



**RESPONSE TO EVERY SCHOOL A GOOD SCHOOL: THE
WAY FORWARD FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION NEEDS AND
INCLUSION**

'The way it was, was like this – the smartest (young people) was up at the front of the class, the ones doing ok were next and then the slowest or the stupidest ones were at the back. The favourites in the class were by how smart you were.' (young person)

'Every child has personal circumstances that could impact on their progress through school and these changes will, hopefully, allow these particular children the opportunity to be identified and helped. This move towards a more holistic approach to each child can only improve the school experience for children.' (practitioner)

October 2009

Executive Summary

Include Youth welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation document and to engage in the debate on how we can overcome barriers to learning for all children. In preparation for making our response we consulted young people aged 16 – 20 years old, who are currently taking part in the Include Youth Give and Take Scheme in Belfast, Derry, Armagh and Ballymena. The young people had all experienced difficulties in education and had poor educational attainment. We also held a consultation session with the YOYO Practitioners Forum which was attended by representatives from Education Welfare Service, various Alternative Education Project, the Curriculum Development Network, and various voluntary and community sector organisations.

Include Youth welcomes the Department of Education's efforts to ensure that all children have the opportunity to reach their full potential and that every child should be treated equally. We also concur with the aim to prioritise early intervention, provision of appropriate support and collaborative working. Many of the issues which Include Youth has lobbied on in relation to developing an inclusive education system are contained within the document and we welcome the broadening of the remit of SEN to include AEN. We want to move away from a situation where some children and young people are labelled as 'problem pupils', and as a result do not have underlying barriers to learning addressed. The barriers to learning can come about as a result of a plethora of factors. It can be as a result of difficulties at home, of emotional and psychological needs not being identified, of a learning disability, issues related to being in care, behavioural problems etc. We believe that if *implemented effectively and resourced appropriately* the proposals within the document, in relation to broadening the concept of SEN, could result in the young people we work with having their needs better met within education.

However, while we welcome a policy which embraces the needs of all children, we are concerned that this broadening of the concept of SEN is not done at the expense of meeting the explicit needs of children with a disability. The implementation of this policy must not threaten or dilute the specific rights and entitlements of children with disabilities. It is our opinion that the funding currently in place to meet the educational needs of children with disabilities **must be protected and ring fenced**. The broadening of the concept of SEN to

incorporate AEN should not result in limited funding being used to meet the needs of a broader category of children. We do not wish to see a situation where children with SEN/AEN will compete for provision. It is our concern that the funding secured to provide the capacity building for schools may not be adequate and would urge the need for increased longer term funding to raise standards and support professional development.

We are concerned that the document has not done more to address the current tensions and weaknesses within the current SEN system. There is a danger that the proposals could simply shift responsibilities to schools without addressing the fundamental weaknesses in the system. This is particularly concerning given the widespread inconsistency in practice which exists across the range of schools in Northern Ireland. Both young people and professionals identified the existence of ‘good’ schools and ‘bad’ schools in relation to how they dealt with SEN. Some schools are not operating good practice as it is and are currently not called to account for it – there is a fear that this policy will give schools even more responsibility without providing additional support to them, and as a result poor practice will simply become even more entrenched. Setting up clear lines of accountability is a critical aspect to the successful outworking of the proposals.

On the whole we are supportive of the proposals and the aspirations contained within the policy document, but we believe that it will be tested when detailed implementation plans are produced and therefore reserve ultimate judgement until the specifics are finalised and presented. We are sceptical about whether the resources and budget will be put in place to really make the proposals a reality.

We believe that this policy is attempting to achieve an education system which can deliver on children’s diverse needs. However, such is the enormity and complexity of the task in hand; we are not convinced that this policy in its present form can deliver the vision it hopes to for all children. There is much more teasing out to be done and detail to be filled in on how we can support schools to deliver on the vision. We share the Department’s commitment that every school can become a good school and look forward to working in partnership to realise that aim.

Response

Introduction

Include Youth promotes best practice with young people in need or at risk. We achieve this through the development and promotion of resources, the provision of training, information and support of practitioners and organisations. We also undertake activities aimed at influencing public policy and policy awareness – both locally and nationally.

Include Youth promotes the development of positive choices and opportunities for vulnerable and challenging young people in the community, residential care or custody. Include Youth promotes the use of community alternatives to care and custody for children and young people.

Amongst the young people at risk with whom, and on whose behalf, Include Youth works are young people from socially disadvantaged areas, those with a learning disability, those with special needs, those who have been truanting, suspended or expelled from school, those from a care background, those who had a negative parenting experience, young people who have committed or are at risk of committing crime, misusing drugs or alcohol, undertaking unsafe sexual behaviour or other harmful activities, or of being harmed themselves.

Include Youth runs the Young Voices project, a participation project for young people who have been involved or are at risk of becoming involved in the criminal justice system, with the aim of supporting these young people to become involved in decision-making processes which impact on their lives. Currently the Young Voices Project supports young people in three groups – one drawing its members from the Greater Belfast area, Juvenile Justice Centre and Hydebank Wood YOC.

Include Youth manages the LACE (Looked After Children in Education) Project which is a multi-agency partnership with the aim of promoting better educational outcomes for children and young people in care.

The Give and Take Scheme aims to improve the employability and increase the self esteem of young people in need or at risk from across Northern Ireland. The Scheme works with

approximately 135 young people from a care. The Scheme aims to support young people to overcome particular barriers that prevent them from moving into mainstream training or employment and towards independent living. 75% of people on the Scheme are care experienced and we have strong partnership with all Trusts, YJA, PBNI and Careers service. The Scheme provides essential skills training (ICT, English and maths) to all of the young people.

