

An Analysis of the Quality of Whole-School Planning for Learning Support

This article begins by outlining the planning requirements for primary schools both generally and then specifically in the context of special educational needs (SEN). It also looks at guidelines offered to schools in recent years by the Department of Education and Skills to inform the planning process. The article then analyses a small sample of policies and assesses the extent to which they conform to requirements and guidelines. Finally, common themes emerging from the analysis are identified and corresponding implications for future work in the area are offered.

BRIAN MAC GIOLLA PHÁDRAIG is a former school principal and currently works as a primary inspector with the Department of Education and Skills.

INTRODUCTION

Currently all schools are legally required to develop a school plan, which should be regularly reviewed and updated and which must include a section dealing with “equality of access to and participation in the school by students with disabilities or who have other special educational needs” (Ireland, 1998, section 21). While there has long been a requirement to formulate a school plan (Department of Education, 1971; 1973), the emphasis on the process of school development planning (SDP) is relatively new. SDP is understood as a “collaborative and developmental process prepared through consultation with all the partners” (Department of Education and Science (DES), 2006, p.14) and is viewed as a means to devolving authority to individual schools and to enhancing school effectiveness (Mortimore, MacGilchrist, Savage and Beresford, 1995).

The concept of self-managed schools is increasingly promoted as an essential stage in the devolution of responsibility to the point of education service delivery and is manifest in placing school governance firmly in the hands of locally constructed boards in countries such as Denmark, Australia and the United Kingdom (Dempster, Kruchov and Distant, 1995). This trend is evident in Ireland where boards of management are now deemed responsible for ‘the quality and

effectiveness of education and the management of staff in a school' (DES, 2010, p. 1). Proponents of self-managed schools see the school development plan as an essential element of the successful implementation of this policy and thus schools are encouraged to develop a strategic plan to assist them in dealing with the increasing responsibilities associated with devolved management.

The impetus for enhancing school effectiveness stems, in part, from a concern that increased spending on education does not necessarily lead to an improvement in overall educational standards. It is also related to a growing emphasis on public services, in areas such as health and education, being more accountable for their actions and their outcomes (Harman, Beare, and Berkley, 1991; Hughes, 1992). In this overall context SDP is promoted as an ideal mechanism to deliver both curriculum and teaching innovations (Hopkins, 1991). The concept of school effectiveness is also evident in Irish education where the Government aspires to high standards of teaching and learning and sees the school plan as an essential in the "achievement of school effectiveness as well as school improvement" (DES, 1999, p. 7). Thus both internationally and nationally the process of SDP is seen as central to decentralising authority from state to schools and to enhancing the quality of educational provision at school level.

In the Irish context the process of SDP was formally introduced through an SDP initiative launched in May 1999. This initiative sought to increase schools' autonomy and enhance pupil learning outcomes, and represented a new direction by the DES in implementing national initiatives. For the first time practicing teachers took ownership of the planning process at national level. A key theme of the SDP programme was that successful SDP would be closely linked to teacher professionalism, capacity building within schools and enabling teachers to be reflective about their practice (Nic Craith, 2003).

However, as the initiative developed, the emphasis on the teacher as the engine of the planning process in schools expanded and now consultation, communication and collaboration with all the stakeholders are seen as 'critical elements' in the process (Primary Professional Development Service, 2010). The school is no longer conceptualised as 'a learning organisation' whose activities are informed by a strategic plan devised by the professionals working within it. Rather, schools are part of a wider learning community and parents, teachers, management and all associated with the school are expected to contribute to this process (Primary Professional Development Service).

School Development Planning in the Context of Special Educational Needs (SEN)

There is a clear expectation that whole-school planning in Ireland should operate within the parameters of SDP, and specific guidance has been offered to schools to inform their planning process. In the case of SEN guidance has been more detailed and specific than for any other area. The Learning Support Guidelines (DES, 2000) devotes a chapter to whole-school planning and clearly delineates the components of a whole-school plan for learning support. These include the identification of roles and responsibilities and the selection of students requiring supplementary teaching (DES). All subsequent guidance to schools on SEN begins from the premise that work in relation to SEN in schools is informed by a whole-school plan (DES, 2005; National Council for Special Education, 2006; National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2007).

