LEARNING NEEDS AND DIFFICULTIES AMONG CHILDREN OF PRIMARY SCHOOL AGE: DEFINITION, IDENTIFICATION, PROVISION AND ISSUES

Harry Daniels and Jill Porter, University of Bath

This briefing draws on Primary Review Research Report 5/2 *Learning Needs and Difficulties Among Children of Primary School Age: definition, identification, provision and issues* by Harry Daniels and Jill Porter. The report was commissioned to review representative published research on children of primary school age with special needs, with a particular focus on identification and provision. The full report, including details of sources consulted, is available at www.primaryreview.org.uk. It may usefully be read in conjunction with Primary Review Research Reports 5/1 (*Children in Primary Education: demography, culture, identity, diversity and inclusion*) and 8/2 (*Primary Schools and Other Agencies*).

The report surveys published research and other evidence on the following:

- Regulation of the field: legislation, policy and practice
- The prevalence of children with special educational needs (SEN)
- Attitudes, discrimination and bias
- Support for children with special educational needs
- Approaches to teaching
- Collaborative and multi-agency working
- SEN and exclusion
- Evaluating provision

Regulation of the field: legislation, policy and practice

This is a highly contested arena containing strong (often single interest) lobby groups, practitioners and their professional associations as well as government. Developments have been convoluted and the pace of change has been slow.

- There has been a move from the policies and practices of segregation to the integration of individual pupils and thence to debates about systemic responsiveness to the broad diversity of pupil need.
- Despite the rhetoric of policy documents, nationally collected statistics suggest that after a period of growth in the numbers of statemented pupils, we have now reached a time when there is a relatively stable proportion of children who are identified as requiring additional resources.
- Statutory guidance allows for a very high degree of local interpretation over the identification of pupil needs together with a lack of consistent thresholds at which the local authority takes over financial responsibility for the child's special needs in education.
- Local interpretations often arise as tradeoffs between competing policy agendas of raising standards and the development of inclusive practices.
- It remains to be seen whether the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (2001) produces changes to policy and practice.

Prevalence of children with special educational needs

The data on prevalence need to be viewed as a reflection of *practice* rather than *incidence*. Changes in approaches to official collection of data make detailed tracking of change problematic.

- Over the last five years there has been a decrease in the numbers and percentage of pupils with statements placed in primary schools. The proportion of children with statements placed in special schools has increased by just over 0.5 per cent.
- The level of statementing in primary schools has been consistent at 1.6 per cent of pupils.
- There is considerable variation between local authorities (2006 figures for statementing range from 0.3 to 3.1 per cent).
- In 2006 the most prevalent group with respect to statements were children with speech, language and communication difficulties (22.5 per cent), followed by children with autism (17.6 per cent) and children with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (12.1 per cent).
- The proportion of children with special education needs but no statements has steadily increased and in 2006 formed 17.6 per cent of the primary school population with a peak during the primary years in Year 4 (8-9 year olds) of 21.3 per cent.

Attitudes, discrimination and bias

In practice, tensions between the policy agendas of raising standards of pupil attainment and achieving inclusive schooling can give rise to considerable difficulties within the school. The attitudes of teachers, parents and pupils are central to developing inclusive practices, yet data on the relationship between positive teacher attitudes and professional burn-out are evidence of the challenges that teachers face in this area. There is evidence of inequalities in the system.

- There is a higher incidence of identification and support of special needs among boys than girls, both with and without statements.
- Children from professional homes are more likely to receive support than children from manual working class homes, taking into account measured comparabilities in reading, mathematics and social adjustment.
- After controlling for socio-economic disadvantage, gender and year group, it would appear that children from some minority ethnic groups are more likely to be identified as having special educational needs; and some groups are more likely to be identified as having particular forms of special need.

Support for special educational needs, approaches to teaching and collaborative working

- The mainstay of support for teachers in primary schools has long been the special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO). In primary schools this role may be taken on by the head or deputy. When this happens it can be difficult to manage the limited time available and meet the demands of procedures for external accountability. A number of key elements have been identified to encourage the move to a more proactive SENCO role, most notably in the development of a clear values position that emphasises pupils' entitlement to success, achievement and the fulfilment of individual potential coupled with the review and development of processes of teaching and learning.
- Research suggests that approaches to teaching pupils with learning difficulties are not much different from effective practice for all children, but that more careful assessment and more opportunities for practice and learning transfer are needed. However, it may be necessary for teachers to have access to the knowledge that underpins the use of these accommodations in order that their practice can be confident and informed. They need to be able to share this knowledge with teaching assistants and to be effective in managing this important aspect of classroom support.
- There is much to be gained from more collaborative forms of practice, with professionals working together across boundaries both within and outside school. This has been found to be particularly effective for children with conduct disorders and those at risk of mental health problems, two groups which are most at risk of exclusion. Special schools may have the potential to act as a resource but their role in contributing to a continuum of inclusive provision is under-developed.

