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Pupils with specific learning difficulties in mainstream schools

A survey of the provision in mainstream primary and secondary schools for pupils with a Statement of Special Educational Needs relating to specific learning difficulties.

A report from the Office of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools

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Introduction

I) The survey

- 1 Between April 1997 and July 1998, four of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) undertook a small-scale survey to evaluate the provision made for pupils who were the subject of a statement of Special Educational Needs (SEN) in respect of specific learning difficulties (dyslexia). They visited 34 mainstream junior, primary and combined first and middle schools, one Special Educational Needs Support Service working with primary-aged pupils, and 20 secondary schools in a total of 10 Local Education Authorities (LEAs) throughout England.
 - 2 The majority of pupils attended specialist provision in units, classes, departments or resource bases attached to mainstream schools that catered mainly or wholly for pupils with specific learning difficulties. Most schools admitted pupils from a wider area than that normally served by the school. HMI also visited pupils who were placed individually in their local mainstream primary and secondary schools.
 - 3 Where possible, two pupils on statements were selected for a close examination of their records and work. These pupils were observed during their normal lessons and in one-to-one or small group sessions. Interviews were held with headteachers, class and subject teachers, teachers in charge of the specialist provision and, in some cases, with visiting advisory teachers from LEA Special Educational Needs Support Services, with LEA officers and with parents.
 - 4 In the initial two terms of the survey the emphasis was on pupils in Year 6 and Year 7 who were due to transfer to secondary schools in September 1997 (depending upon the age of transfer within the pattern of education in the LEA). A sample of these pupils was subsequently re-visited in their secondary schools between January and July 1998 to see how they had coped with the transfer and to evaluate their progress and the quality of the provision made for them in secondary schools. A few of the primary schools were taking part in the National Literacy Project (the forerunner to the National Literacy Strategy) at the time of HMIs' visits. There were too few examples of such involvement, however, to judge how effective the Strategy is likely to be with pupils experiencing specific learning difficulties.
 - 5 The particular focus of HMI evaluation was upon the progress the pupils made in learning to read, write and spell, since these are the major weaknesses experienced by most pupils with specific learning difficulties. These were evaluated in the overall context of pupils' performances in subjects across the curriculum. In addition, attention was given to the quality of the teaching of study and organisational skills.
- ii) Types of provision.**
- 6 A variety of provisions was made for the pupils; in some cases, the pupils remained at their local primary or secondary school and received help from the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) of the school, sometimes with additional teaching or monitoring by an advisory teacher from the LEA Special Educational Needs Support Service. Some of these pupils also had additional support from a Learning Support Assistant (LSA) in some lessons. The majority of pupils, however, were placed in specialist provision, although they were integrated into mainstream classes for much of the week. In some lessons they were given extra help by an additional teacher or LSA, and were withdrawn for individual or small group sessions, mainly devoted to reading or language work, with the teacher in charge of the specialist provision. In a small number of cases pupils spent the majority of their time separated from their mainstream peers.
 - 7 The majority of the advisory and teaching staff had attended LEA or validated courses in the teaching of pupils with specific learning difficulties, and many had additional qualifications. Most of the LSAs had no formal qualifications although some had attended generic courses of training as LSAs, and a few had undertaken considerable personal study of specific learning difficulties. Many of the teachers and the LSAs had become interested in specific learning difficulties through experience of their own child or some other family member having such difficulties.
 - 8 In many of the LEAs the specialist provision attached to mainstream schools was seen as the authority's main provision for pupils with specific learning difficulties. Some LEAs also placed a few pupils in other LEA-maintained or independent day or residential schools that catered specifically for such pupils. Local provision was often made as a response to parental wishes, but also because it was more cost-effective than the purchase of places in a specialist day or residential school.

