

CHAPTER 9

PROVISION FOR CHILDREN WITH ASD AND SEVERE LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

This chapter considers and reviews the education of children with severe learning difficulties and ASD and makes recommendations for the development of comprehensive provision for this group of pupils.

Introduction

9.1 There are pupils with severe learning difficulties (SLD), who are not designated as having Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) within their statements, but who are regarded as having autism by experienced teachers and principals of special schools. A realistic number of pupils with autism cannot be obtained, therefore, by counting numbers of pupils with autism on their statement.

9.2 In one Education and Library Board, for example, a diagnosis of autism may be made by an educational psychologist but in most boards this is not the normal practice. In some board areas the diagnosis is made by a multi-disciplinary team. Occasionally there is a reluctance by parents to accept a diagnosis of autism. In such circumstances, the term 'autism' will not be used in reports or documents, including the child's statement of special educational needs. Some parents of children with SLD who receive an additional diagnosis of autism tend to disregard the impact of the severe learning difficulty.

Incidence Rates and Projections

9.3 Most SLD schools contacted during the compilation of this report indicated that the numbers of pupils in the lower age group on the autistic spectrum are increasing. In one school, for example, which caters for children in the 3-8 age range, 40% of the pupils have autism.

Another school reports 15 out of 18 infant-aged pupils as having autism. A significant number of schools report approximately 25% of their pupils as having autism. The percentage of pupils with SLD and ASD as reported in the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) Survey 1998-2000 is now perceived by schools to be an underestimate.

Current Provision

9.4 The information in this section was gathered by questionnaire from 22 schools for children with severe learning difficulties (SLD). Discussions were also held with a number of the principals of these schools. The ETI report of 1998-2000 on Severe Learning Difficulties was an additional source of information. A scrutiny of relevant literature was also undertaken.

9.5 Presently, all SLD schools have pupils with autism. There are a total of 352 pupils with autism in SLD schools with a further 107 pupils suspected as having autism by their schools although not diagnosed. This indicates a range of 20% to 26% of pupils with ASD attending SLD schools. Most pupils regarded by the schools as having an ASD but without a diagnosis are in the senior age group. The majority of pupils diagnosed with autism are in the infant/junior age group. Pupils with autism are integrated in classes of their peer groups in all SLD schools. In addition 7 schools each have one class exclusively for pupils with autism and 5 schools have more than one class for autism. Most SLD schools run summer schemes for their pupils for between one and 3 weeks during the summer break. The summer schemes are staffed by a core of teachers and/or classroom assistants who work in the schools with additional staffing required in some cases.

9.6 Teaching methods within SLD schools are based on structured approaches. All schools cite using Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communications-Handicapped Children (TEACCH) methods, 15 schools use the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), one school uses intensive interaction (Nind and Hewitt, 1998), and 8 schools report using behavioural analysis for dealing with behaviour problems. All SLD schools have at least one teacher trained in TEACCH methods. Four schools have undertaken

training with the Institute for Applied Behavioural Analysis, Donnellan and LaVigna (IABA). One school has a teacher who completed the module on autism with Queen's University, Belfast. Several teachers throughout Northern Ireland have completed the University of Birmingham autism course which is undertaken by distance learning. Successful completion of the one-year course results in a qualification of an Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE), the two-year course gives a Diploma in Special Education on completion; an additional dissertation can be undertaken for a Masters in Education (MEd).

9.7 The schools report confidence in being able to plan for the needs of the pupils with ASD and have established and improved their provision over the past 7 years. The teaching and learning outcomes are of a good standard in the majority of instances (ETI, 2000).

Support to Schools from Education and Library Boards

9.8 Most schools report that they are left to provide for the problem of increasing numbers of pupils with ASD without any additional resources. They feel that the ELBs do not truly appreciate the wide-ranging challenges schools face through this increase. These challenges include: increasing numbers of pupils with autism; increasing parental demands; the need to develop staff expertise in ASD; increasing challenging behaviour; increasing demand for more teaching space; increasing demand for extra staff; increasing demand for specialist resources; and increasing demand on available staff development time.

