

# Awareness: Preparing for a World Without Work

In the present reality of mass unemployment, can work experience and vocational assessment interviews fill disabled young people and their parents with unrealistic expectations? A new component in leavers' programmes needs to be emphasised.

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Since September 1986 I have been working in the Post-Primary sector of our school, sharing the responsibility for 26 physically handicapped adolescents with another teacher.

The pupils in our double class are in the 14 – 18 years age group. Their physical handicaps range from slight to severe; all are mentally handicapped to some degree.

There is of course no official programme for teachers in this situation. Nor can there ever be. Consequently everything we did and everything we continue to do is based entirely on what we consider to be most relevant to the needs of the group and to the individual children within the group. A feature of our work is the constant devising and revising, the constant trying out of new techniques while refining or disregarding others. It takes a long time to work out an appropriate programme in our particular situation and there is no such thing as a definite one.

## The Challenge of Preparing Pupils for life without Work

While constantly reviewing our work with these disabled teenagers it is necessary always to bear in mind the following points:

1. There are no jobs in society for them in the present climate of unemployment.
2. There are hardly any placements in training workshops either.
3. The Day Centre Service is totally inadequate to meet the needs of our school leavers.

What happens then to these pupils when they leave us? The sad reality is that we hand them back to their parents where after fourteen years of schooling in a very stimulating and enjoyable ambience they are now left to rely on their own resources or on their parents resources indefinitely. Often there is virtually no outside-the-house activity for them.

The lack of after school facilities puts an enormous responsibility on us, their post-primary teachers. We are very conscious that the quality of their lives after school may well be determined by the kind of programme we do with them in their last few years with us. We know that their self-confidence, their social competence and their ability to be self-directing can be promoted and developed by our devising the best programmes for them.

Everything then that we do is designed to promote the social, leisure and life skills of our pupils. We have however, found it necessary to develop a certain change of emphasis in our programme.

Every year some 6 or 7 pupils leave us (our Post-Primary cycle is 4 years). We discovered we were not prepared for the reaction of several of our pupils to the dismal future that lay ahead of them. After their final Occupational Assessment when they, and their parents learned that they had come to the end of the road; that there were no jobs waiting for them, or very little else in the way of services, they were very disconsolate. Somehow we had assumed they understood the position. We had spent our first year preparing our pupils for a life without work but we had failed to communicate this fact to them. Some pupils were confused about the purpose of their Occupational Assessment. They seemed to regard it as an interview for a job. They were sorely disappointed when they realised there was no occupation available to them when they left school.

The problem, however, had very wide implications. Not alone did our pupils have unrealistic aspirations – many parents also had. Not alone would we have to dispel our pupils unrealistic expectations but their parents also would have to be brought to an awareness of their son's/daughter's limited potential and their poor after school prospects.

As we work in a multi-disciplinary system involving among others, the Medical Director, Occupational Therapists and Social Workers, it was necessary to convene several short meetings to discuss our concerns.

We did this and in mid-November 1987 our annual "Clinical Day" had as its theme *The Adolescent with a Physical Handicap*. Every discipline concerned read short papers. The schools contribution consisted of two papers. One, a paper from my colleague Margaret O'Donnell in which she described the work we had done:

- (a) to promote an awareness among parents of our pupils problems.
- (b) to help them set-up a Support Group where parents of school leavers could meet to discuss concerns of mutual interests.

In the other paper I described our curriculum in the classroom and the philosophy behind it. The following is an account of what we do and our reasons for so doing as I outlined it for the meeting.

### **Promoting Awareness in a Life Skills Programme**

#### ***(a) In the Classroom***

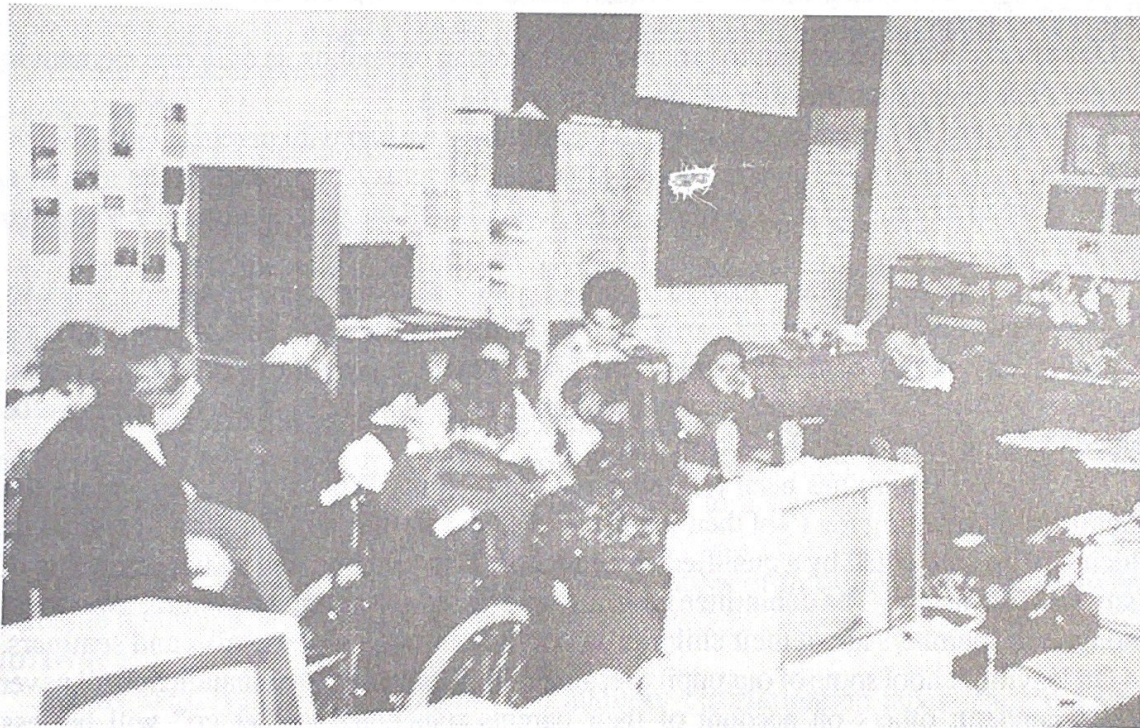
The content of our programme in our Shared Teaching Post-Primary sector was basically the same in 1987/88 as it had been in 1986/87. There was however, a marked difference in emphasis. There is now a very strong stress on *Awareness*.