Main findings

- 9 The majority of pupils with specific learning difficulties made satisfactory or better progress in their school work overall, relative to their previous limited attainments, in almost all lessons. This was a result of receiving some additional focused teaching, either in their existing school or within a specially resourced mainstream school.
- 10 Better progress was made by pupils who were identified earlier in their primary schools than by those who had been given additional provision shortly before transfer to secondary school. Several parents complained about the length of time taken from the recognition of their child's difficulties to the commencement of formal assessment.
- 11 The degree of pupils' learning difficulties meant that, despite good teaching, their general attainment was lower than expected for their chronological ages in two-thirds of the pupils in the final year of primary school, and approximately half of the pupils in their first year of secondary school.
- 12 The quality of teaching and support was satisfactory or better in 94 per cent of the lessons in primary schools and in 90 per cent of the lessons in secondary schools. In significant proportions of the lessons the quality of teaching and support was good or very good and, in some cases, excellent.
- 13 The statutory assessment that resulted in the Statement of SEN provided valuable information on pupils' strengths and weaknesses, and made a significant contribution to the planning of the specialised teaching programme.
- 14 In some cases, pupils who had received well-targeted specialist help made very significant progress in reading. For example, one pupil recorded four and a half years' progress in reading-age terms in 18 months.
- 15 Good progress in reading was usually linked to a highly-structured programme of teaching, often involving a multi-sensory approach. Pupils were also taught specific skills of recognition of letter clusters and word building. In addition, they were taught to make effective use of context and syntactical clues.
- 16 Programmes that were primarily aimed at improving spelling also enabled pupils to recognise letter sounds, blends and digraphs and, therefore, also helped them to read unfamiliar words.
- 17 Pupils made progress in spelling, although seldom to the same extent as in reading, and made much more limited progress in the development of their writing. Spelling and writing remained a difficulty for many pupils after their transfer to secondary school. The majority of the pupils needed to continue to follow a carefully structured programme to develop spelling skills further than had been possible in their primary schools.
- 18 The assessment of pupils' writing was not well developed.
- 19 Pupils who had learned keyboard skills were the most successful at using word processing programs to assist them in their writing.
- 20 Pupils made good use of the strategies and skills taught through the multi-sensory programmes, and were able to apply these effectively to their other work.
- 21 Where there was evidence from end-of-key stage assessments, this confirmed the disparity between progress in reading, spelling and writing. However, most of the pupils made satisfactory progress in other subjects, particularly where these did not require a large amount of reading and writing. These included mathematics, modern foreign languages and design and technology.
- 22 The teaching strategies devised for those pupils with specific learning difficulties were often used effectively with other pupils who had more generalised learning difficulties.
- 23 In secondary schools almost all the pupils continued to require help with their reading, particularly to develop the higher-order reading skills of skimming and scanning text to find information quickly, look for meaning beyond the literal, and develop spelling, writing and study skills. Where this was provided they continued to make good progress.

Recommendations

- 24 The training of SENCOs should include guidance on the nature and implications of specific learning difficulties and the structured multi-sensory programmes that are of benefit to pupils with such difficulties.
- 25 Pupils with significant reading and spelling difficulties should be provided with additional well-structured help as early as possible in their primary school. Where additional support can be provided to pupils with literacy difficulties at Stages 2 and 3 of the SEN Code of Practice, formal assessment at Stage 4 is less likely and, as a consequence, fewer pupils with specific learning difficulties should require a statement of SEN.
- 26 Where pupils make significant use of laptop computers or class PCs using word processing

packages, they should receive specific teaching and be given opportunities to practise keyboard skills to improve their speed and accuracy.

- 27 In secondary schools, pupils with specific learning difficulties need to continue to be taught reading skills, particularly the higher-order reading skills, and also be provided with specific help to develop their spelling and writing skills.
- 28 Attention should be given to improving the assessment of pupils' writing skills.
- 29 Pupils with specific learning difficulties need practical help and guidance to acquire appropriate study skills and to plan and organise their work effectively.
- 30 Pupils with specific learning difficulties should not be expected to complete the same reading and writing tasks as other pupils of similar ability in the class, but should be provided with modified assignments which make allowances for their particular learning difficulties.
- 31 Alternative provision for pupils with specific learning difficulties might include group reading and discussion of the text, the use of video material, the presentation of work in forms other than writing, and the use of suitable notes summarising the work covered, which might also serve to aid revision for examinations.
- 32 While the systematic teaching of reading included in the Literacy Hour (within the National Literacy Strategy) is likely to be of considerable benefit to pupils with specific learning difficulties, some pupils with particular aural or visual difficulties or strengths may require some additional approaches to supplement those included within the National Literacy Strategy.

The identification of pupils with specific learning difficulties

- 33 Several parents spoke of their efforts to convince schools or LEAs of their child's difficulties. Some parents complained about the length of time taken to move to a formal assessment and the issuing of a statement by the LEA. Some felt that had it not been for their persistence, such a diagnosis – with its consequent formal statement – might not have been made. There was a strong perception by these parents that this had resulted both in the waste of valuable time for early specialist intervention and a significant lowering of the child's self-esteem and confidence.
- 34 In several LEAs it was common for pupils to be identified and placed at Stages 1–3 of the SEN

Register in their primary school, but to become the subject of a statement only in their final year. In some cases this was because primary schools became concerned at the pupil's likely ability to cope in a secondary school and in other cases it appeared to be a reluctance on the part of teachers to accept that the school could not meet the pupil's needs from within their provision for special educational needs. Where this was the case, the specialist provision was often filled with pupils in their final year of primary schooling. Although such pupils made progress, particularly in reading, the discrepancy between what might be expected and actual performance was often considerable. In contrast, some pupils who were identified and placed much earlier, such as in Year 3 or Year 4, made good progress, particularly in reading, acquiring fluency and accuracy. However, although they were often reading at a level appropriate to their actual age by the time they transferred to secondary school, they still required help in developing higher-order reading, spelling and writing skills.

