

## Submission to the Education Committee in relation to Shared/Integrated Education

**My name is Dr Peter G Cunningham MBE, my entire teaching career, 35 years, has been spent educating children who have special educational needs. I have been the principal of Ceara Special School, Lurgan for the last twenty years.**

**I have been a member of the Southern Education & Library Board for the last fifteen years and am currently a member of the Southern Education Transitional Board where I 'chair' Board's Child Protection Committee.**

**I am a member of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Tribunal, and have been for the last six years.**

**I am a member of CCEA Council.**

**I have been an associate inspector of schools (the first ever) for the Department for Education.**

**I have presented talks for the Regional Training Unit on educational management to educators from all sections of the educational community.**

**I have spoken on special educational issues to the European Parliament. More specifically, the inclusion of children who have special educational needs into mainstream contexts; and the effective management of ASD in mainstream schools.**

**I have a 2:1 (Hons.) in Special Education; an M. Phil in Special Educational Issues; a M.Sc. in Educational Management and a Ph. D in Special Education Management.**

<p>My evidence to the Committee will look at the advantages of a shared/integrated education from the perspective of the child/pupil and teaching and support staff.</p>
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*At the outset I would remind everyone that the special school system (special care) when initiated in 1948 was a fully shared/integrated system, open to all children irrespective of religious belief or ability levels and to that end predated the Integrated Education movement by some 40 years.*

*I also note that the last time the role of the special school was 'looked at' by DE was in June 2006. I suggest that much of that document has merit today and would*

*recommend it to the committee. In the South of Ireland the role of the special school was reviewed in 2009 by the National Council for Special Education (NASP), again much of the report has a great deal of merit.*

Current DE policy is to encourage the maximum possible level of inclusion for children who have special educational needs within mainstream schools. This policy trend does give rise to an uncertainty around the role and operation of special schools. This review by the Education Committee is timely given the protracted gestation of the Special Education Review.

### **School Based Considerations**

It is my view that children, irrespective of ability, should be educated with their peers in local schools in schools that are appropriately resourced and taught by highly trained and motivated staff who celebrate achievements and tackle difficulties head on and with enthusiasm; and that ELBs have a responsibility to provide a range of provision to meet those diverse needs. However, I recognize that for some children who have severe and complex special needs that a placement in a special school is an appropriate placement. In this respect it is important to note that the needs and difficulties faced by teachers within the special school sector have changed significantly over the recent years especially with regard to behavioural issues.

Consequently, the special school should be viewed as an integral part of the totality of the educational provision - a continuum of provision. A special school placement should not be regarded as a segregated placement. An 'inclusive special school' is now very much the norm in many of our special schools in Northern Ireland, assisted in no small way by the inclusion of special schools into the Area Learning Communities.

It is my view that mainstream schools with an inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all and while I believe that there will always be the need for special school provision it need not be segregated provision. The day of the inclusive special school is very much with us. For example

- There is a trend toward increased connectivity between special and mainstream schools and special schools and special units.
- Special schools are part of every Area Learning Community in the country;
- More pupils from mainstream schools now visit special schools throughout the year than ever before.

There have never been as many children who have, or may have, special educational needs (SEN) in the school population. Many of these children attend special schools where, over the years staff have developed a wide range of expertise and skills in education these children. More recently, an increasing number of children who previously would have attended special schools now attend 'mainstream' schools. This places additional stresses on 'mainstream' staff.

As a group, children who have special educational needs are disproportionately more from disadvantaged backgrounds, are much more likely to be absent or excluded from school and achieve less well than their peers both in terms of attainment at any given age and in terms of their progress over time. Post sixteen years, young persons with special educational needs comprise one of the groups most likely not to be in education, not to be in employment or not to be in training.

#### Recommendation One

Staff from special schools could/should advise and support their colleagues in 'mainstream' schools on many of the issues facing children who have SEN. The Area Learning Communities could be the forum for this to occur. CPD for mainstream staff could take place in special schools. A two way process.

#### **An 'all encompassing' approach**

There is confusion around the term 'shared/integrated education'. Does it mean 'education for disabled children'? Is there a difference between 'education for all' and 'inclusive education'? What does it look like in reality?

A lot has been written about inclusion, a great deal has also been spoken about it with the somewhat unfortunate consequence of polarised views that state that the angels are on the side of the 'inclusionists' and the demons are with the 'segregationists'. Such debates often generate more heat than light. I see the concept of shared/integrated education as inseparable from the concept of quality education: education cannot be considered good quality unless it meets the needs of all its learners.

We need to be clear that the principles of shared/integrated education encompass a much broader range of issues than disability. But the changes needed to ensure that

children with disabilities can benefit from education are not very different from the changes needed to help all excluded children get an education.

#### Recommendation Two

Making education 'shared/integrated' requires schools and education authorities to remove barriers to education experienced by the most excluded children - often the poorest, children with disabilities, children without family care, or children from minority groups. This will require cross-departmental, interagency collaborative working arrangements. Something we really are not very good at.

#### **A Really Special 'Special School'**

Currently, special schools cater for a range of special educational need. A broad spectrum of need. With advances in medical science children with very special needs are living to school age. These children require a 'medicalised' educational provision. I would suggest that now there is the need, at least at KS1 and KS2 to have regional schools, which can deal with very specific special educational needs. In this regard I am thinking of those children with extreme behavioural issues. This is the norm in many areas of the UK.

#### Recommendation Three

Establish schools (units), which, with an integrated approach, could deal with specific SEN from both children from special schools and those from mainstream schools.

#### **Dual Placements**

To date, pupils with SEN are enrolled in a specific school. You are special or you are not! This 'them or us' silo mentality does not consider that for the vast majority of children with SEN a 'dual placement' would be very advantageous for both their curricular and social development. The social inclusion benefits cannot be over estimated. Four days in a mainstream school and one day in the special school so to speak - an extended version of ALC 'Entitlement Framework' arrangements. This type of arrangement does happen in NI at the moment but where it does it is 'informal'.

#### Recommendation Three

A change in DE policy that would allow dual enrolments with consideration to school funding and transportation as happens with EOTAS placements. Dual enrolments could be facilitated by co-locating mainstream and special schools.

### **Interdepartmental Collaboration**

In 1986, special schools split from the Department for Health Authorities and became the responsibility of the Department for Education as previously mentioned. In my view, that split was too clean and too clinical. We need a more shared, integrated, inclusive practical working relationship in schools between Health and Education especially in special schools. The complex nature of the needs of the children I work with requires this joined up working collaborative relationships rather than the - what appears some time to be the jealous guarding of departmental boundaries. That is the new battle for shared/integrated education - departmental inclusion.

#### Recommendation Four

The establishment of collaborative working arrangements with health and social services to enable the development of multi-disciplinary shared/integrated service provision to all schools with all the benefits that could flow from such an arrangement.

### **Post 16 Provisions**

As previously stated, there are increasing numbers of children in our special schools. This means that there are increasing numbers of young adults leaving, or about to leave our special schools. There needs to be the same opportunities available from a FE perspective to young adults with SEN. In this regard the 'shared education' vision implicit in the ALC arrangements could be better utilised.

#### Recommendation Five

There should be better cooperation between DE and DEL to ensure that our FE Colleges provide equality of opportunity for 'statemented' students.

### Oral Evidence

I have no problems should the Committee wish to invite me to present oral evidence.

Dr Peter G Cunningham MBE

Ceara Special School