

Schools for Children with Physical Disability: A Submission to the Special Education Review Committee

In their submission, the principal teachers of the seven schools for physically disabled children in the Republic of Ireland argue for a reduction in pupil-teacher ratio based on the broad range of special needs in the school population evident in their school survey of October 1992.

SUBMISSION PRESENTED by the principals of St. Gabriel's School, Limerick; Central Remedial Clinic, Dublin; School of the Divine Child, Ballintemple, Cork; St. Mary's School, Baldoyle, Dublin; Scoil Mochua, Clondalkin, Dublin; Sandymount School and Clinic, Dublin; and Marino School, Bray, Co. Wicklow.

CHANGING PROFILE OF SCHOOL POPULATION

The population of children attending schools for children with physical disabilities has changed radically since this type of school was first established in the 1950's. The existing ratio 14:1, a reduction from 15:1 since summer 1991, is a very blunt instrument that does not take into account the radical change of profile of these special schools in the last decade.

The children now attending schools for the physically disabled tend to have a much higher level of disability than in the past.

Our survey indicates that 71.5% of our children now have a moderate to severe level of physical disability. Approximately half of the children (49%) have a moderate to severe level of hand dysfunction.

Secondly, while these factors alone have serious implications for the pupil teacher ratio, there are additional factors to contend with. A large percentage of the children now attending the schools may also have another significant

disability or disabilities to overcome if they are to learn successfully and develop their potential.

Our survey shows that approximately one third (34%) have moderate to severe levels of communication difficulties while 17% are non-speaking.

Non-speaking, severely disabled children require highly specialised one to one intervention if they are to make any progress, especially in the area of communication. This simply cannot occur in large classes.

Children with moderate learning difficulties are another group whose particular needs within the population of children with physical disabilities are not yet taken into account in a pupil-teacher ratio of 14:1

Our data shows that more than a quarter (27%) of the children attending these schools have a moderate to severe level of learning difficulty.

A smaller, but none the less significant group of children also attending schools for children with physical disabilities are those with a sensory impairment.

Our survey indicates that more than 10% of children have a mild to severe level of sensory impairment.

It should also be noted that very many of the children (52%) attending the schools live in socially disadvantaged circumstances.

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO CHANGING PROFILE

There are two main factors contributing to the change in the population of children attending schools for children with physical disabilities. The integration of children with milder disabilities into local national schools is one factor. The other relates to the advances made in recent years in medical science which has greatly increased the survival rate of low birth weight babies. Many of these children present with learning problems. The incidence of Cerebral Palsy is for example not decreasing, in fact in most areas it is increasing. The net effect of these trends is to bring about a population of children attending the schools for

children with physical disabilities with a much greater level of disability.

A REVIEW OF PUPIL-TEACHER RATIO REQUIRED

It is the considered opinion of the principals of these schools that a pupil-teacher ratio of 8:1 would be required to adequately meet the needs of the children with these levels of disability.

These special schools have not benefited equally from the substantial improvements in the pupil-teacher ratio in ordinary national schools since the 1950's. In the interest of equality of opportunity alone this matter must be addressed.

A system of points weighting for special needs could also be a useful aid in assessing the level of provision needed to provide for children both in special schools and to identify the additional resources required by ordinary schools supporting the integration of children with disabilities.

TEACHING PRINCIPALS AND SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION

Four of the seven schools for Physically Disabled children in Ireland endeavour to function with a teaching principal, on a similar basis to ordinary primary schools. However, the role of the principal teacher in these schools is in no way comparable to that of his/her colleague in the ordinary National School. A major task of the principal is to co-ordinate the services in the school and to liaise actively with medical and para-medical personnel. Effective liaison with paramedical personnel is essential if an appropriate service is to be provided to the children in these schools.

Recent research into the work of principals of Special Schools concludes some average time allocations as follows:

External Relations, i.e., with a large number of outside agencies:	21%
Consultation/Liaison, i.e. Paramedical/Ancillary Staff/Parents etc:	10%
Impromptu/Unplanned Meetings/Activities:	50%
General Administration:	13%

Therefore, a group of children with hugely complex physical/ intellectual/ communication needs (pupil-teacher ratio, 14:1) are actively discriminated against by being deprived of a class teacher for a high proportion of each school day.

The involvement of Department of Health/Health Board personnel in schools for children with physical disabilities and the impact of this on the role of the principal has not been given due recognition in the provision of an ex quota teacher for these schools. We would urge the Review Body to address this matter which is a serious problem for the particular schools involved.

NEED FOR EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

Schools for physically disabled pupils have all the needs for educational resources, like other schools. The schools, however, have additional needs, in terms of hardware, to assist the pupils' access to the curriculum. These schools must also carry a range of highly sophisticated and very expensive systems to facilitate the non-oral communicating pupils, of whom there are an ever increasing number. At present the Department of Education does not grant aid these educational requirements. We call on it to do so.

It is unfair that it falls on the Parents and Friends of schools for children with Physical Disabilities to provide, what is after all, basic equipment for these children if they are to progress educationally.