

# SEN review in Northern Ireland

## What is the SEN review?

The SEN Review has been ongoing since April 2006. The review has been looking at all aspects of special educational needs in Northern Ireland. It has been set up to look at how

“... We deliver the most appropriate services to these children ... (children with special needs) in the best way and at the best time, so they can gain maximum benefit.”

Minister Maria Eagle,  
Press release 19/7/06

## Who is involved?

The Department of Education has involved people from education and health sectors in both the statutory and voluntary groups. The review team is being led by Marleen Collins from the ETI. A sample audit at board and school level has been carried out to establish current practise. The review is conducted within three strands:

- Identification and assessment.

- Pre school and early identification.
- Capacity building and inclusion.

Representatives from voluntary play groups as well as speech and language therapists have been involved alongside educational psychologists and classroom teachers in discussions.

## What has been considered?

The strands have been looking at current practice throughout Northern Ireland. Strengths and weaknesses as well as inconsistency of practice have been the subject of workshops. Health professionals have been able to indicate how their therapies can be facilitated and benefits maximised. Representatives from playgroups have been able to express how they can sometimes feel that they can have difficulty accessing support or advice for children who may have special educational needs. The benefits of the Code of Practice have been weighed up against its weaknesses.

One of the main areas for consideration was the issue of how the medical model has driven the labelling process and has made inclusion more difficult. The role of the new ESA as well as the need for additional training and support for teachers, SENCos, classroom assistants and parents to help with the capacity building process have been discussed.

## What happens next?

Models of good practice from other educational systems have been disseminated. The review group is looking at these good practice models as well as drawing up its own models of delivering special educational needs provision.

The aim is to find an accountable and effective way of delivering the intentions of the Code of Practice while addressing the fundamental flaws. It is also important that any new model reflects the changed educational environment that will emerge post RPA and

the Revised Curriculum.

One issue that did come up and will be very familiar to members of the INTO is the issue of time pressures. Any new system will need to be realistic about the amount of time that all partners require if the system is to become more effective and accountable. Parents need time to meet with those involved with their child. Teachers require time to meet other allied professionals eg physiotherapists. Inclusion may be the preferred option, however it must be realised that it is neither the only option nor a cheap option.

## How can we contribute?

Any members who have any views or ideas about Special Educational Needs in Northern Ireland can pass on their views or they can contact the Review team directly. Emails can be sent to [senandinclusionreview@deni.gov.uk](mailto:senandinclusionreview@deni.gov.uk)

## More School Reports Published

In late October, the DES published 24 WSE reports on primary schools.

Also published were 11 WSE reports on post primary schools, 162 subject inspection reports in second level schools along with a number of reports on Youth Encounter schools, Youthreach and Senior Traveller Training Centres.

Commenting on the reports that were published John Carr reiterated the union's opposition to the publication.

He said that the INTO position on publication had been

vindicated by the use of a published school report in the dispute over the Bellanaboy terminal in Mayo.

He said that the union was not taking sides in the issue of the terminal. “But,” he said, “teachers, like all citizens, have a legitimate right to engage in public protest.”

It now appears however, that a published school report is being used against a teacher by those who disagree with her.

This is an unfair attempt to discredit someone who is engaging in public protest in

her capacity as a private citizen,” he said. “If a teacher is not doing his or her job in school then there are procedures to deal with it. Using extracts from a report is not part of those procedures. “No other public servant could be treated in such a manner,” he said.

He said that notwithstanding INTO opposition to publication, the latest reports show the extent of Department under-funding in primary education.

One theme that can be picked up in most reports is the absence of basic school

accommodation. He said that the dearth of physical education facilities in particular is now being uncovered.

“The reports also point to the lack of basic facilities such as toilets, office space and discrete resource teaching rooms,” he said. “In other cases, serious health and safety risks are identified by temporary accommodation that has been in use for far too long.”

He called on the Department of Education and Science to seek increased capital funding to meet these urgent accommodation needs.

# Is there anybody out there?

Sometimes people ask "Why do you work in special education?" That's easy – I cannot imagine working anywhere else. I realise that it would not be everyone's choice but those of us who choose this career path do so because we believe we can make a difference and we enjoy the challenge. The job calls for creativity, flexibility, adaptability and a good sense of humour!

There have been many occasions over the past 15 years when we thought special schools could be phased out but, thankfully, we have maintained the continuum of provision in this country. I never believed in a 'one-size-fits-all' system. I think it is a pity that so many special classes in mainstream schools have disappeared but applaud my colleagues for enabling the reality of inclusion for so many children in their local schools. For the small, but significant, number of children who require more than mainstream can provide, the special schools are there to provide a more intensive, individualised programme.

But the system needs a lot more support. At a recent meeting of principals of schools for children with mild general learning disabilities, we discussed the improvements we need to see to meet all the service requirements of a modern special school. The following items were top of the agenda:

- Multi-disciplinary support – in-school services for speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, health related services both medical and psychiatric and of course a psychological service.
- More specialist teachers to support post-primary students as they undertake FETAC and Junior Cert/ Leaving Cert Applied subjects.
- Provision of home school community liaison teachers.
- Increased capitation grants.
- Counselling and support services for students during school and in preparation for leaving school.

