

# An evaluation of the provision to meet the needs of pupils with persistent and challenging behaviour in special schools

2012-2013

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## Quantitative terms

In this report, proportions may be described as percentages, common fractions and in more general quantitative terms. Where more general terms are used, they should be interpreted as follows:

Almost/nearly all	-	more than 90%
Most	-	75%-90%
A majority	-	50%-74%
A significant minority	-	30%-49%
A minority	-	10%-29%
Very few/a small number	-	less than 10%

## Performance levels

In assessing the various features of the provision, Inspectors relate their evaluations to six descriptors as set out below:

DESCRIPTOR
Outstanding
Very Good
Good
Satisfactory
Inadequate
Unsatisfactory

## 1. Introduction and background

This report was commissioned by the Department of Education.

The report aims to provide an extensive evidence base about the impact of challenging behaviour in special schools and to inform future policy developments. It examines the extent of challenging behaviour across the schools, its impact on pupils and staff, staff views and the effectiveness of external support. The report highlights the lessons learnt from practice and from action undertaken since the previous inspections (2004 and 2007)<sup>1</sup> It concludes with a number of recommendations for schools and policymakers.

The main audiences for this report are all staff in special schools and policymakers in both education and health. An executive summary of the main findings is provided which draws together the key findings and recommendations.

## 2. Methodology

2.1 The survey was carried out in three phases over the 2012-2013 period:

1. A mapping of the extent of challenging behaviour in special schools and an analysis of the data from questionnaires returned by all of the schools.
2. Structured discussion with a group of principals to get an in-depth view of practice and to establish a range of indicators of effective practice to assist strategic planning.
3. Visits to schools to observe individual pupils who present with challenging behaviour, discuss their difficulties with staff and identify possible ways to improve the quality of support.

## 3. Executive summary

*Special schools are constantly and currently seeking help and support to address the needs of a very small minority of pupils who present with significantly challenging behaviour which often masks significant aggression, self-harm and high anxiety.*

This summary sets out the main findings of the report of challenging behaviour in special schools. The report is based on a breadth of evidence and evaluation of current provision across all special schools. The report highlights the lessons learnt from practice and concludes with a number of recommendations for schools and policy-makers. The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) carried out the survey over the 2012-2013 period.

The overall findings

The survey found evidence to indicate that there is a very small minority of pupils in special schools whose long-term needs cannot be met by current practices and resources. Without significant health and education collaborative working, the widespread aggression, self injury and distress will not be addressed effectively and the plight of these vulnerable young people will continue.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Report of a Survey of Provision for Pupils with Severe Learning Difficulties and Persistent and Challenging Behaviours in Special Schools in Northern Ireland – June 2004.'

'Report of a Follow-up Survey Inspection of the Provision for Pupils with Severe Learning Difficulties and Persistent and Challenging Behaviours in Special Schools in Northern Ireland – May-June 2007'

## Conclusion

The very small minority of pupils who experience substantial difficulties adapting to daily and school routines pose a major challenge to staff in special schools. Efforts to address their needs have been partially successful but stressful and time-consuming to staff, pupils and their parents. What is clear from the detailed evidence collated for this survey is that some pupils with extreme challenging behaviour require a very different approach with specific and constant input from multi-disciplinary specialist teams currently unavailable in the majority of the special schools.

These pupils deserve better support. Stoic efforts by special school staff hide a true picture of the depth of needs of this group. The evidence concludes with a strong conviction, that action is needed at inter-department level to research how best to meet the long-term needs of this group. The corporate view of special schools is that action at a strategic level would result in more positive long-term outcomes than can currently be achieved.

## Recommendations

The overarching recommendation of this report is that the DE should consider establishing a steering group of policy makers from health, social services, education and practitioners from special schools and other key settings, to pilot and act on examples of provision which can meet the needs of these pupils over their school career and into their adult lives. ETI will monitor progress of the action taken as a result of the findings of this report and report within 18 months on the outcomes.

### **4. The main findings**

#### 4.1 Overall

Since 2007, delegating resources to schools and building their capacity through training to meet a wider range of challenging behaviour has represented 'good practice'. In the majority of instances, this has been the case and it is now accepted that the significant and challenging behaviour of most pupils can be managed. An analysis of the evidence confirms that pupils perform better in small groups supported by highly trained staff, in spacious settings and in response to intensive, individual programmes of support. For a small minority however, most of the current strategies fail to ensure that their behaviour improves or that the pupils develop coping mechanisms for much of their behaviours. One explanation for the failure of these strategies would be the severe complex needs of the pupils and the inter-relation between their overwhelming feelings of insecurity, extreme sensory needs and emotional wellbeing, and the constantly changing environment of the school and home.

