

Flexibility the Key: Implications for Special Education Development in the Green Paper

A major deficiency in our service for children with special needs has been the lack of choice which exists and the limited range of options available. Should we not be aiming to increase, rather than diminish, the range of choices? If "establishing greater equity in education" is the aim of the Green Paper, new structures and new policies will be required to facilitate flexibility within our system.

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INTRODUCTION

The Green Paper on Education - *Education for a Changing World* was published by the Minister for Education in June 1992. Already there has been much reaction to some of the more contentious issues raised in it, particularly those that affected the major interests in the educational world. Thus, there were immediate and strong public reactions to matters such as Church/State relationship in management, closing of small schools, and the future of the Vocational Education Committees (VECs). Matters affecting such a minority field as that of special education do not rate very highly in the public interest stakes.

There are three ways in which the Green Paper will affect the development of special educational provision.

1. There are suggested developments for schools in general which will also, of course, affect special schools.
2. There are suggested developments for mainstream schools which will have an impact on children with special needs who will continue to attend those schools.

3. There are also specific proposals aimed directly at children with special needs.

I intend to look at some of the implications for special education under each of those headings.

GENERAL PROPOSALS: IMPLICATIONS FOR SPECIAL SCHOOLS

The Green Paper suggests a greatly enhanced role for the Board of Management, and sees it as a dynamic body which will direct the school in a very positive way. In outlining its proposals for the composition of Boards, it suggests (p.144) almost identical structures for the larger (5 teachers or more) primary schools, and for all aided secondary schools. Others have commented on the power balance between trustees' nominees, parents and teachers; I believe some further consideration needs to be given to the co-opted member. There is a sequence in regard to this: the smaller primary school may co-opt anyone from the local community; the larger primary school should give preference to a representative of the local business community; and the secondary school must co-opt from the local business community.

I wonder is that the ideal co-option for a special school? Why not a possible co-option of e.g., someone involved with the social or voluntary services, or someone who is unemployed? Are members of "the local business community" the new ideal role model? At national level, some have recently fallen very short of that mark. Is the need for schools to develop an "enterprise culture" the most appropriate need for special schools?

The Green Paper proposes that the role of the principal should be enhanced, reflecting the nature of this position as the central executive function (p.19). Principals of special schools, with a very large amount of administrative and liaison work, sometimes with teaching duties, and frequently in schools without secretaries, child care workers or caretakers, will find this proposal very aspirational indeed.

In chapter 10, on "Research and Development", the Green Paper states that "a major priority for direct and indirect funding from the Department of Education will be support for research and development work that would underpin policy development and implementation" (p.229). This is a very worthy proposal, and one would like to feel confident that any future proposed changes in the provision of special educational services would follow on such research.

PROPOSALS FOR SPECIAL NEEDS IN MAINSTREAM SCHOOLS

In chapter 5, where the essential tasks of the Department of Education are listed, the final one is “to ensure that those in need of special help and attention are identified and their needs addressed” (p.156). Chapter 4 on “Broadening Education” states “The emphasis on acquisition of facts rather than critical thinking hinders young people in preparing for both work and life. There is therefore, a need for the education system to develop in the student:

- (i) An ability to manage oneself and to make the most use of personal resources.
- (ii) An ability to express one’s own viewpoint rationally.
- (iii) An ability to relate effectively to other people.

The second-level programme, in which nearly all now take part, was traditionally geared towards entering third level and to selecting the minority of academic high-achievers. Even after the many changes of recent years it is clearly still not suited to all. Many students complete a dozen years of schooling without having developed their own individual strengths, while some lack the basic literacy and numeracy skills necessary for everyday life” (pp.85-86). Teachers in the field of special education will welcome the sentiments expressed here; they have been aiming for the above goals with their students for many years.

There is a welcome proposal to extend testing to all primary school students as a diagnostic aid in chapter 7. “Its primary purpose will be to support efforts by teachers to identify those in need of special assistance and the nature and extent of the assistance needed. It would provide a further safety net for those who may be experiencing basic literacy or numeracy problems” (p.175). One hopes that, when the nature and extent of the assistance required by those in need of special assistance has been identified, it will be provided.

SPECIFIC PROPOSALS FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION

While the Green Paper acknowledges the role of the Special Education Review Committee, it seems to have redefined its parameters when it outlines what its plans are for that group which it describes alternately as “Children with Disabilities” (p.8) and “Children with Special Educational Needs” (p.60).

Related to those plans, I believe, is the sixth of the key aims which are listed on p.5: “To ensure greater openness and accountability throughout the system and

maximise parent involvement and choice". A major deficiency in our service for children with special needs has been the lack of choice which exists for parents, arising from the very limited range of options available. The Warnock Report in Britain in 1978 referred to ten possible service models; in this country we have, in the main, been confined to a stark choice - that of separate education provision, in either a special school or special class, or integrated education, often with inadequate resources, in mainstream schools. That is a most unfair dilemma to present to parents. Should we not be aiming to increase, rather than diminish, the range of choices? Why should parents of children with special needs be denied the choices which are available to other parents? Is it just, that a system whereby choice is a facility usually afforded only to the financially advantaged, should permeate right through to special educational provision? I do not think so.

