

Review of the Current and Future Role of Special Schools and Classes

National Council for Special
Education

Research Seminar

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Summary

- Background
- Research Questions
- Research Design and Methodology
- Timeline
- Main Findings
- Recommendations

Background

- Historical position of special schools
- Dissatisfaction amongst some parents with segregated provision in 1990s
- 1993 SERC Report continuum of provision to meet a continuum of need
 - Includes both special schools and special classes

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

Research Questions - 1

- To review the role of special schools in the provision of education to pupils with special educational needs and in particular to examine ways in which special schools can act in a co-operative way with mainstream primary and post primary schools to provide enhanced service to pupils with special educational needs and their parents.

Research questions- 2

- To review the role of special classes in mainstream schools for pupils with special educational needs with particular regard to the principle of inclusive education as described in Section 2 of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (2004).

Research Questions - 3

- 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.

Question 1 sub-questions

- the potential for special schools to offer expertise and services to mainstream primary and post primary schools
- Whether special schools should be used/developed as centres of excellence and if so, in what areas and how should they be used.

Question 1 sub-questions

- the issues related to dual enrolment
- Whether special schools should cater for specified categories of special needs or a broader/full range of special needs and what implications changes in the spectrum of special needs over time has in this regard

Research Design

- Two phases to the Review
- Phase 1 December 2005 - January 2007
- Phase 2 December 2007 – October 2009

Phase 1

- Questionnaire Survey of Special Schools and Mainstream National Schools with Special Classes
- Commissioned by the Special Education Section of the DES

Phase 1 Methodology

- Questionnaire developed in conjunction with interested stakeholders
- Special Schools and Primary Schools with Special Classes identified
- Questionnaire sent to all such schools
- Non-responding schools contacted by letter and phone

Phase 1 Questionnaires Sent Out & Returned

Designation of school	Number sent out	Number returned	Percentage returned
Mainstream primary with special class	304	235	77.3
Special School	106	84	79.2
Total	410	319	77.8

Phase 2 Methodology

Five Overlapping Stages

- Questionnaire Survey of Mainstream Post Primary Schools
- Review of the International Literature
- Focus Groups with relevant Stakeholder
- Case Studies
- Submissions

Questionnaires Sent Out & Returned

Phase 2

Designation of School	Number sent out	Number returned	Percentage returned
DES class only	27	19	70
DES & Other Class	78	38	48.7
Other Class Only	120	46	38.3
Total	225	103	45.7

Focus Groups Sampling Considerations

Purposive Sampling used:

- Location: participants from a cluster of schools in each of 3 different areas of the country
- 28 schools in total
- 17 special schools
- 11 mainstream

Focus Groups and Participants Totals

	Groups	Participants <i>(Proposed numbers of participants in red)</i>
Total	21	140 (156)
Pupils	6	34 (36)
Parents	6	26 (36)
Principals	3	28 (28)
Teachers	3	28 (28)
SNAs	3	24 (28)

Case Studies Selection Process

- Collation of information from following sources
- Returned Questionnaires
- Key Informants
- Published school inspection reports (WSEs and subject inspections Ireland, Ofsted England)

Case Studies Data Collection

- Interviews with staff (principal, teachers, SNAs, therapists)
- Shadowing observation and interviewing of 1-2 students
- Interviews with parents/ family members for these students
- Data transcribed and analysed

Submissions

Submissions invited from relevant stakeholders

- Disability and equality groups
- Teacher unions and representative bodies
- Irish universities and colleges of teacher education
- School management bodies
- Parents groups
- School support services
- Public Call

Submissions

Submissions were guided by three questions:

1. Can you outline what you regard as the future role of special schools in meeting the needs of pupils with special educational needs?
2. Can you describe what you regard as the future role of special classes in mainstream schools?