A staged approach to SEN provision was first mooted by the Department of Education and Science in 2003 in Circular 24/03 (DES, 2003). It was subsequently developed in Circular 02/05 (DES, 2005) and in further guidelines issued in 2008 - Special Educational Needs: A Continuum of Support (DES, 2008). While the terminology used in the 2008 guidelines has changed from stage 1, stage 2 and stage 3 to 'classroom support,' 'school support' and 'school support plus' the basic tenants of the approach remain constant. Initial support should be provided to pupils within the classroom, mediated by the class teacher, through adjustments to teaching style or content or through the division of a specific classroom support plan. The second stage involves interventions from the learning support or resource teacher, either within the class setting or through withdrawal and it is only at the third and final stage that external professionals and support services are involved with the child (DES, 2008).

The remainder of this paper seeks to establish the extent to which current whole-school plans for SEN conform to the requirements of national policy. Specifically it seeks to establish whether the processes involved in their formulation reflects the process of development planning and whether their content adheres to the requirements of the Learning Support Guidelines (DES, 2000) and reflects the principles of the continuum of support.

METHODOLOGY

A convenience sample of ten schools was selected. While the sample was not scientifically generated to be fully representative of the total population of schools, it contained schools of various sizes (three with seven or more class teachers, four

with between four and six class teachers and three with not more than three class teachers). Schools from both rural (six) and urban (four) hinterlands and schools with and without an administrative principal were represented along with two all-Irish medium schools and one multi-denominational school. Thus, while the sample size was relatively small, and convenience based, it contained a mixture of schools which are reflective of Irish primary schools. It therefore enabled some generalisations to be made regarding the quality of whole-school planning in SEN.

The methodology involved a combination of semi-structured interviews, content analysis and evaluative analysis. Three semi-structured interviews were conducted in each school; one with teachers on the SEN team, one with the principal and a brief interview with a sample of mainstream class teachers. These interviews were designed to facilitate a discussion on the processes involved in formulating the school's policy on SEN and the extent to which this policy influenced practice. Using an "unstructured interview format" (Cohen and Manion, 1980, p. 293) provided the flexibility and freedom required to tease out the processes involved in the formulation of school policy. Each school's policy was then analysed to determine the extent to which its content conformed to the requirements of the Learning Support Guidelines (DES, 2000).

DISCUSSION BASED ON THE FINDINGS

At a basic level all schools are in compliance with the requirement to develop a school plan which contains a section on SEN. However, in their planning, questions do arise as to the extent to which schools engage with the process of developmental planning.

Engagement

SEN Teacher

While, in some cases, the impetus to develop the school plan on SEN comes from the principal, in most cases it is the SEN teachers who act as facilitators, drafters and organisers of the planning process. The importance of the SEN teacher to the process is further highlighted by the fact that the most comprehensive and detailed policies are in schools where at least one of the SEN teachers has a particular expertise in SEN developed through participation in in-service courses and/or the completion of post-graduate work in SEN.

Class Teacher

A key aspect of current SEN policy in Ireland is that "the primary responsibility for all pupils rests with class teachers" (DES, 2005, p. 5) and while this data

suggests that, in most cases, mainstream class teachers are involved in devising SEN policy, there are instances where mainstream class teachers are just consulted or receive a final copy of policy. The main forum for involving mainstream class teachers in policy formation is through staff meetings or staff planning days led by a member of the SEN team or a facilitator from an outside support agency. However, it was not evident that mainstream class teachers were familiar with the contents of the SEN policy or utilised it to guide their practice. For example, few mainstream teachers had a copy of the policy in their own planning folders and no teacher indicated that they referred to the policy to inform their teaching.

