



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Department of Education

A Survey of Provision for

*Pupils with Moderate Learning Difficulties in Units
in Post-Primary Schools in Northern Ireland*

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eti
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A number of quantitative terms are used in the report to comment on aspects of provision. 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

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 In March 2001, the Education and Training Inspectorate (Inspectorate) undertook an evaluation of provision for pupils with moderate learning difficulties (MLD) in units within mainstream post-primary schools. This report is based on the findings of the survey which included structured survey visits to 23 post-primary schools with MLD units.

1.2 The schools visited in the survey (Appendix 1) included those from the North-Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB), the Southern Education and Library Board (SELB) and the South-Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB). Currently, neither the Western Education and Library Board nor the Belfast Education and Library Board has MLD units in post-primary schools.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 The purpose of the survey was to evaluate the quality of:

- the educational provision for the pupils;
- the ethos in the units;
- opportunities for integration into mainstream provision;
- the partnership between the units and parents and the wider community;
- the planning and implementation of agreed targets related to initial diagnosis and the statement of special educational needs (SEN) in the context of the Code of Practice which became operative on 1 September 1998;
- the management arrangements.

2.2 Throughout the course of the survey, the inspection team held discussions with school principals, unit teachers, special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs), classroom assistants, other teachers responsible for integrating the pupils into the mainstream classes and, where appropriate, with the pupils themselves. In addition, the inspectors observed a range of lessons, examined samples of the pupils' work, and evaluated the teachers' planning. The schools provided a wide range of policy documents and materials specific to individual pupils, including statements of SEN. Interviews were held also with board officers with responsibility for the service, and account was taken of relevant documentation which had been produced by schools.

2.3 There is variation in the way the three boards which were involved in the survey, organise, manage and resource the units in their own area. The context for the provision made within each board is outlined in the following three paragraphs.

2.3.1 The NEELB does not publish written guidance to schools with MLD units and, as a consequence, arrangements for the provision vary significantly from school to school. Currently, the board provides staffing on a consistent basis to each school, and individual schools are given guidance, through discussion, on the need to include integration as part of the provision. The formula for funding to the units is centrally controlled by the board but, in practice, there is wide variation in the resource allocation to classes and teachers in individual schools, with sizable

portions of the funds used to support the level of integration in operation. Meetings between the board officers and the school principals are underway with a view to establishing exemplars of good practice across a number of key issues and to help to ensure consistency in practice.

2.3.2 In the SELB, officers examined the future role of units in the light of recent policy on inclusion in England and Wales and recommended that a Working Group be established in September 2001. In anticipation of a changing role for units, they recommended the use of the designation "Learning Support Centre" (LSC) for the units; most schools, in practice, have already adopted this term. In the majority of cases, schools are in a position to build from a strong basis of integration, since the SELB is unique within Northern Ireland in the context of moderate learning difficulties, having no MLD special schools. The funding arrangements for the units are different in this board from the other two boards, in that additional funding is allocated to schools on the basis of the number of unit classes for which provision is made; currently, this amount is £4000 per class.

2.3.3 In the SEELB, no guidance is issued to schools regarding organisation, management and resourcing of MLD units; there is significant variation in staffing and resources allocated to schools within the board. The SEELB is distinctive, in that its unit provision is almost exclusively made at key stage 3 (KS3). Out of the seven post-primary schools with MLD units, only one has a unit which caters for pupils in years 11 and 12 and this is funded partially from the school's own budget. In the other schools, the units cater for pupils at KS3 and fully integrate them into mainstream classes at KS4. In these schools, there is limited support available for pupils transferring from the KS3 unit into mainstream provision.

3. SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

3.1 MLD units in the post-primary schools are caring and supportive environments which, in the majority of instances, meet well the educational, personal and social needs of the individual pupils.

3.2 The quality of home-school liaison in all schools is good, and parents are satisfied with the quality of consultation and communication arrangements with unit teachers.

3.3 A majority of teachers implement successfully the requirements of the Code of Practice, but many of the schools commented on the burdensome paperwork associated with the unit provision, particularly in relation to the Annual Reviews of the pupils' progress and the completion of Transition Plans at the end of KS3.

3.4 The quality of teaching was good in almost all of the lessons observed. Particular examples of inventive and imaginative teaching were evident across all three boards. The teachers know their pupils well, and individual planning, through the pupils' Education Plans, reflects the pupils' learning needs.

3.5 There is evidence of successful integration in a majority of schools. The arrangements for integration are generally well planned and carefully implemented to ensure that the pupils work successfully alongside their peers. In a minority of circumstances, the opportunities for integration are limited, resulting in the pupils from the unit being isolated from mainstream activities within the school.

