

Vested Interests in the Development of Special Education in Ireland

The evolution of special education is seen often only as a process of reform motivated by humanitarian concerns. However, vested interests, such as the State, religion, teachers and other professionals all have had their individual agendas reflecting considerations which have not always placed the interests of the pupil at centre stage.

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INTRODUCTION

There always have been people with special needs and there always has been special provision for people who are perceived to be different, who do not "fit in". Jails, bridewells, houses of correction, houses of industry, lunatic asylums, workhouses, hospitals and county homes have contained, at different periods, those we now identify as having special needs. Special schooling is one other, more recent form of such provision.

The growth of special schooling in Ireland came in two broad stages. The first dates from the beginning of the 19th century when schools for deaf children were established (McDonnell, 1979). The second stage dates from the mid-1950s which marked the beginning of a period of expansion in special schooling, especially for children with mental handicap (McGee, 1990).

The evolution of special schooling is often seen only as a process of reform, a series of benevolent advances undertaken largely for the pupils' own good. There is no doubt that humanitarian considerations are reflected in the special needs movement in education. However, a concern to do good is not the only element that shapes the special school system. The concerns of the state and the vested interests of particular groups in society are even more important influences. It is true that the state is sometimes forced to accede to popular or energetic movements for social reform. At the same time, not all humanitarian ideas that emerge during any period are acted

upon. Those ideas that are realised must in some way be consistent with the “needs” of the state and must also have the approval of the professional bodies involved (Bannerman Foster, 1987; Tomlinson, 1982).

THE “NEEDS” OF THE STATE

Two aspects of the state's economic concerns stand out. Firstly, the developing industrial societies of the 19th century were characterised by a laissez faire economic ideology. This required as many citizens as possible to be productive and self-supporting. For example, industrial training was a key part of the curriculum in schools for the deaf throughout the 19th century (McDonnell, 1989).

The second economic concern of the state was the question of funding. Special schooling was seen as a form of social investment. There would be economic returns which would compensate for the financial costs of meeting special needs. The argument for state aid for the first special schools was bolstered by claims that these schools provided industrial training.

Along with economic concerns, another major concern of the state was social control. It can be argued that the notion of special provision has its origins in this concern. Although the earliest institutions and laws did not distinguish between the disabled, the sick, the insane, the unemployed or the poor, they did mark a “crucial shift from private troubles to public issues” (Bannerman Foster, 1987, p.6).

The early decades of the 19th century marked another stage in the development of special provision as a form of social control. This period in Ireland was characterised by an expanding population, increasing levels of unemployment and poverty and by widespread social unrest and disorder (McCartney, 1987, Ch. 3). Ireland became a social laboratory in which the state was willing to conduct experiments in government. The experiments opened a phase of expansion and specialisation in special provision. The criminal, the sick, the unemployed, and the poor were not the only groups singled out for special provision; the child population was also seen to have “special needs”. In 1831 the first steps were taken in the establishment of mass primary schooling (Akenson, 1970). Social control was the main concern of those who shaped the national school system.

SPECIAL SCHOOLING AND SOCIAL CONTROL

There was a parallel expansion in special schooling. Between 1816 and 1849 nine

institutions for the education of deaf children were established although two of these closed down after short periods (Census of Ireland, 1851). By 1871 the three largest schools had 433 deaf pupils enrolled in all (McDonnell, 1979).

In the early 19th century, special provision for the mentally handicapped was influenced by the relative confidence and optimism found in the work of Itard and Seguin. Education and moral treatment were to be the key principles in running the new asylums. These were seen as reforming forces and as instruments of social improvement and rehabilitation.

By the end of the century however, the picture had changed. The asylums had become, above all, custodial institutions. The methods of the reformers had not yielded the expected rates of improvement. Some blamed the failure of the asylums on the fact that "incurable idiots and imbeciles" were being admitted. In fact, during the 19th century the workhouse was the chief form of special provision for people with mental handicap; the asylums became institutions primarily for the insane (Finnane, 1981).

As early as 1843 and several times in the following decades, separate provision was recommended for people categorised as idiots (mentally handicapped) as opposed to those categorised as lunatics (mentally ill) (Robins, 1986). This recommendation was not implemented and the existing situation was to remain more or less the same for the next hundred years. It was a question of funding and of social control.

STATE POLICY AND CHANGING ATTITUDES TOWARDS MENTAL HANDICAP

The change in attitude towards people with mental handicap was both influenced and confirmed by two prominent late 19th century movements - the eugenics movement and the intelligence testing movement. There was particular concern among the "educated classes" about the causes, nature and consequences of mental disability. There was also a widespread perception that western society was in a state of fragile equilibrium, that it was exposed to forces which threatened racial degeneration and mental destabilisation (Potts, 1983).

