

The Green Paper and Special Education: An Overview

The publication of the Green Paper is a long-awaited development in Irish education. Reactions to its proposals will influence the content of the proposed White Paper on Education which will in turn form the basis of an Education Act. It will also influence either directly or indirectly the quality of education being provided to pupils with special needs.

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ABSENCE OF PHILOSOPHICAL BASIS

One of my major concerns about the Green Paper is the absence of any philosophical basis to its deliberations. Added to this, the emphasis on consumerism, enterprise culture, the work ethic and success as a measurable entity fill me with concern. The aim of education is not clearly delineated and one, on reading the Green Paper, might be inclined to conclude that the main purpose of education is preparation for work. This narrow focus on education, coupled with the notion that success is equated with results and value for money, hits at the very essence of what special education is all about.

What about the dignity of the human being; the quality of life; the formulation of attitudes; the sense of belonging, sharing and community; the notion of equality, tolerance and acceptance; the personal and social development of the person? Are these entities now outmoded and are they to be replaced by the "progressive" elements of the business and working world? Concepts and terminology such as accountability, cost-effectiveness, utilisation, relevance etc. fit the industrial model well but do not fit snugly into an educational and philosophical milieu. Schools do not prepare people for work. Schools educate, formulate, influence, enable, empower, stimulate, challenge and extend. If such functions are removed from the lot of the educator, we minimise the essence and fruit of the interaction between teacher and pupil.

INDICATORS OF CHANGE: POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE PROPOSALS

This country has been fortunate in having a teaching profession of the highest calibre. The three-tier proposal for the training of teachers at all levels is a retrograde step and one which I view with considerable alarm and disquiet, at a time when an ever-increasing number of pupils with special educational needs are being accommodated in regular schools.

On the positive side, I welcome the commitment to in-career development of teachers; the acknowledgement of the right of parents to be informed about, and involved in, education of their children; the need to adapt school curricula and in so doing give particular consideration to children with disadvantage and/or special needs; the decentralisation of the Department of Education; the democratisation of Boards of Management; the planning for forthcoming educational legislation, and the introduction of a Teaching Council. These developments cannot but enhance the delivery and quality of educational provision across the entire spectrum.

KEY TRENDS AND PROPOSALS FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION

The introduction to the Green Paper refers to the challenge of change and outlines the circumstances to which the Irish education system must adapt in the decade ahead. In the light of emerging needs and the shortcomings of the present system in relation to them, the Green Paper reflects six key aims. The first of these reads:

“To establish greater equity in education - particularly for those who are disadvantaged socially, economically, physically or mentally” (p.5).

Among the proposals made to achieve this aim is a “policy to devote a higher than proportionate share of resources to the special needs of children with disabilities” (p.8) and the development of special programmes at second level in the junior cycle for those students whose needs are not met by the Junior Certificate (p.7).

In relation to special educational provision, a number of key trends and proposals emerge:

- a) Accommodating as many children as is appropriate in ordinary schools,

- backed up by a range of facilities including special schools (p.8).
- b) Movement of children from ordinary schools to special schools and back again as their needs dictate (p.8).
 - c) Enabling students who are socially, physically or mentally disadvantaged to participate to the fullest extent possible in the education system (p.38).
 - d) More co-operation and liaison between mainstream and special schools (p.46).

Pages 60-67 of the Green Paper deal exclusively with children with special educational needs. The first sentence reads

“It is a matter of particular concern that appropriate arrangements are made at all levels of education for children with special educational needs. These are children whose disabilities or circumstances prevent or hinder them from benefiting fully from the education which is provided in ordinary schools at present for children of the same age” (pp.60-61).

It is stressed that this definition embraces a continuum of need which in turn reflects a continuum of provision ranging from ordinary class provision with additional support to very specialised placement and support.

THE GREEN PAPER AND INTEGRATION

The first mention of “integration” in the Green Paper is in the context of a movement recently sweeping through Europe favouring integration into mainstream schools of as many children with disabilities as possible (p.61). The EC Council of Ministers’ Resolution of May 1990 states

“The basic principle of this resolution is 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”.

The Green Paper further states that in line with this resolution, policy

“will seek to provide for children with special educational needs in mainstream schools as far as is possible and according as it is appropriate for the particular child ...”

“The major issues in special needs education today are, therefore, how the balance is struck between school and mainstream provision and how integrated mainstream provision should be developed” (p.62).

In order to effect a policy of integration it is suggested that the following issues must be addressed:-

- a) Identification of students in special schools who are more appropriately provided for in ordinary schools and vice-versa.
- b) Arrangements for moving students from special provision to mainstream and vice-versa.
- c) Effective identification and assessment of students with special needs.
- d) Adequate support services for all schools catering for students with special needs.

The Green Paper mentions that a survey will be undertaken to ascertain the extent of disability in schools. This survey is in fact being carried out at present.

