Tablets of Stone? The Green Paper and the Philosophical Basis for Special Education

One of the criticisms of the Green Paper on Education is that it fails to outline a philosophical basis for its proposals. Under scrutiny, the assumptions and recommendations with regard to special education are derived from a philosophy of functional limitations. Is this the most appropriate model for consideration?

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The first aim of the Green Paper *Education for a Changing World* (Ireland, 1992) is stated as being "To establish greater equity in education - particularly for those who are disadvantaged socially, economically, physically or mentally" whilst the second aim aspires to "broaden Irish education - so as to equip students more effectively for life, for work in an enterprise culture, and for citizenship of Europe". My reason for stating those aims at this point is to provide some yardstick against which education arrangements for people with learning difficulties can be judged. To do this, I will outline the philosophical basis of current models of service, their inherent difficulties in relation to realising the above aims and finally more recent philosophies and models.

PHILOSOPHY OF FUNCTIONAL LIMITATIONS

The philosophy which until recently has dominated the field of learning difficulties and consequently education services is one of functional limitations which very clearly reflects the clinical focus of medicine and psychology (Stubbins, 1982). It assumes that the principal difficulties of people with disabilities lie within those individuals and that solutions are available by surmounting those deficits (Hahn, 1985). This approach has generated a wide range of diagnostic categories that indicate the desirability of prevention and

eradication as solutions to the problem of disability. In addition this method of categorising people with disabilities bears little or no relationship to the functional skills of the labelled people. In recent times some professional organisations (1984) have tried to promote alternative approaches, nevertheless, the role of most professionals continues to justify identifying "deviant, at risk or special needs" students in terms of categories of disability. This philosophy has played a major role in the image of disability within society.

The effects of the philosophy of functional limitations are particularly obvious in the field of special education and rehabilitation. Because of the focus on the limitations being based solely within the individual child, teaching programmes generally focus on deficits, personnel are trained for specific disabilities and little or no attention is paid to societal issues (Fine & Asch, 1988). Some of the implications of this orientation as described by Shepard (1987) include lowered expectations on the part of administrators and educators. Parents of children who have a disability have not escaped the labelling process being described in literature as "disabled" (Ferguson et al, 1987).

Traditionally the principal role of individuals in industrialised society has, until recently, been that of worker. Disability has therefore been described as a "health related" inability or limitation on the amount or kind of work that a person can perform (Berkowitz et al, 1976). Because of the consequent emphasis in rehabilitation programmes on vocational training, educational programmes have become closely linked with this economic understanding of disability and tend to focus on the narrower goal of preparation for "entry level jobs".

MODELS OF SERVICE BASED ON PHILOSOPHY OF FUNCTIONAL LIMITATIONS

This philosophy has underpinned all models of service from residential schools to special classes. It has underpinned the "continuum of placements" (Reynolds, 1962) and the "cascade model" (Deno, 1970). It currently underpins the philosophy adopted by the Council of Ministers of the European Community (Resolution etc. 1990,162/01) and the model being proposed within the Irish Green Paper on Education. Sometimes described as a principle of "least restrictive environments", it focuses on matching need to provision rather than vice versa and thus perpetuates the deficit approach. A comprehensive review of literature on least restrictive environments (Taylor, 1988) indicates the inherent difficulties as follows:

(i) The principle, whilst overall favouring less restrictive placements, implies and thus legitimises the necessity of segregated and more restrictive placements for a significant percentage of students.

(ii) The principle affirms that increased intensity/need of services requires greater degrees of segregation. This has not been found to be true either in school or work settings (Brown et al, 1983). Studies of services in Madison, Wisconsin will state that "any developmentally meaningful skill, attitude or experience that can be developed or offered in a segregated school can also be developed or offered in a chronological age appropriate school".

(iii) The principle is based on a "readiness model" which demands that the person be ready or able to move to a less restrictive environment. Apart from abdicating responsibility for learning to the student with a disability, this principle ignores the evidence on how people learn and in particular the problems associated with generalising of learning by people with significant learning difficulties. Further, the outcomes of this type of model are not heartening, the experience being that very few students move upward through a continuum.

(iv) The principle establishes the primacy of professional decision making by requiring professional judgements on "appropriateness" and placements rather than accepting the desirability of pupils being educated with their peers.

(v) Finally this principle is more concerned with establishing data on numbers and types of buildings and staffing ratios, rather than focusing on re-allocation of these resources within existing settings.

FUNCTIONAL LIMITATIONS AND SEGREGATION

Summarising the outcomes of separate education for people with disabilities, Brown et al, (1987) states "The environments in which students with severe intellectual disabilities receive their instructional services have critical effects on where and how they spend their post-school lives. Segregation begets segregation. We believe that when children with intellectual disabilities attend segregated schools, they are denied opportunities to demonstrate to the rest of the community that they can function in integrated environments and activities; their nondisabled peers do not know or understand them and too often think negatively of them; their parents become afraid to risk allowing them opportunities to learn to function in integrated environments later in life; and taxpayers assume that they need to be sequestered in segregated group homes, enclaves, work crews, activity centres, sheltered workshops, institutions and nursing homes". Judith Snow (1991), a consultant in Special Education to the University of Toronto and

other institutions, who is herself seriously disabled, summarised the outcomes of this functional limitations model from the perspective of a consumer:

"Someone jumped the gun and labelled us (people with disabilities) a problem. Instead of seeing us as a gift and an opportunity, we are called problems and projects. We are not supported by the community. We are serviced by staff. People's livelihoods are determined by their fixation on fixing us. But this is crazy because we are not fixable. We never stop to think about that. Our society has created a billion dollar industry to fix people who are not fixable. It is destined to failure. It doesn't work and there are tremendous costs both to society and to the people who cannot be fixed".

