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The Role of Special Schools and Special Classes in Ireland

In line with the worldwide movement towards inclusion, educational policy in Ireland currently advocates including students with special educational needs (SEN) in the mainstream school when and wherever possible. Not surprisingly, this stance challenges the role and very existence of the special school. Rather than defensive reaction, what is needed is research evidence that will facilitate informed debate about best practice for the educational provision for students with SEN. This article summarises a national review of the role of special schools and special classes for students with SEN, which was commissioned by the Department of Education and Skills and the National Council for Special Education (NCSE). Survey and case study design were employed to collect the data. Findings emerged in relation to the range and complexity of pupil need, links with mainstream schools and the place of special schools and special classes in a continuum of provision for pupils with SEN. The implications of the research, along with recommendations for the current and future role of special schools and classes, are discussed. This Irish study has the potential to make a significant contribution to policy and practice in relation to the education of students with SEN.

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INTRODUCTION

In a time when national and international policy and practice promote the inclusion of students with special educational needs (SEN) in the mainstream school, the role of the special school becomes a hotly contested issue. This article summarises a national review of the role of special schools and special classes for students with SEN based in mainstream schools (Ware, Balfe, Butler, Day, Dupont, Harten, Farrell, McDaid, O'Riordan, Prunty and Travers, 2009). The

review was commissioned by the Department of Education and Skills (Phase One) and the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) (Phase Two). The rationale for the review is followed by a description of the two phases of the research. Having explained the process used to select the relevant research literature, the methodological approach used in the study is outlined. The findings are presented and discussed with reference to the research literature and to the recommendations made in the review. Implications from these findings regarding the current and future role of special schools and special classes are integrated into the discussion. As this article can only offer a brief overview, readers are invited to read the full report on the NCSE website (www.ncse.ie).

Given the significant role played by special schools in the educational provision of students with SEN in Ireland since the 1950s, the review was welcome. However, there were other important reasons for the research. Firstly, the Report of the Special Education Review Committee (Ireland, 1993), recommended the provision of a continuum of services for students with SEN, which included special schools and special classes, to meet a continuum of special educational needs. However, there was evidence of growing dissatisfaction with the segregated nature of education provided, from some parents and stakeholders in the early 1990s. Secondly, the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN) (Ireland, 2004) gave further weight to the current government policy of encouraging the maximum possible level of inclusion of students in mainstream schools. These developments gave rise to some uncertainty about the role and future of special schools and classes in Ireland, making the review necessary as well as timely.

This two-phased review was conducted by a research team* from the Special Education Department of St. Patrick's College, Dublin. The first phase, 2005-2007, consisted of a questionnaire census of special schools and mainstream primary schools with special classes, which sought information on educational provision and on participants' views on the role of special schools and classes. Informed by the data from the first phase, Phase Two, 2007-2008, addressed three main issues:

- The role of special schools in the provision of education to pupils with SEN and in particular, the ways in which special schools can act

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in a cooperative way with mainstream primary and post-primary schools to provide enhanced service to pupils with SEN and their parents

- The role of special classes in mainstream schools for pupils with SEN with particular regard to the principle of inclusive education as described in Section 2 of the EPSEN Act (Ireland, 2004)
- The international literature in the area of special education with particular emphasis on the role of special schools and special classes.

The review also examined a number of specific issues including the potential for special schools to offer expertise and services to mainstream primary and post-primary schools; issues related to dual enrolment; whether special schools should cater for specified categories of special needs or a broader/full range of special needs; and whether special schools should be used/developed as centres of excellence.

There were a number of limits to the scope of the review. The terms of reference did not include any explicit mention of curriculum issues or examination of alternative models of provision. Both phases were conducted to tight budgetary restrictions and Phase Two, to a very short timeline. While it was possible to identify the number of special schools in Ireland, it was extremely difficult to access an accurate list of special classes in mainstream schools, particularly at post-primary level. Although a number of lists, official and unofficial, from various agencies were consulted, variations existed (Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD), 2003; Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO), 2006; Department of Education and Science (DES), 2008; Stevens and O'Moore, 2009).

