

CHAPTER 7

PRIMARY PROVISION

This chapter reviews the educational arrangements made for pupils with ASD in Key Stages 1 and 2 (age 4 to age 11). It considers issues arising from teaching pupils in mainstream schools and in special provision for pupils with moderate learning difficulties and other difficulties. Provision for children with severe learning difficulties is considered in Chapter 9.

Introduction

7.1 The SEN Code of Practice (1998) encourages greater levels of integration and inclusion of children with special needs into mainstream educational settings.

7.2 Children with ASD attending mainstream schools bring individual challenges and rewards to the classroom environment. The issues highlighted in this chapter arose in interviews with teachers working in ASD support services throughout each ELB and with special educational needs co-ordinators, class teachers, Vice Principals and Principals in primary schools and schools for pupils with moderate learning difficulties. Further information was gained from parents who responded to questionnaires seeking their views on current provision for their children.

Current Support

7.3 At present pupils with ASD attending their local primary school receive a variety of types of support depending on their needs and the availability of services. This support can consist of classroom assistance, individual counselling, advice to teachers and parents and flexible arrangements to promote learning and access to the curriculum. In some schools, adjustments are made to the curriculum and emphasis is placed on the social and emotional needs of the

individual with ASD. Many schools endeavour to provide supportive environments, supervision during free time and appropriate arrangements to enhance the pupil's integration and sense of security and well-being.

7.4 In all ELBs it is often the case that pupils with ASD are provided with a classroom assistant. Usually the assistant is recruited by the school and paid by the ELB. In some cases the assistants are recruited to the ASD support service and deployed by them to schools as indicated by the assessed needs of the child. This latter arrangement makes it easier to ensure the classroom assistants are properly trained and are supervised by a teacher with specialist expertise. In such cases also the assistants may be deployed at Code of Practice Stage 3, without the need to wait for a statement of special educational needs.

7.5 Where pupils attend schools for pupils with moderate learning difficulties (MLD), classes are small and the adult:pupil ratio is high. It is common for there to be a classroom assistant available for support. Support on site frequently includes access to speech and language therapy and sometimes also occupational therapy. The small numbers in the class and the emphasis on routine and structure often enhances the pupil's school experience. However, teachers expressed anxiety at having children with ASD in their room as many felt inadequately trained and inexperienced in meeting the needs of pupils with ASD.

7.6 Pupils with ASD in some ELBs may attend Speech and Language Units, but in some boards the admissions criteria for these units specifically exclude pupils with ASD.

7.7 Cedar Lodge school in the Belfast Board is the only special school in Northern Ireland for children with medical problems which impact on their educational progress. An increasing number of pupils coming to the school have ASD.

7.8 Support is available for mainstream primary-aged pupils in each ELB from ASD support staff but this type of support is not always available to MLD schools. It may be that ELBs consider that MLD schools do not need this support because they have a high adult:pupil

ratio, but the Task Group finds that many teachers in MLD schools have not had the training and ongoing support that is necessary for them to develop adequate expertise in teaching children with ASD. In one ELB access to ASD support is available only to pupils with a statement of special educational needs.

Belfast Education and Library Board (BELB)

7.9 The Oakwood Support Team at present consists of 2 support teachers and 5 classroom assistants. This service is available at Code of Practice Stage 3, ie a statement of special educational needs is not required. The team supports pupils at Key Stage 1 and 2, providing advice and training when required. A classroom assistant from the team can be assigned to pupils for varying amounts of time according to need. Some pupils with ASD are supported by the outreach services from Harberton and Clarawood schools.

North Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB)

7.10 In NEELB the ASD support service consists of a seconded field officer who supports pupils at Code of Practice Stage 5 (ie pupils with statements of special educational need) and provides training and advice to schools throughout the ELB as required.

South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB)

7.11 In SEELB the ASD support service consists of a Senior Advisory Teacher and an Advisory Teacher. They provide training for individual schools from nursery through to post-primary including special schools and units provision. They also provide training for parents and professionals, often in conjunction with colleagues from HSS, and support for pupils on an individual basis.

Western Education and Library Board (WELB)

7.12 In WELB the ASD support service team consists of a teacher and a classroom assistant providing training and advice to primary and post-primary schools as required, mainly in the Foyle Trust area. Another advisory teacher will take up post in early 2002 and will support schools in the more southerly parts of the board area.

