

Chapter 15

St Mary's School for Deaf Girls, Cabra

Introduction

Background

- 15.01** St Mary's School for Deaf Girls opened in August 1846 in the grounds of the Dominican Convent in Cabra in Dublin. It is managed by the Dominican Sisters under the trusteeship of the Catholic Institute for Deaf People (formerly the Catholic Institute for the Deaf), which is under the patronage of the Archbishop of Dublin.
- 15.02** The School was established at the request of Fr Thomas McNamara, a Vincentian Priest from Phibsborough, Dublin who was one of the founding members of the Catholic Institute for the Deaf. In 1845 when the Institute was founded there were no Catholic schools for the education of deaf children. The Catholic Institute for the Deaf sought to change this and, as a result, St Mary's school was established for the education of deaf girls and in 1856 a boy's deaf school was founded, also in Cabra, which was managed by the Christian Brothers.
- 15.03** Early in 1846 two Dominican Sisters went from Ireland to Le Bon Sauveur Institute for the deaf in Caen in Normandy to study the French system of teaching the deaf. Two deaf pupils accompanied them. French sign language was used at the school in Caen and the Sisters on their return adapted this signing method to suit the English language. For a hundred years this sign language system (also known as Manualism), which was modelled on the French sign language was taught in St Mary's. The boys' school in Cabra also adopted this teaching method. In 1946, St Mary's changed from signing to the Oral method, known as Oralism. This consists of lip reading and speech training rather than relying on gestures and signs. Oralism is the preferred teaching method employed in the School to the present day.

Population

- 15.04** When St Mary's opened in August 1846 it had 15 pupils, which increased to 50 in 1850. In 1952 there were 177 children in the school. In 1985 the school had 350 girls enrolled. It accepts both day pupils and boarders. Girls were admitted to the school from the age of four years through to 17 or 18 years of age.

Management

- 15.05** The School is managed by a Board of Management with a Principal and Vice-Principal in day to day charge. When it was first opened in 1846 the School was directly managed by the Dominican Sisters.

Structure

- 15.06** The pupils were divided into three main groups: (a) profoundly deaf; (b) partially deaf; (c) deaf students with other disabilities. Until 1974 boarders were divided into groups of approximately 30 according to age. After 1974 the groups were reduced in size to 16 or less. Each group had a Sister in charge, a housemother and a sewing girl. The babies group had two sewing girls.
- 15.07** The School consists of a primary and post-primary section.
- 15.08** In 1973 a new residential school for the hard of hearing pupils, known as Rosary School, was built. It was situated a quarter of a mile from the main school of St Mary's. At that time it consisted of 12 classrooms, a general purpose room, a library, a staffroom, offices, a cookery room and store room. A school inspection report in 1984 carried out by a Department of Education Inspector noted that the school was 'clean, comfortable and well-maintained' and 'located in pleasant grounds'.
- 15.09** In 1987 a new school for deaf multiply disabled children was built on the grounds of St Mary's. It was known as the Marian School. It consists of four large classrooms, two shared-area classrooms, a staffroom, a library, a large kitchen, an art room and play hall. The pupils were grouped into eight classes according to disability, age and academic ability. By 1990 there were seven full-time teachers employed.

Funding

- 15.10** Originally, the School was funded by the Catholic Institute for the Deaf. They received a grant from the local authorities where the children came from. The school made an application to the Catholic Institute for funding based on the number of days each child was resident in the school. The remainder of the funding came from charitable bequests or fundraising. It was not until 1952 when the School was officially recognised by the Department of Education as a special school that it received funding from the Department. The Department of Health later assumed responsibility for the residential aspects of the School.
- 15.11** In 1960 the grant paid by the local authorities for the maintenance of the children amounted to £80.00 per pupil per year. In a letter from the Department of Education to the Department of Finance seeking an increase in the staffing levels dated 1st March 1960, the Department officials pointed out that this figure of £80 was insufficient to maintain a child in the School. They also asserted that 'no other maintenance grant' was provided to the nuns. Reference was also made to the high cost of hearing equipment necessary for deaf children. For example, in 1960 a group hearing aid consisting of a large table with plastic top, microphones and wiring for 12 individual hearing aids cost £250.

