

Feature: Responding to the Report of the Special Education Review Committee

The SERC Report: What is the Role of Remedial Teachers?

According to the Association of Remedial Teachers of Ireland, while remedial education has influenced significantly the whole nature of schooling in Ireland, it is nobody's brainchild. The system of remedial education has no administrative base of its own. There is no individual, no department nor section of a department given over to the administration of remedial education nor does this Report call for such a development. Remedial Education - with no base of its own - is seen as "an also ran".

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TOWARDS A 'BETTER' EDUCATION

This Report is, I believe, a serious attempt to review the present status of Special Education in Ireland and to make recommendations for planning into the twenty-first century. As such I welcome this document and appreciate the work of those who compiled it.

Central to the Report is the notion of the better education of the child - and who could argue with that - but this statement includes the value laden and general notion that there is a clear definition of "better". The call for equal rights for all children is also everywhere in evidence alongside the mistaken assumption that many of the children in need of remedial education are beneficiaries of equality in educational provision at present.

REMEDIAL PROVISION - THE STRENGTH OF THE SYSTEM?

When the Review Committee highlighted the most positive attributes of the present system of provision, top of its list was "the level of provision that

continues to be made for the largest groups with special educational needs, namely pupils with remedial needs, pupils in disadvantaged areas and children of traveller families" (page 51). Surely the statistics themselves as they appear in the Report refute this. The Report accepts that this large group comprises some 15% to 18% of the pupil population and that only 53% of Primary schools catering for 77% of pupils have access to remedial education.

From surveys carried out within ARTI, this "access" often means a visit once a week from a remedial teacher who in some cases is covering up to seven different schools. At second level, 277 out of 795 schools have officially appointed remedial teachers - whose appointment was made on no obvious criteria - which in effect means that about 34% of students in second level schools have a remedial service. Quite obviously, this is not enough. Students transferring from Primary to Secondary school bring with them all their problems: learning, emotional, behavioural and social. On top of this they now have to cope with demands of a new system and all that that entails. Today there is no continuum, no equality and certainly no "strength" in the system as it now exists.

ELUSIVE CONCEPT OF THE DISADVANTAGED AREA

The Association of Remedial Teachers of Ireland opposes the easy categorisation of students, the labelling, the database and the reduction of the child to the lowest common denominator. While accepting the fact that "there is nothing more unequal than the equal treatment of the unequal" and that there is need for positive discrimination, we have special difficulty with the concept of the disadvantaged area.

This term is widely used and finds its way into this Report (page 230) but lacks definition. Effectively, it facilitates inequality. The criteria under-pinning the designation of an area as disadvantaged do not seem to exist. There are schools existing side by side, one apparently in a disadvantaged area and the other not. I could give examples of schools separated by a school yard; one a primary school feeding into an adjoining secondary school - one deemed to be in a disadvantaged area and the other not; one with an appointed remedial teacher and the other not. There is an inherent danger here of being misled by administrative categories. We were disappointed that the Report did not call for the clarification of the terminology in use or give a clear definition of the criteria applied to such usage. All the talk of transparency in the system must be backed by the general availability of such information.

TESTING AND THE TENTH PERCENTILE

The Report calls for the future appointment of remedial teachers on the basis of testing. It proposes the adoption of an operational figure of 10% of each age-cohort of children for this purpose. This recommendation could be fundamental to the future of remedial education and if adopted will dictate its whole development.

I recognise that finding a criterion for the creation of remedial posts and a selection procedure for entitlement to remedial education is difficult - but using the 10th percentile as the cut off point is dangerous. So many children in need of remedial education will not fall within this range. Children who fall behind because of illness or poor attendance, may justify the intervention of the remedial teacher although these students may not score below the 10th percentile. Then there are the students with Specific Learning Difficulties and the gifted children; these are also in need of remedial education. Who will look after these disadvantaged groups? There are those students too, who have emotional problems, and to date, many of these pupils have benefited from the one-to-one attention and care of the remedial teacher. Not all of these students may be operating below the 10th percentile inclusion threshold.

In the same way that "the handicapped" are not one great homogeneous group, neither are the students who need remedial education. The idea that teaching only the bottom 10th percentile is equivalent to "remedial education" is, at the least, questionable.

On the subject of testing itself, there is no recommendation in the Report concerning what test should be administered. At the moment there are many tests available and depending on which one is chosen widely different results can be obtained. Calling for "valid and reliable instruments for discrimination among pupils at this level of functioning" (page 78) is too vague a notion. It is indicative of a limited vision; it will lead to inequality.