In addition, Include Youth runs the YOYO Practitioners Forum, which draws together professionals from a range of statutory, voluntary and community organisations working directly with young people in need or at risk, and meets on a quarterly basis.

General Comments

Include Youth welcomes the publication of this consultation document and is pleased to have the opportunity to make this response.

In the course of preparing our response to the consultation, we held a number of consultations with young people (aged 16 – 20 yrs) from the Give and Take Scheme. Four consultation sessions were held in Belfast, Derry, Newry and Armagh. The overwhelming majority of young people we talked to had negative educational experiences and/or poor educational attainment.

We also facilitated a group discussion with a range of practitioners who are members of the YOYO Practitioners Forum where there was representation from Education Welfare Services, Alternative Education Projects, Curriculum Development Network and a variety of voluntary and community organisations.

We have used direct quotes from both young people and practitioners to inform our response.

Include Youth welcomes the Department of Education's efforts to ensure that all children have the opportunity to reach their full potential and that every child should be treated equally. We also concur with the aim to prioritise early intervention, provision of appropriate support and collaborative working. Include Youth works with many young

people who have experienced difficulties in learning. The reasons for these difficulties are many and varied. It can be as a result of difficulties at home, of emotional and psychological needs not being identified, of a learning disability, issues related to being in care, behavioural problems etc. This multiplicity of factors results in the chances of doing well at school being stacked up against our most disadvantaged children and young people. The young people appear to become disaffected from an early age and very often their experience at school only serves to reinforce that alienation. Unidentified needs can lead to truanting and ultimately can result in a young person coming into conflict with the law and potentially entering the criminal justice system.

The young people we work with are representative of pupils who fall into all four of the overlapping categories identified within the document:

- Children with SEN
- Learning Environment
- Family Circumstances
- Social and Emotional

As a result we are mindful of the need for this policy to embrace the needs of all children with additional educational needs, whether that need is arising from a disability or from a more transitory, social and environmental barrier. It is regrettable that the debate surrounding this document has served to put the needs of certain categories of children in competition. We appreciate that this was not the intention of the DE when formulating this policy, but the failure to address the real tensions and unmet needs within the Special Education system prior to launching this document, was, we feel, an error of judgement and has resulted in a wave of criticism from the disability sector as well as the teachers unions.

It is unfortunate that this weakness will risk undermining the overall ethos and central principles of the policy, of which we are fully supportive. We firmly believe that this document should promote the educational rights of all children – it should seek to ensure that a child with complex disabilities has their needs met, it should also help the child who is in the care system, a child with dyslexia, a child who is dealing with witnessing their mother being abused, a child who is struggling with depression and self-harm, a child who is caring for their alcoholic parent and trying to bring up a younger sibling at the same time. All of these children demand and deserve an education system which understands their specific needs. No-one would pretend that doing that and meeting these diverse needs is an

easy challenge. Clearly, it is extremely complex. We believe that this policy is attempting to come towards an education system which can deliver on all these diverse needs. However, such is the enormity and complexity of the task in hand, we are not convinced that this policy in its present form can deliver the vision it hopes to for all these children. There is much more detail required on how we can support schools to deliver on the vision.

Include Youth are not professional educationalists so we are unable to become very involved in the detail of how this policy should be worked out. But what we do offer, is an insight into children's experiences at school and a snapshot of what some professionals working with our most vulnerable children and young people think of the proposals contained in the document.

Specific Comments

Consultation Point 1 - Inclusion

1 Do you agree with the introduction of an inclusive framework based on the wider concept of additional educational need (AEN)?

Include Youth are supportive of the introduction of an inclusive framework based on the wider concept of additional educational need (AEN). We have felt for a long time that the needs of the young people we work with have not been recognised by the education system and that the problems they have experienced at school have not been dealt with sensitively or in their best interests. Too often they have been labelled as problem children whom schools in the main want to move on and abdicate responsibility for. As the Department will be aware we have long lobbied for an education system which accepts children for who they are and from whatever social and environmental background they come from. We can see that this document is attempting to recognise that need.

However, while we welcome a policy which embraces the needs of all children, we are concerned that this broadening of the concept of SEN is not done at the expense of meeting the explicit needs of children with a disability. The implementation of this policy must not threaten or dilute the specific rights and entitlements of children with disabilities. It is vital that the funding that is currently in place to meet the needs of children with disabilities remains protected and that the money is not expected to remain at the same level while the demands on it are expanded to meet the needs of a wider group of children.

We support the intention to develop an inclusive framework, which places a clear emphasis on children being educated, where at all possible, within the mainstream sector. The decision to be educated within the mainstream sector should only be taken when it is the expressed wishes of the child and parent involved. This is particularly relevant to those children with disabilities, who together with their parents feel their needs are best catered for within a special school.

The young people we spoke to had mixed views about whether children with disabilities should be educated in special schools or in mainstream schools. Some were able to give examples of children with disabilities attending their school and being supported well to do so.

'In Primary School, there was a boy who was paralysed and was in wheelchair; he had a helper in school and got on really well, no problems.'

'Children with disabilities should be in the same school as us, they are like us, sure they are only human.'

'I don't think it would benefit them to be in a mainstream school; it wouldn't do any good, more harm than good and could get picked on.'

'With so many in the classroom, maybe wouldn't want to speak up and teachers don't care unless you speak out.'

