

**A Survey of Provision for Pupils
with Severe and Profound
Learning Difficulties
in Northern Ireland**

1998-2000



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APPENDIX

PUPILS WITH SEVERE AND PROFOUND LEARNING DIFFICULTIES SURVEY - SCHOOLS VISITED

Ceara Special School, Lurgan
Clifton Special School, Bangor
Cranny Special School, Omagh
Donard Special School, Banbridge
Elmbrook Special School, Enniskillen
Foyleview Special School, Londonderry
Glasvey Special School, Limavady
Glenveagh Special School, Belfast
Glenside Special School, Strabane
Hillcroft Special School, Newtownabbey
Kilronan Special School, Magherafelt
Knockevin Special School, Downpatrick
Lisnally Special School, Armagh
Loughan Special School, Ballymena
Riverside School, Antrim
Oakwood Special School, Belfast
Parkview Special School, Lisburn
Rathfriland Hill Special School, Newry
Roddensvale Special School, Larne
Sandelford Special School, Coleraine
Sperrinview Special School, Dungannon
Tor Bank Special School, Belfast

10. CONCLUSION

10.1 Since the transfer in 1987 of responsibility for the SLD sector to the DE, it is evident that significant improvements have been made, and examples of excellent practice have developed. There is clear evidence from the survey findings to show that the SLD school sector fulfils an important role in providing effective education for pupils with severe or profound learning difficulties. It is hoped that this report will enhance the status of the special education work in the schools and help to identify approaches to best practice which are evident, or emerging, so that these approaches can be shared across all schools.

all schools, and is an issue for action at both school and area board level. In a number of schools, ICT work is inhibited by the poor quality of much of the hardware.

9.5 Significantly, the survey revealed the anxiety felt by a majority of teachers in making use of ICT to support learning. In these instances, the computer was often under-used or used only to play games or to word process written work. This under-use, and a number of other aspects of provision, needs to be addressed if the pupils' ICT skills and knowledge are to be developed effectively. These include:

- ▶ the need for further staff development in ICT;
- ▶ the need to have a co-ordinated ICT strategy throughout the school;
- ▶ the need to up-grade resources;
- ▶ the need to link more firmly the teachers' curriculum planning to the pupils' skills.

These issues should be addressed within the development of an inter-board forum for the effective promotion of ICT.

Action Required to Develop Further the Effective Use of ICT

At DE/area board level:

- ▶ to establish a working group to identify standards of effective competence in ICT for special schools;
- ▶ to up-grade resources and provide effective in-service support.

At school level:

- ▶ to prioritise the ICT area for staff development and ongoing evaluation of practice.

have regular and planned computer work, and support from an experienced teacher. Throughout the sector, there is insufficient evaluation by schools of the impact of ICT upon the quality of teaching, and upon pupils' progress.

9.4 In those schools where the provision is of a high standard, a number of features are evident which contribute strongly to the pupils' ICT development. These include:

- ▶ the expertise, skill and enthusiasm of the ICT co-ordinator;
- ▶ the encouragement of the principal;
- ▶ well planned programmes indicating the ICT skills to be taught and applied across the curriculum;
- ▶ the carefully planned use of specialist multi-sensory ICT equipment;
- ▶ efficient arrangements to ensure support for class teachers;
- ▶ the use of ICT to assist individual pupils' learning;
- ▶ the organisation of the resources to ensure appropriate pupil access;
- ▶ the willingness of the school to be innovative in its use of ICT;
- ▶ good in-service opportunities for teachers and classroom assistants;
- ▶ the ongoing evaluation of practice.

In these schools, the skill and experience of the ICT co-ordinators has been decisive in raising the confidence and competence of the other teachers, and promoting the regular classroom application of ICT. In Glasvey School, for example, the more able pupils are encouraged to read through good use of personalised reading material, and specially adapted ICT programmes designed by the ICT co-ordinator. In Loughan School, the use of ICT programmes, such as Writing with Symbols, enhances the non-verbal pupils' written communication skills. One group of senior pupils in Ceara School has prepared word processing stationery of a good standard for sale in their mini-enterprise company. In Knockevin School, the staff and pupils have used a digital camera and word-processor to produce reading materials reflecting life in school and the local community. This work was subsequently included in a CD-ROM, produced by the Teacher Training Agency, as support material for the New Opportunity training initiative. However, the use of ICT to support a range and variety of learning is not yet established practice in

- ▶ named members of staff from each sector were timetabled to produce and monitor common arrangements for the continuation of the pupils' programmes.

Action Required to Develop Further the Provision for School Leavers

At DE/area board level:

- ▶ to resource the leavers' programme to ensure the good progress found in developing work-experience and accreditation is maintained;
- ▶ to establish working arrangements with the Health Trusts to develop the agenda for future collaboration and review of provision between schools and ATC.

At school level:

- ▶ to review, through inter-school conferences, the provision for 16-19 year old leavers, to share best practice and promote its effectiveness.

9. INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY (ICT)

- 9.1 The quality of work in ICT varies from poor to excellent. While the majority of schools are at an early stage of developing their ICT competencies, a minority of schools are making excellent provision for ICT. However, the survey reveals that there is, at present, no mechanism to identify and disseminate good practice across the area boards. Examples of good work observed during the survey remain isolated, and do not influence the effective development of ICT across the special school sector.
- 9.2 The input from the boards' advisory service, in response to the government's ICT initiative, has helped to raise the profile of ICT provision in the schools, and has been the most important factor in encouraging some schools to audit their provision, and plan appropriately.
- 9.3 The survey found examples of good practice in some classrooms in most schools, and examples of the excellent use of ICT in five schools. The general finding is that pupils' progress in ICT is directly associated with the extent to which they

date. This need places a responsibility on the area boards to support schools in accessing the support of the local business community. For their part, schools should endeavour to expand their leavers' provision into the wider community. In this endeavour, the schools should:

- ▶ identify and initiate leavers' programme which suit their pupils' needs and interests;
- ▶ identify a senior member of staff to take the work forward;
- ▶ establish regular meetings with various agencies to agree objectives and outcomes for the pupils.

8.7 The survey report has described the strengths and issues relating to the quality of the leavers' programmes, and the development of alternative options for school leavers. However, for many pupils, the work of world and further education placement are not a realistic option. For these pupils, placement in Adult Training Centres (ATCs), which are the responsibility of the Department of Health and Social Services, is the most appropriate post-school placement. The links between the schools and the adult education centres are well established and largely effective. The present arrangements make it easy to allow for the smooth transfer from school to the ATC, and the documentation relating to transfer indicates a common, though often casual, approach throughout the system. There are good examples of effective sharing of information at case conferences, and phased entry into the ATCs in ways which make the pupils feel at ease. Nonetheless, schools, with area board support, could benefit from a review of this aspect of their provision in the light of the pupils' need for consistent and continuous curricular provision. In many cases, the established links are primarily administrative, and scant consideration is given to the importance of continuing the programme of work of the school into the ATC. From the survey evidence, it is possible to identify a number of indicators of good links which most schools could use to enhance current practice. For example, it would be helpful if:

- ▶ school and ATC staff developed more focused working links in order to concentrate on the key elements, including the curricular aspects, of pupil transfer;

with one member of staff at the leavers' level, there was an obvious lack of confidence and insufficient staff to implement a programme of work experience. However, the following strategies are beginning to emerge in these schools as useful foundations for further development:

- ▶ the commitment to change, and the timetabling of meetings to discuss how best to achieve an effective leavers' programme;
- ▶ the auditing of existing practices to identify priorities for action;
- ▶ developing links with the local Further and Higher Education (FHE) college;
- ▶ the involvement of parents in discussions to ensure their confidence in the increasing options available at post-school level;
- ▶ in many of the smaller schools, the experience of the Options for Progression in Transition programme (OPT) project has helped to make the possibility of work placement a reality.

8.5 It is evident from the survey findings that a number of issues remain which need to be addressed if the schools are to meet more effectively the needs of the school leavers. These issues include:

- ▶ the need to deal effectively with the wide range of FHE courses, many of which overlap considerably in content and outcome;
- ▶ the need to deploy staff appropriately, to give the necessary time to develop and implement aspects of the leavers' programme;
- ▶ the need to affirm links with FHE colleges in order to ensure the verification of work completed.

8.6 The survey findings indicate that all schools are in the process of making considerable changes to their 16-19 provision; while some have made great strides, a minority have yet to make significant progress. All the work in this area is based on a growing recognition in the schools that pupils are capable of adjusting successfully to the world of work, and can benefit from the experiences of greater community involvement. The survey recognises the useful input of the OPT project in this regard, and records the need to maintain the progress achieved to

- ▶ a system of recording achievements to which the pupils contribute;
- ▶ a pastoral system which respects the pupils' ages and promotes their sense of responsibility and maturity.

8.3 Where schools have established effective and efficient provision, they have invested considerable preparation in developing a complete curriculum package of activities which builds on the pupils' previous work, and aims at ensuring they apply their learning in a variety of contexts, both in and outside the school. The survey brought to light numerous examples of innovative and imaginative work: the mini-enterprise at Glenveagh school, for example, has resulted in the pupils accessing work-experience across a range of employment placements, and has led to the development of appropriate work skills. Of particular note, also is Foyle View School's special achievement award in the Young Enterprise Trade Fair in Dublin in which 63 schools from 19 countries took part. Lisnally School has pioneered accreditation including verification to enrich its work with school leavers, and Sperrinview has made great efforts to enhance the vocational experiences for its older pupils. Tor Bank School makes good use of their leavers' facilities as a community base to prepare pupils for numerous work placements. In these schools, the staff have established effective ways of monitoring, assessing and recording the implementation of their leavers' programme so that adjustments and improvements can be carried out as part of the process. The successful strategies include:

- ▶ the creation of an infrastructure within which work is planned and evaluated. The input of the teacher responsible for the work is crucial in this respect;
- ▶ the policy of including all pupils in the leavers' cycle, and of offering job-sampling to those pupils who could respond to it positively and productively;
- ▶ the involvement of other agencies, such as the Training and Employment Agency (T&EA), in the process.