The Department of Education and Science create rigid structures that don't always meet the needs of children or their families. A special school cannot have a dual designation as both special and disadvantaged, for example. Therefore, special schools cannot access the very successful HSCL scheme despite the fact that we cover large geographical

areas and find communication with parents more difficult than the local school. Support teachers are also attached to disadvantaged status. Yet, despite the fact that the majority of our students leave disadvantaged schools to come to the special school, they are no longer able to claim the benefits they have left behind. There is no sense in this.

Another anomaly in the system relates to children with significant speech and language disorders. If they are not of average or above intelligence, they cannot gain entry into a language unit. Guess where many of them end up? Yes, in the special school where there may not be a service available. A child with more than one disability can be short changed by the system. We all know that children don't always fit into the neat boxes created by the DES but the system is slow to acknowledge this.

The lack of multi-disciplinary support and the incredible policy decision to exclude all special schools from the NEPS service is nothing short of a disgrace. If the DES is serious about considering dual enrolment, surely they need to consider providing these resources so that special children, no matter what school they attend, can avail of services easily as they need them.

I asked the question "Is there anybody out there?" because the call for resources has gone unanswered for so long. Another question might be "Is there a plan?" No two schools have the same provision. So much has been done on an ad hoc basis for so many years, it's hard to believe that we are all supposed to be providing a similar service. One might be forgiven for thinking that the advent of the SENO would improve the situation but again there is little uniformity in their response to schools. Many feel that another layer of bureaucracy has been added – like we needed any more of that!

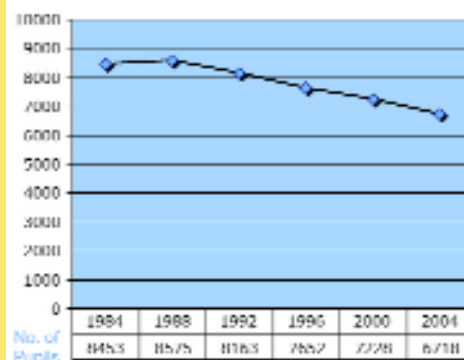
But we're not giving up! We'll continue to campaign for improvements in our service because we believe these children are worth it and they deserve the best. They, and very often their families, cannot take on the DES and other agencies but we will. It would be a very sad day indeed if we stopped lobbying and just accepted our lot.

**Valerie Monaghan, Principal, Scoil Chiarain, Glasnevin, Dublin.**

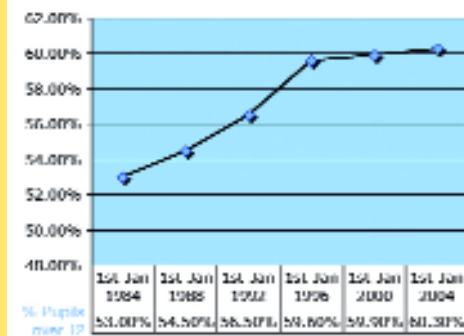
## Special Schools and Classes 1984-2004

*Figures from DES Statistical Reports*

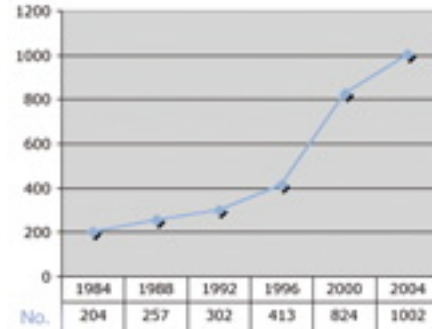
Number of Pupils in Special Schools



% Pupils in Special Schools Aged 12+



Number of Special Classes



# ASD – An evaluation of provision

*Emer Ring, Divisional Inspector, DES, describes the recent evaluation of educational provision for children with autistic spectrum disorders and suggests practical school-based strategies and resources for teachers in meeting children's needs.*

## Autistic Spectrum Disorders

Significant developments have occurred since the Government announcement in 1998 that children with autism were to be recognised as a distinct group for special educational provision. The *Report of the Task Force on Autism* was published in 2001 and made a series of recommendations in relation to policy and practice.

Autistic spectrum disorders (ASDs) are identified by a triad of impairments in social interaction, patterns of communication and flexibility of thought and imagination (DES, 2001). It has been suggested that an additional dimension related to difficulties experienced by children in processing sensory information might also be added to the triad (Autism Working Group, 2002a; Jones, 2002; Bogdashina, 2006). In addition, it is important to remember that some 75% of children with ASDs are within the range of general learning disability (Ireland, 1993). It is acknowledged that, because of the nature of ASDs, it may be difficult to secure a precise assessment of a child's particular level of cognitive functioning (DES, 2001). However, it is clear from recent literature that the severity of ASDs and the level of general learning disability form two separate dimensions, which have to be explicitly considered when planning learning and teaching programmes for individual children (Peeters, 1997; Jordan, 2001; Autism Working Group, 2002b). According to the Task Force on Autism prevalence rates of individuals affected with ASDs are estimated to be in the region of 56 per 10,000 of the general population (DES, 2001).

