



An Roinn Oideachais
Department of Education

Evaluation of Educational Provision for Children and Young People with a Specific Learning Disability

Special classes attached to mainstream primary schools in Ireland

March 2023

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Terms and abbreviations

CPD: Continuing Professional Development

DEIS: Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools

ICT: Information and Communications Technology

NEPS: National Educational Psychological Service

NCSE: National Council for Special Education

PDST: Professional Development service for Teachers

SEN: Special Educational Needs

SERC: Special Education Review Committee

SET: Special Education Teachers

SLD: Specific Learning Disability

SNA: Special Needs Assistant

1. Introduction and Background

1.1 Introduction

The Inspectorate was requested by the Department's Special Education Section, on behalf of the Minister of State with responsibility for Special Education and Inclusion, to evaluate provision in special classes for children and young people with a Specific Learning Disability (SLD). This evaluation commenced in 2020, but was suspended due to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. It recommenced in January 2022. During the period January 2020 to November 2022, the Inspectorate conducted Evaluations of Provision for Pupils with Special Educational Needs in a sample of five mainstream primary schools with a total of seven SLD classes. The findings arising from these evaluations are presented in this report.

1.2 The purpose of the evaluations

The purpose of the evaluations was to examine the quality of provision for children and young people with SLD, with particular reference to understanding the placement of children and young people in these classes and to identifying the strengths and areas for improvement in learning and teaching in these classes. This report is intended to inform decision-making in the Department's Special Education Section in relation to the overall effectiveness of SLD classes, in the context of emerging international trends for inclusion.

1.3 Aims of SLD classes

SLD classes offer intensive intervention in the teaching of literacy skills within a differentiated curriculum to children and young people whose overall ability level is average or above and whose performance in literacy skills, as measured by a standardised test, is at a very low level.¹ The literacy intervention is provided in a special class setting and the children and young people participate in mainstream classes for learning activities in other areas of the curriculum, as appropriate.

This establishment of SLD classes is predicated on the idea that good literacy skills are essential for learning across the curriculum. Therefore, for a cohort of children and young

¹ (<2nd percentile)

people whose literacy skills are significantly in arrears of their overall ability levels, intensive intervention in literacy is provided in a special class setting. This approach is underpinned by a medical model which uses a diagnoses of difficulty as its starting point for interventions. It differs with current understanding of SLD and current Department policy which uses a needs-based approach. A needs-based approach begins with an identification of learning need followed by a selection of appropriate interventions to address these needs and a careful monitoring of the child or young person's response to the interventions.

1.4 Origin of the special SLD classes

The origin of the SLD class provision can be traced back to the *Special Education Review Committee (SERC) Report* (1993). The report defined a specific learning disability as:

impairments in specific aspects of reading, writing and arithmetical notation, the primary cause of which is not attributable to assessed ability being below the average range, to defective sight or hearing, emotional factors, a physical condition or to any extrinsic adverse circumstances.

The report recommended that provision for children and young people with specific learning disabilities in third, fourth, fifth and sixth classes in primary schools should be made by establishing SLD classes in designated ordinary schools. It also recommended that these classes should have a pupil:teacher ratio of 11:1 and that the children and young people enrolled in these classes should participate in mainstream classes for some activities.

Arrangements to establish and administer these SLD classes were set out in *Guidelines on the Enrolment of Children with a Specific Learning Disability (SLD)* (Department of Education, 1988). The guidelines, using an exclusionary approach to eligibility², lists the criteria for enrolling children and young people in a special school or special class as:

² An approach which uses a defined cut off point and excludes any pupil who does not meet that cut off point. In the SLD class, the specifier is an IQ score in the average range of ability. Therefore any pupil for scores below this point is not eligible to attend the class

1. General intellectual ability within the average range or above
2. An obvious discrepancy between intellectual ability and performance on a standardised test of reading ability
3. Performance in basic literacy skills as measured by a standardised test at a very low level compared to the vast majority of children in a similar age cohort.

