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Special Education: A Time for Change

The anticipated report of the Special Education Review Committee will indicate important policy directions for special needs education in Ireland for the next century. Official policy statements issued at various times in the past decade, in supporting the ideal of integration, have been at variance with a consistently restrained approach to the allocation of necessary resources.

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INTRODUCTION

From a situation ten years ago when I was convinced that the integration of special needs children into ordinary schools was the ideal solution which we should strive to attain, I now believe that such a policy is too simplistic and that we should strive for a continuum of educational provision for children with special educational needs. I know that this is not an easy thing to achieve but I would contend that if we do not set our sights on this as an aspiration, we will be failing the most vulnerable and dependent children in our society.

CHANGING POLICY ON INTEGRATION

Before 1980, the Department of Education's policy was that children with special needs should attend special schools. By 1980, this policy began to change in line with developments in other western countries. The White Paper on Educational Development of 1980 was the first official document which questioned the policy of segregated provision (Ireland, 1980).

This policy of separate provision of special educational services has in recent years been questioned on the grounds that it is not necessarily calculated to promote the optimum human development of the children in question and it has been replaced in some countries by a policy of total integration of all children into

ordinary schools. The need for special provision is not at issue, what is at issue is whether it should continue to be made on an integrated or on a segregated basis.

The White Paper went on to state that “the prospect of the integration of the handicapped is not as daunting now as it would have been even ten years ago”. It was recognised however that “many of the arguments which favour segregation still retain their cogency”. The section on Special Educational Provision concluded by stating that “While full integration will be the first option to be considered, other options, including that of complete segregation, are being kept open”. The Report of a Working Party on the Education and Training of Severely and Profoundly Mentally Handicapped in 1983 stated that:

It is the policy of the Government to integrate as many handicapped children as possible in ordinary schools...the working party is of the view that the...needs of severely and profoundly mentally handicapped children are such that they could not be met, in the foreseeable future, by attendance at ordinary schools. (Ireland, 1983)

The following year, the Programme for Action in Education 1984-7 further explained government policy in relation to the education of children with special educational needs (Ireland, 1984). Provision for children diagnosed as mildly mentally handicapped would increasingly be made in special classes attached to ordinary national schools as “such an arrangement is seen as facilitating the integrating of the children with their peers”. The Programme continued:

While special schools will continue to operate in this field, their role is seen as one which will in future cater for children with more serious learning disabilities in the mild mental handicap range and for children who cannot be catered for through special classes in ordinary schools. In addition the special schools will be encouraged to become resource and reference centres for teachers and pupils in special classes throughout their area.

In 1990 the Report of the Primary Education Review Body reiterated that “the official policy of the Department of Education... is one of integration where possible while retaining the option of segregation where necessary” (Ireland, 1990). The report admitted that “there are limits to the degree of integration which is possible and there are considerable financial implications in the

implementation of integration". The same year the report of the Review Group on Mental Handicap Services — *Needs and Abilities* — welcomed the fact that increasing number of pupils with general learning difficulties were being provided with educational opportunities in their local environment. (Ireland, 1990, ii)

Also in 1990, the EC Council of Ministers of Education (including the Irish Minister for Education) unanimously adopted a Resolution that

the integration into mainstream schools of children with disabilities should be accelerated in all appropriate cases, on the basis of individual assessment and provided that good quality education can be maintained.

SPECIAL EDUCATION PROVISION

By 1990/1, there were almost four and a half thousand children in special education in Ireland as the following table shows:

SPECIAL EDUCATION, 1990/1 NUMBER OF SCHOOLS, CLASSES AND PUPILS.			
	In Special Schools	In Ordinary Schools	Total
No. of Schools	117	-	117
No. of Classes	744	291	1,035
No. of Pupils	8,269	3,235	11,504
(Pupils less than 13 years of age)	4,333	2,820	7,153
(Pupils aged 13 yrs. and over)	3,936	415	4,351

Source: Department of Education, 1991.

In other words, about 1.3% of the total numbers of pupils attending primary and post-primary schools were either in special schools or special classes. Less than 1% were totally segregated in special schools.