## Evaluation process

Five categories of educational provision for children with ASDs were evaluated by the Inspectorate over the two-year period 2002/04.

The final composite report entitled *An Evaluation of Educational Provision for Children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders* was published in April 2006. An extensive literature review was conducted as part of the evaluation and concluded that there was no definitive evidence to support the exclusive use of a single teaching approach to meet the varied needs of children with ASDs and their families. The review of educational approaches suggested that the elements in Figure 1. represent best practice in meeting children's needs.

## Practical school-based strategies emerging from the evaluation

The following areas emerged as being of particular significance in meeting the needs of children with ASDs.

**Curriculum access** All children with ASDs benefit from accessing a broad and relevant curriculum. The significance of the triad of impairments, sensory sensitivities and general learning disability for curriculum delivery is illustrated in Table 1.

A range of publications is available to assist teachers:

- The Draft Curriculum Guidelines for *Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities* published by the NCCA.
- A CD entitled *Autistic Spectrum Disorder: A Teacher's Toolkit* and a video for parents were distributed to all schools in 2005.

- *Autistic Spectrum Disorders: A Guide to Classroom Practice* (Autism Working Group, 2002b) was also distributed to schools.
- *Opening the Spectrum: Insights into Working with Pupils on the Autistic Spectrum* is available on the SESS website at [www.sess.ie](http://www.sess.ie). A co-ordinated approach to curriculum planning and implementation is fundamental to ensuring continuity in and consolidation of children's learning and teaching. Individualised planning is a key component of children's learning and teaching programmes. The *Guidelines on the Individual Education Plan Process* was recently published by the NCSE.

Children with ASDs may become anxious during unstructured periods of the school day such as recess periods. Creating buddy-systems, organising and monitoring structured games and activities and providing opportunities for children to engage in activities of their choice during these periods can assist in reducing children's anxiety. Children with ASDs benefit greatly from being included with their non-ASD peers during curricular and social activities. It is essential that inclusion opportunities are carefully and deliberately planned and that reverse inclusion opportunities are also provided.

Monitoring children's progress in curricular areas can be achieved through the use

of a range of formal and informal assessment procedures. A selection can be made as appropriate from assessment strate-

gies such as teacher observation, homework, teacher-devised tests, diagnostic tests, criterion-referenced tests, norm-referenced standardised tests, checklists, summative assessment, curriculum profiles, retention of samples of children's work and photographic records,

**Teaching approaches** A range of teaching approaches may be used in implementing education programmes for children with ASDs. Approaches used in implementing the Primary School Curriculum such as direct-teaching, modeling, prompting, task-analysis, task repetition scaffolding, activity learning, experiential learning and collaborative learning may be effectively used with children with ASDs.

## ASD Specific approaches

### Interactive approaches:

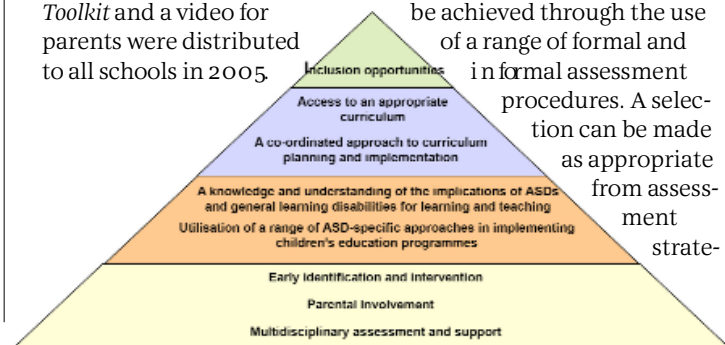
Emphasis is placed on assisting the child in developing relationships and engaging in reciprocal communication through structuring naturalistic and incidental learning and teaching contexts.

### Communicative Approaches:

Children's communication skills are specifically targeted, promoted and developed through the use of approaches such as the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), the LAMH manual signing system, and/or the use of real objects, symbols, pictures, photographs drawings and written words.

### Discrete Approaches, TEACCH:

The Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication handicapped Children (TEACCH) approach is based on the rationale that children with ASDs progress better in structured rather than in unstructured environments and incorporates a physical organisation of the environment, visual schedules, work-



**Figure 1: Elements of best practice in meeting the needs of children with ASDs**



systems and task organisation. **Social Stories:** Social Stories are designed to enable the child to cope with social situations, which s/he finds difficult. They a revisual, identify relevant cues, provide easily accessible accurate information for the child and describe expected behaviours. Role-play and video may be used to enhance this process.

**Integration Approaches:** Integration is used as the learning medium and children are taught to directly participate in activities with their non-ASD peers. Buddy-systems, circle of friends approaches and social stories are successfully used to promote this process. The importance of providing mainstream peers with accurate age-appropriate ASD-awareness information in inclusive settings is stressed.

**Behavioural Approaches:** Behavioural approaches originate from Skinner's work in the 1950s and focus on modifying and shaping children's behaviour. The behavioural techniques of reinforcement, shaping, promoting and prompt-fading underpin the programme.