The guidelines also advised that consideration be given to the child's speaking, writing and spelling skills as well as to their level of adaptation to learning within mainstream education, to their progress in other aspects of the curriculum and to their social and personal development.

Enrolment in SLD classes was to be on a whole-time basis for a maximum period of two years.

1.5 Location and operation of SLD classes

Figures from the NCSE indicate that there are thirteen SLD classes attached to ten mainstream primary schools. These classes are located across the country, though they are generally located in larger schools in urban settings. Five of these schools are in Dublin, two in Clare, one in Galway, one in Louth and one in Wexford.

While SLD classes operate within the context of designated mainstream schools, most children and young people enrolling in these classes leave their original school to attend a designated school. Due to the regional location of the special SLD classes, most, but not all, children and young people transfer to a different school to access the special class. At the end of their time in the class, children and young people return to mainstream education, generally in their original schools, in another primary school or by moving to a post-primary school.

1.6 Exemption from the study of Irish

Under *Circular 0054/2022*, a pupil who is enrolled in a recognised special class in a mainstream school is automatically entitled to an exemption from the study of Irish. Exemptions from the study of Irish held by children and young people continue to apply until the end of their post-primary education.

1.7 Pupil:Teacher ratio in SLD classes

The initial circular on staffing of SLD classes³ stated that a pupil:teacher ratio of 11:1 should apply in SLD classes in mainstream primary schools. However, the report of the *Task Force on Dyslexia* (2001) recommended a pupil:teacher ratio of 9:1. Currently the NCSE in their publication *Guidelines for Setting Up and Organising Special Classes for Boards of Management and Principals of Primary and Post-Primary Schools* lists the pupil:teacher ratio as 9:1 and use this ratio when determining staffing levels in SLD classes.

³ Circular 09/1999

2. International and national policy on inclusion

The rationale for the existence of special classes in Ireland, including SLD classes, has been influenced by the range of evolving international and national policy developments.

2.1 The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

Current policy development in Ireland is influenced by *The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*. This convention was adopted by the United Nations in 2006 to protect and reaffirm the human rights of people with disabilities. The Irish Government signed the *Convention* in 2007 and subsequently ratified it in March 2018. Section 24 (Part 2) requires States to ensure that “persons with disabilities are not excluded from the general education system on the basis of disability, and that children with disabilities are not excluded from free and compulsory primary education, or from secondary education, on the basis of disability.” It also requires that “persons with disabilities can access an inclusive, quality and free primary education and secondary education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live.”

Currently, the Irish education system emphasises the importance of having a variety of educational provision to support children and young people with a range of disabilities or additional needs. Depending on a child’s level of need, this education may be provided in mainstream classes, special classes or in special schools.

2.2 The Special Education Teaching Resource Allocation Model

Following policy advice provided by the NCSE in 2013, the Department of Education committed to ensuring that provision for all children is underpinned by the following principles:

- All children, irrespective of special educational need, are welcome and able to enroll in their local schools
- All educational supports are allocated equitably to schools in line with the educational needs of children and young people
- All children and young people with special educational needs have access to available educational supports in line with their needs

- Children and young people with special educational needs have an individualised assessment which informs learning and teaching and forms one part of an ongoing and cyclical process of assessment, intervention and review of outcomes
- Available resources are used to maximum effect to drive improved outcomes for children; state services work together to achieve this
- Parents' role as the natural and primary educators of the child is respected.

Circular 0013/2017 *Special Education Teaching Allocation* provided guidance to schools on the revised allocation model. This circular outlines a model of provision for special education teaching support which prioritises the allocation of teaching resources based on the principle of providing the greatest level of support to the children and young people with the highest level of need rather on an exclusionary model⁴.

The circular was also accompanied by *Guidelines for Primary Schools: Supporting Pupils with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools*. These guidelines indicated that an 'important aspect of the revised allocation model is that special education teachers are deployed according to identified needs, rather than being based on a diagnosis of disability'. (p. 18). Such an approach provided greater autonomy and flexibility to schools in how they allocate their special education teaching resources. As a result, special education teachers provide support to children with special educational needs in a variety of ways including:

- Assessing and recording the child's needs and progress
- Consulting with parents, class teachers and others regarding appropriate targets for each child
- Teaching children through in-class support, small group withdrawal or one-to-one tuition.
- Advising class teachers about differentiating the curriculum
- Advising parents, accompanied by the class teacher, as needed
- Meeting other professionals such as psychologists, speech and language therapists, and visiting teachers in relation to a child's special educational needs.

