

Chapter 16

Mary Immaculate School for Deaf Children

Introduction

Background

- 16.01** In July 1955, at the request of the then Archbishop of Dublin, Dr John Charles McQuaid, the Provincial Superior of the Congregation of the Daughters of the Cross of Liege, met officials from the Department of Education with a proposal to establish a school for deaf boys aged between three and 10 years in Beechpark, Stillorgan, County Dublin.
- 16.02** These proposals were subsequently formalised in a letter from the Provincial Superior to the Department of Education seeking recognition of Beechpark, Stillorgan as a residential school for deaf boys between the ages of three and 10 years.
- 16.03** The Department having obtained the necessary sanction from the Department of Finance gave recognition to the School on the basis of the Congregation's proposals on 10th April 1956. The School was named 'Mary Immaculate School for Deaf Boys'. The School patron was the Archbishop of Dublin and it was owned and managed by the Congregation of the Daughters of the Cross of Liege. The School closed in 1998 due to lack of pupils.
- 16.04** The property in Stillorgan had been purchased by the Sisters for the purposes of opening a school for deaf children. However, the property was in a state of disrepair and needed work done so, in the interim, the School operated from St Gabriel's Hospital in Cabinteely.
- 16.05** It appears that the impetus for such a school came from some parents of profoundly deaf children, who approached the Archbishop, seeking the establishment of a school for younger children, as St Joseph's School for Deaf Boys in Cabra run by the Christian Brothers only took boys from the age of seven years upwards. St Mary's in Cabra run by the Dominican Sisters only catered for deaf girls.
- 16.06** The School was recognised as a special national school. It catered for profoundly deaf boys between the ages of six to nine years and served as a preparatory school for St Joseph's School for Deaf Boys in Cabra.



Original residential school and school between 1956 and 1962.



The school from 1962.

The Investigation

- 16.07** The Investigation Committee was unable to conduct a full hearing into this institution. The principal difficulty was in obtaining statements of complainant witnesses. Protracted correspondence and discussion failed to produce agreement as to arrangements for taking statements that would be considered satisfactory. Twenty-one complaints were made to the Investigation Committee and 20 written statements were furnished. The legal team interviewed all the complainants.
- 16.08** The result is that the investigation into the School was confined to a review of the discovered material produced by the Department of Education and Science, the Congregation of the Daughters of the Cross of Liege, the Garda Síochána, the Archbishop of Dublin and the statements furnished. The discovered material was limited in nature. A review of the discovery documents furnished did not provide any contemporary evidence to substantiate complaints. The school log, which was carefully maintained, recorded activities and outings. Progress reports on the children were maintained. The reports of the Department of Education Inspectors on the teachers were satisfactory. There are no records of complaints by parents to either the School or the Department of Education.
- 16.09** A Garda Investigation into allegations of sexual and physical abuse at Beechpark was carried out in 2001/2002 but the Investigation Committee received information from the Chief State Solicitor's Office that no file was sent to the DPP as the allegations concerned common assault and were statute barred.

Education

- 16.10** The school followed a primary school curriculum with emphasis on speech, lip reading and the acquisition of language.
- 16.11** The policy in Ireland at the time was to teach children through the 'oral/ aural' method which was widely used throughout Europe for the education of the deaf.
- 16.12** The Congregation accepted that Oralism had its critics and did not suit every child in the school. They say that if a child was struggling, an assessment conference was convened and a decision made as to how to cater for the needs of the child. Complainants alleged that children were punished and beaten for using sign language. In their Statement the Congregation stated that children were not beaten for signing. They accepted that children were discouraged from signing and may have got a slap on the hand and/or been reprimanded verbally for doing so.

Nature of the allegations

- 16.13** Twenty statements of complaint were furnished by the complainants. Allegations were made against six members of the Congregation and two members of the lay staff. The school opened in 1956 and closed in 1998 and the complaints span most of that period.
- 16.14** Sr Ernesta¹ occupied a senior position in Beechpark for nearly one-third of its existence. She was described as a very strict authoritarian nun. She enforced the rule against signing and it was alleged that she slapped children who signed. The complainants also said that their education suffered because of the enforcement of Oralism.
- 16.15** All of the complainants who were present during Sr Ernesta's regime described being lined up in the morning to go to the toilet and expected to 'perform on demand' and were punished if they

¹ This is a pseudonym.

did not do so. Many of them complained of being given laxatives for this purpose. This routine was carried out every day and the children did not have privacy with regard to their toilet routine.

- 16.16** A number of the complainants described the food as poor and basic and that they were forced to eat it. A number of complainants stated that the food was fine, much like home-cooked food, and they could ask for extra helpings.
- 16.17** Five other nuns were criticised, but most complaints were about Sr Ernesta. She was the nun who slapped for signing, enforced the toilet regime and force fed those who would not eat. She slept near the dormitories and supervised the children at night.

Response of the Congregation to the allegations

- 16.18** The Congregation acknowledged that the School followed the oral/aural method of teaching the deaf. This they said was considered at the time the best way to educate the deaf. Consequently, the children were discouraged from signing and may have got a slap on the hand and/or been reprimanded verbally for doing so. They do not accept that children were beaten for signing.
- 16.19** They accepted that between the years 1961 and 1971 there was a 'toileting routine' in the morning. They do not accept that the children were punished or humiliated or made the object of public derision during this 'toileting' process. They acknowledged that some children may have unconsciously been worried about it. They accepted that today this routine would not be considered 'best practice', but in the late 1950s and in the 1960s it was not questioned. It ceased in 1971 when the children were divided into smaller groups. The Congregation stated that as a general rule laxatives were not arbitrarily given to any pupil, only when necessary if it was considered a child was constipated. This was done under the supervision of the school nurse who liaised with the school doctor.
- 16.20** The Congregation stated that the food was wholesome and plain but in the early years it did not have the variety that was available from the 1970s. They believed that children were well nourished and did not accept that children were force fed.
- 16.21** The Congregation acknowledged that Sisters carried keys for safety reasons from the late 1970s. Prior to that, the keys were hung high over the doors. They accepted that a Sister might have had a key in her hand while trying to get the attention of a profoundly deaf child who may on a rare occasion 'have got a tip of a key on the back of his hand to gain his attention'. They accepted that this could be painful and not 'good practice' and may remain in the memory of the person concerned. They denied that keys were used to deliberately hit the children.
- 16.22** The Congregation supported Sr Ernesta in denying allegations that she beat the children or hit them with a stick or ruler. The School was small and the staff were a closely knit community. If she had beaten the children, Sr Ernesta would have been reported to the Manager of the school for mistreating pupils and abusing her position as Principal. Rules and regulations were necessary even if they appear harsh and unreasonable by the standards of today. Changes were made during 1971 which led to a more lenient regime. Most of this forward thinking and planning was the 'brain child' of Sr Ernesta.