As children develop, they become less reliant on visual information for learning and teachers rely less on visual

methods and more on verbal methods in their teaching (White and Worth, 2006). However children with ASDs require visual support throughout their lives in order for them to meaningfully engage in activities. Temple Grandin, an adult with ASDs explains that she thinks in pictures and that words are as a second language to her (Grandin, 1995). Reconciling the strong visual learning modality of children with ASDs with the auditorily-based environment of classrooms is critical to the meaningful engagement of children in curricular activities (Hodgdon, 1995). The use of visual schedules and checklists, labeling children's personal spaces and belongings, labeling the location of objects and areas where specific activities take place, clearly delineating areas of the classroom in association with the activities that occur in each area and utilising concrete materials assist in engaging children in curricular tasks.

**Parental involvement** Children with ASDs require consistent support within school and home environments in order to make optimal educational progress and avail of opportuni-

ties to practice acquired skills in a range of different contexts.

**Information and communication technology** Computers have features that distinctively appeal to children with ASDs (Murray, 1997). Computers are rule-governed and predictable, context free, enable safe-error making and provide possibilities for verbal and non-verbal communication. However the over use of computers should be avoided as some children exhibit a tendency to become obsessed with particular programmes. Concealing the computer and incorporating the computer in the child's daily work schedule are effective strategies for controlling computer access.

**Staff development** Staff should be facilitated in availing of opportunities to engage in staff development and training that enables them to effect a combined-skills approach to meeting the needs of children with ASDs.

### Conclusion

Significant progress has been made since autism was given recognition as a discrete disability category in 1998.

Schools are proactive and successful in enabling children with ASDs access appropriate education and achieve their full potential. The imagination, commitment and skill of individual teachers have contributed greatly to the high quality of educational provision that is available for children with ASDs. Important insights can be gained from the children themselves as the following poem written by Philip Aston, a seven-year old child with ASD demonstrates (Aston, 1996).

### How I Got to Keep Listening

*I got to keep listening  
But I keep missing the words  
Maybe I could sit at the front of  
the carpet*

*That will be a little bit louder*

*Mrs Hirst talks to me  
And I got to think  
I thought 'it's hard'  
But Mrs Hirst thinks it's easy.*

*Maybe I only got small ears  
And I got to keep them on  
That's how  
I got to keep listening.*

We can usefully adopt Philip's advice and keep listening.

Extended version of this article can be read on [www.into.ie](http://www.into.ie)

**TABLE 1**  
Traits particular to ASDs

Impairments in social interaction	Implications of these traits for learning and teaching		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Literal thinkers</li> <li>• Confused by the rules that govern social behaviour</li> <li>• Require direct teaching in social skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need to structure opportunities for the child to use social skills in different situations</li> <li>• Awareness of the difficulties for the</li> </ul>	child inherent in less structured situations, such as break and lunch time, and in transition between lessons.
Impairments in language and communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The child needs support in understanding the purpose and value of communication</li> <li>• Attention needs to be directed towards teaching the social aspects</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>of language eg, turn-taking</li> <li>• Direct teaching of gestures, facial expression, vocal intonation, and body language</li> <li>• Use of visual material or signing to</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>support and facilitate the child's communicative initiations and responses</li> <li>• Providing precise instructions for the child to follow.</li> </ul>
Impairments in imagination, with a restricted range of behaviour, activities, and interests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The child must be helped to cope with new and varying activities</li> <li>• Pre-empting the child's anxiety,</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>from being presented with unstructured or unfamiliar situations without prior warning or</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>explanation</li> <li>• Devising and implementing a structured play programme.</li> </ul>
<b>Additional difficulties:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sensory and perceptual sensitivities</li> <li>• Fine or gross motor control.</li> <li>• Eating, drinking or sleeping.</li> <li>• Inability to block out distractions</li> <li>• Inappropriate eye contact.</li> <li>• Poor organisational skills.</li> <li>• Difficulties in managing time and completing work.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adjustments must be made to the classroom to deal with the child's undersensitivity or oversensitivity to noise, smell, taste, light, touch, or movement</li> <li>• Implementing structured and systematic programmes for developing the child's gross or fine motor skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eliciting relevant information regarding the child's eating, drinking or sleeping irregularities</li> <li>• Structuring the class room environment to reduce distractions</li> <li>• Securing the child's attention before issuing instructions irregularities or engaging in conversation</li> <li>• Providing structures that assist the</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>child in understanding the duration of tasks</li> <li>• Making the links between different tasks clear to the child</li> <li>• Direct and clear teaching of identified skills.</li> </ul>

# Teacher Education Section, DES

*Supporting the continuous professional development of teachers working with pupils with special educational needs*

**T**eacher Education Section (TES), formerly the In-Career Development

Unit, is committed to initiating and managing ongoing programmes of inservice training and professional development for teachers and other stakeholders in education.

Through an expanding range of accredited courses in colleges and third-level institutions and in the development of support programmes and services, TES continues to provide support for teachers in their ongoing professional development. TES strategy in providing opportunities to assist teachers in meeting the teaching and learning needs of pupils with special educational needs combines a number of elements.