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

A summary of the literature reviewed for the study is not possible within the word-length restrictions of this article. Instead, the procedures used to search the relevant literature and the major areas reviewed, are outlined. The current review built on a review of the literature on the role of special schools which was conducted by the University of Birmingham for the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) (Porter, Lacey, Benjamin, Miller, Miller, Robertson, Sutton and Visser, 2002). The references, journals and data bases cited in that 2002 review were searched and updated to 2008. Some key works published in 2009 were also included. In addition, relevant Irish educational research theses and educational journals from 1998-2008, were hand-searched. Pertinent websites were targeted to access national and international policy and summary information.

Within the wider debate about special and inclusive educational provision, the literature review concentrated on the role of special schools and classes in Ireland and internationally. The development of and contexts for special schools and classes were examined. Current and future roles were also explored, raising amongst others, topics such as linkages with mainstream, isolation, outcomes and pupil profiles at primary and post-primary level. The issue of leadership and the implications for educational change as well as the impact of continuous professional development (CPD) on SEN were also reviewed. The methodological approach to the study was informed by the literature and is now outlined.

METHODOLOGY

Survey and case study design were selected to address the research questions. Quantitative and qualitative research methods (questionnaires, focus group interviews, individual interviews, observations, document analysis, submissions and literature review) were employed to collect the data.

Phase One

A questionnaire was developed in conjunction with a number of key stakeholders (the special education and teacher education sections of the DES and the National Educational Psychological Service) to collect both quantitative and qualitative data from all special schools and primary special classes in Ireland. Questionnaires were circulated to a total of 410 schools (all 106 special schools and all 304 primary schools with special classes on the lists provided by the DES) in May 2006. The overall response rate to the questionnaire was 78.2%.

Phase Two

While five distinct stages emerged in the approach to Phase Two of the study, these stages are interrelated and interdependent. In the first stage, a total of 225 questionnaires were distributed to principals of post-primary mainstream schools with special classes. The complexity of the issues involved in identifying post-primary schools with special classes is described and discussed in detail in the report. The methodology used for stage two, the review of the literature, has already been outlined. In stage three, focus group interviews involving 140 relevant stakeholders (pupils, parents, teachers, principals and special needs assistants) from twenty-eight schools (seventeen special schools and eleven mainstream schools) were conducted in three geographical regions. A further level of enquiry using a case study approach in real-life contexts and using multiple sources of evidence (interviews, observation and document analysis) was

conducted in stage four to enhance and validate the findings. Three educational sites, including primary and post-primary, where there was evidence of best practice in relation to the role and operation of special schools and classes were selected (two from Ireland and one from the UK). In stage five of the study, submissions, addressing the key research questions, were invited from relevant organisations and the public at large.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were coded and analysed using SPSS version 14. All qualitative data were transcribed and imported into NVivo for a seven-stage process of analysis. The findings from both phases of the study were analysed and presented in an integrated manner which addressed the specified tasks of the investigation.

FINDINGS, DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings from the study are discussed with reference to the international literature under the two main headings of special schools and special classes. Recommendations from the report and implications for policy and practice are included under the relevant sections.

Special Schools

Findings relating to the range and complexity of pupil need in special schools, links with mainstream schools and dual enrolment, are presented and the implications of the findings for the future role of special schools discussed.

Complexity and Range of Pupil Need in Special Schools

In general, the findings indicated that special schools are an important part of the continuum of educational provision for pupils with SEN:

Often it is forgotten that the special school provides a holistic education where a fully rounded student emerges at 18. Special schools do provide education in a different environment, however often their very difference is also their strength. The special school is a vital, intrinsic and ever-changing part of the education continuum, often ahead of mainstream, often questioning teaching approaches and seeking student success

(Special school questionnaire: School for pupils with mild general learning difficulties (GLD)).

The review, as indicated in Table 1, found evidence of significant complexity, diversity and severity of pupil need in special schools, particularly those for pupils with mild and moderate GLD.

