

PARENTAL ATTITUDES TO THE STATUTORY ASSESSMENT AND STATEMENTING PROCEDURES ON SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

Key Findings

- ◆ 80% of parents indicated that they were satisfied with the statutory assessment procedure.
- ◆ 45% of parents said that the school was instrumental in initiating the request for assessment.
- ◆ 63% of parents reported that their child had been experiencing difficulties for longer than two years prior to the start of the assessment procedure.
- ◆ 96% of parents stated that they had received copies of written reports on their child's assessment.
- ◆ 80% of those who responded agreed that the final statement represented a fair and accurate assessment of how their child's needs would be met. 70%

of parents reported that the wording of the proposed statement was easily understood.

- ◆ 18% of parents indicated that they had requested amendments to the proposed statement, of whom 70% stated that the Board had taken account of their request.
- ◆ 18% of parents stated that they had appealed to the Special Educational Needs Tribunal, of whom 60% stated that the appeal did not go to a hearing.
- ◆ 73% of parents said that the annual review was helpful in meeting the special educational needs of their child. 76% indicated that a review was needed annually, even if their child's needs remained unchanged.
- ◆ Most parents interviewed welcomed the inclusion of children with SEN into mainstream schools.
- ◆ Suggested improvements to the statutory assessment procedure included earlier intervention, more consideration of parental knowledge of the child, reduction in time taken, less bureaucracy and paperwork and greater feedback from professionals.

INTRODUCTION

1. The present system for the identification, assessment and statementing of children with special educational needs (SEN) was first introduced in January 1986. Since the 1998/99 academic year, Northern Ireland has had a similar government code of practice to that already operated in England and Wales, offering practical guidance on how to identify, assess and monitor all pupils with SEN. The Code was developed with the view that the SEN of most children can be identified and addressed in a mainstream setting. Importantly, it standardised provision for children with SEN in terms of procedures and timescales. It set out five recommended stages, from an initial school-based assessment through to the decision by the Education and Library Board (ELB) to issue a statement identifying a child's special educational needs. ELBs have a statutory duty to identify, assess, and in appropriate cases make special educational provision for children with SEN in their areas.

2. The number of pupils with statements of SEN in Northern Ireland in 1997/98 prior to the introduction of the new Code of Practice was 7,962, representing 2.3% of the total school population. The number of pupils with statements of special educational need in the 2001/02 academic year was 10,040, representing 2.9% of the total school population.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

3. Against a context of emerging policy and legislation, several studies have already been carried out to examine aspects of special education provision in Northern Ireland. The purpose of this research study, as identified by DE, was to conduct a representative survey of the parents of children with a statement of SEN, and to ascertain the parents' views on a number of issues.

4. The remit of the research study translated into five key tasks:
 - i. to explore parents' experience of the statutory assessment procedure;
 - ii. to examine whether, in the parents' view, the process met their child's needs;

- iii. to analyse if provision met parental expectation;
- iv. to examine parents' attitudes to inclusion in mainstream schooling;
- v. to identify any other relevant issues.

MAIN FINDINGS

5. Data analysis revealed that, overall, parents were satisfied with the present system for statutory assessment and statementing. The main findings of the research are as follows:

Characteristics

- ◆ 59.2% of parents indicated that their child had learning difficulties (moderate/severe/profound/multiple). This result varied significantly across Education and Library Boards.
- ◆ 30.5% indicated that their child presently attended a primary mainstream school, ranging from 19.2% in the Belfast Education and Library Board area to 45.3% in the Western Education and Library Board area.
- ◆ 57.1% of parents indicated that prior to having a statement their child had attended a primary mainstream school. This ranged from 38.5% in the Belfast Education and Library Board area to 67.3% in the Southern Education and Library Board area.
- ◆ Most parents indicated that their child attended school within the Board area where they lived.
- ◆ 85.7% of parents indicated that no other child in the family had a statement.

The Statutory Assessment Procedure

- ◆ Some 79.7% of parents indicated that they were satisfied with the statutory assessment procedure. Levels of satisfaction were not uniform across individual Boards, ranging from 69.3% in the

North-Eastern Education and Library Board area to 86% in the South-Eastern Education and Library Board area.