9.9 Education and Library Boards provide peripatetic support teachers for ASD including one ELB which has in addition an Assistant Advisory Officer for ASD. Schools value the support and advice from the advisers although it is not consistently available. There is a demand for more of this type of provision.

9.10 The Education and Library Boards provide funding to schools for their summer schemes.

9.11 However, funding is not always equitable, with schools of over 100 pupils receiving the same funding as schools with less than

50 pupils. The effect of this is that some pupils are offered one week on a play scheme whilst pupils in other schools are offered 2 weeks.

9.12 One SLD school, with SEELB assistance, has established a unit for challenging behaviour. This is for pupils of secondary age who have behavioural difficulties. The provision is not specifically for pupils with ASD and challenging behaviour but there is some evidence that it is successful for these pupils. A significant factor in the success of this venture is the substantial dedicated, regular input from clinical psychology. Another SLD school, who grouped 8 pupils with ASD and challenging behaviour together, did not find it to be effective and abandoned this strategy. There was no input from clinical psychology services in this example.

9.13 The Task Group validates the contribution made by the clinical psychology service to some schools.

9.14 Input and support from educational psychology services is valued by schools. A thorough assessment with suggestions for teaching and learning strategies is seen as vitally important for children with autism who have uneven profiles of ability.

Support to Schools from Health and Social Services Trusts

9.15 Most schools reported dissatisfaction with the amount and/or type of support available from Health and Social Services. The types of support available are telephone advice, assessment of challenging behaviour and behavioural programmes within a hospital setting. There is a reluctance to allow health staff to work off site in homes and schools in order to help the transition process from one setting to another.

9.16 Input from therapists varies from school to school in time allocation, collaboration and in quality.

9.17 Principals in SLD schools value the support occupational therapy can provide towards addressing the sensory needs of children with ASD. Unfortunately this provision is rarely available in schools.

9.18 Input from clinical psychology and psychiatry is valued where available but the majority of schools report that they receive insufficient support from this sector. Principals point to the need for much more support. The principals consider support as being of greatest value where personnel visit schools regularly and provide detailed reports with suggestions for practice. Further issues identified by the principals refer to:

- ❖ the inadequate amount of speech and language therapy received by children with ASD in SLD schools;
- ❖ the amount of occupational therapy varies with some schools not receiving any autism-specific input and others getting appropriate input;
- ❖ the inadequate availability of music therapy;
- ❖ support to families.

9.19 The links between home and school are valued by the school principals and a range of strategies are used including:

- ❖ support groups and workshops for parents;
- ❖ social work support for families of children with ASD;
- ❖ community nurses advice and support;
- ❖ voluntary groups, eg Barnardo's, PAPA and PEAT, provide support and training for families.

Current Issues in the SLD Schools

9.20 All SLD schools report that they have pupils with autism who have severe challenging behaviour but who are mostly manageable; a total of 171 pupils throughout the schools. In addition to this, most schools report an increase in numbers of pupils with extremely challenging behaviour which has resulted in an increase in staff injuries, some of them serious. This degree of difficulty concerns a minority of pupils (schools estimate a total of 64), but takes a disproportionate amount of teacher attention and whole-school time

resulting on occasion in less than satisfactory provision for other pupils in the same class. This aspect is dealt with in more detail in Chapter 10.

9.21 Some schools report exceptional organisational difficulties arising from lack of sufficient teaching space in which to address the difficulties of pupils with extreme challenging behaviour. Increasing numbers of pupils in some SLD schools have resulted in classes which have unacceptably large numbers of pupils. In one ELB, SLD schools have some classes with 12 to 15 pupils. The inevitable noise and other stimuli in these classrooms can result in behavioural difficulties amongst pupils.

9.22 Staffing, in most instances, is a problem with some pupils needing constant dedicated attention and supervision. Some ELBs provide 1:1 support for these pupils although schools do not regard this as adequate in some instances. One ELB provides 3 classroom assistants for one pupil who is educated in a separate class because of the pupil's challenging behaviour.