Southern Education and Library Board (SELB)

7.13 In SELB the ASD support service consists of an Assistant Advisory Officer (AAO) and a peripatetic teacher. The AAO provides training to schools and works with post-primary pupils on an individual basis. This person also participates in 2 multi-agency special assessment clinics. The peripatetic teacher supports pupils in nursery, primary and post-primary sectors.

7.14 More generally, many of the teachers involved in support services participate in the TEACCH strategy for Northern Ireland, facilitated by PAPA. The intended outcome is the creation of a team of TEACCH trainers able to carry out cost-effective feasible training. Four ELBs participate in the Northern Ireland TEACCH strategy. In SEELB the advisory team are an integral part of TEACCH training facilitated by their board in conjunction with the Down Lisburn Trust.

7.15 ASD support services may also work in schools for children with severe learning difficulties at times, providing advice and training. However most do not view this as a priority as expertise is already available from a number of teaching staff employed in these schools.

7.16 Teachers in schools and units for children with MLD and other problems have had fewer opportunities for training in ASD. Many are less well equipped than teachers in SLD schools to make policies for pupils with ASD or to create individualised education plans for them. In SLD schools approximately 20% to 25% of pupils have ASD. The proportion is much lower in other special schools and units and in mainstream schools.

7.17 The main remit of the advisory staff is to support pupils in mainstream education. Their caseloads throughout each ELB are increasing. Their job descriptions may include: training for parents, teachers and classroom assistants; meeting parental needs; contributing to diagnostic services; working alongside voluntary services and keeping up-to-date with local and international developments in service delivery. Although essential, this work is leading to great demands on time and the dilution of services to the pupils themselves.

Emerging Issues

7.18 The Task Group has identified a number of issues and perceived gaps in provision for primary-aged pupils. These point to the need for ELBs and Trusts to review provision and put in place more effective structures and strategies in order to ensure that “autism friendly” environments are provided in mainstream and special schools and units. These issues are listed below and considered later in greater detail:

- ❖ teacher anxiety about their ability to educate children with ASD;
- ❖ teacher concerns about coping appropriately with behavioural difficulties associated with ASD;
- ❖ lack of understanding of ASD by teachers, some of whom have little or no ASD training or empathy;
- ❖ the lack of training of teachers and classroom assistants;
- ❖ irregular access to specialist ASD teachers/advisers;
- ❖ poor emphasis, within the curriculum, on the social and emotional needs of children with ASD and their lack of friendships;
- ❖ few curriculum guidelines directing ASD provision;
- ❖ weaknesses in inter-agency co-operation;
- ❖ inconsistency of support from Trusts;
- ❖ lack of access to speech and language therapists and occupational therapists;
- ❖ the generally poor co-ordination of therapies with teaching programmes;
- ❖ the lack of after-school and holiday time support;

- ❖ the difficulties experienced by siblings and the family;
- ❖ in some ELBs the slowness of the statementing process and policies which prevent access to provision unless pupils have statements (ie have reached Code of Practice Stage 5);
- ❖ the lack of flexible placement arrangements to meet needs (eg the fear that once placed in special provision return to mainstream is unlikely);
- ❖ weaknesses in home/school liaison;
- ❖ the difficulties of transfer from pre-school provision to primary school;
- ❖ the difficulties of transfer from the primary sector to post-primary.

7.19 A recent survey by the Education and Training Inspectorate focusing on the provision for pupils with Asperger syndrome in primary and post-primary schools 1999-00 found that the quality of provision varied considerably:

'In general, it ranged from satisfactory to good; in a few instances, the practice observed was of excellent quality and in one case the needs of the pupils were not being met.'

7.20 The survey found, and discussions with teachers confirmed, that teachers' anxieties are increased by the pressures arising from co-ordination of teaching programmes and infrequent, and often casual, contact with numerous education and health professionals. Many teachers were unclear as to how to refer a pupil with Asperger syndrome for additional assistance, and equally unsure of the type of help a child may require. Teachers' difficulties were compounded by

the fact that in many cases there is only informal inter-agency co-operation. The ETI survey report states,

'There is a need to ensure that the pursuit of consistency within the area boards should be mirrored by a similar development across the boards and between Health Trusts and the area boards.'