Table 1: Primary disabilities of pupils reported by schools for pupils with an official DES designation of mild GLD and moderate GLD

Primary disability of pupil as reported by schools	Mild GLD	Moderate GLD
Physical disability	6	
Hearing impairment	2	
Visual impairment	2	
Emotional disturbance and/or behavioural patterns (EBD)	12	4
Social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD)	20	1
Mild GLD	1828	2
Moderate GLD	193	1013
Severe/profound GLD	37	386
Autism/autistic spectrum disorders (ASD)	63	152
Specific learning disability (SLD)	12	
Multiple disabilities	161	51
Total	2336	1609

These findings concur with reports in both the Irish and international literature (Buckley, 2000; Porter et al., 2002; INTO, 2002; McCarthy and Kenny, 2006; Head and Pirrie, 2007). There is also international agreement that part of the future role of special schools is to cater for pupils with severe and complex needs (Porter et al., 2002; DfES, 2003). Based on these findings, recommendations were made that special schools should be enabled to continue catering for students with complex needs *in the absence of evidence that Irish mainstream schools could provide a better education for these students* (Recommendation 1) and that *a range of special school provision should continue to be available catering both for specific categories of need and for a range of needs* (Recommendation 2).

Pupils Entering the Special School at Transition to Post-Primary

The evidence from the study indicated that the majority of pupils attending special schools for pupils with mild GLD are of post-primary age and that there is a trend of an increasing number of admissions at post-primary transfer. Data from Phase One showed that of the age profiles of 2,012 pupils given by principals of schools for pupils with mild GLD, 677 were in the four-twelve age range and 1,335 in the thirteen-nineteen age range. The evidence also showed that those who move from mainstream to special school at this juncture were likely to have additional needs and behavioural issues as well as mild GLD. This increasing diversity and complexity of need in special schools, which challenges their capacity to retain pupils in school and to provide access to appropriate certification and other courses, has also been highlighted by Norwich and Gray (2007) in England and Head and Pirrie (2007) in Scotland. The evidence from the current study is that special schools were successful at retaining pupils with mild GLD, and that in some special schools for pupils with mild GLD a range of appropriate post-primary programmes was available in a flexible manner. In light of the absence of evidence in relation to post-primary schools' capacity to meet the needs of pupils with mild GLD the review recommended that *further research is needed into the factors which lead to the comparative success of schools for pupils with mild GLD in retaining pupils in school and the implications for the whole post-primary sector evaluated* (Recommendation 3.1) and that *a review of the curriculum and certification offered to pupils with mild GLD of post-primary age in both special and mainstream schools is required to ensure a range of choices for pupils and their parents* (Recommendation 3.2).

Links with Mainstream Schools

In the international literature one important role envisaged for special schools into the future is in supporting mainstream schools (Gibb, Tunbridge, Chua and Frederickson, 2007). The Irish literature suggests that around half the special schools in the country have links with mainstream (Buckley, 2000). In the current study, the type of link mentioned most frequently by special schools was providing work experience for post-primary students. Many of the special - primary school links involved collaboration in preparing pupils for First Communion and Confirmation. Only a minority of links involved Outreach or Inreach support. The review found that links involving support for mainstream schools are valued, but they tend to be of an informal and ad hoc nature, based on the goodwill of those involved:

People ringing and saying, you know, have you ever come across a child like this? And I say, right, it's down to the goodwill of the teacher at this stage

(Focus group: Principal from a special school).

By contrast, the English case study special school had links which were formalised and resourced in line with the current international literature which highlights adequate staffing and resourcing as being essential to special schools acting as resource or outreach centres (Meijer, 2003). Porter et al. (2002) concluded that teachers in special schools may feel ill-equipped for the role of supporting mainstream schools, and such a role may not be appropriate for all special schools. Data from the current study raise some serious questions about their ability to support mainstream schools, in two important areas which are addressed in the next section: the training and expertise of the staff in at least some schools and the availability of a multi-disciplinary team. The review thus recommends that *one aspect of the future role of some special schools could be to provide Outreach and Inreach support for mainstream schools to enhance the provision these schools are able to make for pupils with SEN. It should be noted that the review found that not all Irish special schools currently have the capacity to fulfil this role* (Recommendation 4).

