

The SERC Report: A Blueprint for Under-Resourcing?

An analysis of the statistical information supplied in the SERC Report indicates that a policy of anticipated under-resourcing is being planned for special educational needs within our school system. If this Report was a strategic short-term plan for a commercial company, scheduled to take place over three years or so, one might commend its proposals. If, however, it is a Blueprint for restructuring the system into the next century it is unacceptable that under-resourcing should be built into the plan.

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ISSUES RAISED BY THE REPORT

I have to commend the people who produced this report. It was a difficult and onerous task. It is a wonder that any report, at all, was issued given the thorny issues which are being considered within the SERC Report. Issues raised by the Report include the following positions:

"Ordinary" teachers may feel that they will be swamped with problems related to disability that they do not know how to deal with.

"Special" teachers are worried that they will become redundant and are being undervalued.

Parents are concerned that they will be disempowered.

People with disabilities are worried that they will be under-resourced, bureaucratised and stigmatised.

Individual disability groups are uncomfortable with global solutions.

In the context of these and many more concerns, the SERC Report stipulates a series of principles which are acceptable to most people. Whether you criticise this Report or commend it, it reflects the hard work of all concerned to resolve the conflict that exists within the field.

RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS OF THE SERC 'BLUEPRINT'

As I was reading this report I began wondering whether it would become the bible which would be used to dictate the shape of services for the next 20 years; whether it was a wish list of desirable interventions which would fail to be resourced or whether it was a fantasy which would end up gathering dust on the library shelf. I was interested to hear the Minister call this Report a Blueprint for the 21st century. It was of concern particularly because a "Blueprint" implies an accurate survey of the terrain. A blueprint based on an inaccurate survey will not fit with reality. If the SERC Report is a blueprint then we should be very careful about endorsing its content without examining the resources it requires.

A useful way to do this is to examine the adequacy of current and planned resources to meet the special needs of pupils who are currently within the system before evaluating the resources specified for additional pupils with a disability within the SERC Report. On the basis of the figures implied within this Report it could be concluded that under-resourcing is being planned for the educational system. If this was a strategic plan for a commercial company which was scheduled to take place over three years, one might commend the report highly. However, if this report is to be implemented over a period of 10, or 15 years, then it would be unacceptable that under resourcing should be built into the plan.

PLANNING AN UNDER-RESOURCED SYSTEM

The evidence in favour of the hypothesis that this Report is recommending under-resourcing arises from the study of "certain specific disabilities" within the ordinary school system at primary level which is appended to the report. Up to 61% of all "certain specific disabilities" in this research are accounted for by four categories of disability. These are: behaviour problems, specific learning disability, speech and language disorder and emotional disturbance. It is difficult to discern whether the high level of instance of these disabilities relates

to their prevalence within the population at large or whether they are an index of the degree of integration which is happening in the educational system at present. But it is still worthwhile to examine the resources which are being allocated to the four most prevalent "certain specific disabilities" in ordinary schools. With regard to emotional disturbance and speech and language disorder, the Department of Education and the educational system provide little or no support for these disabilities. In general, speech therapists and psychiatrists are employed by the Health Boards. The category "behaviour problems" is in itself a recognition that the primary education system as it exists is under-resourced to deal with these children. All of the other categories of "certain specific disabilities" specified in this study required an assessment of some kind. Whether this assessment was from a doctor, a psychiatrist or a psychologist, a diagnosis was required. In contrast to this, "behaviour problems" were defined as those children who despite the implementation of the recommendations of circular 20/90 were considered to have behaviours which could not be met within the ordinary school. A reasonable interpretation of this is that there are at least 2,000 pupils within the primary school sector who are currently not having their special needs met.