I believe that the Department of Education, in planning its policy, should allow for the differing wishes of service recipients to be accommodated, as far as is reasonably possible. It appears that such may be the intention of the Department, as outlined in the Green Paper. In a subsection of its primary aim of "establishing greater equity in education, particularly for those who are disadvantaged socially, economically, physically or mentally" it says, when referring to the needs of children with disabilities: "Dealing with this problem effectively involves recognition that there is a very wide variety of different needs, and that the needs of individual children will change from time to time. Consistent with this, the approach would be committed to having as many children as is appropriate in ordinary schools, backed up by a range of facilities, including special schools which children should draw on as necessary. The greatest possible flexibility would be aimed for, with children moving from ordinary schools to special schools and back again as their needs dictated. A committee is currently working out the practical details of this approach." (p.8).

"The practical details of this approach" may however be quite difficult to work out. It would seem to suggest, nevertheless, that there would be some choices available to children and their parents. I particularly welcome the proposal that "the greatest possible flexibility would be aimed for" and that children would be free to move from one facility to another, as their needs demand. This would be a significant improvement on the system which now exists whereby a placement in a special school or class tends to be a final one, due to no alternative being available. In order to allow a real choice to be made, I believe that there should be an equality in facilities, resources and support services. Most importantly, there must be an insistence on the parents' right to the fullest information on the options available, to enable them to make an informed judgement.

PROPOSALS FOR ASSESSMENT

The Green Paper has also specific plans for the manner in which assessments should take place. "Assessments should begin in the school, involving remedial and guidance teachers. For more difficult cases, school-based assessment should be supplemented by the School Psychological Service, as it develops. More complex cases still would be attended to by the multi-disciplinary teams at present in existence under the Director of Community Care" (p.63).

Assessment, of its nature, will provide a statement of the child's abilities and needs. The crucial issue for parents may well be - where and how can those needs be met so that the abilities can be most profitably developed? At this point a recommendation, or referral must be made, and this process is not always as straight forward as it may appear. Who makes the recommendation, and to whom is it made? What sort of information is required to make the recommendation, and what use can be made of this information? Is it to be made by one person making a particular part of an assessment - such as the psychologist, whose views on special education may be different from those of another psychologist; or would the recommendation be made by all involved with the assessment, including the parents? When it is a matter of educational placement, is the referral to be made to the Department of Education or to the School Authorities, either mainstream or special? If made to the School Authorities, can they refuse if they believe they cannot meet the child's needs? Will the parents be given the opportunity to visit local educational options, before they make their decision? Will the Department of Education's sanction be required, either directly in accordance with a predetermined policy, or indirectly through its sanction of school transport, when that is necessary? The resolution of these matters will be essential if the Green Paper's intention that "flexibility would be aimed for, with children moving from ordinary schools to special schools and back again as their needs dictated" is to become a reality.

PROPOSALS FOR RESTRUCTURING SPECIAL SCHOOLS

There are also some other issues of relevance raised by the Green Paper. It states that a review of current provision for children with special educational needs will "likely entail also a degree of restructuring of existing special school provision to cater, where appropriate, for more than a single disability in a particular school and to enable the special school to act as a resource centre for the ordinary schools in its area". (p.63). Some years ago, the Department of Education established a group to examine the feasibility of special schools acting as Resource Centres. That group, of which I was a member, never issued its report.

The concept of a special school catering for more than a single disability can be far more complex than its superficial attractiveness would suggest. Its effect on all pupils must be considered. The Green Paper also refers to the appointment of resource teachers to mainstream schools where there are children with disabilities, and to an extension of the Visiting Teacher Service, so that it may be made available to children in the different categories of disability (p.64). While the appointment of additional support personnel is to be welcomed, it is to be hoped that it will not occur to the detriment of existing services.

Chapter 5 of the Green Paper, in examining funding of schools, states that together with the standard budget "an additional budget allowing for schools serving disadvantaged areas and for those providing for children with special needs" (p.153) would be made. There will be major financial implications if the range of options available to parents is to allow for real choice. In this regard, I wish to state that I believe that the differing educational alternatives must be accountable for their delivery of service. I believe that the continued existence of special schools will be, and must be, dependent on parents' acceptance. Special schools, unlike most other schools do not have a "captive population". They will cease to be viable if parents are not willing to accept them as an option. In that case, of course the school would lose its recognition. If such an eventuality is to occur, it should be in that manner, rather than by a withdrawal of its services and facilities, as a matter of policy, by either the Department of Education or by its Board of Management.

CONCLUSION

In the Foreword to the Green Paper, the Minister recognises the solid base on which our system has been built but "naturally draws attention in a special way to those areas which require change and development". We are also told that "progress in implementing change will take place within the framework of available resources", and that may be ominous. The essential thrust of the Green Paper with regard to special education, it seems to me, is that there is a recognition of the complexities involved; that a continuum of services from special schools, through special classes, to resource teachers in mainstream schools will be available, and that flexibility will be the key. The practicalities of this may be more difficult to operate in view of the emphasis given to the autonomous nature of each school and its individual relationship with the central authority, rather than through the development of local educational authorities which would allow, it would seem, for more flexibility.