⁴ This circular does not state that it supersedes Circulars 09/99 or 0038/2010 which deal with SLD classes and their staffing arrangements. Circular 0013/2017 is silent on the specific matter of special classes for pupils with SLD in ordinary primary schools.

2.3 The Continuum of Support

The Continuum of Support is the official Department approach to dealing with special educational needs in primary and post-primary schools. It is underpinned by Circular 0013/17.

The *Continuum of Support* is a problem-solving model of assessment and intervention which enables schools to gather and analyse data as well as plan and review the progress of all children and young people and respond to their needs. This framework recognises that special educational needs occur along a continuum, ranging from mild to severe and from transient to long term. Consequently children and young people require different levels of support depending on their identified educational needs.

This framework provides a means through which teachers can ensure that interventions are incremental; moving from mainstream, class-based interventions for children and young people with mild or transient educational needs and delivered by the mainstream class teacher, to more intensive and individualised supports at school support and school support plus levels. School support plus level generally responds to those children and young people with the most significant level of need. The *Continuum of Support* emphasises that interventions at all levels should be informed by the careful monitoring of progress and the development of targeted intervention plans as part of a student support file.

Under current advice from the Department, the NCSE and NEPS, the classroom teacher has primary responsibility for the progress and care of all children and young people in their classroom. Mainstream class teachers may be supported by special education teachers (SETs) who will work closely with the class teacher to provide additional teaching support for the children and young people.

Both NEPS and the NCSE provide a comprehensive suite of resources for schools on their websites to support implementation of the *Continuum of Support* and to further enhance the capacity of teachers to deliver evidence-based interventions to meet the needs of children and young people who experience difficulties with literacy.

2.4 The Salamanca Statement

The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), was a written commitment by ninety-two countries, including Ireland to improve the integration of children and young people with special educational needs in mainstream settings. Since its publication, many countries have developed policy frameworks designed to enable all children with special educational needs to be educated in their local communities.

2.5 The Special Education Review Committee Report

The report of the *Special Education Review Committee* (SERC, 1993) was the first comprehensive review of provision for children and young people with special educational needs in Ireland. Its report outlined seven principles designed to serve as basic guidelines for the future development of the education system in Ireland:

1. All children, including those with special educational needs, have a right to an appropriate education
2. The needs of the individual child should be the paramount consideration when decisions are being made concerning the provision of special education for that child
3. The parents of a child with special educational needs are entitled, and should be enabled, to play an active part in the decision-making process; their wishes should be taken into consideration when recommendations on special educational provision are being made
4. A continuum of services should be provided for children with special educational needs ranging from full-time education in ordinary classes, with additional support as may be necessary, to full-time education in special schools
5. Except where individual circumstances make this impracticable, appropriate education for all children with special educational needs should be provided in ordinary schools
6. Only in the most exceptional of circumstances should it be necessary for a child to live away from home in order to avail of an appropriate education
7. The State should provide adequate resources to ensure that children and young people with special educational needs can have an education appropriate to those needs

The report also outlined a framework for pupil:teacher ratio in special classes which is still used by the NCSE.

2.6 Summary of policy landscape

The existence of special classes in Ireland, including SLD classes, has been influenced by a range of evolving international and national policy decisions. The future implications of Ireland's signing of the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* will need to be examined in light of the current range of educational provision available to support children and young people with disabilities or additional needs in mainstream classes, special classes or in special schools, including in relation to SLD classes.

