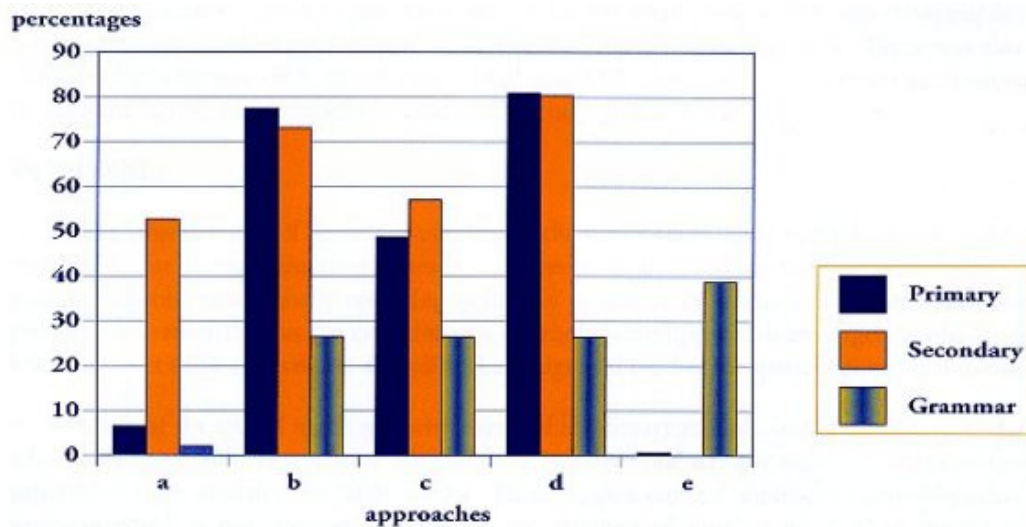


Practice in Mainstream Schools for Children with Special Educational Needs

Key Findings

- Overall, it was evident that there was no absolute notion of special educational needs (SEN) being applied in schools.
- Over 90% of schools, but just over 60% of grammar schools, responding to the survey had a designated teacher responsible for SEN.

Figure 1: Principal forms of provision for SEN



- a = teaching in special class
 b = withdrawal for individual or small group tuition
 c = in-class support
 d = differentiation by class or subject teachers
 e = none of the above

- Some schools had access to a wide range of external services (e.g. educational psychologists, peripatetic teachers, outreach teachers, speech therapists, advisers etc). However, the availability of these services was patchy and their quality was variable.
- Schools made use of a range of responses to SEN, though there was a heavy reliance on withdrawal work and (in secondary schools) special classes, with somewhat less evidence than might have been expected of in-class support or differentiation. Around 7% of schools had special units.
- Schools tended to rely heavily on the use of cut-off points on standardised tests, particularly of reading attainment, in identifying children's SEN.
- Most schools (around 80%) maintained a record of children receiving additional help because of their SEN. However these records were often not in the form of the register advocated in the Code of Practice.
- Many schools anticipated at least some difficulties in implementing the recommendations of the Code of Practice, with the production of education plans and the maintenance of the SEN register seeming particularly problematic. Secondary schools tended to perceive more problems than their primary counterparts.
- In by far the greatest number of schools there were forms of SEN provision and practice which did not currently meet the Code's requirements, but which could, in principle, be developed and adapted to do so.

Introduction

1. There is a strong tradition in Northern Ireland, as elsewhere in the UK, that the large majority of pupils with special educational needs should be educated in mainstream schools. This study looks at provision and practice in those schools. The immediate occasion of the exercise was the publication of the draft *Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs* (DENI, 1996) and the proposal that, after due consultation, the Code should be introduced into schools in September 1998.

2. The purpose of the study was to provide data for DENI and the Education and Library Boards (ELBs) on the status and form of special educational needs provision prior to the introduction of the Code, and to establish a baseline against which the impact of the Code might be evaluated. Data collection took two forms: a postal questionnaire sent to every mainstream school in the province, and case-study visits to 27 schools (with telephone follow-up in a further four). The survey and case studies took place during the 1996/97 academic year.