Special educational needs and exclusion

The faltering progress towards inclusion is also reflected in exclusion rates.

- Pupils with special educational needs are more likely to be excluded, particularly during the primary school years. Pupils with behavioural difficulties are most at risk of exclusion.
- Exclusion is likely to slow the formal process of assessment and inevitably exacerbates the child's difficulties, often exerting a considerable impact on their life after school.
- The primary school has a key role to play in the prevention of social exclusion, and this is reflected in their growing social work responsibilities.

Evaluating provision

- The complexity and challenge of evaluating provision is demonstrated by the paucity of good research evidence, with limited intervention studies and little research which has investigated the characteristics of schools that are both effective and inclusive.
- Evaluating provision in relation to narrowly-defined attainment outcomes marginalises further those pupils who experience difficulties in learning.
- The development of pupil voice has an important contribution to make to our understanding of meaningful outcomes and could more prominently inform research evidence on the effectiveness of different types of intervention.
- To move the field forward, research and policy must focus on processes rather than simply outcomes, including the identification of mechanisms for change.

Conclusions and Implications

- Identification of children with special educational needs is resource driven, regulated by statutory guidance, and open to a multiplicity of interpretations and practices across local authorities and geographical regions. Practices of identification and assessment are constrained and restricted by local priorities for provision. There are inequities within the system with respect to gender, class and ethnicity, and as a result of the influence of single-interest lobby groups certain SEN groups are over-represented. All this adds up to an excessive degree of variation in what should be a consistent and equitable system.

- There is also much to recommend the provision of sufficient flexibility in the system to allow for local responses. However, this is predicated on the availability of a full and functioning continuum of provision including inclusive primary schools where SENCOs have the time to facilitate whole school responses and where teachers are well placed to engage in problem-solving collaborative practices.

- The uncertain progress towards fully inclusive primary schools is evidenced by an increase in the proportion of statemented children in special schools as well as an increase in the numbers of children for whom schools request extra help. We have also noted that children with special educational needs are much more likely than their peers to be excluded from school. These findings along with others in Report 5/2 suggest that teachers are finding it increasingly difficult to support children with special educational needs in mainstream primary schools. There is a need to support schools as they strive to provide for children's needs rather than simply deliver a curriculum.

- Given the paucity of evidence for effective teaching approaches for children with special educational needs we suggest that:
    - teachers need expertise and support to make adjustments and adaptations to their teaching practices in the context of inclusion;
    - there is a need to look more closely at whether the shift towards more whole-class teaching is contributing to the higher prevalence of children with particular needs;
    - it is important to create the conditions in which teachers can focus on the processes of learning and an appropriate diversity of outcome measures.

- The compatibility and consistency of policy and regulations emanating from government and its agencies should be reviewed, and care should be taken to align these with stated commitments to children with disabilities and difficulties. A key issue is the tension between, on the one hand, competitive education markets based on school league tables and narrowly-conceived measures of pupil attainment and, on the other, a broadly-based account of inclusive schooling within the 'whole child' remit of local authority children's services. This tension is fundamental to current policy and it needs to be resolved.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The report is available at www.primaryreview.org.uk and is one of 32 Primary Review interim reports. Two of these deal with the opinion-gathering strands of the Review's evidence base. The remainder report on the thirty surveys of published research which the Review has commissioned from its 70 academic consultants. The reports are being published now both to increase public understanding of primary education and to stimulate debate during the period leading up to the publication of the Review's final report in late 2008.

The Primary Review was launched in October 2006 as a wide-ranging independent enquiry into the condition and future of primary education in England. Supported by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, it is based at the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education and directed by Professor Robin Alexander.

The Review has ten themes and four strands of evidence (submissions, community and national soundings, surveys of published research, and searches of official data). The report summarised in this briefing relates to the **Research Survey** strand and the theme **Diversity and Inclusion.**

Enquiries: The Administrator, The Primary Review, Faculty of Education, 184 Hills Road, Cambridge, CB2 8PQ. Phone: 01223 767523.

Email: enquiries@primaryreview.org.uk . Website: www.primaryreview.org.uk.

Press enquiries: richard@margrave.co.uk (Richard Margrave, Communications Director).

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UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE *Faculty of Education*