

Paper presented at the Sixth Annual Conference on Special Education, IATSE,
St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra, Dublin, June 9-11, 1994.

The SERC Report: A Basis for Change

The concluding article in our series of commentaries on the Report of the Special Education Review Committee is written by two of the signatories to that Report. It is argued that in identifying the strengths and deficiencies of current provision, the SERC Report has laid the foundations for effective legislative change in the areas of rights, responsibilities and resources. The role of creative linkages between special and ordinary schools is regarded as an important pathway in this process.

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INTRODUCTION

It is not our intention to summarise, defend, or criticise the Report of the Special Education Review Committee. We accept this Report as one agreed by a variety of interested and concerned parties, as a basis for future policy and change. What we hope to do is to give a personal viewpoint, placing the Report in context, commenting on a number of what we perceive as major findings, and in the light of these findings, suggesting some ways in which the Report can be constructively used as a basis for change.

THE REPORT IN CONTEXT: DEVELOPMENTS SINCE THE 1950's

It is important to place the report in context, at a time of unprecedented change and challenge in education in Ireland today. While the first schools in this country for pupils with disability were established in the nineteenth century, it

was not until the mid-1950's that major development and expansion of special educational provision began. This initiative was spearheaded by parents, voluntary organisations and professionals and facilitated in the 1960's by the establishment of the Special Education Section and a Special Education Inspectorate within the Department of Education.

Since the 1950's there has been a major expansion of special educational provision, in terms of both numbers of pupils catered for and the range of special educational needs. Reports over that period have been published on the education of four different groups of people with special needs, namely those with mental handicap (1965), hearing impairment (1972), physical handicap (1982), and severe and profound mental handicap (1983). Of these reports only those relating to hearing impairment and physical handicap could be said to have included a serious review element in their work.

PROGRESS IN A CLIMATE OF CHANGE

We have witnessed in the past thirty years, a climate of change and a shifting of attitudes in relation to special educational provision, and the concept of special education. To an increasing extent pupils who traditionally attended special schools are now attending ordinary schools. The concept of special education is changing from one associated with the delivery of special educational provision in separate distinct locations for people who were perceived to be somewhat different, to one which is now regarded as an integral aspect of mainstream education.

Prior to the 1960's the handicapped were deemed to be quite distinct from the rest of the population in many countries - so far as education was concerned, ordinary schooling was simply *not* an option for them, if indeed they were considered capable of benefiting from education at all. (Hegarty, 1993 p.195)

International trends are also influencing us and the ongoing debate on education provides challenges and opportunities for all schools, special and mainstream, primary and post-primary. Parental wishes and attitudes communicated by people working within the services are proving to be the most powerful influences on the placement of pupils with special educational needs in ordinary schools. This is particularly true of handicaps and disabilities of a lesser degree. The result is two-fold:

- a) Greater numbers of pupils with special educational needs in regular schools;
- b) Pupils with greater degree of handicap/disability in special schools.

This has resulted in *all* schools, irrespective of nature or level, being increasingly challenged by a changed and changing population of pupils with special educational needs.

ACKNOWLEDGING FEARS

In a climate of change there are the opportunities of reappraisal, review and reform. As we engage in this review the voice of people with disabilities themselves, their families and their advocates is demanding to be heard. Such change brings inevitable fears - fears that must be acknowledged first if we are to embrace the Report's recommendations and move forward with confidence to a new era. Such fears among teachers exist in all our schools, both special and mainstream and include concerns relating to:

- Lack of back-up services and resources
- Overcrowded classes
- Examination orientated curriculum
- Negative attitudes towards disability
- Security of tenure
- No guarantee of continuity in one's chosen profession of special education
- For others the possibility of being forced to work in another discipline for which one has neither the expertise nor the possibility of appropriate in-service training

THE REPORT: WHAT DOES IT OFFER US?

In the light of these fears what does the Report offer us? The Report among other things, highlights important principles, anticipates the enshrining of such principles in law, recognises deficiencies in the system, promotes a comprehensive structure reflecting a range of provision to accommodate the continuum of special educational need and states that

as a first prerequisite, the system will need to be allocated additional resources on an ongoing basis, if the range of service provision in the Report is to be developed and sustained (p.21).

The principles enunciated in the Report, place the children as central to the educational endeavour, their parents as critical to the decision making process, their communities as responsible for the delivery of an appropriate education to them through a combination of services in ordinary and special schools. Furthermore, the Review Committee recommends that

Due account should be taken of the principles outlined....in the framing of an Education Act (p. 19-20).