8.4 In those schools where the survey found poor practice, the teachers required guidance on how to make changes to the 16-19 programme, and feel uncertain about how best to expand the leavers' programme. In the smaller schools, often

Action Required to Develop Further the Provision for Pupils with Autism

At DE/area board level:

- ▶ to review the current assessment practices to ensure consistency;
- ▶ to review pre-school support for parents and their children in order to ensure a more cohesive and co-ordinated approach to provision;
- ▶ to address the training needs of teachers.

At school level:

- ▶ to audit current practices in order to identify areas for development, and to address the various issues highlighted in this report.

8. PROVISION FOR SCHOOL LEAVERS

8.1 The quality of provision for school leavers varies widely; it is mostly good, and in a small number of schools the provision is of a notably high standard. By contrast, in about 35% of the schools inspected, the provision has serious weaknesses. Many schools are still in the early stages of exploring the 16-19 curriculum, and have not yet developed effective strategies to ensure adequate focus on life skills, and preparation for the adult world.

8.2 Those practices which the survey team found particularly effective include:

- ▶ a high priority given to the leavers' curriculum;
- ▶ a three year rolling programme which emphasises functional life and work-skills;
- ▶ firm links with the local Further and Higher Education College providing recognised accreditation courses and vocational work experiences;
- ▶ a range of accreditation courses to meet the needs, where appropriate, of all pupils;
- ▶ a programme of activities to integrate the pupils with their mainstream peers;
- ▶ an effective mini-enterprise project, and local network of work experience;

teaching instructions to reflect, more precisely, the pupils' communication difficulties.

- 7.13 It is evident that teachers are focusing appropriately on the fine motor skill area, and steady progress was noted during the course of the survey. While pupils' profiles vary, it is important to use the test results to personalise the education programme, and to deal appropriately with gaps in the pupils' learning; the use of the psycho-educational profiles and pupil profiles are a means of ensuring effective assessment of the pupils' progress. It is also important to ensure that learning should be evaluated in performance across a variety of contexts and situations. In some schools, effective evaluation is closely linked to a programme adapted to individual characteristics and circumstances. The involvement of the educational psychology service, in partnership with schools, may provide a rigorous and effective support to measure the extent of pupil progress as part of the annual review process.
- 7.14 A small minority of schools have begun to investigate the possibility of creating a system of self-evaluation of their provision, and a number of promising initiatives are beginning to emerge which may result in the development of an external accreditation validation of good practice. The survey affirms this trend toward quality assurance as worthwhile.
- 7.15 A few schools deserve further recognition for the support they offer to mainstream schools in their locality; for example, Knockevin, Sperrinview, Foyle View and Lisanally Schools are among those which are endeavouring to extend their experience and expertise to support mainstream schools to meet the needs of pupils' with autism spectrum disorder. This is an important development which boards should co-ordinate to ensure that the advisory commitments they have successfully initiated over the past two years can be enhanced by the existing expertise in the SLD sector.

7.9 The survey findings also highlight a number of aspects of provision for further consideration by a minority of schools. These include:

- ▶ a review of admission and exit strategies to ensure that the pupils' progress is central to planning;
- ▶ the greater involvement of parents to empower them to help their children and support the work of the school;
- ▶ the need to establish, more formally, a system of baseline assessment and evaluation in order to measure the effectiveness of the teaching input.

Care should also be taken to ensure that class sizes remain at a manageable number, and that close liaison with post-school placement institutions is fostered to permit the smooth transfer of pupils.

7.10 A common practice found, particularly where it is necessary to bring together a breadth of information to evaluate individual pupil progress, was to call a case conference at which agreement could be reached about achievement. Such conferences are of value, and can be effective in deciding to make changes to the pupils' provision and in the promotion of inter-agency collaboration.

7.11 An additional method, used in many schools, is to maintain records against objective baseline testing using the psycho-educational profile which indicates the pupils' level of skills across a seven category measure. In over thirty-five pupil profiles, examined as part of the survey, which recorded progress on an annual basis, all pupils were making progress ranging from one and a half to almost five years, with the majority being at the upper achievement level in their overall development. This level of progress indicates the effectiveness of the provision, and is supported by school reports and information from annual reviews describing progress in terms of social and curricular achievements.

7.12 In a number of instances, the teachers' records show exceptional improvements in individual pupils' ability to read, to use the computer or to participate in team games and tasks. It was, however, noted that some of the teachers observed did not adjust their verbal instructions or use sufficient visual support materials to ensure more effective teacher-pupil communication and pupil progress. The survey identifies the need for further training to ensure that teachers can adapt their

- ▶ the school's clear concept of those elements which should be included in the planning of provision, schools drawing on the information available, and the in-school assessment of individual pupil's learning strengths and emerging skills, as a sound basis for developing appropriate educational plans;
- ▶ the flexible arrangements in place to accommodate the integration of the pupils with their peers.

In their evaluation of provision in Hillcroft School, for example, the staff are convinced that the creation of a structured day calms the pupils, and is directly related to the reduction of pupils' dependence on obsessive behaviours.

