![eti - The Education and Training Inspectorate - Promoting Improvement]

An evaluation of
teacher professional learning
in meeting the
special educational needs
of learners

December 2023

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Introduction and methodology

The Department of Education (DE) commissioned the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) to carry out an evaluation of teacher professional learning (TPL)* in meeting the special educational needs (SEN)* of learners in schools*. The purpose of the evaluation was also to identify examples of effective practice, key challenges to be addressed and areas for consideration to inform policy development and practice.

*Throughout the report, where text is accompanied by an asterisk, this indicates that additional information can be found in **Appendix C: Notes**.*

The findings are based on visits to, or engagement with 39 organisations: three pre-school settings; 13 primary, 13 post-primary and four special schools; two Education Other than At School (EOTAS) centres; two youth settings (2); and two of the six colleges of Further Education (FE). Seven of the primary schools and four of the post primary schools who engaged in this evaluation had specialist provisions*.

Inspectors observed lessons and held discussions with learners and key staff*, including principals/senior leaders, learning support co-ordinators (LSCos) and classroom assistants in schools. The ongoing industrial action by the teaching unions impacted adversely on the scope of some of the visits to the organisations. This evaluation also draws upon evidence from district inspector visits and other evaluations completed by the ETI throughout 2022/23.

The ETI invited all teachers in nursery, primary, post-primary and special schools, and EOTAS centres to respond to an online questionnaire (the questionnaire) about the effectiveness of their TPL for SEN.
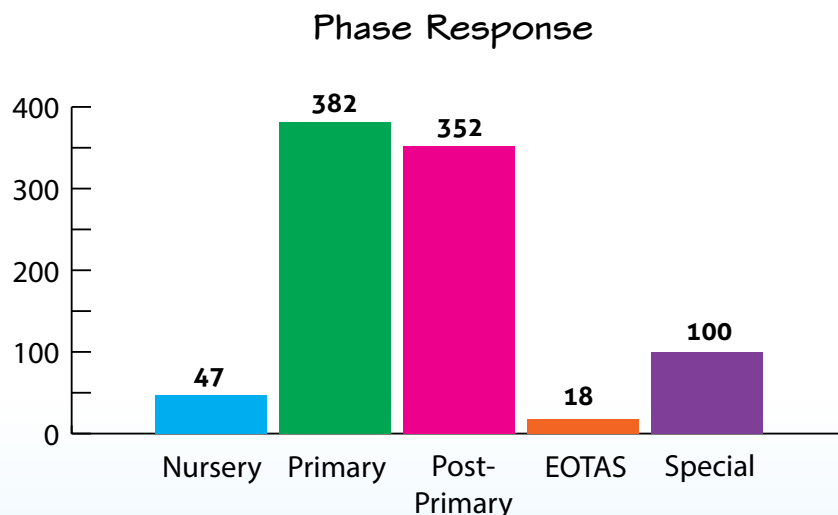
Phase Response

Phase	Response
Nursery	47
Primary	382
Post-Primary	352
EOTAS	18
Special	100

There were 899 responses with 956 written comments across the four open text options. Of the 897 respondents who specified their role, 57% (512) were teachers; 9% (80) teachers with LSCo responsibilities; 10% (89) teachers with senior leader responsibilities; 12% (105) teachers with LSCo and senior leader responsibilities; 4% (38) were a LSCo only; 1% (13) were a LSCo and senior leader; and 7% (60) were senior leaders only. Further detail is included in Appendix B.

Inspectors held discussions with the Education Authority (EA), Initial Teacher Education (ITE) providers*, the Curriculum and Programme Support (CAPS) organisation* and with staff from the Early Years Organisation*, early years specialists from Altram*, and an independent Early Years specialist.   A sample of the EA's pre-recorded online courses and live online professional learning sessions were observed. Inspectors also met with a small cohort of Post-Graduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) student teachers from the School of Education, the Queen's University of Belfast.

The ETI would like to thank all those who supported the work, as detailed above.

Background

Special Educational Needs and Disability Legislation

In response to the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Act (NI) 2016, the EA SEND team delivered dedicated training to school staff on SEN, and specifically the new duties outlined in the SEND Act. These duties include: requiring the EA and governors of schools to have regard to the views of the child; for the EA to consult on and publish an annual plan of its arrangements for special educational provision; for governors to ensure a LSCo replaces the role of a SEN co-ordinator; for schools to complete and review a personal learning plan for each learner with SEN; for the EA to reduce the time taken to assess needs; and increased co-operation between the EA and health and social care services across the five Health and Social Care Trusts (the Trusts) in the identification, assessment, and provision of services with a joint plan on the co-operation. However, in the absence of a working Executive and Assembly, aspects of the new SEN regulations and a new SEN Code of Practice remain to be implemented.

Some 200 recommendations have been made in the past six years, in various reports on how to improve the provision, to better meet learners' SEN. Key recommendations focus on providing effective and efficient support to learners with SEN to enable them to reach their full potential. The reports include: The Northern Ireland Audit Office (Special Educational Needs), The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Young People ('Too Little, Too Late'), and the Institut Public de Sondage d'Opinion Secteur's (Ipsos) DE-commissioned Independent Review of Special Educational Needs Services and Processes.