- 35 Some LEAs had devised local criteria for determining whether a statement in respect of specific learning difficulties should be issued. In most cases these were based upon a disparity between the pupils' actual ages and their reading-ages. It was usual for this disparity to be at least two years before the LEA considered the pupils to have specific learning difficulties, although in many cases the disparity was considerably greater than this.
- 36 One LEA's procedure for determining whether to undertake a statutory assessment considered the pupil's reading-age in relation to a statistically predicted level of reading judged to be needed to read work expected for the pupil's chronological age. The disparity between this predicted reading-age and the pupil's measured reading-age was used as the criterion. For example, a pupil in Year 3 (aged 7–8 years) was predicted to require a reading-age of at least 7 years and 6 months, and would be considered as possibly having a specific learning difficulty if his or her actual reading-age was 5 years and 8 months, or less. The disparity between the predicted reading-age and the actual reading-age increased with chronological age. Thus, the predicted reading-age for an average Year 5 pupil was at least 8 years and 11 months, and a child would only be considered for a diagnosis of specific learning difficulties if the actual reading-age was below 6 years and 2 months. The use of these criteria in the LEA in question resulted in the inclusion of some pupils with a low level of general ability. Such pupils experienced difficulty in keeping up with the teaching programmes and the highly-structured multi-sensory approaches used. In the few cases observed, such pupils made significantly less progress than of at least average general ability did.

- 37 One LEA adopted a policy of providing support for primary-aged pupils with specific learning difficulties at Stage 3 of the SEN Code of Practice. In this LEA, the pupils were placed in specialist units attached to primary schools without becoming the subject of a Statement of SEN. The LEA believed that this enabled support to be provided earlier and was a more cost-effective use of resources than undertaking formal assessment and maintaining a statement. There was an expectation that with additional specialist help many of these children would make good progress and, therefore, no longer require such a level of additional support. Pupils who still had severe difficulties prior to secondary-school transfer were formally assessed and a Statement of SEN was then maintained at secondary-school level. This policy appeared to provide support for pupils at an early stage and also reduced the number of pupils who required formal assessment and the maintaining of a statement at secondary age.
- 38 In the other LEAs, most of the pupils identified for this survey had a Statement of SEN. The provision specified on the statement matched the current placement, ie, in a mainstream school with additional support, or in a specialist unit attached to a mainstream school.
- 39 In all cases the LEA had written the statement after a full assessment in line with the SEN Code of Practice or previous guidance. The psychological advice usually included detailed test scores that identified the pupil's particular areas of strength and weakness. Such advice was helpful to teachers in highlighting areas of strength that could be used for teaching purposes, while also indicating those areas in which the pupil needed particular support and development. The assessments also generally included reading and spelling test scores that formed a useful baseline against which subsequent progress could be measured.

Attainment and progress.

- 40 Assessment of the pupils with specific learning difficulties showed that in most cases they were of average or above average levels of general ability, as measured by psychometric tests. Their difficulties with literacy, however, meant that this was not generally reflected in their attainment in terms of standards achieved in lessons in both the primary and secondary schools visited. The figures in Table 1 (*above right*) show that the majority of primary-aged pupils and almost half the secondary-aged pupils were attaining at levels below that expected for pupils of the same ages. This indicates a significant degree of under-achievement in relation to their general ability.

Table 1: Attainment in primary and secondary school lessons.

	Primary (87 lessons)	Secondary (51 lessons)
Above levels expected for pupils' ages	0 (0%)	1 (1.9%)
At expected levels for pupils' ages	29 (33.3%)	25 (49%)
Slightly below levels expected for pupils' ages	43 (49.4%)	19 (37.3%)
Significantly below levels expected for pupils' ages	15 (17.2%)	6 (11.8%)

- 41 However, when the nature of the pupils' difficulties and their previous performance was taken into account, their progress in most lessons was satisfactory or better. There were no lessons in which pupils were judged to be making very poor progress. Most of the lessons contained a significant element of reading, although some also included specific instruction on spelling and writing.

Table 2: Progress made in primary and secondary school lessons.

