

A Parent's Perspective: Special Education and the Green Paper

The principle of parental involvement in education is highlighted and positively supported in general terms in the Green Paper. However, key principles concerning the rights and duties of parents of children with special learning needs, their access to full information to facilitate decision-making, and their involvement in the planning process, are not adequately addressed in the document.

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INTRODUCTION

Every reader of the Green Paper on Education will have responded to its contents with reference to a personal set of educational values, a personal set of views about the guiding principles that ought to underpin the teaching/learning process, a personal vision for the future development and evolution of our Educational Service. It seems only fair, in offering a comment and critique of that section of this historic document which deals with Special Education, that any commentator should make explicit those personal norms, so that others may judge their validity, and thus the validity of the response to the Green Paper. I will propose then, some personal views as to the key educational principles which, in my view, should determine the content of legislation and policy in relation to special education, as a basis for commenting on the actual content of the Green Paper.

PRIMACY OF PARENTAL RESPONSIBILITY

An essential starting point in developing any educational service, is, in my view, a clear recognition that the learning environment of the child is constituted jointly by the home, the school and the wider community. From a recognition of this psychological and educational reality would flow legislation and policy which would

underpin and support the family learning process and the home-school partnership, and acknowledge the legal implications of the constitutional primacy of parental responsibility for education, in respect of areas such as assessment, programme planning, access to information and reports, and choice of school.

The scope of this perspective, in legislative terms, can be seen in the U.S. Educational Legislation. Public Law 94-142 provided for a wide range of participatory rights to parents in respect of their children's educational programmes. These rights include the right to be part of the process of evaluation; active involvement in the educational planning process; access to school records; rights to give or withhold consent to evaluation and placement. These legal provisions are not some new and radical departure, but have been on the Statute Books in the U.S. for over a quarter of a century. These legal provisions are mirrored in the educational legislation in Britain and other European countries. They reflect critically important areas which have certainly not emerged in the Green Paper and which have yet to be actively debated and discussed in the context of future Irish legislation.

INDIVIDUAL EDUCATIONAL PLANNING AND ASSESSMENT

A further key principle in addressing particular learning needs is the need to see the development of the *educational plan* for the individual child as a core educational service. The essential holistic approach to meeting needs in the development of this plan requires that it be approached on a multidisciplinary basis. The principle of parental responsibility requires that parents and families are, as of right, members of the planning team. The principle of parental choice requires that this service be independent of individual service providers.

Educational planning to meet individual learning needs must be based, not only on accurate diagnostic assessments of children's functioning in various areas, but, equally essentially, it requires in-depth assessment of the child's learning environments or proposed learning environments. So, it requires that the planning team have available detailed information on the educational options, in the form of formal, systematic, comprehensive and regularly updated dossiers on the programmes, support services, physical facilities, staff training, experience and attitudes to meeting special learning needs.

The tendency to focus almost exclusively on clinical assessment, rather than on the educational plan, as a core service in the area of special education has, one might suggest, facilitated an undue emphasis on the systematic assessment of the child, and a corresponding lack of structured evaluation of the schooling options. The tendency

to focus on the options in terms of mainstream versus special placement has tended to compound this skewing of perspective. Assessment is a tool of planning. Planning must match individual need to available programmes. The process can only be successful when the planning team has access to systematic evaluative data on the options.

CO-ORDINATING A MULTI-DISCIPLINARY SUPPORT SERVICE

A further core principle, in my view, is that the response to individual learning needs is a process which must acknowledge the importance of early learning, and the need of children with disabilities, and their families, to be supported from infancy, in the task of developing children's competencies and capacities. Again, the need is for a multidisciplinary approach, in which the whole range of necessary supports is provided in a co-ordinated manner. This co-ordination is one of the most essential features of service provision from a parent's point of view.

A range of particular learning needs will be found in any community. It is important to maintain and develop within the support services the expertise and the capacity to respond to the very particular needs of individual children and groups of children. The total range of expertise need not necessarily reside in any service, or individual. But it will be essential to build a model of service which facilitates research, policy, and practice, as well as guidance and support for the needs of children within particular disability groups, their teachers and parents.

ADAPTING MAINSTREAM CURRICULA FOR INTEGRATION

The principle of integration can be viewed as one of planning a programme which meets all the particular learning needs of the individual child, and does so in a learning environment which maximises their opportunity for normal socialisation and social development. By placing the emphasis on the meeting of learning needs, we identify the critical factor in the process of moving towards the provision of integrated education - the curriculum in the mainstream school. The challenge is one of enabling local schools, classroom teachers, in partnership with parents, to adapt curricula to meet a much wider range of learning needs than have traditionally been found in local schools.

What supports will teachers need to make this transition possible? This is a question which focuses in a fundamental way on curriculum planning at local school level, classroom organisation, school organisation, whole school policies to cater for wider populations, new emphases on home-school partnership, and staff development. The

focus in the integration debate on schools as agents of socialisation, and on the role of different school types has tended to skew the discussion away from the critical issue of mainstream curricula and the adaptations which may be needed both to programmes and teaching methodologies.

The discussion of resources has tended to centre on resource teachers, to meet particular children's needs for *additional* help rather than on the question of how teachers can respond to the challenge of teaching *all* the children in their classes in a new way. If this central issue is overlooked, the resources, support services and staff development opportunities which local schools and classroom teachers will need in order to respond to the challenge of a much wider ability group in classrooms, may not be identified.

