

Department *of* Education



**A Report on A Survey of Provision  
for Pupils with Moderate Learning  
Difficulties in Primary Units in  
Northern Ireland**

**1999-2000**

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A number of quantitative terms are used in the report. In percentages, the terms correspond as follows:-

More than 90%	-	almost/nearly all
75%-90%	-	most
50%-74%	-	a majority
30%-49%	-	a significant minority
10%-29%	-	a minority
Less than 10%	-	very few/a small number.

Terms



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 In February 2000, the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) undertook an evaluation of provision for children with moderate learning difficulties (MLD) in units within mainstream primary schools. This report is based on the findings of that survey which included twenty-three structured survey visits to primary schools with MLD units. The report also takes account of evidence from the unit in another school undergoing a general inspection.
- 1.2 The schools visited in the survey were part of a random sample, and included schools from Belfast Education and Library Board (BELB), North-Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB), Southern Education and Library Board (SELB) and South-Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB).

## 2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The purpose of the survey was to evaluate the quality of:
- ⇒ the educational provision for pupils;
  - ⇒ the ethos in the units;
  - ⇒ opportunities for integration into mainstream;
  - ⇒ the partnership with parents and the wider community;
  - ⇒ the planning and implementation of agreed targets related to initial diagnosis and the statement of special educational needs in the context of the Code of Practice which became operative on 1 September 1998;
  - ⇒ the management arrangements.



- 2.2 Throughout the course of the survey, the inspection team held discussions with school principals, unit teachers, Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCOs), classroom assistants, other teachers responsible for integrating pupils and, where appropriate, with the pupils themselves. In addition, the inspectors saw a range of lessons, examined samples of pupils' work, and scrutinised teachers' planning documentation. Schools provided a wide range of policy documents and materials specific to individual pupils, including statements of special educational needs.

### 3. SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

- 3.1 MLD units in primary schools are caring and supportive environments which, in a majority of instances, meet their pupils' individual educational, personal and social needs well.
- 3.2 The quality of home-school liaison in all schools is good, and parents are well satisfied about the quality of consultation and communication arrangements with unit teachers.
- 3.3 A majority of teachers implement successfully the requirements of the Code of Practice, and appreciate the help and support which they receive from the area boards' Curriculum Advisory and Support Services (CASS), but expressed concern about the extent of the paperwork. This report urges all concerned to reduce this paperwork to the necessary minimum.
- 3.4 The quality of teaching observed in almost all of the lessons was good. The teachers know their pupils well, and the quality of planning reflected the pupils' learning needs.



- 3.5 There is evidence of successful integration in a majority of schools. The arrangements for integration are generally well planned and carefully implemented to ensure that pupils work successfully alongside their peers.

#### 4. ETHOS

- 4.1 In most of the schools visited, unit classes have a positive ethos, with good quality relationships within the units, and between the units staff and pupils and the rest of the school. Also, in the vast majority of units, the relationships between teachers and pupils are very good, the pupils are well behaved, and settle quickly to their tasks. An example which characterises the good practice found in many schools is Holy Trinity Boys' Primary School in Belfast, where the teachers value and respect the children, treat them with empathy and patience, and set them tasks which are challenging and effective.
- 4.2 For those pupils with both learning difficulties and emotional and behavioural difficulties, unit staff employ effective methods to cope with these problems. In almost all classes surveyed, the teachers and classroom assistants worked well together to create a warm, caring and ordered environment.
- 4.3 A majority of classrooms are bright and attractive; displays are stimulating and well used to support teaching. The pupils receive high levels of care and attention, and, in the best examples, teachers and classroom assistants work in a sensitive, supportive yet firm manner. As a consequence, the pupils enjoy their learning.
- 4.4 The pupils respond well to the variety of methods used to increase their self-esteem, and to praise their efforts. There



is evidence of the effective use of target setting and rewards for good behaviour and good work and, in the best examples, good use is made of involving the pupils and parents in setting, agreeing and achieving personal targets. In Bloomfield Road Primary School, for example, the teacher involved the pupils in setting their own targets, recording them on a wall chart, and evaluating sensitively whether or not they had been successfully met. In a majority of units, pupil attitudes to school are positive, and the unit teachers do much to improve self-esteem, and to help pupils enjoy their school life.

- 4.5 Good use is made of a variety of methods of communicating with parents, including home/school diaries, home/school visits and additional parents meetings. Annual reviews provide a more formal opportunity in all schools for parents and teachers to share views on a pupil's progress, and it is reported that most parents take the opportunity to express their own views on how their child is progressing.
- 4.6 All teachers were concerned to streamline the administrative aspects of annual review.

