of provision or in order to introduce flexibility of provision should be closely considered in terms of losses as well as in terms of gains.

SPECIAL AND ORDINARY: MAKING MINDS MEET

The White Paper does not indicate, in the Chapter on “The Teaching Profession”, how teachers generally might be empowered to interact with the special education sector or to carry out the responsibilities required of them under the new arrangements. The present arrangement is unsatisfactory: only those who are already employed in the special education sector can participate in one of the relevant in-service courses and there is no requirement that such teachers shall have spent any time at all in a mainstream school. There is no proposal that teachers in special education return to the mainstream periodically or that teachers from the mainstream spend time in a special school. Yet one of the most critical problems in the whole area of special education is the lack of communication and understanding between special and mainstream schools. This is not anybody’s fault, just a feature of the system. There are no structural mechanisms to facilitate movement or communication between special and mainstream schools in either direction so that in many respects mainstream teachers have at best only a vague idea of what their colleagues in special education are doing while in special schools a sense of isolation is not uncommon. There is a great need for a

mechanism whereby teachers could, for a limited period and without any consequential loss, move between schools either on the basis of exchange or for recognised (and paid) study purposes. Such a scheme would, I believe, contribute very significantly to the likelihood of success of the White Paper proposals.

White Paper on Education *Charting our Education Future* (1995) is available from Government Publications Sales Office, Molesworth St., Dublin 2. Price IR£5.

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