

## **While We Await the Report ...**

**Reports and rumours of reports can keep teachers in a state of animated anticipation. The Green Paper is further fuel for the ardent arguments for change and for the debates on the future direction of special education in Ireland. Yet much in the way of basic development urgently remains to be done in order that the foundations for effective change can be laid.**

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### **WHAT'S ANOTHER REPORT?**

Every question addressed to the Minister for Education or to the Department of Education over the last number of years seems to have invariably elicited the reply that an answer must await the findings of a committee or a report. Among these committees/reports have been the P.E.S.R. (Programme for Economic and Social Recovery); the R.B.P.C. (Review Body on the Primary Curriculum); the P.E.R.B. (Primary Education Review Body); and the P.E.S.P. (Programme for Economic and Social Progress). We waited and waited - indeed, what else could we do? Reports and recommendations were eventually "leaked" and then launched. We hungrily perused these quite palatable productions but at the time of writing we are still awaiting the Green Paper (though we've seen a tantalising "introductory document"). Following this, we are awaiting the White Paper and the report of the Review Committee on Special Education. Then we expect details of an Education Act.

### **THE REALITY OF INTEGRATION**

Meanwhile, back in the staff room, if you are fortunate enough to have one, what are the teacher realities? Integration in its many forms continues as flavour of the month. It is both positive and significant that one has yet to meet a teacher or parent who is openly hostile to the educational integration of children with special needs, but interpretations of the reality, both philosophically and functionally, range across a very wide spectrum. Do you intend that the situation which has existed in our educational system over the last twenty to thirty years



should continue? In the situation that exists, approximately 1.5% of all children of school going age have been educated in special classes or schools. In this system an excess of 98% of all pupils have existed in huge (40+) or multi-grade classes in grossly under-resourced so-called "ordinary" schools. Many teachers believe that at least 10-12% of this population need specialist service to make relevant their experience of formal education.

One must acknowledge, of course, the implementation of a pilot remedial service. I say "pilot" as we still await the implementation of an integrated, properly resourced service for all those pupils who need it -and I stress need - this is not an optional extra. The development of vibrant Teacher Associations in conjunction with Inservice Diploma Courses, all in teachers' own time and often at significant expense, are beacons on a grey horizon.

### **SHOULD SPECIAL SCHOOLS BE CLOSED DOWN?**

Another "officially approved" integration development is the growth of special classes for certain categories of children, generally pupils who are mildly and/or moderately mentally handicapped. A number of valuable studies and reports on this "preferred option" have been presented. Teachers note the response of the "appropriate authorities" to the more problematic aspects in relation to the practical implementation of these schemes as well as their many positive outcomes.

More recent, radical developments in the area of integration involve the less than 2% of children at present not in the ordinary system. They include pupils who are enrolled in special schools with classifications, i.e. Mildly and/or Moderately Mentally Handicapped, Physically Handicapped, Emotionally Disturbed, Hearing and/or Visually Impaired, Traveller, and a number of other categories. This population must also include approximately 1,800 children functioning in the Severe and Profound ranges of mental handicap for whom there is as yet, no adequate educational provision by the Department of Education.

One proposed approach would close all Special Schools forthwith and place all pupils in ordinary schools. This would force, indeed ensure, Department of Education action, and integration would be, de-facto, effected. Teachers in special schools interpret this as a slur on their work and commitment and view, with a somewhat jaundiced eye, the ordinary integrated system which after all, is segregated on the grounds of sex and/or religion and/or language, or even ethnic background. Teachers in ordinary schools share our concerns.



## **SPECIAL SCHOOLS LINKING WITH ORDINARY SCHOOLS**

An alternative development such as the one pioneered at St. Michael's School, Ballymun, Dublin, involves the integration of a number of local schools, primary and second level, with the special school. All the schools concerned, following discussion and consultation, review their programme and activities in the light of facilitating the appropriate interaction and learning together of pupils from the different schools. On-going, time-tabled active learning sessions include P.E. and games, swimming, art and craft, gardening and horticulture, educational outings, shared concerts / presentations and religious events. A beginning is being made to include some appropriate reading and number activities in this programme. These activities are planned co-operatively by the class teachers involved, are taking place both in schools and out in the community and are proving to be very positive, instructive, and indeed fun, for everyone involved. Parents of all the pupils involved not only approve, but actively support these developments. I believe that this approach is a valid contribution to the continuum of educational integration, however it needs review and deserves resourcing.