7.8 The schools regarded as having exemplary provision had, in addition:

- ▶ increased involvement of parents at an early stage in the process, and in the implementation of a home-based programme;
- ▶ clarified the focus of the methodology as a means of encouraging independent work habits and peer-interaction;
- ▶ enhanced links with various agencies and professionals;
- ▶ formalised assessment and recording, and were well placed to indicate the standards of quality and individual pupil progress achieved;
- ▶ support for parents and pupils at pre-school level.

In both Loughan and Foyle View Schools, for example, the direct involvement of parents, through attendance at workshops, has contributed significantly to the success of the provision in school and at home, and has led to a strong parent-school partnership. Links established with speech and language therapists have also enhanced the quality of provision and, in Roddensvale School, a focus on social interaction has contributed well to the pupils' ability to make decisions in a variety of social settings. The support, provided by some schools, for young children of pre-school age and their parents is developing steadily, and helps to complement the efforts of the boards' pre-school service. This survey highlights this aspect of work as a worthwhile initiative, and urges closer liaison between schools and boards as a valuable means of supporting parents of young children with autism at a stage when they are most anxious and in need.

7.5 In those schools where the autistic population is small, individual pupils are taught in their peer-group classes, and use of the principles of the Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication handicapped Children (TEACCH) approach is evident. In those schools where there are larger number of pupils with autism, who are close in age, the tendency is to operate a separate specialist class or classes to supplement the integrated provision. In all schools, a structured approach is maintained, which reflects the TEACCH approach in aspects of classroom organisation and teaching strategy. In a minority of schools, provision has evolved more creatively to suit the schools' increasing experience and interpretation of the outworking of TEACCH methods to ensure the pupils apply their skills and learning in increasingly independent situations and, more frequently, alongside their non-autistic peers.

7.6 The value of training has contributed significantly to the quality of provision, and its impact is evident in classroom practice. The teachers surveyed were knowledgeable about the principles of TEACCH, and demonstrated considerable practical application of the approach in their classrooms. In the majority of cases, this has led to successful improvements in the pupils' ability to settle to work, to access the curriculum and to develop routine, positive learning habits. In a few cases, teachers, although well-informed about the TEACCH approach, were not sufficiently expert in the implications underpinning the spectrum of autism. In these circumstances, it is often the case that some pupils remain too long on some schedules, repeat simple tasks or have restricted opportunities to work alongside their peers. This was the exception, however, as the survey found the majority of teachers sufficiently skilled in recognising when appropriate exit strategies should be used to introduce the pupil into the more challenging environment of paired, group and whole class work.

7.7 From the survey findings, the main indicators of effective practice can be identified as:

- ▶ the commitment and willingness of all staff to bring about change in order to meet more effectively the pupils' needs;
- ▶ the staff's knowledge of autism-specific issues, and their relationships with the pupils;

instances. In at least five schools, the level of provision is exemplary. A number of important issues pervade much of the current provision, and these are highlighted below, with some examples of good practice to indicate how improvements can be made, and provision generally enhanced.

7.2 Autism-specific provision is relatively new, and there is no doubt that the degree of interest, and the need to introduce specific methods for teaching these pupils within such a short time frame, has been daunting. Important steps in the initial development of provision include the interest of a small number of individual teachers and principals, the pressure from concerned parents, the work of the Parents and Professionals in Autism (PAPA) in accessing training for teachers, and the support by area boards and the DE in meeting the cost of fees. This combination of factors has helped to promote effective approaches, and has resulted in a major commitment toward the creation of effective provision which the survey finds largely successful.

7.3 There is ample evidence from the survey of good work in all schools. In particular, the provision has:

- ▶ helped to focus attention on the autism-specific needs of the pupils;
- ▶ clarified the schools' need to introduce policies and procedures to direct work in this area;
- ▶ identified individual teachers with the skills and attributes necessary to take the work forward effectively.

7.4 The survey found that schools varied in the manner they introduced and implemented provision. In general, the variations related to four broad areas:

- ▶ the size of the school and the autistic population;
- ▶ the impact of training on the whole staff;
- ▶ the input from the statutory services, particularly the educational psychology service and the area boards' advisory services;
- ▶ the schools' level of vision and commitment to continuous improvement and quality.

arrangements for these pupils. Sensible arrangements were identified in all schools, with, for example, tea/coffee breaks timetabled to ensure constant cover and attention for the pupils.

- 6.12 In the majority of schools, the accommodation and resources for pupils with PMLD is of a high quality, and the new buildings offer excellent accommodation and facilities. A minority of schools, however, provide for these pupils in poor and inadequate rooms.

Action Required to Develop Further Provision for Pupils with PMLD

At DE/area board level:

- ▶ to initiate a review of the education of pupils with complex conditions to ensure joint health and education collaborative planning and working practices;
- ▶ to establish working groups to share and disseminate good practices.

At school level:

- ▶ to review the placement of newly qualified or substitute teachers to the PMLD sector without adequate previous SLD experience or training;
- ▶ to provide a framework to review planning, and to produce guidance on best practice in the classroom.