ALTERNATIVE PHILOSOPHIES AND MODELS

Judith Snow reflects the change in attitude of people with disabilities in recent times. This change very clearly originated in the Civil Rights movement in the United States in the 1960s and has been further strengthened by the philosophies of Wolfensberger, Illich, Vanier and McKnight. These philosophies emphasise the wholeness of the individual, the necessity of taking their place in their own communities, their giftedness or contribution to community, empowering the individual and their community and thus returning the "professional" to the appropriate role of consultant.

The philosophy of Normalisation has given rise to systems of service assessment in terms of how systems value or devalue people with disabilities. The focus is on the perceptions and images fostered by services (Hall, 1992). For the individual person with a disability, five valued principles are espoused as the cornerstone of any service. O'Brien (1986) describes them thus:

PRINCIPLES OF NORMALISATION

1. The right to share ordinary places;

2. The right to have relationships;

3. The right to dignity; being free of labels which devalue;

4. The right to make choices;

5. The right to contribute to society.

These philosophies are further enhanced by the emphasis from Behaviourism on the role of environment in people's lives and by the emphasis from Ron Edmonds' "Effective Schools" movement (Edmonds, 1979) which proposed and proved that all children could be taught given effective organisation and teaching skills within schools.

MODELS OF SERVICE

Models of service originating from the above philosophies as well as from the Civil Rights movement are generally described as "unitary models" i.e. that only one system of education exists and that all children with disabilities are educated with their age appropriate peers in ordinary classrooms. Most education authorities, now operating unitary systems, are doing so on the basis of evidence on effective learning, diminution of prejudice and cost effectiveness. Others, e.g. inclusive models, besides requiring excellence in education, stress the necessity for every member of a community to be included and the consequent loss to a community by the exclusion of any member. Schools are reflections of communities which require and accept diversity and look at participation or contribution rather than labelling deviant members.

Unitary systems require a fundamental change in the way we view people who are "different", in the way education is organised and what we perceive to be the purpose of education. Unitary education systems focus on "effective instruction for all students" (Algozzine et al, 1985), "adapted learning environments" (Wang, 1987) and methods of instruction e.g. peer tutoring, co-operative learning etc. (Slavin, 1987). Whilst the unitary movement is relatively new, research findings are indicating that "the integrated model (was) a viable alternative service delivery model for students with learning disabilities, as the results are virtually indistinguishable from those of the resource room programme. Any significant differences found supported the integrated model" (Affleck et al, 1988).

BEYOND THE PROGRAMMES ?

In 1981, over three out of four Irish teenagers had never spoken to someone who had an intellectual disability. Formally labelling people as different and excluding them from regular services has served "to promote ignorance, fear and prejudice" (Mehta, 1985). The extent of the fear and prejudice which continues to be fostered can perhaps be estimated by reflecting on the statistic given by the

US Department of Education (1988) i.e. "that approximately 15% of children in any classroom will become parents of children with some level of disability". The effect on "regular students" of labelling and segregation has been described by authors including Granger et al (1986) as follows: "Every time a child is called mentally defective and sent off to special education class for some trivial defect, the children who are left in the regular classroom receive the message: no one is above suspicion; everyone is being watched by the authorities; nonconformity is dangerous". How are we to give a message to our future community that "disability is only one dimension of a person, not all-defining and not inherently a barrier to being recognised as fully human" (Biklen, 1989) if we continue to deny them membership of their community in the fullest sense?

SOME QUESTIONS

To achieve an integrated school system, Knoll et al, (1988) has identified three main elements: (1) commitment, (2) planning, and (3) staff involvement, preparation and training. To have commitment assumes "a strong belief in the value of educating all children with disabilities alongside their peers" (Taylor, 1988). There is no evidence of this belief in the Green Paper which continues to follow the model of least restrictive environments and the philosophy of functional limitations which we know from our knowledge bases to adversely affect the person with a disability from educational, social, psychological, economical and civil rights perspectives. The first question then is: What are "professionals" in the field doing about it, knowing the literature? The second question is: If we are not questioning and changing, why not? Do we really believe that people with disabilities are "not quite human" (Goffman, 1963) ? If we accept their humanity, then why do we not accord them the opportunities to exercise their rights? But then the Green Paper does not at any point suggest that either parents or their children, consumers of services and taxpayers, have any rights in relation to education services. What it does state is that some citizens of this country will be described or judged as being "appropriate" to be educated with their peers whilst others will be judged not to be "appropriate". Can this really promote equity and equip students for life, for work or for citizenship? Do policy makers believe that people with disabilities are citizens?

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