Submissions

3. Can you outline your views on the potential for special and mainstream schools working together in the future?

A word limit of 1,000 words was applied to each survey response

Overall Data Analysis

- Quantitative Data (Studies 1 and 2)
 - SPSS plus hand analysis
- Qualitative Data (Studies 1 and 2)
 - NVivo plus hand analysis

Findings

Three main headings:

- Role and operation of special schools
- Role and operation of special classes in mainstream schools
- Dual placement

Findings

Role and Operation of Special Schools

Overall context

- While the number of special schools is increasing, pupil enrolment has been decreasing
- The pupil population had decreased by around 1870 over 20 years (8491-6619) (DES, 2008)

Context

- 4,942 pupils in the 83 special schools
- Pupil teacher ratio of 1: 6.3 (excluding principals)
- 46 schools had an additional 124 teachers funded other than by the DES
- Not clear how many of these were part time

Staffing

- There were 1, 156 special needs assistants funded by the DES in the 83 special schools giving an SNA:pupil ratio of 1:4.27
- Together with teachers (excluding principals) this gives a staff pupil ratio of 1: 2.55. There were also 59 care assistants in 17 schools and 34 stated that that they had at least one nurse (though not all may be full time)

Complexity and Range of Pupil Need

- special schools an important part of the continuum of educational provision for pupils with SEN
- evidence of increasing complexity and severity of pupil need in special schools
- Trend for increasing number of admissions at post primary age to schools for pupils with Mild GLD

Complex Needs

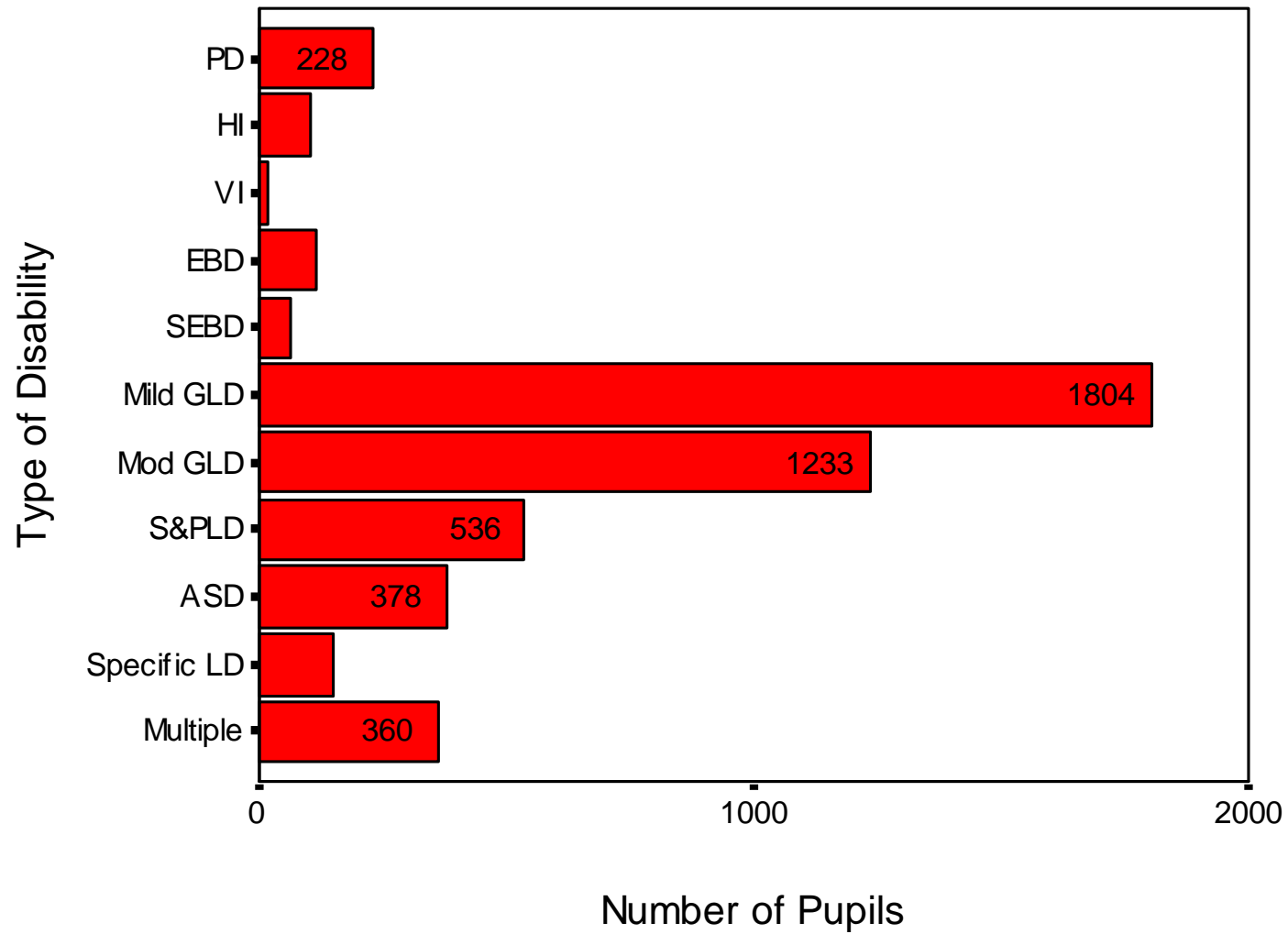
- ‘Complex needs’ can usefully be thought of as encompassing both breadth *and* depth of need