Principal

The importance of the principal to the planning process has been frequently cited (DES, 1999; 2006) and the fact that in seven instances the principal was involved in devising the SEN policy reflects this pivotal role. Principals displayed an awareness of the potential benefits of a robust policy; the most frequently cited being the ensuring of continuity of approaches throughout the school and the provision of guidance to teachers who were new to learning support. The potential of the policy to clarify the relative roles and responsibilities of the class teacher and SEN teachers was also commonly mentioned by principals as an advantage.

Board of Management

A national review of planning in Irish primary schools found that “board members were not actively involved in the discussion and development of policy and instead, their role was limited to ratifying final drafts devised and presented by the teaching staff” (DES, 2006, p. 36). It appears that this is still very much the practice, as in all cases policies were merely ratified by the board. Principals articulated a feeling prevalent amongst board members that planning for teaching, learning and curriculum provision was essentially a matter for the professional members of staff. Board members did not feel that they had sufficient knowledge or expertise to make meaningful inputs into this aspect of school planning.

Parental Involvement

In regard to parental involvement in planning, a review of planning in primary schools claimed that “school-based structures to accommodate the systematic and continuous involvement of parents in the planning process had not yet been established in most schools” (DES, 2006, p. 80). The data garnered here, that neither the parents’ association nor the wider parent body were even circulated with final copies of school policy attests to the absence of a meaningful role for parents in planning for SEN. This is particularly significant in the context of the growing body of evidence that parental involvement in planning for and

delivering programmes for children with SEN can significantly influence the success of such programmes (McConkey, 1985; Macbeth, 1989; Hornby, 1995).

Elements of School Policy for SEN

The analysis of the content of various policies indicates particular elements that schools prioritise for inclusion in policies and equally areas that do not feature in schools' policies.

Aims

All policies analysed begin with aims. Some are general; "to enable pupils to monitor their own learning and become independent learners" while others are more specific; "to clearly outline the early intervention strategies in use within the school". Overall, schools utilise the subsidiary aims for learning support as outlined in the Learning Support Guidelines (DES, 2000, p. 15). While these guidelines also articulate a principle aim for learning support, "to enable pupils with learning difficulties to achieve adequate levels of proficiency in literacy and numeracy before leaving schools" (DES), only two schools adopted this as a policy aim.

Policy makers are frequently advised of the importance of considering local contextual factors in devising policies (McDonnell and Elmore, 1987; Blandford and Gibson, 2005). However, it was not apparent, from this sample, that school policies on learning support were context bound, as policy aims were quite generic and easily applicable to other schools. For example, the unique contexts of Irish medium schools, or schools with a high proportion of pupils for whom English is an additional language, are not reflected in their policy aims.

In discussing this area with SEN teachers and with principals it is apparent that they attach little importance to articulating policy aims seeing it merely as a requirement of policy making rather than a beneficial part of the process. A common view expressed was that policy aims were adopted from Learning Support Guidelines as "there was little benefit in reinventing the wheel". The exclusion of the primary aim of learning support appears as an oversight in the case of many schools, as opposed to a deliberate decision.

Early Intervention

Effective early intervention is seen as a critical component of successful learning support (DES, 2000) and many school policies refer to it specifically. However, in the main, school policies repeat the principles of early intervention stated in the guidelines (DES) without adapting them to specific contexts. For example, all

school policies that contained a section on early intervention stated that their programme will 'stress the interconnected nature of listening, speaking, reading and writing' which is a direct quotation from the Learning Support Guidelines (DES). In no case, however, did any policy provide guidance for teachers on a means of achieving this. Similarly references to a strong focus on the development of oral language and the development of phonemic awareness were central components of early intervention. However, appropriate ways of applying these principles were not delineated.