## **EDUCATION NOT LOCATION IS THE ISSUE**

Authentic educational integration is not happening where a pupil with identified special needs is placed in a class with 37 or more other children without specific, agreed additional necessary resources - including personnel. Indeed, it is only very exceptional children (not to mention teachers) who will survive this approach. Teachers have responsibility for the education of all the pupils in their care - education, not location, is the real issue. A number of innovative Support Projects have been initiated by, for example, the Down's Syndrome Association. Acknowledging the good intentions and work of the teachers, parents and others involved, nevertheless, serious concerns have to be expressed regarding the implications of utilising under-resourced and poorly rewarded professional personnel with the most important development of integration.

## **WELCOMING THE COMMITTEE ON SPECIAL EDUCATION**

The establishment of the Review Committee on Special Education is to be warmly welcomed at this critical time in the future planning for educational provision for all children in this country. It is essential that those pupils with special educational needs are represented in this process from the initial planning stages and that their needs and the implications involved are formally



acknowledged and addressed. In the meantime i.e. since the last Commission in 1965, there have been and still are a number of universally agreed actions needed urgently. These will not preclude any findings or recommendations of the Review Committee but mean that some of the foundations and cornerstones must be in place for any future developments.

## **PROPOSALS FOR PRO-ACTIVE DEVELOPMENT**

### **1. Teacher/Staff Training**

Teachers are the crucial educational factor in any development in schooling. We do not require further reports to convince us that all teachers require a significant input during Pre-Service Training, including some practical experience. On-going relevant appropriate in-service provision, possibly linking a number of local schools, will further develop awareness and skills and enthusiasm and pay rich dividends for children.

### **2. Ages of Learning**

Statutory school going ages do not equate with educationally critical periods for a significant number of pupils. Children, particularly those who are disadvantaged/disabled, urgently need appropriate pre-school provision. Developments, drawing on the Rutland Street experience and expertise, staffed by qualified teachers and assistants, with a positive, practical orientation towards integration, should be initiated in both rural and urban settings throughout the country. The Post-School, Pre-Vocational, Third Level Area has experienced massive growth in recent years, attracting funds from Government Agencies and Departments, Local Authorities, EC sources and, indeed, private business. However, many pupils who are disabled are still being sent home from school at eighteen years of age because there is no appropriate provision available for their on-going education. Who has responsibility here?

### **3. Class size and classroom assistants**

Every class in every school which has pupils with specific special needs is experiencing staffing levels which have fallen below the critical level of adequacy. The crisis is particularly evident in schools which have teaching principals who are greatly overworked and under resourced. The number of pupils must be significantly reduced and a suitable classroom assistant is required. The contribution an effective classroom assistant can make to the delivery of a positive educational service is immense and has generally been unacknowledged.



#### **4. School/Home Liaison**

Parents and teachers need to develop clearer and easier communication - this is especially true for children who are disadvantaged/disabled. Additional home/school liaison takes additional time and work and requires additional resources and personnel. Parents are the prime educators and are experts in their own areas. However, I believe that teachers not only have expertise, experience and training, but also have the best interests of their pupils at heart. Various pressure groups claim to know what children want; teachers, in a position to know what children really need, must be listened to carefully when decisions are being made as to the children's best interests or educational needs.

#### **5. Support Services**

Support services are a euphemism for many things of late. Support services which do not take active and participatory responsibility are the bane of the lives of many teachers and parents. An assessment must include observation and consultation, realistic recommendations, active follow up and regular review. That is what constitutes support.

#### **A PLEA - WHILE WE ARE WAITING**

I do welcome the recent reports and acknowledge the importance of the debate. I do look forward to an Education Act which, as the Minister has indicated in his Green Paper introduction, must improve the educational opportunity for the most disadvantaged - both children and teachers .... But please, while we wait, not just for provision, but for real access and real participation, let foundations be laid and action initiated in the above priority areas.