## **Post-graduate professional training programmes**

In order to equip teachers to meet the needs of pupils requiring learning support and pupils with special educational needs, a new combined post-graduate diploma programme of training is being offered to teachers in the current school year. This programme is available in St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, Church of Ireland College of Education, Rathmines, St Angela's College, Sligo, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, University College Dublin, the National University of Ireland, Galway and University College Cork. Details of this programme are available in Circular 0035/2006. An allowance is payable to teachers who successfully complete the course in accordance with the terms of Circular 21/05.

A one-year, fulltime taught programme, running from September to June and leading to a Masters in Special Educational Needs is provided at St Patrick's College, Drumcondra. The programme is concerned with developing

teachers' knowledge and skills in analysing, critiquing and applying special education research literature, and in carrying out research relevant to children with special educational needs. Details of this programme are available in Circular 0027/2006.

## **Advanced training in specific areas**

From 2001, a Graduate Certificate Course in the Education of Pupils with Autism has been available at St Patrick's College Drumcondra. This is a one-year part-time programme and is delivered through both distance learning modes and some direct teaching. The programme allows for teachers' learning to be related directly to their teaching and to the pupils' learning over the year. The Graduate Certificate course consists of three modules of ten credits each and is equated with 450 hours of which approximately 65% involves independent learning activities and contact with pupils. This is the course that is referred to in the recent publication by the Inspectorate, *Evaluation of Educational Provision for Children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders*, which involved teachers being released from schools for a two-week period and being released to attend two regionally-based group tutorials per module. In the current year, teachers may complete the Post-Graduate Diploma in Special Education with a specialisation in ASDs or alternatively complete the Post-Graduate Certificate in Autism. These options are detailed in Circular 0073/2006.

## **Special Education Support Service**

The Special Education Support Service (SESS) was established by TES in 2003. The aim of this nationwide service is to

enhance the quality of teaching and learning with particular reference to special education provision. The SESS aims to provide a quality service that is inclusive, promotes collaboration and co-operation and provides for equality of access. SESS is hosted by Cork Education Support Centre. There has been significant expansion of the SESS in the past year, now with a coordinating team of fourteen full-time teachers.

The main areas of work of the SESS includes

- **Local Initiatives Scheme:** The scheme invites schools and individual teachers to identify their own particular professional development needs and apply to the SESS for funding or support across all areas of Special Education. Application forms are available on the SESS website. [www.sess.ie](http://www.sess.ie).
- **SESS Core Strategy:** The SESS has teams of teachers with specific expertise (SESS Associates) who, in collaboration with the Education Centre Network, provide a range of supports to schools through seminar delivery and school visits. The key elements of the work of the teams are identified below.
- **Autistic Spectrum Disorders:** This team is engaged in providing a one-day seminar, 'An Introduction to Autistic Spectrum Disorders', for classroom teachers. Almost 650 teachers nationwide attended these seminars in 2005-2006.
- **Dyslexia:** Similarly, the Dyslexia team are focusing on the class teacher with 'Dyslexia in School: A Seminar on Planning and Intervention for Class

Teachers'. Over 1,900 teachers availed of these seminars in the last school year.

- **Second-Level:** Over 1,200 second-level teachers were facilitated at this series of one-day in-school whole-staff seminar - 'Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream: A Whole-School Approach'.

## **Management of challenging behaviour in special school settings**

Special schools who deal with serious and persistent challenging behaviour on a day-to-day basis that requires specific interventions sought specific CPD on the use of such interventions at whole-staff and whole-team level. Special schools availed of funding to get specialist training in the management of challenging behaviour. Teachers attending the courses were eligible for EPV days.

Schools catering for students with Mild General Learning Disabilities availed of professional development provided directly by the SESS team. An initial in-school whole staff seminar, 'Introduction to Challenging Behaviour', was followed up by a one-day seminar for whole staff on 'Managing Challenging Behaviour'. An exceptional one-day school closure had been sanctioned for the purpose of facilitating delivery of this latter seminar.

## **Cross-border professional exchange programme**

The work of the Exchange Programme is completed. The following documents, were published and launched at the closing conference in Newry, May 2006.

- *Opening the Spectrum: Insights into working with Pupils on the Autistic Spectrum.*

- *Inclusive Dyslexia– Friendly Practice.*
- *It's Good to Talk. Using Case-Based Learning.*

The documents are available on the website [www.sess.ie](http://www.sess.ie)

SESS is also involved in a number of exciting and innovative developments. In collaboration with the Department of Education, Northern Ireland and the DES, SESS has secured additional funding under PEACE II to build on previous experience.

The core aim of the new project, 'Special Educational Needs: Cross Border Parent Community and School Project', is to bring parents, their communities and schools into closer working harmony by establishing effective local networks, placing schools at the heart of a structured training programme.

### Current and On-going Developments

A project manager has been appointed to lead the 'Special School as a Resource Project'.

The project aims to

- Develop the special school as a central resource for a group of mainstream schools/units within the hinterland of the special school

- Develop and enhance the expertise both in the special school and in the outlying schools

- Create networks of schools that are willing to collaborate and co-operated with each other.