'If he can do the work, then yeah, just 'cos he's in a wheelchair can't stop him learning from a desk – it doesn't mean he can't do any of the work.'

We welcome the acknowledgement of the barriers to learning which exist for children and young people and are particularly pleased that 'particular life or personal circumstances, either short or long term' are included within this.

We support the proposal that schools should consider the class management and teaching strategies they employ in supporting the diverse needs of children within a class. It is imperative that schools are provided with adequate funding, resources and training to enable them to fulfil this proposal.

Practitioner Views:

A number of professionals from the YOYO Practitioners Forum expressed their support for broadening out the remit of SEN and could see that it would be of benefit to those children, young people and families that they represent. They did however, recognise that schools need support and training to meet this challenge.

'It is a good thing if they are broadening out SEN – it is good for looked after children – this is positive.'

'Every child has personal circumstances that could impact on their progress through school and these changes will, hopefully, allow these particular children the opportunity to be identified and helped. This move towards a more holistic approach to each child can only improve the school experience for children.'

'If there is abuse at home for children – will this initiative really make them more visible? Teachers are saying they are educators and not social workers – maybe this will help make sure teachers have support to deal with this stuff.'

Consultation Point 2 - Key Principles of the Proposed Policy Framework

2 Do you agree with the key principles on which the policy proposals are based?

We are supportive of the key principles under-pinning these policy proposals. Include Youth is fully supportive of an inclusive ethos and agree that this needs to be a whole school approach, involving staff at all levels.

We welcome the Department's commitment to develop **an approach which encompasses all children who face barriers to accessing and progressing in learning, whatever the reason**. Our work at Include Youth has demonstrated to us that children have difficulties in school for a plethora of reasons. Many of the young people we work with have not had stable family backgrounds, and this lack of stability impacts greatly on their school work. For example, the young people we consulted talked about how it has been a struggle for them to complete homeworks and keep on top of schoolwork while dealing with personal problems at the same time.

'Others work harder, if they are from a better family background, they don't seem to have as many problems.'

‘Stable upbringing, easier to get on well at school didn’t have parents there after dinner to help with homework.’

‘Didn’t worry too much about doing coursework.’

We support the development of quality intervention and tailored provision.

It is vital that all professionals, including teachers, have the skills and knowledge to allow early identification and appropriate intervention. It is our opinion that too many children who are struggling at school are not having their underlying needs identified soon enough. We understand that there is always a reason why a child is not performing well in school, either at an academic level or in terms of the quality of their social interaction. We work with young people who have not benefited from early identification and intervention and as a result have not had learning difficulties diagnosed until much later in years, have not had behavioural and emotional difficulties picked up, have not had their mental health needs recognised, have not had any understanding in the school environment that the problems they are facing at home are affecting their behaviour and learning at school. Include Youth sees the end result of this oversight and lack of timely intervention at the extreme end it can mean a young person eventually gives up on school, opts out of the entire system and can run the risk of coming into conflict with the law and entering the juvenile justice system.

‘For 6 months, you couldn’t hold me there, I didn’t really care and I felt they didn’t really care about me.’

We support the principle that education and related health and social care professional’s work together to support children. This collaboration is central to the successful outworking of the proposals.

The knowledge, views, experience and involvement of parents and carers should play a vital part in the development of any support programme. We would recommend that this principle be amended to read, ‘the knowledge, views, experience and involvement of parents and carers, **children and young people**’.

Consultation Point 3 - Early Identification and Intervention

3 Do you agree with the proposals relating to early identification and intervention?

Include Youth agrees that early identification and assessment are crucial to providing appropriate intervention. We welcome any attempt to strengthen and streamline the current identification and assessment process. While we support the proposal to place the emphasis on schools and ESA to identify and provide for children who require additional educational support, we are concerned that schools be given resources and support to fulfil this function. While it is clear that schools could make a difference to address the barriers to learning for children who are experiencing short term and temporary difficulties (such as a family bereavement), they will find it more challenging to meet those barriers which are result of more complex needs, such as learning difficulty or severe behavioural issues. We would seek reassurance that support and resources will be in place to allow schools to meet the needs of those pupils experiencing the more serious barriers to learning. We are aware that there are already delays in accessing Educational Psychologists and would suggest that the document needs to address how these current issues will be addressed to assist any streamlining process.

The focus on outcomes within the newly planned Personal Learning Plans (PLPs) is welcome. These plans will be key documents which must be validated by a statutory timeframe. We would welcome more detail on how the plans will incorporate involvement of the child and their right to participation in the process.

Consultation Point 4 - Pre-School Settings

4 Do you agree with the proposals relating to pre-school settings?

We welcome the intention to require all early years settings to have regard to the revised framework for SEN and inclusion. We would however, stress the need to ensure that all staff in pre-school settings can access appropriate training and support to fulfil this responsibility.

Consultation point 5 - Primary and Post Primary

5 Do you agree with the proposals relating to primary and post primary?

We agree that it is imperative that staff in schools have the skills to recognise when a child is facing a barrier to learning, that they know how to respond and when and where to seek

advice. We support the principle that there will be greater collaboration and sharing of expertise and resources across local educational establishments and agencies.

We agree that **some difficulties in learning can be exacerbated by the school's learning environment or adult/ child relationships**. The young people we spoke to were able to give **examples of practice within schools which could certainly act as a barrier** to learning for those young people struggling to fit in and keep up with the class standard. The very actions of certain teachers served to exacerbate existing problems and the following quotes demonstrate the lack of understanding which exists in some schools.

