

Time to Act

Changes in our educational system are not corrected by law but more often by request, bargaining, manipulation and even threats of coercion. The damage which such methods may do to concerned individuals, groups and institutions is enormous. In this response to Páid McGee's article "Acts, Commissions and Change" the need to establish a new Commission on Special Education is strongly endorsed.

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Participants in the **First National Conference on Special Education** will have their own memories of particular presentations, seminars, discussions and debates which impacted on them. For me the high point of the conference was the thoughtful, stimulating and absolutely timely presentation by Páid McGee, which I was delighted to see published under the title "Acts, Commissions and Change" in REACH 3, 1. While one must avoid the error of believing that to every complex question, there is an answer which is usually simple, nevertheless, the need, highlighted by him, to establish a Commission which would consider special educational provision in this country, and which might lead on to subsequent enabling legislation, is surely long overdue.

THE UNCERTAINTY OF CIRCULARS

The advantages of such a Commission would be many, not least that it would, if accepted by Government, be a statement of philosophy for our society, at this time, on the issue of educational provision for those of our children who have special needs. Even more importantly, I believe, it would help to solve many of the difficult problems that individual Boards of Management, Principal Teachers, Referring Psychologists and Schools' Inspectors are often required to face.

While the 1965 Committee of Inquiry into Mental Handicap did provide the basis for the evolution of the system of special education in the late 1960's and early 1970's, it did not provide direction as to how many specific questions should be addressed. It was not until 1977, when the Department of Education issued Circular No. 23/77 that it was clearly established how admission to special classes in mainstream schools should operate. But there is no such document, to my knowledge, referring to procedures for admission to special schools, nor is there any guarantee in the absence of an Education Act, that even 23/77 will not be altered, or withdrawn, at the individual decision of the Minister, or, perhaps, one of her advisors, at any given moment.

HAPHAZARD SERVICE PROVISION

This lack of an Education Act in Ireland does not only affect special education, of course, but it is perhaps, more acutely felt here where there is an increasing awareness of the need for appropriate statementing or individual programming.

While we are without an Act, our system will continue to develop in a haphazard manner. Alternatively, issues may have to be resolved by the courts, as in recent cases such as those involving school discipline and suspension of pupils, and the issues of children being taken into care by Health Boards. At the moment we have such uneven distribution of educational service as: special classes for pupils with mild mental handicap at primary and post primary level, with different criteria for admission at each level, in some areas; special schools in other areas; and special classes at primary level only in some other areas. And, in some areas, no provision at all. Further anomalies exist for children with a moderate degree of mental handicap. Some such children are educated in separate special schools; some others in mainstream classes at primary level; still others in special classes in mainstream schools at primary level, with no provision at all at post primary level. A recent development, it would seem, is the establishment of special classes for these children in some special schools which have, up to now, catered only for children with mild mental handicap. All these variations are only for those children with a mental handicap, and rarely, if ever, allow parents a choice option.

RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

In such instances, how are decisions made? How are the child's rights, and those of their parents met? What is the extent of the right, or responsibility of the Department of Education in establishing or altering a special educational provision, if it does not have the consent of a school's Patron or Board of Management? Changes are not effected by law, but often by request, bargaining, or even by manipulation or threats of coercion. The damage which methods such as these can do to voluntary associations of Parents and Friends is enormous, and the damage it can do to individuals involved may not be inconsiderable. And where can such individuals, be they professional or lay, turn to for advice or support?

A COMMISSION FOR CO-OPERATION

Mr. McGee refers to what he describes as enabling or permissive statements from the Department of Education in recent years favouring integration, but without facing the question of what integration means, or the resource implications of any such move. He further states the change is likely to occur in any event, and that it is imperative that we have a Commission or some other authoritative body to ensure that such change is co-ordinated. Were this to occur, I believe that those people, to whom he refers as being now in their middle years, but happily still with us, and whom he credits as having built up our special school system, would be more than willing to co-operate with any planned changes. But these people will not respond positively to what they see as 'ad hoc' changes in the system, nor the removal of appropriate educational provision from a particular group of children, without ensuring that those children will be suitably catered for in an alternative system.

Yes, we need a Commission of Inquiry into Special Educational provision, and we need it urgently. Furthermore, such a Commission needs to be chaired by a person with experience, insight, expertise in special education, and wisdom. I can think of no one better qualified for the task than Paid McGee.