

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

The SERC Report: Pointing a Sensible Way Forward towards the Middle Ground

In spite of the wide area of omission in the Report regarding the special educational needs of students at second level and the lack of pointers towards policy and provision in this area, a focus on the child as a person with a range of interdependent needs is acknowledged and emphasised. An entirely sensible and responsible model of service provision can be drawn up on this principle provided that the delivery of services is not conducted in a piecemeal fashion.

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FOCUSING ON THE INCLUSIVE MIDDLE GROUND

It is my intention to share my thoughts on this document as I find it, insofar as it is likely to inform the content of a White Paper and an Education Act. I am going to confine myself to the Report as published and not engage in speculation on prior issues such as the appropriateness or otherwise of the terms of reference, the make up of the Committee and so forth. The time for that kind of argument is long gone. After two years of deliberation we've got a report. It will not please everybody - no report could - but let us use it as a framework for progress.

The bulk of the Committee membership was drawn from a range of groups with long involvement in the field of special education. Individually appointed members brought further expertise to the table and there was both first and second level input. The Committee wisely avoided taking up an ideological point of view on any of the more contentious issues in special education, thus ensuring that no one group could be isolated. It would appear that the Committee decided that it could and would be radical and yet adhere to the philosophy that in education, as in most of the other affairs of mankind, the inclusive middle ground is where the greatest good can be achieved. I applaud the Review Committee for that decision - it cannot have been the easy option.

As we approach the new century, it is envisaged that an increasing number of pupils with special needs will be educated in regular classes in mainstream schools alongside their more able peers. This is acknowledged in the Report as the way forward. It is not possible for a multitude of reasons for all students with special needs to be educated in this way and so a variety of alternatives are looked into by the Report. A continuum of service is offered which gives real meaning to the term "the least restrictive environment", a term often used when suitable placements are being considered for a child or young person with special educational needs. This ensures that the appalling either/or scenario, suggested over the last number of years by the polarised pro and anti-integration lobbies, can finally be put to bed. The needs of the pupil can at last be seen as paramount and be addressed without sacrificing him or her to either ideology or sentimentality.

THE SEVEN PRINCIPLES - A MODEL FOR LEGISLATION

Politically, it is not our practice in Ireland to legislate specifically for rights. Human and civil rights are protected by a written constitution and by the interpretation of that constitution by the Supreme Court. If, in an Education Act, we are to protect the child and ensure that needs are being appropriately met, it is possible that Government will part company with tradition and legislate very specifically for the rights of the child. We could do worse than look to the Seven Principles in the Report to inform aspects of such legislation. I would caution our legislators by noting that one reason why we have tended to legislate as we do, may well be that litigation around specific rights can tie systems up for long periods of time and can produce a siege mentality in professionals who deliver a service. The services to people with special needs in this country benefit greatly from the altruism of most of these same professionals. A litigious culture would be like a canker on our educational system.

ASSESSMENTS AND HEALTH RELATED LINKAGES

As long as it is subject to rigorous controls, the idea suggested in the Report of a Database of children with disabilities is a good one. Not only should these controls ensure the protection of information, they should also ensure that unhelpful categorisation does not occur. The Report is rightly critical of successive Governments for not extending the Schools' Psychological Service and for not establishing linkages between the various agencies catering for people with special needs. On the subject of assessment, it is good to see the

recommendation that both parents and teachers should play a significant role. I would also like to have seen a clear recommendation that where possible, students leaving the school system should play a major part in the assessment of their own abilities. The recommendation of an annual review of assessments is to be welcomed but the "Description of Special Needs", suggested in the Report, could come too close to the policy of "statementing" for my liking. Not everyone will feel that the Report goes far enough in its suggestions for improvement in the way pupils are assessed. I believe that the recommendations will reduce waiting time to a minimum, will improve the quality of the assessments significantly and ensure that pupils are far more likely to be appropriately placed. Furthermore, if the recommendations concerning the upgrading of other services including the School Health Service are implemented we can then start to see the pupil as a person with a range of interdependent needs which must be met. The pupil as a human being - an entirely new concept! This entirely sensible manner of providing service responsibly, cannot be achieved if this section of the Report is implemented in a piecemeal fashion.