7. PROVISION FOR PUPILS WITH AUTISM

(NOTE: This survey does not attempt to define autism. It is a major finding of the survey, however, that the use of the term, and the interpretation of autism in statutory statements varies greatly within and across the boards. There are pupils, not designated autistic within their statements, but regarded as autistic by experienced teachers and principals. There is clearly a need, at Regional Strategy Group level, to address the issue of agreeing a generally recognised educational diagnosis of autism for the province as a whole.)

- 7.1 There are approximately 215 pupils with autism in the SLD school sector, representing around 7% of the SLD school population. In all schools, there is a commitment to meet the pupils' educational and social needs, and it is a gratifying finding of the survey that provision is of a good standard in the majority of

However, in many instances, the amount of paperwork is cumbersome, and a refinement and clarification of recording is required. A more succinct method of linking assessment, planning and recording should be attempted, underpinned by the examples of good practice identified by the survey. It is also important to note that the practice of planning and recording solely against a checklist is neither helpful nor supportive of good teaching.

- 6.9 During the survey, there was an opportunity to evaluate innovative work carried out by the principals of the North-Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB) into establishing a framework to promote a quality assurance system as a means of monitoring and evaluating the PMLD provision. While this work is still at an early stage, and is developing slowly in a few schools, it is commendable that the work has resulted in the production of performance indicators to support quality statements or standards. In Roddensvale School, for example, the work provides a focus for self-assessment, and teachers are steadily gaining confidence in the process. This work has potential, and the approach could feature more widely in the curriculum planning and evaluation work of all schools.
- 6.10 More than 90% of the pupils are catered for in separate classes, usually organised in age bands. There is a trend, however, toward planning activities which integrate the pupils in lessons alongside their peers, and it is now common practice for most of the pupils with PMLD to have such opportunities. In those schools which have integrated the pupils fully into the mainstream of the school, the survey finds no detrimental effects on their learning. The schools generally take care to ensure that the pupils' programmes are sufficiently differentiated and matched to their needs. In Foyle View, for example, the role of the co-ordinator has been clarified to ensure the effective monitoring of the classroom programme.
- 6.11 The teacher-pupil ratio in respect of the PMLD provision is approximately 6.5, but this conceals a wide range of class sizes ranging from two to eleven pupils. At peak times, that is, during lunch, body-awareness sessions, or on outings, staff express concern about the shortage of staff to supervise. In practice, the survey found that many of the difficulties encountered could be addressed by more flexible staff deployment and re-location of existing staff. The issue, however, points to the need to ensure that other members of staff have the opportunity to gain experience of working with pupils with PMLD in order to support more adequately the working

- ▶ the documentation of agreed formats for assessment and recording individual pupil progress;
- ▶ the constant review of practice to ensure that standards of provision are kept under review.

6.7 Less than 25% of the schools have a PMLD policy detailing adequately the curriculum content, teaching approaches, or identifying a philosophy and rationale to direct the provision. In all instances, the schools place great importance on securing a happy and stimulating environment, and good efforts are made to ensure that the pupils are settled and well cared for. In all schools, the pupils experience activities designed to promote their sensory development and encourage a systematic and functional means of communication. The latter experiences are infrequently linked to past learning or related to further purposeful outcomes. In the best examples, the most effective lessons centred around a combination of sensory and multi-sensory activities, and excellent use was made of the individual strengths each pupil displayed in response to a range of approaches and resources. The more productive resources included the use of sensory equipment, aromatherapy, music therapy, body-awareness sessions, and their use in a structured and rigorous manner. During these sessions, the staff's skill in interpreting the pupils' attempts to communicate basic needs and pleasures through body action, pointing, and eye contact were central to the pupils' successful learning experiences. The survey found considerable skill and experience among the teachers of pupils with PMLD, but the findings identify the need to ensure adequate training and induction for this level of work.

6.8 Planning for progression is particularly challenging for those working with pupils with PMLD. It was best achieved when there was a continuity of approach, and this was reflected in the teaching of short and long-term targets. In all schools, it was notable that a consistent daily routine was in place, for example, the early morning break and end of day procedures were constant signals to the pupils of changing events. This structured approach supports the progress made by the pupils, and is a useful means of assessing their responses and preferences on a daily basis. In all schools, the level of recording is extensive, and, in most instances, the information is relevant and precise. Schools vary in the type and content of recording made; this variation reflects individual teacher or school preferences, and no prescriptive recommendation can be made to replace existing practices.

- ▶ individual pupils' educational plans (EPs) are checked by a senior member of staff, and advice is given to aid their implementation;
- ▶ planning is based on a thorough knowledge of the pupil's strengths and weaknesses, as recorded in the statutory statement, and underpinned by a policy to direct the provision;
- ▶ the practice of setting a small number of targets which could be encouraged through a functional approach, and supported, where necessary, by a highly structured behavioural approach.