Pupils with Special Educational Needs

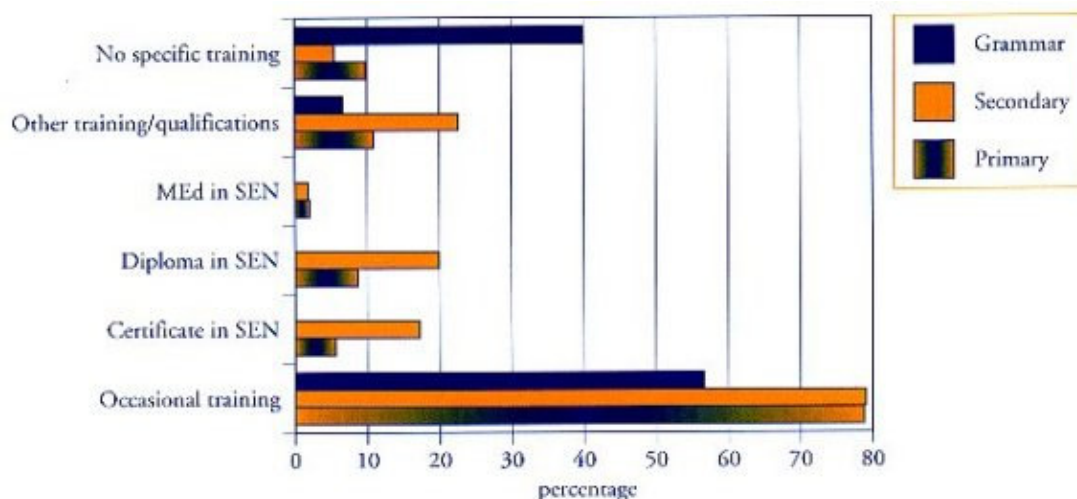
3. The percentage of pupils with statements of special educational needs in responding schools was 1.1%. However, the distribution of these pupils was uneven, with some 31% of schools having no pupils with statements whilst others were the location for units providing for significant numbers of such pupils. Similar variation can be seen in the figures provided for pupils with SEN but without statements, where 18% of pupils in secondary schools were identified as having SEN, but only 0.7% of grammar school pupils and 11.5% of primary pupils. There was some evidence that schools which streamed pupils or withdrew them for small group tuition saw those pupils in bottom streams or withdrawal groups - and *only those pupils* - as having SEN. There was also a tendency for behaviour difficulties to be equated with SEN. Overall, it was evident that there was no absolute notion of special educational needs being applied in schools.

Personnel

4. The large majority of schools responding to the survey (over 90%) had a designated teacher responsible for special educational needs. However, many of these teachers, particularly in primary schools, were actually operating as literacy or numeracy teachers managing withdrawal programmes rather than as the co-ordinators of whole-school provision envisaged by the Code. Only just over 60% of grammar schools had a designated teacher for special educational needs.

5. Many of the special needs teachers (over half in primary schools, over a third in secondary schools and over 90% in grammar schools) have less than one day per week equivalent of their timetabled time available for SEN work. These figures conceal significant school-by-school variation which is not necessarily related to the numbers of pupils with SEN in the school. Similarly, the large majority of them have other significant roles to carry out in their schools.

Figure 2: Training and qualifications of special needs teachers



6. Many special needs teachers had received training on an occasional basis, but far fewer had received sustained training or held specialist SEN qualifications. For instance, fewer than 5% of special needs teachers in primary and secondary schools hold masters' degrees in SEN. Much of the recent training had related to the proposed introduction of the Code and had been in the form of a short, usually one-day, programme.

7. Many schools (41 % of primaries, 64% of secondaries and 12% of grammars) are able to call upon at least one other teacher to undertake SEN work and may also be able to call upon non-teaching assistants (NTAs). Again these figures conceal considerable school-by-school variation and the tendency is for additional SEN staff to be part-timers or (in secondary schools) subject teachers filling 'gaps' in their timetables.

8. Some schools were able to fund their additional staff as a result of resources made available through time-limited projects. Where this was the case, it sometimes appeared that provision was 'bolted on' to the mainstream of the school, making little impact on mainstream practice and remaining vulnerable to sudden changes in funding.

External Services

9. Some schools had access to a wide range of external services (educational psychologists, peripatetic teachers, outreach teachers, speech therapists, advisers etc). Where these services were available and of high quality, schools were appreciative of the support they offered. The quality and extent of support available to schools from external sources was, however, highly variable and this casts some doubt on the ability of schools to construct a meaningful response at the Code's stage 3. It was also apparent that the availability of services varied between ELBs.

Forms of SEN Provision

10. Ability-grouping (sets or streams) was the dominant form of organisation for teaching purposes in both secondary and grammar schools, and was also evident in over a quarter of primary schools. Pupils with SEN tended to be placed in bottom groups and such placement was sometimes equated with 'having SEN'.