Training and Expertise of Staff

From the limited data on initial teacher qualifications, 392 (39%) teachers in special schools were reported to have restricted recognition, seventeen with provisional recognition and fourteen were said to be unqualified. Data were available on the continuing professional development opportunities available to teachers from both phases of the study. It is interesting to note that from a total of 988 teachers working in the eighty-three special schools, only 238 (27.6%) held a special education qualification (diploma) recognised for the payment of an allowance from the DES. In addition to accredited courses, considerable numbers access relevant short courses and seminars provided mainly through the Special Education Support Service (SESS). However, Phase 1 of the review identified gaps in relation to specialist qualifications for teachers in special schools, a much smaller percentage of whom now have an accredited qualification in SEN than in 1990 (McGee, 1990). If teachers from special schools are to meet the extremely diverse and complex needs of their pupils and advise and support mainstream colleagues, they will need to have the opportunity to become qualified specialist teachers (Ofsted, 2006), and to develop consultation skills (Porter et al., 2002; McTague, 2005). Thus, a recommendation was made that:

Special schools should receive resources and have access to continuous professional development for staff to reflect the variety of roles which they fulfil, including opportunities to develop specialist skills appropriate to particular groups of pupils and collaborative working skills... (Recommendation 5).

While the study did not specifically investigate the role, qualifications or training of special needs assistants (SNAs), some participants were clear that access to training is required for SNAs in order to enhance the support they provide to pupils with SEN. A recommendation was made that a *review of the training needs of SNAs should be conducted* (Recommendation 8).

Access to Multi-Disciplinary Support

Access to multi-disciplinary support emerged as a major issue in both phases of the review. Questionnaire data showed that, with only one or two exceptions, services were available only on a part-time or ad hoc basis, with many schools receiving no service from a number of professionals within the multi-disciplinary team (Table 2).

Table 2: Numbers of special schools receiving auxiliary services

Auxiliary Service	Special Schools
Educational Psychology	40 (48.2%)
Speech therapy	70 (84.3%)
Social Worker	53 (63.9%)
Occupational Therapy	49 (59.0%)
Physiotherapy	46 (55.4%)
Psychiatry	22 (25.5%)
Clinical Psychology	39 (47.0%)
Counselling	13 (15.7%)
Family Support	20 (24.1%)

It was clear from the review that access to multi-disciplinary support is currently insufficient and inconsistent. Additionally, there is very wide variability between schools in the amount of support available to pupils. This conclusion is supported

by a DES evaluation of educational provision for pupils with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) (DES, 2006). While a handful of participants felt that the resources available in special schools contribute to their ability to be a centre of excellence, much more frequent were comments about the lack of resources and the impact that had on the quality of provision:

A major obstacle to appropriate education is, of course, lack of services. Speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, psychologists and behavioural intervention specialists must be employed directly by the Department of Education and Science in order to rectify this problem

(Submission: Disability organisation).

The review recommended that *the way in which multi-disciplinary support is provided to pupils with special educational needs in all types of school needs to be urgently reviewed...More access to multi-disciplinary teams is required and access needs to be available on the basis of need regardless of the setting in which the pupil is placed* (Recommendation 9).

Dual Placement

One aspect of the way in which special schools can act collaboratively with mainstream schools is through linkages such as dual enrolment and dual placement. The difference between these two types of arrangements concerns whether or not the pupil is officially on the roll of two schools simultaneously. The majority of participants in the current study indicated that they are in favour of some form of dual placement. Factors which contribute to successful linkages between mainstream and special schools are identified in the literature (Buckley, 2000; Porter et al., 2002; De Paor, 2007; Gibb et al., 2007) and were also identified by participants in the study. These include planning, coordination, parental support and good communication. Participants also identified issues such as time for collaboration, a dedicated coordinator, provision of SNA support, low pupil teacher ratio, access to therapies for the pupil and administrative support, as elements to be considered for successful dual placement. All of these factors have resource implications. Participants in the study also perceived that costs in staff time and travelling between schools would inhibit or detract from the success of dual placement.

Pupils' ability to adapt to attendance at two schools has been identified in the literature (McTague, 2005) and is also of concern to a minority of adult participants, particularly in relation to pupils with ASD, and also to pupils who participated in focus groups:

Interviewer: *What do you think of that Paul (pseudonym) what do you think about going to two different schools?*

Paul: *I wouldn't be able*

Interviewer: *Why wouldn't you be able?*

Paul: *You'd be seeing different faces every day, you'd be going back and forth and back and forth and back and forth.*

As in the literature, (Buckley, 2000; Fletcher-Campbell and Kingston, 2001; INTO, 2002), some participants in the study, including students from one focus group, highlighted access to curriculum subjects which may not be available in some special schools, as one of the advantages of dual placement.