'The classroom assistant supposed to help you with work and I had one up to my 3rd year. I had to go to the 'isolation unit'. It wasn't for help, it was for punishment, with the same teacher ...but this made me worse, I refused to do the work.'

'How they make that feel for you i.e. help, rather than seeing it as punishment.'

'I was put into the storeroom and locked in there; it happened a number of times and once I got so fed up I ended up smoking in there!'

'Shouldn't be allowed to be in a room all on their own all day, surely it's breaking the law and against human rights.'

'Once I was caught smoking in school. The teacher grabbed my throat, pushed me to the wall and I wouldn't go to his to class to teach me after that – and it was about that time I stopped going to school.'

A mechanism must be found to identify the schools/ teachers who are treating pupils in this way and deal with it. If the DE is serious about tackling barriers to learning, then addressing this type of treatment must be central to any policy document.

Many of the young people we spoke to have experienced **what it feels like to struggle with learning and too many of them have very negative views on how the teachers deal with those pupils who are finding learning difficult**. They see themselves as second class citizens within the classroom and feel they are sidelined while the smarter children are given more teacher time. Clearly this is not generally how teachers deal with slower learning pupils but it is worrying that so many of the young people we work with are able to recount similar negative experiences.

'30 people in your class, if you didn't keep up with work, you got behind in work and you had to go to the back of the class – the teacher would say work away there and if you asked for help, they would just ignore you.'

'The way it was, was like this – the smartest (young people) was up at the front of the class, the ones doing ok were next and then the slowest or the stupidest ones were at the back. The favourites in the class were by how smart you were.'

'In Primary School, I was stuck into a desk at the front of the class and then this went the whole way through PS. I had started off school and couldn't sit in my seat for long amounts of time so that's why I was up at the front for the teacher to keep an eye on me. Sometimes I wasn't allowed to eat my lunch with the other ones, the dinner lady had to come in to the classroom and check I had eaten my lunch and that I was still there. It wasn't fair, it wasn't right to keep me away from the other ones.'

One of the young women who took part in the consultation had recently moved to Northern Ireland from another European country and could not speak English at all when she started school here. She described how she received absolutely no support at school and felt that she was left to get on with it despite the obvious barriers she faced. This young women resorted to getting help from her English speaking friends.

'I never had a support teacher, some friends helped but one to one support would have helped.. I would have liked a tutor for English and Maths, but didn't get it.'

Many of the young people we work with talked about the need for teachers to give them **respect**. Very often they feel that there is an inherent lack of respect between pupils and teachers, and they are confident that a change in this would improve young people's experience of schooling and subsequently their level of learning.

'Respect – is a two way thing, a working relationship between pupils and teachers.'

'It's all to do with how teachers present themselves, say if they have a quick chat at the start of class to ask how people are doing.'

Nurture Groups

We support the establishment of Nurture Groups and would stress the need for schools to receive the necessary support and resources to run them effectively.

Education other than at school

We would agree that too many schools abdicate their responsibility for those pupils who end up in Alternative Education Provision (AEP). We would like to get to a situation where schools do not use the existence of AEP projects as an alternative for dealing with challenging pupils. Some of the professionals from the YOYO group expressed similar concerns about how schools use AEPs, and saw their popularity as a signal that schools are not doing enough to accommodate all pupils.

'We should be identifying what is going on at mainstream schools to say why EOTAS is needed.'

'Schools are allowed to pass up on their educational responsibility on those children with additional educational needs.'

We share the Department's aspiration that children should be at school where at all possible, with the right support structures. We do however acknowledge that for some young people attending an AEP project is the best option. Once more the practitioners confirmed this:

'EWOs couldn't do without AEPs – I couldn't do my job without AEPs.'

'I have some concern about what will happen to EOTAS provision – will it eventually be made redundant?'

'It can't be a one size fits all.'

'AEP – works for the square pegs that won't fit into the round holes.'

'Some schools couldn't replicate what AEPs do – some young people need a fresh start in a new place.'

The young people's views on AEPs were mixed. Some of the young people shared the adult view that it should only be used in extreme circumstances and felt that placing pupils outside school would mean they would not get the same standard of educational provision. Some young people regretted having to go to EOTAS projects and felt that they would have achieved more if they had stayed at school.

'I don't think it is a good idea, don't get the same proper education in school. I was offered to go but said no, I wanted to get a proper education in school and I wanted to stay in school.'

'Everybody's better off at school, there is the social side of school as well.'

'I liked my school but regretted going to EOTAS, I felt I could have done much more. I liked my music class and my teachers in my old school and I really missed them.'

On the other hand, there were young people who had benefited greatly from taking part in an AEP and they regarded that as the best option for them. The reasons given were that they had teachers who were more understanding, the rules were not as strict and the class sizes were much smaller.

'All the teachers were approachable in AEP.'

'In my AEP, the teachers there gave me the attention and talked to me and tried to understand my situation.'

'I think it depends on what works for individual young people and they should have the option, whether to get some one to one support in the school or whether to go off-site completely.'

'We had 4 young people in the class, you get a lot more attention than in the other classes in my previous school so it was definitely better for me.'

The challenge seems to be how schools can replicate some of the positive aspects of the AEP projects and try when possible to keep children within the school.

'I don't know about EOTAS, it depends whether you like it or not, or if school can work for you and help you so you can stay on there.'

We understand that if the Department is keen to limit the use of AEPs outside the school, increasing the number of AEP units being placed within the school setting. We therefore asked the young people for their views on attending an AEN/ Special unit within the school. When asked if they would be supportive of keeping AEP within the school building, some young people were concerned about the stigma attached to this and would not welcome the attention and curiosity of other pupils.

