

## **Students' Perceptions of their Special Schooling**

**In a study carried out in a Dublin school for children with mild learning difficulties, school leavers and past pupils reported significant satisfaction and success with their experience of a special curriculum. This was matched however with a strong sense of stigma regarding special school attendance. Would these students have been more or less stigmatised if they had remained integrated in a relatively unresourced ordinary school system?**

---

**MARY DRISLANE is a teacher in St. Augustine's School, Blackrock, Dublin.**

---

### **INTRODUCTION**

The integration of students with learning difficulties in ordinary schools is the most contentious issue in special education today, with most of the debate representing the views of parents, educators or administrators.

St. Augustine's School, Blackrock, Co. Dublin is a special school managed by the St. John of God Brothers. It is officially classified by the Department of Education as being for students who are "mildly mentally handicapped."

The aim of this study was to hear what students of St. Augustine's had to say about their special schooling, how they felt it had affected them and how they think they are perceived by other people in the light of their having attended a special school.

### **INTERVIEWING PAST PUPILS AND SCHOOL LEAVERS**

Twenty past students and twenty students in the current school leavers' class at St. Augustine's were interviewed. These students were aged 17-22 years and all had been in ordinary schools prior to their enrollment in St. Augustine's, the majority having transferred at 12+ years of age. Each interview was of approximately 30 minutes duration and took the form of an open-ended question schedule presented in a conversational dialogue flow.

## ATTITUDES TO ATTENDING A SPECIAL SCHOOL

What was most striking in this section was the students' keen sense of failure in

1. Out of 40 students 28 were glad to transfer to St. Augustine's.
2. All were aware that they were failing in the ordinary school.
3. Every student said that St. Augustine's was quite different to their ordinary school.
4. Many students (27) said that they had learned more in St. Augustine's than they would have elsewhere.
5. Out of 40 students, 26 were glad that they had attended St. Augustine's.
6. Altogether 7 expressed ambivalence about having attended.
7. Altogether 7 felt they would have been better off in another school.

the ordinary school and their sense of relief on coming to St. Augustine's:- "I stopped worrying, it was easier to cope, I could do the work." Many students mentioned being afraid, bullied, jeered and having no friends. For many, their relationship with their teacher was problematic, with many perceiving themselves as having been a burden: "The teacher pretended I wasn't there"; "The teacher was always saying 'hurry up you'." In describing how they learned more in St. Augustine's, students said: "It's the same books - it's the way it was given to you"; "The teachers don't force you to read, they help you"; "It's the smaller classes, with 35, the teachers can't get around." The students expressed almost unanimous enthusiasm for the extensive facilities in the school for practical subjects, computing and sports activities. They said these were enjoyable and helped them to learn.

These responses suggest a strong endorsement of the alternative aspects of the organisation and curriculum of St. Augustine's. However, although they identified external factors in the system, every student located the reason for their failure in the ordinary school within themselves, with the majority referring to their own "slowness". This self-definition was a consequence of separate special education to which Dunn (1968) referred when he asserted that "failures are program and instructor failures, not pupil failures". This is a view more recently echoed in the debates by Booth (1983) when he concludes that "there is nothing

in their nature, which requires that children with mental handicaps should be isolated for their schooling.”

### **TELLING OTHERS ABOUT ATTENDING A SPECIAL SCHOOL**

- 1. As many as 38 students out of 40 expressed concerns about telling people they went to St. Augustine’s because of the reactions they perceived.**
- 2. Only 2 students said that they had no problem about telling people and that people reacted favourably.**
- 3. While a minority said that they hide the fact that they attended St. Augustine’s, most of the 38 who expressed concerns said that they didn’t conceal their school attendance.**

Most students’ responses to this topic were characterised by a change in demeanour when the questions were asked, appearing uneasy, embarrassed or angry. It seemed that not only are they ashamed about giving the information but they are also guilty at their own reticence. As one said: “I know I shouldn’t be ashamed, but I don’t like the word St. Augustine’s, it feels so different to any other school.” Typical comments were: “I tell them, but they look at you in a strange way, because of the name of the school, you have to live with it”; “I don’t discuss it. I don’t want people to know. They’d think I was one of those handicapped zombies”; “It took me a long time to tell my girlfriend.”

While no student used the terms “labelling” or “segregation”, it is obvious that these issues form the basis of their perceptions. Such issues have been to the forefront of the literature, particularly since Goffman’s (1963) influential analysis of how stigma is acquired. In its conclusion that special schooling is a stigmatising experience in the eyes of the students, the findings of this study are consistent with the results of Irish studies of the past pupils of special schools, in which stigma was found to be a factor (Carroll, 1981; Toomey and O’Callaghan, 1983; Dooley Groake, 1985; Doyle and O’Callaghan, 1989).

### **SOME QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION**

While topics reported on here formed part of a larger study, I suggest that the students’ responses to the elements that have been highlighted raise the following

questions:

1. If the majority of students were relieved to come to St. Augustine's, approved of the curriculum and concluded that they were glad they had come, does this not mean that segregation is a good thing? Taken in conjunction with the fact that students feel deeply concerned about people knowing they went to St. Augustine's because they fear their reaction, I suggest that while on the one hand these findings endorse the programme of St. Augustine's, on the other hand they are a strong indictment of their initial experience in the ordinary school which they have quite vividly described.
2. Following on from this, the question arises as to whether the students suffered as great a feeling of stigma during their time in the ordinary school, as they did subsequently from having attended St. Augustine's.
3. If they had been left in the ordinary system would students have concluded that they had done as well as the majority do in relation to St. Augustine's?

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR INTEGRATION**

These are questions that must concern proponents of integration, particularly in view of the relatively unsupported integration policies of the Irish system at present. The students' explanations as to why they failed in the ordinary school and succeeded in St. Augustine's point to major adaptations of the ordinary system, requiring greatly increased resources, if integration is to be successful.

For St. Augustine's School, there remains the inescapable impression from this research that special schooling per se is a stigmatising experience, regardless of the merits of a particular school. Perhaps one can argue that the appropriateness of the curriculum alleviated stigma to some extent, but can one say that smaller classes, more understanding teachers and better facilities can be the 'raison d'etre' for a segregated education?

The findings of this study of students' perceptions, allied to a recent objective survey of past pupils' employment experiences testify to the fact that St. Augustine's has to a reasonable extent discovered how special educational needs can best be met. In this regard, I think that in any trend towards integration, schools such as St. Augustine's have many resources to offer, not least among them the opinions, feelings and experiences of their students.

## REFERENCES

- Booth, A. (1983). "Policies Towards the Integration of Mentally Handicapped Children in Education". *Oxford Review of Education* Vol. 9, No.3, 1983.
- Carroll, D.F. (1981). *Whatever Happened to Them?*  
Dublin: Order of St. John of God.
- Dooley Groarke, A.M. (1985). *Community Integration*.  
Galway: Brothers of Charity Services.
- Doyle, M., and O'Callaghan, R.J. (1989). *Lifestyle Satisfaction*.  
Cork: Cork Polio and General After Care Association.
- Dunn, L.M. (1968). "Special Education for the Mildly Retarded - is much of it justifiable?" *Exceptional Children*, 35, 1968.
- Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma*, London: Penguin.
- Toomey, J.F., and O'Callaghan, R.J. (1983). "Adult Status of Mildly Retarded Pupils", *Special Education, International Journal of Rehabilitation Research*, 1983, Vol. 6, No. 3, 301-312.