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*The Education and Training Inspectorate -
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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Education and Training Inspectorate

Report of a Inspection

Autism Specific Classes in the Southern Education and Library Board

Inspected: April-May 2007

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 In April 2002, the Department of Education (DE) published the 'Report of the Task Group on Autism'. This report sets out a strategy to improve the standards of provision for pupils with autistic spectrum disorders (ASD) and signified a commitment to the funding and development of provision across the five Education and Library Boards (ELBs).

1.2 In its response, the Southern Education and Library Board (SELB) has initiated a substantial programme of support for pupils with autism and has adopted a continuum of approach to ensuring that the needs of all pupils with autism are provided for in settings appropriate to their needs.

1.3 The Autism Advisory and Intervention Service (AAIS) of the SELB has an important contribution to make in supporting the development of autism provision and is a core point of contact for teachers, schools and parents. Part of their work is in steering and advising the development of autism-specific classes (ASC) in nine primary schools across the SELB area.

1.4 The focus of the inspection was on the quality of provision for pupils in the nine ASC. As part of the process, all schools received an inspection, and a short written report was provided to each school. This composite report identifies the main strengths common to the classes and the schools, and indicates areas for further development. An evaluation of the SELB's level of strategic planning and quality of support is also included.

2. THE MAIN FINDINGS

2.1 SELB STRATEGY

2.1.1 Currently some 863 pupils with a confirmed autistic spectrum disorder are educated in a range of autism-supported settings in the SELB. Approximately 5% of these pupils are educated in ASC in nine primary schools. The classes are regarded as part of a broad continuum of provision which reflect the diversity of need, age and ability of the pupils. Specifically, the ASC cater for key stage (KS) 1 pupils who require a level of support and continuous assessment to enable them to access a mainstream place and cope with the classroom environment and primary curriculum.

2.1.2 The findings from the inspection of the classes, discussion with the relevant SELB officers and scrutiny of relevant documents indicate an effective and robust SELB strategy and model of support appropriate to the needs of the pupils enrolled in the ASC.

2.1.3 The key strengths of the ASC arise from the careful and expert planning of the SELB officers, the focus on early intervention and the well-considered elements of advisory and policy support, such as a concentration on whole-school autism training, teacher commitment to inclusion, parental support, generous resources and the tracking of pupil progress as an evaluative measure of the strategy and provision.

2.1.4 Notwithstanding the need for continuous refinement and further development of the provision, the inspection finds the model of provision appropriate to the needs of the pupils and an endorsement of the relevant recommendations in section 7 of the Report of the Task Group on Autism, 2002, and the DE and the Education and Training Inspectorate's (Inspectorate's) autism guidance publications. Overall, the provision has strengths in important areas: it is consistently good and has the capacity to address further areas for development and improvement.

2.1.5 The key indicators of the quality of the support provided are:

- the high level of autism-specific understanding and commitment to inclusion, which underpins the planning and rationale of the ASC;
- the priority given to training in autism awareness and a range of autism-specific interventions, and to whole-school approaches to providing autism-specific provision;
- the ongoing access to support, advice from the SELB and from a network of other teachers across the ASC;
- the focus on an individual needs approach which includes a comprehensive assessment process, an effective individual education plan outlining the barriers to learning and the identification of individually tailored intervention strategies; and
- the development by the SELB of an appropriate policy and procedures based on appropriate autism values and principles which enable the promotion of consistency and cohesion in provision across the classes.

2.1.6 Much of the evidence-based information available and collated for this report reflects the SELB's capacity to map autism prevalence, needs and services. The findings of the inspection of the ASC identify also the need to ensure that teachers and classroom assistants in the ASC are trained further in the educational and behavioural assessment of autism so that early and ongoing intervention is central to maximising the pupils' social and educational development.

2.1.7 It is also essential that a variety of therapies, in particular, speech and language, and occupational therapy, are identified and play a key role in a holistic approach to effective delivery of provision. It is important that the SELB estimates current and future demands for the use of therapy services. The development of a health and education strategy to include an overview of the arrangements to secure appropriate therapy services would enhance the current practice and ensure a more holistic outcome for the pupils. The DE, through the Inter-departmental Special Education Group, should therefore, address the issue of the therapy provision for children and young people with autism across Northern Ireland.

2.1.8 The SELB recognises the important contribution parents and carers make in caring and supporting the education of children with autism. The AAIS has been active in attempting to develop parent/carer courses. Much remains to be done to ensure greater parental/carer confidence and involvement in ASC, but the signs are that the ASC are working well with parents and developing close partnership and mutual respect. While not within the brief of this report, there is abundant research evidence of the stress families

experience in caring for a child with autism, and of the need for them to receive access to appropriate support services and informed educational advice. The findings of this inspection suggest that the DE, in co-operation with the ELBs, should explore this issue further and consider how to progress the implications of parental and family needs and school collaborative working.

2.1.9 In summary, the findings of the inspection indicate that the SELB has a critical role in encouraging and ensuring the development of effective provision for pupils with autism. The AAIS brings increasing specialist expertise to enable schools to develop ASC as an appropriate form of intervention for those pupils who, without a period of graduated and autism-specific support, would be prevented from full inclusion in mainstream classes. The AAIS encourages successfully a whole-school understanding of the barriers the pupils with autistic spectrum disorders experience in learning and socialising with their non-autistic peers.

2.2 THE FINDINGS FROM THE INSPECTION OF THE ASC

2.2.1 As each school has already received a spoken and written report of the key findings of the inspection of their ASC, a report of each is published on the DE and Inspectorate websites. The focus of this section is on the main and common strengths and areas for improvement arising from an analysis of the inspection evidence and findings across the nine schools. Judgements were made using the autism-specific evaluation proforma designed for the inspection and based entirely on the Inspectorate document 'Evaluating Provision for Autistic Spectrum Disorders in Schools' which provides a professional benchmark for the quality assurance of observed provision.

