

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

The SERC Report: Sidestepping the Past and Future Roles of Special Schools

While the Review Committee did not cost its recommendations, the Department of Education has estimated that implementing them would entail a spending of £55.7m in a full year. The Report seems to turn away from spotlighting the wealth of service resources already available in the special school system, their pioneering role in the past, and their potential for creative development in the future. There is a fear among teachers working in the system that the "specialist" function of special schools might give way to an unstructured "rag bag" type role in time to come.

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TRIBUTE TO UNSTINTING PUBLIC SERVICE

Any response to the Report of the Special Education Review Committee, should begin, I feel, with an expression of appreciation to the members of the Committee who obviously worked very hard over a two year period. The Chairman acknowledges this in his Foreword when he refers to the members giving unstintingly of their time even to the extent of "devoting weekends and in some cases vacation days to meetings of the Committee". This is, without doubt, public service of the highest order. Whether or not it is desirable, or even reasonable to request people to serve on committees of enquiry under such terms - particularly when the people concerned are also involved in their own normal heavy work schedule - is of course another question.

NO ENTRENCHED DOCTRINAIRE POSITION

I believe that the Report deserves to be welcomed, not just for the above reason, but because it made a fair assessment of the present state of special educational services in this country, and provided an outline of what its development should be into the next century. It had, I believe, an enormously difficult task; in addition to its stated terms of reference, it also had to take cognisance of the strongly held, but often widely diverging views of the various interests involved,

and it must have known that whatever its findings were, it would not meet with universal satisfaction. Perhaps the most eagerly awaited aspect of the Report was the way it would tackle the second of its four terms of reference - the integration issue. It sets out its position on this quite early: "The Review Committee holds no entrenched doctrinaire position regarding the integration into the ordinary school system of pupils with disabilities and / or special needs. Our philosophy could best be summed up by saying that we favour as much integration as is appropriate and feasible with as little segregation as is necessary" (p.22).

PRINCIPLES - BUT WHAT ABOUT PRIORITIES?

In presenting its position in this way, it was restating what has essentially been the practice since the White Paper on Educational Development stated in 1980, "while full integration will be the first option to be considered, other options including that of complete segregation are being kept open" (4.4 p.29). The implementation of a policy such as this, of course, immediately gives rise to a whole range of "who", "how" and "why" questions. It also results in the inclusion of two principles, among the list of seven which are to form the basis for the future development of the system, which will evidently give rise to some tension in their application. Principle four states that "a continuum of services should be provided for children with special educational needs, ranging from full time education in ordinary classes, with additional support as may be necessary, to full time education in special schools". Principle five states "except where individual circumstances make this impracticable, appropriate education for all children with special educational needs should be provided in ordinary schools" (p.20).

The Review Committee did not cost its recommendations - though the Chairman does state that the "cost of those recommendations is not insignificant" (p.10). Yet, at the Seminar held within a few weeks of the Report's publication the Department of Education had estimated the cost of the Committee's main recommendations as being £55.7m in a full year. I think it was regrettable that the Review Committee did not provide costing: had it done so, it could then have prioritised its recommendations on educational grounds, with an awareness of the cost implications. We now face the distinct possibility of the priorities in implementation being determined exclusively by cost factors.

UNACKNOWLEDGED WEALTH IN SPECIAL SCHOOL SYSTEM

The Review Committee also failed, I would suggest, to provide the level of

reassurance that many teachers within special education needed. There has been a great air of unease and uncertainty among teachers in special education over the past 15 years or so - in marked contrast to the pride and enthusiasm of the ten years before that. Having decided that the system would include "a place for both ordinary and special schools" (p.22) the Report goes on to review current special educational provision in Chapter 2. It does this over 25 pages (pp 50-74), the first five of which refer to the strengths of the system and the ensuing twenty to its deficiencies. It pays tribute to "the commendable work done in the special schools in Ireland since their establishment" on page 63, but that sentence stands in solitary isolation. No reference is made to the attempts of so many teachers to have special schools operate as communities rather than institutions, nor is there any acknowledgment given to the pioneering work of those schools in establishing curricular innovations such as health education programmes, work experience programmes, programmes in personal, social and vocational competence, and so on - programmes which were often later adopted by mainstream schools. It is acknowledged on page 61 that pupils with special needs "drop out far too early an age from mainstream post primary schools". But there is no acknowledgment of the very high level of continuing attendance right up to the age of 18 of pupils in special schools. These, and many more successes were achieved in the light of some extraordinarily difficult structural and resourceless circumstances - deficiencies which the Report very properly calls to be rectified.

FLEXIBILITY AND CHOICE ADVOCATED

The Report has also very properly highlighted some essential and necessary changes: the real involvement of parents as partners, including their entitlement to make a choice (for which, of course, a continuum of services within an area is essential); the inadequacy of provision for post primary aged children; the inequity of the present operation of the transport service; improvements in the pupil teacher ratios and availability of additional resources both material and personnel. It also has broken new ground with two innovative but related concepts. It states that "bringing the pupil to the service is often a more realistic and effective option than bringing the service to the pupil" (p.24) and that this will result in "*designated schools* being selected to provide a centralised special service for pupils who will be transported from the catchment area of neighbouring schools". I fail to see how this is substantially different from the way in which the existing special class system operates.

DIFFICULTIES POSED BY MULTI-CATEGORY SPECIAL SCHOOLS

There is also the suggestion that special schools would in future “enrol pupils from different categories of disability and will become more in the nature of *regional multi-category special schools* serving pupils with several types of significant special needs” (p.23). The Review Committee indicates that it would welcome this development provided that it could be ensured that it would be properly planned. This would result in the ending of the system whereby the prime handicap was the determinant for the placement. It could also result in special schools operating as “rag bag” type schools, a phrase used by Mr. Gillen of the Department of Education at the Dun Laoghaire Seminar - rather than in the manner of “specialist” schools, which is how they have operated up until now. While such a development might be administratively convenient, it could give rise to serious difficulties in relation to self image for, in particular, older pupils at the upper end of the mild mental handicap category, or for many pupils with physical and sensory disabilities.

There is a similar issue on which the Report seems to lack clarity. On page 125 it outlines the existing provision for children with moderate mental handicap: three types of provision are referred to - special schools, special classes in schools for children with mild mental handicap and special classes in ordinary national schools. Recommendation 5.2.7.(c) on page 127 suggests that in future provision should either be in special schools or in special classes in designated ordinary schools. It is not clear, whether or not it would consider special classes in schools for pupils with mild mental handicap as being included or excluded in such provision.

RECOMMENDATIONS - LONG TERM PROSPECTS ?

As I said at the beginning, we must express our gratitude to the Review Committee for its work in producing the first ever comprehensive Report on special education in this country. Not all its recommendations will meet with equal approval and it is unclear as to what progress will be made in implementing them. The Minister has stated that some are clearly long term, and that may be ominous. The Chairman’s statement that the recommendations are made “in the conviction that they are necessary if the Government is to meet its obligations in respect of the education of those children in our society who have special educational needs” (p.10) is noteworthy, and it is to be hoped that finance will be made available to immediately rectify some of the many deficiencies in the present operation of the system.