- Create a climate of openness in schools that will facilitate the sharing of expertise and experiences of good practice

SESS has commenced the provision of series of lectures by renowned international speakers. In September, Professor Bill Rogers addressed teachers in Cork on 'Cracking the Hard Class'. Dr Steve Chinn spoke in Limerick, Cork and Dublin on 'The Trouble with Maths'. In October, Lindy Petersen addressed groups of teachers in Dublin, Kildare, Navan and Limerick, on her programme 'Stop, Think and Do'. Professor Barrie Bennet, University of

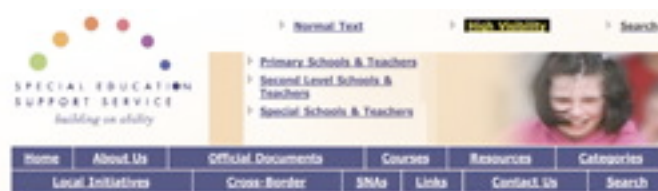
Toronto, Canada will speak on 'Instructional Intelligence' at conferences in Limerick, Cork and Dublin, commencing on 13 November.

Arrangements have been also been made with TEACCH (North Carolina, USA) to provided specific courses over the coming year. These are:

- Two-day Introduction to TEACCH' (Maynooth, February 2007).
- Two-day Introduction to TEACCH ( Kilkenny, February, 2007).

- Five-day hands-on-TEACCH (Newbridge, October 2006).

- Five-day hands on TEACCH (Galway, January 2007). SESS continues to part-fund training on-line with a range of courses being provided this autumn. SESS is liaising with Pyramid UK to provide funded access for teachers to forthcoming two-day PECS course throughout the country. The development and expansion of the website is on-going. With over 8,000 hits in September, is becoming a valuable resource for teachers in schools



### SESS CONTACT DETAILS

Special Education Support Service, c/o Cork Education Support Centre, The Rectory, Western Road, Cork  
Telephone: (0 21) 4254241  
Call Save: 1850-200884 Website: [www.sess.ie](http://www.sess.ie)

## Special Education

### a whole different language

Acronym	Stands for		
AD(H)D	Attention Deficit (Hyperactivity) Disorder.	NDA	National Disability Authority.
AS	Asperger's Syndrome.	NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service.
ASD	Autistic Spectrum Disorder.	ODD	Oppositional Defiant Disorder.
CP	Cerebral Palsy.	SEN	Special Educational Needs.
EBD	Emotional and/or Behavioural Disturbance.	SENO	Special Educational Needs Organiser.
EPSEN Act	Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (2004).	SERC Report	Special Education Review Committee Report (1993).
GLD	General Learning Disability.	SLD	Specific Learning Disability.
HSE	Health Service Executive.	SNA	Special Needs Assistant.
IEP	Individual Education Plan.	SPGLD	Severe to Profound General Learning Disability.
NCSE	National Council for Special Education.	SSLD	Specific Speech and language Disorder.

### SU DOKU

The Comhar Linn Su Doku challenge is to fill every space in the grid with one of the digits 1 to 9, so that all 9 digits appear on each row and each column, as well as in each of the 9 square-shaped cells. There is a unique solution to each puzzle.

Good luck.

Solution on page 39

5		8		1		2		3
	3						1	
1			5		7			9
		9		7		3		
8			3		1			4
		3		2		7		
7			4		2			5
	8						6	
3		1		6		8		2



# Teaching children with Autistic

## *A personal journey*

**N**o logic or reason can explain the outright certainty I felt during a staff meeting, when the principal presented the possibility of setting up an outreach pre-school for children with autism. Our school had been approached by Beechpark Services for children with ASD, as falling numbers in school enrolments indicated potential availability of space. My head didn't come into it. All it could do was try to grapple with the conviction that had bypassed it entirely and lodged deep within the gut. This was the job for me. In the months and years that followed I would come to see how it had to have been this way. If logic or reason had been allowed a vote, common sense and fear would have pulled rank and the gut would have been over ruled.

It was 1999 and I had been teaching mainstream junior and senior infant classes in the school since 1990, having previously taught in Killinarden and Ballyfemot. I had trained in Froebel College, receiving a degree from Trinity College in 1982. Apart from the basic study of child psychology, I had no professional experience or knowledge to prepare me. From a personal perspective however, I understood at some level, the wretchedness of isolation that can result from the disconnection of the human spirit with the world in which we live. Hardly a pre-requisite, but it may explain the magnetic pull towards this particular field of education.

Confusing days followed. As a service, it was in its infancy and the teething was murder! Trial and error brought the realisation that almost all of what I had learned up to this had to be discarded or at least reinterpreted. Support from Beechpark along with in-school support

was crucial. Teachers in general are used to being the experts and accepting that you "know nothing" can be a humbling but very necessary experience. Further inservice training helped. But stress levels resulted in a family agreement that if it didn't get better within the third year, I would quit.

