

The Suppression of 128 Special Classes for Pupils with Mild General Learning Disabilities: A Response

In responding to the recent decision to suppress 128 special classes for pupils with mild general learning disabilities, this article outlines the huge changes in provision for these pupils in recent years. Drawing on relevant studies it raises many issues about the capacity of the general allocation model of support provision to meet the needs of these pupils.

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INTRODUCTION

The recent decision of the Department of Education Science (DES) to suppress 128 special classes for pupils with mild general learning disabilities (MGLD) where the enrolment is less than nine is the focus of this article. It will draw on findings from three relevant studies. The first is Stevens (2007), which looks at provision for pupils with mild general learning disabilities in 1989 and 2004, drawing on survey responses from 588 schools across the two years. The second is Travers (2007), which focused *inter alia* on the implications of the General Allocation Model (GAM) (DES, 2005a) for pupils with mild general learning disabilities, drawing on responses from 137 schools, giving details of the practices of 558 learning support/resource teachers in 2006 and thirdly, Stevens and O' Moore (2009) which presents additional data on provision in 2007 based on responses from 319 schools.

PROVISION FOR PUPILS WITH MILD GENERAL LEARNING DISABILITIES

When analysing support for pupils with mild general learning disabilities it is important to recall the previous options for these pupils. Up to 1998 the main placement options for pupils with mild general learning disabilities were in special schools and classes. The advent of the resource teacher service introduced a third option in mainstream classes with additional support. This had an impact on the number of such pupils being placed in special classes. Stevens (2007) outlines that in 1989 one third of the school-going population of pupils with mild general learning disabilities attended special schools and two-thirds attended special classes. With the development of the resource teacher service many of these pupils were then given resource hours and supported mainly by withdrawal from mainstream classes. Thus by 2004 the situation had changed whereby 47% of pupils were in mainstream classes with resource teacher support, 40% were in special classes and only 13% were enrolled in special schools (Stevens, 2007).

In addition, the introduction of the GAM in September 2005 in primary schools also had a significant impact on special classes and schools. Stevens and O' Moore (2009) report that by 2007 the percentage of pupils with mild general learning disabilities attending special schools was only 9% and the percentage in special classes was 27%

with 64% in mainstream classes. This was a dramatic change in a short period of time. There is an urgent need for research to evaluate the impact of these changes in meeting the needs of pupils with mild general learning disabilities before dismantling the special class support infrastructure.

THE GENERAL ALLOCATION MODEL AND PUPILS WITH MILD GENERAL LEARNING DISABILITIES

With the introduction of the GAM in 2005, pupils with mild general learning disabilities were subsumed within the support service of the new learning support/resource model and were not entitled to any additional support outside of a staged interpretation of this resource. Stevens and O'Moore (2009) argue that within this model many teachers feel that such pupils have “fallen off the radar” (p. 205). It is within this model that the pupils from the closed special classes will be catered for. What do we know about this model and its capacity to meet the needs of pupils with mild general learning disabilities? As it is a fairly recent development there is little research done on this but there are at least two studies that can help throw some light on the issue. In a study of 137 support teachers in schools serving over 42,000 pupils, Travers (2007) found that most teachers reported a large fall in the level of support that was being offered to these pupils. The average caseload of the new learning support/resource teacher was twenty-one and within this number a much smaller level of support was possible. Under the previous system these pupils were granted 2.5 hours of resource teaching per week per child. This was largely done on a one-to-one basis (IATSE, 2000). Theoretically, under Stage 3 of the staged approach introduced under the GAM, some one-to-one teaching could still be provided if deemed appropriate and if resources allowed it (DES, 2005a). Table 1 illustrates how teachers in the study perceived these changes.

Table 1: Teachers’ opinion (percentage of respondents) of the effect of the General Allocation Model on pupils with mild general learning disabilities and on pupils with dyslexia in their schools (n=129)

Effect of the General Allocation Model	%
Pupils benefited more	15.5
Pupils lost out	67.4
Pupils are receiving the same support	17.1

Interestingly, while most teachers in this study reported an increase in support teaching for mathematics, 67% reported that pupils with mild general learning disabilities and pupils with dyslexia lost out under the new policy. Teachers were invited to comment further on this issue. Eighty-nine teachers did so reflecting the concern felt about this change in provision. The key issues that arose were the reduction in support teaching, the negative effect on special classes and difficulties balancing the needs of all pupils. These are considered in detail below.

Reduction in Support Teaching

The majority of the eighty-nine teachers who commented on this issue felt that pupils with mild general learning disabilities or dyslexia had lost out under the new system. Thirty teachers stated that these pupils now had less support time-wise and twenty-nine that the pupils no longer had access to one-to-one tuition. Teachers felt that provision was less intensive and less individualised than previously.