The Investigation

- 15.12** Twenty one statements of complaint were furnished to the Investigation Committee. Response statements were supplied by both the Dominican Sisters and the Department of Education in respect of these written complaints.
- 15.13** The investigation into the School consisted of a review of the material produced by the Department of Education and Science, the Dominican Sisters, the Catholic Institute for the Deaf, the Garda Síochana, the Archbishop of Dublin and the complainants' statements. Thirteen complainants attended for interview out of 23 who were invited to attend. These interviews took place at the Commission's offices and at various other locations around the country and in the United Kingdom.

Education

Primary education

- 15.14** On 21st April 1952, Sr McEvoy, Prioress of St Mary's wrote to the Department of Education seeking recognition as a special school. She insisted that due to the nature of deafness small class sizes were necessary and that 'there can be no mass teaching of deaf children, each child has her own separate problem'. She felt that 10 to a class would be ideal but 'twelve may be allowed under stress'. Sr McEvoy also emphasised the importance of speaking:

Another point of difference is the fact that it is a residential school. The time spent outside class – play, meals, etc. – is as important for the education of these children as the time spent in class; our's is now an up-to-date oral school and in consequence the children must be kept speaking at all times, and not allowed to use sign language. This work is done by a qualified matron. She would have to be included in the recognised staff, as well as a Principal and a Vice Principal.

- 15.15** A report for the Department of Education in 1952 noted that there were 177 pupils in the school aged between four and 18 years. The staff consisted of six nuns and six lay teachers who were assisted by five deaf adults. Two of the nuns were fully trained as teachers of the deaf and the remaining staff members had experience in teaching the deaf but their qualifications were 'approximate to the qualification of untrained teachers'. The report commented that the premises and equipment were excellent and 'that the whole direction shows an enthusiasm, vision and progressiveness which should make the institution a model not alone for this but for other countries'. The Department felt that a staff of 12 teachers would be needed for the recognition of the school together with a new set of minimum qualification requirements for teachers, assistants and Principals. The teacher pupil ratio was to be 14:1. The Department sought the approval of the Department of Finance for these proposals on 1st August 1952.

- 15.16** The Dominican Sisters generally accepted the Department's proposals, but they were concerned about the high pupil-teacher ratio. In a letter to the Department of 17th September 1952, Sr McEvoy pointed out that there should only be a maximum of 10 deaf children to one teacher in a class. She asserted that this was a 'matter of universal experience'. She also took issue with the Department treating them as a national school and reminded them that the Sisters had never at any time applied for recognition as a national school and stated that they had 'declined to do so for many years, because we believe that many of the Department's regulations for National Schools are incompatible with the proper running of a residential school for deaf children'. She again reminded the Department that 'Our application was for recognition as a special school, and we understood before making the application that your Department had initiated a scheme for special schools'.

- 15.17** In 1955, the Department of Finance sanctioned the pupil teacher ratio for the school at 10 pupils to one teacher which was to be calculated on the basis of the number of children 'in average attendance' in a year. On 27th January 1960 the Department of Education wrote to the Department of Finance seeking to change the requirement of staffing levels based on the number of children in attendance in a year to the number of children enrolled in the school in any given year. The reason was that the numbers of children in attendance often fluctuated due to illness and hospitalisation. The Department also pointed out in this letter that:

...The authorities of the Department of Education of the Deaf at Manchester University have been reported as being of opinion that St. Mary's is one of the leading schools for deaf in the world and that there are only two others – one in Holland and the other in America – to compare with it.

15.18 The Department of Finance refused the request and stated that the staffing levels in the school were 'already liberal comparing favourably even with the special quotas for other categories of handicapped children...'. The Department of Education replied by letter dated 1st March 1960 and argued that the only correct basis of comparison of staffing levels could be made with deaf schools in other countries and not with other special schools. They pointed out that in deaf schools in England there was one teacher to every eight students on the rolls and such a similar basis operated in the United States. In English deaf schools, children were not removed from the school rolls even when they were in hospital, unlike their Irish counterparts who had to remove their names from the rolls when in hospital. On 22nd March 1960, the Department of Finance capitulated.