9.23 Another ELB provides temporary general assistants for dedicated pupil support. This makes recruitment difficult due to the lower rate of pay. General assistants are usually untrained yet are required to fulfil a consistently demanding role.

9.24 Most schools report that through the use of structured programmes of learning and the use of visual instruction, problems with behaviour difficulties have diminished. Two schools report making significant progress in addressing pupil behaviour problems through the use of structured teaching and behavioural analysis methods.

9.25 One school has undertaken training in restraining techniques for use with pupils. However, the staff do not use this training, regarding it as being impractical to use in the classroom and in conflict with acceptable pastoral care and their school ethos. Research, cited by La Vigna (2001), indicates that pupil restraint exacerbates episodes of challenging behaviour and is inappropriate for the classroom. The school has preferred to develop whole-school positive reinforcement strategies alone, with detailed analysis of the problem behaviour. This

is having an immediate and positive affect on the behaviour of the pupils.

9.26 Pupils who have autism and additional psychiatric difficulties may require specialised help from health services. Most schools report a serious lack of support from clinical psychology services. One school principal stated "At present, in our area, this is non-existent". One school, with ELB and HSS support, has opened a unit attached to the school for senior pupils with challenging behaviour. It has a ratio of 4 pupils to 3 staff with extensive input from a clinical psychologist.

9.27 Behaviour strategies used in schools may fail to bring about acceptable levels of behaviour and more radical strategies may prove necessary. These include suspension, expulsion, and amendment of statements in order to transfer the pupil to an alternative school or to home tuition.

9.28 One ELB is funding a placement in a school in Scotland which caters specifically for pupils with autism and challenging behaviour whilst another ELB is funding placement of a pupil in England. Health Boards have helped in some cases by removing the pupils for assessment and treatment in psychiatric hospitals. There is usually a care plan of residential assessment and treatment followed by a gradual re-entry to home and to school. A major flaw in this system is the lack of structured advice and staff support to schools in order to enable the school to learn and use the strategies being used by the hospital. Liaison is usually casual and not sufficiently focused with a hospital/school/home plan. A further difficulty is the lack of opportunity to generalise new skills and acceptable behaviour learnt by the child or young person into a new environment. Some parents refuse hospital support and when this happens schools are left in a very difficult position. One school principal commented on the dangers to pupils and staff, adding "one extra classroom assistant is not enough for a pupil with extreme challenging behaviour".

9.29 Some schools report that a shortage of speech and language provision leaves them disadvantaged in addressing one of the core difficulties of autism, that of communication. Speech and language therapists are seen by schools as effective in giving guidance and

strategies to staff for working with children with autism as well as assessing the pupil's communication needs and working with the pupils individually.

9.30 Some SLD schools have input from occupational therapists with expertise in working with children with ASD. Sensory difficulties can be significant for some pupils with ASD and detailed assessments and programmes are valued by schools.

9.31 The purchase of equipment to meet the specific needs of pupils with autism can be significant. Screens, for example, are often needed for pupils and cost £100 each. A wider variety of equipment than usual may be needed by individual pupils because of their exceptionally varied ability across a range of skills. One principal suggests that ELBs should give an allocation of money based on the school numbers of children with autism.

Staffing Ratios

9.32 Most schools report that they do not have enough staff to cater effectively for the needs of children with ASD. Where percentages of pupils with ASD within a school are small, schools can manage with the current staff:pupil ratio. However, this is proving very difficult for those schools where a large percentage of pupils have autism. This is because of the need for a higher staff:pupil ratio for these children and the need for class sizes to be kept consistent with pupil need: in some cases schools maintain ASD classes of 4 pupils. The resulting demand for adequate staffing and for classrooms cannot at present be met in some schools.

9.33 The Task Group supports the view that a teacher:pupil ratio of 1:6 with 2 classroom assistants is acceptable.

9.34 Some ELBs have provided classroom assistants or general assistants to help meet the needs of those pupils with autism with challenging behaviour. However, no school reported having extra staff to meet pupil needs arising solely from autism rather than behaviour. It may be that challenging behaviour may not arise if there were sufficient staffing in order to meet the extra needs of these children.