3.6 There is evidence that the pupils within the units achieve sound educational standards; at KS4, a majority of pupils are successful in achieving external accreditation in a range of examinations including GCSE.

3.7 A number of schools are successfully implementing a flexible curriculum at KS4 with the pupils involved in a variety of pre-vocational courses, participating in work experience and accessing vocational courses through successful links with their local college of further education.

3.8 Within boards and, across the three boards, there is considerable variation in the organisation, management and resourcing of the MLD units. It is recommended that boards review provision within their own area to ensure consistency in staffing and resource levels, and that all three boards seek to establish consistent arrangements for unit provision across the boards.

4. ETHOS

4.1 In most of the schools visited, the unit classes have a positive ethos, with good quality relationships evident between the staff and pupils of the unit, and the rest of the school. Also, in the vast majority of units, the relationships between the teachers and the pupils are very good, the pupils are well-behaved, and settle quickly to their tasks. In common with a number of other schools, Kilkeel High School, for example, successfully promotes the understanding and sense that the pupils from the unit belong to the school rather than the LSC. The pupils who have a statement of SEN are part of a mainstream form class, participate in form trips, residentials, sports teams and school musicals. In addition, the pupils in the LSC follow, as closely as possible, the courses in mainstream classes and sit the same external examinations. In St Mary's High School, Downpatrick, the quality of pastoral support for pupils in the unit is good, with all staff, including the principal and the head of unit, treating pupils with respect, empathy and patience; they ensure that the pupils achieve a sense of belonging by providing them with opportunities for active participation in school life alongside their peers.

4.2 In a majority of the schools visited members of the management team were supportive of having a special unit in their school. Senior members of staff within these schools are committed to the educational, spiritual and moral welfare of the pupils, and seek to develop and implement structures to include the pupils as part of school life. In St Ciaran's High School, Ballygawley, for example, the principal, the Senior Management Team, the LSC staff, the SENCO and the mainstream teachers have developed strong, inclusive practice which permeates school life and is evident in the ethos which reflects the value placed on all pupils. During the inspection a good example of social integration was observed when, during a lunch-time charity event, one pupil from the LSC entertained an audience of five hundred pupils in a musical duet with one of his peers from the same year group.

4.3 For those pupils with both learning difficulties and emotional and behavioural problems, the unit staff, in the main, employ effective teaching strategies. A particularly innovative approach was observed in Dundonald High School where a project called "Team Spirit", involving the Belfast Giants Ice Hockey Team and a team from the local radio station "Cool FM", was being implemented successfully, to raise the self-esteem and achievements of a group of year 9 disaffected pupils.

4.4 In almost all the classes surveyed, the teachers and classroom assistants worked well together to create a warm, caring and ordered environment. Despite the examples of good practice noted

however, a major cause for concern expressed by principals and heads of unit, is the reported increase in the number of pupils referred to the units who have significant behavioural difficulties.

4.5 The majority of classrooms are bright and attractive; displays of the pupils' work are stimulating and used well to support teaching. The pupils receive high levels of care and attention, and, in the best examples, the teachers and the classroom assistants work in a sensitive, supportive, yet firm manner. As a consequence, a majority of the pupils enjoy their learning. The quality of accommodation in the units is also a factor in raising the pupils' sense of belonging and their self-esteem. Among the good examples of effective use of suitable accommodation was St Patrick's High School, Banbridge, where mainstream resources, which are available to all the pupils, are supplemented by a central resource room/classroom and self-contained office for general administration purposes and meetings with parents, pupils and outside agencies. The unit is well furnished with good quality resources and good facilities for information and communications technology (ICT). It is situated in the main school and the pupils can be taught in small groups or as a class. The pupils from the unit see the centre as a venue for support, but attend their mixed ability form class for registration and to facilitate integration.

4.6 The pupils respond well to the variety of methods used to increase their self-esteem, and to praise their efforts. There is evidence of the effective use of target-setting and, in the best examples, observed in a minority of schools, good use is made of involving the pupils and parents in setting, agreeing and achieving personal targets. The practice of writing the pupils' personal targets, in specific subject areas, inside their workbooks, as observed in De La Salle High School in Downpatrick, for instance, was particularly successful in motivating the pupils.