All of these reports made recommendations in relation to TPL, including: a mandatory ITE, early and career-long TPL programme for SEN, through collaboration between the DE, the Department for the Economy and the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)*; an apprenticeship-type SEN programme for student teachers; TPL that equips teachers to identify learners with SEN and take necessary action to support them; access to good quality, evidence-based resources and TPL within directed time budgets; tiered TPL matched to need and experience; and multi-disciplinary SEN support hubs, based around area learning communities which utilise expertise from within special schools.

Learning Leaders

Published in 2016, the DE's Learning Leaders: A Strategy For Teacher Professional Learning (the Strategy) sets out three aims, namely to: provide a structured framework for TPL; develop the leadership capacity of teachers; and offer practice-led support within communities of practice, in order to achieve its vision for TPL, "every teacher is a learning leader, accomplished in working collaboratively with all partners in the interests of children and young people." Underpinning the Strategy is the recognition that TPL is both a professional obligation and a personal commitment to continuous improvement, with self-evaluation an essential element.

The Strategy signals a move away from 'top-down' approaches to the learning and development of teachers' knowledge and skills. Instead, it envisages that teachers take responsibility for their continued professional learning throughout their career, as the agent of their own development. The ETI reported on the Strategy in 2017, recommending a framework for career-long TPL, identifying the limited effectiveness of support for student teachers in schools and the need to build a strategic TPL partnership across the education community. The aims of the Strategy and ETI's recommendations have still to be fully met.

Since the Strategy's publication and the ETI report of 2017, the educational landscape has been increasingly challenging with significant budgetary pressures, ongoing industrial action and the management of complexities arising during and post-pandemic. Now with the increase of specialist provisions in mainstream schools and the increased numbers of learners with SEN, the Strategy and ETI's recommendations need to be implemented fully.

Summary of key findings

The ongoing industrial action is limiting robust evaluation in schools, and more widely at system level by all stakeholders, including the ETI, of how well TPL for SEN impacts on learners' experiences and outcomes, particularly in the classroom.

In the majority (66%) of the 35 schools who engaged in this evaluation, it was reported that TPL enabled staff to meet learners' SEN. Most (83%) highlighted that they still need greater access to ongoing and effective external TPL to meet learners' SEN.

The TPL to meet the SEN of learners, overall, is not sufficiently fit-for-purpose. Of the teachers who responded to the questionnaire:

- Over one-third of teachers (36%) indicated that they do not have the knowledge, skills and understanding to meet their learners' SEN.

- **Almost two-fifths (39%)** indicated that their internal TPL was not effective enough.

- Only a minority (27%) indicated that they received effective TPL from the EA and statutory funded organisations.

- Over one-third (36%) indicated that the TPL they received using external agencies financed by their school was not effective enough.

- Only 25% indicated that they are aware of the DE's Learning Leaders strategy and that it is being implemented in their school.

- Only over one-third (37%) indicated that they make use of the DE SEN resource file.

- Over one-half (52%) did not feel well-informed about the opportunities available for TPL.

Context

The views of learners

Learners with SEN highlighted to inspectors that how well their teachers relate to and engage with them is key to meeting their needs effectively. Learners were clear about how their teachers meet their needs well and when they feel their needs are not met well enough. They valued when their teachers really know their strengths, interests and needs; and through listening and working with them were able to provide or facilitate different ways of learning and find solutions to address barriers to their learning.

A year 7 pupil stated: "*I struggle to complete a task when there is a time limit. Teachers could help me more by reducing the pressure to complete tasks within a certain time or to a certain number of tasks.*" A year 14 pupil stated: "*A teacher helped me to communicate better with people appropriately and with understanding... I learned how to use different techniques when upset to bring me down, study skills and how to complete presentations.... I have developed my writing skills, confidence and self-esteem.... I appreciate the support for my education and life choices... in helping me come out of my shell.*" In a special school visited, learners spoke about strategies that worked well for them such as: clear instructions; fun tasks and study skills that help them memorise key learning; and a calm room where they can concentrate. They valued activities tailored to meet their needs such as a Lego club and spoke about how these help them to develop their personal and social skills.

Just over one-half (51%) of the schools involved in this evaluation reported that they take account of the views of learners when evaluating the impact of teachers' TPL. In a primary school visited, teachers now use the term '*individual educational need*' in response to learners' feedback that they did not like the term '*special*' . The views of learners with SEN have led to the introduction of opportunities to learn about neurodiversity in a post-primary school visited, to help all learners understand different perspectives when working with others.

The views of learners beyond the annual review process need to better inform SEN work in all schools, including the priorities for TPL. One learner in a post primary school visited

stated, *"It is really important that all teachers read and understand my statement so that they know what I face, my triggers and ways to help me."*

The views of schools

In addition to their considerations about the effectiveness of TPL for SEN, the schools who engaged in this evaluation and many of the responses to the questionnaire also highlighted a range of other challenges that impact on SEN provision. Budgetary pressures and lack of resources for multi-agency partners* providing services across the Trusts are hampering the early identification of pre-school children's SEN and early identification across all phases. A significant challenge for schools is how thresholds to access EA support have increased. Insufficient access to educational psychology support is also cited. Schools report that the bureaucratic demands in supporting learners with SEN means that the TPL can become overly focused on upskilling staff in the required administration rather than the impact of pedagogy on the quality of the learning in the classroom.