Under the previous system, there was an acknowledgement that these children with mild general learning disabilities or dyslexia were guaranteed 2.5 hours support per week. There now seems to be a perception that this entitlement has been withdrawn and many other factors can influence the level of provision individual pupils with roughly similar needs may receive as evidenced in the following comments:

There are special schools for both of these categories so it is very unfair that in a mainstream school they are not entitled to help every day. They no longer get one-to-one help. They may only get two or three times a week instead of five.

By taking away their specific individual allocation of time, they have become part of a greater caseload and despite their 'weighted' allocation, the reality has resulted in reduced levels of support.

Negative Effect on Special Classes

Travers (2007) also found some teachers whose schools have special classes for pupils with mild general learning disabilities, with a maximum pupil teacher ratio of 11:1 felt that this provision was now also under threat, for example:

A child with mild general learning disabilities who was assessed did not get a place in the special class under the new allocation and was limited to learning support intervention, which the child had been receiving anyway. It appears that this will become more common.

At the moment children with mild general learning disabilities are going to our special class where they get a high level of intervention. If they become part of LS [learning support] workload they will get less time and less intensity of provision.

As pupils with mild general learning disabilities need no longer be categorised under the GAM, the future of special classes for these pupils is under threat. Ironically, this may result in less inclusion in the future. Kidd and Hornby (1993) for example, found much higher satisfaction ratings among twenty-nine students and their parents of being integrated in a unit in a mainstream school than in mainstream classes after transferring from a special school. If one views the school rather than the class as the unit of inclusion (Norwich and Kelly, 2004), special classes which operate flexibly in conjunction with mainstream classes could be a vital element in meeting the needs of some pupils with mild general learning disabilities in mainstream schools.

Balancing the Needs of all Pupils

Teachers in schools with a high proportion of pupils under the 10th percentile on standardised tests of literacy and numeracy felt that they could not meet the needs of all pupils under the GAM (Travers, 2007). This then entailed difficult decisions about who gets support. In some cases it led to not all pupils under the 10th percentile getting support and in others to pupils with mild general and specific learning disabilities having their former allocated support time cut back:

These children no longer qualify for resource hours. Therefore, where there is a large caseload in a school below the 10th percentile they do not get the extra attention they need.

These children seem to be the biggest losers under the new scheme, much to their parents and teachers disgust. It is a licence to cut their time allocations if caseload is heavy.

Because the caseload of the learning support/resource teacher is more diverse it seems to be creating greater pressure to balance the needs of all pupils.

Stevens and O Moore (2009) report that in 2004, the mean amount of time per day spent by pupils with mild general learning disabilities with a resource teacher was fifty minutes and that 29% of resource teachers felt that this was insufficient. Since the introduction of the GAM this has fallen to twenty minutes. The authors comment that, “This finding is extremely important as it illustrates that the introduction of the GAM has significantly reduced the period of supplementary teaching for MGLD pupils” (p. 174). In this scenario, we need to ask if those responsible for assessment and placement are presenting all of the options to parents and evaluating the implications of each.

Thus, this is the reduced level of support that pupils transferring from the suppressed special classes can expect to receive. They go back to larger mainstream classes and have to compete with a much wider pool of pupils for additional support. This will be further complicated by the fact that the learning support service will come under additional pressure to address the unmet needs of pupils with English as an additional language because of the reduced service in this area.

The use of categories like ‘mild general learning disabilities’ can have the effect of masking the very large differences between pupils within this group. Such pupils’ experiences lie on continua of learning and additional difficulties. Stevens (2007) found that in 2004 the majority of teachers in special schools (71%) considered most or all of their pupils to have difficulties in addition to mild general learning disabilities compared to a third of special class teachers and a quarter of resource teachers. However, between 2004 and 2007 the number of learning support/resource teachers who reported that their pupils with mild general learning disabilities had additional difficulties increased from 25% to 61% (Stevens and O’Moore, 2009). Thus the challenge for mainstream class teachers in addressing needs was increasing while the level of additional support for pupils with mild general learning disabilities was decreasing.