POLICY POINTERS

Other elements of policy enunciated include (p.63):

- A three level structure of educational assessment - school based, School Psychological Service, and multi-disciplinary teams under the Director of Community Care;
- Review of current provision taking survey's findings into account and planning accordingly on a catchment area basis;
- Restructuring of special school provision and review of special class provision;
- Appointment of resource teachers to schools where there are a number of children with disabilities or to a designated school in a locality;
- Development of Visiting Teacher Service. (In the context of current debate it should be noted that “this service is being reorganised at present in order that it be made available on a phased basis, to children in the different categories of disability” p.64);
- Access to services of a Speech Therapist to all children requiring same;
- Provision of Child-Care Assistants (following report of Special Education Review Committee);
- Provision of supplementary tuition, special facilities or special equipment.

Other areas of special educational provision mentioned in the report include:

- Access Facilities - these are provided in all new and refurbished buildings and every effort will be made to accommodate requests for improved access to existing buildings.
- Vocational Training - Department of Education, in conjunction with Department of Health will seek to have a comprehensive network of training units established.
- Research and Development - links with universities will be explored.

THE FUTURE OF SPECIAL SCHOOLS

Little is stated in the Green Paper on the future of, or further development of, special schools. It says that to an increasing extent children with special needs and their parents are reluctant to accept the separation from their peers which a special school entails (p.61).

It does go on to say that there will continue to be children with disabilities for whom enrolment in an ordinary school would not be appropriate and indicates that the special school in the future will be influenced by a policy of integration and will possibly:

- cater for more than a single disability;
- act as a resource for the ordinary schools in its area.

A review of the pupil-teacher ratio in special schools, the Green Paper says, will be necessary in the light of the changing population being provided for in such schools.

The Special Education Review Committee is mentioned in three instances throughout the report:

- Working out details of movement of children between special and ordinary schools and vice-versa (p.8);
- Awaiting its recommendations on provision of Child-Care Assistants (p.64);
- Outlining its terms of reference (p.66).

Before I finish detailing what the Green Paper actually says, I should mention

that the Department of Education in “divesting itself of its excessive involvement in day to day administration of the education system” will set up a series of executive agencies “which would have designated powers and responsibilities, within given policy and budgetary frameworks”. One such agency will be the “Special Education Service Agency” whose remit will be “to implement new policies on special education, following receipt of the report of the special committee currently examining this area” (p.157).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

At the outset, I expressed serious reservations about the lack of a philosophical basis to the Green Paper. This, coupled with the focus on consumerism, causes me concern about the general direction of education in Ireland and about the future thrust and development of special educational provision for people with greatest need. If resources are to be mainly deployed to facilitate the successful, the person and school which achieve measurable results, the educator and institution who give value for money, then much of the laudable rhetoric throughout this report will not be translated into reality, and will further alienate an already marginalised and significant sector of our society. Proposals arising from discussions on the Green Paper will lead to the publication of the White Paper which will form the legislative basis of an Education Act.

The Act, I hope, will ensure the:

- Right of all pupils with special educational needs to an appropriate education as near as possible to their own home;
- Responsibility of all schools to accommodate this right if feasible;
- Resources from the State to all schools to enable them to do so.

For integration to be actively facilitated rather than passively supported, a clear unequivocal commitment to realistic funding, appropriate resources and adequate qualified personnel for all schools - regular and special - that cater for pupils with special educational needs is imperative. Specifically what is needed is:

- A substantial increase in Capitation Grants to all schools;
- A “weighting” system in pupil-teacher ratios to take account of the special child in the ordinary class;
- A reduction in pupil-teacher ratio in all schools - ordinary and special;
- Provision of para-educational personnel as needed - in all schools catering for special needs;

- Pilot schemes to inaugurate, investigate, evaluate and recommend positive integrational experiences;
- Information to parents to enable them exercise choice regarding special educational placement;
- Clear planned policy, coupled with inservice training, and resources, to enable special schools take on the challenging role envisaged for them;
- A Schools' Psychological Service, funded by the Department of Education and operating on a regional basis;
- Curricular guidelines, formulated by teachers in consultation with parents for the whole range of special needs;
- A cohesive plan of in-career development in Colleges of Education and Teachers' Centres for all teachers involved with pupils with special needs ;
- The further development of the Special Education Department, St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra;
- Access facilities to ensure the elimination of barriers to mobility disabled students;
- Technological aids, funded by the Department of Education, for visually impaired, hearing impaired students etc.;
- Home-school liaison personnel in all schools catering for pupils with special needs.

These recommendations relate to the generality of special educational provision. However, whilst acknowledging the desirability of refraining from categorising people, it is important that some specific disabilities be examined and particular recommendations made reflecting their particular concerns.

There are many misconceptions about integration and special education. For instance, what exactly is meant by "integration"? Integration is not only about placement, it is about people. It is about people having "integrity". It is about people with a disability having the same chances and choices in life as other people. Idealistic? Yes, but we need to come from the ideal to the reality that needs to be changed if we are to move forward. It is our ideals that should influence the reality, not the other way round.