While it is possible to demonstrate that all pupils for periods of time can behave positively, it is clear that reducing or eliminating the negative behaviours of a very small minority is hugely difficult. The trend since 2007 in the behaviour of the more challenging pupils suggests that their negative behaviours have increased in intensity and they have become more violent. By considering carefully the wide range of data over the report period, a small number of consistent issues emerge which enable this report to suggest a range of recommendations for practice and policy makers.

The data finds that most pupils with very challenging behaviour need:

- a highly structured environment and skilled staff;
- a constant routine and time out of class to calm down; and
- a practical and active curriculum based on personal needs and meaningful activities.

Above all else, the data shows that a very small minority of pupils have developed emotional/mental conditions relating to severe autism, and triggers to their negative behaviours are extremely difficult to identify and are not for teachers alone to identify. For this reason, the findings suggest there are three key strands needing further development in relation to strategic policy. These are:

- developing a system, at local and regional level, to track and respond to the pattern of need year on year;
- establishing a consensus about the long-term needs of the pupils and the most appropriate settings in which they can be maintained and met; and,
- agreeing an action plan to set out the best way of achieving the objectives noted above.

#### 4.2 Mapping the extent of the problem

<b>Number of pupils displaying challenging behaviour and manageable most of the time</b>	<b>Number of pupils requiring significant additional support and manageable some of the time</b>	<b>Number of pupils requiring significant additional support and unmanageable most of the time</b>
524	104	63

The number of pupils who display persistent and significant challenging behaviours in special schools is approximately 524 out of a total special school population of around 4,653 (just over 10%); of these up to 104 (20%) are manageable for some of the time while a small number (12%) remain unmanageable for the majority of the school day. The latter group are aggressive and extreme in their outbursts and require substantial supervision and high levels of support to ensure their safety and that of their peers. Injuries to staff are constant and often of a serious nature.

Pupils with autism are the group highlighted most in the more severe category and often diagnosed with severe learning difficulties, epilepsy which is usually not controlled, and depression. Frequent triggers to challenging behaviour relate to a combination of noisy and unpredictable environments, medical needs, being told 'no' or being re directed and not getting immediate demands met. This leads to feelings of fear, anxiety and insecurity. The behaviours these pupils use can be similar and unpredictable and, at times, reflect the mood and vulnerability of the pupil. Behavioural change can come about quickly and for no apparent reason. A wide range of negative behaviours arise as a consequence which may endure for lengthy periods of time, for example, hair pulling, biting, punching, kicking, throwing objects, running away or attacking others to more severe, extreme actions such as self injury, urinating, smearing faeces and sexual activities. In such instances, immediate intervention by skilled staff can be successful or alternatively the pupil or the whole class has to be removed temporarily from the setting. The effects of challenging behaviour cannot be underestimated and other pupils in the same classes often feel frightened, anxious and unhappy. Above all, lessons are interrupted and learning is inhibited.

For the most part, schools have developed their capacity to provide for the needs of many pupils presenting with challenging behaviour. They have done so through considerable expertise, effort and consideration, and by appropriate deployment of resources.

For the smaller number of pupils who are at high risk of injuring themselves or others, schools have been actively coping in a number of ways, including making good use of multi-disciplinary support where available, and always with a view to doing their best for the pupils, often in spite of a history of injury to staff. This small group of pupils requires specialised support. Schools need detailed and relevant information prior to a pupil's enrolment to plan appropriate intervention and allocate necessary resources. In support of schools, the Education and Library Boards (ELBs) have allocated additional classroom assistants and provided training to schools. However, it is noted that the process can be lengthy and arduous for principals and takes insufficient cognisance of the fact that these pupils may display challenging behaviour for a number of years with only short periods of respite. ELBs need to work to ensure equitable access to specialist services, such as Middletown Centre for Autism.

#### 4.3 What schools are doing well

In the course of this survey, inspectors have observed high quality work by the individual staff members in schools. The more effective work has taken time to establish and is worthy of sharing across the sector both to benchmark the key features of support for this population and to signal the need to audit provision to ensure resources are constantly reviewed and renewed. (See Appendix 1 for examples of effective practice).