The study found considerable dissatisfaction with the lack of a clear official DES policy on dual enrolment. By contrast, the literature reports that policy in England actively encourages arrangements of various types which facilitate part-time attendance by pupils at mainstream and special schools (Evans and Lunt, 2002). In the researchers' view, the benefits of dual enrolment advocated by the participants could be achieved for Irish pupils with SEN by dual placement, if the issues of resourcing, insurance and transport were addressed. In England the policy of co-locating new special schools with mainstream schools helps to overcome some of the logistical barriers to dual placement. Based on these findings from the review, it was recommended that:

Dual placement arrangements should be facilitated where these are seen as being in the best interests of the pupil in order to facilitate either educational or social inclusion. However, there is a need for clarity on how insurance, transport and substitute cover for teachers or SNAs facilitating such arrangements are funded and managed (Recommendation 14) and that dual placement arrangements should be facilitated in the future by co-locating mainstream and special schools (Recommendation 15).

While the main themes and issues in relation to special schools have been addressed, additional themes emerged from the qualitative data in Phase Two of the study. Special schools were seen by their pupils, parents and staff as providing support to the parents of children with SEN and contributing to the well-being and happiness of the pupils who attend them. Full details are presented in the report.

Special Classes

A description of the composition of special classes in primary and post-primary schools is followed by an outline of the benefits of special classes cited by the

study participants. A number of issues and challenges which arose are then discussed.

The Composition of Special Classes

Based on the study data, Table 3 shows the number of special classes in primary schools by category of disability for which they were originally designated and the total number of pupils in these classes.

Table 3: Special classes in primary schools included in the study

Original Designation	Number of classes	Number of classes reporting pupil numbers	Total number of pupils (for those classes reporting numbers.)	Mean no. of pupils per class for categories with 10 or more classes	Range (i.e. minimum and maximum no. of pupils per class)
Mild GLD	211	204	1,512	7.41	2-14
ASD	77	75	349	4.65	1-8
Speech and language	54	51	333	6.53	4-10
Moderate GLD	15	14	71	5	2-9
Specific Learning Disabilities	15	14	119	8.5	4-11
Hearing Impairment	10	10	30	3	1-6
EBD	8	7	39	-	2-9
Severe and Profound GLD	6	6	29	-	3-6
Multiple Disability	3	3	13	-	4-5
SEBD	1	1	4	-	-
Visual Impairment	0	0	-	-	-
Total	400	385	2,499		

Like special schools for pupils with mild GLD, special classes in primary schools for these pupils, cater for a diverse range of needs, albeit less complex needs than their peers in special schools. The age trend also replicates that in special schools, with greater numbers of older pupils in special classes in primary schools,

including some of post-primary age. Based on the 385 classes for which pupil ages were supplied, there were 246 students aged four-eight years, 819 aged nine-twelve years and 48 aged 13-15 years in special classes in primary schools.

Information from post-primary schools was more limited. Data from fifty-five DES designated special classes in forty-one post-primary schools were analysed. However, ‘unofficial’ special classes were not included in the review. Although not always directly comparable with those in Ireland, special classes with different titles exist in post-primary schools in other countries (Meijer, 2003; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2000; 2005). In the absence of a definitive list of special classes in Ireland, the review recommended that an audit of special classes be conducted and that the subsequent data base be up-dated regularly.

The small number of classes at post-primary level suggests that in many areas no post-primary special classes exist. Educational provision at post-primary for pupils with SEN was a major issue for all participants. The parents in particular, reported concern over the lack of continuity of special classes from primary to post-primary level. There was also a perception among some of the participants that professionals, particularly psychologists, for a variety of reasons, were no longer recommending special class placement for students with SEN, a concern highlighted by McGee (2004) and Nugent (2007). It should be noted however, that there has been an increase in the establishment of post-primary special classes since 2005, the majority of which are for pupils with ASD, with a smaller number sanctioned for pupils with moderate GLD. In order to maintain the option of the special class as part of the continuum of educational provision for students with SEN, the review recommended that:

The issue of continuity of special classes at post-primary level needs to be dealt with as a priority and all future special classes should be set up as part of a coherent area plan at primary and post-primary level considering the type of special classes required, age ranges of the pupils and gender and that the criteria for the establishment of a special class at post-primary level need to be explicit (Recommendation 13).

