

Forum of People with Disabilities: A Response to the Green Paper on Education

People with disabilities seek higher standards and choice of education in the ordinary school or college setting. Successful integration, properly resourced, must cover primary, secondary and third level education.

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INTEGRATION AND EQUALITY

The first and key aim of the Green Paper proposes that there would be greater equity and equality of opportunity in education. It has been proposed that this aim be the main priority in resource allocation so that each student has the opportunity to develop their educational potential to the full. We welcome this primary goal and advocate that all people with a disability must be afforded the choice of an education in the environment of their choosing. Historically, the challenge of meeting special needs in education meant special schools were often categorized according to type of disability. The shortcomings of organising educational provision in this way are well documented and the trend in Europe is now one that favours integration into the mainstream. In 1984, the Green Paper on *Services for Disabled People: Towards a Full Life* noted that "Segregation is unlikely to promote the optimum social and personal development of the disabled child and is a major obstacle to the achievement of integration and equality."

IMPORTANCE OF POSITIVE ATTITUDES

A major obstacle to integration in Ireland is that of fear, especially on the part of

teachers and some parents. Opposition may be voiced in favour of the 'extra' care and individual attention that a child is receiving in the special school setting. However, integrated and segregated education are not mutually exclusive. Special education must be seen as part of the continuum where a child should be encouraged to move into higher levels in the educational spectrum..Research studies have shown that more positive attitudes were found where there was a close personal, social, educational or employment contact with disabled persons. Only when full integration begins at a young age can the abilities of the disabled be seen and acknowledged.

In 1976 The National Economic and Social Council stated in *Educational Expenditure in Ireland* that: "Access to education is of major consequence in determining a person's subsequent life circumstances, in particular his ability to follow a career of his choice and to benefit from further education and training." The long-term effect of early mainstreaming can also induce positive results later on in life, where opportunities for employment in the open market may then become the norm rather than the exception as it is today. It must be remembered that peers grow up together and some will be tomorrow's employer. If an employer has been educated and experienced life with a disabled person then the chances of him/her seeing their qualities in a working environment are increased.

INTEGRATING SKILLS AND ABILITIES OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY

The second aim of the Green Paper is to broaden Irish Education. The aim of promoting self-esteem and self-worth combined with a respect for the rights and beliefs of others cannot be achieved unless people with disabilities are included on an equal basis. Critical thinking and problem solving skill attributes are processes that both employers and the Culliton Report maintain are lacking amongst the young people in this country. The last PESP document stated that the Government would foster greater public awareness of the skills and abilities of people with disabilities and that they would provide training and placement services to promote equal opportunities. This commitment has not yet become a reality. In areas of information technology and business where real opportunities of employment lie for people with a disability, the emphasis in education must be to promote and develop individual skills or abilities. Student exchange arrangements such as those operating under the Erasmus and Petra schemes should be extended to include a quota of people with disabilities. Vocational Education and Training schemes should facilitate and encourage greater participation from people with disabilities.

THIRD LEVEL ACCESS - EDUCATION NOT A HEALTH ISSUE

All third level colleges should be accessible for people with disabilities. Suitable access, transport and accommodation for students who wish to attend college must be considered equally important factors for people with a disability. The situation at present where many disabled persons in Training Centres come under the responsibility of the Department of Health is inappropriate. There is an inherent negative attitude in this allocation because as long as people with disabilities are seen to be 'sick' and therefore the responsibility of the Department of Health, their economic worth and potential to generate income will never be realised. All students in Training Centres should be appropriately registered with the Departments of Education and Labour, not the Department of Health. The relevant Department or the primary provider must be properly nominated and assume ultimate responsibility for the service provided.

SHARING RESOURCES TO FACILITATE ACCESS AND INTEGRATION

The third and perhaps most controversial aim of the Green Paper is to make the best use of educational resources. It is proposed that school Boards of Management will have greater responsibility and decision-making powers. The proposal to end discriminatory procedures of selection and entry to schools is welcomed. However, the condition of no entrance barriers to a school on the grounds of means, social background or academic ability must also be extended to include disability. When Boards of Management prepare their school plan, a specific statement outlining how the needs of pupils with a disability will be met should be provided.

If better facilities are to be made available for students with disabilities then limited resources will have to stretch further. More efficient sharing must be developed, for example with buildings, property and school transport. Schools should be encouraged to share resources, especially items of equipment or technical aids on a regional basis. There should be a lending bank for this function such as those that exist in the Nordic countries. Regional guidance counsellors with a specific knowledge or training in the needs of people with disabilities should be appointed to act as both a resource and liaison to school staff and students alike.

Where certain functions such as building and property services, guidance on school transport, the administration of examinations, the curriculum and the

psychological service are to be handled by external agencies, then it is imperative that rules, guidelines and policy consider the rights and needs of people with a disability. Transport decisions if made at this level must acknowledge the needs of people with disabilities.

TRENDS FAVOURING INTEGRATION

The projected decline in the primary school sector is a further reason in favour of initiating supported integration programmes now. The lower pupil teacher ratio will afford schools, teachers and the educational authorities the opportunity to develop further a whole-school approach to mainstreaming pupils with disabilities. Other support structures that will promote the integration of all children into mainstream education include on-site remedial facilities where necessary, fully accessible premises, access to technology and special equipment including Irish Sign Language interpreters to allow deaf children to participate in ordinary schools if so desired.