It got better. The Department of Education and Science (DES) organised a postgraduate course in ASD with Birmingham University in conjunction with St Pat's. I hadn't written an academic sentence in twenty years. The challenge was immense. My first assignment was a naive composition with, at best, tenuous theoretical links. Somewhere between the second and third module, I came into my own. Everything I did related closely to my work in the classroom, with everyday practice benefiting directly from each assignment. Since study seemed an integral part of my work as opposed to something extra that had to be done, it made sense to continue with this (tailor made for me) learning process. When I was offered the opportunity to work towards an M.Ed, it seemed a natural progression. The only stumbling block was the age-old self-doubt thing. I thought that Masters degrees were the preserve of academics, whereas my sole interest lay in the practicalities of my everyday work coupled with a passionate desire to gain a deeper understanding of ASD. I decided in the words of Bob Dylan just to "keep on keeping on".

At the end of my sixth year, it's beginning to make sense. Working with 30 children and their families (six each year) has provided invaluable experiential learning while ongoing study has provided a broadening of my theoretical knowledge on which to base my everyday practice. Each brought a level of

depth to the other. It is my personal observation that the children's gains are increasing correspondingly each year in line with improvements in service. Validation came, in 2004, in the shape of a DES request that the service be expanded to double its size. We must have been doing something right.

What informed the development of our practice? I wish I could give you a simple answer. How about an easy recipe for good autism practice? I wish! Autism, by its very nature, precludes generalisations. It's probably best to presume that the gap between your perception of the world and the child's is unimaginably huge. "Men are from Mars; women are from Venus" doesn't come even close! What follows is an attempt to give an overview of ASD. But remember, every child you meet may manifest the common underlying deficits in very different ways.

### **What is autism?**

Autism or Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD) involve three fundamental areas of deficit, often referred to as the triad of impairments:

- Impairment of social interaction (in other words, the children are affected in their ability to understand social behaviour, which affects their ability to interact with other children and adults).
- Impairment of social communication (they are affected in their ability to understand and use verbal and non-verbal communication).
- Impairment of social imagination (they are affected in their ability to think and behave flexibly).

(Jones, 2002).

### **Social understanding and interaction**

A pupil with autism:

- May show preference for solitary space and avoid people.
- May show preference for objects over people.
- May not feel motivated to share other people's interests
- May not acknowledge others in play.
- May shun physical contact or make contact on his/her own terms.
- May experience difficulty with turn-taking.
- May not be able to comprehend the needs or feelings of others or may not even perceive them.

(Jones, 2002).

### **Understanding verbal and non-verbal communication**

A pupil with autism:

- May have difficulty understanding the purpose of communication.
- May not seek to communicate with others.
- May not display or even have any interest in other people or their interests.
- May present with speech development delay or an absence of speech.
- May present with limited use of gesture, eye contact, facial expression and body language that may appear as inappropriate.
- May present with good speech and language but still not be able to communicate effectively.
- May talk at length to someone on his/her own terms but not participate in a two-way conversation.
- May not understand or be able to grasp the element of social timing necessary in conversation.

(Jones, 2002).

### **Thinking and behaving flexibly**

A pupil with autism:

- May pursue repetitive activities for example twiddling; spinning; flicking.
- May show a special interest in

# Spectrum Disorders (ASD)

a particular activity and pursue it relentlessly.

- May show strong preference for solitary play and display limited skills particularly in pretend play.
- May have difficulty adapting to change.
- May pursue his/her own agenda to the exclusion of others.
- May want to control events.

(Jones, 2002).

Individuals may also present with intellectual difficulties and sensory perception and response difficulties.

(Jones, 2002).

## Intellectual ability

Children with autism can present with varying degrees of intelligence, from those presenting with severe or profound learning difficulties to those of well above-average ability.

(Howlin, 1998; Jones, 2002; Jordan, 1999).

## Sensory perception and responses

A child with autism:

- May find certain sounds distressing and react by covering ears, crying or trying to get away from the source of the offending sound.
- May be hyper-sensitive (over-sensitive) or hypo-sensitive (under-sensitive) to temperature or touch by people, objects or even the material of their clothing.
- May become absorbed by visual patterns.
- May actively avoid the broadening of tastes and show a preference for certain foods, textures or smells.

(Jones, 2002; Kranowitz, 1999).

## Individuality

Individuals with autism:

- Differ from one another reflecting differences in the severity of their autism, their intellectual ability and any additional difficulties.

(Jones, 2002, p.2).

Their personality and life experiences will also have had an impact and continue to impact on how s/he presents at school. Each child needs to be understood and treated in all respects as an individual.

## How does knowing all this help me as a teacher to provide an appropriate education?

This is the tricky bit. How do we avoid a theory/practice gap? I could write a book. But here are a few general points for starters:

- Devising Individual Education Plans collaboratively with parents and Multi-disciplinary team based on the needs of the child is essential.
- I try to see the world through the individual child's eyes. I find out what lights him/her up and use this to build a relationship of trust between us.
- Providing an environment that is structured and calm, balancing comfort with cognitive

challenge, helps the child with ASD to make sense of the world and often results in a significant reduction in anxiety.