11. Schools made use of a range of responses to SEN, though there was a heavy reliance on withdrawal work and (in secondary schools) special classes, with somewhat less evidence than might have been expected of in-class support or differentiation. Around 7% of schools had special units, which tended to operate somewhat separately from the mainstream of the school, although this figure conceals differences between the various ELBs.

12. Schools tended to rely heavily on the use of cut-off points on standardised tests, particularly of reading attainment, in identifying children's special educational needs. In some primary schools, identification of children's difficulties was delayed until year 2. There was little evidence of broader notions of special educational needs calling for more holistic forms of assessment.

13. Most schools (around 80%) maintained a record of children receiving additional help because of their special educational needs. However, these were often simply lists of pupils receiving help with literacy and to a limited extent numeracy. These lists were often not in the form of the register advocated in the Code of Practice. Over half of schools produced individual plans and operated a five-stage assessment process as recommended in the Code. However, although these features were in existence, it is not clear that they always served the purposes implied by the Code. In particular, stage 2 tended to consist of the withdrawal of pupils for extra literacy, or numeracy tuition, and the plans produced at that stage took the form of the SEN teacher's personal records. There was only limited evidence of a response to children's needs centred on the mainstream classroom and co-ordinated by the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) through cross-curricular planning.

Anticipated Problems in Implementing the Code of Practice

14. Many schools anticipated at least some difficulties in implementing the recommendations of the Code of Practice, with the production of education plans and the maintenance of the SEN register seeming particularly problematic. Secondary schools tended to perceive more problems than their primary counterparts. Some schools expressed confidence in their ability to meet the Code's demands, though this was sometimes because they felt they could simply re-label existing practice in the Code's terms.

15. The majority of schools had produced a SEN policy and/or had devoted a section in their school development plan to SEN. There was evidence that many schools had undertaken some SEN training in response to the publication of the Code, but fewer had plans to sustain that training in future.

16. Schools tended to use somewhat traditional and formal means of communicating with parents, but did not report any major problems in obtaining their support. However, the Code's requirement for increased parental involvement may require a review of existing procedures and methods of communication. Governing bodies appeared to play only a limited role in respect of SEN provision.

Two Models?

17. In a few schools, it was evident that SEN practice was already very close to both the letter and the spirit of the Code. In others, SEN practice appeared to be rudimentary and in need of substantial development. In by far the greatest number of schools, however, there were forms of SEN provision and practice which did not currently meet the Code's requirements, but which could, in principle, be developed and adapted to do so.

18. However, it is clear that practice in Northern Ireland schools is based on a model which is somewhat different from that implied by the Code. This model has to be seen in the context of a selective system with a large voluntary sector - a system, moreover, which appears not to have undergone the significant changes brought about in England by the whole school approach, the integration of pupils with SEN and the comprehensive schools movement.

19. The Code assumes that children with a wide range of SEN will be distributed throughout a school, that curriculum access is a priority and that SEN provision is accordingly best made by ordinary class and subject teachers in mainstream classrooms. The priority for schools, therefore, is to identify children's needs and co-ordinate the responses that all teachers make to them through the efforts of a proactive SENCO. Schools in Northern Ireland, by and large,

adopt a narrower focus on literacy and numeracy. SEN provision tends to be located outside mainstream classrooms and not effectively linked into classroom practice.

20. Matched against the Code's recommendations, provision and practice in Northern Ireland schools appears wanting. However, it is not at all clear whether this practice is less *effective* or whether it is simply based on *different assumptions* about special needs education. The dilemma facing DENI and the ELBs is whether they pursue a form of 'surface compliance' with the Code, without any widespread acceptance of its underlying assumptions, or whether they seek a major realignment of provision and practice in Northern Ireland in line with those assumptions. In the process, of course, they might risk losing some of the real benefits of current forms of provision.