The Green Paper proposals on teacher training need to include courses on management and education of pupils with disabilities. Ideally, disabled people should be consulted and specialist peripatetic staff such as physiotherapists and speech therapists should be available. If more teachers with disabilities were employed, their example would serve as a role model and further encourage young people with a disability.

ASSESSMENT, CERTIFICATION AND SPECIAL NEEDS.

Assessment of all students should be considered judiciously. Any system that aims to assess pupils at various stages of development must allow for the practical aspects of sensory or physical impairments such as dexterity, mobility, hearing or sight. It is absolutely necessary that any assessments undertaken focus on ability so that such areas may be further developed. The experience of statementing in the UK has proven to be costly, time-consuming and ineffectual. It would be erroneous to adopt the same scheme in this country. Any assessment must have a system of safeguards where a second opinion may be sought and where appeals by either the parents or pupil may be made to an independent body. Individual assessments of students with special educational needs should typically be conducted over a period of more than any one day. If not the recommendations based on one day assessments may cause a lifetime of unhappiness or distress for some pupils. Arrangements must be made to ensure that there is a flexible approach to the changing needs of pupils so that the aim of

mobility between special and mainstream education can be realised. The role of the inspectorate in the assessment of pupils should be defined.

We agree with the Green Paper that there will always be a need for special schools. However, formal recognition of the time spent and curriculum followed in special schools has not been addressed in the Green Paper. It is imperative that a standard system be applied to all special schools as there is a need for state certification in special education. It is recommended that such a scheme be administered by a body such as the National Council for Vocational Educational Awards.

REPRESENTATION AND CHOICE OF PROVISION

Access to information is vital for parents and students alike so that they may make choices based upon full knowledge of what service is to be expected from any particular school or system. The proposals for greater parent involvement and for student representation on the Boards of Management at second level are welcomed. The results of any research and development into special needs education should be sought by the Department of Education. Where any Review committees are undertaking studies into planning and development for the future, relevant people who have a disability should be invited to take a place on the committee.

We want to break down the barriers to opportunity. We are seeking higher standards and the choice of an education in the ordinary school or college setting. Successful integration must cover Primary, Secondary, and Third Level Education. As long as there is no contact between the able-bodied and disabled communities there will always be negative attitudes and misunderstandings. People with a disability have a right to sit alongside their peers on an equal basis. Any legislation or Education Act should enshrine and stimulate further progress towards integrating people with disabilities. Disabled children and adults must come in from the margins and education be made equally available to everyone. If sufficient resources and planning are applied now, not only will the quality of life for people with disabilities improve, but also in the long run they will reduce their economic dependence on the state.

OBSTACLES REMAIN AT IDEOLOGICAL LEVEL

Resources are undoubtedly an obstacle but not always justifiably so. Many adaptations can be made easily and at relatively little cost e.g., toilet doors can be

widened to facilitate wheelchairs, cooking equipment in the home economics room can be adjusted to a lower level, and ramps can be installed at little cost. It is more a question of political will and commitment. Despite enabling legislation in many countries, the biggest obstacle to educational integration remains at the ideological level. Undoubtedly, the greatest issue is attitude and commitment. Firstly, positive attitudes amongst teachers must exist. Then pedagogical and curricular approaches to changing attitudes towards individuals with disabilities may be addressed by educators. To treat pupils with a disability separately induces the fear that these students are to be considered as outsiders in relation to the ordinary system of education. If this is so, any aspirations or statements concerning equity must be interpreted as merely paying lip-service to a part of the Irish population. There must be a shift in emphasis from disability to ability. The disabled must be, like others, regarded as central rather than peripheral to society. Therefore, students with disabilities should be considered in all mainstream options, be they at primary, secondary or third level cycles. To segregate is to separate and thereby reinforce attitudes to what is normal and abnormal. To integrate is to become a full member of a community.

NEED FOR FAIR DISTRIBUTION OF RESOURCES

Educational expenditure in Ireland as a percentage of the Gross National Product has grown immensely since the 1960s. However, it is now time for a comparable outlay of resources on the educational needs of the disabled in Irish society. Due to medical advances many more children will outlive their parents than previously, and will ultimately become dependent on the State. But, if sufficient resources and planning are applied now, not only will the quality of life for people with disabilities improve, but also in the long run they will reduce their economic dependence on the State. So, if the moral arguments for integration are not sufficiently compelling, there are also sound economic reasons for it.

MEETING WITH DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Following our response to the Green Paper, the Forum Education working group met with senior officials in the Department of Education. It was a useful discussion, where we reiterated our members' concerns and issues, such as the need for greater flexibility and liaison between special and mainstream schools, access and support arrangements including transport, assessment, teacher training and the home-school liaison service. We learned that integrated education at Post-Primary level is now a priority within the Department of Education. It was agreed however, that an integrative approach involving the Departments of Health, Tourism, Transport and Communications, and of course Education is

absolutely necessary. So, we look forward to another meeting with interdepartmental representatives in the near future. The most important outcome of this meeting is that we are now recognised as legitimate partners in this most important debate.

We fully intend to be included in any changing world!