(Rosengard et al. 2007)

Complex Needs

- *Breadth* Pupils with complex needs may have several different needs, requiring support from several different services to ensure those needs are met (e.g. pupils with two or more disabilities attending schools for pupils with MGLD)
- *Depth* of need where the individual pupil has a severe or profound level of disability; this includes not only those with severe or profound GLDs but also others.

Disabilities of pupils in special schools



Complexity and Range of Pupil Need- Schools for Pupils with MGLD

- Schools for pupils with mild GLD are not only catering for pupils with a large number of different primary disabilities but also for a large number of pupils with two or more disabilities
- Similarly schools for pupils with moderate GLD are catering for a higher number of pupils with severe and profound GLD and with ASD than they had in the past

Age of Pupils in Schools for Pupils with MGLD

- As of May 2006, 66% of pupils in schools for pupils with mild general learning disabilities were aged 13 above with only 10% aged 4-8

Support for Mainstream Schools

- Supportive links with mainstream schools are valued but tend to be of an informal and ad hoc nature based on the goodwill of those involved
- Special mainstream links should be bi- rather than uni- directional
- Not all special schools currently equipped to fulfil this role

Staffing in Special Schools

- Only between one quarter and one third of teachers in special schools have undertaken specialist training at diploma level or higher.
- In addition considerable numbers access relevant short courses and seminars.

Multidisciplinary support

- There were major issues for all types of school around the provision of multidisciplinary support.
- Wide variability between schools in the amount of support available to pupils.
- Apparent lack of coordination between different services.

Findings

Role and operation of
special classes in mainstream
schools

Context Special Classes

- Data from 230 primary schools
- In these schools there were 400 special classes and 2499 pupils between 385 of the classes for which pupil numbers were given
- Mild general learning disability 211
- ASD 77
- Speech and language disorder 54
- Moderate GLD 15
- Dyslexia 15

Special Classes in Mainstream Schools

- Similar concerns to special schools about staffing and multidisciplinary support
- Concern over the lack of continuity between special class provision in primary and post-primary schools

Findings Special Classes - advantages

- Facilitation of inclusion within the mainstream school
- Provision of safe haven for some pupils
- A favourable pupil: teacher ratio
- Enabling pupils to remain in their local area or not too far from it
- Enabling flexibility in the organisation of teaching and curriculum provision

Organisation of Special Classes

- All day in special class: 170 of 400 special classes
- No reliable data source at post primary level
- Confusion over official and unofficial special class

Special Classes in Mainstream Schools

- High levels of satisfaction with special class provision
- Perceived by focus group participants to be an important part of the continuum of provision

Dual Placement

- Dual attendance/dual placement and dual enrolment/dual registration both describe arrangements in which pupils spend some time at a special school and some at a mainstream school.
- The difference between these two types of arrangements concerns whether or not the pupil is officially on the roll of two schools simultaneously (dual enrolment/ dual registration).