'Better to leave school,' cos otherwise other young people in the school would be asking where you were at and then they could end up calling you names or getting bullied.'

Some consideration may need to be given to how AEP (youth work based) methods of engagement and motivation can be adopted in the classroom.

Consultation Point 6 - Training and Development

6 Do you agree with the proposals relating to training and development?

Include Youth are supportive of the plans to ensure that all beginning teachers have an awareness of differences, and will explore different teaching strategies to meet the needs of different pupils. We are also in support of the provision of appropriate continued professional development (CPD) to teachers to develop their skills and strategies for meeting the diversity of needs within their classes.

Our work with young people confirms the urgent need for this training to take place. It is clear that while some schools have already developed excellent practice in dealing with the diverse range of pupil ability, others are less able and as a result pupils are falling behind and not receiving the additional support they need.

The young people's experiences reflected this **spectrum of diverse practice**. One group of young people, from Derry were very complimentary about their school (St Joseph's Boys School) and were proud to say that they believed their school had excellent practice with regard to SEN. Evidently; this school had been well supported to develop good practice and had the necessary resources in place to meet needs. Their positive experiences are reflected in the comments below.

'Anything I needed help with, I put my hand up and could ask the teacher.'

'In some classes there was a support teacher, for Maths especially and in English.'

'Definitely worked well in the class – was a good help.'

'Support in the '2.6. room', which was a room with support teachers in it e.g. had computers and had a lesson on the computer. Could ask questions, work it out with you and spent more time with you, one to one work (From 1st year onwards).'

'Young people loved getting out of class to go to it. Sometimes it was twice a day, one very day 20 minutes to half an hour.'

'Seen as something ok, everybody wanted to go to it.'

'The unit in our school was called 'Education Plus' and the people were there 'cos they needed it, if you got behind in class. They tried to keep the numbers low. There were two teachers and a classroom assistant, they wanted to get the best from the young people.'

'I was at one of the newest, most expensive school in NI at the time – it had everything you could want was in that school. SEN teachers – we had many of them. I know of plenty of young people who had more needs and there was no problem with them in the school.'

Such was the level of support available at one school that one young person actually said he found the offers of help overwhelming.

'I was getting pestered by people offering me support I felt I didn't really need – from social workers, mentors, teachers, tutors, carers – it was too much if anything, it melted your head.'

Many of the young people (who attended other schools) **were able to give examples of when teachers had been supportive to their needs and particular circumstances.** The reassurance of somebody understanding makes an enormous difference to how the children feel and subsequently perform at school.

'All teachers were sound.'

The young people welcomed the support of teachers who knew their personal circumstances and made allowance for that within the class.

'The teachers looked after me well – they knew the story. Mainly my Form Teacher, my Year Head and one other teacher gave me support, they would've known maybe a bit more about my family circumstances.'

'Still to do homework, they were a lot more understanding if you were having a bad day, leaving you be or I chatted to one of the teachers, though it didn't have to happen all the time.'

'Teachers do care. My form teacher, she really did care, she looked out for us. It was about her attitude, how she knew my circumstances, but I didn't mind.'

'One teacher in the school I could say anything to.'

'My RE teacher was good at listening and understood what I was going through.'

They also singled out for praise those teachers who helped them learn when they were struggling in the class.

'Teachers care when they listen to you and when they spend time with you to really help you, especially if you have a problem, say in Maths.'

'Teachers can help at school, to spend more time with young people and take more time to explain things.'

There does appear to be **a lot of inconsistency about how teachers deal with pupils who are having difficulties, with some teachers showing exceptional levels of understanding while others are less empathetic.**

'Some teachers do care. If teachers take a liking to you, then they care for you. I went to three different schools and it was the same thing in every school, if they took to you and liked you.'

As our previous work with young people as shown, and in particular those consultations which took place in preparation for our response to Every School a Good School: Improving Literacy and Numeracy, not all the comments we hear about teachers are

positive. Sadly, **there are many examples of teachers showing less support and understanding than is required and as a result pupils feel they are being singled out as ‘problem young people’.**

‘there wasn’t one teacher I could talk to, felt as if they were ganging up on me.’

‘Teachers didn’t have the time of day for you.’

We would welcome **training for teachers which would help them understand the realities of life for marginalised young people and be more sensitive to the problems and challenges they face.**

‘They should do some things like in youth work e.g. anger management for young people, dealing with situations, problems that young people experience and on conflict handling.’

‘Some teachers can’t understand young people’s behaviour, especially if you have ADHD and you can’t help it and how they react to it.’

‘They need better training, especially how to deal with young people.’

There is also a need for teachers to receive general training on adolescence and how to deal with young people experiencing various moods and emotions.

Views of YOYO Group:

Our practitioners also confirmed that there was good practice and bad practice within the school community.

The practitioners forum were in agreement with the young people that there was inconsistency in school practice, with some schools demonstrating good practice while others were far from achieving even minimum standards in how they deal with SEN and AEN. They were unclear about how the proposals if implemented would really address this inconsistency. There is a fear that the good schools will simply become better while the poor schools will continue to under-perform and let their most vulnerable pupils down. If the proposals are to achieve what they are aimed at we would suggest that an audit be undertaken of all schools’ current practice and a review of good practice compiled, which can act as a toolkit for all schools.

‘It is an equality issue, ‘cos you’ve got good schools and bad schools, and the good schools will stay good and the bad schools will stay bad.’

