

Department *of* Education

Report on

**A Survey of Provision for
Special Educational Needs in
Irish-Medium Primary Schools**

1999

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*The Education and Training
Inspectorate*

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1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 In May and September 1999, the Education and Training Inspectorate (Inspectorate) undertook an evaluation of the effectiveness of provision for children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in grant-aided Irish-medium primary schools in Northern Ireland. Four of the seven grant-aided Irish-medium primary schools were inspected in a series of structured survey visits in September 1999; the SEN provision in a fifth Irish-medium school was inspected as part of a focused inspection in May 1999 (see Appendix 1).
- 1.2 English is the first language of almost all of the children attending Irish-medium schools. They experience two years early total immersion in the Irish language in Irish-medium pre-school centres before entering year 1 of their respective primary schools. The children attending the Irish-medium schools inspected represent a wide spectrum of learning abilities.
- 1.3 Most of the schools are located in areas which have suffered from high levels of unemployment, social deprivation and the effects of a long period of civil unrest; the percentage of children entitled to free school meals in the schools inspected ranged from almost 42% to 75%.
- 1.4 There is a high proportion of beginning teachers in the schools; in addition, the majority of principals have been appointed recently.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Under Article 4 of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1996, the Department of Education for Northern Ireland (DENI) issued the Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs; this became operative on 1 September 1998. The purpose of the Inspectorate survey was to evaluate and report on the general quality and effectiveness of SEN provision and policy in Irish-medium schools. The inspectors conducted 36 classroom visits and 17 interviews with staff during this survey.

3. SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS RATIONALE

- 3.1 Each of the schools inspected operates a policy of early total immersion in the Irish language; the children experience all of the curricular areas through the medium of Irish in years 1-3, and begin the formal study of English in year 4. The schools are aware of the need to know the children's linguistic backgrounds; they use Irish sensitively and consistently as a medium of communication and instruction to encourage and develop the learning of those children whose first language is English. Further consideration, however, should be given to needs of the small number of children from homes which are bilingual or Irish-speaking and whose command of the Irish language is more advanced than that of their peers.
- 3.2 Each of the schools has begun to implement a number of key aspects of the SEN Code of Practice; they all have appointed an SEN co-ordinator (SENCO), and have initiated an agreed approach to identifying and referring

children with individual needs. In addition, they have begun to provide children with extra help, within classes, in withdrawal groups or through a combination of both.

- 3.3 Other key aspects of the SEN Code of Practice, however, are addressed with varying degrees of consistency. There are inconsistencies in the range of identification strategies used, the development of formal SEN registers, the provision of education plans for individual children, the SEN policy documentation, the in-service training (INSET) experienced, and the arrangements to provide learning support for individual children across the curriculum.
- 3.4 There is a need across and within Irish-medium schools generally for a clearer, collective understanding and consistency of approach to SEN policy, procedures and practices, in relation to the needs of children who are learning in two languages.

4. IDENTIFICATION OF SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

- 4.1 Standardised reading tests have not yet been developed for Irish-medium schools in Northern Ireland; this is a significant deficiency. To help them identify children with learning difficulties, the schools are implementing, in the most successful instances, a range of assessment strategies. These include: the use of information on the children's progress at pre-school centres, continuous classroom observation, the application of a customised word test approach, and the introduction of an Irish language verbal reasoning test. In one instance, a SENCO had adapted techniques acquired during training for Reading Recovery

to obtain more precise measurements of children's attainments and clearer information about their areas of difficulty.

- 4.2 In addition to the assessment strategies outlined, the teachers in three of the schools are beginning to use standardised English language tests to assess ability in reading, ascertain individual learning difficulties and plan appropriate strategies to meet the children's needs.
- 4.3 The schools are making steady progress in developing a system of identifying and recording concerns relating to the behaviour and learning difficulties of individual children. The recording of concerns, however, is variable across schools; in the most effective practice seen, the teachers and SEN co-ordinators had worked together to identify and record clearly individual areas of difficulty, often based on precise, early observation and assessments.
- 4.4 Four of the schools have begun to participate in a Baseline Assessment pilot initiative organised by the Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (NICCEA). They report that participation in the initiative had helped them to record earlier the interests, abilities and needs of individual children. A significant outcome has been the building of closer links with parents. Their participation in Baseline Assessment has brought into sharp focus a number of issues peculiar to immersion language learning. These include: the language through which the assessments should be conducted, the recording formats and timing of the assessments, and the access needed to specific support materials and INSET.

- 4.5 The staff in schools generally showed a sound awareness of the children's attainments in formal assessments at the end of key stage 1 (KS1); the schools, however, need to use this information more effectively to inform future teaching and learning and to monitor the attainments of individual children in Irish and mathematics.