SPECIAL EDUCATION REVIEW COMMITTEE

In 1991, the then Minister for Education, Mary O'Rourke T.D. set up a

committee to review the provision for special education. The Committee, chaired by Declan Brennan, former Secretary of the Dept. of Education, is due to issue its report in Summer 1993. Its terms of reference are broad-ranging. It is expected to discuss the question of identification of children with special needs as well as to advise on support service which need to be provided. The Committee has been specifically requested to advise on the various arrangements that might be made for such children, including complete or partial integration in ordinary schools, special classes in ordinary schools and special schools or other special arrangements.

GREEN PAPER ON EDUCATION

The Green Paper on Education - *Education for a Changing World* - was issued in June 1992. A section on special education stated that government policy

...will seek to provide for children with special educational needs in mainstream schools as far as possible and according as it is appropriate for the particular child. This means that it is accepted that there will continue to be children with disabilities for whom enrolment in an ordinary school would not be appropriate. (Green Paper, p.62)

The Green Paper admitted however that the major issues in special needs education to-day are how the balance is to be struck between special school and mainstream provision and how integrated mainstream provision should be developed. It identified the issues which needed to be addressed as follows:

INTEGRATION ISSUES IN THE GREEN PAPER

- **Identification of students in special schools who might be more appropriately provided for in ordinary schools, and vice-versa.**
- **Arrangements for ensuring that students can be moved from special provision to mainstream, or vice-versa, as the changing needs of the child require.**
- **A system ensuring effective identification and assessment of students with special needs.**
- **Adequate support services for both special schools and ordinary schools providing for these students.**

INTEGRATION - TYPES OF ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURES

Until relatively recently, special educational provision tended to be classified on a binary basis — it was seen to be provided either in segregated special schools or in an ordinary class in an ordinary school. More recent analyses suggest a much wider range of options. The following classification of various types of possible organisational structures indicate different possibilities which might be considered depending on the needs of the child and local circumstances. (Hegarty et al, 1981):

CLASSIFICATION OF INTEGRATIONAL STRUCTURES

- (a) Attendance in a regular class with no additional support**
- (b) Attendance in a regular class, with in-class support for teacher and pupil**
- (c) Attendance in a regular class, with withdrawal support**
- (d) Attendance in a regular class as the basis, with part-time attendance in a special class.**
- (e) Attendance in a special class as the basis, with part-time attendance in a regular class.**
- (f) Full-time attendance in a special class.**
- (g) Attendance at a special school part-time and at a regular school part-time.**
- (h) Attendance at a special class full-time.**

THE IRISH EXPERIENCE

To date, however, very few of these options have been available in Ireland. Administrative conventions here are such that any additional resources which are made available for pupils with special needs are “attached” to the school and not to the child. During the 1960s and 1970s some additional resources — such as improved pupil—teacher ratio, grants for special equipment etc., were made available to special schools. Children attending such schools were also entitled to special transport facilities. Some facilities provided by the Health authorities such as speech therapy, physiotherapy etc. were made available to special schools. In the 1980s as government policy encouraged the provision of special classes in ordinary schools, some additional resources were also made available in special classes. But if children with special needs were accepted into the ordinary classroom to integrate fully with their more able-bodied and able-

minded peers, there were virtually no additional resources available for them. The resources which they had had in a special environment (whether school or class) were no longer available for them in an ordinary class in an ordinary school.

ALLOCATION OF RESOURCES

Pupils in schools in this country are enrolled in either a special school, a special class or an ordinary national school. What limited additional resources which are available are targeted at the school in which the special needs children are enrolled. A child can be on the rolls of only one school or class and additional resources, if they are made available, "belong" to that school. This effectively means that there are no additional facilities available to the ordinary school which is willing to accept special needs children on a part-time basis, neither is additional support available for a special school which agrees to allow a special needs child who is enrolled in the ordinary school to attend on a part-time basis. Because of this, options d to g in the list above are not effective options for special needs pupils in this country.