One of the founders of the IQ test, Lewis Terman, was confident that the test would identify "...tens of thousands of ...these high grade defectives." (quoted in Kamin, 1974, p.6). The ultimate aim was to curtail "...the reproduction of feeble-mindedness.." and to eliminate "...an enormous amount of crime, pauperism and industrial inefficiency" (Ibid.).

Attitudes such as these had a very significant influence on state policy in the field of mental disability. The Royal Commission on the Care and Control of the Feeble-minded (1904) for example, recommended that "mentally defective persons" should be detained in institutions where they could be "...kept under effectual supervision so long as may be necessary" (Royal Commission, 1904, par.553). The Commission discussed other measures that might be employed to control the feeble-minded. Although restrictive marriage laws and compulsory sterilisation were enforced in some American states, the commission felt that restrictions on marriage were unworkable and that public opinion would not sanction sterilisation. Ryan and Thomas (1980), however, argue that sterilisation operations were carried out in Britain under a variety of guises. In the Mental Deficiency Act, 1913, long term segregated confinement was established as the means of controlling the mentally handicapped. Although neither the Mental Deficiency Act nor subsequent education acts were extended to Ireland, confinement in mental hospitals and in county homes (successors of the lunatic asylums and workhouses respectively) was the main form of special provision for the mentally handicapped until the 1950s (Robins, 1986).

VESTED INTERESTS: PROFESSIONALS

The term "special needs" is usually taken to mean the needs of pupils. The emphasis on the needs of pupils masks the fact that others in the special school system have needs too. Administrators, teachers, doctors, psychologists and other professionals are better placed than pupils to have their own needs met and to shape the way in which special schooling develops. Bannerman Foster claims that change in special provision is dependent upon professional consent and approval (Bannerman Foster, 1987).

The medical profession has an important vested interest in special schooling. The involvement of doctors dates back to the early 19th century when they were anxious to gain recognition as a professional body. Their efforts were enhanced by claims to have competence in identifying, assessing and supervising the treatment of people with mental disability.

In Ireland in the 1830s and 40s for example, doctors strove to secure participation in the development of the state's mental health policy. This period marks the beginning of a medical takeover of the asylums from lay managers and superintendents.

Doctors were also involved in establishing other forms of special provision. The first two special schools for the deaf were opened by doctors in Dublin in 1816 and in Cork

in 1822 (Census of Ireland, 1851,III,pp.33-35). Experimentation and research in education were means of establishing status as a professional (Orpen, 1828).

As the 19th century progressed, doctors acquired a wide range of powers in the field of special provision. They defined and classified disabilities, assessed children, inspected schools, drafted educational policy documents and frequently dictated curricula, timetables and teaching methods (Potts, 1983). Almost from the beginning, a form of medical certification was necessary for children before they were admitted to the special schools for the deaf (McDonnell, 1979).

The prominent involvement of the medical profession in special schooling is evident down to the present time. In 1972, a committee of twelve prepared a report on The Education of Children who are Handicapped by Impaired Hearing. Of the twelve, four were in the medical profession. There were two school principals but no practicing teachers on the committee. (Department of Education, Ireland, 1972, Appendix I).

However, the medical profession had no sooner established its dominance than it was challenged. In the early 20th century, the emerging profession of psychology sought a foothold for itself in the field. The rise of the intelligence testing movement was closely linked to the measurement of mental disability. Children with special needs comprised a population among whom psychologists conducted research and could thereby enhance their professional status. Psychologists such as Burt, Goddard and Terman were thus in a very powerful position to promote their own social and political agenda and to shape state policy in terms of provision for pupils with special needs.

Today, psychologists occupy a prominent place in the special schooling sector. They play a significant role in determining who will be placed in special schools. Psychological tests are important criteria in selecting children for placement in different kinds of special schools. Intelligence test measurements are used to determine categories of mental disability and are also important criteria by which children are admitted to educational services (McGee, 1990). The changing perception as to which children are deemed educable reflects a change in the profession which determines educability. Previously, it was the physician; today it is the psychologist.

VESTED INTERESTS: THE CHURCH AND RELIGION

Both church and state encourage conformity and compliance in society. In Ireland there has always been a strong involvement by religious in special schooling. The vested interests of the churches are reflected in two important ways. Firstly, special schooling was seen as an evangelising or missionary enterprise. The first annual report of the National Institution for the Education of Deaf and Dumb Children of the Poor in Ireland stated that the deaf had to be rescued "...from the depths of more than heathen darkness to the glorious light of gospel Truth" (Report, 1817, p.13). The Catholic Institution, founded thirty years later in 1846, was inspired by a similar missionary zeal. Its 16th Annual Report noted that there were in Ireland "...about 4,000 Deaf-mutes doomed to go down into their graves in total ignorance of the existence of a Supreme Being and of man's destiny in this life and that to come, if not rescued from their sad estate..." (Report, 1862, p.18).