It is also the case that the system's understanding of the nature and impact of a specific learning disability has evolved since the publication of the *SERC Report* in 1993 and the *Guidelines on the Enrolment of Children with a Specific Learning Disability (SLD)* in 1998. For example, the *Guidelines for Primary Schools Supporting Pupils with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools* (2017) suggest that, similar to a range of other special educational needs, the assessment of and interventions to support children and young adults who present with SLD should reflect a staged process. Interventions should be planned carefully to address the identified needs of the individual, delivered skilfully using evidence-informed interventions. Children and young people's response to interventions is seen as an indicator of both the significance and persistence of their reading difficulties and highlights the importance of careful monitoring of outcomes.

3 Methodology

3.1 The Special Education Needs - Primary (SEN-P) Inspection Model

The main aim of this evaluation was to evaluate provision for children and young people in special classes for SLD. In order to meet this aim, the schools visited as part of this evaluation had an Evaluation of Provision for Pupils with Special Education Needs – Primary (SEN-P) inspection. This model provided the flexibility and focus to examine provision in both mainstream and special class settings within a whole-school context. Full details regarding the evaluation procedures for this model are available in the published [Guide to Inspection in Primary Schools and in Special Schools](#).

Through the published reports arising from the inspections, inspectors reported on the overall outcomes for children and young people with special educational needs (SEN) in each school in the following areas:

- The quality of learning of children and young people with special educational needs
- The quality of teaching of children and young people with special educational needs
- The management and use of resources received to support children and young people with special educational needs.

As part of the inspection process in these schools, inspectors also completed a survey for each SLD class visited. Together with quantitative ratings, they provided qualitative comments to illustrate the strengths and areas for development and explain their ratings. The survey used for these evaluations looked at the following domains, drawn from *Looking at Our School: A Quality Framework for Primary Schools* (2016):

- Learner outcomes
- Learner experiences
- Teachers' individual practice
- Teachers' collective/collaborative practice
- Leadership and management.

Between two and four checks were conducted under each domain with an overall quality rating attached to each check, in line with the Inspectorate's Quality Continuum, as follows:

Very Good=5	Good=4	Satisfactory=3	Fair=2	Weak=1
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To capture the unique context of the SLD classes, six additional lines of enquiry were also explored as follows:

- The general profile of the children and young people enrolled
- The curriculum and learning programmes accessed
- How well individual needs were met
- The quality of teaching, planning and assessment observed
- The management of the special classes
- The quality of transitions into and out of the special SLD classes.

Within this survey sample, three of the schools had one special SLD class while the other two schools had two special SLD classes each. Consequently, the unit of analysis for this report is the SLD class (N = 7) rather than the school (N = 5).

3.2 Context and limitations

The results and findings of this survey reflect inspectors' evaluative judgements based on the evidence gathered during the SEN – P inspection. The evidence base for the inspection contains evidence of current standards and of progression since enrolment. Conclusions in relation to longer-term outcomes for these children and young people when they return to their mainstream classes cannot be drawn from this evidence base.

The SEN – P model, at that time, did not include opportunities for inspectors to engage with the parents of children in the special classes through focus group interviews. While all parents of children and young people receiving support from the school were afforded an opportunity to respond to a paper-based survey during the evaluation, it was not possible to fully disaggregate the responses of the parents of children and young people in the SLD class from other parents in the school.

4. Main Findings

This following section presents the results and key findings of the evaluation as indicated by analysis of the data. The report uses qualitative terms, which are explained in the following table:

More than 90%	Almost all
75% – 90%	Most
51% – 74%	Majority / more than half
50%	Half
25% – 49%	Less than half / a significant minority
16% – 24%	A small number / less than a quarter
Less than 15%	A few

4.1 The profile of the children and young people and enrolment

- Six of the seven classes had a pupil:teacher ratio of 9:1. The remaining class had a ratio of 10:1.
- More than half of the classes had children and young people enrolled with a co-morbidity or other diagnosis.
- Enrolment criteria for most classes conformed to the 1998 Guidelines. In one class, a child who registered above the 2nd percentile was enrolled. This enrolment, allowed for under the guidelines, did not deny a qualifying pupil a place in the class and was made on the basis of identified literacy need.
- All children and young people enrolled in one of the classes were drawn exclusively from the cohort of children and young people attending the mainstream school in which the class was located. In the other six classes, children and young people travelled a considerable distance to attend the class. For example, in two classes children and young people travelled up to 40 kilometers. In the remaining four classes, children and young people travelled up to 25km to attend the class.
- English was the first language of all children and young people in these classes and all classes were based in English-medium schools. Two classes had children and young people who transferred from Irish-medium schools.