- ◆ Some 45.4% of parents stated that the school was instrumental in initiating the request for assessment.
- ◆ 63.4% of parents responded that their child had been experiencing difficulties for longer than two years prior to the start of the assessment procedure. 43.7% of parents stated that the period between the request for assessment and the start of assessment had been longer than six weeks.
- ◆ Some 54.6% of parents responded that they had been given a designated Named Board Officer as a point of contact for advice and guidance. Of the parents who responded, 87.2% said they had been advised of their right to make a representation about their child's learning needs.
- ◆ 96.4% of parents stated that they had received copies of written reports on their child's assessment, and of these 81.7% were satisfied that it represented an accurate description of their child's educational needs.

The Making of a Statement

- ◆ Of the parents who responded (943), 79.8% indicated their satisfaction with the procedure for making a statement. This ranged from 74.7% in the North-Eastern Education and Library Board area to 86.2% in the Belfast Education and Library Board area.
- ◆ 80% of the parents who responded agreed that the final statement represented a fair and accurate assessment of how their child's needs would be met.
- ◆ 70% of parents stated that the wording of the proposed statement, including the recommendations made, was easily understood. 79.1% of parents stated that it was specific to their child's needs.

- ◆ 18.5% of parents indicated that they had requested amendments to the proposed statement, while 12.6% responded that they did not know they could. Some 70.3% of parents who indicated that they had requested amendments said that the Board had taken account of their request.
- ◆ 39.5% of parents stated that they did not know how long the process took to complete the final statement. A further 21.4% stated that the process had taken place within eight weeks.
- ◆ Most parents (92.7%) responded that they agreed with the school named in the final statement.
- ◆ 18.3% of parents responded that they had appealed to the Special Educational Needs Tribunal. Of these 60% stated that the appeal did not go to a hearing.

The Annual Review

- ◆ A total of 706 parents responded that the annual review was helpful in meeting the special educational needs of their child, representing 72.7% of responses. A further 15.9% indicated that the annual review was sometimes helpful, while 4.3% indicated that it was not helpful.
- ◆ 88% of parents indicated their satisfaction with the arrangements for review meetings.
- ◆ Most parents confirmed that arrangements were in place for their child's statement to be reviewed annually, representing 87.5% of total responses.
- ◆ 72.3% of parents responded that their child's statement had been reviewed between 1-4 times.
- ◆ Most parents stated that they had received a report summarizing the outcome of the review meeting for their child, representing 78.3% of total responses.

- ◆ Most parents responded that a review was needed annually, even if their child's needs remained unchanged, representing 75.8% of total responses.

Amendments to Statements

- ◆ Most parents responded that no amendments had been made to their child's statement, representing 64.6% of total responses. A total of 20.9% of parents responded that amendments had been made and 14.4% of respondents did not know.
- ◆ Of 203 respondents who indicated that an amendment had been made, 52.7% said that they had requested the amendment.
- ◆ A total of 194 parents indicated reasons for an amendment. The reasons were identified as:
 - A change of school.
 - A change in provision (eg classroom assistance; speech therapy).
 - Updating to reflect child's changing condition and/or needs.
 - A change in wording.

Transition

- ◆ Of the parents who responded (90), 76.7% indicated their satisfaction with the recommendations in the Transition Plan.
- ◆ Most parents responded that they did not have a copy of a Transition Plan for their child, representing 65.6% of total responses (157).
- ◆ Of 133 respondents, 51.9% indicated that they were aware of a named teacher who would co-ordinate the transition process.
- ◆ Most parents responded that they had received advice and guidance from the school regarding the Transition Plan, representing 62.2% of total responses

Parental Attitudes Towards Inclusion

- ◆ Most of the parents interviewed welcomed the inclusion of children with SEN into mainstream schools. Consensus was, however, limited by a number of caveats relating to existing standards in training, teaching, intervention and resources.
- ◆ The main points raised in support of inclusion can be categorised as follows:

Collective Benefits of Inclusion

- Inclusion should be encouraged where possible and where appropriate.
- Inclusion should not be endemic, but should be based on the ability, needs and interests of the individual child.
- Inclusion demands a broader view of children's needs so that their education is not just defined in terms of their learning difficulty or disability.
- Positive inclusion should challenge common stereotypes and prejudices surrounding the term 'special educational needs'.
- Inclusion should encourage mainstream schools to develop and promote a whole-school ethos of equity, inclusiveness and integration and to demonstrate this in subsequent policy documents.
- A detailed, comprehensive and unambiguous statement should reliably inform the type of school proposed and appropriate education provision.
- Successful inclusion strategies should ensure that all recommendations specified in the final statement are implemented.

Benefits of Inclusion for Children

- Children should be consulted as part of any inclusive plan to gauge their readiness for integration.
- Inclusion in a mainstream setting enables children with SEN to interact with their peers and encourages the development of a social identity and associated social skills.
- Integration with one's peers is considered a significant factor in the development of self-confidence, self-esteem and self-worth.
- Inclusion can encourage independence.
- Inclusion can encourage and positively challenge the intellectual and educational progress of children with SEN.
- The presence of children with SEN in a mainstream setting has significant benefits for other children – educationally, intellectually, socially and emotionally. These benefits need promotion.
- Concerns exist that brighter children may be under-challenged in a special school.
- Children with a purely physical disability or medical condition should have automatic ease of access to mainstream schools and freedom of movement around school buildings.
- Inclusion in a local mainstream school has extra-curricular benefits and enables children with SEN to socialise with their peers outside school hours.
- Inclusion in a mainstream school can benefit the family in terms of travelling times and associated arrangements.

Implications for Schools

- DE should consider the funding implications that accompany increased inclusion, and take steps to ensure sufficient resources exist to support integration.
- DE and Education and Library Boards should develop training strategies to ensure that mainstream schools have sufficient

numbers of trained teachers with expertise in SEN in its various forms.

- Mainstream schools should seek to raise staff awareness of SEN in its various forms - from ancillary staff to senior management and Boards of Governors.
 - Mainstream schools should have adequate facilities and resources to accommodate children with SEN.
- ◆ Reservations surrounding strategies to promote inclusion can be categorised as follows:

Collective Disadvantages of Inclusion

- Certain learning difficulties – particularly severe or profound difficulties – may not, under present conditions, be adequately provided for in a mainstream setting.
- Special schools have an important role to play in the education of certain children with SEN and may have greater expertise and available resources.
- The integration of children with SEN in a mainstream setting may only serve to highlight their differences.

Disadvantages of Inclusion to Children

- Mainstream inclusion may not necessarily be the best option for every child. Children with SEN should essentially attend the school that most responds to their needs.
- Consideration should be given to the difficulties that a child with SEN may encounter in a mainstream setting, including the size of class, inability to cope with curricular demands, the worry of 'being left behind' and the prejudices of others in the school.
- Children with SEN may benefit from being educated in smaller groups.
- Lack of awareness may lead to mis-labelling and unnecessary stereotyping.

- The integration of children with SEN into a mainstream setting may detrimentally affect the progress of other children in the class.
- A special school placement can protect children with SEN from bullying and insensitive treatment.

Implications for Schools

- Sufficient funding arrangements to access adequate resources may not be available to mainstream schools that are seeking to become more inclusive.

6. A number of issues were identified by parents. These include:

- ◆ administrative procedures which are time-consuming, bureaucratic and non-user friendly;
- ◆ perceived deficiencies in the level and nature of communication;
- ◆ perceived deficiencies in the dissemination of information;
- ◆ perceived deficiencies in levels of parent support and guidance;
- ◆ perceived deficiencies in the implementation of procedures;
- ◆ perceived deficiencies in training for teaching and teaching support staff;
- ◆ perceived deficiencies in funding and resource allocation.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

7. The research report suggests that consideration should be given to the improvement of special education provision as part of an inclusive strategy. Recommendations, based on parental feedback, are made with regard to the assessment procedure; the statementing procedure; support and guidance; administrative procedures; training and resources and inclusion.