- A lot of what is termed challenging behaviour can be an acting out of frustration and anxiety. Empowering the child as a communicator who can make his/her needs understood and validating him/her as an effective communicative partner in enjoyable social routines often negates the necessity for such behaviour.
- Providing visual instructions and prompts promotes the child's understanding of what is being asked of him/her, as does the use of visual schedules and supports. Boundaries must be clear and readily understood by all.
- Since all impairments of autism lie in the social domain, it follows that early intervention should focus on ways of opening the child up to the joy and rewards of two-way interaction. This will pave the way for broader access to

learning throughout the child's life.

- PLAY AND HAVE FUN. As Samuel Beckett said, you learn more through laughter than through tears.

## Reference

Howlin, P. (1998) *Children with Autism and Asperger Syndrome: A Guide for Practitioners and Carers*. Chichester: Wiley.

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**Mary McKenna, Outreach class for children with autism, Scoil Mhuire, Ballybolen, Dublin 16**

■ It's probably best to presume that the gap between your perception of the world and the child's is unimaginably huge.



# National Council for Special Education

**T**he National Council for Special Education was set up to improve the delivery of education services to persons with special educational needs arising from disabilities with particular emphasis on children.

The Council was first established as an independent statutory body by order of the Minister for Education and Science in December 2003.

With effect from 1 October 2005 it has been formally established under the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 (EPSEN Act). That Act sets out both the general functions of

the Council and its specific function in relation to the provisions of the Act.

The general functions of the Council as set out in Section 20 of the EPSEN Act may be summarised as follows.

- Planning and co-ordinating provision of education and support services to children with special educational needs.
- Disseminating information on best practice concerning the education of children with special educational needs.
- Providing information to parents in relation to the entitlements of children with special educational needs.

- Assessing and reviewing resources required by children with special educational needs.
- Ensuring that progress of students with special educational needs is monitored and reviewed.
- Reviewing education provision for adults with disabilities.
- Advising educational institutions on best practice.
- Consulting with voluntary bodies.
- Advising the Minister for Education and Science on matters relating to special education.
- Conducting research and publishing findings.

In addition the Council has specific functions in relation to the core provisions of the Act such as assessment and individual education plans.

In carrying out its functions under the Act the Council is required to consult directly with stakeholders as necessary and to establish a formal National Consultative Forum representative of all the stakeholders.

**Contact details:** National Council for Special Education, 1-2 Mill Street, Trim, Co Meath. Tel – 046 9486400. Fax: 046 9486404. Email: [info@ncse.ie](mailto:info@ncse.ie). Website: [www.ncse.ie](http://www.ncse.ie)

## National Educational Psychological Service Agency

**T**he National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) is a service funded by the Department of Education and Science. NEPS psychologists work with both primary and post-primary schools and they are concerned with learning, behaviour, social and emotional development. Each psychologist is assigned to a group of schools. NEPS psychologists specialise

in working with the school community. They work in partnership with teachers, parents and children in identifying educational needs. They offer a range of services aimed at meeting these needs, for example, supporting individual students (through consultation and assessment), special projects and research.

“NEPS mission is to support

the personal, social and educational development of all children through the application of psychological theory and practice in education, having particular regard for children with special educational needs.”

**Contact details:** NEPS, Head Office, Frederick Court, 24/27 Nth Frederick Street, Dublin 1. Tel: 01 8892700. Fax 01 8892755. Email: [neps@neps.gov.ie](mailto:neps@neps.gov.ie)

## Irish Learning Support Association

**I**LSA's main raison d'être is to provide regular, dynamic in-career professional development for its members

- at autumn and spring national conferences; and
- at regular regional cluster meetings (ILSA has 30 regional clusters).
- ILSA keeps in touch with its membership through the publication of newsletters and through its website.
- ILSA publishes an annual research journal entitled *LEARN* to keep members

abreast of current research findings and good practice in learning support and resource teaching.

- ILSA encourages research into learning support and resource teaching and makes bursaries available to members to facilitate this research.
- ILSA maintains regular contact with sister learning support and resource teacher Associations in Scotland, England, Wales, USA, and Northern Ireland.

- ILSA engages with the teacher unions (TUI, ASTI and INTO) and raises current issues, which concern learning support and resource teachers.
- ILSA makes representations to the DES on policy issues pertaining to learning support and resource teaching.

**Contact details:** ILSA, c/o Drumcondra Education Centre, Drumcondra, Dublin 9, Ireland. Email/General Information: [info@ilsa.ie](mailto:info@ilsa.ie) or [www.ilsa.ie](http://www.ilsa.ie)

## Irish Association of Teachers in Special Education

**I**rish Association of Teachers in Special Education (IATSE) is an association of and for teachers and educators of people with special educational needs in Ireland.

IATSE provides:

- Regional meetings and seminars.
- UPDATE, newsletter each term.
- REACH, journal of special education in Ireland, twice annually.
- Annual international conference.

**Contact information:** IATSE, Drumcondra Education Centre, Drumcondra, Dublin 9. Email: [info@iatseireland.com](mailto:info@iatseireland.com) [www.iatse.ie](http://www.iatse.ie)