PROBLEM OF SPECIFIC LEARNING DISABILITY

With regard to specific learning disability there is also a grave danger of under-resourcing. According to the survey one third of one percent of all students in primary school were identified as having a specific learning disability (0.34%). In terms of real numbers this amounts to 1,744 children give or take 140. It is acknowledged within the SERC Report that the documented incidence of SLD is between 1% and 4% of the population. Thus there are between 5,000 and 20,000 pupils in the primary school currently with specific learning disabilities. While accepting the statistical error within the survey as being valid, there is a strong indication that the measurement error of this survey is between 300% and 1,200% in this instance. Given that 17% of all pupils assessed by psychologists within the study were diagnosed as SLD, it would be safe to assume that there are far greater numbers of students with this disability in the system than had been indicated by the survey.

A possible reason for this under-estimation of SLD is the requirement within its definition for psychological reports. It is not surprising that such psychological reports are unavailable given the under-resourcing of the primary sector in this regard. Evidence of this can be gleaned from the fact that, based on the assumption that all specified pupils with disabilities have contact with a remedial

teacher, 25,000 other pupils approximately are attending the remedial teacher with no specified disability. Is it safe to assume that all of these pupils come from disadvantaged backgrounds? On this assumption 73% of all pupils attending remedial teachers are socially disadvantaged. A more likely explanation is that a substantial majority of those pupils attending the remedial teacher have a specific learning disability.

A RESOURCE DEFICIT FOR REMEDIAL STUDENTS

Another perspective on the resourcing implied within the SERC Report is to compare the level of resourcing recommended for the future with the Report's own definition of current need. The SERC Report specifies a cut-off point at the tenth percentile of attainment for pupils attending the remedial teacher. On this basis there are currently 51,091 pupils within the primary sector who require remedial teaching. The current attendance at remedial teachers is estimated as being 35,102 pupils. This would imply that there are nearly 16,000 pupils within the primary school system who have unmet needs. The extra remedial teaching resources which are recommended by the SERC Report amount to 350 remedial teachers nationally. Given that ratios remain the same this will cater for 12,250 pupils. On this basis one might conclude that the SERC Report plans a resource deficit which will leave over 3,500 pupils without adequate support.

UNDER-RESOURCING AT SECOND AND THIRD LEVEL

It is a pity that similar data was not collected at second level. In the absence of such a survey one can only rely upon reports of people who have expertise within the system. This body of evidence is in favour of the hypothesis that there is also under-resourcing at second level.

Post secondary and adult education for people with special needs are also under-resourced currently and it is difficult to discern from the SERC Report what resources will be placed in this area. An example of this under-resourcing is a pre-university course which was established three years ago by the Rehabilitation Institute. This programme which was developed in co-operation with University College Dublin, provides compensatory interventions for people with disabilities who have difficulty in actualising their potential within the second level system. A combination of adapted new technology and individualised teaching has proved successful in placing over 20 people with disabilities into higher education over the past three years. The programme has been commended in the Green Paper *Education for a Changing World* and is also referenced in the SERC

Report. It is ironic that this programme is not being funded by the Department of Education. It is also not being funded by the Department of Health. It is also ineligible for European funding. This programme has been supported by fund raising for the past three years. This example is cited purely as another indication of under-resourcing at secondary and post secondary levels.

Lest it be thought that the evidence for under-resourcing relate to the certain set of disabilities specified by the study, it is interesting to note that epilepsy was not considered as an option within the questionnaire. This omission would appear to have occurred in spite of a submission by the Irish Epilepsy Association. Epilepsy was considered to be a medical condition rather than a disability. This decision was made in the face of evidence that at least a third of all children with epilepsy encounter learning difficulties during their educational experience.

PERSPECTIVES OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

It is important that the response to the SERC Report from all people involved in the field of disability is co-ordinated. Too often sectoral interests have fragmented the disability voice. There are many issues within the SERC Report which are of general concern to people with disabilities themselves, educational providers, families and advocates. In order to gain a perspective on some of these common issues, an informal survey was carried out amongst representative bodies within the field of disability. There is not enough space here to elaborate the arguments in favour of these key points but it is important to enumerate them.

KEY ISSUES

Phasing and Costs:

The phasing of the report, confusion about the priorities implied and the lack of any specification of the cost of implementation were considered to be three major weaknesses.

