Disabled Children and Education Policy in Northern Ireland

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Introduction

The education provision for children with disabilities in Northern Ireland was the subject of considerable controversy throughout the 1990s. The debate is often unhelpfully posed as being about a choice between the segregation of disabled children in special schools or their inclusion in mainstream schools. Neither form of provision is without its problems and limitations. Segregated provision has too often been characterised by a culture of low expectations while inclusion, if insufficiently supported, can entail neglect of the child’s educational and social needs. The negative experience of being bullied can and does occur across both settings. Perhaps the worst long-term educational placement is that of education at home. While this may achieve certain educational goals, the absence of social skills development and experience means such a provision should only ever be a short-term measure.

Policy Context

The concept of special education needs was introduced into education legislation in Northern Ireland by the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986. This Order promoted the inclusion of children with statements of special need in mainstream schools. The 1986 Order was amended by the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1987 and under these orders Education and Library Boards have a duty to identify and assess children in their area who have special education needs. This was followed by the Education (NI) Order 1996, which provides a legal framework for the assessment and development of special education provision for children with special education needs. Forthcoming legislation on Special Education Needs and Disability (anticipated in 2003 in Northern Ireland) will place more stress on the rights of children with special education needs to be educated in mainstream environments with a view to increasing inclusion.

The Educational Circumstances of Disabled Children in 1990 – Key Facts

This data is taken from the 1990 Disability Surveys undertaken by the Policy Planning and Research Unit (PPRU).

* Similar proportions of disabled children aged 5-15 years in Northern Ireland and Great Britain attended mainstream primary or secondary schools.

* Two thirds (64%) of disabled children living in private households in Northern Ireland attended mainstream schools, compared to 59% of those living in communal establishments.
* The proportion of children in special education schooling increased as children got older. For children aged 5-9 years, three quarters were in mainstream schooling (73% of those living in private households and 78% of those living in communal establishments), compared to only half of disabled children aged 10-15 years (58% and 54% respectively).

* 10% of disabled children living in communal establishments and 4% of disabled children living in private households were not attending any school at all – whereas in Britain all children had a school place. This increased to 13% of those aged 10-15 years living in communal establishments in Northern Ireland.

* Disabled children living within two parent households (32%) were more likely to attend a special school or unit compared to lone parent families.

* Children of lone parents were three times as likely to have no school provision at all (9%) compared to children from two parent families (3%).

* One third of disabled children in 1990 (37% of those living in private household, 30% of those living in communal establishments) had their education needs assessed.

* One fifth (19%) of those children living in private households and one seventh (14%) of those living in communal establishments had received a statement of education needs.

* Children living in two parent families were more likely to have had their needs assessed (38%) and have received a statement (20%) compared to lone parent families (29% and 13% respectively).

* 43% of disabled children living in private households and 16% living in communal establishments had experienced exclusion from school activities (for example, physical education, playing, outings and lessons.)

**Children’s Views in 2001 on Education Provision**

The majority of children said that they liked their school and most talked to the interviewer about the things they liked or disliked there (including subjects, homework, detention, travelling to and from school, playtime and their teachers). They talked about school in the same way that any child might discuss school, but there were also particular issues for disabled children – the difficulty some children had in making friends, coping with bullying in relation to their impairment and changing school from mainstream to special school (particularly at age 11).
School Friends
While several children were very outgoing and had lots of friends, for other children achieving friendships was a real problem. Some of the children’s own words best describe this.

“I don’t have any friends – nobody likes me... (and later when looking at various feeling cards, indicating the sad face) ...he’s sad because he doesn’t like me”

“...nothing to do, only play football but that's boring because I've got no-one to play with (when asked about what he would like to do in the future he was very despondent) ...just sit in the house all day and do nothing”.

“I’m an ugly fat and short geek. That’s what the boys call me. I try to make friends and they push me away. Sometimes they run after me and hit me. Sometimes I hit them where it hurts down there...Then they tell teacher and I get in trouble”. (This boy spends lunch-time in the library) “… because no-one wants to play with me”.

As can be seen from these examples, not having friends is forcing these young people to become withdrawn and self-reliant with some even losing interest in the outside world.

Bullying at school
Several children told the interviewer about instances of bullying either at their current school or at a previous school. This included name calling, swearing and sometimes hitting.