6.6 The survey revealed a few more innovative schools which were providing good to excellent quality work in areas of the curriculum. There is, however, no formal means to ensure that these practices can be shared across the schools. For example, the successful introduction of the Movement Opportunities Via Education (MOVE) programme in Roddensvale School, and the results of the external validation of this programme, have not been shared, and so has not led to the programme's implementation in other schools. The successful music therapy sessions observed in Tor Bank School, the good quality ICT provision of Glasvey School, and the excellent use of interactive equipment found in a number of schools, such as Knockevin, have not been disseminated and discussed sufficiently at inter-school level to allow staff generally to establish a core of activities which promote effective curricular provision. The examples of effective teamwork in Clifton School, the whole-school planning approach of Foyle View, and the impact of hydrotherapy on pupils' communication abilities noted in Park School, also need to be disseminated more widely in order to establish a more consistent curriculum programme with recognised learning activities and outcomes. It is evident from the survey findings that planning the curriculum for pupils with PMLD will involve:

- ▶ the establishment of an inter-board forum, supported by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), to collate and disseminate good practices;
- ▶ the development of policies, associated closely to guidelines, for putting policy into practice;

sufficiently experienced or skilled to provide advice and support to this specialist area of education. It was not uncommon, for example, for the teachers to take responsibility for pupils with all or a majority of the following conditions:

- ▶ a tracheotomy, through which the child is suctioned frequently;
- ▶ a peg in the stomach to tube-feed;
- ▶ a series of seizures triggered by sudden staff movements or sounds;
- ▶ frequent chest infections;
- ▶ a need for oxygen;
- ▶ a need to be nebulised;
- ▶ general poor health.

6.4 Throughout the survey, school staff, both teachers and classroom assistants, often with considerable skill and experience, were observed working rigorously to manage pupils with serious health conditions, but who were being frustrated in their efforts by a lack of specialist training or nursing back-up. While identifying the degree of training and support as a major limiting aspect of current provision, yet very good practice was found in some schools. The general finding, however, to emerge from the survey is that nursing support is a major issue, and the evidence overall indicates the need for a fundamental review of the education of a small number of pupils with complex conditions, in order to ensure that adequate joint health and education staffing support is available, and that collaborative working practices are assured.

6.5 In a significant minority of schools, where teachers are able to manage their work effectively, the active support of the principal and the senior management is a crucial factor. This support involves prioritising the PMLD provision as a whole-school issue, and ensuring that the involvement of colleagues is well planned. These measures have the effect of raising awareness of the PMLD provision, and of building the teachers' confidence. In these schools, the following strategies were found to be effective:

- ▶ the task of planning is shared amongst a team, co-ordinated by the PMLD teacher, and represents the differing aspects of PMLD provision;

attention. All experience communication difficulties, have very short attention spans and consequently have great difficulty in learning, and all, to different degrees, are dependent on adults for their day-to-day needs. A significant number suffer from serious or life-threatening medical conditions, and require the help of various therapists and medical professionals. Given the diverse and complex needs these pupils have, it is significant that there is much discussion and concern about what constitutes an appropriate curriculum for them. The survey team recognises this aspect of special education as one of the most challenging for teachers, classroom assistants and other professional staff.

6.2 A core finding of the survey was the many examples of good work observed, but also the absence of a forum to share and promote good practices among teachers across the sector. The teachers welcomed the Early Stepping Stones document as a useful means of helping them to focus their special needs work, and to set appropriate targets for the pupils. The majority of teachers, however, expressed uncertainty about the subject base of the curriculum, and the relevance of long-term targets. They questioned who should be involved in assessing and planning the daily work, how much detail should be recorded about a pupil, how often targets should be up-dated, and how their implementation should be monitored effectively. Their main concern is how to make the routines of the day productive and relevant in meeting the pupils' needs while providing appropriate access to the school's and the Northern Ireland curriculum. These challenges are most acute where:

- ▶ the teacher is either new to the position or is a substitute teacher;
- ▶ the majority of the pupils are very delicate, and their medical needs are more complex and time-consuming;
- ▶ the pupils are continually aggressive and self-injurious, and occupy the staff's time inappropriately;
- ▶ the teachers have little curriculum guidance on formulating education plans to ensure consistency or flexibility;
- ▶ there is inadequate or ineffective provision of therapy.

6.3 In the above circumstances, the teachers feel isolated professionally, and generally do not regard the area boards' curriculum and advisory service (CASS) as

confidence, and providing them with the skills necessary to encourage their children's progress across a range of areas. From this example, it is clear that:

- ▶ parents and schools can work together effectively to share and develop important parental and teaching skills;
- ▶ early intervention is an important aspect of early developmental support for pupils with special educational needs.

The challenge to the system is to ensure that the special school's pre-school role is effectively maintained and valued.

Action Required to Develop Further Home-School Liaison/Pre-School Provision in the SLD Sector

At DE level:

- ▶ to maintain the post of home-school links teacher.

At area board level:

- ▶ to clarify the role of the home-school teacher in respect of pre-school support to mainstream.

At school level:

- ▶ to formulate guidance on implementing and monitoring the work of the home-school teacher.

6. PROVISION FOR PUPILS WITH PROFOUND AND MULTIPLE LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

- 6.1 There are approximately 325 pupils, representing about 19% of the SLD pupil population, regarded as having PMLD. However, pupils with PMLD are not a homogenous group: some pupils with PMLD may be ambulant, and pose serious challenges to staff who are responsible for their education and well-being; a significant minority of pupils with PMLD remain passive throughout the day, they are often asleep and respond little to the world around them; some pupils with PMLD are actively abusive to themselves and require constant support and

keep detailed notes of the visits, and are careful to ensure that each visit is structured to allow the parents time to talk about their concerns, and to provide them with suitable support to work with their child. It is clear that the introduction of the home-school liaison post has been an important initiative which contributes significantly to the work of the SLD sector.