4.7 Links with parents are generally sound. All of the schools which were visited reported keen parental interest in the educational progress of their child. Attendance at meetings with unit teachers, particularly at Annual Reviews, is usually good with the parents making an active contribution to the assessment of their child's progress. In a minority of cases, schools report that the absence of parental interest in their child's educational progress results in lack of motivation and limited educational attainments on the part of those pupils. Many schools link successfully with their local community and a number are active participants in helping others outside the school. For example, in Coleraine Boys' Post-primary School, as part of the community support programme, the pupils from the unit help children from a local special school during swimming and assist others at Horse Riding for the Disabled; while in Monkstown Community College, the pupils participate in a cross-community programme which involves residential work with pupils from other schools both in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

5. QUALITY OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

5.1 The quality of teaching is generally good, sometimes very good, and on occasions excellent. There are many examples of inventive and imaginative teaching, with the teachers employing a wide range of teaching approaches to motivate and interest the pupils. In general, the teachers are hard-working, conscientious and diligent in their planning to meet the pupils' needs. Many teachers are successfully using ICT to support their planning and, in schools like Donaghadee High School, have modified the computer programme producing Individual Education Plans, in order to suit their own particular context. While much of the work observed was of a good standard, with teachers taking account of the range of ability in their classes, in a small minority of instances, whole-class teaching did not differentiate the content of the lessons sufficiently to meet the individual needs of pupils.

5.2 There is significant evidence of the pupils achieving good standards in a wide range of external examinations at KS4. A majority of the schools are offering some subjects at GCSE along with a range of subjects in the Welsh Joint Examination Committee (WJEC) examinations. It is notable that when the pupils' opinions were canvassed by the Inspectorate about their preference in terms of qualifications achieved at year 12, a majority opted for GCSE to keep them in line with their peer group in mainstream. Various schools are currently investigating adopting a more flexible curriculum approach at KS4 with more emphasis on vocational experience and pre-vocational qualifications. In these instances, good contact has been forged with the local colleges of further education to introduce the pupils from the unit to sampling vocational courses. In Dundonald High School, for example, the principal conducted a survey of the suitability of the curriculum for the pupils presently enrolled in the KS3 unit and has drafted a pilot programme of KS4 options with the emphasis on vocational choices. Also, in Our Lady of Lourdes High School in Ballymoney the pupils at KS4 are provided with the experience of a range of vocational areas, in their local college of further education, including basic food hygiene, catering and hospitality, painting and decorating, carpentry and joinery and brickwork. In Maghera High School the pupils are prepared for a range of external examinations and also have the opportunity to participate in vocational courses such as motor vehicle studies; the staff report that this has had the effect of improving attendance and motivation at year 12.

5.3 A majority of the schools provide appropriate opportunities for the pupils to integrate with their mainstream peers for a range of subjects. In a small minority of schools, however, the pupils have limited experiences of integration, with physical education classes often providing the only opportunity to interact with their peer group. In these instances, the pupils from the unit are isolated from others in the same year group and often lack confidence to participate in activities outside the supportive environment of the unit classrooms. In one instance, in a school with a small overall enrolment, the opportunity for integration is limited by the large number of unit pupils who form the majority in the integrated classes. In another board, the practice of siting KS3 and four MLD units in junior high schools, which cater for pupils up to the end of KS3, limits the opportunities the years 11 and 12 pupils have for interaction with their peers.

5.4 There were many good examples where the pupils from the units participated fully in the life and work of the school through well-managed and carefully-focused integration into mainstream classes. In Ballymoney High School, for example, in a mainstream science lesson, the teacher successfully developed a good mixture of individual help and small group work, which ensured that the pupils carried out the experiment with confidence and enthusiasm. In St Joseph's High School, Crossmaglen, the LSC staff worked hard to integrate one pupil with severe behavioural problems. The successful outcomes were the result of positive attitudes from staff, good communication, perseverance and flexibility from the LSC teacher, and a strong commitment to the pupil as a valued member of the school community.

5.5 It is clear from the inspection evidence that the integration of pupils, from the unit classes into mainstream provision, has a vital role in raising the pupils' self-esteem and in helping them to develop appropriate relationships with their peer group. The factors which contribute to successful integration include:

- managed opportunities for integration across the full range of subjects, progressively from year 8 onwards;
- the sharing of the pupils' Education Plans between unit and mainstream teachers;

- the mainstream teachers receiving support from the unit teachers with teaching approaches for MLD pupils;
- an evaluation by mainstream teachers of how pupils in the unit are progressing in their classes;
- in-service opportunities for mainstream teachers in teaching methods for MLD pupils;
- the targeted use of classroom assistant support to facilitate integration;
- the careful selection of mainstream classes for integration;
- the pupils from the unit being identified as being part of a mainstream form class so that relationships can be developed with their peers from year 8;
- the support and commitment of school management to the principle of inclusive education, promoting a culture of inclusion throughout the school.