- Most children and young people spent the maximum two years in these classes. In three of the classes, some children spent three years in the class, where it was felt that they would benefit from such an extension. This practice is not specifically provided for under the 1998 *Guidelines*.

4.2 The quality of learning and teaching

4.2.1 Learner outcomes

- In most of the special classes, children and young people demonstrated satisfactory or better progress in acquiring the knowledge, skills and understanding required by the curriculum.
- In four out of the seven classes, children and young people were making good or very good progress in achieving the stated learning objectives for the term and year.
- Progress in two classes was considered satisfactory and was fair in the remaining one class.
- In three of the seven classes, children and young people' progress in literacy skills was considered to be very good. In two of these classes, the progress of some children exceeded expectations.
- Children and young people were reported to enjoy their learning, to be motivated to learn and expected to achieve as learners in all classes. In four of the seven classes, inspectors considered this aspect to be at a good or very good level.
- In five of the seven classes, children and young people demonstrated a good or very good ability to reflect on their progress as learners and develop a sense of ownership of and responsibility for their learning. In all seven classes, children and young people were reported to be experiencing opportunities to develop the skills and attitudes necessary for lifelong learning at a satisfactory, good or very good level.

4.2.2 Learning experiences

- In four of the seven classes, children and young people' engagement in purposeful and meaningful learning activities was at a good or very good level.
- In one of the classes, some children and young people' additional learning needs or behavioral needs impacted negatively on their ability and the ability of their peers to engage fully with tasks.

4.2.3 Teachers' practice

- All teachers created a culture of openness about SLD with children and young people and held open discussions with them on dyslexia⁵. In some classes, children completed projects on role models with SLD and many children had high levels of understanding as to why they were in the special class.
- In three of the seven classes, inspectors noted that the teacher's experience of teaching children and young people with SLD and the lack of appropriate professional development was impacting negatively on the learning opportunities of all children and young people. The remaining four teachers demonstrated good or very good subject knowledge, pedagogical and classroom management skills.
- The following aspects of practice were noted in classes with good or very good teaching:
 - teachers being positive and affirming of children and young people
 - teachers' high expectations for children and young people' learning and achievements
 - flexible but structured approaches to teaching
 - high levels of differentiated provision
 - the development of programmes based on children and young people' identified needs
 - teachers' specialist knowledge of SLD
 - teachers' appreciation of the importance of continuing professional development
 - the development of children and young people' self-monitoring or self-assessment skills
 - a collaborative atmosphere
 - effective use of ICT to support learning
 - stimulating classroom environments.
- Among the aspects of less than satisfactory practice noted were:
 - an inability to optimise learning in oral language lessons in a significant minority of classes

⁵ Teachers used the term dyslexia and SLD interchangeably

- a lack of meaningful and appropriately challenging learning experiences in a few classes
- an insufficient provision for the breadth of the curriculum in a significant minority of classes
- inappropriate classroom management approaches used to appease a minority of children and young people behavioral needs in a few classes
- an overreliance on commercial programmes for learning and teaching and an over-use of movement breaks in a significant minority of classes
- a lack of consistent teaching approaches across the SLD settings in a significant minority of classes

4.2.4 Wellbeing of children and young people

- All schools employed a wide range of actions, methods and approaches to support the wellbeing of the children and young people in the SLD classes. These included:
 - the creation of success opportunities
 - the pre-teaching of topics for whole-class presentations in mainstream
 - initiatives to promote resilience
 - a bespoke dyslexia awareness week
 - a focus on inclusion including integration and reverse integration
 - positive, respectful interactions and affirming relationships
 - focused CPD in the area of wellbeing
 - discrete timetabling of wellbeing on the class timetable
 - visits by local guest speakers to the classroom.
- In a majority of SLD classes, inspectors reported good or high levels of self-esteem and positive interactions were evident among children and young people in most classes. However, in a small minority of classes, a minority of children with behavioral difficulties were having a negative impact on overall class management.