- 5.7 Fifteen schools operate pre-school or early development groups which are highly successful, encouraging parent participation in the education process, and providing an opportunity for parents to meet to share their concerns about their children with one another. They also gain useful skills and knowledge to help them promote effectively their child's development. Observation of the group sessions and home visits indicated that this aspect of provision has a number of strengths, and is an important pre-school initiative. There is, however, a need to clarify the remit of the provision as special schools report that some parents of pupils with special educational needs are opting for five-day mainstream pre-school or playgroup placements in preference to the one weekly session available from the special schools sector. Given the special schools' aim to focus support on the individual needs of the child and on involving the parents in the process, it is possible that the needs of some children with more significant special educational needs in mainstream provision, may not be met fully without the effective involvement of the parents and the support of the special school. The survey findings indicate that consideration should be given to expanding the remit of the special school pre-school provision to support mainstream placement of pupils with special educational needs, and to ensure that parents are encouraged to participate in, and take responsibility for, implementing the early years programme. It is important that the pre-school extension programme addresses the issue of special educational needs placement, with, where appropriate, support from the special education sector.

Among the examples of excellent practice identified in this aspect of provision is the practice at Foyle View School of enrolling the parents attending the Early Development Group in a parenting programme run in co-operation with the local community centre. This practice has the effect of enhancing the parents'

5.2 Attendance at the annual meeting of the Board of Governors, to report school progress to parents, was found to be poor throughout the sector. Schools find it difficult to determine an approach which encourages parents to attend.

5.3 In all instances, the home-school diary is the most important means of sharing information about the child's well-being and attitude to school life. Schools differ in the degree to which they use the diaries. Almost all include a daily comment on the child's health, behaviour, likes and dislikes. Less than 15% of the schools use the diaries for curricular purposes, to encourage consistency across classes or to involve the parents more fully in the education process. Where it was the practice to do so, for example in Roddensvale School, the outcomes were valuable, and the school reported more focused parental interest and involvement.

5.4 Increasingly, the schools are benefiting from the policy of closer links with parents, and it is now common to find a range of timetabled activities to encourage parents to become involved in the work of the school. Of particular interest is the practice of offering opportunities for the parents to:

- ▶ attend curricular workshops;
- ▶ attend parent/teacher/staff association meetings;
- ▶ receive home visits by teachers;
- ▶ avail of pre-school provision.

The evidence is that these efforts are valued, and help to draw the parents and the schools into closer and more trusting contact.

5.5 The role of home-school links teacher is now well established, and some 80 children of pre-school age receive support within the sector. Fifteen of the schools operate a pre-school group. Three schools do not have any pre-school provision.

5.6 The survey found the quality of teaching, individual teacher planning, and the wide-ranging activities prepared to support children in the early years of development to be of a high standard. The survey also found good relationships among visiting teachers and parents, who appreciated the teachers' efforts to teach the important early skills of communication, fine motor skills and cognitive learning. Home visits take place on a weekly or fortnightly basis. The teachers

4.5 School assemblies contribute well to the ethos of SLD schools and, in most instances, set a pleasant tone for the school day. In some schools, the older pupils are encouraged to take a high degree of responsibility for their behaviour which results in their showing a marked respect for one another, and for adults. In these circumstances, the pupils' growing sense of independence is apparent.

4.6 The survey identified a number of successful strategies employed by a minority of schools, which can provide a practical focus for future planning for all SLD schools. These include:

- ▶ the practice of dealing differently with the older pupils in order to give them a greater sense of responsibility;
- ▶ the development of personal and social education programmes in co-operation with other professionals;
- ▶ the regular monitoring of practices;
- ▶ the further involvement of parents and pupils in the process of pastoral care and child protection.

Action Required to Develop Further School Ethos in the SLD Sector

At school level:

- ▶ School workshops should focus on developing benchmarks for monitoring the school's ethos.

5. HOME-SCHOOL LIAISON/PRE-SCHOOL PROVISION

5.1 The quality of home-school liaison in all schools surveyed was good, and in approximately one-quarter the quality was excellent. Schools operate a common system of regular contact with the parents through home-school diaries, meetings, newsheets and attendance at social, festival and religious events. In all schools, almost all of the parents, through the annual review process, indicated their acceptance of their child's placement, and their support for the school.

- ▶ a recognised designated teacher for child protection, and appropriate policies and guidance for staff on child protection and complaints procedures;
- ▶ relevant vetting procedures for all adults who work with the pupils;
- ▶ the regular involvement of the Educational Welfare Service in the work of the schools.

4.3 The schools fulfil the requirements of the DE child protection circulars, and have responded appropriately to ensure that pupils are protected in the school community. The findings indicate that those pupils with more dependent needs receive a high standard of personal care and empathy.