Staff Training

9.35 Education and Library Boards provide some training for teachers who work with children with autism but schools find this training is often inadequate both in frequency and in breadth. Some schools reported that they have very specific training needs which cannot be met by a general course on autism. One school received training in behaviour strategies for pupils with ASD from an ELB behaviour support team member who had experience of teaching these pupils. This was valued by all staff involved because it was based on a detailed knowledge of ASD and clearly focused on practical outcomes in the classroom. Advice from autism support teachers and advisory officers was praised and found to be particularly effective when training was for all members of staff in a school.

9.36 TEACCH training is regarded by some principals to be too sparse in frequency and availability. This is being addressed through the creation of a local training team in Northern Ireland. Several principals commented that TEACCH was the only autism-specific funded training available throughout Northern Ireland whilst a more eclectic choice of training was needed to meet the various needs of pupils with ASD and learning difficulties. It was recognised by school principals that not all pupil needs will be met through the use of one methodology and that a range of strategies and knowledge of different approaches was crucial to the quality of their ASD provision.

9.37 Training by ELBs of classroom assistants is rare but appreciated by staff able to access it. One member of staff commented that *“it was good to be able to concentrate for a full day on autism and what it means for a child. It makes you appreciate where they are coming from.”* Some schools include their classroom assistants in training days but when staff are employed on temporary contracts they are not paid for training days and subsequently rarely attend.

9.38 Schools are increasingly buying in their own training having identified specific needs. However, their ability to do this is limited, as schools do not have their own staff development budgets. One ELB has funded whole-school training for 2 schools training together in the

use of the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS). This was found to be particularly useful in allowing all teachers and speech therapists in the schools to train at the same time and in promoting further school links. The schools, as a consequence, then trained their classroom assistants using staff from the schools and speech and language therapists.

9.39 There is growing demand from schools for access to training for staff in behavioural analysis. Four schools have undertaken training with the Institute for Applied Behavioural Analysis (IABA), which promotes non-aversive methods of dealing with challenging behaviour from pupils within school settings. These schools report promising results with pupils to date. Some ELBs have funded training with IABA.

Transition Stage Pupils

9.40 In SLD schools the transition stage begins at 14 years and continues until the pupil leaves school at 19 years of age. For young people with ASD this is a particularly traumatic time due to the changes which accompany leaving school and the preparations for this change. It is important that all professionals appreciate the extra care and attention that will be needed to help the young person with autism through the process to an appropriate provision or combination of provisions. A diagnosis of autism may be required in order to access autism-specific provisions. It is therefore important that older pupils have the opportunity for diagnosis if this was missed or unavailable when they were younger.

Models of Best Practice and Future Developments to be Considered

9.41 The following indicators of good practice were identified through the SLD survey (1998-2000) conducted by the Education and Training Inspectorate and through discussion with school principals:

- ❖ commitment and willingness of staff to meet more effectively the pupils' needs;
- ❖ staff knowledge of autism-specific issues;

- ❖ staff training in a variety of effective teaching and learning methods for ASD;
- ❖ an eclectic approach which recognises that some approaches work for some children and not for others and that some approaches are appropriate for some kinds of learning and not for others;
- ❖ recognition that pupils' needs vary from individual to individual, over time and for different areas of learning within individuals;
- ❖ positive staff relationships with pupils;
- ❖ appropriate educational plans drawing on assessment of each child's learning strengths and emerging skills which are individualised, and appropriately recorded;
- ❖ clearly defined and consistent use of effective methodology for encouraging independent work and peer-interaction;
- ❖ the use of a structured day;
- ❖ involvement of parents: support for, and partnerships with parents;
- ❖ enhanced links with outside agencies and professionals;
- ❖ support and teaching for pre-school children;
- ❖ provision for pupils in schools and nurseries from age 3;
- ❖ strong links with speech and language therapists;
- ❖ close liaison with post-school placement units.