THE GENERAL ALLOCATION MODEL AND PUPILS WITH MILD GENERAL LEARNING DISABILITIES IN DISADVANTAGED CONTEXTS

In addition, there are certain inherent weaknesses in the GAM that militate against pupils with mild general learning disabilities in some schools designated as disadvantaged. While overall there was an increase in the number of support teachers across all schools (DES, 2005b), some schools lost teachers while others gained substantially based on numbers as against actual need. To understand the negative impact on some schools designated as disadvantaged it is necessary to understand how they had attained teaching resources before the introduction of the GAM. These schools had proportionately more resource teachers serving pupils with mild general learning disabilities and borderline mild general learning disabilities because of the larger distribution of these pupils in disadvantaged contexts, than in other schools. Thus, when these pupils moved within the new model, these schools lost proportionately more of these posts. This was not sufficiently compensated for within the new allocation of one support teacher for every eighty pupils. A knock on effect is that these schools have proportionately more pupils with mild general learning disabilities on the caseload of the new learning support/resource teacher and this in turn effects how many pupils in the school can receive learning support and whether a comprehensive service can be offered for mathematics as well as literacy. The exceptions to this situation were schools that had special classes as against resource teachers for pupils with mild general learning disabilities. They were in a better position to offer a support service. That is until now.

These concerns are relevant from an equity perspective as there is evidence of wide differences between schools in relation to the cut-off point for access to learning support. Travers (2007) found many schools offering a service in both literacy and mathematics up to the 30th percentile, one school offering a service up to the 66th and others using some of their learning support provision for enrichment activities for high achievers while other schools in disadvantaged contexts could not meet the needs of all pupils under the 10th percentile.

An additional weakness in the GAM is that it allocates the same level of resources to all schools designated as disadvantaged, even though we know that from the scheme organised by the DES itself that there are varying degrees of disadvantage across schools (DES, 2005c). Also, a gender differential was applied to all schools except those designated as disadvantaged which has little logic given that we know that all-boys schools have higher proportions of pupils with mild general learning disabilities and with dyslexia (National Council for Special Education (NCSE), 2006).

Finally, in contrast to Circular 02/05 (DES, 2005a), the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (Ireland, 2004) makes no distinction between high incidence and low incidence special educational needs. This has implications in terms of which pupils with mild general learning disabilities will receive an assessment and be entitled to an individual education plan and how these decisions will be made.

CONCLUSION

While special classes can be criticised for not facilitating full inclusion, it is important to recognise their function as part of a continuum of provision. For some pupils where full inclusion in a mainstream class simply does not work out in terms of meeting the learning needs of the pupil, the special class operating in a flexible format offers the possibility of meeting the pupil's needs and keeping him or her in their local or in a mainstream school. In this scenario the special class can facilitate inclusion. It is important to stress the various ways that special classes can work and how many operate in an integrated way with the rest of the school. The option of part-time in a special class may for some pupils provide the educational crutch that ensures that they remain within a mainstream school. In this sense the unit of inclusion is the school and not the mainstream class (Norwich and Kelly, 2004).

In closing special classes an important part of the continuum of provision is under threat for this group of pupils. There is a danger in treating all pupils with mild general learning disabilities as if they are similar. There is no doubt that many pupils with mild general learning disabilities can benefit educationally from being in a mainstream class with appropriate support. However, there are some pupils who require a learning environment tailored to their unique needs where a more targeted programme, "That is individualised, specialised, intensive, structured, precise, goal directed, and continually monitored for procedural fidelity and outcomes" can be delivered (Heward, 2003, p. 201).

Because the GAM has broken the link between resource allocation and assessment for pupils with mild general learning disabilities, fewer of these children will be assessed and identified in primary schools which will further impact on special classes. An option worth considering is broadening the general allocation allowances to include flexible use of part-time placement in a special class/resource room for some pupils as a further option on the staged approach to assessment, identification and programme planning outlined in Circular 02/05 (DES, 2005a). This would have the benefit of maintaining a key part of the continuum without the necessity of external assessment and identification and would allow schools greater flexibility in responding to pupil needs. In contrast, reducing the options for placement for pupils with mild general learning disabilities may result in more of these pupils transferring to special schools when they could have their needs met in a mainstream school. As the population of many special schools originally designated for pupils with mild general learning disabilities has changed, the option of transfer may not be as straightforward as in the past (Special Education Department, St. Patrick's College, 2007).

To close down special classes without first systematically investigating the impact of the recent dramatic changes in provision for pupils with mild general learning disabilities is regrettable, as a very viable flexible option of provision is being lost to many schools and may lead to many pupils not receiving an appropriate education. Ironically, the value of special classes/units is readily seen for other pupils with special educational needs, for example, for pupils with autistic spectrum disorders.

The timing of this decision, before the publication of a review of special classes commissioned by the NCSE is also regrettable. While the government has also deferred further implementation of the EPSEN Act (Ireland, 2004, p. 21), Section 20, which has commenced (Ireland, 2005), states that one of the functions of the NCSE is “to ensure that a continuum of special educational provision is available as required in relation to each type of disability.” Surely this includes special classes for pupils with mild general learning disabilities?

Note: Since this article has gone to press, 10 special classes have been reprieved.

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