While schools have annual staff development days (SDDs) to progress their priorities for improvement, in which teachers can engage in TPL, other mandatory training* limits the days and/or time available to focus on learning strategies. During this period of industrial action, there are instances where SDDs are also used to facilitate parent-teacher meetings. In special schools, teachers have days assigned to TPL in meeting the medical needs of learners. Some schools engaged in this evaluation reported examples of how the accommodation was limiting the extent to which teachers could apply their TPL in the classroom. For example, a special school visited had to repurpose their art and music specialist accommodation for general classrooms.

Key findings

TPL to meet the needs of learners and staff

Over one-third of teachers (36%) who responded to the questionnaire indicated that they do not have the knowledge, skills and understanding to meet their learners' SEN. Their comments indicated variation and inconsistencies in access to, and availability of, opportunities for TPL for all teachers.

In discussion with inspectors, however, a number of leaders and teachers reported examples of TPL approaches that worked well in meeting the needs of learners in their particular contexts.

○ Staff embedded their vision of meeting all learners' needs inclusively in a pre-school setting by engaging in a five-day TPL programme to promote an inclusive environment through: classroom organisation and layout; routines and transition; and a sensory environment to support the learners' social and emotional regulation. They spoke about how the TPL impacted positively on all learners' experiences and progress, not only those with SEN. The leader of the pre-school setting also engaged in a Fair Start-funded programme, to use a research-informed method of consultation with learners with SEN. The leader then worked with EA staff, including an educational psychologist, to reflect on the learners' needs and agree the most effective strategies to use. Staff within the pre-school also benefited from EA staff visiting the setting to observe the learning, followed by reflective professional dialogue.

○ In another pre-school setting, parents* were invited to attend sessions with an external consultant to learn about the social and emotional regulation strategies used in the pre-school that could be used at home. Where the parent and pre-school used consistent approaches, staff reported improvements in the learners' wider skills and dispositions which benefited their readiness to learn. The learners' positive progress was captured in their personal learning plan reviews and individual class profiles.

○ A primary school reported the impact of their TPL on embedding an inclusive whole-school culture to foster happiness and successful learning for all learners. Staff used the premise of 'love grows brains' to ensure the children's learning was celebrated through the art of identifying brilliance. The TPL included the secretary, caretaker, cooks, governors and parents and learners mentoring each other. The school spoke about how a trusted colleague network is being developed with staff engaging in peer observations.

○ In another primary, leaders consulted with teaching and non-teaching staff, learners and parents to identify priorities for TPL through the school development planning process. The school reports that the tailored approach to TPL led by the needs of the learners and staff ensures their approach to TPL is not a 'one size fits all' and is helping to develop a highly skilled workforce.

○ Another primary school recognised the value of learning from other practitioners* modelling ways to help learners progress. EA staff team-taught* lessons alongside staff, using a range of approaches to meet learners' social, behaviour and emotional wellbeing needs. It was reported that this impacted positively on the quality of teachers' interaction with learners through intonation, pace, expression, demeanour, open questions, pauses, flexibility in choices for learners and the celebration of success.

○ In response to the lengthy waiting lists for the services' individual appointments, a primary school piloted work with the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)* within the school, to identify learners' needs and support them through preventative in-school interventions.

○ In an EOTAS centre, an educational psychologist team-taught with staff lessons on neurodiversity and brain development. This TPL provided staff with the knowledge, understanding, skills and strategies to empower their learners to understand how their brain works and the strategies that work best for them.

❍ The daily debrief in another EOTAS centre provided ongoing TPL opportunities for staff to reflect on their practice and learn from each other. Staff were able to develop diagnostic skills in identifying learners' needs; share strategies to use with learners to help them with social and emotional regulation; adapt planning; and trial new approaches to improve learning and teaching in meeting the learners' needs. An "open-door*" approach also enabled staff to observe each other's lessons, and learn from the strategies, questioning and interactions.

❍ In a special school, teachers spoke about how they talk to learners and their parents regularly about ways to help them in their learning. In taking time to listen to the personal stories of learners and their parents, the teachers gained greater understanding of learners' lives and the challenges they faced beyond the classroom. This ongoing partnership between the learners, teachers and parents helped them communicate more effectively with each other about making reasonable adjustments, incorporating preferred learning approaches and interventions recommended by other practitioners. The school also involved its cluster of special schools in TPL that helped teachers to work with parents on regulating sleep patterns for learners.

❍ In a post-primary school, teachers reported that TPL increased their confidence and ability to spot, at an early stage, signs of learners experiencing barriers to their learning and put in place appropriate interventions. As a consequence, the school provided early intervention for pupils waiting for specialist SEN support through an emotional and resilience adventure learning programme. This was successful in improving engagement and attendance for targeted pupils.