	Primary (87 lessons)	Secondary (51 lessons)
Very good progress	8 (9.1%)	5 (9.8%)
Good progress	37 (42.5%)	10 (19.6%)
Satisfactory progress	37 (42.5%)	29 (56.8%)
Unsatisfactory progress	4 (4.6%)	7 (13.7%)
Poor progress	1 (1.1%)	0

- 42 As can be seen from Table 2 (*above*), a higher proportion of pupils was judged to be making good progress in lessons in primary schools than in secondary schools. This may reflect the pupils in secondary schools having more severe difficulties or having been identified relatively late, but it also reflects the additional difficulties faced by pupils in secondary schools being taught by a number of teachers who have differing degrees of awareness of specific learning difficulties, as well as the additional demands of the secondary curriculum.
43. Schools placed a high priority on the teaching of reading as this was seen as the major difficulty faced by these pupils. The majority of these pupils were in mainstream classes for most of the time, sometimes supported by a specialist teacher or an LSA, and were withdrawn from the class for intensive work several times per week. When pupils were withdrawn, either individually or in small groups, the

major focus of the work was on reading with some attention also given to the improvement of spelling and writing skills.

- 44 In addition, records of these children with Statements of SEN showed clear evidence of progress in reading since their difficulties had been identified and they had been provided with additional help. Most pupils were making in excess of 1 year's progress in 12 months, so that they were beginning to reduce the gap between their reading-ages and their actual ages. In some cases, particularly where pupils had been identified early, progress in reading was such that their reading-ages were approaching – or even exceeding – their chronological age. In one case, a pupil had made four and a half years' progress in reading-age in the 18 months spent in the special provision. In a few cases, pupils' reading-ages were above their chronological ages and in line with their assessed ability.
- 45 Test scores indicated that the pupils made good gains in reading comprehension as well as in word recognition. Pupils' overall progress in reading resulted from the carefully structured teaching. This went beyond merely hearing pupils read. It focused on the use of context to aid reading, and discussion to check that the pupils were understanding the text read, as well as the systematic teaching of word groups and the sounds and clusters of letters. The pupils built up a variety of strategies for tackling new words alongside the development of comprehension skills.
- 46 Where pupils were making slower progress in reading, this was not associated with any particular form of organisation of support, but was usually the result of late intervention, often coupled with the pupils' lowered self-esteem and confidence and the experience of failure in previous settings. This may, to some extent, account for the slower rate of progress made by pupils in secondary schools, since many of the pupils had been identified and placed in specialised provision towards the end of their primary education.
- 47 Most pupils also made progress in spelling, particularly where systematic approaches were used. These approaches had usually given the pupils a strategy for tackling the spelling of words. They were often observed in use in other lessons confirming transfer of the specific teaching into a wider setting. However, progress in spelling was rarely as significant as that made in reading. In some cases effective use was made of computer programs to support the development of spelling skills.
- 48 Progress in writing was much more limited and continued to be a major difficulty for many pupils, particularly for pupils in secondary schools. Most pupils could complete worksheets that required single-word answers or short phrases. They found difficulty, however, in undertaking more sustained pieces of writing, such as accounts of scientific investigations or writing about historical events in continuous prose. They were more successful when provided with a framework or other outline to structure their writing. Where teachers or LSAs supported pupils, they were able to give verbal accounts that showed their understanding of the work, and the adult supporting them transcribed these.
- 49 Pupils who learned keyboard skills were the most successful at using word processing programs to assist them in their writing. Touch-typing was not necessary, but where they were familiar with the keyboard layout and could type at a reasonable speed, without having to search for each individual letter, progress was better. Pupils using tutor programs at lunchtime sessions or at home often developed such skills.
- 50 The use of devices such as writing frames or storyboards was also helpful to some pupils in structuring and organising their ideas, and they contributed to writing of good quality. Many of the secondary-school pupils needed to be taught quite specific strategies and skills of organising their thoughts before they started to write. Where support staff in the classroom reinforced such strategies they were also often used with benefit by other pupils with learning difficulties.
- 51 The disparity in progress in reading, spelling and writing was confirmed by the results of National Curriculum Standardised Assessment Tests (SATs), where these were available at the time of the visits. Such tests and tasks also showed that pupils with Statements for specific learning difficulties were making progress in other subjects. Many had achieved average levels, or above, in mathematics and science. In one school with a specific learning difficulty department all the pupils had achieved Level 5 in the Key Stage 2 science results, which is above the national expectation of Level 4. Pupils also made good progress in other subjects where there was not an over-reliance on reading or writing to demonstrate progress in knowledge and understanding.
- 52 Some secondary schools made use of special arrangements in public examinations, such as additional time for reading, use of an amanuensis or the use of a computer as a tool for writing in the examination. This was reported to have helped the pupils to achieve more successfully and to reflect their ability in the subjects taken. However, such arrangements needed to be made well in advance of the examinations and often required a recent assessment report from an educational psychologist, so schools needed to plan for this in advance. Such

arrangements needed to have been considered at the annual review and built into the transition plan. It could be of some significance that there were differences in the arrangements allowed by different examination boards.