Secondly, special schools were perceived as ideal places for individual members of religious orders to pursue their personal vocations. This dimension was probably a major factor in the establishment of new provision by religious orders during the 1950s.

VESTED INTERESTS: SCHOOLS AND TEACHERS

The growth of special schooling is associated with the development of compulsory mass schooling. Pupils who did not fit in, presented administrative problems for ordinary schools and pedagogic problems for the teachers. Thomas, for example, describes how ordinary schools have evolved elaborate strategies for removing troublesome pupils (Thomas, 1978). These strategies claim to function as responses to pupils' needs. In fact, they are practices which accommodate the "needs" of the school.

Tomlinson (1982) argues that such practices were widespread in Britain during the post-war period. Between 1947 and 1955 the number of schools for Educationally subnormal (ESN) pupils doubled. Numbers of ESN pupils grew from 12,000 to 22,000. A further 27,000 pupils awaited placement. In the 1960s two-thirds of referrals of children with special needs were for one category alone: Educationally Subnormal-Mild (ESN-M). Tomlinson suggests that ordinary schools were taking advantage of the vague and complex definition of the ESN-M child and were using this category to remove children who were difficult in learning and behavioural terms.

It is possible that a similar off-loading process is taking place in Ireland. There has been much recent discussion about the trend integration. However, there has also been a contrary movement towards increased special provision. Special facilities for pupils with specific reading disabilities, with specific language impairment, and with emotional disturbance or deviant behaviour, are of very recent origin (McGee, 1990). One recent British study showed an increasing trend in the integration of pupils with sensory disabilities. It also showed evidence of increasing segregated provision for pupils perceived to be maladjusted or to have learning disabilities. (Swann, 1985).

Teachers in special schools have an obvious vested interest in maintaining the system. Their jobs are at stake. Their status is also affected since it derives from their claim to have special expertise and skills. Binet and Simon (1914) observed, "Ever since public interest has been aroused in the question of schools for defective children, selfish ambition has seen its opportunity. The most frankly selfish reasons conceal themselves behind a mask of philanthropy and whoever dreams of finding a fine situation for himself in the new schools never speaks of children without tears in his eyes.... There is no reason for indignation. Everyone has the right to look after his own interests so long as he does not compromise interests superior to his own".

SPECIAL PROVISION: THE SECOND STAGE

The change from custodial to educational provision for pupils with mental handicap launched the second stage in the development of special schooling in Ireland. Pupils with mental handicap constitute the great majority of pupils with special needs. The first real educational provision for them dates from the 1950s (McGee, 1990). During the preceding hundred years, if children with mental handicap were placed in special provision at all, they were placed in workhouses and later in county homes. The new educational provision came mainly as a result of the efforts of parents. Voluntary associations of parents and professionals raised funds and agitated for change. The very few existing facilities were expanded. New special schools and classes were established and subsequently recognised by the Department of Education.

These developments should be seen in a context of general social and educational changes that were taking place. During the 1950s and 60s Ireland changed from an agricultural to an industrial economy. Irish society became more urbanised (Breen, et al., 1990). As Ryan and Thomas (1980) point out, changes in industrial and social life radically affect those who depend on others for support. In an urban and industrial environment they become more visible and are less easily accommodated in the workplace.

Changes were also taking place in the educational system as a whole. From the 1950s expenditure in health and education climbed steeply. Education came to be seen as a form of investment, similar to other forms of capital investment. It would be the key element in the drive for economic growth. Equality of opportunity in education was a much vaunted policy objective. During the 1960s many changes were undertaken with a view to achieving a greater degree of equity for all children (Breen et al., 1990). New forms of special provision were part of the wider social, economic and educational changes that were taking place in Ireland during this period.

CONCLUSION

This article has focussed on the hidden curriculum of provision for children with special needs in Ireland. It has not stressed the idea that the development of special provision was a humanitarian and progressive enterprise. This view is a popular one and has been well described elsewhere (Swan, 1986). It is fair to say that the development of special provision is never wholly determined by the political and social agenda of the state or by vested interests. The agenda of the state is often contradictory and vested interests are rarely unanimous in what they want. However, provision for pupils with special needs cannot be divorced from wider political, economic and social realities. Of the major participants in special schooling - pupils and their families, professionals and the state - pupils and their families are in the weakest position in terms of ensuring that their needs get priority (Bannerman Foster, 1987).

As we move into a third stage of development, integration, the hidden curriculum of special schooling has a very important significance for the future. Integration is taking place in an educational system and a society that is divided and unequal (Lynch, 1989). New developments are being promoted, mainly on the grounds that they benefit the pupils. In reality, they will largely reflect the economic and social concerns of the state and the vested interests of professionals.

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