❍ In another post-primary, work was undertaken with an occupational therapist and a sleep therapist to provide a movement programme which supported learners and their parents in establishing sleep routines.

❍ Another post-primary school identified the need for, and subsequently provided, TPL focused on enabling teachers to work confidently and constructively with parents who were finding it difficult to accept and support their child's SEN.

In a youth setting, youth workers, with support and supervision from their managers, discussed the impact of professional learning to support young people with autism on their practice. This included identifying how to use the professional learning and the intended impact on the young people's learning. The youth training officer met with teams to quality assure the impact of the professional learning through qualitative and quantitative data and to inform priorities for going forward.

In a number of primary and post-primary schools visited, LSCos enabled teachers and classroom assistants to access external TPL for specific SEN unfamiliar to them. They reported that external TPL facilitated in the schools requires careful planning to ensure that the content takes account of the differing starting points of staff. They deployed classroom assistants to support individual learners with their needs based on the expertise, experience and skillset of each assistant.

In the majority (66%) of the 35 schools who engaged in this evaluation, it was reported that TPL for SEN enabled staff to meet learners' needs. The LSCos and teachers who met with inspectors, spoke about how they use their personal and professional learning to inform their practice. They recognise that, with the evolving complexity of learners' needs, their TPL is crucial. In these schools, they spoke about how they prioritise TPL, through for example: personal research and study; internal TPL provided within the school by the LSCo and other staff, with examples of supporting resources collated digitally; internal professional learning between teachers in year groups or subject departments, including at transition points and daily debriefs about what works well and what needs to improve; online TPL provided by the EA and other TPL providers*; support from providers such as Middletown Centre for Autism (MCA), multi-agency partners, and links with HEIs; and peer-support groups/social networks created by teachers for themselves.

In a small number of schools visited, they reported the benefit of the following examples of TPL: learning from each other through classroom observations of interactions, questioning, planning and strategies used; advice, guidance and support from other practitioners observing the learning in the classroom; and through SEN cluster groups, shared education partnerships or links with special schools and/or EOTAS centres.

From the lessons observed, inspectors noted examples of teachers who used their TPL well to:

○   inform how they identify, plan for, meet and assess individual learners' needs. This included using a range of diagnostic assessments, records of observations, discussions with other teachers, parents, classroom assistants and multi-agency partners to inform precise instructions, positive interactions and the choice of resources, strategies, adjustments, and routines.

○   enable learners to use specific strategies they have learned to self-regulate, organise their learning, ask for help, and engage well with others.

○   develop positive learning environments for the learners through effective planning and use of classroom layouts and resources. For example, individualised learning stations, multi-sensory corners, visual schedules, timers, movement breaks as a preventative measure, signage, sensory toys, emotion puppets, wobble cushions and a wide range of other appropriate resources, including information and communication technology benefited the learners well.

○   work with their classroom assistants through linking observations of learning with the learners' personal learning plans. Together they ensure any support develops the learners' independence and classroom assistant deployment is agreed with learners and their parents.

○   partner with multi-agencies to ensure their learners' holistic needs are met. For example, physical movement, health and wellbeing, medication and therapeutic interventions where there is a clear understanding of, and mutual respect for, the role of the teacher and that of multi-agency partners.

While these examples reflect the professional dedication of staff to their TPL, leaders in most schools visited expressed frustration about the context in which schools are working with the adverse impact of industrial action. This has resulted in limits being placed on teachers attending meetings to reflect on practice, engaging in new initiatives, and the

extent to which all staff can engage in robust evaluation of how well their TPL impacts on learners' experiences and outcomes.

Accessing TPL information and opportunities

Over one-half (52%) of teachers who responded to the questionnaire did not feel well informed about the TPL opportunities available for SEN. While there is a list of courses advertised on the EA website, teachers would welcome a centralised and easily accessible list of TPL across all providers, to inform teachers of where and how to access TPL most appropriate to their identified needs.

Sixty-four percent of the respondents indicated that, in meeting learners' SEN, they received effective professional learning, but it was as a result of personal research or self-funded study.

With only 25% of respondents indicating that they are aware of DE's Learning Leaders Strategy or if it is being implemented in their school, there needs to be awareness-raising about the Strategy and for it to be implemented fully, with a framework for career-long TPL. This includes a common understanding of the breadth of activities which can constitute TPL, understood and used consistently by all TPL providers. As the ETI identified in its report in 2017, in comparing education to similar professions, there is no formally recognised, career-long arrangements for the validation and certification of TPL activities.

While the ITE providers report that SEN is a compulsory element across all of the Bachelor of Education (BEd) and PGCE programmes, each provider has its own unique structure and course content.

The ITE providers work with a range of organisations* and school practitioners to develop the student teachers' knowledge and understanding of complex and diverse learning needs within whole-child, barriers to learning and inclusive pedagogy frameworks. Student teachers can opt for further SEN modules and special school placements. The EA staff have appropriately linked with the ITE providers to provide student teacher placements in EOTAS centres.

In discussions with inspectors, student teachers said that they valued learning from practitioners from different contexts and that they would like more opportunities to develop further their understanding of, and experience in, how to plan for and meet effectively the individual needs of learners. Student teachers and ITE providers also identified that the quality of a student teacher's SEN experience and support while on school placement varied according to the quality of the SEN provision in the host school.