## 5. QUALITY OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

- 5.1 The quality of teaching was generally good, sometimes very good, and on occasions excellent. The teachers work hard to tailor the curriculum to the needs of the pupils and many have produced good quality teaching resources. In D H Christie Memorial Primary School, for example, the excellent materials produced by the unit teacher on concept keyboard are used by colleagues throughout the school.



- 5.2 The pupils make satisfactory progress in literacy, numeracy, and in other aspects of the curriculum in line with their ability; the quality and variety of teaching strategies are almost always very good, and in a majority of classes the pupils are well motivated, and work well together.
- 5.3 Many schools identify pupils with additional special needs such as autistic spectrum disorder, mild sensory impairment, speech and language difficulties or behavioural difficulties. The teachers are committed to meeting these needs, but require staff development and support in order to do so more effectively.
- 5.4 Lessons are carefully planned to ensure relevance, and to take account of the diverse range of learning difficulties within each class. In nearly all schools, planning is thorough and reflects the pupils' learning needs. A majority of unit teachers are skilful in assessing individual pupils' learning strengths and weaknesses. They make good use of detailed information from pupils' statements. In St Brigid's Primary School in Ballymoney, for example, the teachers have planned their work well: the target setting is of good quality, and is based on a realistic appraisal as to what can be achieved. Targets are based on literacy and numeracy needs, and a separate target for behaviour is completed daily. The planning is evaluated monthly, succinctly presented, shared by all who have contact with the pupils, including, where appropriate, the pupils themselves, and the outcome is imaginative and effective teaching.
- 5.5 Many schools involve the community in the work of the unit, and there are examples showing that this ensures meaningful and interesting experiences for the pupils. In the Armstrong Primary School Armagh, for example, one of the unit's



teachers had involved the local doctor, dentist, community shops and groups to support the curriculum very effectively. As a result, stimulating materials, reflecting work with the community enhanced the work in the classroom. The pupils were able to talk about their work, and clearly valued the involvement with the local community.

- 5.6 The teachers place great emphasis on raising the pupils' self-esteem through displays of work, supportive comments in marking, and in providing positive feedback to pupils. In Clandeboye Primary School, for example, the teacher had used an attractive wall display depicting the various schools from which the pupils had arrived, which helped them to settle in their new environment, and establish good relationships in their new class.
- 5.7 Classroom assistant support provides a valuable resource which complements the work of the teacher in a variety of ways, and there were many examples in the schools surveyed of effective use of this support. In Castlewellan Primary School, for example, the teacher was ably supported by her classroom assistants in dealing with a wide range of ages and special needs, and managed the team very skilfully. In a majority of schools, unit teachers have established good working relationships with their assistants. In the best examples, teachers and assistants communicate effectively, and take time to plan together. This ensures that the daily routines are consistent for the pupils and, while encouraging pupils' independence, also gives them support and help when necessary.
- 5.8 Information, advice and support from other professionals are used very effectively to enhance the quality of teaching. In a number of schools, assistance from speech therapists in day-



to-day activities is a regular feature of classroom practice, and helps to support the development of language.

- 5.9 Unit teachers are also supported by expertise provided by colleagues in the schools of which the unit forms a part. In Harpurs Hill Primary School, Coleraine, for example, the support of the reading recovery teacher is a strong feature which provides a clear focus on the pupils' literacy needs.
- 5.10 A majority of teachers plan effectively for the integration of their MLD pupils into a variety of lessons. In a majority of units, integration takes place during practical subjects such as art and design and physical education although the survey also identified a number of examples where pupils are successfully integrated for English, mathematics and science. In Knockbreda Primary School, Belfast, for example, at KS2, some of the unit pupils are integrated for mathematics, and are able to talk confidently about their work in mathematics on returning to the unit. In St Malachy's Primary School, Castlewellan, three children are integrated with their peers for very successful paired reading sessions. In other examples, pupils were integrated very successfully on school outings, assemblies, and for after school activities and educational visits.
- 5.11 In the best examples of integration, there is evidence that the detailed comments on individual education plans help to keep colleagues fully informed, and ensure that individual targets are understood and implemented by all teachers working with a pupil. In a minority of schools, there is a need for further development of this approach.
- 5.12 All schools would benefit from ongoing staff development in order to ensure that teachers are familiar with the special



educational needs of pupils integrating into their classes, and how best to cater for their needs.