In the area of early intervention there was a mis-match between policy and practice. Some examples of very effective methodologies, such as group teaching of phonemic skills, paired and buddy reading schemes, a co-ordinated approach to phonic teaching, and team-teaching of literacy skills involving the learning-support teacher and the class teacher were evident in the schools. However, relevant policies made little, if any, reference to such effective practices and were not amended to reflect on-going developments. This was readily acknowledged by many principals and teachers with teachers not seeing the recording of effective practices or structures in policy format as a priority. The evidence further suggests that teachers are not convinced of the need to so record their practice.

The Staged Approach

A staged approach to assessment, identification and programme planning has long been advocated for pupils with SEN (DES, 2003; 2005; 2008). However, less than half of the school policies contained a specific reference to the staged approach. In the four policies that did contain such a section, all but one of them mirrored the wording of the relevant circular, with no attempt to contextualise it to the schools' circumstances.

One school has clearly engaged with the staged approach and their policy outlines specific strategies for use at stage one, screening tests available for stage two and responsibilities for contact with outside agencies at stage three. SEN teachers attributed high importance to this aspect of policy and expressed considerable satisfaction with the principles and approaches of the staged approach (DES, 2008). They felt that it was essential their policy provided clear guidance as to how pupils were selected for learning support and at what stage the learning support teacher became involved. Clarity in this area protected the learning support teacher from requests from their mainstream colleagues to intervene in all cases where pupils were experiencing difficulties. They also felt that stage one of the staged approach provided the best mechanism for involving mainstream class teachers in learning support and encouraging them to assume responsibility for

pupils in their class experiencing learning difficulties. Principals also expressed the view that clarity in this area was important in order to deal with parental queries as to which pupils are selected for learning support. They display, however, a lack of familiarity with the contents and terminology of the most recent publication on the staged approach, *Special Educational Needs: A Continuum of Support* (DES), suggesting awareness about this document be heightened amongst school staff dealing with SEN.

Roles and Responsibilities

Many school policies contained sections on roles and responsibilities in learning support, comprising mainly of the responsibilities of principal, class teacher and learning support teacher. In only one case was roles for parents, pupils and special needs assistants delineated. Again, the content of these sections reflects the relevant section of the *Learning Support Guidelines* (DES, 2000). SEN teachers felt that it was important to include this section in the policy and specifically highlighted the need for school policy to attribute primary responsibility for pupils' education to the class teacher. In discussing the absence of parents and pupils from the policy, teachers argued that the policy was primarily for internal school use and thus parents may not necessarily have access to it.

Time-Tabling

Among the items that only featured in some policies was the area of time-tabling for supplementary teaching. The *Learning Support Guidelines* argues that schools should adopt a flexible approach to time-tabling and outline two key principles, firstly, that supplementary teaching in English or mathematics should "be in addition to their regular class programme" and secondly, that "pupils do not miss out on the same curricular area each time they receive supplementary teaching" (DES, 2000 p. 28). Careful planning and an agreed whole-school approach are required in order to realise these principles. However, there is little evidence to suggest that schools have reflected on how best to achieve these aims, or laid out mechanisms for their implementation, as even in cases where timetabling does feature in policies, the section is limited to detailing specific days and times for learning support in schools that operate in a cluster. SEN teachers, however, do appreciate the importance of considering timetabling. They mention that pupils often miss out on important class work during supplementary teaching as there is frequent confusion over who is ultimately responsible for the pupil's programme in English or mathematics. Therefore, schools may benefit from affording this area more careful consideration at whole-school level and the inclusion of a discrete section on timetabling in their policies.

Strategies for continuing and discontinuing pupils in receipt of learning support and monitoring the progress of individual pupils both only appear in some policies. In a sense both of these areas are closely linked, as decisions as to whether or not to continue learning support for a pupil will be informed, in part, by data garnered through the effective monitoring of pupils' progress. However in only two cases are procedures for continuing and discontinuing learning support based on a clearly defined procedure of regular assessment and consultation between class teacher, SEN teacher, principal and parent. Both SEN teachers and principals recognise that this can be problematic, particularly with parents who feel that their child has benefited from learning support and are therefore reluctant to have this benefit removed from their child. Ensuring their school policies are clear in this area is another aspect that school staff could explore when revising their whole-school policy.