4.4 In a minority of schools, examples of excellent practices were noted which integrate comprehensively pastoral care practices into the school's daily routines, the curriculum, and the links with other professional agencies. Characteristics of this excellent practice include:

- ▶ the joint planning and implementation of personal and social education programmes by teachers and community health visitors or other professionals;
- ▶ the placement in the school of a nurse to support the needs of pupils with more life-threatening medical conditions;
- ▶ the involvement of the parents in the production of the child protection procedures and policies;
- ▶ the rigorous monitoring of pastoral care practices;
- ▶ the regular review of policies and procedures;
- ▶ high standards of record keeping;
- ▶ regular meetings with the local Trust Area Child Protection Team.

In these schools, the parents are fully informed about the pastoral care provision and the recommendations of the DE. There is a culture of celebrating positive attitudes and behaviours, and sensible rules are actively promoted by all staff through the daily routines and the curriculum.

- 3.8 the quality of provision for school leavers varies widely: it is mostly good, and in a small number of schools, it is of a notably high standard. Many schools, by contrast, have not yet developed effective curriculum provision for their school leavers;
- 3.9 while a minority of schools have excellent ICT provision, the majority are at an early stage in developing their ICT provision;
- 3.10 since the transfer of responsibility for the SLD sector to the DE, it is evident that important improvements, and many excellent practices, have developed. Throughout this report, there is ample evidence to indicate that the SLD school sector fulfils an important role in providing effective education for pupils with severe or profound learning difficulties.

4. PASTORAL CARE

- 4.1 The high quality of the ethos found in the schools is one of the most significant findings of the survey. In all schools, the staff have a shared understanding of the importance of the school ethos, and have established effective arrangements and working practices to ensure that the pupils feel secure, and are valued as individuals. The teachers and the classroom assistants have worked hard to produce and maintain a caring atmosphere and a climate of individual support. It is clear that the SLD sector is a caring community of schools which gives priority to the individual needs of the pupils.
- 4.2 A number of common strengths contribute to the pastoral care provision in the schools. These include:
- ▶ the celebration of pupils' achievements;
 - ▶ agreed strategies to encourage good behaviour, and to deal with inappropriate or challenging behaviours;
 - ▶ the high expectation of standards of care and hygiene;
 - ▶ staff awareness of pastoral care issues, and the provision of relevant training;
 - ▶ the effective dissemination of information on policies and procedures to the parents and guardians;

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 The Department of Education (DE) assumed responsibility for SLD schools in 1987, when this sector became an integral part of the educational provision of the five Education and Library Boards (boards). The number of children in the SLD sector in Northern Ireland is currently 1,671, which represents approximately 36% of children attending special schools, and approximately 18% of children with statements of special educational needs. There are presently 22 SLD schools in Northern Ireland which vary in size from 35 to 145 pupils. With one exception, the schools cater for all four key stages. The schools are located throughout the province with a view to ensuring a fair degree of local provision. To date, some ten major new SLD building projects have been completed at a cost of £26.2m.

3. SUMMARY OF THE MAIN FINDINGS

The survey findings indicate that:

- 3.1 the SLD schools sector is a caring community of schools which gives priority to the individual needs of pupils, and creates an ethos within which the pupils feel secure;
- 3.2 those pupils with more dependent needs receive a high standard of personal care;
- 3.3 the quality of home-school liaison in all schools is good, and in about one quarter the quality is excellent;
- 3.4 the introduction of the home-school liaison post has been an effective initiative which contributes significantly to the work of the schools;
- 3.5 there are many examples of good work with pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties;
- 3.6 provision for pupils with autism is generally of a good standard, and in a minority of cases the provision is exemplary;
- 3.7 there is a need for a review of the education of a small number of pupils with complex medical conditions, in order to ensure adequate collaborative planning and working practices for health and education;

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 This report is based on the findings of a survey of provision in 17 of the 22 special schools in the severe learning difficulties (SLD) sector in Northern Ireland. The survey was carried out in the period 1998/99 and 1999/2000, and also takes account of the findings of district visits in the remaining five schools. A list of the schools visited in the survey is shown in the Appendix.

1.2 The purpose of the survey is to report on the quality of:

- ▶ pastoral care;
- ▶ home-school links/pre-school provision;
- ▶ provision for pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD);
- ▶ provision for pupils with autism;
- ▶ provision for school leavers;
- ▶ provision for information and communication technology (ICT).

1.3 The survey team held discussions with the school principals, members of staff with responsibility for the areas under inspection, all teaching staff about their planning and teaching approaches, and with pupils. In addition, the team observed lessons across the curriculum and, on occasion, attended school assemblies. Samples of the pupils' work, records of teachers' planning, school documentation, as well as statements of special educational need and other pupil records, were examined. The survey findings were shared with the principals, and with the relevant board officers throughout the period of the survey.

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.

CONTENTS

	SECTION	PAGE
1.	Introduction	1
2.	Background	2
3.	Summary of Main Findings	2
4.	Pastoral Care	3
5.	Home School Liaison/Pre-School Provision	5
6.	Provision for pupils with Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties (PMLD)	8
7.	Provision for Pupils with Autism	14
8.	Provision for School Leavers	20
9.	Provision for Information and Communication Technology (ICT)	24
10.	Conclusion	27
	Appendix	29



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1998-2000