The Benefits of Special Classes

Analysis of the data shows that special classes were perceived to be an effective form of provision by parents, teachers, principals and by those who made submissions to the research. Not surprisingly therefore, there was widespread support for the future role of special classes as part of a continuum of provision to

address a continuum of need. The most frequently stated advantage of special classes related to the principle of inclusive education. Some of the benefits listed by all types of participants at primary and post-primary level included: facilitation of inclusion within the mainstream class, provision of a 'safe haven' for some students, a favourable pupil teacher ratio and flexibility regarding teaching and curriculum provision. The following response summarises the views of many:

...by having dedicated special classes located within mainstream schools. This provides a learning environment suited to the children's needs through experienced specialised teachers working in a favourable P/T ratio, while at the same time providing for integration opportunities with mainstream pupils. I am convinced that pupils being educated under those arrangements are potentially receiving the best possible education.

(Questionnaire: Primary school with special classes for pupils with ASD and EBD).

For some participants, the special class was regarded as a viable option in the choice between a special or mainstream school. This was articulated by a parent:

And then the option of here came up and this was the best of both worlds 'cause they have the special class, the special attention and yet they're still in mainstream, still mixing. So to me this is definitely the best of both worlds

(Parent: Primary school with a special class for pupils with moderate GLD).

Many respondents to the questionnaires cited the fact that the existence of a special class enabled pupils to remain in or near to their own locality.

Issues and Challenges for Special Classes

Participants voiced uncertainty about the future role of special classes as a form of educational provision for students with SEN. Concerns were also raised regarding teacher qualifications, access to multi-disciplinary support and the role of the special class with regard to inclusion in mainstream.

Some participants expressed concern over what they perceived to be a threat to special classes for pupils with mild GLD. Twenty-one percent of mainstream primary principals responding to the questionnaire reported a drop in numbers in their special classes. Stevens and O'Moore (2009) document a dramatic shift in the placement of pupils with mild GLD since the introduction of the resource teacher model and again after the introduction of the General Allocation Model of support (GAM). Likewise, studies by Travers (2007) and Stevens and O' Moore

(2009) raise serious concerns about the level of support being provided to pupils with mild GLD under the GAM. Acknowledging the many positive features of the GAM, the review recommended that *the capacity of the GAM and Resource Teacher service to meet the needs of pupils with mild GLD should be evaluated before reducing the option of special class placement in the system* (Recommendation 11.2).

In relation to teacher qualifications, ninety-five (24%) of the 400 teachers in special classes in the primary schools studied, were reported as having restricted recognition, twenty-one provisional recognition and two as unqualified. The need for specialist qualifications and CPD has already been discussed. Only 114 schools have at least one teacher with a diploma in either special education or learning support in one or more of their special classes. However, teachers from special classes in primary schools had availed of both accredited training and short courses to at least the same extent as their colleagues in special schools.

The questionnaire data show that some schools had access to and support from multi-disciplinary services as outlined in Table 4.

Table 4: Numbers of schools receiving some auxiliary service

Auxiliary Service	Primary Schools with Special Classes	Post-primary Schools with Special Classes
Educational Psychology	110 (47.8%)	27 (49.1%)
Speech therapy	140 (60.9%)	21 (38.2%)
Social Worker	37 (16.1%)	16 (29.1%)
Occupational Therapy	66 (28.7%)	18 (32.7%)
Physiotherapy	19 (8.3%)	8 (14.5%)
Psychiatry	15 (6.5%)	6 (10.9%)
Clinical Psychology	33 (14.3%)	3 (0.5%)
Counselling	31 (13.5%)	17 (30.9%)
Family Support	33 (14.3%)	18 (32.7%)

It is clear that not all schools receive multi-disciplinary support and like their colleagues in special schools, principals in primary and post-primary schools identified the lack of access to psychological and clinical services as a major issue in providing for pupils in special classes. If the special class model of educational provision is to be a viable alternative to that offered by the special school, it is crucial that the necessary support services are in place for those students who require them. Thus, the review recommended that *support services should be provided to all pupils who require them in special classes and inclusion of pupils from the special class in mainstream classes should not be used as a reason to withdraw such services when still required* (Recommendation 12.2).