5. ETHOS

- 5.1 The schools are characterised by a positive ethos. Relationships between the teachers and the children are good, and the children learn in a secure, friendly environment. The behaviour of the children is generally very good; in almost all classes, they responded willingly to their teachers and displayed an eagerness to learn. The teachers have created colourful and stimulating learning environments to reinforce aspects of the children's learning.
- 5.2 In most of the schools inspected, current procedures for Child Protection are being implemented in line with the guidance outlined in the Department of Education for Northern Ireland (DENI) Circular 1999/10; one school has yet to develop comprehensive Child Protection procedures.

6. QUALITY OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

- 6.1 The teachers are generally hard-working and committed to the education and welfare of the children. The written planning for whole-class learning, however, varies considerably. In the best practice observed, planning took due account of learning objectives and outcomes, and the methodology and resources to be used. In addition, the

planning included appropriately differentiated activities. In other instances, the planning did not provide sufficient detail to guide effectively the work of the teachers and there was insufficient regard for the needs of specific groups or individuals. There is a need for a more developed and consistent approach to written planning for whole-class and individual learning.

- 6.2 Almost all of the schools have begun to develop education plans for individual children; these vary in quality. The most effective education plans contained clearly identified learning difficulties, specific remediation objectives and strategies, and precise details of anticipated learning activities and outcomes. In addition, the planning for learning was often enhanced by regular liaison between teachers, co-ordinators and parents.
- 6.3 The quality of teaching observed during the survey visits was always satisfactory, often it was good. In the most successful practice seen, the lessons were planned and paced efficiently, and the learning was differentiated appropriately and matched realistically to individual or group needs. In these classes, the work was sufficiently challenging and the children participated with purpose and enjoyment; many achieved success commensurate with their abilities.
- 6.4 In the withdrawal and in-class support groups, the quality of teaching and learning observed was of a consistently high standard. The learning support was characterised by effective liaison with the class teacher, focused short-term learning goals, and a useful range and combination of teaching resources and strategies. In these sessions, the teachers used a variety and balance of activities which challenged and extended the children's learning in

meaningful contexts. There was also evidence of purposeful continuous monitoring and recording of the children's progress.

- 6.5 In a small number of whole-class situations, however, the learning was not as successful as it might have been. The teachers had not planned the children's learning experiences and outcomes with sufficient rigour; the organisation of learning did not take adequate account of the range of the children's abilities and interests, and the activities lacked challenge. On these occasions, a number of the children became disinterested and restless. There is a need to ensure within the schools greater consistency in the quality of teaching and learning.
- 6.6 Most of the SEN support in Irish-medium schools is focused, appropriately, on the development of Irish language at KS1, and on English at KS2; there is a need for the schools to extend their SEN provision in numeracy.
- 6.7 There is a shortage of appropriate specialist teaching and learning resources for Irish-medium education such as graded reading schemes, Reading Recovery materials and information and communication technology (ICT) software. The staff have undertaken a significant amount of additional work to generate relevant resources to support the children's learning. In one school, for example, the special needs teacher has developed materials to complement Reading Recovery techniques and has established links with other schools involved in using Reading Recovery methods.
- 6.8 There are significant implications in the findings of this report for the future work of Irish-medium resource projects; it is essential that the shortage of specific teaching

and learning resources is addressed, particularly in relation to the production of graded reading materials and ICT software.

- 6.9 In general, the use of ICT is underdeveloped in the schools; insufficient use is made of ICT to enhance the children's learning experiences in those schools in which there are good quality computer resources.
- 6.10 The teachers generally mark the children's work regularly and supportively. The marking procedures in schools, however, vary in detail and rigour. There is insufficient emphasis on using marking to help the children improve their work.

7. MANAGEMENT

- 7.1 In three of the schools, the principal had adopted the role of SENCO, in another the co-ordinator is a KS1 teacher, and in the remaining instance the SENCO had been providing specialist support in a full-time capacity for two years. In one of the schools in which the principal is SENCO, two part-time teachers are employed to provide structured support in each key stage.
- 7.2 The effectiveness with which individual schools are developing the role and responsibilities of SEN co-ordinators is variable. In the most successful practice observed, there was evidence of emerging and purposeful planning, and the development of support and review links between the classroom teachers and the SEN co-ordinators. Progress in liaison with parents was also developing appropriately. There is a need for all the schools

to continue to develop more sharply focused co-ordination of SEN provision.