The responses and attitudes of the pupils

The responses of pupils in lessons was almost entirely satisfactory or better, with only two lessons in each of the primary and secondary schools where the pupils' responses were unsatisfactory. Good or very good responses by pupils were recorded in a high proportion of the lessons. There were no lessons where the responses were poor or very poor. Table 3 (*below*) shows the details.

Table 3: Pupils' responses in lessons

	Primary (87 lessons)	Secondary (51 lessons)
Excellent	2 (2.3%)	2 (3.9%)
Very good	23 (26.4%)	10 (19.6%)
Good	45 (51.7%)	22 (43.1%)
Satisfactory	15 (17.2%)	15 (29.4%)
Unsatisfactory	2 (2.3%)	2 (3.9%)

54 The figures in Table 3 (*above*) indicate that these were pupils who enjoyed their lessons, worked hard and showed a commitment to learning. The high proportion of good and very good grades reflected the comments made by many of the pupils that they felt they were being helped to overcome their previous difficulties and could see that they were making progress. The unsatisfactory responses in all four lessons was because the teachers did not appear to understand the difficulties and particular needs of the pupils and made no allowance for these in the work presented or in the teaching style chosen. In contrast, the same pupils responded well in other lessons. The positive response of pupils was often satisfactory or better, even if the quality of teaching and support was judged to be unsatisfactory (*see Table 4 above right for comparative figures*).

The quality of teaching and support

55 Judgements were made about the quality of teaching of these pupils in lessons. These lessons included both individual teaching and small groups withdrawn for extra support, and lessons where the pupils were part of a mainstream class. A teacher or a learning support assistant supported the pupils in some

lessons while in others there was no additional help. The judgement related to the quality of teaching and support, or to the quality of teaching by the teacher in the lessons where no other help was provided. There were no lessons where the quality of teaching and support was judged to be poor. Table 4 (*below*) gives the details.

Table 4 The quality of teaching and support in lessons

	Primary (87 lessons)	Secondary (51 lessons)
Excellent	1 (1.1%)	3 (5.9%)
Very good	19 (21.8%)	5 (9.8%)
Good	38 (43.7%)	21 (41.2%)
Satisfactory	24 (27.6%)	17 (33.3%)
Unsatisfactory	5 (5.7%)	5 (9.8%)

56 In both primary and secondary lessons where the quality of teaching and support was not judged to be satisfactory, the teachers were either insufficiently aware of – or failed to take sufficient account of – the learning difficulties of the pupils. They failed to adjust their teaching style or their expected demands of the pupils to enable them to develop knowledge and understanding of the work being covered. This was often reflected in teachers' unrealistic expectations that all pupils would be able to read significant amounts of text and to demonstrate their learning in writing.

57 Within these overall statistics, there were some differences between primary and secondary schools. The proportion of lessons in which the quality of teaching and support was good or better was higher in lessons in primary schools than in secondary schools. This reflected the different organisation in primary and secondary schools. In primary schools the majority of pupils' time was spent with their class teachers or the specialist teachers. Where the class teachers received appropriate in-service training and support, they understood the difficulties faced by the pupils and could take account of these in the planning of their lessons and the activities and tasks set for pupils. In secondary schools several teachers taught the pupils and it was more difficult to ensure that all teachers had such awareness and understanding, and that they planned appropriately for the needs of the pupils.

58 Teachers in charge of specialist provision in secondary schools were nearly all full-time appointments and spent most of their time teaching individual pupils or providing in-class support to pupils with specific learning difficulties. A few were also SENCOs.