FAILURE TO FOCUS ON SECOND LEVEL NEEDS

In terms of educational provision for pupils with special educational needs, I would broadly welcome the Report. I have some reservations concerning certain recommendations and indeed on some issues I would disagree quite strongly. I also feel that a number of issues were not adequately addressed. One such issue is that of second level provision in both special and mainstream schools.

Any mainstream second-level school that may have been considering developing provision for people with special needs is as wise after the publication of the Report as beforehand. There are many people working in special schools who have developed excellent senior programmes to suit the needs of their individual student populations. Many of these programmes have been taken on by the Government Departments and are currently being used as training modules in a variety of areas. This work should have been acknowledged by the Review Committee and strategies for an extension of these programmes to meet special needs in mainstream second-level schools should have been recommended. Excellent work is being done in special schools meeting the needs of those whose intellectual disability is more significant in providing appropriate second level education and training. At present this happens with highly inappropriate levels of funding. These schools run senior programmes which challenge the students to the maximum and include in-school training and work experience programmes in the community. As the Report recommends, these students need

the highly specialist support of the special school but recommendations to help develop this provision and have it valued in these schools, let alone strategies to transfer such programmes to the proposed second-level special classes, do not appear in the Report. I only highlight a few examples of this wide area of omission in the Report.

ANOMALIES IN PUPIL-TEACHER RATIO PROPOSALS

There is another area in which I feel the Report could have been more thorough and this is the area of additional difficulties experienced by students with disability. The meeting of secondary and indeed tertiary needs can present great difficulties in the management of the school or classroom for those working with such pupils. For example, it would seem to make sense that a class that contains two pupils, both presenting with significant physical disability and a mental handicap to a moderate degree, one with behaviour difficulties, the other blind, should have a lower pupil/teacher ratio than a class of 10 pupils with physical disability and mixed intellectual needs who have no further significant difficulties. Yet there is no real freedom being suggested in the Report for such a school to manage one such hypothetical (but common) situation without significantly disadvantaging the other. By this I mean increasing the pupil/teacher ratio in one class in order to reduce it in the other. According to the Report, the support teacher allocation in such a situation, which may indeed only reflect the entire school in microcosm, is wholly inadequate. It is difficult to quibble with the proposed pupil teacher ratios as they are outlined in Table 7.1.1 of the Report but there must be freedom to request, and the probability of receiving, additional teaching posts when genuine needs exist.

I have no hesitation in quibbling with the proposed appointment ratios for Special Needs Assistants. No special needs setting should ever have less than one Special Needs Assistant per two classes. Where needs are significant, such as with the profoundly deaf or with those intellectually disabled due to a moderate degree of mental handicap, there should be one assistant per class. The ratio for those with the most significant level of intellectual disability listed in Table 7.2.4., of one per three pupils is, I think, reasonable.

POINTING TO A SENSIBLE WAY FORWARD

This is an interesting time to be involved in education. The debate engendered by the Green Paper has done a great deal to arouse people from the torpor brought on by the too-familiar. We have been shaken up, made uncomfortable by change

and made re-assess our ideas by a society that looks at educational provision as a service which should be available to all of the people equally and looks at those who provide that service as skilled, professional, accountable public servants. Those of us with additional specialist skills, trained to meet the extra needs of certain students have been especially challenged in recent times. We were sometimes made to feel undervalued although we knew our value to be great. The debate is now over. This Report, for all of its faults, points a sensible way forward. I believe that the political will to implement it is to be found in Marlboro Street. I hope the financial resources to implement it can be found in equal measure in Merrion Street and Kildare Street.