- 7.3 In the most effective organisation of SEN provision, there was appropriate, well-focused and regular learning support for individuals and small groups of children, both in classrooms and in withdrawal sessions. In a number of instances, in which the organisation was less efficient, the children would have benefited from additional support on a more regular and more systematic basis.
- 7.4 In a minority of the schools inspected, members of staff other than the SENCO were deployed to provide afternoon support to groups of children. Much scope exists in the schools generally to provide greater levels of SEN support through more effective deployment of staff.
- 7.5 There were no children with statements of educational need enrolled in any of the schools at the time of the inspections. The schools reported that a small number of children with learning difficulties, for whom they had neither the expertise nor provision to meet fully their needs, had left to enrol in English-medium schools. There are no facilities within the Irish-medium sector to cater for the wide range of specific learning difficulties and syndromes evident in the schools. There are insufficient external resources to meet more specifically the wide ranging special education needs of Irish-medium children.
- 7.6 Almost all of the co-ordinators have availed of some INSET for special needs teaching in Irish-medium education. One SENCO attended Reading Recovery training and there is clear evidence that the techniques acquired have added an extra dimension to the school's provision. In another

INSET development, one school has become involved in a Reading Together programme in which a university student undertakes reading with an individual child over a ten week period. Specific Irish-medium SEN INSET opportunities for teachers have been limited. Nevertheless, the schools have not availed of all INSET targeted at the Irish-medium sector. There is a need for staff in Irish-medium schools to access a wider range of INSET opportunities and support from external agencies.

- 7.7 Those schools who have requested and received INSET from the education and library boards (ELBs), or support from their education and psychology services, acknowledge the positive effect on their SEN provision, particularly in relation to the testing of individual children and the development of education plans. There are no specialist Irish-medium curriculum support officers or education and psychology personnel in any of the ELBs to address the variation across schools in their SEN procedures and practices as identified in this report.
- 7.8 Of the five schools inspected, two were housed in new accommodation, one of which is a permanent building. Accommodation in the remaining three schools is not conducive to effective teaching and learning and is, in many aspects, unsatisfactory. A new building programme is currently in progress in one of these three schools. Most of the schools inspected supplement their existing financial resources in order to provide good quality learning support materials and appropriate staff training.
- 7.9 The principals are conscientious professionals, strong in the commitment they display to the children and generally efficient in the organisation of their schools. They have

begun to prioritise SEN provision appropriately and with varying degrees of success. The range of management challenges specific to the Irish-medium sector include the induction and continuing professional development of many beginning teachers and principals and the lack of Irish-medium learning resources. There is a need for the principals to continue to keep the quality of the SEN provision under constant review.

8. CONCLUSION

8.1 This survey provides the findings of inspections of SEN provision in five Irish-medium primary schools in four of the ELB areas. The survey highlights the many effective features of SEN provision in all of the schools inspected. These include:-

- the good behaviour and responsiveness of the children;
- the supportive learning environments of high quality;
- the commitment and hard work of the teachers;
- the much effective whole-class teaching, with appropriately differentiated work, where necessary;
- the consistently high quality teaching and learning in withdrawal and in-class support groups;
- the implementation of key aspects of the SEN Code of Practice; and
- the many efficient and effective aspects of the organisation of SEN provision.

8.2 This survey has identified a number of significant issues which need to be addressed if the Irish-medium primary schools inspected are to meet, more consistently, the needs of all the children. These include the need for:-

- a clearer understanding and greater consistency of approach to SEN procedures and practices, in relation to the needs of children learning in two languages;
- a common and consistent approach to identifying the needs of individual children, planning for their learning and assessing their progress;
- greater consistency in the quality of whole-class teaching and learning;
- stronger whole-school co-ordination and monitoring of individual and whole-school SEN programmes;
- more extensive use of ICT in the teaching and learning and management of SEN;
- more effective deployment of staff; and
- greater access for staff to further INSET and support from external agencies.

8.3 This survey has also identified a number of significant areas of concern which are beyond the control of the schools and which need to be addressed as a matter of urgency if Irish-medium primary schools are to meet, more consistently, the needs of all the children. These include:-

- the issues arising from the very high proportion of beginning teachers and principals;

- the significant shortage of appropriate, specialist teaching, learning and assessment resources for Irish-medium education;
- the lack of appropriate, specialist curriculum and learning support for Irish-medium education; and
- the high proportion of unsatisfactory accommodation.

APPENDIX

SCHOOLS INVOLVED IN THE SURVEY

FOCUSED INSPECTION

Bunscoil Cholmcille, Londonderry

STRUCTURED SURVEY VISITS

Scoil na Fuiseoige, Twinbrook, Belfast

Bunscoil an Iúir, Newry

Bunscoil Bheann Mhadagáin, Belfast

Bunscoil Phobal Feirste, Belfast

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