- 59 Over half of the lessons seen in primary and secondary schools were lessons in which the pupils were withdrawn for specialised work. These lessons were usually focused on the teaching of reading and spelling, but often included some work on writing. In some cases additional time was spent supporting the pupils in work being done in class in a variety of subjects. In all of these lessons the quality of teaching was satisfactory, and in most cases good or better. Such lessons had clearly-planned targets for the pupils, often based upon one of a number of structured multi-sensory approaches to the teaching of pupils with specific learning difficulties. The successful use of such approaches was reflected by the good progress made by the pupils, particularly in reading, and to a lesser degree in spelling. In most cases the planned targets of the lessons clearly reflected the targets set in the pupils' individual education plans.
- 60 In such withdrawal sessions, books other than those in use in the mainstream lessons were often used. They were chosen because of their attractiveness and their high interest level, despite the relatively lower reading level required. In addition, use was made of a wide variety of structured and systematic programmes designed to develop different aspects of the pupils' language skills and to build their awareness of phonics and word groups. A multi-sensory approach was often used which exploited the different strengths of the pupils as well as supporting their areas of weakness.
- 61 When the pupils were observed in mainstream classes, either with or without additional support, they generally used the strategies of such programmes, demonstrating a carry-over of skills and strategies into the rest of their work. In some cases, as a result of the success the pupils were seen to be having, class teachers had sought further information about the strategies from the specialist teacher, and were using them successfully with other pupils in the class who were experiencing reading difficulties.
- 62 Pupils with specific learning difficulties who were in classes without support managed better if the teacher did not rely too much on reading text or written work. Where alternatives were used, such as exposition by the teacher, discussion by the class, or video material, pupils were able to take a full part in the lesson, often making high-quality oral contributions. Such success also had a positive effect on pupils' self-confidence. Where text was used, it was helpful if there was group reading aloud and discussion of the text before the pupils went on to answer questions or to write on the subject. In lessons in modern foreign languages, because good use was made of an oral/aural approach often supported by visual cues, the pupils frequently made good progress and kept up with the acquisition of vocabulary and were able to speak the target language with confidence and clarity.
- 63 Some lessons, particularly in secondary schools but also in some primary schools, were concerned with the teaching of specific strategies and study skills to enable the pupils to extract information from text and to organise their work, particularly written work. It was clear that these pupils were making good use of the specific instruction and were able to cope better with lessons in mainstream classes than other pupils with specific learning difficulties who had not been taught such strategies. Where teachers or LSAs supported the pupils in mainstream lessons, the adults consistently took opportunities to reinforce such skills and strategies and apply them to the content and context of the lessons. Where the pupils worked as part of a small group, the support staff often used the strategies and skills with other pupils in the group who also found them helpful.
- 64 In one secondary school pupils were supported by a former advisory teacher who had taken early retirement but was employed by the school to provide additional support to pupils with specific learning difficulties. The pupils were taught to use a systematic programme of checking their writing, in turn, for spelling errors, grammar and meaning. The use of this strategy was helping pupils to complete writing tasks in a variety of lessons with a high level of success. They tackled writing tasks with enthusiasm and were proud of the success they achieved.
- 65 In other schools, both primary and secondary, the use of laptop or class-based personal computers with word processing programs enabled the pupils to separate the tasks of writing down their ideas and checking for spelling and grammar. This often led to the production of good-quality writing. Where such programs were used it was helpful if the spell checking and grammar-correction components of the programs were initially switched off and did not immediately indicate a spelling or grammatical mistake when the pupil was writing his/her first draft. When such features functioned automatically, the appearance of the coloured line, or other indicator of an error, often distracted the pupils from what they were writing and they became absorbed in the correction of the spelling or grammatical error – losing the thread of their writing. In contrast, where such features did not operate automatically, pupils concentrated wholly on their writing and the flow of their writing was maintained. Having made a first draft, the spelling and grammar checkers could be used, in turn, to refine and correct the original draft. Such separation of the tasks of writing the content and then checking and amending the spelling and grammar of the text was more effective in enabling the pupils to produce longer and better-quality pieces of writing.
- 66 Other good practice occurred in the department of a City Technology College, which had developed a

spelling programme suitable for secondary pupils. This was used by most pupils across the college and had led to significant improvement, in pupils' spelling. The intensive use of computers to foster opportunities for writing and to research information was also helpful to the pupils with specific learning difficulties.

- 67 In some cases, particularly in secondary schools, the teacher or the support staff had prepared notes summarising the content of the lesson, which the pupil then had available for future reference and revision for examination purposes. Often such notes were also helpful to pupils who had other, more generalised, learning difficulties.
- 68 In many of the primary schools and some of the secondary schools the teacher in charge of the specialist provision, or the advisory teacher from the LEA support service, provided awareness training for other members of staff. This meant that the teachers were aware of the pupils' difficulties and the learning implications for the pupils. This resulted in better understanding and planned activities and teaching approaches for lessons in which the pupils would be taking part. The presence in the lesson of the specialist teacher or other support staff provided opportunities for them to make suggestions of activities or approaches that would be helpful to the pupils. In some cases, support teachers or other staff were involved in the planning of the lesson and were able to prepare activities or to modify the text or worksheets or produce glossaries, which were also found to be helpful.
- 69 Where there was no additional help, or the teacher had not made any allowances for the particular difficulties of the pupils, the quality of the provision for these pupils was unsatisfactory. The result was that they made considerably less progress than in other lessons. In these instances the quality of teaching for all pupils was also judged to be unsatisfactory, usually because the lessons were not sufficiently well planned or because the activities were not well matched to the range of needs and abilities of the pupils in the class.

Assessment and recording

- 70 Since almost all the pupils were placed after a detailed assessment by educational psychologists as part of the formal assessment procedures, there was comprehensive information on each pupil prior to admission to the specialist provision or to the allocation of additional support in the mainstream school. In some cases this had been supplemented or updated, either by further assessment by an educational psychologist or by the advisory teacher or teacher in charge of the specialist provision. Teachers generally used published standardised reading and other tests, sometimes supplemented by

test materials that had been designed for pupils with specific learning difficulties. The aim of such testing and assessment was to give more detailed information of pupils' strengths and weaknesses, particularly in aural or visual skills, so that the teachers were able to decide which were the pupils' most successful areas of learning and which required further development.