Dual Placement

- Majority of participants in favour of some form of dual placement
- Many were unhappy with the present 'informal' arrangements in which dual enrolment is not possible
- A minority of participants were concerned about pupils' ability to adapt to two schools

Dual Placement

Factors contributing to successful dual placement arrangements

- planning and coordination
- parental support
- good communication.
- provision of SNA support,
- low pupil: teacher ratio,
- administrative support

Recommendations

1. Special schools are catering for a group of students with complex needs, appear to have some success in doing so (though the evidence for this is limited), and should be enabled to continue to do so in the absence of evidence that Irish mainstream schools could provide a better education for these students.

2. The review found a trend both in Ireland and Internationally towards the development of two distinct types of special school. While some special schools are catering for a wide range of categories of need, others cater exclusively for pupils from a specific category. In the absence of evidence favouring one of these types of special school, a range of special school provision should continue to be available catering both for specific categories of need and for a range of needs

3. i. Further research is needed into the factors which lead to the comparative success of mild GLD schools in retaining pupils in school and the implications for the whole post-primary sector evaluated

ii. A review of the curriculum and certification offered to pupils with mild GLD of post-primary age in both special and mainstream schools is required to ensure a range of choices for pupils and their parents

4. One aspect of the future role of some special schools could be to provide Outreach and Inreach support for mainstream schools to enhance the provision these schools are able to make for pupils with SEN. It should be noted that the review found that not all Irish special schools currently have the capacity to fulfil this role

- 5. i. Special schools should receive resources and have access to continuous professional development for staff to reflect the variety of roles which they fulfil,*
- ii. Such CPD should be available to all teachers working in special schools and classes in a timely manner.*

6. i. Research should be carried out on teachers in special schools with a view to ascertaining:

- their qualifications, both undergraduate and postgraduate and*
- the extent to which limitations in their qualification contributed to or brought about their employment in the setting in which they are working*

6. ii. The terminology used to describe qualified teachers from other countries, and Irish-trained teachers with certain Montessori qualifications should be reviewed. The terminology chosen should reflect the groups of pupils for which the individual is appropriately qualified rather than the fact that there are some groups of pupils who they are precluded from teaching

7. Given the central role of the principal teacher, programmes of professional development for principals should have a substantial element on special education.

8. A review of the training needs of SNAs should be conducted.

9. i. The way in which multi-disciplinary support is provided to pupils with special educational needs in all types of school needs to be urgently reviewed.

ii. It was clear from the review that access to multidisciplinary support is currently insufficient and inconsistent. More access to multi disciplinary teams is required and access needs to be available on the basis of need regardless of the setting in which the pupil is placed.

10. An audit of special class provision in mainstream schools should be conducted and the data base of classes subsequently regularly updated.

11. i. In the absence of evidence on the capacity of the General Allocation Model and Resource teacher service to meet the needs of all pupils with special educational needs in mainstream schools, special classes should continue to be part of placement options

- 11. ii. The capacity of the General Allocation Model and Resource teacher service to meet the needs of pupils with mild general learning disabilities should be evaluated before reducing the option of special class placement in the system*
- iii. Special classes should continue to be an alternative solution to special schools where the demographics would not support such a school*

12. i. Schools operating full day special classes should develop and implement policies and plans outlining how the special class relates to other classes and consider options such as part time and/or time related placement

ii. Support services should be provided to all pupils who require them in special classes and inclusion of pupils from the special class in mainstream classes should not be used as a reason to withdraw such services when still required

- 13. i. The issue of continuity of special classes between primary and post-primary levels needs to be dealt with as a priority and all future special classes should be set up as part of a coherent area plan at primary and post-primary level considering the type of special classes required, age ranges of the pupils and gender*
- ii. The criteria for the establishment of a special class at post-primary level need to be explicit*

14. Dual placement arrangements should be facilitated where these are seen as being in the best interests of the pupil in order to facilitate either educational or social inclusion. However, there is a need for clarity on how insurance, transport and substitute cover for teachers or SNAs facilitating such arrangements are funded and managed.

15. Dual placement arrangements should be facilitated in the future by co-locating mainstream and special schools