The Report, in reviewing current special educational provision, engages in a most valuable exercise in identifying what it considers the strengths and deficiencies of the system - valuable because the way forward must build on the strengths of the system and remedy its deficiencies.

THE WAY FORWARD: FROM DEPENDENCY TO EQUITY

The Report in its recommendations charts clearly the direction of change in the years ahead. It focuses strongly on the need for legislation, supports for teachers and schools, and the necessity for meaningful links between special and ordinary schools. The deficiencies highlighted clearly indicate the basis for change. Paramount among these and the first mentioned is the absence of legislation. The focus of legislation must be to guarantee the rights of people with a disability to an appropriate education in their own community.

As we engage in this review of the way forward, we must listen to what people with disabilities, their families and their advocates are saying to us. People with disabilities are no longer content to be passive while a vision of education is thrust upon them. People with disabilities are forming their own organisations such as The Forum for People with Disabilities in Ireland, People First, Speaking for Ourselves. Groups around the world are making their message clear to us. They are demanding equity, justice, involvement in their community and participation at all levels of society. They see themselves as a people moving away from being dependent and being spoken about to claiming their rights in society and speaking for their own lives.

ROLE OF EDUCATORS IN 'ACTIVE LISTENING'

How do we as educators respond to this changing reality? As we examine the impact of change we realise that the players may well be the same as they have

always been, but their role is significantly altered. People with disabilities, their families and advocates, are now centre stage and all the other players - professionals, service providers, agencies and others are relegated to the wings in a supportive and advisory role. This involves an "active listening" on our part as educators to people with disabilities. Educating students with special needs is not just another "charity ball for the disabled" - it is no longer a matter of goodwill on the part of the Department of Education, management authorities or teachers - it is a question of the right of the child with special educational needs to an appropriate education. We are reminded of Jenkinson's assertion that

the presence or absence of a disability, however severe, is irrelevant to an individual's basic human rights (Jenkinson, 1993, p. 332).

LEGISLATION: RIGHTS, RESPONSIBILITY AND RESOURCES

In other countries such as the USA, Britain and Denmark, it has been found necessary to enact legislation which enshrines the rights of people with a disability. Goodman (1991) states: Legislation rather than language is the key to social change.

We, of course, still await with interest the findings of the O'Donoghue Case which is bound to have an influence on the forthcoming Education Act. Such an act will inevitably deal with rights and responsibilities. We would hope that the forthcoming legislation would enshrine the following:

WHAT THE EDUCATION ACT SHOULD CLARIFY

Right of all pupils with special educational needs to an appropriate education as near as possible to their own homes

Responsibility of all schools to accommodate this right if feasible

Resources from government to all schools catering for pupils with special educational needs

Right of Appeal by a parent who feels his/her child is not being accorded due educational opportunity.

There are differing views about the advisability of legislation that would enshrine the aforementioned principles. Opponents to legislation make a plea for

flexibility and are anxious to continue to capitalise on an Irish community which has always shown a commitment to people with a difficulty, handicap or disability. However we would welcome legislation for the following reasons:

- Legislation can articulate and reinforce a country's policy on special education
- Legislation can help to secure resources
- Legislation draws attention to discrepancies between policy and practice
- Legislation facilitates those who seek change
- Legislation can help to change attitudes.

The key elements of appropriate legislation are a clear statement of policy, a coherent framework for provision, a conduit of resources and guarantee of consumers' rights. Legislation on its own, however, is not going to guarantee movement or change. There will be no movement forward unless we are willing and enabled to move forward. We must be able to acknowledge the genuine fears which exist, address these fears and come to terms with them.

PROBLEMS FOR THE FUTURE ROLE OF SPECIAL SCHOOLS

Special schools are going to be asked to play a critical role in the development of new approaches, structures and provisions for pupils with special needs. They can, however, only do this, if they are secure in what they are doing. One can only embrace change if secure about one's future in the context of that change. Teachers in special schools at present are dealing with a changing population but with no likelihood of increased resources to do so adequately, but more importantly their falling enrolments places them in a very uneasy and sensitive situation. A teacher in a special school going on the redeployment panel with the Irish language qualification does not have the option of continuing his/her career in special education, and if he/she does not have the Irish qualification, going on the panel means possible redeployment into another discipline of special education for which the teacher concerned has neither prior expertise nor any assurance of prior appropriate in-service education. No other profession, or their representative organisation, would tolerate such an iniquitous situation. This factor alone generates justifiable fears and anxiety in special schools that mitigate seriously against any fruitful debate about the changing role of our special schools.