- 71 In almost all cases teachers assessed pupils' reading and spelling skills annually, and sometimes more frequently, so that there was good evidence of the progress made by the pupils. Tests for reading usually included a measure for comprehension as well as of reading accuracy. Generally, the frequency of testing was appropriate.
- 72 Pupils' files showed clear evidence of assessment of reading and spelling made over a period time. The assessment of pupils' writing, however, was not well developed, and this is an area to which greater attention should be given. Where records were available of pupils' National Curriculum test results, these almost invariably showed a pattern of good progress in reading, some progress in spelling, but less progress in writing. In many cases the results of the regular assessment of reading indicated that the reading-ages of the pupils had improved considerably, often reaching, or even exceeding, their actual ages. In the relatively few cases where pupils' reading-ages had not shown significant improvement, evidence in the files showed that the pupils had been assessed as having below-average general ability. These pupils tended to make the least progress.
- 73 For pupils in secondary schools, a significant amount of information had usually been passed on from their primary schools. This included both initial assessment information, information from annual reviews where appropriate, together with test results from the end of Key Stages 1 and 2. Such information provided a valuable baseline of the pupils' attainments on entry to the secondary school, against which subsequent progress could be measured. Generally, secondary schools made effective use of this information, particularly in the setting of targets for the pupils' individual education plans. These were usually prepared either by the SENCO or by the teacher in charge of the provision for pupils with specific learning difficulties. In most cases information about the pupils and the implications of their learning difficulties had been passed on to all relevant teachers.
- 74 However, in some cases not all the relevant teachers were sufficiently aware of these implications, or of the targets in the pupils' individual education plans. These teachers were therefore unaware of the most appropriate strategies to adopt in their lessons to aid progress toward the achievement of the targets. In a few cases targets had been prepared for each subject, which usually led to an unmanageable list of targets to be achieved. Better practice was where more generic

targets related to reading, spelling, writing and the development of organisational strategies and self-study skills had been established. These had been communicated to all relevant teachers, together with strategies that could be used to adapt lessons to the particular needs of the pupils. They included the production and display of lists of subject-specific vocabulary, the use of alternatives to text, and the avoidance of a requirement for the pupils to produce lengthy pieces of writing for much of their work.

Implications for provision in primary schools

- 75 Not surprisingly, this survey shows that most progress is made as a result of early identification, together with appropriate specialist help. The pupils who generally made more significant progress were those who were identified early in the primary schools, and then given carefully-planned teaching of particular reading skills. Progress was further improved by teaching that was based on structured multi-sensory programmes that aimed to improve pupils' word building and spelling skills. This indicates that it would be of benefit for pupils to be identified as having specific learning difficulties as early as possible. This would enable the pupils to obtain additional specialist help for the maximum time prior to transfer to secondary school. It would also enable them to begin to improve their reading before the gap between their reading-age and actual age becomes too great.
- 76 Another benefit of early intervention is that pupils are less likely to experience emotional problems as a result of failure. Many of the parents interviewed reported an initial reluctance by schools to accept that the pupil had specific learning difficulties. Even when this was accepted, there were often lengthy delays in the completion of the formal assessment procedures, the placement of the pupil on a Statement of SEN and the commencement of appropriate additional help. In some cases the delays in arranging for pupils' formal assessments had resulted from LEA policies that required a fixed number of individual education plans to be completed and reviewed before a pupil could be considered for additional resources from outside the school. This included advice from an advisory teacher, under Stage 3 of the SEN Code of Practice, or for formal assessment at Stage 4. Such policies interpreted the guidance in the Code very restrictively and did not take account of the provisions for streamlining procedures where it was felt that earlier outside intervention or assessment was indicated.
- 77 In order to ensure earlier identification and intervention, SENCOs in primary schools need to have a greater awareness and knowledge of the nature of specific learning difficulties and of the structured multi-sensory teaching programmes that have been

found to be successful. If there was greater awareness of the nature of the difficulties, and also training of SENCOs in the use of such programmes, specialised intervention could take place, possibly at Stage 2 of the Code, or at Stage 3, without the need of a Statement of SEN, as was the case in at least one LEA.

- 78 Greater attention must be given to the formal teaching of writing skills to these pupils. The success experienced by pupils who used word processing programs indicated one way in which their writing skills could be promoted.
- 79 Occasionally, some teachers allowed pupils who continued to have extreme difficulties in writing down their responses to express their ideas orally. Sometimes these were tape recorded, or in other cases, written down by adults. In one school a voice-recognition computer program was used successfully. These indicated ways in which the learning could take place without being obstructed by the mechanics of writing.