'Appropriate' Education:

In the absence of any model of education, or philosophy of education or specified direction many people were concerned about the definition of "appropriate" education.

Role of Parent:

There was general concern expressed about the role of parents within the system. In particular, the delegation of the right of a local team to exclude a parent from a case conference was cited.

Aids and Adaptations:

The requirement for parental fund raising or voluntary action in order to fund appropriate aids and adaptations for pupils with disabilities was considered to be inadequately addressed within the SERC Report.

Rights of Pupils:

There would appear to be no provision for the recognition of the rights of pupils within the recommendations of the SERC Report. While this may seem unimportant at primary level, the growing individual requires an individual voice.

Identification and Assessment:

Much concern was expressed about the process of identification and assessment. While these were specified as being desirable and important strategies within the SERC Report there was little indication as to the nature of these assessments and particularly for whom the assessment was being carried out - parents, teachers, the individual or the professional team.

Teacher-Training:

The need for teacher training was of universal concern. This is specified not only in terms of in service training but also in terms of the integration of disability awareness modules into all teaching programmes.

Linkages:

The importance of strong linkages between special and ordinary schools was emphasised.

Co-ordination of Resources:

The need to co-ordinate resources at a local level was considered. One solution which was suggested to this problem was the appointment of a liaison person to each local educational administration area with responsibility for co-ordination of resources.

Accountability:

Given the emphasis on local education administration areas within the Report and the lack of definition of "appropriate" education, a serious question was raised about the lack of accountability within the structures recommended by the SERC Report. An appeals procedure would appear to be essential.

Segregated Education:

The need for special and in some cases segregated education from an early age was expressed particularly in relation to children with blindness and deafness.

Ratios and Resources:

There were many questions as to the reality of the ratios specified in the SERC Report in terms of effectiveness. The adequacy of resources implied by the SERC Report was also questioned.

Curriculum:

The SERC Report has little to say about curriculum. The curriculum is perceived as being one of the barriers to effective integration. There is little room for flexibility, a characteristic which is required when dealing individual needs.

THE DILEMMA OF SPECIALISED EDUCATION

It is difficult to describe the broad range of issues which arise for all parties involved in the integration process. However, a most striking metaphor was presented by a Danish educator at a recent seminar. The illustration consisted of the following letter:

**Mrs Smith,
3 Same Place,
Out Town.**

To the P.E. Teacher.

Dear Teacher,

**Please ensure that Johnny is not allowed to enter
the swimming pool until he has learnt to swim.**

**Yours sincerely,
Mrs. Smith.**

Everyone within the Irish educational system would hope that Johnny would learn to swim. No one wishes to throw Johnny into the deep end, or worse still,

into an empty swimming pool. But it is difficult to conceive of how Johnny can learn to swim without entering the swimming pool. The law in Denmark guarantees the right of every pupil with a disability access to integrated education. This does not mean that every school in Denmark has been adapted for every disability. Each individual in Denmark has the right to go to the school of his/her choice. If a pupil with a disability presents themselves at a pre-school of their choice. If a pupil with a disability presents themselves at a pre-school, primary, secondary or post secondary school, that school has a statutory responsibility to accept that pupil. The Department of Education has the responsibility to provide on site support in both the training of teachers and the required physical and technological adaptations.

Responding to the special needs of pupils with disabilities is not about adapting to a stereotype. If every primary school building in the country was made accessible tomorrow it would absorb more than the total budget of the Department of Education. On the other hand, if resources were allocated within the context of individual need then resources would be used more effectively to adapt specific schools to particular needs.

This principle was adopted by UCD in its response to people with disabilities. By utilising an orientation and induction process the university has been able to identify the specific needs of each individual who has gained access to higher education and has made a commitment to allocate resources to meet those needs. It is difficult to understand why a child with a disability must wait to enter university for such accommodation to be made. Perhaps a similar approach should underpin special education at all levels of the educational system. Whether a child is in a segregated or mainstream setting, an individualised and flexible response is required. Appropriate resources must also be available. However, without the support of appropriate legislation this scenario is unthinkable