A majority of teachers (63%) who responded to the questionnaire indicated that the professional learning they received during ITE did not prepare them well enough to meet learners' SEN. EA staff reported to ETI that SEN and managing learners' behaviour make up the key priorities in the majority of teachers' early career action plans. EA staff also identified that teachers would benefit from TPL for qualified teachers, through further collaboration between the EA, ITE providers, and HEIs, to ensure a coherent TPL continuum.

Most (83%) of the 35 schools engaged in this evaluation, highlighted that they need greater access to effective external TPL to meet learners' SEN. Schools report that some TPL is ad hoc and initiative-driven, offered en-masse to very different schools, rather than meeting the specific SEN requirements within a school's context. Special schools report that external TPL bespoke to their context is limited and Irish-medium practitioners report the lack of immersion-specific TPL opportunities.

Only a minority (27%) of teachers who responded to the questionnaire indicated that they received effective TPL from the EA and statutory-funded organisations. As one post-primary principal reported, *"access to a suite of online resources is not an alternative to properly funded and researched programmes to develop teacher skills and expertise with regularity over a sustained period of time."*

Teachers, through the questionnaire and in discussion with inspectors, highlighted that they require the following: in-person TPL with opportunities to reflect critically on practice with others beyond their school; follow-on practical workshops to develop further learning from the pre-recorded presentations; a greater TPL focus on learners rather than administration associated with the changing requirements in SEN; greater consideration of different contexts and ways to meet more effectively the SEN of multiple learners in a class. It is evident from the schools visited and teachers' written comments in the

questionnaire that there is a need for more TPL in meeting the needs of learners with dyscalculia and those requiring numeracy support.

The schools engaged in the evaluation shared an overview of TPL provided to their teachers which showed variation in the type and level of TPL accessed by different schools, and by the teachers within a school. In addition, some leaders reported that while a programme of TPL can be offered by a school, it is then about how the individual teachers apply their TPL to meet learners' SEN in the classroom. All stakeholders need agreed expectations of the nature of TPL available, what teachers access and how they apply their TPL as reflective practitioners to meet the different learners' needs in their context. Furthermore, teachers need a TPL programme for SEN to support them as reflective practitioners, through early career development and career-long access to accredited professional learning which uses cross-sectoral training opportunities, informed by all relevant sectors, departments and multi-agency partners.

Communities of Practice

Communities of Practice* involve collaboration by schools, internally and externally with stakeholders, including other providers and agencies.

Almost two-fifths (39%) of teachers who responded to the questionnaire indicated that their internal TPL for SEN was not effective enough. There were examples of written comments that, whilst commending the work of LSCos in disseminating their TPL, indicated subject leaders, key stage co-ordinators and other postholders would like to learn from others working in different settings and contexts, through critical reflection on practice, especially those in small schools or departments. There were written comments that also indicated that teachers do have not enough time for their TPL to meet learners' evolving and often complex SEN.

Given that only over one-third (37%) of teachers who responded to the questionnaire indicated that they make use of the DE SEN resource file, and based on the written comments provided, a centralised, interactive and up-to-date repository of SEN research and practice from across all TPL providers would be helpful to teachers and their schools.

Over one-third of teachers (36%) who responded to the questionnaire indicated that the TPL they receive using external agencies financed by their school was not effective enough. Some teachers' written comments indicated that the sessions focused, at times, on theory rather than on classroom practice. For the 43% of respondents who indicated such TPL was effective, written comments highlighted the benefits of in-person TPL tailored to the school's context provided by experienced practitioners. School leaders and governors must be assured that externally financed TPL providers are validated and that the impact of this TPL is evaluated through feedback from teachers, learners and where appropriate, their parents.

A minority of teachers (29%) who responded to the questionnaire indicated that they do not receive effective TPL through partnership with other schools. Furthermore, just over half (52%) of respondents indicated that receiving effective TPL through partnership with other schools was not applicable to them. In contrast, some of the schools who engaged in the evaluation spoke about the benefits of SEN cluster groups, TPL through area learning communities with links to HEIs, and joint practice development* through shared education partnerships. There is a need for the EA to give close consideration to how its directorates can collaboratively work to deliver and evaluate an easily accessible, research-informed, coherent and centralised TPL programme for SEN, with better signposting, support and where necessary, challenge to schools.

The classroom assistants who met with inspectors highlighted the importance of flexibility when supporting learners and of listening to the learners' views about the support they provide. They indicated they receive professional learning internally from the LSCo, the teachers they work alongside and from each other. In a special school visited, a classroom assistant with an Arts degree and a qualified dance instructor provided TPL for a 'DrumFit' programme. This resulted in learners showing improved concentration, co-ordination, memory recall, recognition of number patterns, and self-regulation. Across schools, classroom assistants can access information and pre-recorded online presentations from the EA and other providers. In discussion with the more experienced classroom assistants, they requested a more tiered approach to professional learning.