Recommendations

21. The research team's recommendations assume that implementation is intended to be real rather than superficial. These recommendations include:

- Some immediate concerns of schools could be addressed if DENI and the ELBs gave a lead in the development of education plans and SEN policies and in producing guidance in respect of those aspects of the SENCO role that are relatively unfamiliar.
- There is a need to place an emphasis on the classroom implications of the Code and, in particular, to promote the development of strategies for meeting children's needs within ordinary classrooms. This requires action by DENI, by the ELBs and by Principals.
- There is a need for a 're-visioning' of the Code, involving schools and other stakeholders in an engagement with its fundamental principles and in the establishment of a series of working groups to review the specific implications of these principles for a range of aspects of SEN policy and practice in the Province.
- Mechanisms and processes should be developed to support SENCOs and Principals as key players in the implementation of the Code. These include INSET support, target setting, the specification of job descriptions and the promotion of networking.
- A review of support services (including the Educational Psychology Service) provided to schools by ELBs and other agencies is necessary to ensure equitable access and the opportunity for schools to develop responses at the Code's stage 3.
- A series of issues which were not the primary focus of this research nonetheless emerged as important factors in schools' responses to SEN. Accordingly, we recommend that a review should be undertaken of the role of special schools to harmonise their work with that of mainstream schools and of training for teachers and NTAs. We also recommend that DENI and the ELBs should keep their funding policies under review and seek the involvement of parental groups in the implementation of the Code.
- Given the imminent review of the English version of the Code, DENI and the ELBs should focus their implementation effort on the principles of the Code rather than on 'those detailed procedures which are subject to change.'

Methodology

22. Data collection took two forms:

- A postal questionnaire was sent to every mainstream school in the province. In the event, some 700 responses were received (a 59% return rate).
- Case-study visits were undertaken in 27 schools across the Province (with telephone follow-up in a further 4), identified by ELBs as reflecting the range of practice in their areas.

The questionnaire sought information on:

- the nature of the special needs population in the school (numbers of pupils with SEN, numbers with statements etc);
- the presence or otherwise of features of SEN provision recommended by the Code (Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator [SENCO], SEN policy etc);
- perceptions of the likely impact of the introduction of the Code.

The case study visits took the form of interviews with Principals, special needs teachers and any other teachers closely involved in SEN provision. The purpose of these interviews was to amplify the information provided in the questionnaire responses and explore issues that were emerging from those responses.

The Project

23. The project was undertaken for DENI by the University of Newcastle Department of Education (Special Needs Research Centre), at a cost of £29,745.

Full Report

24. The full report entitled '**Practice in Mainstream Schools for Children with Special Educational Needs**', DENI Research Report Series No 11, is available from DENI, cost £5. *

This paper is a summary of the research report, and as such any views it contains are not necessarily those of DENI

* Each educational institution and library is entitled to one free copy.

Purpose of DENI Research Briefings

DENI places a high value on the wide circulation of research results to ensure that research has the maximum impact on policy and practice in education. DENI Research Briefings are designed to provide attractive, interesting and easy access to research findings for policy makers, researchers, teachers, lecturers, employers and the public to facilitate informed discussion of educational issues. Research cannot make decisions for policy makers and others concerned with improving the quality of education. Nor can it by itself bring about change. But it can create a better basis for decisions, by providing information and explanation about educational practice and by clarifying and challenging ideas and assumptions.

Previous Research Briefings

- DENI funded research 1993/94 RB1/1993
- DENI funded research 1994/95 RB1/1995
- Persistent school absenteeism in Northern Ireland in 1992 RB2/1995
- Approaches to differentiation in primary schools RB1/1996
- Education and economic development in Northern Ireland: empirical evidence and regional perspectives RB3/1996
- DENI funded research 1996/97 RB1/1997
- A follow-up survey of teachers who qualified in 1991 and 1992 RB2/1997
- Diversification of the first foreign language - a review of the literature RB3/1997
- An initial analysis of the impact of formula funding and local management of schools RB4/1997
- A review of research evidence on the apparent underachievement of boys RB5/1997
- Staying on in full-time education in Northern Ireland: an economic analysis RB6/1997
- An Investigation into Non-completion of NVQ and GNVQ courses in Further Education Colleges RB1/1998
- Science at Key Stage 4 RB2/1998
- DENI Funded Research 1997/1998 RB3/1998

- The success of young people in further education and vocational training: an economic analysis RB4/1998

DENI research briefings may be photocopied for use within your own institution

A limited number of additional copies may be obtained by writing to:

Statistics and Research Branch
Department of Education Northern Ireland
Rathgael House
Balloo Road
BANGOR
Co Down
BT19 7PR

(Telephone: 01247 279679/Fax: 01247 279777 / e-mail:
stats.mail@deni.gov.uk)

***Edited and produced by
Statistics and Research Branch, Department of Education Northern Ireland.***



A Government Statistical Publication