Warnock (1978) envisaged the model of the special class as presenting an “inclusive” setting. However, others warn of its potential for segregation within the mainstream school (Meijer, 2003). Although the capacity of the special class to facilitate inclusion was highlighted as a major advantage, the research revealed that pupils in almost half (170) of the special classes in the primary schools studied, remained all day in the special class. Thus, the data suggest that many schools may not be taking full advantage of the special class model to promote inclusive practice. The DES (1999) requires all schools with special classes to have a policy outlining how the special class interacts with other classes. Mindful of the flexibility of the special class model operated in many of the study schools and its potential for inclusive practice, the review recommended that *schools operating full day special classes should develop and implement policies and plans outlining how the special class relates to other classes and consider options such as part time and/or time related placement* (Recommendation 12.1).

When discussing provision for pupils with SEN in Ireland, the special class model is usually linked to that of the special school. As Stevens and O’Moore (2009) argue, it is more difficult to find evidence of debate about the current and/or future role of special classes, in comparison to special schools.

CONCLUSION

Recent Irish legislation, policy and practice support a continuum of educational provision, but also advocate as inclusive an education as possible for students with SEN. This apparent contradiction is a manifestation of the dilemmas inherent in recognising and meeting individual needs on the one hand, and promoting inclusion for all without highlighting differences between pupils, on the other. (Norwich, 2008; Wedell, 2008). The future role of special schools and classes in Ireland is not without its own dilemmas and tensions and the review highlighted

a number of ways in which that role has changed, is changing and needs to change in the future.

There is clear evidence from the review that pupils in special schools and classes now have more diverse and complex SEN. They are older and are transferring to special schools at the end of their time in mainstream primary schools. In line with international trends, a primary role for special schools in the future will be to provide for older pupils and for those who have more complex and severe SEN.

The review highlighted a number of threats to elements of the continuum of provision for pupils with SEN. The fact that there is no special class provision in many parts of the country, particularly at post-primary level, reveals one such threat. The decrease in the number of special classes for pupils with mild GLD presents another gap in the continuum for pupils with mild GLD. Linked to the lack of continuity of special classes from primary to post-primary is the challenge of school completion and retention for older pupils with increasingly complex SEN. Since the current study started, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment and the Further Education and Training Awards Council have initiated reviews into curriculum provision and certification for pupils with SEN. This is a most welcome development.

One of the future roles envisaged for special schools internationally is that of forging links with mainstream schools. The current study found that while many special schools had links with mainstream schools, the nature and extent of these links varied greatly. Dual placement arrangements offer one possibility for developing future linkages. However, if they are to have a role in supporting mainstream schools in the future, special schools need to have and be perceived as having, the relevant, specialist knowledge and skills to fulfil that role. The findings from the current study raised some questions about the capacity of special schools in this regard, particularly in relation to the availability of suitably qualified and trained, specialist staff and access to the necessary multi-disciplinary support services.

Conflicting evidence in relation to the capacity of special classes to promote and foster inclusive practices emerged from the study. It is worrying that pupils in almost half of the special classes in the primary schools studied, remained in their special class all day. If the option of special classes is to be retained, the onus is on schools to capitalise on its potential for inclusion.

The researchers were well aware of the expectations that accompanied the publication of this review and are grateful to the participants for sharing so

generously and supporting the research process. There can be no doubt that there is a role for special schools and classes in Ireland in the future, albeit a different role from that of the past. Although the review was quite comprehensive, readers need to be conscious of its limitations and indeed, of the limitations of research in general. Nevertheless, the review has raised some and signposted other important issues for the future and for further research. The debate has long since moved on from whether or not pupils with SEN should be educated in special or mainstream schools. Recognising the tensions that exist, the responsibility is to provide the best possible education for pupils with and without SEN regardless of location or designation. Collaborative links between special and mainstream schools are not only mutually beneficial. They are essential.

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