2.2.2 Overall, the findings reveal a promising picture of provision with many good features in important areas of development and a few areas for improvement. In one instance, aspects of the provision require significant action to ensure that the provision is improved and more purposefully focused if the pupils are to make appropriate progress and if the school is to be assured of its efforts to achieve improved practice.

2.2.3 ETHOS

2.2.3.1 The findings highlight an ethos across the classes which is child-centred and autism friendly. The classrooms include clear visual areas and supports whose purpose the pupils recognise and understand, and where they feel secure and settled. The teachers and assistants demonstrate a commitment to the pupils, their needs and to the importance of curriculum access, learning and socialisation.

2.2.3.2 The arrangements for pastoral care and child protection are in place and adhered to by all staff across the ASC. In all classes, the pupils' needs are prioritised and every effort is made to re-direct or displace anxious or challenging behaviour. The pupils are aware of the rules of the class, respond well and are praised frequently by staff for their efforts and achievements. Although integrating with and learning alongside their peers in the mainstream classes present challenges, most pupils succeed in achieving these desirable outcomes in the course of their time in the ASC. During the inspection, several planned integrated activities were testimony to the good quality of preparation of the staff and their decisions on the timing of appropriate integration activities for the pupils. The ethos across the ASC and within the school settings generally is a benchmark of good practice.

2.2.4 ASD KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS

2.2.4.1 The staff of the ASC have received a broad range of appropriate staff training and, as a consequence, useful strategies are in place and used in all classes. In the classes, the teachers plan individual and group lessons keeping in mind the unique needs of each pupil and the impact of autism on learning and social involvement. The quality of assessment, recording and planning is meticulous and well set out to inform teaching and record progress.

2.2.4.2 In the majority of the practice observed, the strategies in use enabled the pupils to make good progress. The teachers are confident in their deployment of different strategies and teaching approaches to meet changing needs. The pupils, as a consequence, are familiar with the daily routines of the curriculum, the designated purposes of areas of the classroom, and the cues for task beginning and completion. The outcomes for the pupils are the development of independent skills, which each pupil can generalise and apply in mainstream classes.

2.2.4.3 Good emphasis is placed on play and the significance of play as a means of identifying and developing concrete and higher level interaction skills, social learning and understanding. It is evident that the impact of training and advice builds on and supplements the quality of the teaching and learning. It is also notable that many of the teachers and assistants have read and researched autism to a high degree, and a few having gained further accreditation in the subject.

2.2.5 TEACHING AND LEARNING

2.2.5.1 The quality of teaching across the classes is always satisfactory, mostly good and, on occasions, of an excellent standard. In the best practice, the teaching is imaginative, carefully structured and engaging. This practice was noted in many of the lessons observed and had a positive outcome for the pupils. A further notable characteristic of the best practice was the enthusiasm which the teachers have for their pupils and the care they take over each child. The staff know their pupils so well that they can challenge and extend their learning without causing the pupils stress and adverse reaction.

2.2.5.2 In addition, the systematic assessment and carefully matched teaching programme for each pupil are quality benchmarks of the teaching observed. The targets set are realistic and achievable, designed to promote learning as an encouraging experience for the pupils, and to enable them to learn with increasing independence in various settings. Good use of visual, tactile and auditory resources were found to encourage the pupils to learn. In some of the outstanding practice observed, the pupils' responses are carefully logged to help the teacher track effectively their progress.

2.2.5.3 The inspection found that the teachers used a combination of strategies in their classes with a strong reliance on a visually structured programme and flexibly adapted to suit individual needs. Where appropriate, behaviour intervention was applied when a pupil's involvement in the learning activity was less engaging and distracting to other pupils.

2.2.6 MANAGEMENT

2.2.6.1 The management of the ASC is highly effective and instrumental in promoting a positive ethos and whole-school climate for learning and achievement. As a result, the planning of integration and inclusion activities is effective in the majority of schools and ensures that every pupil is valued and understood. Accommodation, with one exception, is appropriate, its design is well researched, and appropriate to autism. The principals demonstrate a commitment and enthusiasm for the provision and have focused much of the staff development on raising the profile of autism, ensuring that all members of staff gain a knowledge of autism and its implications for teaching and learning. This level of achievement is excellent as it promotes the school as a learning environment: the pupils with autism have the capacity to learn and apply their skills in a variety of lessons and school activities, in a manner which accepts and celebrates their individuality, and social and educational progress. The principals work closely with the ASC teacher and assistants, as supportive and critical mentors, in order to improve the provision and develop the school's capacity to meet the needs of the pupils with autism, both in the ASC and across the mainstream classes.

2.2.6.2 It is also noted that to differing degrees, the schools have involved the parents/carers in the work of the classes, to develop their confidence in the capacity of the school to succeed with their child. The schools, however, have limited opportunities to provide outreach support to parents/carers. The SELB should consider further how best to develop home-school collaborative working in order to share the expertise developing in the ASC with the parents/carers for the benefit of the pupils.

3. CONCLUSION

3.1 The overall effectiveness of the SELB's ASC demonstrates strengths in the important areas of providing for pupils with autism. This report highlights many good features and consistently good practice across the ASC. While there is room for improvement in aspects of the provision, the strategic planning constitutes a major strength in the SELB's provision for pupils with autism who would benefit from mainstream education; this type of provision heralds for such pupils, an effective and early intervention of a sound and effective quality. This report endorses the efforts of the SELB to develop ASC as worthy of dissemination and development.

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