The schools visited spoke about the need for assurance through robust, ongoing evaluation, that the deployment of classroom assistants is effective and that they empower SEN learners with independence and self-advocacy, which can be challenging.

As one teacher stated, *"SEN training tends to 'lock' children into a SEN space whereas a more holistic approach is needed.... children become reliant on the classroom assistant who assumes they must do everything for the child...when the best thing for the child is to allow them to develop independence and resilience."*

Communities of practice include cross-phase and sectoral professional learning opportunities and hence this evaluation also drew upon evidence gathered from other ETI work undertaken in two of the FE colleges and two youth settings.

Both FE colleges visited hold the matrix Standard for information, advice and guidance (IAG) services* which impacts positively on learner experiences and inclusive support. For example, specialist training and upskilling programmes are delivered in supporting children and adults with special needs, and understanding autism. There are also examples of post-primary and EOTAS staff liaising closely with FE staff to prepare learners effectively for transition. The EA youth service reports that youth centres have in-house professional learning and access to external training for paid staff, volunteers, and young people which is informed by the identified needs of young people. Effective collaboration between youth workers and teachers supports well young people with a range of additional support needs in their personal and social development.

In developing further communities of practice which can better support learners with SEN at transition points, teachers, FE lecturers and youth tutors would benefit from more collaborative, cross-sectoral opportunities to share their professional learning in meeting learners' SEN. Furthermore, such collaborative and cross-phase working would support the implementation of the Framework To Transform 14-19 Education and Training.

Conclusion

The TPL to meet the SEN of learners, overall, is not sufficiently fit-for-purpose. With more schools with specialist provisions and the increase in the numbers of learners with SEN, and of learners with increasingly complex SEN, teachers require now, more than ever, equitable access to and engagement in regular, high-quality TPL in this key area of their work. All stakeholders who supported this evaluation recognise this.

The DE's five-year Corporate Plan, Every CHILD 2023 -28 sets down its vision that *"Every child and young person is happy, learning and succeeding"* and is underpinned by five strategic priorities, **C**hampioning, **H**elping, **I**nspiring, **L**earning and **D**elivering*. Effective TPL in meeting learners' SEN is key to realising the actions DE aspires to within this corporate plan, in particular to: ensure every child and young person with additional or SEN has their needs identified and assessed as early as possible and receives provision which is timely and appropriate; an inclusive curriculum that gives equal emphasis to skills and knowledge and empowers all children and young people to achieve their potential and to make informed and responsible decisions throughout their lives; and, deliver a highly skilled, motivated and high functioning education workforce, which is provided with adequate support and training to enable it to meet the needs of every learner and stakeholder it serves.

The impact of quality TPL to meet the SEN of the learners should be two-fold: learners should be better supported to make individual progress and teachers, as reflective practitioners, should be better supported to develop further their skills and expertise.

In light of the changing profile of SEN across the schools the evaluation has identified priority areas for consideration:

○ **The full implementation of the Learning Leaders Strategy to provide a 'structured framework for TPL' and equitable access to 'practice-led support within communities of practice'.** This should include a common understanding of the breadth of activities which can constitute TPL, understood and used consistently by all TPL providers and further collaboration between the EA, ITE providers, and HEIs.

○ **A TPL programme for SEN to support the reflective practitioner, through early career development and career-long access to accredited professional learning.** This should include cross-sectoral training opportunities, informed by all relevant sectors, government departments and multi-agency partners.

○ **For the EA to** give close consideration to how its Education Directorate, Children and Young People's Services Directorate and other directorates, as appropriate, can **collaboratively work to deliver and evaluate an easily accessible, research-informed, coherent and centralised TPL programme for SEN, with better signposting, support and where necessary, challenge to schools.**

○ **Greater access for teachers to more effective in-person and collaborative TPL networks.** These should provide: opportunities to reflect critically on practice with others beyond their own schools; follow-on practical workshops which develop further learning from pre-recorded presentations; greater focus on learners rather than the administration associated with changing requirements in SEN; greater consideration of different contexts; and ways to meet effectively the SEN of multiple learners in a class.

○ **The creation of a centralised, interactive and up-to-date repository of SEN research and practice from across all TPL providers.**

Appendix A:

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%

Appendix B:

Questionnaire

There were 899 responses with 956 written comments across the four open text options.

1.   Please tick the correct options below that best explain your context and please detail if you have an accredited qualification in teaching learners with SEN.

Teacher only	512
Teacher and LSCo	80
Teacher and senior leader	89
Teacher, LSCO and senior leader	105
LSCo only	38
LSCo and senior leader	13
Senior leader only	60
No role specified	* (less than 5)
Total	**899**

Teacher	
0-3 years	35
3-5 years	40
5-10 years	107
More than 10 years	604
Total	**786**

LSCo	
0-3 years	59
3-5 years	34
5-10 years	56
More than 10 years	87
Total	**236**

Senior leader	
0-3 years	39
3-5 years	42
5-10 years	73
More than 10 years	113
Total	**267**