Ordinary schools which accept children with special educational needs and which do not have a specially designated class got no additional resources at all from the Department of Education until recently. A small number of peripatetic resource teachers have recently been employed to visit schools in which children of impaired sight and or impaired hearing are enrolled. In the past year, two peripatetic resource teachers have been employed in the Dublin area to support a limited number of named children with Down's Syndrome. However, the amount of time which any one of these resource teachers can spend with any one child is extremely limited.

VISIONARY POLICIES BUT LACK OF ADMINISTRATIVE ACTION

No additional current (capitation) grants are available to ordinary schools which accept special needs children. Children with special educational needs are not given additional "weighting" when the school's quota of teachers is being calculated. Neither are grants available for special equipment which might be required. In the case of a child with a physical handicap where the school is required to undertake structural alterations, the school authorities are expected to make the necessary arrangements for such work and to pay for it.

It is difficult to reconcile the Department's restrained approach to supporting

children with special needs in ordinary schools with the visionary policy statements that were issued at various times in the 1980s. It would appear that no effort at all was made to develop administrative supports which would enable the policy to be put into practice, insofar as it related to full integration in the ordinary classroom. In spite of this, a number of innovative and caring schools and teachers attempted to include special needs children within their ordinary classrooms but unfortunately, and predictably, many of these are disillusioned and cynical today and would be very reluctant to repeat the experience.

CONTINUING NEED FOR SPECIAL SCHOOLS

It seems to me that we should be particularly careful not to further dismantle the special schools which we have in this country. It is important to remind ourselves at this critical juncture that less than 1% of our school-going children attend special schools and that only about 1.3% are in either special schools or special classes. This is a very small proportion by European standards. In a recent article in the *European Journal of Special Needs Education* it is pointed out that most countries seem to agree that at least 1.5% of students are difficult to integrate on a curricular level in regular education (Pijl and Meijer, 1991).

There is no reason to believe that Ireland has a smaller proportion of children with special educational needs than our European neighbours. On the contrary, some medical research would suggest that if anything Ireland has a higher incidence of mental handicap than other European countries. The Special Education Review Committee has commissioned a survey of children with special educational needs in ordinary schools and it will be interesting to see what this survey will reveal. It is likely that there are a greater number of unsupported special needs children in ordinary classrooms than has been recognised to date. The immediate priority will have to be the provision of support and resources for these children as well as for children with special educational needs in relatively remote areas of the country - children who are not within daily reach of the present special schools or special classes.

POST-PRIMARY NEEDS

The issue of suitable post-primary education for children with special needs who are currently in special classes or in ordinary classes at primary level also needs to be addressed. For historical reasons, post-primary schools in this country are largely exam-orientated. The subject rather than the child tends to be at the centre of the curriculum. Research evidence in recent years has highlighted the extent to

which post-primary schools have failed such a large proportion of pupils - up to 20% of pupils fail to achieve meaningful results at national examinations - both Junior and Leaving Certificate. If the post-primary system is currently failing to deliver a satisfactory service to the 20% of pupils at the lower end of the ability range currently enrolled at that level, how can we expect it to deliver a suitable education for the lowest 1.5% or 2%?

On a recent visit to a special school for mildly mentally handicapped children, I was impressed by the sense of purpose and achievement which was evident - particularly in areas such as homecraft, arts and crafts (including pottery), and woodwork. The young people were working at their own pace, there was no apparent sense of frustration or failure and there appeared to be no significant discipline problems in the schools. It struck me as being quite a contrast to the situation which I have observed as a secondary teacher in schools where pupils in the lowest streams felt a sense of failure, of low self-esteem and of frustration which frequently translated into disruption and sometimes even violence.

CONCLUSION

I hope this paper has not come across as being pessimistic. What I have tried to point out is that a lot of the educational provision currently available for children with special educational needs in this country is of a very high standard. We must not allow this provision to be dissipated. In particular we must continue to value the many excellent and committed teachers who are working in the area of special education and ensure that children with special needs continue to benefit from their skills and expertise. It is much easier to dismantle an effective service than to build up a new one.

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