“...they’re bullies...they go, look who it is, the slut... calling me names and start teasing me and calling me bully and all, then I start going, well I’m not the bully you’re the bully and they started hitting me and all, giving me punches and everything”

“somebody bossing me around...always bossing me...they were teaching me bad language and all...I told them to stop it and they wouldn’t stop it...always bossing me they were... I don’t like whenever they call me names...they call me that name...they’re always calling me handicap”

“I don’t like people who bully me...(when asked who bullies)...A boy on the bus and then the bus escort tells him to stop it”

The children who talked about bullying were very much aware that they or others were being bullied and that this should not happen. However, some children internalised this and where they also had difficulty making friends they tended to have a negative image of themselves and become withdrawn.

Changing school
A number of children discussed the difficulties they had experienced when they left a mainstream primary school. For some this was problems with not being able to go to the school of their choice due to access problems and for
others it was coping with the change involved in attending a mainstream primary and now moving to a special school at secondary level. For another child it was concerns about being picked on because of her size when she moved to the secondary school.

One boy attended a special school for visually impaired children and this involved a round trip of 110 miles per day. If he had the choice he would have liked to attend the local secondary school.

“Unfortunately, I was looking forward to going to [local high school] with the rest of my friends, but I couldn’t. Had to go to [special school]…I would like to go to [local high school]”

His friends at the special school come from all over Northern Ireland and only see each other at school. He said that when he left that school at 17, if he wanted to further his education, he would have to go to a special college in England that could cater for people with visual impairments.

Another teenage girl with cerebral palsy could not attend the same secondary school as her friends because of physical access to the school. She was given a place at a special school but she felt that she did not fit in there and later moved to the local integrated (religion) school which catered for physical access needs including the provision of easily accessible facilities such as toilets and showers for P.E.

“(talking about the special school) I left in the first week…I absolutely hated it…I saw the work they were doing and I, it was just so, well not basic, you see all the kids have learning disabilities and find the work hard, and I was like really, really ahead in everything…you had no freedom, you had carers wherever you went …even in the playground you had carers for every two kids and you had to stay with an adult at all times…you couldn’t go anywhere where you were with kids without adults prying in…I thought get out while you can, I’ve never looked back…you know some parents of disabled kids they don’t listen to their ideas…I’m lucky in that respect”.

As this young person pointed out, children’s views on their education and being involved in decisions about the choices being made are important.

**Parents’ views in 2001 on Education Provision**

Some additional information about education provision was obtained from parents. While most parents believed that their child’s current school met his/her educational needs, a number of key issues were raised by parents. These included inadequate provision of classroom assistants, a lack of understanding from some school staff about their child’s needs, dissatisfaction with the education statementing process, and the difficulties experienced in obtaining an appropriate school place.
Policy Recommendations

* The Department of Education should ensure the successful implementation of the new Special Education Needs and Disability legislation as quickly as possible.

* Additional education funding allocated under the Chancellor of the Exchequer's Reinvestment and Reform Initiative in Northern Ireland should also target the needs of disabled children in mainstream schools in addition to the development of three new special schools.

* The Department of Education should set and monitor achievement of a timetable for the proportion of disabled children educated in mainstream classrooms.

* Further to the Post Primary Review – disabled children should be more meaningfully included in the re-organisation of post primary education. The proposed ‘learning support service’ is a positive step in assisting schools to meet the special needs of children within mainstream schools already but does not address the needs of children in special schools. This is an opportunity to address the segregation of special schools and they should be included in Collegiates if they are to be introduced.

* It should no longer be necessary for disabled children to be educated at home or to be educated at boarding schools in other jurisdictions.

* The Department of Education should consider the needs of disabled children when implementing anti-bullying policies in schools.

* In line with the recommendation of the NI Committee schools should be required to publish, within their annual report, how they have used that part of their budget intended to be spent on special educational needs.

* A Northern Ireland wide agreement should be formulated between the Department of Education and DHSSPS to address the needs of disabled children that are within the remit of both Departments.

* A strategy should be developed to address the needs of children in the older age group and with cognitive or consciousness disabilities to ensure they have access to secondary school places.

* The process of assessment and statementing should be reviewed under New Targeting Social Need to ensure that the most disadvantaged children are gaining equal access.
The full report ‘Is Anyone Listening?’ and two further Policy Briefings are available from:

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