

## A Parent's View on Integrated Education

**The integration of children with Down's Syndrome into ordinary local schools is a right that parents have fought for for many years. Parental initiatives have finally succeeded in persuading the Department of Education to provide some resources in this area. The case for integration, according to many parents, is a case for the progressive adaptation of educational structures to a new approach to education.**

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Some children with Down's Syndrome learn to speak a little and to master simple chores. In most cases, however, they cannot learn to speak or can utter just a few hoarse sounds and they seldom learn more than elementary self-care. From time to time there are reports of remarkable achievements in raising IQ scores of subnormal children. Headlines in newspapers and articles in magazines raise the hopes of countless parents who have retarded children. This publicity is unfortunately misleading, because the overall evidence we have today is not encouraging. It gives little promise of dramatic improvement in the mentally subnormal.

These words do not come from the dark ages of care for the handicapped. Neither are they the sentiments of some ignoramus from whom we would expect nothing better. They are the words of eminent present day psychologists (Atkinson et al., 1979, p.370). Apart from being factually inaccurate, this quotation reflects the passive acceptance approach to children with Down's Syndrome that we parents reject out of hand. We firmly believe that our children can and do learn, can and do develop, given the proper encouragement and adequate teaching.

We no longer institutionalise our children. We do not hide them away. We love them, and more importantly, we respect them. We respect them as unique individuals with the same rights and privileges as the rest of us. One of these rights is the right to a place in the community.



## **INTEGRATED EDUCATION**

These two convictions, the educability of our children and their right to community living, form the basis of our desire to have our children with Down's Syndrome educated with their brothers, sisters and friends in local primary schools. This is why five or six years ago the Down's Syndrome Association of Ireland began pushing for integrated education as a realistic option for parents.

That move was not, as some have claimed, at the instigation of a few aggressive parents. Two recent surveys of parents' opinions in Ireland have shown that, given the necessary resources, the majority would opt for integrated education for their handicapped children (Report of a Working Party, 1989; Dunne, S., 1990). In fact, many have gone down this road without any state support. As one could imagine, neither the short term nor the long term prospects made this an easy option.

All things considered therefore, it is a source of great satisfaction that after years of battering at the door, the Department of Education has finally acknowledged integrated education as an alternative method of meeting the educational needs of our children. From September 1991, the Department of Education has agreed to accept the responsibility of educating our children who attend our local schools. There is a certain trepidation felt by parents also, since we remain uncertain as to what model of education will be employed and if it will prove to be adequate.

## **INTEGRATION WORKS**

It is widely accepted that from a social point of view, mainstreaming is more effective than segregated schooling. But does it work with regard to the academic or intellectual development of the child? There are many accounts of wonderful achievements of children with Down's Syndrome attending ordinary schools and there is a growing body of scientifically sound research that indicates that integrated education does work. A few such research projects can be cited as examples.

**Ireland:** In September 1986, eight children with Down's Syndrome were enrolled in their local national schools. This was a joint project organised by the St. Michael's House organisation and the Down's Syndrome Association of Ireland. A resource teacher was employed - financed entirely by the two organisations and the parents of the children concerned. Further support was



given by a psychologist from St. Michael's House and other care workers. There was an ongoing term by term monitoring of the project and in 1990 a comprehensive assessment was carried out by the psychologist and a report presented to the Department of Education. As yet, this report has not been published.

**The United Kingdom:** The Haringey Down's Syndrome Project is a comprehensive study of two groups of children with Down's Syndrome (*Special Children*, July 1986). Half of the children in the project attended mainstream schools and half were at special schools. The evaluations were made over a period of two years. The conclusions were that "the overall trend...suggests that Down's Syndrome children in mainstream schools do at least as well, and often better than, their peers in MLD schools... As well as this general trend, the mainstream children made a significantly greater improvement in numeracy than the MLD children..."

Kirkleatham Hall School in Cleveland County is an all-age special school catering for the full range of learning difficulties (*Special Children*, April and May 1987). Integration began by transferring groups of children into full-time attendance at three different mainstream schools.

**Australia:** Ward and Centre examined the integration of intellectually disabled children into regular schools in New South Wales. Their study produced preliminary results providing "tentative evidence that children of primary school age with moderate to mild intellectual difficulties can, provided that some basic requirements are met, be realistically placed in regular school classes" (Ward and Centre, 1990).

**Israel:** The work of Reuven Feurstein with mentally handicapped children, summarised in many reports (Sharron, 1987; Chigier, 1990) has indicated that the intellectual level of children can be modified through mediation techniques and instrumental enrichment.

The conclusions of these studies, and others, is clear cut: integrated schooling for mentally handicapped children does work.

## **ACCUSATIONS ANSWERED**

Some accusations have been made in relation to parents who seek to provide



ordinary schooling for their handicapped child and some of these are worth addressing.

**Anti-Special School:** Far be it from us to desire the closure of any special school. We recognise the great work these schools have done and continue to do. We realise that many parents will choose them for their children. However, special schools are special because of the special skills of the teachers employed there. We are asking that this expertise might be transferred to a more appropriate location - the child's local school.

**Elitism:** This accusation is a perversion of language. Elitism is the segregation for special treatment of those whom society considers the academically best. This is the system which we seek to oppose.

**Pretence that children are not handicapped:** As parents of children who have Down's Syndrome, we are well aware of the rogue chromosome that has invaded the cellular structure of our children. Parents know that there is no possibility of a medical or scientific cure. All the wishful thinking in the world cannot change the biological irreversibility of the situation. But parents will not let the infernal chromosome have the last word. It has determined our children's condition; let it also determine the quality and quantity of the necessary intervention - both at home and school - for our children to grow and develop to their highest potential.

## CONCLUSION

Let us, parents and teachers alike, generously consider the following. In order to adapt to the changes in our world, to the progressive discoveries in the science of education and human development, we must be able and willing to change ourselves, our views, and our strategies when they are no longer adequate to the task of educating our children.

## REFERENCES

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