*The most important factors in addressing challenging behaviour are the professional knowledge and personal qualities of the staff working with the pupils, the consistent application of a child-centred approach, access to multi-disciplinary support and the creation of ample space to support the pupils' sense of security and wellbeing.*

It is difficult to draw firm conclusions about what strategies work in all schools as each pupil is unique and school settings vary so much, but a number of key features are identified and were observed to be effective. These include the use of a wide range of resources and spacious accommodation that provides personal space for each pupil.

The effective strategies include:

- comprehensive risk assessment and information about each pupil's needs;
- a practical and personal curriculum which includes frequent exercise as a mainstay of the daily routine;
- staff training and consistent use of a range of techniques and resources to address the escalation of behaviour;
- staff's knowledge of the pupils, their understanding of challenging behaviour and ability to engage with the pupils in a confident and caring manner;
- teamwork including parental input and training; and
- access to a range of professional support for the most challenging behaviour.

The evidence indicates that those schools which have accessed the services of Middletown Centre for Autism have found all of the above features are provided and effective.

#### 4.4 What is not working well

Observations completed during visits to schools reveal that pupils with severe challenging behaviour do behave positively for periods of time. A consistent daily structure is crucial to the pupil's school day as is the staff's capacity to change activities quickly in response to sudden mood changes and outbursts. Reducing extreme behaviour and remaining highly alert to sudden changes in behaviour is difficult and stressful for staff. It is, nevertheless, evident that staff across schools have considerable skills, but principals report that staff need a break from the pressure of this work and sustaining high quality is difficult. What is clear is that positive outcomes for the pupils largely depend on the consistent application of agreed procedures along with the need to analyse and track outcomes to inform improvement. (See Appendix 2 for examples of less effective practice).

The use of a time out room has difficulties and should only be used as a last resort when the pupil's behaviour is a danger to others and the pupil needs time to calm down. Seclusion by its very nature can be litigious and should only be used under clear guidance. Most schools have become aware of the need to reconsider this practice and to develop a policy to ensure its use is clearly specified and understood by all, including parents.

Discussion with staff during the school visits and with principals highlights:

- heightened tension in a classroom when a pupil is having a 'bad day';
- the need for respite for staff at periods of time during the day;
- the increasing impact of additional mental health issues and need for counselling;
- variable support from health professionals;
- the additional pressures which accompany change to a pupil's home conditions or respite timing;
- the tolerance shown by parents of children in the class where disruption is constant;
- the expectation that things will get worse when the pupil completes their education;
- the negative impact of challenging behaviour on the daily curriculum and learning;
- delays in waiting for external assessment information and intervention;
- limited advice and support for staff from external agencies and services;
- a lack of training in terms of intervention strategies and
- inadequate access to effective social services and psychology provision.



The importance of staff de-briefing after an incident and the effective management of the logistics in arranging this is also a key element of good practice.

Maintaining the high levels of support is noted as difficult by principals. When pupils display improved behaviour, resources may be withdrawn too soon; a degree of flexibility by ELBs is required if progress is to be consolidated.

## **5. Conclusion**

What is very clear from the detail of evidence collated for this survey is that some pupils with extreme challenging behaviour require a very different approach and specific and constant input from a number of different professionals that is not currently available to the special school sector. These pupils, teachers and classroom assistants, however skilled or experienced, need the input of specialist therapy professionals and consistent access to clinical and medical advice at the point of need and particularly, at transition stages. It remains however, the conclusion of this survey that education is a major positive factor in the lives of these pupils and in the efforts to achieve a better long term outcome.

From discussion with the principals, it is often difficult for them to secure therapy provision as recorded in the health section of the Statement of Special Educational Needs. Input from multidisciplinary specialist teams can also be difficult to secure. This can lead to pupils with challenging behaviour not receiving the support that they need. The findings of this survey indicate the need for a new approach which sets out the learning and life outcomes for pupils across education, health and social care. The requirements of collaborative support leading to collaborative responsibility and shared provision is central to any further steps to meet the needs of pupils.

The case for change is clear and the evidence indicates the need to:

- reduce stress on staff and schools;
- provide further support to teachers and assistants;
- establish comprehensive assessments of medical needs;
- develop collaborative accountability; and
- achieve improved outcomes for pupils.

In reaching its evaluations, the inspection team has taken account of the work of the special schools and considered the responses to the questionnaires. The findings indicate that the challenges posed by a small minority of the pupils cannot be solved without significant action by DE and the ELBs in collaboration with health and social services. Fundamentally, provision for these children is not sufficiently pupil-centred.

