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An Overview of State Services

Dr. Ugo Mifsud-Bonnici
Minister Of Education

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G'MANGIA MALTA

I feel that the problems faced by handicapped persons as related to my ministry are the following. First of all everybody has a right to education. Thus one must think carefully about educational development so that each person according to their possibilities may experience the best appropriate education. What is happening in our country at present and what more can be developed?

First of all the choice of educational provision. Where does one educate his/her handicapped child? In a normal school or special school? More than that in fact, because each handicapped person must experience all possible education even if this person is confined to the home or hospital. In fact I think we are providing all three educational opportunities. Whether these services are adequate or not must be examined, however all three are available as follows:

There are a number of handicapped children open to integrated education in normal schools; that means that a number of children especially those solely with a physical handicap are attending school with all the other children.

There are a number of children with emotional or intellectual handicaps who are still attending normal schools. I use the words 'still attending normal schools' with care - we choose (and is required of the law enacted last year) not to pressure parents into forcing them send their children to special schools. The choice remains the prerogative of the parents. Very often however parents need to be persuaded into making the best choice for their children's educational placement. Many parents still find it difficult to accept to remove a child from a usual school to have their child attend a special school, although this may be to the child's advantage.

The parents need a lot of persuasion and generally after some time parents may be persuaded.

Then we have a specialised service. I must point out at this stage, that the special schools are not run on the same basis. There are many types of special schools. I'll just list them for you.

We have introduced more specialisation in peripatetic education. This means that teachers are sent into the hospital and in some cases to private homes, for so many days a week so that children may be taught even in their homes, when it is difficult for the handicapped child to leave home. I must state at this stage that one of the main difficulties faced is that parents still 'hide' their children, or that the children's handicaps are identified rather late. Unhappily we have a small hurdle to overcome. As you know the obligatory age for a child to start schooling has been reduced from 6 years to 5 years for the child's benefit. But 5 years for some children could already be late. We have a situation whereby children could start attending kindergarten schooling at the age of 3 years and 4 years and yet parents do not bring their children forward for this education, because there exists no obligation to do this. If only these children could be reached at an earlier stage, so much could be done for their special education or that early suitable education which could help the children to progress quicker towards normality.

In this respect I have written to the C.G.M.O. so that the necessary information will be available to the Department of Education at an early enough stage, so that the parents may start to be approached and persuaded to give their children the necessary early education. The C.G.M.O. expressed his doubts as to whether he was free to pass on this information regarding a handicapped child to the Education Department as this could amount to a breach of confidentiality.

I believe that we must somehow overcome this hurdle so that parents will not be forced into, but persuaded to bring their children forward at an early stage. There is no need to change the law. It is true that children do benefit tremendously if they would have started their education at kindergarten age or even at a younger age.

Recently I was discussing this fact with a German doctor, I don't know how scientifically true this is, however I believe that if help is given to say a physically impaired child, a deaf child in the way of having a hearing aid, at an early stage when the child is learning unconsciously from his/her mother and father, he can benefit from learning this like normal children.

This, he/she will be doing unconsciously even before he starts school. Thus the effects of the impairment will be reduced.

At kindergarten level children are exposed to the possibility of a certain degree of early diagnosis. The kindergarten teachers observe and identify those children who appear not to be hearing well, or seeing well or because they appear not to be following. Some may even suffer from emotional disturbances. One of the advantages of the kindergarten experience is that children have less emotional problems related to schooling and the social integration of children is successful at an earlier stage. However we must also keep in mind those children who suffer from other more serious impairments and disabilities other than handicaps or emotional difficulties. These children require more efforts by people involved for their effective rehabilitation - for instance those children who suffer from a major physical handicap would fall into this category.

In a short while, namely on the 15th of June, we hope to inaugurate a new school at St.Andrews. This school will be more suitable for the children since the Pieta' school in the hospital grounds, presented a lot of difficulties for the people handling and dealing with the children, and of course for the children themselves. I hope that the St.Andrew's School will prove to be a better school within a healthier environment and will present less difficulties.

We are trying to increase facilities and services at both the other two schools namely the Guardian Angel School and the Wardija School. We have for instance increased the nursing service as this was inadequate. In certain schools a medical service was non existent. We have tried to interest the University to study the problems experienced by handicapped people - in November 1987 when I visited the Guardian Angel School. I was thinking along these lines. I subsequently wrote to Fr.Peter, the University Rector and I told him that it seemed that the University had never undertaken systematic studies of handicapped people in Malta. I am really pleased to see so many academics present here today because I believe that children's problems especially handicapped children's problems should be studied, be they pedagogical or even genetical.

I think that Malta is a small enough country to enable us not only to quantify but also to reach overall conclusions in respect of certain handicaps.

I am sure, however, that you do understand that central question. How do we educate handicapped children? And in this respect I believe that the variety should be great. It is one thing to visualise a collective group of handicapped children and it is quite another matter to come into direct contact with the enormously different impairments, handicaps and disabilities of children. As a result of my visits to the schools I am convinced that these children are educable in some way or another.

I have an advantage over the teachers of seeing great changes in the children, since I do not visit the schools daily, but every couple of months. I can see a change in certain

children's physical development and this surely must be due to the exercises that they have been doing. You can tell that children can truly learn. Differences can be noted in the intellectual development even of the intellectually disabled children. This shows that education can be effective.

In respect of physically handicapped children the teaching must be adapted to their needs, but fundamentally it is the same - for instance let me give you an example. We talk of the use of the computer being suitable to be taught to physically handicapped people. I'm sure that with adaptations and the teaching of skills, they can cope but the educational aspect in fact will be the same as for normal children. These children are intellectually educable through the use of normal methods. It is more the practice of skills that is necessary so that physically they may learn to adapt and also certain adaptations for use may be made accordingly.

The greater difficulty however concerns not those who are physically disabled like those who are hearing impaired or visually impaired. (We have a blind chess champion, he had a very good teacher) because somehow they can be made to understand. But those children who are emotionally handicapped and those who are intellectually disabled are more difficult to teach.

But I say that society must dedicate a lot of thought and resources, disproportionate to numbers, to the resolution of the problems of handicapped children - I think that we must not quantify returns for any efforts undertaken even though efforts can give results, as Tonio has said - disabled people can help others who are not disabled, because when they do manage to work, very often, they are more motivated to work.

A disadvantaged person applies his efforts at work, like other normal people, she/he gives more than someone who is not disadvantaged. However we must not measure these returns on an economic level. I think that we do have a social conscience to invest and attach importance to teaching disabled people even if we do not see quick returns. However I state that society will see returns in the way that each disabled person is becoming better educated. The fact that he is receiving more learning is already a way to the resolution of their problems. The human problem is always the degree of his understanding. It is the problem of people - everybody has big problems, and each perceives his own, as I see mine - one needs understanding for acceptance and unhappily in our society today the word resignation has taken on a mistaken connotation. In a Catholic context the words to resign oneself do not mean that you don't react in order to overcome the problem but that you do not rebel against your condition. I think that today we need to learn and be capable of understanding all the modern ways of overcoming weaknesses of humanity. We must sort matters out in a better way which will lead to a solution so that even what is not solved will be resolved and thus bring us closer to acceptance - of the situation.