Previously our curriculum included clusters of subjects such as Biology, Sex Education and Care of our Bodies under headings such as – (a) Drugs, (b) Diet, (c) Hygiene. However, in the course of our programme we barely alluded to physical handicap. Now, by contrast, we use our Biology time to promote an understanding of the pupils different disabilities. Questions such as "Why are some children born with Cerebral Palsy?" or "How does Brain Damage affect bladder incontinence or our ability to learn?" are discussed. The pupils are encouraged to discuss details of their disabilities with their parents and to find out the facts of their difficult early lives from their mothers.

Awareness of their immediate environment is promoted through Environmental Studies, Nature Study and above all by Civics. We find it necessary that they have some understanding of how our society is ordered. Consequently an outing to the Mansion House to see the

exhibition of the services of the Corporation was a high priority with us. The corporation impinges a great deal on the lives of most of our pupils through its services.

Awareness of what is going on in the world is promoted through the very strong emphasis we place on Current Affairs. Every day we listen to the news headlines on R.T.E. Radio. As part of their homework our pupils must watch the news on television every evening and write out an account of what they saw the next morning. Some, through practice are quite adept at this; others who are new to our post -primary group may not be able to produce much more than "there was a big fire in a shop". We attach enormous importance to developing an interest in Current Affairs. The low reading ability of our pupils will make access to information through print difficult for them. It is therefore very important that they are helped to make the best use of the electronic media as television will be the main source of information for most of our pupils after school.



*A past pupil tells the leavers' class about life after school.*

Awareness of where events are happening in the world brings us to geography – local, national and international and this is promoted only as it pertains to current affairs and subjects of topical interest e.g. The Ethiopian Crisis, Dublin Millennium etc.

Our social skills programme stresses Language as a communication skill. Our Oral language lessons are based almost entirely on current affairs. The daily news headlines provide an excellent opportunity to develop all language subskills, namely skills of listening, recall, articulation and understanding of content. Our reading revolves around newspapers, magazines and simple reference books on Nature Study, Biology, Cookery etc. Our Writing is concerned with topical subjects and constant practice in letter writing.

Other life skills include – learning through role play how to cope with social situations, Mathematics for daily use and Survival Cookery.

Leisure activities include Swimming, P.E. & Games, Music and Crafts.

Our Pastoral Care programme is concerned with concepts of Responsibility, Decision Making and Using our Talents.

As well as doing a social skills programme through which pupils are made aware of themselves and of the world around them, we are at all times very anxious that they understand why we are doing such a programme. We constantly ask them questions such as “Why do we spend so much time on current affairs? Why do we read newspapers in class? Why do we do these kind of Maths? Why do we do this type of cookery? Why do we role play situations? Why do you come to school? Why do you come to a special school? Why are you disabled?” And when we talk to our pupils about their future we make sure they can differentiate between what they would like to do and what they are likely to do.

*(b) Among Parents*

Our efforts in the classroom to promote awareness in our pupils, is only one element in a larger plan to enhance the after school life of our pupils.

My colleague in her paper documented the meetings we had with parents (1) to discuss with them our concern for their teenagers after they leave us (2) to promote the idea of a Support Group among the parents of our present pupils and the parents of pupils who have recently left.

We also arranged to bring forward their Occupational Assessment by several years so that parents would be aware much earlier of their teenager’s ability or lack of ability to cope with everyday issues of daily living. This arrangement leaves more time for parents, therapists and teachers to intervene and if nothing can be done at least the teenager can be helped to come to terms with his/her condition.

The Support Group has been formed and is flourishing. With our encouragement the committee is arranging for 15 of their members to attend a 2 day Workshop on Social Skills which will be conducted by a qualified co-ordinator. This we hope will be the beginning of many such occasions. The committee have also expressed interest in promoting awareness among their members about their children’s condition through videos, talks and seminars.

On leaving school some of our pupils because of the severity of their handicap will never be independent; others on account of their parents reluctance to “let go” will be less independent than they could be; others still will be remarkably capable and independent in the light of their limitations.

However, because of the almost total dearth of after school state-funded services all of our pupils face the same dreary prospect of a life without challenge or stimulation. As I said at the beginning of this article they are thrown back on their own resources and on their parents resources.

This is where the Parents Support Group through its activities will, we hope be able to offer some measure of comfort to its members and perhaps some stimulation and challenge to the school leavers. Through their working together they may be able to exert pressure on politicians for a better deal for their teenagers.

Mar adeirtear sa Ghaeilge “Ní neart go cur le chéile”