

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

The SERC Report: Looking for Flexibility but Maintaining Old Structures

One of the most positive elements in the Report is the recognition that there is a need for a continuum of services, including special schools, for pupils with special needs. Hardline ideological positions on the integration issue have been avoided. On the other hand, maintaining the present model of a psychological service and fastening existing links between the Departments of Health, Education and Finance does not augur well for a new flexible system.

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FINE RECOMMENDATIONS - BUT WILL THEY BE IMPLEMENTED ?

“You must be very old, Sir Giles”, the poet William Morris wrote in the nineteenth century. That is how I feel in relation to special education and many allied issues which are still being avidly debated in this country and which are to be found in the Report of the Special Education Review Committee 1993.

As far back as 1972 I attended a meeting in the Department of Education where the management of the third Dublin school for physically disabled children was being debated. I put forward the view that this was an ideal opportunity, which might not be repeated, to ensure that the projected school was not built in splendid isolation from other primary schools. I gave the opinion that integrating these pupils into the regular system would be greatly assisted by building the new school alongside, or even as part of, an existing primary school. The meeting agreed with me, in theory, but said that the site for the new school had already been purchased. It was far removed from all other schools in a green field site.

I gave evidence, on behalf of the National Association of Teachers in Special Education (as IATSE was formerly called), to the Committee set up in 1977, which drew up the Report on the Education of Physically Handicapped Children, published in 1981. One recommendation was to extend the visiting teacher service to assist in facilitating the integration of physically disabled pupils into

regular schools. This did not merit mention in the final Report. Otherwise the 1981 Report was an excellent blueprint for the task for which it was set up. Those of us in the field were very happy as we waited for the various recommendations to be implemented. As time passed and little happened, we discovered that the document only had the status of a report to the Minister, on whom there was no onus to act on any of the recommendations contained therein. Official enquiries about the implementation of specific recommendations drew the reply that only where and when no financial considerations would be incurred, could recommendations be given serious consideration. Unfortunately, the Report sought to get the Department of Health and the Health Boards to accept financial responsibility for many of the measures proposed. The 1981 Report on the Education of Physically Handicapped Children remains a fine theoretical document twelve years on.

RETAINING A "FEELGOOD" PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICE

Despite such unhappy memories of past experience and despite the fact that none of the proposed measures contained in the Report of the Special Education Review Committee are costed, I remain hopeful. One has to be. I believe that the best service the Department of Education can do for disabled children is to afford them maximum interaction with teachers. This is where the available resources should be directed, by reducing the pupil teacher ratio and increasing resource teachers (7.1.1. & 7.1.2.(d)). I am very sceptical of the comparative value of exposing special needs pupils to other professionals for irregular and brief sessional periods. This is often seen as a *deus ex machina* by the uninitiated, but I regard it as often a "feelgood" situation with little or no long-term value to the pupils. This applies particularly in the context of this Report where there is no short-term possibility of a proper educational psychological schools' service. Paragraph 1.2.14 (1) states "Pending the general availability of a School Psychological Service, the system of assessment services currently in operation should be retained". For primary schools certainly, this means the continuation of a clinical psychological service, often purporting to be an educational one. Where the Department of Education requires an educational service, in the widest possible meaning, for its charges, it must fund and control that service. The ethos of unaccountability, often found in health related services, must be shunned.

PHYSICAL DISABILITY - DISSAPPOINTING PROPOSALS

The section of the Report dealing with pupils with a physical disability is most disappointing. Unlike other pupils with disabilities, there is no attempt to define

or describe these. This is despite the detailed statistical submission by the Principals of the seven day-schools for children with a physical disability, indicating the drastic changing nature of their pupils' needs and the consequent demands made upon teaching staffs (see *REACH* 7,1 pp.13-16). One quarter of the recommendations in this section refer to school transport, which were made in the 1981 Report already referred to. There appears even an attempt to clawback the excellent recommendation that preschool assessment classes of physically disabled children aged 3-5, should be part of the day-schools as recommended in the 1981 Report.

TEACHERS AS PARTNERS IN ASSESSMENT PROCESS

Mr. John Carr, Assistant Secretary of the INTO, recently made the point that there was a need for the professional expertise of teachers to have greater standing. He noted that teachers spend up to 1000 hours per year with their pupils and, apart from parents, know the children better than anyone else. There may in the past have been a tendency for teachers to defer to other professionals who have only a fleeting interaction with the pupils. It is my belief that teachers are the best placed people to assess their pupils in a wide variety of ways. There will be a need for some training in this area (1.2.9 & 1.2.10). The Department should be aware that their greatest professional resource is the body of serving teachers. It should give them every opportunity to expand their expertise and have that accorded the highest recognition in the educational context. The practice where teachers accept parents as full partners in the educational process must also be fostered.

EMPHASIS ON CONTINUUM OF SERVICE PROVISION

One of the most positive elements in the Report is the recognition that there is a need for a continuum of services available for disabled pupils, which includes special schools. This was necessary as an antidote to the hostility generated towards special schools among those blindly committed to integration by ideological fixation. The adherents to this cause appear ignorant of the fact that only about 0.9% of all pupils of primary and post-primary age are lucky enough to be educated in special schools in Ireland (2.2.2b). Mr. John Carr, in a public debate, felt obliged to make the point, in discussing integration, that there were dedicated and skilled teachers at work in special schools.

FISCAL FEET RATHER THAN INTER-DEPARTMENTAL HANDS

The major caveat I have with this Report is the importance it gives to the establishment of an Interdepartmental Committee with the Department of Health (8.2.1.(1)). Interdepartmental committees have not had a happy history. Each side tends to operate on the principle of fighting its own corner and pushing extra expenditure across the table. The Review Committee received submissions on the lack of co-ordination, consultation and co-operation between the various providers of special services. Breakdown in communication between the Education and Health authorities is frequently alleged, the Report coyly states. The reliance of the Department of Education on the Department of Health, for the deliverance of educational services, has not been a happy experience for pupils, parents or teachers. I would have hoped that Education would be desperately trying to stand on its own fiscal feet, particularly in the expectation of an Education Act and demanding the necessary resources to deliver essential services. For there to be some realistic hope of an improvement in this sphere, I would have expected at a minimum, a recommendation that a Minister for State be appointed with responsibility for service co-ordination. One has to be an optimist not to smile wryly reading the last recommendation: The Principal Teacher, or another nominated teacher, in consultation with the School Psychologist, when appointed, should be responsible for co-ordinating the delivery of educational support services to pupils with special needs (8.4).

LEGISLATION AND SCHOOLS AS COMMUNITIES

The need to legislate to establish various rights and responsibilities in education is unfortunately inescapable. The Report recommends an Education Act to uphold the rights of pupils with disabilities and special needs to an appropriate education. The Report wants the basic rights and responsibilities of pupils, parents, school authorities, teachers and the State to be defined (2.3.2. (a)). Yet, though I support this, I cannot but refer to a dichotomy I see in this situation. Schools are not primarily institutions established under some neat legal structure. Rather they are part of a community sharing a vision of human life embracing all its aspects, spiritual, moral, and cultural. An institution is something you enter on its terms, one that you don't bring your whole self to. Institutions depend on structures because that is the only way in which competing and often hostile groups can work together. The organic structures of a community, on the other hand, are grown out of shared understanding and a shared interest. The rules of a community are not an externally imposed burden, but the fruit of a mutual respect and a common vision. A community is a group where you can be fully yourself; at best it is an extension of the home.