The assessment procedure

- ◆ the development of a more personal, less bureaucratic framework;
- ◆ a review of strategies to increase parental representation and involvement;
- ◆ a review of the relevance, validity and compatibility of assessments to the individual child;
- ◆ a review of strategies to improve early intervention;
- ◆ a review of statutory arrangements for children with medical/physical conditions.

The statementing procedure

- ◆ the development of relevant, unambiguous and understood statements that reflect the needs of the individual child;
- ◆ a review of guidance procedures for parents;
- ◆ a review of funding arrangements to adequately resource recommendations set down in the statement;
- ◆ a review of the implementation of recommendations set down in the statement;
- ◆ a review of the quality and effectiveness of the Annual Review;
- ◆ a review of the quality and effectiveness of the Transition Plan.

Support and guidance

- ◆ a review of the arrangements for the dissemination of information to parents;
- ◆ a review of the helpfulness of professional terminology to parents;

- ◆ a review of the remit of the Named Board Officer;
- ◆ consideration of the nomination of a designated Officer with a specific remit for parents of children with SEN;
- ◆ consideration of the merits of a helpline service to provide independent, impartial advice;
- ◆ a review of the efficiency of current partnerships with other statutory agencies and voluntary organisations.

Administrative procedures

- ◆ a review of strategies to streamline and reduce timescales;
- ◆ a review of the efficiency of current management information systems;
- ◆ consideration of strategies to reduce the shortfall in levels of provision of specific remedial services.

Training and resources

- ◆ consideration of the training implications for teaching and teaching support staff for educating children with SEN;
- ◆ consideration of strategies to further promote an awareness and understanding of SEN;
- ◆ consideration of strategies to increase the number of teachers with specialist qualifications;
- ◆ consideration of additional funding to further support in-service training;
- ◆ a review of training opportunities and consideration of accredited training for non-teaching staff.

Inclusion

- ◆ Consideration of the further promotion of an educational culture of equity and respect for diversity;
- ◆ Consideration of the development and promotion of a more inclusive teaching profession;
- ◆ A review of the impact of inclusion on the professional development of teachers;
- ◆ A review of schools' policy in relation to SEN.

METHODOLOGY

8. The chosen research methodology and associated evaluation instruments were designed within the context of current educational policy and statutory requirements relating to Stages 4 and 5 of the Code of Practice. The research was intended to investigate parental perceptions concerning statutory assessment and statementing and the associated processes, namely amendments to statements, the annual review and transition plans, and their views on the concept of inclusion.
9. A quantitative and qualitative approach to the collection of data was considered the most efficient means of compiling a broad representation of parent perspectives. Two methods of gathering information – a questionnaire survey and telephone interviews – were developed.
10. Each ELB issued a letter to parents of children who had statements or who were going through the statutory assessment process inviting them to take part in the survey. A total of 7,222 letters of invitation were issued. Of these, 2,346 parents (32%) responded that they would be willing to take part in the survey. Of this number, 1,032 questionnaires (44%) were returned. This number included some returns (n=25) from an abbreviated questionnaire which had been sent to identified parents (n=48) in the BELB area who lived in the most deprived wards and who had not completed the original questionnaire. This also served to address some under-representation in the main survey.

11. Parents who completed the questionnaire had the option to indicate if they wished to be contacted for a telephone interview. Interview questions were based around the same broad areas as the questionnaire, with the added opportunity to obtain information in greater detail. Two representative control groups of parents were selected for interview – 1) parents who were most dissatisfied with the process and 2) a selected group of all parents to obtain views on inclusion.

THE PROJECT

12. The research project was carried out for the Department of Education by the University of Ulster, Coleraine. The cost of the project was £27,094.

FULL REPORT

13. The full report, entitled “Parental Attitudes to the Statutory Assessment and Statementing Procedures on Special Educational Needs” by Una O’Connor, Brendan Hartop and Roy McConkey is available on the Department of Education website at www.deni.gov.uk/facts_figures/

This paper is a summary of the research report and as such any views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Department of Education.

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