PRINCIPLES OF PARENTAL CHOICE AND RESPONSIBILITY

What has the Green Paper to say in respect of the principles and issues just discussed? The principle of parental involvement in education is highlighted and positively supported in general terms throughout the document. However, the critical and key questions raised here concerning the rights and duties of parents of children with special learning needs, the supports for the principle of parental choice and responsibility for their children's education, their access to full information to facilitate decision-making, their involvement in the planning process - these key principles are not mentioned in the Green Paper.

CLINICAL ASSESSMENT OR PARTNERSHIP PLANNING?

The Green Paper is silent on the concept of an educational advice and planning service for parents. The emphasis instead is on assessment, in a clinical framework, which, in its use of the language of the clinical medical model, would suggest a prescriptive focus very much different in emphasis from the enabling model envisaged in the principles discussed here. The concepts of identification, assessment, movement of students between services, have their own validity, but do not bespeak a view which enables and empowers teachers, families and other professions to work together in a partnership in which the responsibility for planning is shared, but where decisions must ultimately rest with families.

IMPLICATIONS FOR A CONTINUUM OF EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY

The Green Paper is silent on the role of curriculum and curriculum adaptation in the

development of a continuum of educational opportunity for children. Undoubtedly, this concept is implicit, but it may need to be made explicit, if its implications for classroom teachers and the supports they will need in order to meet the needs of all children in their classrooms are to be adequately addressed. The concept of broadening of curriculum, must, in equity, be taken on board for all our children.

NEED TO CO-ORDINATE SERVICE STRUCTURES

The Green Paper does not advert to the question of structures for the co-ordination of services eg. between Health Boards, Educational Services, the specialist services available from State and Voluntary organisations. The arrangements for the orderly co-ordination of these services, the formal allocation and division of statutory responsibility both for services, their co-ordination and funding at local level, represents one of the most urgent issues needing to be addressed in the forthcoming legislation.

REVIEW COMMITTEE ON SPECIAL EDUCATION

That these issues do not arise in the Green Paper is undoubtedly on account of the ongoing work of the Committee on Special Education, which is due to report shortly. In the circumstances, it will be imperative that there is a proper opportunity for public discussion and debate on that report, as part of the process of the Green Paper debate. In view of the broad areas of concern which have not been adverted to in the Green Paper, it would simply not be possible for interested parties to respond now on the basis only of the content of the Green Paper.

So, we must look with keen anticipation to the report of the Committee. It is reasonable to expect that the Committee will have addressed some of the issues which have been proposed here as critical to the development of an educational service responsive to the needs of individual children and their families.

A NEW ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE NEEDED

I wish to finish by addressing one particular crucial aspect of service provision, and to offer a view of what I would hope to see in the Committee report and ultimately in the Education Act. The aspect in question is that of the administrative and organisational arrangements for the delivery of programmes to meet individual needs. What kind of administrative structure would deliver services incorporating the principles discussed above? I would like to offer a view on the elements of such a structure.

In my ideal world, each of the local education areas now being considered, according to the Minister for Education, as the administrative unit of service delivery, would put in place an Educational Support Programme. The Programme personnel would have responsibility for the provision of an Educational Advisory and Planning Service, with the brief of providing advice and guidance to parents about schooling options. This service would also provide specialist support to local schools in relation to programme development at the general level and for individual children. The support team would be a multidisciplinary one, bringing together the range of professional expertise needed by parents and teachers. The Programme would co-ordinate the work of school psychologists, visiting teachers and other resource personnel. The Programme personnel would be responsible for facilitating flexible interaction among local schools and their staffs.

Children would be administratively facilitated should they choose to move within the curricular continuum available within the local area. The Programme would have responsibility to begin to meet children's learning needs, as they are identified, from infancy. The Programme would have active responsibility to ensure co-ordination with other local services, within the legal framework of the Education Act. Local Teachers' Centres would operate within the programme in helping to meet the training needs of local personnel. The brief of these centres would be extended to enable them to provide a service to parents as well as professional staffs. Existing special schools might serve as Innovation Centres where new curricula and programme initiatives would be developed. The Educational Support Programme would have a budget enabling it to undertake innovatory and developmental work to meet particular local needs.

In this imaginary programme, each area would immediately be charged with the responsibility for developing a Five-year Plan for the area, in acknowledgment of the impossibility of undertaking detailed planning at a national level. No existing facility would be dismantled, except as part of the Plan. The plan would not focus exclusively on measuring numbers of children considered to have different from average needs. It would address the task of working with individual schools to identify the scale of the task to be undertaken to enable each school to offer curricula for a wider range of learning needs.

SPECIAL EDUCATION - IMPLICATIONS FOR ALL CHILDREN

I have no idea as to the content of the forthcoming Report on Special Education, but many expectations. Its content has wide implications for the totality of the Education

Service. Special Education is not about a few children. It is about all children, since the accepted concept of integration has fundamental implications for all classrooms and communities. In the light of the Report, we will have to reconsider *all* aspects of the Green Paper, in particular the sections dealing with funding, teacher education, the broadening of the curriculum, administrative structures, disadvantage strategies, and parental involvement. In these circumstances, the publication of that Report is urgent and in the public interest. And the next issue of REACH Journal will have a new challenge.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

REACH JOURNAL

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To assist with escalating costs in the publication of the Journal an appeal was made in 1991 to the Boards of Management to all the special schools in Ireland to donate or pledge over the next three years, IR£25 annually, towards production costs. Schools assisting us in this way are deemed PATRONS OF REACH Journal.

We would like to gratefully acknowledge the contributions from the following schools/organisations:

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