

THE DEVELOPMENT OF EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS (IRELAND)

Ireland is credited as having the first national school system in the British Isles, a network of primary schools being set up in 1831 and attendance for children aged between 6 and 14 on 150 days of the year being compulsory by 1892. These early schools were run by Boards of Commissioners who were then replaced in 1924 by the Department of Education. Yet despite its early enthusiasm for education, a report in 1936 made it quite clear that the education of children with special needs was not to be done alongside their peers as this was considered to be detrimental to the education of 'normal' children and their teachers.¹

The first special school in Ireland recognized by the State was St Vincent's Home for Mentally Defective Children in 1947. There was a general belief that the needs of special children was a medical issue and not an educational one and as such, should be dealt with by charities and religious benefactors rather than the state. The language used such as 'defective' 'handicapped' 'mongol' etc. seemed to refer to special children as being something different to the rest of the population and an over-reliance on IQ factors when considering the purpose of education. County Clinics all over Ireland were responsible for assessing children who were considered to have mental handicaps. Such children would then usually be provided with institutional care or at best, some kind of training.

However, by the end of the 1950's increased parental movement and work by religious communities seemed to provide the push needed and in 1959 the first inspector for special education was appointed by the Department of Education. In 1960 the Minister for Education announced more provision for mentally handicapped children.

Alongside this were developments in the training of teachers and psychologists who could work with deaf children and other children who needed specialist assessment. These courses were supported by the Irish National Teachers' Organisation and the psychologists trained would provide the bridge between the health and education authorities.

Gradually throughout the sixties special schools for mentally handicapped pupils and also for sensory and physical handicaps became recognized. A report in 1965² accepted that this was the way forward and even suggested that there should be some classes within mainstream schools for slow learners. There was further suggestion that education of children with special needs should be a shared one between health and education.

However, the policy throughout the 70s and 80s was for separate schools and by 1989 there were 65 schools for mentally handicapped children. The quality appears to have been good despite the fact that many were taking place in old institutional buildings; dedicated and well-trained teachers and the introduction of curriculum guidelines for special needs helped raise the status of these schools. During this time there seems to

¹ Commission of Inquiry into the Reformatory and Industrial School System 1934-1936.

² Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Mental Handicap 1965

have developed a distinction between children who were simply slow to learn and those who had mental or physical disabilities. Courses were designed for teachers in primary and secondary schools who would teach 'remedial' children. In practice, many of these classes contained children with mild mental handicaps. The Department of Education had at this time introduced the 'New Primary School Curriculum'³ and special schools used modified versions of this for their pupils.

The notion of integration began to appear in the mid-eighties with the idea that special classes could be part of mainstream schools and also from parents who were not availing of special education. The government seemed happy to follow this trend in a White Paper⁴ proposed that integrated education for children with mild mental or physical handicaps be the first option if at all possible.

In 1983 it was recognized that children with severe and profound mental handicaps should also be entitled to education.⁵ Teachers were to be trained to educate such children in special classes within mainstream education.

By 1993 over 2000 pupils were being educated in such a way. The speed of change raised concern among many who were worried that the idea of integration was not well thought out; that it was being pushed for financial reasons rather than sound educational ones. Teachers in special schools began to worry that their hard-fought for schools would be closed.

In 1993 there was a major change in educational policy towards children with special needs. The SERC⁶ report dealt comprehensively with the educational implications of special needs. It provided a definition of special needs which included those with severe and profound difficulties through to those who were exceptionally able and included both physical and mental disabilities. It recognized that the desire of the majority of parents of children with special needs was that they be educated in mainstream schools. As a result there was a recommendation for a school psychology service to be set up linked to the School Health Service. This service would deal with assessment etc. It also recommended additional support personnel to be provided in schools. Integration was to be the most desirable option with as little segregation as possible for all children. Some change was recommended, particularly in the post-primary curriculum, to help with special provision. All in all the report gave recommendations for a new Education Act which would also give local authorities more resources and power to deal with local administration.

Although the SERC Report had much to recommend it, there were some criticisms. The use of 'appropriate' for the type of education recommended and the rights of parents to make 'an informed choice' were ambiguous and often unhelpful terms. The distinction between remedial and special needs was not defined and is one still used today but it is

³ Learning Support Guidelines 1971

⁴ Educational Development 1980a

⁵ The Education and Training of Severely and Profoundly Mentally Handicapped Children in Ireland 1983

⁶ The Report of the Special Education Review Committee 1993

one which in practice is not clear as many of the children involved and the teaching strategies used are similar in both cases. The use of the term 'mental handicap' was still being used extensively.

Despite all the developments in special education the rights of children with severe and profound disabilities was to be tested twice in court. In one case the state argued that the child was 'ineducable' and therefore it did not need to provide for him; in the other the argument was about whether primary education related to a child's needs or his chronological age. In both cases the children were deemed to have the right to the necessary education.

In 1996 a comprehensive report was published on the needs of people with disabilities. A Strategy for Equality; Report of the Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities⁷ noted the lack of co-operation between special and mainstream schools, the lack of support services for special education, lack of flexibility in the curriculum, lack of transport and lack of resources in relation to assessment. This report too, recommended localized empowerment.

In 1998 the Education Bill was passed with the introduction that the Act would provide for the education of every person in the state including those with disabilities or any other special educational needs. These are further defined as:

Total or partial loss of bodily or mental function

Presence in body of harmful organisms

Malfunction, malformation or disfigurement

A condition in which a person learns differently

A condition, illness or disease which affects a person's thinking, perception, emotions or judgments or which results in disturbed behaviour.

A special educational need is defined as the needs of those who have a disability or are exceptionally able.

This Act made it a constitutional right of children to receive education appropriate to their needs; there was a requirement for the Minister to provide support services of a level and quality which met the needs **but** it also stated that it was necessary to have 'regard to the resources available'. Schools were obligated to provide admissions policies outlining accessibility; ensuring that educational needs of all pupils were met and that the education provided should be appropriate. The major policy change is now one of entitlement rather than availability. However, it did not devolve power to local authorities.

In 1998 finally a National Educational Psychology Service began to have effect in some schools and all schools now have an assigned psychologist although there is still limited resources in relation to how many children can be assessed per year. This body has also

⁷ . A Strategy for Equality; Report of the Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities⁷ Flood1996

recently produced a three point plan for teachers and parents in regard to the assessment process.

In the same year announcements were made setting up a formal contract of provision of resource teachers, classroom assistants and special pupil: teacher ratios for children with autism.

In 2000 it was recognized that there were still problems with co-ordination and limited resources of professional services across the country. The government planned to put in place a national support service to ensure early and comprehensive identification of special needs and to promote inclusion. At this time also the Learning Support Guidelines⁸ were published and these gave clear definitions on the roles of various personnel within schools as well as guidance on curriculum, policies, teaching strategies and use of ICT.

In 2002 substantial guidelines were produced for the teaching of pupils with special educational needs. Ireland, as part of the European Union, has agreed to many policies affecting the Rights of the Child, Equality Legislation etc. which also influences its policies and practice.

The Education for Persons with Disabilities Bill which has just come into legislation (2003) aims to guarantee the provision of suitable education for children with special educational needs. It states that integrated, inclusive education is to be the general approach. Each child will have the right to a holistic assessment and to have the services identified in such an assessment detailed on an individual education plan.

Finally it would seem that policy has caught up with the desires of the majority of the population in supporting the notion of inclusivity. It remains to be seen to what extent resources will be put in place to see the enactment of such policies.

[BACK](#)

⁸ Learning Support Guidelines 2000