

Review of the current and future role of special schools and special classes in Ireland

Abstract

Aim:

To review the role of special schools and special classes for pupils with special educational needs in mainstream schools and to provide a review of international practice in the area of special education with a particular emphasis on the use of special schools and special classes.

Methods:

- 1) Questionnaire survey of special schools and mainstream schools, primary and post-primary, with special classes
- 2) Literature review of international practice in special education focused on the roles of special schools and special classes.
- 3) Focus Group Interviews involving pupils, parents, teachers, principals, special needs assistants)
- 4) Case studies in three schools
- 5) Submissions from relevant organisations, and the public at large addressing the key research questions.

Main Findings:

Both special schools and special classes were regarded by the study participants as an important part of the continuum of provision for pupils with special needs

Two clear roles were envisaged for special schools into the future:

- providing for those pupils with the most complex needs,
- supporting and collaborating with mainstream schools

Special classes were perceived to have advantages in:

- Facilitating inclusion within the mainstream class
- Providing a 'safe haven' for some pupils
- A favourable pupil: teacher ratio
- Enabling pupils to remain in their local area
- Flexibility in the organisation of teaching and curriculum provision.

Issues which emerged for fulfilling these roles:

- Expertise and resources
 - Only $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{3}$ of teachers working with pupils with Special Educational Needs have undertaken specialist training at diploma level or higher
 - Not all special schools currently have the resources and/or the expertise to support mainstream schools
 - Insufficient and inconsistent multidisciplinary support
 - Informality and unresourced nature of dual placement arrangements

- Lack of continuity between special class provision in primary and post-primary schools.

Fifteen recommendations were made

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