## 6. MANAGEMENT

- 6.1 In a majority of units, there is a clear written policy for the unit, and good quality procedures to ensure its implementation. The principals are well informed about the work of the unit, and there is a good level of liaison between the SENCO, the principal and the unit teacher. In Edenderry Primary School, Portadown, for example, the principal takes a keen interest in the work of the unit, has a good level of liaison with the SENCO and unit teachers, and there is a strong sense of common purpose which guides and directs the good quality work. In this unit and many others, the school management recognises the commitment, experience and expertise required to work successfully with these pupils.
- 6.2 In a minority of schools, the senior management are not sufficiently informed about the work of the unit, and there is insufficient monitoring and evaluating of the unit's work.
- 6.3 In a number of schools, the principal reports a change in the nature of the pupil population in the unit, with many pupils presenting more significant and complex special needs. This perception is supported by the findings of this survey. The widening range of special needs now found in units requires appropriate additional staff development. This is seen as a priority in some of the schools. A significant minority of principals also commented on the time required for conducting multi-disciplinary liaison, administration and annual review.



- 6.4 In a majority of units, there was evidence from annual reviews that parents are happy and satisfied with the progress and welfare of their children.
- 6.5 The integration of pupils is most successful in those schools where the unit is accommodated in the main body of the school and where management has allocated suitable classrooms with adequate space. Also, where the school's management facilitates the flexible and creative deployment of resources and a culture of effective collaboration, staff are able to make provision for children from the unit in most areas of the curriculum in the most appropriate setting.

## 7. FEATURES AND ISSUES

- 7.1 The findings of the survey indicate that the strengths of the current provision for pupils in MLD primary units include:
- ⇒ the caring and supportive environments in the units, which the majority of meet their pupils' individual educational, personal and social needs well;
  - ⇒ the good quality of home-school liaison;
  - ⇒ the very good quality teaching found in a majority of units;
  - ⇒ the well planned and carefully implemented arrangements for the integration of pupils into mainstream classes;
  - ⇒ the good quality of the relationships within the units, and between the unit's staff and pupils and the rest of the school;



- ⇒ the caring ethos which contributes significantly to meeting the pupils' learning difficulties by providing a secure and well structured environment;
- ⇒ the effective use of target setting, and the reward arrangements to encourage good behaviour and work.

7.2 The survey also highlights areas where improvement is necessary. These include:

- ⇒ the need for more staff development opportunities to help teachers working with children with MLD, and additional special needs such as autistic spectrum disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder;
- ⇒ the need to ensure that all staff are fully informed about the specific needs of pupils joining their classes from MLD units;
- ⇒ the need, in a small minority of schools, for the principal to be more involved in monitoring the work in the unit;
- ⇒ the need to streamline, as much as possible, the administrative aspects of managing the annual review, including liaison with parents and other professionals.

## 8. CONCLUSION

8.1 Throughout this report, there is ample evidence that a majority of MLD units in the primary school sector provide good quality education for their pupils. The diverse needs of this group of pupils are met by teachers who have responded well to the challenges set by the Code of Practice, and who continue to develop their expertise in addressing the range of



special needs in the MLD unit population. The strengths of the units lie in the good quality of the teaching, the effective planning for the pupils' learning, the effective integration arrangements, and the sound progress the pupils make in their learning. However, the survey also identifies a number of areas which need to be addressed to enhance the provision further. Evidence from the survey would also indicate that MLD units generally would benefit from the dissemination of the best practice highlighted in this report.



The Primary MLD units inspection survey included the following schools:

Kilkeel Primary School  
St Colman's Primary School, Kilkeel  
Holy Trinity Boys Primary School, Belfast  
Bloomfield Road Primary School, Bangor  
Knockbreda Primary School  
Clandeboy Primary School  
St Brigid's Primary School, Ballymoney  
Antiville Primary School, Larne  
Ballysally Primary School, Coleraine  
DH Christie Memorial Primary School, Coleraine  
Harpurs Hill Primary School, Coleraine  
St Patrick's Primary School, Dungannon  
Armstrong Primary School, Armagh  
St Patrick's Primary School, Armagh  
Castlewellan Primary School  
St Malachy's Primary School, Castlewellan  
Maghera Primary School  
St Joseph's Primary School, Bessbrook  
Carrick Primary School, Lurgan  
Dungannon Primary School  
Cookstown Primary School  
Edenderry Primary School, Portadown  
St Mary's Primary School, Banbridge  
Holy Trinity Primary School, Cookstown  
Downpatrick Primary School



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