Policy Review

The Learning Support Guidelines (DES, 2000) suggest monitoring of the school plan through "regular meetings between principal teacher, learning support teacher and the teacher with responsibility for co-ordinating learning support services" (DES, p. 30). It suggests that these meetings occur termly and offer a host of issues which could be addressed at such meetings. No policy refers to such a procedure and few policies mention any specific means of monitoring implementation, aside from one which indicates that learning support will be frequently addressed at staff meetings. However, principals and SEN teachers argue that their policy and its implementation is constantly under informal review through discussions between staff members and principals as the need arises.

Parental Involvement

Parental rights and responsibilities in education and the importance of schools encouraging the active involvement of parents, through discussing assessment outcomes, designing programmes and holding information sessions for parents on pupils' learning and related topics, are all emphasised in the Learning Support Guidelines (DES, 2000, p. 25). However, sections on parental involvement were conspicuous by their absence from school policies as were agreed whole-school procedures to facilitate active parental involvement. In interviews however, both SEN teachers and principals suggested that while such strategies did exist within the school they were not formally recorded in their policy. They also acknowledge that parental involvement in learning support was somewhat underdeveloped in comparison to other areas.

Other Elements

Other areas that featured in many policies included strategies for communicating information, record keeping and reviewing the school policy (i.e. arrangements for parent-teacher meetings, school reports and specific mechanisms for facilitating staff discussion on learning support). Record keeping sections outlined the planning requirements of SEN teachers and the location of pupil files. Many also included dates for review. Thus, policies provided clear guidance on routine organisational matters for teachers and were beneficial for new teachers joining a school.

Topics that only appeared in a few school policies included strategies for preventing learning difficulties, co-ordinating learning support, referring pupils to outside agencies and the work schedule of the learning support teacher. SEN teachers suggested that the first of these was covered in the relevant section on early intervention and also in curricular plans for subjects such as English and mathematics. The other areas were considered routine matters for which agreed procedures operated, irrespective of whether or not they were formalised in policy format.

CONCLUSION

It is evident that whole-school planning for learning support and SEN is very much driven by SEN teachers, with some involvement by principals and mainstream class teachers. However, boards of management and parents are not active participants in whole-school planning for SEN. The recommendation therefore that protocols be drafted "to clarify the roles and responsibilities of each of the partner groups in the whole-school planning process" (DES, 2006, p. 84) is still apposite to the area of SEN.

Overall, there is evidence of a lack of contextualisation in school policies, as many of the most detailed sections of policies are an executive summary of pertinent circulars or departmental guidelines. The need therefore for schools to adapt national directives and guidelines to match the unique context of their own school is an area that perhaps future in-service in planning could address.

It appears that the principle of early intervention has impacted on the system. It frequently appears in policies, and while some policy sections could be more context-specific, SEN teachers show an appreciation of its overall importance.

While SEN teachers appreciate the importance of the staged approach to supporting pupils with SEN, not all policies provide relevant guidance to school personnel, and where guidance is provided it is rarely context-specific. It is also apparent that more recent developments in this area, contained in *Special Educational Needs: A Continuum of Support* (DES, 2008) have not influenced policy in any meaningful way.

There is need for schools to develop procedures for effective time-tabling, monitoring the implementation of the SEN plan, parental involvement and clear procedures for continuing/discontinuing learning support. These areas, while obviously important for a unified whole-school approach to learning support, rarely appear in school policies.

Overall, effective whole-school policies for learning support should be “comprehensive and assertive statements intended to guide the school community and be the outcome of a democratic decision-making process involving all members of the school community” (Blandford and Gibson, 2005, p. 120). The evidence of this small-scale study suggests that, while all schools have begun the process of whole-school planning for learning support, further work both on process and product is necessary in order to provide planning documents that serve as a useful guide to practice in SEN.

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