PROBLEMS FACING ORDINARY SCHOOLS

There are also genuine fears in ordinary schools. Such schools are encountering phenomenal change already in relation to curricular innovation, increasing demands on teacher expertise and time, increasing pressures arising from social and domestic circumstances, not to mention the tensions arising from the questions being asked in relation to the relevance of education for a substantial minority of students. In this situation it is hardly surprising that an influx of pupils with special educational needs - especially if unplanned and under-resourced - is being viewed with considerable caution. All of this, of course, has huge implications for in-service education for all teachers.

EMPOWERING SCHOOLS AND TEACHERS TO FACE CHANGE

We now face two challenges:

(i) How to reconcile the right of the child with disability to an appropriate education with the fears surrounding teachers, and management authorities regarding the delivery of this provision?

(ii) How to empower teachers and management to face the challenges involved in this process and the changing realities that ensue?

To facilitate this challenge the Report recommends a range of supports for teachers which broadly speaking can be divided in two - those relating to in service education, and those relating to resources - both material and personnel. The importance of linkages between teachers in different schools is also strongly emphasised throughout the Report. A range of supports for schools is also emphasised by the Report including increased capitation grants (now a reality), improved pupil-teacher ratios, a school-based psychological service and the establishment of special classes in designated schools.

LINKAGES BETWEEN ORDINARY AND SPECIAL SCHOOLS

Special schools are a significant element of educational provision in Ireland, as in many developed countries. For many years they were the only access to formal education for a sizable number of children and young people. They now, however, face a watershed in their development. On the one hand new roles are being thrust upon them, whereas on the other hand, the rationale for their very

existence is being questioned. Even if it were not evident that progress towards the necessary reform of the ordinary school is slow, it must be remembered that the special school sector is a complex system of educational provision which is going to be part of the general educational provision for some time to come. Our response to this situation should be to ask how ordinary schools can capitalise on this resource.

Special schools have precisely, what, at the moment, many ordinary schools are lacking - expertise in teaching pupils with special educational needs. The best special schools have a developed competence in modifying and implementing the curriculum for pupils who learn with difficulty, and ordinary schools can only gain from tapping into this experience (Jowett, Hegarty and Moses, 1988, p.2).

The idea of cooperation between special and ordinary schools is not a new one. Firm links should be established between special and ordinary schools in the same vicinity. (Warnock Report, 1978). These should include as appropriate, educational programmes, social experiences and resources. Such links if successfully planned, benefit pupils and teachers alike. Pupils gain through curriculum enrichment and more natural participation in social activities. Teachers in ordinary schools benefit from the expertise of colleagues in special schools while the latter avoid the professional isolation experienced by many in special schools.

The writers of this paper are each in different ways involved in the *Fast Friends* Programme, a programme designed to develop real links, curricular and otherwise between special and local mainstream schools. This is what the principal of one of the many special schools involved has to say about the programme:

I think the programme (*Fast Friends*) certainly would make our school look out much more into our community and the surrounding area. We would see our school as being one of the schools in the area, not just being a special school and part of a network of other special schools in Dublin. We would very much see our school as linked now with all the local schools.

A RE-EXAMINATION OF SPECIAL EDUCATION

Such changes, such views provoke a re-examination of what is meant by

“education” and “special education” and a refocusing on what is “special” about “special” education. That re-examination will not be facilitated by polarisation by people who are unaware of the huge enrichment that is mutually advantageous if special and mainstream schools work together. We are reminded of the statement from the INTO:

Special schools and ordinary schools should not be seen as two different systems - they are just two among an array of educational systems in the continuum of the organisational structure for children with learning difficulties (INTO, 1993).

The Report of the National Education Convention (1994) reminds us that there is a strong case for increased integration, but also for the continuation of special provision. Special provision, special education places the task of teaching - irrespective of where or with whom it takes place - in perspective. This perspective recognises the pupil as central to the educational endeavour and the teacher as critical in mediating between the pupil's educational needs and a creative and dynamic curricular experience which accommodates such needs. Education is the same for all - what is *special* about special education is the manner in which the special educator *accesses* the curriculum for the pupil with special needs through the provision of *appropriate methodology, resources and materials* and through forging a meaningful *relationship* with the pupil.

The key to the future is that each community through the diversity and strengths of its various educational structures facilitates all its pupils, irrespective of their abilities or circumstances, through drawing on the strengths and resources of each other in a spirit of cooperation and partnership. The way forward will require belief - belief in ourselves and people with disability - a belief that people with a disability are fully human and equal to ourselves. Such a belief could revolutionise all our schools, ensuring a rich, stimulating educational environment for all.

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