4.2.5 Transitions

- In five of the classes, there was communication between the class and the base schools during the two-year placement. In six of the classes, good or very good transition strategies were in place.
- At the end of the placement, most children and young people either returned to their original primary school or transferred directly to post-primary schools.

- In some instances, those children and young people who began their primary education in Gaelscoileanna, transitioned to the mainstream school attached to the special class and did not return to the Gaelscoil.

4.2.6 Integration and inclusion of children and young people

- Practices around children and young people integrating into mainstream classes during their placement in the SLD class varied across all classes.
- Children and young people from all of the special classes had integration opportunities for subject areas such as Mathematics, SESE, Visual Arts, Physical Education (PE), Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Music.
- There was an inclusive culture in most schools. Reverse integration⁶ was in place in four out of seven classes.
- There were no instances of any child or young person enrolled in an SLD class being put on a reduced timetable or a shortened school day.

4.2.7 Individualised planning, assessment and progress records

- In six out of the seven classes, teachers devised suitable individualised support plans to direct the educational programme for children and young people. Inspectors deemed the individualised support plans for children and young people in one class to be unsuitable.
- The individualised plans in the six classes were well informed by the reports of professionals and previous teachers, with evidence that teachers consulted with parents in all cases.
- Wider involvement in the planning process varied as follows:
 - the mainstream class teacher was involved in five out of seven classes
 - all children and young people were involved in two out of seven classes
 - sixth class children only were involved in two out of seven classes
 - the mainstream class teacher in the base school was involved in two classes
 - the principal was involved in one class

⁶ Reverse integration is a process whereby pupils from mainstream classes attend the special class for particular subjects / parts of the day.

- the SET team was involved in one class.
- In five of the seven classes, children and young people's individualised learning plans were formally reviewed on a twice yearly basis.
- Inspectors found that children and young people's progress in their learning was assessed regularly in all classes and, in a majority of the classes, a range of targeted assessment tools were administered.
- In six of the seven classes, assessment records indicated that children and young people were making acceptable progress towards achieving their individual targets.
- In these six classes also, the records indicated that the children and young people were making acceptable progress generally with the curriculum.
- In the remaining class, acceptable pupil progress was not evident from written work, student support plans or assessment records.

4.3 Whole-school structures

4.3.1 Leadership

- Inspectors considered the effective operation of SLD classes to be significantly influenced by the quality of leadership provided by the principal and the school management team. This quality of school leadership and its contribution to the effective operation of the special class was good or very good in six of seven classes.
- In these cases, inspectors noted a culture of improvement, collaboration, innovation and creativity in learning supported by school leadership.

4.3.2 Deployment

- In two out of seven classes, teachers with limited experience of SLD were deployed in the special class. In one of these classes, the quality of teaching was satisfactory and in the other it was fair.

4.3.3 Continuing Professional Development

- Teachers in six of the SLD classes were judged to value and have engaged in professional development, with a majority deemed to have done so to either a good or very good level.
- Five of the seven teachers contributed well or very well to building whole-staff capacity by sharing their expertise with other staff members.
- Three teachers also indicated that they had undertaken CPD at post-graduate level.

4.3.4 Non-teaching support for children and young people

- SNA support was provided to one pupil in one of the classes.⁷
- NEPS had been involved in case work in three of the seven classes, including the delivery of assessment and consultation.
- In the remaining four classes, teachers reported that they sought and received advice informally in relation to issues including in-class assessment.

4.3.5 Resources to support learning and teaching

- The availability and allocation of resources for the special classes were described as very good in six out of seven classes and satisfactory in one class. Among the resources used were:
 - phonics books
 - wide range of novels and other books available
 - evidence informed programmes
 - bespoke handwriting programmes
 - digital technologies, including Chrome books, Nessy ICT, Kindles, laptops.
- Five of the seven classes availed of support from support services such as the NCSE Regional Support Teams to support children and young people who had learning needs additional to their SLD diagnosis.