2. There is an inclusive ethos in my school that sets high aspirations for learners with SEN.

    Yes: 96%   No: 4%

3. My school values and uses well the views of learners with SEN to inform strategic planning for TPL.

    Yes: 87%   No: 13%

4. My school values and uses well the views of parents/carers of learners with SEN to inform strategic planning for TPL.

    Yes: 88%   No: 12%

5. I feel well informed about the opportunities available for TPL in meeting learners' SEN.

    Yes: 48%   No: 52%

6. I am acquiring the knowledge, understanding and skills I need to meet the SEN of the learners I teach.

    Yes: 64%   No (Please explain):   36%

7. The teacher professional learning I access is effective in helping me meet learners' SEN.

    Yes: 53%   No (Please explain):   47%

8. I find the DE SEN resource file useful.

| Yes: | 37% | No: | 14% | Not aware of the SEN file: | 49% |

9. I am aware of the DE Learning Leaders Strategy for teacher professional learning and it is being implemented in my school.

| Yes: | 25% | No: | 8% | Not aware of the strategy: | 67% |

10. In meeting learners' SEN, I receive(d) professional learning through the following:
    Please tick all that apply.
    (E = effective; NEE = not effective enough; NA = not applicable)

	E	NEE	NA
During initial teacher education	22%	63%	15%
Internally within my school	56%	39%	5%
Through partnership with other schools	19%	29%	52%
Through personal research/study	64%	27%	9%
From external agencies or trainers paid for by school	43%	36%	21%
From EA and other statutory-funded organisations	27%	54%	19%

Appendix C:

Notes

Page 1

teacher professional learning (TPL)*

A collective term agreed by stakeholders that refers to ITE, early career development and career-long personal and professional learning. It can include for example, experiential, action or enquiry-based learning, professional dialogue with colleagues, other professionals, parents, and learners, critical analysis of reading, learning and impact on professional practice, team-teaching, peer support e.g. coaching or mentoring, classroom visits / peer observations / shadowing with related professional dialogue, self-evaluation and critical reflection processes, accredited courses or qualifications and professional / academic conferences.

special educational needs (SEN) *

A term defined in legislation as 'a learning difficulty which calls for special educational provision to be made'. Children have a learning difficulty if they have 'significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of children their age and/or have a disability which hinders their everyday use of educational facilities.'

schools*

The term 'schools' as used in the report includes pre-school settings and EOTAS centres.

specialist provisions*

The EA funds specialist provision in a mainstream school to support children with a statement of SEN with specialist teaching within a small group setting.

key staff*

The term 'staff' as used in the report refers to both teaching and non-teaching staff.

Page 2   **Initial Teacher Education (ITE) providers***

ETI consulted the following providers of ITE in Northern Ireland (NI): the Queen's University of Belfast, St Mary's University College, Stranmillis University College and the University of Ulster on how they prepare student teachers to meet learners' SEN. It should be noted that respondents to the online questionnaire also included those teachers who completed their ITE in other jurisdictions.

the Curriculum and Programme Support (CAPS) organisation*

CAPS is an independent organisation who support voluntary pre-school settings.

the Early Years organisation*

Early Years is a non-profit making organisation. It is the largest organisation in NI working with and for young children.

Altram*

The regional support group for Irish-medium early years projects.

Page 3   **Higher Education Institutions***

These provide TPL for qualified teachers and include NI's three universities and two university colleges: The Queen's University, Belfast; Ulster University; the Open University in NI; St Mary's University College, Belfast; and Stranmillis University College. NI's FE sector comprises six colleges with 29 campuses that provide access to a wide range of Higher Education courses including degrees, foundation degrees, Higher National Certificates, Higher National Diplomas, and Higher Level Apprenticeships.

Page 7   **multi-agency partners***

This includes multi-disciplinary specialists such as, art therapists, drama therapists, music therapists, podiatrists, dietitians, occupational therapists, osteopaths, physiotherapists, prosthetists and orthotists, and speech and language therapists.

mandatory training*
This is annual compulsory training and can include: updates on child
protection and safeguarding, health and safety and medication awareness.

Page 8   **parents***
This includes those with parental responsibility.

Page 9   **other practitioners***
Teachers from other schools, EA staff, staff from other TPL providers or
multi-agency partners across the Trusts.

team-taught*
In team-teaching, both adults are in the room at the same time but take
turns teaching the learners.

the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) *
CAMHS is the National Health Services that assess and treat young people
with emotional, behavioural or mental health difficulties.

Page 10   **open door***
This TPL approach involves staff moving in and out of each other's rooms
regularly and informally observing, and learning from each other's
practice.

Page 11   **other TPL providers***
These include the EA, HEIs and MCA. Schools may also access support
from the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), the Council for
Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) or the Controlled Schools' Support
Council (CSSC). There are also online providers, external companies,
individual consultants and charities providing TPL focused on specific
SEN, as well as peer-support groups /social networks.

Page 13   **ITE providers work with other organisations***
The following list is not exhaustive and may include the MCA, EA, CCEA, Disability Sport NI, Royal National Institute of Blind People in NI and the Down's Syndrome Association.

Page 15   **Communities of Practice***
Communities of Practice (CoPs) are organised groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly. The concept was first proposed by cognitive anthropologist Jean Lave and educational theorist Etienne Wenger in their 1991 book Situated Learning. CoPs are increasingly being used to improve knowledge management and connect people within business, government, education, and other organisations. There are four basic types of communities:

- Helping Communities provide a forum for community members to help each other with everyday work needs.