ETI will monitor progress of the action taken as a result of the findings of the report and report within 18 months on the outcomes.

## **6. Recommendations**

The overarching recommendation of this report is that DE should consider establishing a steering group of policy makers from health, social services, education and practitioners from special schools and other key settings to pilot examples of provision which can meet the needs of these pupils over their school career and into their adult lives. (See Appendix 3 for one school's view).

In recommending this action, the report concludes that the steering group will need to review current practice with the aim of helping to engage this group of pupils.

## Examples of effective practice adapted from schools' submissions

### ***In-school provision***

*The use of the Team Teach\*\* techniques and ethos throughout school, encourages a positive attitude to dealing with challenging behaviour and promotes an in-house expertise to sharing good practice. Examples of good practice include:*

- *Good communication between home and school.*
- *Positive handling files in all classes to outline risks etc to substitute staff/new staff within the class.*
- *Documentation which meets legal guidelines (policies, risk assessments, positive handling plans and serious incident forms).*

### ***In-school provision***

- *We offer children a highly structured, predictable and nurturing small group environment for learning. The curriculum is delivered at a pace and manner suitable to each child's academic ability and aptitude.*
- *Each class has a management plan which contains class rules and an explanation of rewards and consequences. Class rules are devised and agreed with pupils at the start of each academic year.*

### ***Case study***

*This case study relates to a 15 year old boy with significant mental health issues, severe learning difficulties, autism, global developmental delay and possible cerebral palsy, epilepsy, very aggressive.*

*He has been in the school since he was three years old and has built up very good working relationships with staff. He has suffered a mental health breakdown in school. He has been detained under Mental Health Act but attends school daily. He is in foster care and has an extremely difficult parental home background with alcohol and drug dependency issues with a parent. The pupil may also have been traumatised; it is not yet clear.*

### ***In-school Provision***

*Attacks on pupils are regular including sexualised language and behaviour, severe risk to self and others including peers and staff, biting, hitting, removing clothes, destroying the room, assaulting staff, self harm and self-induced vomiting.*

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\* *Team Teach is a training programme for dealing with behaviour issues.*

*The pupil has led a flower growing project and with his classroom assistant has grown and sold flowers. Consequently the school has attracted funding to develop this project. The pupil along with his four classmates went on a trip in a limousine last year with the staff and behaviours were excellent.*

**Provision**

*The school maintains a post primary support centre with positive ethos, high expectations and clear boundaries. The pupils are engaged in purposeful activities, well planned to meet their needs and a focus on learning and diverting them from negative behaviours. The centre is staffed by well trained staff with a well organised environment and activities planned to challenge and help the pupils to progress and develop. Provision includes very good individual attention and support and opportunities to interact with others within the school environment but outside of the classroom.*

**Examples where practice is inhibited**

*“Reaction times to requests for external support have in the past been slow, leaving school staff to deal with difficult situations without the necessary staff to ensure pupil safety. A period of observations then follows and reports and recommendations are made. When everyone has agreed to the behaviour plan in its entirety, any funding is then released for additional staff. This process has taken up to 18 months in some cases and in one situation agreement could not be made, leaving school staff to deal with an extremely challenging pupil while trying to keep other pupils and staff safe. The observations and recommendations focus purely on the pupil named and do not take into consideration the needs of other pupils in the class when referencing staff deployment.”*

*“Physical injuries in our school are very serious, and compounded when we have little or no information regarding new pupils, for example, those coming from Europe. As a result we get little input for mental health.*

*We have reached our maximum capacity for providing for any more pupils with extreme behaviour but the staff are apprehensive that the ELB will place more”*

**What is needed to improve school capacity?**

**A suggestion from one school.....**

*“A multi-disciplinary support infrastructure staffed by health and education professionals with a proven history of working with challenging behaviour; more flexibility for the school to decide and to determine an appropriate staffing model. The ability to reduce the length of a school day would be useful; additional training days for staff in multi-disciplinary working from health and educational experts on a yearly basis; increased input from the counselling service; additional funding to release the Behaviour Support team members to do more in-house support and training; more consistent input and accountability from Health Trust Staff. Additional funding to support the needs of a child as and when required; more training in the field of behaviour management and the use of physical intervention practices; additional on-site accommodation which is destruction proof; more effective ELB understanding and support; more effective ‘hands-on’ input from educational psychologists. We need a unit built on the school grounds and staffed by health and education personnel on a joint accountability basis as a model of intensive support with a research perspective.”*

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