4.3.6 Access to the curriculum

- Appropriate programmes to develop children and young people's skills in literacy and numeracy were in place in six of the seven classes.
- Curriculum provision afforded appropriate support and challenge for all children and young people in these six classes.
- Children and young people had access to a suitably broad and balanced programme in all classes. Access to subjects, aside from English, was typically mediated in the special class in four cases and in the remaining three it was mediated in the mainstream settings.

⁷ Under circular 38:10, unlike SSLD or ASD classes, SLD classes do not have an automatic entitlement to SNA access.

- Children and young people in six of the seven classes were not learning Irish; children and young people in one of the SLD classes were learning Irish.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

The aim of the SLD class is to provide intensive intervention in the teaching of literacy skills within a differentiated curriculum to the children and young people enrolled. The class is specifically designed to cater for those children and young people whose attainments in literacy are significantly in arrears of their expected attainment levels. The evaluation found that pupil outcomes were good or very good in most, but not all, of these classes. For example, children and young people in the majority of classes were making good or very good progress in achieving the stated learning objectives for the term and year. Similarly, the findings note that while teachers' practice in the majority of classes was at a good or very good level, this was not consistent across all classes and in one of the classes practice was less than satisfactory.

The evaluation also found that many of the factors that are characteristic of effective practice in all schools: leadership, teacher deployment, teacher continuous professional development and individualised planning, are also important factors influencing the quality of provision in the SLD classes. The findings also indicate that the quality of these aspects of provision are good or very good in the majority of these classes. The quality was less than satisfactory in a few classes.

Recommendation 1

Special Education Section, in collaboration with the NCSE, should consider a means of

- **Sharing best practice for supporting learning in the thirteen classes for children and young people with SLD**
- **Ongoing quality assurance of practice in the thirteen classes for children and young people with SLD**

A further important policy consideration for the Department's Special Education Section is the understanding of SLD that underpins these classes. When these classes were formed, SLD was conceptualised using an exclusionary model. Current policy and practice are informed by the *Continuum of Support* model. This emphasises that interventions to support children and young people with SLD should be informed by the careful monitoring of the response to intervention and the development of targeted plans across all levels of the continuum of support; support for all, support for some and support for a few. The current approach also emphasises the primary responsibility of the classroom teacher for the progress and care of all children and young people in their classroom, including those with SLD.

Recommendation 2

The Department's Special Education Section, in collaboration with the NCSE, should examine a means of further enhancing existing capacity within the mainstream system to deliver whole-school and targeted approaches to support those learners who experience persistent and enduring difficulties in the acquisition of literacy skills.

The evaluation also highlighted a need for greater clarity on a number of administrative issues associated with these classes. These include:

- Enrolment practices, including the enrolment of children and young people who do not meet the criteria and enrolling children and young people exclusively from the base school in the class
- Appropriate pupil:teacher ratios for these classes
- Appropriate catchment areas for these classes
- Access to Irish for children and young people attending these classes who began their primary education in an Irish-medium school.

Recommendation 3

The Department's Special Education Section, in collaboration with the NCSE, should update the circular on the operation of special classes for children and young people with SLD. The updated circular should contain clear guidance on:

- **Appropriate enrolment procedures**
- **Appropriate pupil-teacher ratio**
- **The study of Irish**

While this report highlights many aspects of practice within SLD classes, only longitudinal data can address questions regarding the longer term outcomes for children who attended these classes and the impact of the experiences of these classes on their future educational pathways. Longitudinal data should be relatively easily accessed and would be very helpful in determining future policy options.

Recommendation 4

The Department's Special Education Section, in collaboration with the NCSE, should consider the possibility of requesting expressions of interest from educational researchers in researching the longer term outcomes for children who attended SLD classes attached to

mainstream schools and the impact of the experiences of these classes on their future educational pathways.