‘The schools that are good will stay good, but how will bad schools become good.’

'If it is bad now what will it be like when their remit is broadened.'

'There is a total lack of consistency – some schools are open to sending a pupil who is struggling to a one day placement etc, to work experience and find something which suits him better, but if you go half a mile down the road to another school it can be an entirely different story – one that is still totally academic focussed and not open to vocational opportunities for pupils – if this happens then a struggling child will just give up.'

'There are havens of good practice out there – but not all schools are good for ALL CHILDREN.'

'Why can there not be an audit of schools and what they are doing now – must be some way of doing that – this would highlight those schools with good practice and those are not coming up to the mark.'

Include Youth is concerned that if more responsibility is transferred to individual schools there may be even greater inconsistency in provision as the majority of decisions will be made by individual schools.

Many of the YOYO group, who have vast experience of working with a variety of schools and are well versed in how schools deal with SEN pupils, were quite despondent about how some teachers and pupils regard the whole issue of SEN. They claimed that some schools do not have an interest in addressing SEN and that they are in denial that it might be an issue within their school. This concern goes beyond teachers not having adequate training to identify SEN to actually drawing attention to the need to impress on schools that it is their responsibility to meet the demands of the SEN agenda. There is a need for awareness raising of these responsibilities within schools.

'The old guard don't want to know- some teachers are ready to embrace change – others not interested.'

'Has to be willingness on the part of the school.'

'Some schools just don't care and aren't interested.'

'Schools in the main are not comfortable with the AEN principle.'

'Some teachers have a very bad attitude to young people with SEN.'

'Some schools refuse to accept that there may be SEN issues within their school – not happening here attitude.'

While both the young people and the practitioners we spoke to pointed out the failings of some schools and teachers to address diversity and respond appropriately to those children facing barriers to learning, they did acknowledge that teachers work in an ever increasing environment of pressure and that the very basic conditions for them to be able to rise to the challenge are not always present. Many of the professionals were of the opinion that if teachers are not given the necessary support to meet the proposals in this document that it will be nothing more than a case of passing increased responsibility over to teachers without equipping them with the tools to do the job properly.

'It's buck passing to teachers.' (practitioner)

'Schools are having to ameliorate all the ills in our society – they are policemen, social workers, dieticians.' (practitioner)

'Schools have had endless government initiatives thrown at them – they are struggling to do their job and keep up with the paperwork. The very title of the document – Every School a Good School is pie in the sky.' (practitioner)

Include Youth recommends that these fundamental barriers to teachers being able to do their job must be addressed.

One of the main reasons why teachers fail to meet the needs of all pupils is because **class sizes are too large. Young people confirmed that class sizes are a critical factor in addressing a child's ability to learn.**

'Didn't like being in a big group, though it meant you could mess about a bit more.'

'Teachers couldn't give you enough attention, or help you with your work, when people were messing about.'

'Group thing again – too many people in the class, teachers having to shout at too many young people playing up in the class – too much disruption.'

Another obstacle to teachers being able to respond to the individual needs of all pupils is the lack of appropriate support within the classroom in the form of **Classroom Assistant** posts. Our young people were particularly supportive of the role of the Classroom Assistant and in many instances believed they were key to providing additional support to those struggling to keep up in class. They also act as another pair of eyes to identify any problems which may be developing and to draw attention to those pupils who may need additional support.

'Better to have more than one classroom assistant, it's better to have two, so if you don't know something, you can ask them and feel ok to ask them, not to feel under pressure in a class.'

So, while we fully support increased training and development, we must state that teachers will continue to experience difficulties unless class sizes are smaller and they are given additional support, including the increase of Classroom Assistant posts.

Consultation Point 7 - Learning Support Co-ordinators

7 Do you agree with the proposals relating to Learning Support Coordinators?

We agree that currently SENCOs are not given adequate training and resources to do their job properly and are not given the status they should be afforded. We support proposals to strengthen their skills and knowledge base to advise and to instigate initial assessment of learning difficulties, and ensure that appropriate interventions are delivered by the teacher.

We are supportive of the proposal to make Learning Support Co-ordinators part of the school SMT.

We acknowledge that the role of the LSC is critical within the school and as such needs to be **fully resourced, supported and a dedicated non-teaching post.**

'This is a critical role – massive body of knowledge needs to be held by this person.'
(practitioner)

'Needs to be a non teaching post.' (practitioner)

'I wouldn't like to be a LSC – it's a hell of a job.' (practitioner)

Consultation Point 8 – Co-ordinated Support Plans

8 Do you agree with the proposals relating to Coordinated Support Plans (CSP)?

While we do not in principle object to Statements being replaced with CSPs, **we are concerned that any changes will threaten the rights of children with SEN.** The current statutory assessment gives rights to these children as a statement gives entitlement to extra

support. We are concerned that the proposals take away these rights. We are concerned that children who currently meet the requirements for a statement will not qualify for a CSP and therefore may potentially lose their current enforceable entitlement.

Include Youth are concerned that the removal of the annual review could jeopardise some pupils accessing the support they need. When Annual Reviews operate in the way they are intended they can act as an important mechanism for parents and can generate rights to appeal a statement. The removal of the annual review will reduce appeals rights further. We note the intention to instigate a review at the request of parents. This could potentially discriminate against children from poorer socio-economic backgrounds.

