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Integration: Pipe-Dream or Possibility?

For parents of children with mental handicap, the issues of terminology and categorisation are elements in an academic debate. Integration may be a desirable ideal but for those intimately involved with the special needs of their own children the current debate may be a dangerous distraction. The central concern should be that of choice and quality of provision based on the needs of the individual and not on the needs of the State.

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MENTAL HANDICAP AND THE RIGHT TO AN EDUCATION

The concept of mental handicap in education is still relatively new, and as yet it is not fully understood and recognised. In fact it is often still seen as an issue of charity, both among parents and professionals. The notion that people with a mental handicap have as much right to an education as anyone else is still all too often ignored.

But they do have that right - a right to a proper education that suits their particular needs and abilities, and that will develop their potential to its maximum. If it is only going to be a token gesture, their needs are not being met as of right. It has to be legislated for, and that is why the forthcoming White Paper on Education, and the projected Education Act, are so important for our children just as much as for any others.

THE GREEN PAPER AND INTEGRATION

The 1980 White Paper on Education failed to address the issue of integration - the excuse offered at the time by the Department was that the issue of integration was a "very complex one which could not be fully discussed". The Programme for Action in Education 1984-1987 established a co-ordinating committee to monitor projects in special education. It never issued any report.

What does the present Green Paper on Education say about the particular educational needs of people with a mental handicap? It identifies the issues this way: "The major issues in special needs education today are, therefore, how the

balance is to be struck between special school and mainstream provision, and how integrated mainstream provision should be developed.”

In other words, the principle of integration has become a sort of buzz-word for every official document and report of recent years - but nobody knows how to identify what it means, or what should be done to bring it about.

In fact, the whole issue of integration has become a real battleground. People become entrenched in argument about it. It's an “either / or” situation - either we integrate people with a mental handicap in ordinary schools, or we segregate them in special schools.

PROTECTING THE FUTURE OF SPECIAL SCHOOLS

Meanwhile the Department of Education sits on the fence, contentedly doing nothing, while our children are neglected and pushed into situations that may not suit them. Those of us who want to protect the future of special schools and special education are forced to argue, sometimes emotionally, against the very principle of integration. Those who argue passionately for integration are sometimes guilty of giving weapons to those who would happily cut back on the resources that special education needs.

We are advocates for special education and special schools first, and that means that we are sometimes branded as being against integration - or alternatively, as being in favour of the segregation of our children. Well, we all know what isolation means. And we have all seen our children much more segregated in situations that are supposed to be integrated, than in other situations where they are surrounded by people of similar abilities and capabilities to themselves.

INTEGRATION AND THE REALITY OF ALONENESS

The truth is that there are many different types of integration - sometimes they work, and sometimes they don't. There is no more lonely a sight in the world - at least to a mother - than to see her handicapped child in the corner of a school yard, eating her lunch while “normal life” goes on around her. This problem of aloneness becomes more and more pronounced as the child grows, as her “normal” peers stretch away from her throughout puberty.

Most of us, when our children were very young, saw integration as the only ideal for them. Many of us were successful in having our children placed in ordinary

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schools. Then we watched as they were passed out, year after year, by every other child in the school, until they became an intolerable burden on the school, which had no resources, no curriculum, and no time for them.

We wanted better, and we still do. We want our children to reach their full potential, and we believe that a properly resourced and specially geared system of education is essential for that - far more essential than an ideal which is never realised.

A QUALITY CURRICULUM IS REQUIRED

A proper system of education for people with a mental handicap would have its own curriculum and standards - and they would both be controlled by the Department of Education. That curriculum would address a wide range of needs, including: Literacy - Numeracy - Communication Skills - Social Skills - Sex Education - Physical Education - Life Skills - Art, Music and Drama - Independence Training - Vocational Skills.

The educational system which would meet these needs could have the same status as any other school, and could be divided into first, second and third level schools - just as ordinary schools are. Neither is it necessary that such schools should be isolated - there is no reason why a special primary school couldn't share the same campus as an ordinary primary school, for example. There is no reason why a vocational training centre for people with a mental handicap shouldn't share the same campus and recreational facilities, and even have flexibility in certain classes, as do third level colleges.

In other words, we think the Green Paper is wrong. The major issue in special needs education is *not* the balance between integration and special schools. The major issues are what kind of curriculum, what kind of standards, and what kind of resources are necessary to meet those special needs.

INTEGRATION: THE PHONEY DEBATE

This argument about integration is a dangerous distraction. For too long, policy-makers have talked about integration when what they really mean is: the more children we can shove into ordinary schools, the fewer special schools will be needed. Special schools are more expensive, because they have lower pupil/teacher ratios. So the argument for integration has become a code-word in some circles for education on the cheap.

As to whether integration is a pipe-dream or a reality, - we believe the question must be addressed this way. Who has the better chance of a normal, fulfilled life - the person who has been enabled to reach a high level of independent living through a properly structured and resourced education, or the person who has been forced to live as part of a community and never adequately equipped to belong? Who has the better chance of happiness - the person living with others who share his/her interests, or the person left behind while others get on with their lives?

In other words, this is a phoney debate. We shouldn't be talking about integration at all. We should be talking about *choices* - and those choices should be based on the needs of the person, and not on the needs of the Exchequer. When we start thinking about the things we need to do, and the changes we need to make, we will see that we need to integrate with *them*. We need to stop thinking about how we are going to force others to integrate with *us*, then maybe integration will stop being a pipe-dream, and real integration will become a possibility.