Implications for provision within secondary schools

- 80 Most of the pupils transferring to secondary schools made significant progress in the mechanical skills of reading. Thus, the main requirement for these pupils was the need to develop their higher-order reading skills of skimming and scanning text for information and of being able to interpret meaning beyond the literal level. The pupils would then be able to read more effectively the considerable amount of text required in many secondary lessons. Specific instruction and support was also needed in their continued development of spelling and writing skills.
- 81 Secondary-school pupils needed continued teaching to use reference material effectively and to extract and synthesise information. They also needed help in planning their ideas and in structuring their thoughts before they began writing. These pupils did not automatically acquire such skills. Where such skills were systematically taught and used within classes, other pupils also gained from this.
- 82 Such skills were often successfully taught in withdrawal lessons. However, the demands of the secondary curriculum meant that if pupils were withdrawn for more than a few lessons per week they were in danger of missing important aspects of the curriculum and falling behind in other areas. For this reason many of the pupils were given help in classes with only limited amounts of withdrawal time. Schools should have clearly-stated plans, shared with all staff and parents, as to how withdrawal time is to be used. The plans should focus on the support needed to develop skills that will enable pupils to follow externally accredited courses at Key Stage 4.

- 83 The schools were faced with the task of providing additional support but without the pupils losing access to part of the curriculum or missing lessons and getting behind. For those reasons, much of the support in secondary schools was in class, often with the teacher or support assistant working with the pupil as part of a group rather than individually. Other schools tackled the problem of providing additional support in different ways. In some schools, for example, pupils who still had considerable difficulties at Key Stage 4 were given a reduced programme of options. These pupils took one less subject for external accreditation and continued to have help in withdrawal groups or individually in the time made available. In many cases this proved to be a successful strategy. Other schools managed the issue of finding time for specialised help through withdrawing a pupil from some English lessons, and occasionally from other subjects. Other schools provided individual sessions before or after school, during assemblies or at lunchtime.
- 84 Pupils undoubtedly benefited where all the teachers had received awareness training about the nature and the implications of specific learning difficulties. In such cases, teachers considered what teaching methodology to use with particular pupils and what allowances or special provision to make. In some specific cases where the learning difficulty was especially resistant to teaching, a decision was made to plan a pupil's work on the basis of a reduced requirement for reading or writing. Such procedures were often found to be beneficial, not only for the pupils with specific learning difficulties, but also for pupils with more general learning difficulties.

Appendix

The assistance of the following schools and LEAs is acknowledged

Bromley	Balgowan Primary School
Bromley	Princes Plain Primary School
Bromley	Priory School (Secondary)
Bromley	Ravensbourne (GM) School
Bromley	Royston Primary School
Bromley	Tubbenden Junior School
Buckinghamshire	Bell Lane Combined School
Buckinghamshire	Great Horwood Combined School
Buckinghamshire	Grenville Combined School
Buckinghamshire	Sir William Ramsay School
Buckinghamshire	The Grange School
Buckinghamshire	Tilehurst Primary School
Buckinghamshire	Widmer End Primary School
Buckinghamshire	William Harding Middle School
Buckinghamshire	Wye Valley High School
Cheshire	Bamton Junior School
Cheshire	Byley Primary School
Cheshire	Hartford Primary School
Cheshire	Hartford High School
Cheshire	Middlewich High School
Cheshire	Verdin High School
Cheshire	Wharton Junior School
Croydon	Harris City Technology College
Croydon	Parish Church Junior School
Croydon	Riddlesdown (GM) High School
Croydon	Special Needs Support Service
Croydon	St James the Great RC Primary School
Essex	Katherine Semar Primary School
Essex	Quilters Junior School
Essex	Stansted Mountfitchet High School
Essex	Templars Court Junior School
Essex	White Court Primary School
Milton Keynes	Denbigh (GM) School
Milton Keynes	Heronsgate Combined School
Milton Keynes	Summerfield Combined School
Rotherham	Greasbrough Primary School
Rotherham	Maltby Crags Junior School
Rotherham	Maltby Lilly Hall Junior School
Rotherham	Old Hall Comprehensive School
Rotherham	Wingfield Comprehensive School
Sheffield	Bluestone Primary School
Sheffield	King Ecgbert High School
Sheffield	King Edward VII High School
Sheffield	Nether Green Junior School
Sheffield	Nook Lane Junior School
St Helens	Blackbrook RC Junior School
St Helens	Rainhill St Anne's CE Primary School
St Helens	Rainhill High School
St Helens	St Augustines RC High School
Suffolk	Cliff Lane Primary School
Suffolk	Coplestone High School
Suffolk	Gusford Primary School
Suffolk	Holbrook Primary School
Suffolk	St Albans High School
Suffolk	Springfield Junior School