Consultation Point 9 - Transition Points

9 Do you agree with the proposals relating to transition points?

Include Youth supports the plan to focus on transition and to require pre-school settings and schools to have effective arrangements in place to undertake early assessments and share information about SEN and AEN. Staff within the various settings must have the skills and knowledge to be able to make these assessments or to know how to access those who can make assessments.

Consultation Point 10 - Developing Effective Partnerships

10 Do you agree with the proposals relating to the development of effective partnerships:

(a) Within school and pre-school settings?

We support the focus on a ‘whole school’ approach to reducing barriers to learning.

(b) Across educational settings & learning communities?

Include Youth supports the promotion of collaborative working within and between educational settings and other professionals. We would recommend that the learning

community should include the voluntary and community sector. We strongly support financial assistance being given to support this form of collaborative working.

(c) *Between mainstream and special schools?*

While we support increased collaboration between special schools and mainstream schools we would guard against a situation where staff from special schools are asked to provide expertise to mainstream schools without an increase in resources and support.

(d) *Between Education and Health and Social Care (e.g. Education and Skills Authority and proposed Regional Health Boards)?*

While the document acknowledges the lack of specialist provision, such as Speech and Language Therapists, it does not suggest how these limitations will be addressed. Unless these fundamental areas of under provision are addressed, the needs of many children and young people will remain unmet.

'This relies on the co-operation of agencies outside the remit of the ESA.' (practitioner)

We support any move towards multi-disciplinary planning and working and the proposed use of the 'team around the child' approach. While we acknowledge the intention to develop agreements to plan jointly, we would prefer to see a statutory duty imposed on the all relevant bodies to comply.

(f) *Through the establishment of Multi-disciplinary Groups?*

We would welcome more detail on the exact make up of the MGs, where they will be located and on how they will be resourced. We would question if the voluntary and community sector will be represented on MGs.

Consultation Point 11 - Outworking of the Proposed Model

11 *Do you agree with the replacement of the sequential stages of 1-5 of the current CoP by the proposed 3 strand model (Within School, Within School plus External Support, Co-ordinated Support Plans)?*

While we are supportive of the move towards strengthening provision within schools, we are concerned by the statement that ‘schools should not assume that an increase in a child’s level of need, necessarily calls for increased level of resource.’ It is our opinion that the outworking of this policy will undoubtedly require an increase in resourcing for schools.

We note the comment within the document in para 13.3, that ‘the employment of more appropriate teaching strategies is often as effective or even more effective in ensuring that a child achieves the agreed outcomes and level of progress’. The comments from our young people would suggest that this is true particularly in respect of how teachers address the needs of pupils with different levels of ability and need within a classroom. It would seem that if teachers were more aware of those pupils who are struggling to keep up and had the time to help them, many of these young people would not have had the subsequent learning problems they have gone on to have. Some pupils simply need more time and assistance to learn.

‘Teachers would write something up on the blackboard, you had only so much time to write it, then the teacher would wipe it out before you had finished writing it down. Then you asked about it again but she had gone on to the next thing and so you got behind.’

‘They should go to school and teachers need to talk a bit more slowly and have more teachers in the school.’

However, a prerequisite for teachers being able to meet varying levels of ability effectively is very often dependent on the support they receive from having a classroom assistant. Making more of these posts available will have significant resource implications.

Young People’s Experience of support within school:

A number of the young people we spoke to had received one to one tuition within the schools or had spent time in smaller groups. On the whole, they responded well to being taught in this type of environment.

‘I had a classroom assistant who was a teacher I already knew at school and had him as a classroom assistant for the last two years at school. He would sit down and go through things with me, sometimes I was there all day or I got to see him for part of a day. I was with the same people the whole way through and I really liked him.’

‘My classroom assistant was there for me the whole time at school.’

‘The classroom in school was a good idea, it was a help as you went there different days and there was only about 4/5 in the group.’

'I had trouble with maths. There were two classes (about 35 young people) mixed in together so you didn't really know the other half of the class. I also went to a special unit but you could do the work there and then go back into the ordinary class. It was doing something like the same work but in a smaller group. In the bigger class, I wasn't getting the same space and time and people were talking over each other and doing f... all. I ended up going back to do my Maths and English and I know I can do better in a smaller group.'

Include Youth supports the use of one to one support and the facilitation of teaching in smaller group setting.

We note in para 13.6 the possible avenues from which schools can seek external support. While we agree with the list of possible options, we are concerned that the document does not address the current shortfall in provision within many of these areas. For example, there is a current and recognised need to improve provision for children and young people with mental health difficulties.

A number of professionals from the YOYO group were concerned that the proposed changes were a way of the DE limiting the number of young people going through to the Statement process. They see the suggested 3 stage process as slowing the process down and making it even harder to secure the services of the Educational Psychologist.

'They are just putting hurdles in place to stop you getting to the Educational Psychologist – it is slowing it all down.'

However, there were other members of the YOYO group who could see the benefits of reducing the number of stages and of offering schools the opportunity to intervene at an earlier stage. They noted that for some young people a delay in the Statementing process can mean they are left in a vacuum with no support being offered in the interim. In that regard they were supportive of any steps taken by the school to meet needs prior to entering the formal process.

'Early assessment is not rocket science – this could speed the process up and not waste Educational Psychologists time.' (practitioner)

'These proposals could help – sometimes you know what a young person needs and it is held up because of the statement process – so it could be good.' (practitioner)

'I think there is good in this.' (practitioner)

Schools can only meet support needs within the school if they are adequately resourced to do so and can take full advantage of readily available outside support.