15.19 School Inspection Reports show that in 1985 the average number of pupils in each class was between seven and eight. In 1986 the pupil teacher ratio was 6:1.

Post-primary education

15.20 In the late 1950s the School began providing secondary education. At that time the number of students was quite small and the School was able to meet the needs of these students either within the primary staff quota or with minimal extra teachers. It operated along the lines of the secondary top model where primary teachers taught primary classes in the mornings and taught various subjects to students for the Intermediate and Leaving Certificates in the afternoons. From the mid-1960s the demand for post-primary education grew. The School responded to the demand by employing more teachers. The Department of Education was not directly involved with the provision of post-primary education and it was only with the publication of the 1965 Report on Mental Handicap that the State gradually became more involved not only in the provision of special schools and services for the learning disabled but also in the areas of education of the deaf and the blind.

15.21 A Departmental Committee was set up to review the education of hearing-impaired children and it began its work in the late 1960s. The Committee's report, the first official Irish Government report on the subject, was published in 1972.

15.22 The report made some general recommendations about the desirability of the two Cabra schools co-operating in the provision of services. The Principal of St Joseph's at the time who was a member of the Committee dissented from the opinions of the rest of the group on the question of co-operation. Although, some attempts at co-operation were made during the 1970s, no significant developments occurred. By 1989, 24 full-time permanent teachers were employed in the post-primary section of St Mary's even though the post-primary section of the school did not have official status as a proper post-primary school. Technically and administratively the school operated as a special national school for the hearing impaired with a post-primary facility.

15.23 The Department were anxious that serious consideration be given to the amalgamation of both schools at least at post-primary level. In their view, the post-primary sections of both schools were overstaffed and not understaffed as contended by both school principals.

15.24 In correspondence between the Department of Education Special Schools section and the Manager of St Mary's commencing in February 1965, the Sisters pressed the Department to sanction an extra teacher and a financial contribution towards the cost of a prefabricated building in which they proposed to establish a special class for emotionally disturbed deaf girls. The Department had no objection in principle to this proposal provided the staff pupil ratio was maintained at agreed levels.

Nature of allegations

- 15.25** The complainants' statements alleged physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect and emotional abuse.
- 15.26** Twenty complainants alleged excessive corporal punishment by nuns, teachers and lay staff using a variety of implements. The complaints included allegations of punishment for using sign language by being slapped and having hands tied behind the back.
- 15.27** Allegations were made of sexual abuse by visiting priests and the Congregation admitted that such an allegation was made against a priest, who left shortly after that and never returned.
- 15.28** Nineteen complainants alleged neglect in respect of one or more of the following: education, food, accommodation and medical care.
- 15.29** All of the complainants alleged emotional abuse in respect of prevention of use of sign language, segregation from other children based on hearing impairment, fear, bullying or humiliation.

Response of the Dominican Sisters

- 15.30** In their respondent statements, the Dominican Sisters stated the following in general terms:
- They accepted that corporal punishment was used but denied that children were 'beaten'.
 - They stated that Oralism was the preferred option from 1947 and that signing was discouraged.
 - They denied that a child was physically punished for signing but accepted that a child may have been slapped if they persisted.
 - They did not respond to specific allegations of abuse against individuals due to the passage of time which they contended made it prejudicial to them.
- 15.31** The Department of Education decided in 1990 that their policy should be pragmatic and flexible and open to all aspects of education of the deaf including the communication issue. They decided they would have a caring and flexible system of education of every deaf child from an early age and certain modes of communication should not be seen as mutually exclusive or as having inherent or distinct qualities which made them better than others. Special schools should be encouraged to base their methods on real needs of the children not on any particular approach to the education of the deaf. Regular reviews of programmes of work and individual progress would be undertaken. With regard to post-primary education the Department saw the way forward to amalgamate St Mary's and St Joseph's in Cabra into a single community-type post-primary school.