A REMEDIAL TEACHER IN EVERY SCHOOL

In the submission by ARTI to the Review Committee, we sought "a provision that would be clear, consistent and extending from pre-school to adulthood." This would call for considerable reorganisation within the system and a huge injection of resources. We welcome the recommendations on increased funding in the Report but a credibility gap now exists caused by broken promises and the

lack of financial support in the past. This gap between the policy makers and those who have to implement policy has yet to be bridged.

The most basic resource at Primary and Secondary level must be a remedial teacher in every school, "with legislative guarantees in the area of funding, personnel and training as a prerequisite to further progress." (ARTI submission).

The Report contains an in-depth consideration of the present level of teacher education and training across the whole spectrum of special educational need in Ireland. Its recommendations are welcome. One of the major concerns of ARTI has been the diverse nature of currently available training. We join with the Report writers in calling for initial teacher education and training courses in special educational needs, the standardisation of training courses throughout the country, and the awarding of recognised qualifications for such courses "which would attract additional remuneration," (page 73). We also feel that the current trend towards modular study, outreach and distance education using a variety of methodologies and personnel would go a long way to raising the profile and the morale of remedial teachers. When it comes to curriculum development, it would be true to say that "Curriculum development in teacher education is largely absent, inadequate, primitive or all of these" (Goodlab, 1990). This issue too must be addressed.

I would also call for the career-long education of the educators. There is a serious paucity of in-service provision in the present system. It has been left to associations such as ARTI to take the initiative and to fill this gap with our annual September conference, workshops and the like. While ARTI willingly undertakes this work, the lack of support and recognition is a clear indication of the lack of serious commitment to in-service for remedial teachers. "Matching provision and resourcing with identified needs is surely the goal of all serious educators." (Dyson and Gains, 1992).

INTEGRATION: DUMPING ON THE REMEDIAL TEACHER?

The whole question of integration demands an examination of civil and human rights. There can be no doubt that the rights of students with special needs and the rights of their parents are not often acknowledged. The special school system was forced into being with little, if any, discussion and it is right that this matter be addressed. However, the recommendations to integrate students into mainstream schools who previously have attended special schools must be approached with caution.

Integration must not be a cheap alternative form of education. It must not come on the strength of vague promises of future support services. It must not creep in by stealth through the back door - as is already happening. "Provision for special education students must not be confused with provision for students who need remedial education and no confusion should exist between the roles of the remedial teacher and the special education teacher. The remedial teacher must not be dumped upon" (ARTI Submission). Furthermore we must explode once and for all the myth of the travelling resource/support teacher, as a cure-all miracle worker.

The fundamental question must be: Integration for whom? Is it for the convenience of the Department, for the satisfaction of parents, or for the prestige of the school, or for the good of the child? This leads on to other questions. What is education? What is special education? Being a form of social action, surely education is rooted in a particular culture expressing the philosophy and recognising the needs of all within that society? Integration is not just about our education system; it is about our society.

NO PHILOSOPHY OF REMEDIAL EDUCATION

While the problem of under-achievement at school is age old, it is only a few decades since the first remedial teachers were appointed in Ireland. The term remedial education arose because a body of students was identified whose required form of education was different from that offered to the majority. From those early times there emerged much rhetoric on the part of the Department of Education with regard to the provision of remedial education.

In many ways remedial education has influenced the whole nature of schooling in Ireland - yet it is nobody's brainchild. It has no administrative base of its own. There is no individual, no group of individuals, no department nor even section of any one department given over exclusively to the administration of, and with responsibility for, remedial education. Nor does the Report call for any such development.

At second level, remedial education comes under the auspices of Psychological Services in the Department of Education at Marlborough Street. At primary level, a query about remedial education will find you heading for Athlone to the Special Education Department.

Remedial education has no base of its own - it is "an also ran". Even in some

schools the remedial teacher is seen as an appendage to the staff, an "educational dogsbody" (Sen. Joe O'Toole, 1991). In the Report, remedial education is yet again seen as "an also ran".

Nowhere in the document is there a philosophy of remedial education. There is no definition of the role of the remedial teacher or even a statement of the problems connected with remedial education. Therefore, there is no direction here. Finding a solution to the problems in remedial education will be difficult because in fact there is no consensus on a definition of the problems themselves.

A REPORT OF OUR OWN

Change needs to be designed and managed. Change has in the past crept in on the pendulum swings of current trends. If, as Bismarck once said "Politics is the art of the possible", then there is still hope that remedial education can come of age in its own right. It has not happened with this Report.

Perhaps remedial education will be the subject of a report of our own with a Department Section of our own and personnel of our own - someday. "For far too long remedial education has been the Cinderella of the Irish education system" (Sen. J. Costelloe, 1992). This Report, while it makes many laudable recommendations and highlights many of the deficiencies in the present system, has no fairy god-mother in it for us. And it like - this time - we will not be going to the Ball.

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