5.6 Across the three boards, there is variation in the number of classroom assistants employed to support the work of the MLD units. There is no consistency even within some of the boards as to the schools' entitlement to classroom assistant support. A number of classroom assistants are employed to support specific pupils with particular problems, and in other cases, assistants are employed to support the work of the unit. This inspection confirms the high quality of the work done by assistants in partnership with teachers and recommends that the boards review current employment policy to ensure that all of the MLD units have the required level of classroom assistant support to enhance the quality of education in the units.

6. MANAGEMENT ARRANGEMENTS

6.1 In a majority of units, there is a clear written policy for the unit, and good quality procedures to ensure its implementation. Most of the principals are well informed about the work of the unit, take an interest in the welfare and progress of the pupils, and there is a good level of liaison between the SENCO, the principal and the unit teacher. Evidence of the clear commitment of the school management team to the work of the unit is seen when schools include information about the MLD unit in their prospectus. In the best examples, the schools demonstrate pride in the achievements of the pupils from the unit and celebrate their successes and in one case, in particular, the current head boy is a former pupil of the school's MLD unit.

6.2 In a minority of schools, the members of senior management are not sufficiently informed about the work of the unit, and there is insufficient monitoring and evaluating of the unit's work. In these instances, the pupils do not make the progress of which they are capable and the teachers feel undervalued and isolated from the rest of the school.

6.3 In almost all of the schools surveyed, the teachers in charge of the units are dedicated, hard-working and are committed to the welfare of their pupils. They take an active interest in the educational progress of their pupils and they combine the role of head of department (HoD) and classroom teacher successfully. In a small minority of instances, the HoD is also the school SENCO. These roles place a difficult burden on such teachers and, where possible, this practice should be reconsidered and reviewed.

7. STRENGTHS AND AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

7.1 The findings of the survey indicate that the strengths of the current provision for pupils in MLD post-primary units include:

- the caring and supportive environment in the units, which almost always meet well the educational, personal and social needs of the individual pupils;
- the good quality of home-school liaison;
- the strong emphasis on inclusive practice within most of the schools;
- the very good quality teaching found in the majority of units;
- the well-planned and carefully implemented arrangements, in the majority of instances, for the integration of pupils into mainstream classes;
- the sound quality of links with further education colleges and the schools' commitment to accreditation at KS4;
- the good quality of the relationships within the units, and between the staff and pupils of the unit and the rest of the school;
- the effective use of target-setting, and the positive atmosphere in which pupils are encouraged to achieve those targets;
- the commitment of principals and members of senior management to the work of the units.

7.2 The survey also highlights areas for improvement. These include:

- the need for more staff development opportunities to help teachers working with pupils with MLD and additional special needs such as behavioural and emotional difficulties;
- the need to ensure that all staff are fully informed about the specific needs of the pupils joining their subject classes from MLD units;
- the need, in a small minority of schools, for the principal to be more involved in monitoring the work in the unit;
- the need to streamline, as much as possible, the administrative aspects of managing the Annual Review of pupils, including liaison with the parents and other professionals thus reducing the burdensome paperwork involved;
- the need for the education and library boards to ensure greater consistency across the boards in terms of organisation, management, staffing and resourcing of the MLD units;
- the need for a minority of schools to review the opportunities which the pupils from the MLD units have for meaningful and successful integration.

8. CONCLUSION

8.1 There is ample evidence that a majority of MLD units in the post-primary school sector provide good quality education for their pupils. The diverse needs of this group of pupils are met by teachers who have responded well to the challenges set by the Code of Practice, and who continue to develop their expertise in addressing the range of special needs in the MLD unit population. The strengths of the units lie in the good quality of the teaching, the effective planning for the pupils' learning, the effective integration arrangements, and the sound progress the pupils make in their learning. The survey has also identified a number of areas which need to be addressed to enhance the provision further. Evidence from the survey indicates that MLD units generally would benefit from the dissemination of the best practice observed, some of which is highlighted in this report.

SCHOOLS VISITED DURING THE MLD SURVEY

North-Eastern Education and Library Board

Ballymoney High School
Coleraine Boys' Secondary School
Larne High School
Maghera High School
Monkstown Community School
Our Lady of Lourdes High School

South-Eastern Education and Library Board

De La Salle High School, Downpatrick
Donaghadee High School
Down Academy, Downpatrick
Dundonald High School
St Mary's High School, Downpatrick
St Patrick's High School, Lisburn

Southern Education and Library Board

City of Armagh High School
Banbridge High School
Clounagh Junior High School, Craigavon
Cookstown High School
Kilkeel High School
St Ciaran's High School, Ballygawley
St Columban's High School, Kilkeel
St Joseph's High School, Coalisland
St Joseph's High School, Crossmaglen
St Patrick's High School, Banbridge
St Paul's High School, Bessbrook

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