7.21 Several submissions from parents mentioned the delay in receiving support following referral for assessment. Most pupils with ASD do not cope well in school without additional adult support. In some boards this can usually only be secured through the issue of a statement. The statementing procedure is a lengthy process, sometimes taking more than 6 months. Even before the statementing procedure begins children may have to wait for a considerable period for an informal (Stage 3) assessment to be completed. In such circumstances, parents are frequently frustrated and angered since such delays prevent the early intervention which is considered crucial to future development for children with ASD.

7.22 There is a general concern among parents that placement may be final and that inappropriate placement is difficult to alter. Concern about the annual review procedure, and the potential of a flexible placement such as temporary attendance in a special class or school becoming a permanent set-up, underlies parental anxiety. Parents need to be better informed of the statementing process and the purpose of the annual review as a mechanism to provide a continuum of provision across a range of different settings with an emphasis on integration and inclusion.

7.23 A very effective model, providing a continuum of provision, has been created in a Primary School in the SEELB area. The Speech and Language unit in this school consists of 2 teachers educating pupils at Key Stage 2. There are 14 boys in the unit, 8 of whom have ASD. The unit seeks to improve the pupils' skills in communication and social interaction and their awareness of appropriate behaviour. It also aims to increase their independent working and living skills. Every opportunity is taken to integrate the pupils into general school life and regular liaison between home and school is a valued feature of the

unit. The unit is centrally positioned within the school and it provides easy access to genuine, realistic integration opportunities. A speech and language therapist divides her time between this unit and one other in the area.

7.24 The training of staff is identified as a priority issue in meeting the needs of pupils with ASD. The teachers interviewed felt that training needed to be available as a prerequisite to teaching pupils with ASD. Teachers felt frustrated in that training is difficult to access and expensive. The ASD advisory services offer in-service training courses but they are insufficient to meet the demand. Teachers felt that whole-school training on a basic level would be very useful to ensure that all staff members were aware of issues involved in helping a child with ASD integrate into school life.

7.25 Parents and teachers highlighted classroom assistant training as essential. Without training the assistant can misunderstand the pupil, leading to situations where the child becomes over-dependent or starts to resent the help given. Training needs to be available covering the nature of autism and specific strategies for dealing with pupils at difficult times such as whole-class or group lessons. Assistants need to be aware of how to help the pupil in dealing with the social demands of break and lunchtime and how to organise their belongings to cope with the demands of a school day. Presently, training for classroom assistants is difficult to access and often informal. ELBs need to ensure that training for assistants is appropriate and accessible. The Task Group notes that many assistants are not linked to ASD support services, but are recruited by individual schools. Assistants who are members of ASD support services appear likely to have much better opportunities for appropriate training, advice and supervision.

7.26 One in-service training courses booklet examined for the purpose of this report contained details of 155 courses, only 3 of which were related to issues of ASD. Most primary in-service training booklets did not include information on any of the courses provided on ASD.

7.27 The behaviour of children with ASD emerged as a recurring theme in interviews with professionals in schools. There is no doubt

that meeting the needs of a pupil with autism can be extremely challenging. Managing pupils effectively often requires changing traditional approaches to teaching, learning and discipline. Teachers noted that they often had to make differences in their treatment of the pupils with ASD in order to accommodate their needs and that this action often led to resentment amongst the other pupils. Lack of understanding from staff and peers compounded the difficulties experienced in managing behavioural issues.

7.28 Specific behavioural characteristics highlighted by teachers included:

- ❖ aggressive and odd behaviours;
- ❖ difficulty understanding and following rules;
- ❖ lack of motivation;
- ❖ organisational difficulties;
- ❖ difficulties with concentration;
- ❖ rude and outspoken remarks;
- ❖ violent outbursts.

7.29 Teachers felt that unstructured times were often most difficult for these pupils.

7.30 Parents and teachers were very concerned about bullying in relation to pupils with ASD. The pupils' different styles of thinking, learning and behaving make them very vulnerable and it is feared that pupils with ASD may become more socially isolated and vulnerable as they get older. The school environment should be safe. Appropriate policies and strategies should be employed to prevent bullying and to deal effectively with it when it does occur. Schools need support and advice from ELBs on appropriate policies and strategies, such as some of those mentioned in the paragraph below.