We are somewhat concerned that these proposals could act as a disincentive to schools requesting external support, if they perceive that a request could be seen as a failing on the part of the school. Schools must not be put off seeking outside support, if that is what they deem to be necessary to help a child.

Consultation point 13 - Funding

13 Do you agree with the proposals relating to funding?

We are disappointed by the lack of detail contained within the document of the funding arrangements that will be put in place to deliver the proposals. The proposals have significant resource implications and are critical to determining whether a school can deliver on what is being proposed. Many professionals fear that without funding the policy proposals will come to nothing.

'Schools need to be funded and skilled to meet this need.'

'Extra support must be there.'

'There are no resources to do this properly.'

'We know what works, but we can't resource it.'

'There ain't going to be money to fund this – this is just a paper exercise.'

One of the young people doubted the commitment of school staff to make the necessary funds available to meet the needs of those struggling to learn.

'Teachers or headmasters don't want to hand out money for things like classroom assistants or getting an interpreter.'

We would welcome clarification on what 'the increased funding allocation ' for schools will be.

It is our opinion that the funding currently in place to meet the educational needs of children with disabilities **must be protected and ring fenced**. The broadening of the concept of SEN to incorporate AEN, should not result in limited funding being used to meet the needs of a broader category of children. We do not wish to see a situation where

children with SEN/ AEN will compete for provision. It is our concern that the funding secured to provide the capacity building for schools may not be adequate and would urge the need for increased longer term funding to raise standards and support professional development.

Consultation Point 14 - Monitoring, Review, Evaluation & Accountability

14 Do you agree with the proposals relating to monitoring, review, evaluation & accountability?

We are concerned that if more financial responsibility is given to schools, there needs to be accountability measures in place to ensure that schools use the money for the purpose for which it is given. There is already concern about whether SEN monies are used in the correct way by schools, as the quotes from the YOYO group indicate:

'Comes back to accountability – schools are not accountable.'

'Accountability is a major thing.'

'It needs legislation – it needs teeth to make schools do it.'

'If it was a business there would be a recession a lot sooner.'

'We need funding and auditing.'

Merging the funding for SEN/AEN with the mainstream budget will make it more difficult to establish the amount of money that schools need to support pupils with SEN and other AEN.

Consultation Point 15 – Roles and Responsibilities

15 Do you agree with the proposals relating to the roles and responsibilities for?

(a) The Department of Education (DE)? (paragraphs 17.1 to 17.2)

We support DE investment in a training programme for principals, governors, LSCs and teachers which should ensure a greater understanding of the challenges and barriers that some children experience.

We support the introduction of an information and communication strategy to ensure that parents understand the new framework. This should be amended to read: ‘to ensure that parents, carers, children and young people understand’.

(c) *The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS)?*

Securing the support of the health and social care sector is critical to the outworking of these proposals.

(d) *Multi-disciplinary Groups (MGs)?*

The role of the MGs are varied and complex and we would stress the need for them to be adequately supported and resourced and for their work to be fully transparent and accountable. We would also question how accessible the MGs will be to parents and whether they can be held to account by parents. We would like to see the MG being seen as a gateway to support for schools rather than a body which is primarily about holding schools to account.

(e) *Mainstream schools and other educational establishments?*

We support the introduction of a ‘whole school’ approach and a culture of inclusiveness in which there are high expectations for all pupils.

We fully support the proposal that teachers should be responsible for supporting all learners whatever their individual needs to reach their potential but would stress the need for teachers to be equipped with the knowledge and skills to be able to meet this challenge. Central to this is the accessibility of other appropriately qualified professionals and support staff, who will help teachers meet the challenge.

19. *Equality Issues and Rural Issues*

As already stated we are concerned that the proposals may have an adverse impact on equality of opportunity for some groups of pupils, including children with disabilities. The proposal should be reviewed and revised to address the concerns raised. Failure to do so will risk the DE not fulfilling its responsibilities under Section 75 of the NI Act 1998.

The proposals do not address adequately the needs of children in rural areas. This is particularly significant given the difficulty of many rural schools to accessing additional support for pupils with SEN/ AEN. We would welcome detail on how rural schools will be funded and resourced adequately to meet the diverse needs of all pupils.

Concluding Comments

Include Youth welcomes the opportunity this consultation has afforded to become engaged in the debate on how we can remove barriers to learning for our most vulnerable children and young people. The young people we seek to represent do not fall into neat categories of need – their needs are many, varied and complex. In that respect they mirror the characteristics of the general school population. We support any attempt by the Department of Education to raise the profile of the needs of those children not performing as well as they should be at school. We particularly support a move away from seeing the child as the ‘problem’ to seeing how the education system can better respond to barriers to learning. We agree that it is a school’s duty to ensure that every child is supported and progresses. While there is much in the document that Include Youth supports, we are also looking forward to seeing how the detail will be worked out in practice. In particular, we are keen to see budgetary commitments made to make the proposals reality. We are also, along with our colleagues working in the disability rights sector, concerned that these proposals do not threaten the legal entitlements of children with disabilities. This group of extremely vulnerable children have a right in law to have their needs identified and assessed by the appropriate skilled specialists and to receive prescribed provision. There must be no dilution of these rights or of the financial support currently available to children who have these needs.

We believe that every school can become a good school. The existence of good practice within schools in Northern Ireland who are currently delivering for ALL children in their

classes proves that the challenge can be met. The success of schools meeting the challenge depends on whether schools, teachers and related professionals are supported and resourced appropriately. We look forward to continuing to work in partnership with the Department of Education to fulfil the vision as set out in the document.

Include Youth

October 2009