- Best Practice Communities develop and disseminate best practices, guidelines, and strategies for their members' use.

- Knowledge Stewarding Communities organise, manage, and steward a body of knowledge from which community members can draw.

- Innovation Communities create breakthrough ideas, new knowledge, and new practices.

Page 16   **joint practice development***
Teachers in shared education partnerships develop their practice together through classroom-based action research.

Page 17   **the matrix Standard for information, advice and guidance (IAG) services***
An international standard for IAG services.

Page 18   **five strategic priorities, Championing, Helping, Inspiring, Learning and Delivering***

Championing the needs and aspirations of all our children and young people and the positive impact of education; **Helping** all our children and young people by supporting their well-being and learning; **Inspiring** all our children and young people to make a positive contribution to society; Meeting the **Learning** needs of our children and young people and developing their knowledge and skills, enabling them to fulfil their potential; and **Delivering** an effective, child-first, collaborative and high quality education system.
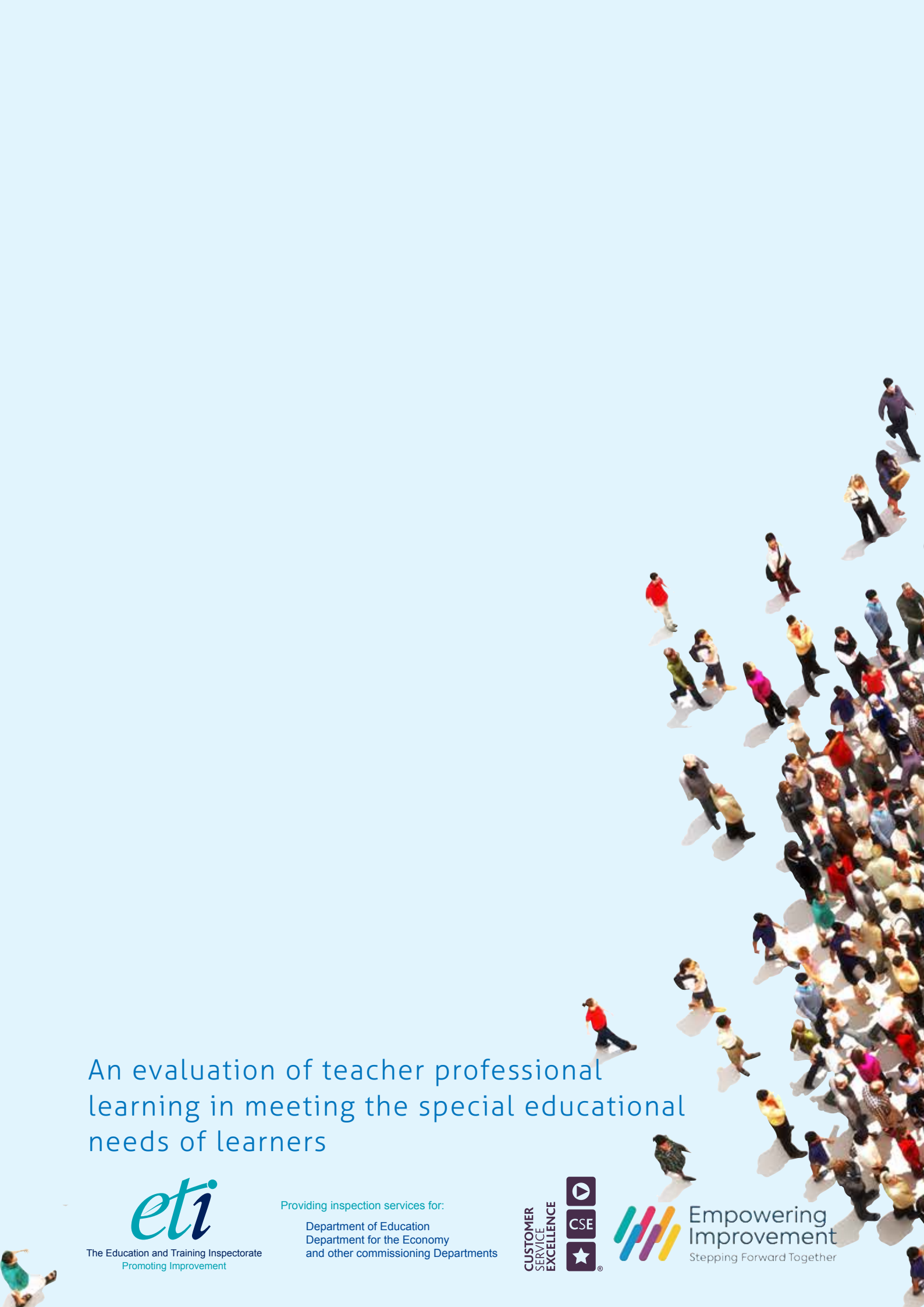
Copies of this report are available on the ETI website

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An evaluation of teacher professional
learning in meeting the special educational
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