9.42 Information obtained from school visits and liaison with the Department of Education and Science in the Republic of Ireland, and the Task Force on Autism (ROI), provides the following additional exemplars of developing practice:

- ❖ classes of no more than 6 pupils with one teacher and 2 classroom assistants;
- ❖ separate schools established for pupils with highly challenging behaviour with staffing ratio of 2 staff to one pupil;
- ❖ separate class for individual pupils with extreme challenging behaviour with one teacher and at least one special needs assistant;
- ❖ schools with their own full-time speech and language therapist;
- ❖ a school with its own occupational therapist;
- ❖ access to a variety of ASD professional development programmes;
- ❖ State funding of Birmingham autism course with access through local universities.

9.43 In other countries notable examples of good practice include the following:

- ❖ staff ratios determined according to individual need of pupil;
- ❖ speech and language therapists employed by school;
- ❖ whole-school training, initiatives eg Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS);
- ❖ access to specialist units for behaviour support;

- ❖ centres of expertise in autism for assessment, staff training and individual work with pupils with ASD in addition to their mainstream school placement.

9.44 The Task Group finds that provision for children with ASD and severe learning difficulties is improving and indicators of best practice are emerging which provide benchmarks for establishing effective provision. The findings indicated in this section are underpinned by two main elements:

- ❖ pupils with ASD and SLD need programmes which identify their individual needs, learning strengths and difficulties and provide guidance towards addressing the impact of the triad of impairments;
- ❖ there is a need for a policy guideline by ELBs for pupils with ASD and SLD in order to direct resources and promote multi-disciplinary initiatives.

9.45 Jordan (2001) identifies the main issues in providing an educational environment conducive to promoting effective provision for pupil with ASD. These are:

- ❖ structuring the teaching approach emphasising visual instruction;
- ❖ minimising verbal instruction to what is necessary;
- ❖ learning with and from peers as well as one-to-one support;
- ❖ therapeutic environments including sensory rooms and equipment.

9.46 In making recommendations the Task Group finds that provision must address the child's ASD and equally their SLD. The issue is in matching provision to individual needs (Jordan, 2001). The Task Group endorses current provision including separate classes and integration, though it is stressed that classes must be within a Key Stage and maintain opportunities for integration. The Task Group

considers SLD schools are part of the continuum of ASD provision. Schools for SLD should audit their provision and prioritise the action they need to take to meet the challenges of increasing admissions of pupils with ASD and SLD. Provision to support children with ASD integrated into mainstream should also be developed. Schools for SLD should develop ASD outreach provision. A major finding of the Task Group is the need for staff development to ensure that teachers can individualise programmes to address each child's:

- ❖ pastoral needs;
- ❖ communication needs;
- ❖ social and emotional needs;
- ❖ cognitive needs;
- ❖ long-term needs into adulthood.

CHAPTER 9

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RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 9(i)

The Task Group recommends that staff in SLD schools should have access to a range of training provision to meet their various needs and provided by the ELBs in co-operation with voluntary associations, the ASD support service and other training providers, for example, universities. This provision should include:

- ❖ whole-school training in ASD;
- ❖ training in a variety of teaching methods and approaches;
- ❖ training in behavioural techniques;
- ❖ access to conferences and workshops for ASD provided by agencies.

Recommendation 9(ii)

The Task Group recommends that SLD schools should have:

- ❖ a staffing ratio of one teacher and 2 classroom assistants to 6 pupils identified with an ASD; and additional staff to meet the needs of pupils experiencing severe challenging behaviour as indicated by multi-disciplinary assessment;
- ❖ appropriate accommodation to meet pupils' needs;

- ❖ sufficient additional equipment to meet the needs of pupils with ASD;
- ❖ speech and language therapists appointed to their staff;
- ❖ access to occupational therapy with ASD specialist knowledge;
- ❖ access to music therapy;
- ❖ adequate funding to run ASD-specific summer schemes.

Recommendation 9(iii)

The Task Group recommends that SLD schools should maintain:

- ❖ home-school ASD programmes which encourage the full involvement of parents;
- ❖ partnership links with voluntary associations in order to avail of their services and support.