7.31 Teachers recognise that pupils with ASD have particular need for help with social and emotional needs. Many feel, however, that

they lack expertise and are unsure about how to address the issues arising as a result of the pupil's lack of social understanding. This has implications for training and support for teachers in using methods such as circle time, role play, social stories and comic strip conversations, and in developing 'buddy' or mentor systems and 'circle of friends' approaches for use within schools. Social skills need to be addressed from Key Stage 1 in teaching the child with ASD to, for example, take turns, share, wait, ask to use other people's possessions and to share their own willingly. The child is also likely to need guidance on how to join a group, and to begin and maintain friendships. The ETI Asperger syndrome survey (1999-00) found that where school had access to ASD support services from the ELBs,

'Attention to social and behavioural issues was more marked... education plans included targets for encouraging positive classroom interaction, and the schools reported improvement in the pupils' social behaviour over time.'

7.32 Teachers and parents indicate that pupils can appear to cope well with the school situation, but at home, their behaviour is often very different. Some parents expressed concern that their child spent long periods of time in the bedroom finding solace in a current obsession, or would get upset or aggressive very easily after school. It would seem that some pupils become increasingly stressed during the day and then react adversely when they reach the safety of their own home and family.

7.33 It is important that teachers should include targets for social understanding and behaviour in the child's individual education plan (and therefore reflect the child's autism), in addition to targets for academic tasks. Speech and language therapists are specifically trained and skilled at assessing and teaching the use of social skills. Educational psychologists and other members of Behaviour Support Teams in the ELBs also have expertise in assessment and teaching of social skills. In one inter-disciplinary project the Task Group notes that educational psychologists and social workers are collaborating in a social skills training project with pupils who have just transferred to post-primary education. There are many resources available for

teachers to access, but most said they would welcome support in setting specific social and language goals.

7.34 Teachers also need assistance in assessing the child's expressive and receptive language abilities and in setting up alternative communication systems when necessary. The report from the Working Group on the Provision of Speech and Language Therapy Services to Children with SEN in England (November 2000) incorporates this view:

'Therapy for children of school age is best carried out collaboratively within the school context...assessment, diagnosis and therapy should all be carried out in conjunction with teachers and parents/carers.'

7.35 The report further states that the educational context should inform provision. The Task Group considers that speech and language therapists should play a central and consistent role in the education of children with ASD. However, speech and language therapy managers point out that they do not have enough therapists to carry out sufficient school-based multi-disciplinary work. At the instigation of the Minister there has been a recent increase in the number of therapists being trained from 24 to 30. This may still not be sufficient to meet demand.

7.36 Pupils with ASD often have difficulties with motor co-ordination and are likely to have heightened or impaired sensory awareness. Motor problems often lead to difficulties with writing and the presentation of work and such problems may in turn lead to problems of self-esteem, motivation and conflict with teachers. Sensory awareness problems may affect many areas of the pupil's life and inhibit the child's ability to concentrate, sit still, and take part in everyday activities such as eating, dressing, work and play. It is vital that pupils in mainstream primary schools have access to an occupational therapist skilled in addressing these issues. Occupational therapy managers feel that this would be a useful approach to therapy, but state that clinical caseloads are very difficult to manage. The numbers embarking on University courses total 50 per year and all are given general training with sensory and motor issues included. There are relatively few jobs in paediatrics, however, so trainee therapists

tend not to specialise in this area. There are, as a result, very few qualified occupational therapists who have an interest in ASD.

7.37 Professionals and parents alike recognise that there is often weak co-ordination of services from education and health and social services within the school setting. The increasing involvement of educational psychologists and advisory teachers in multi-disciplinary clinics does facilitate better communication between the clinic and the school. However, it remains difficult, while therapists remain primarily clinic-based, for them to have sufficient influence on the individual education plan for the child.

7.38 Often schools and supporting professionals must operate in response to situations as they arise. Comprehensive forward planning, however, is essential to ensure that appropriate arrangements are in place to support children with ASD at critical times so that crises may be avoided. It is vital for example that the child and family and the receiving school are prepared in advance for the arrival of the child into year one or into first form of a post-primary school. The Task Group is aware of examples of year one teachers being provided with training and support by the ELB advisory staff or educational psychologists in anticipation of the arrival of a child with ASD into their class. The Group commends this practice and recommends that it should become the norm.

