

Special Education Developments in Latvia

The recent reassertion of independence by the Baltic Republic of Latvia is also reflected in a serious concern to re-examine and reform the attitudes and structures relating to special education in that country.

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AN OVERVIEW OF LATVIA TODAY

In recent years, the Baltic countries have undergone a re-awakening in their struggle to regain independence which was lost in 1940. As a result of the famous Molotov-Ribentrop protocol, the Baltic states of Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia were forced to join the Soviet Union.

The territory of Latvia is 64.6 thousand square kilometres and its total population is 2.68 million people. Latvia is divided into four ethnographic regions with various Latvian language dialects, national costumes and traditions. Significantly, over 70% of Latvia's population is concentrated in its cities. The ethnic composition of the country consists of 52% Latvian, 34% Russian and 14% comprising of various other nationalities. However, in the capital city of Riga, 47% of the population are Russian and only 36% are Latvian. Consequently, our republic is experiencing great demographic problems which raise important questions for the future survival of the Latvian nation. The first steps that must be taken are the control and restriction of immigration into our country.

For fifty years, Moscow imposed its ideas and will on the Baltic countries. This also applied to our educational system. Until recently, the curriculum and syllabus in Latvian schools had to be sanctioned and approved by the Soviet authorities in Moscow. Since the national re-awakening of our Baltic republics however, various opportunities have come about for contact with other countries and their special education systems - and for this we are truly grateful.

A SPECIAL SCHOOL IN RIGA

Riga's 5th school for mentally handicapped children was founded in 1972. At present, 122 children in nine classes attend our school. The school's faculty consists of 40 people. Twenty of these are teachers and counsellors, eight of whom have special education qualifications. There is also a child psychiatrist, a pediatrician, a logoped (or speech therapist), and a nurse employed on the staff.

The school year is divided into three terms beginning on September 1 and ending on May 30. During the school year particular attention is paid to general subjects and vocational skills training. Girls are taught sewing skills and boys are taught construction skills. Job training begins in the fourth grade and 6 to 10 hours a week are dedicated to this training, depending on the level of the class.

SPECIAL EDUCATION PROVISION IN LATVIA: STATISTICS

In the Republic of Latvia there are altogether a total of 63 sanatorium type schools and schools for mentally and physically handicapped children. In the 1990/91 school year, a total number of 9,173 children attended these 63 schools. Of the total number of schools in Latvia, 7% are schools devoted to the special education of physically or mentally handicapped children. Up to 2.7% of all the republic's pupils attend schools and classes for the handicapped. A population of 6,236 pupils attend 46 schools for mentally and physically handicapped children and 23 classes in 9 ordinary schools. It must also be pointed out that 88% of the children who attend these schools are orphans. The remainder, numbering 2,937 children attend the republic's 17 residential sanatorium type schools for the handicapped.

ASSESSMENT, PLACEMENT AND REHABILITATION

The number of pupils in schools for the handicapped has decreased in the past few years. For example, in the 1988/89 school year, 3.1% of all the country's pupils attended special schools for the handicapped. By 1990 that figure had dropped to 2.7%. The selection of children who are to attend schools for the handicapped is carried out by a medical-educational committee. These committees are responsible for the assessment, placement and rehabilitation of children who are to attend the sanatorium type schools and the special schools for the physically and mentally handicapped children throughout the country.

The district medical-educational committee examines each pupil from the first

through the fourth grade. Every year the number of children rehabilitated increases. In 1990, up to 27 pupils were rehabilitated - but it must be said that 15 children were also categorised as ineducable.

Children attending schools and classes for the mentally handicapped have a special educational programme. In schools for the physically handicapped, children follow the same curriculum as the ordinary schools. Each school takes into consideration the various individual handicaps of the children.

A NEW SYSTEM FOR EDUCATING MENTALLY HANDICAPPED CHILDREN

With the beginning of the 1991/92 school year, a new three-tier teaching system will be put into practice in schools for mentally handicapped children in Latvia. The development of this new multi-level system emerged out of the following concerns:

- the variety and range of intellectual ability among children in the same class;
- the need to teach children according to their abilities, developmental levels and health conditions rather than attempt to accommodate all pupils in one teaching programme;
- the desire not to overburden academically or endanger the health of children whose intellectual capacity is limited, but also to provide for the greater development of those children whose potential allows for it;
- the increased appreciation of international experience of teaching pupils in classes of mixed ability;
- the need to provide a range of teaching methods and systems according to each school's resources or limitations.

In preparatory schools for the mentally handicapped which accommodate pupils from grades 1 to 4, slow learning children and children with mild mental handicap are educated together. The three levels in the new teaching system are categorised as levels A, B and C. These classes can be a part of an ordinary school or a separate special school. Collaboration among teachers, medical staff

and parents determines the level of education, and future education, which each child requires. The levels can be described as follows:

1. Rehabilitation, which results in a child attending an ordinary school.
2. Attendance at an "A level" school or class for slow learning children.
3. Attendance at a "B level" school or class for children with mild mental handicap.
4. Attendance at a "C level" class for children with moderate mental handicap.

During the 1990/91 school year, "C level" classes were used as an experimental study method in two of the country's schools for the mentally handicapped. Until 1990/91, these children with moderate mental handicap did not have a place in the educational system and were considered hopeless and ineducable. Thanks to this new programme in its experimental year, there is now some future for these children and their parents. Though work with these children is extremely difficult and intense, and the results by ordinary standards minimal, these "C level" classes are important, for even the smallest results help these children participate in society, and, just as importantly, help society to understand better and to accept these children as human beings with special needs.

Teaching materials and instructional content are determined by each school according to the particular level of instruction operating in the school or class. Those children who successfully complete "A level" classes are given the opportunity to continue their education at a nine year ordinary school. Children attending schools and classes for the handicapped in Latvia are taught, as far as possible, according to their ability and potential. Special attention is paid to physical education and the development of the artistic capabilities of the children. Latvian heritage and culture, along with the importance of ethics and values, are also made an intrinsic part of the education of our children with special educational needs. To further promote the rehabilitation and development of handicapped children, special olympics, amateur drama shows and exhibitions, art and drawing competitions and other activities are organised and encouraged.

TOWARDS THE FUTURE

Since the declaration of Latvian Independence and with it, our educational system's break with Moscow, a new era of openness is taking place within education and in society in general. No longer is our society hiding the statistics and the painful reality of the existence of handicapped children. Our educational system is now reaching out for new information and techniques to help us educate and rehabilitate our children with special needs. With newly gained knowledge, it is hoped that we will not only help these children to develop to their maximum capacity but will also help our society to recover from an all too long period of silence and stagnation in our country's history.



Photograph shows Silvija Jones, Anna Barkane and Ilmars Kalnins at the Third Annual Conference on Special Education, Dublin 1991.