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Nonsense in Autism Educational Provision

Following numerous High Court proceedings (in many of which I had direct involvement) brought by parents of children with autism the Department of Education and Science decided to establish special classes, sometimes called "units" in mainstream schools for children on the spectrum. Most of these units were established in the late 90's and early in 2000. Today these units continue to provide education and supportive services for children with autistic spectrum disorders (ASD's). Sounds good doesn't it? Well, some of it is good, but a lot of it is the usual haze of half-truth, misrepresentation and outright lies in educational provision here in Ireland.

Let's us take an example of what is happening around the country at the present time. Some, and they are few, secondary schools are now establishing classes for adolescents with ASD. The establishment of these classes typically follows a series of parental battles which often culminate in High Court cases of Section 20 appeals. (Section 29 is a part of the Education Act which permits parents to take a case against a school for failure to admit a child or alleging wrongful suspension or expulsion. So there are few schools that can raise their head high and proclaim a great desire to establish these classes.

Upon agreeing to open a class the school will begin the admission process which follows a rather unique guideline established by some sectors of the autism service continuum in Ireland. This guideline typically specifies that no child on the spectrum who has intellectual impairment (a General Learning Disability, meaning significantly sub-average IQ) will be enrolled in the class. This little clause means that up to 85% of adolescents on the spectrum will be denied admission to a unit which purports to specialise in their education. Even more diabolically, the service provider who established this clause makes it clear they will not provide any supportive service (speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, psychological services) to a student with a GLD.

Schools use this escape clause with surgical precision in denying access to the classes supposed to be specialised in education children on the spectrum. In some cases schools actually use outdated and meaningless terminology to exclude students (more will be written about this later).

Let's call a spade a spade shall we? Some school administrators, under the encouragement of the Boards of Management, don't want some children with and ASD in their classes. They will use any means necessary to refuse them and the best excuse available to them is the GLD escape clause.

Read my upcoming article on assessment of ASD to see exactly how this plan is executed.

Parents let me ask you, does anyone in the DES or HSE really care about these children?

Why Are We Doing This to Pupils with Autism

There is something seriously wrong with the assessment of children and adolescents with Autistic Spectrum Disorders here in Ireland. If it wasn't enough that educational provision is slipshod for the most part and downright non-existent in most secondary schools, we also put the in double jeopardy by relying on assessment instruments that are not fair to them. What do I mean by saying this? Read on please.

People with autism universally have communication deficits to one degree or another. Even when expressive language is present and seemingly unremarkable there are considerable difficulties with understanding the nuance of language usage, delays in the time required to process spoken language and significant differences in how they understand idioms, humour, sarcasm and social discourse.

The common forms of assessment of intelligence feature the use of assessment tools that rely heavily on language understanding. The use of these tools, such as the Wechsler Scales, results in lower scores when assessing intelligence. These lower scores often make it seem as though the person functions in the range of Mild or Moderate General Learning Disability (scores below an IQ of 70). When these scores are recorded in a written report the people who read them treat them as if they were chipped in granite.

Yet at the same time anyone who has met the child in question or who lives with them knows there is far more intelligence locked inside than is being measured!

The unfortunate result of these inappropriate assessments is that the children then become ineligible for those classes created to cater to their education. The child is now seen as having an "intellectual disability" that is the primary problem and is said to belong to those services which cater for people with primary intellectual disability. (Let us remember that the proper and official terminology is General Learning Disability). Denied access to classes at secondary or primary school for children with autism they find themselves in a limbo of confusion and are often denied any educational service whatever while the situation is resolved, which, by the way, it usually isn't.

When are we going to stop this nonsense? fWhy are we creating “special classes” for people with autism and denying up to 85% of the spectrum population entry to these classes” Does anyone care!