7.39 It is commonly the case with children who have ASD that changes in routine lead to difficult behaviour. Parents often find that the child with ASD reacts negatively to school holidays, and in some cases the outcome may be very challenging behaviour at home and a great deal of stress for the family. There is a need in many cases for provision during holidays, but it is not clear whether the responsibility for making such provision should lie with the ELBs or with the Trusts. Collaboration between ELBs, Trusts and voluntary agencies may bring about a resolution of this problem.

Features of Good Practice

7.40 The Task Group contends that Key Stage 1 and 2 provision for children with ASD should be:

- ❖ flexible;
- ❖ differentiated;
- ❖ individually planned and resourced;
- ❖ inclusive;
- ❖ functional;
- ❖ structured;
- ❖ supported.

7.41 The Task Group considers that best practice should be underpinned by 3 crucial components:

- ❖ a whole-school ASD approach, including a range of provision and inclusive ethos;
- ❖ staff training and commitment;
- ❖ close links with parents as educators.

7.42 Effective whole-school practice includes informing all staff of the nature of the child's difficulties and making them aware of strategies to help the child with ASD integrate into the school environment.

Effective and positive educational experiences for the child with ASD depend on the staff having an understanding of ASD and how it relates to the individual child in their classroom. The long-term implications of the condition must be considered and short-term targets should be included in the individual education plan. Arrangements to help the child transfer from nursery or playgroup into year one should be well established and shared with the parents. A potentially difficult time for pupils with ASD is transferring to post-primary provision. The primary

school should consider this in advance and make plans, along with ELB support staff, to ensure a smooth transition.

7.43 The Task Group, in making its judgements, considers the following main characteristics as central to a school's planning for effective practice:

- ❖ staff knowledge and expertise;
- ❖ access to ancillary support as indicated in the child's statement or IEP;
- ❖ access to peers of similar age and ability;
- ❖ curriculum flexibility matched to the child's strengths and interests;
- ❖ parental involvement.

7.44 Schools offering added value for children with ASD will, in the Task Group's view, have classroom assistants with appropriate training, and nominate an ASD teacher co-ordinator to act as an advocate for these pupils. This person, who in many cases may be the SEN co-ordinator, should initiate and implement a whole-school policy and arrange provision, including a home support programme. Teachers should endeavour to create co-operative learning activities using the strengths of the child with ASD as a central focus of the task. In all instances the staff should foster involvement and actively plan opportunities to exploit possible group or paired work.

CHAPTER 7

PRIMARY PROVISION**RECOMMENDATIONS****Recommendation 7(i)**

The Task Group recommends that the Department of Education should ensure that ELBs, Trusts and voluntary organisations significantly develop services for pupils of primary school age so that they include the following:

- ❖ early assessment and regular review by a multi-agency, multi-disciplinary team involving parents;
- ❖ access to suitable mainstream placement;
- ❖ access to special unit placement when required, and for as long as required, subject to regular review - the needs of some pupils with ASD may be met in MLD units or Speech and Language units but some pupils may require placement in a unit specially designed to meet the needs of pupils with ASD;
- ❖ access to special school when required, and for as long as required, subject to regular review - the needs of some ASD pupils may, for example, be met in MLD schools or in schools which cater for children with communication difficulties or medical difficulties;
- ❖ provision of a comprehensive and adequately resourced programme by trained staff, implementing an individual education plan which addresses the child's needs and maximises educational and social inclusion;

- ❖ access to appropriate levels of training for all staff - the training needs of staff will vary according to circumstances, and the training available should match their identified needs - staff in special schools and units for children with MLD, speech and language problems and health problems will have particular need of training since they work frequently with pupils with ASD;
- ❖ provision of educational advice, training and support from an adequately resourced ASD support service, to include help as required from appropriately trained and supervised classroom assistants;
- ❖ access to therapy and advice from professionals allied to medicine, to include support with the development of the child's individual education plan;
- ❖ carefully structured and adequately resourced programmes to ensure smooth transition into year 1 and on to post-primary education;
- ❖ home-school programmes which encourage the full involvement of parents;
- ❖ summer schemes appropriate to the needs of ASD children.