

REFLECTION, RENEWAL AND REALITY: Teachers' Experience of Special Educational Needs and Inclusion

RESEARCH AIMS

Following a range of concerns raised by members about issues related to special educational needs (SEN) and inclusion, the NASUWT commissioned research from Canterbury Christ Church University to explore policy, practice and experience in more depth. The first stage of this research, *Reflection and Renewal*, involved a substantial review of existing literature, the main findings of which are summarised in this document. The review examined:

- interpretations of inclusion, including local authority interpretations and how this translates into policy and practice;
- different understandings of the term 'special educational needs';
- teacher attitudes to inclusion;
- classroom practice and teachers' training and development needs; and
- issues of behaviour, SEN and inclusion.

The literature review compared policies and practice in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

Reflection and Renewal was first published in 2008 and is available at www.nasuwt.org.uk. A subsequent report based on its findings, *Reflection, Renewal and Reality: Teachers' Experience of Special Educational Needs and Inclusion*, was published in 2012. This report takes into account the significant proposed changes to existing policy approaches to SEN in England set out by the Coalition Government, which took office in May 2010. Copies of this report and summary versions are also available from the NASUWT.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to adopt the good practice of systematic literature reviews, this review was based on a new approach – Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA) – developed within the Cabinet Office to harness relevant research evidence in a similar way to a systematic review.

There were four strands to the review methodology:

- relevant electronic databases were searched;
- key journals were hand searched, including *Support for Learning*, *British Journal of Special Educational Needs*, *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, *Education and Law Journal*, *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, *Educational Psychology*, and *British Journal of Special Education*;
- legislation, policy documents and reports from the Education Departments of the four countries, Ofsted, the Audit Commission and the Centre for Studies in Inclusive Education and other relevant websites were considered; and
- key texts and references in the papers and documents above were considered.

The criteria for including papers in the review were that they must:

- have been published since 1978 (except papers relating to legislation, where the 1944 Education Act was the start point);

- have been published in English and mainly concerned with the UK education system;
- have as their main topic the education of children and young people;
- be concerned with state-funded schools; and
- be concerned with inclusion and/or SEN.

MAIN FINDINGS

The nature of inclusion

- There is not a single agreed definition of inclusion.
- Definitions that do exist are often based on differing combinations of educational, social, moral and human rights grounds.
- Inclusion can be defined and evaluated at the level of principles, place, purpose, practice and person.
- Recent criticisms of inclusion have focused on outcomes for the individual learner.

The nature of SEN

- National variations in statementing and the incidence of SEN may in part be attributable to the coexistence of medical and social models of SEN. This poses problems for the early identification of SEN.
- This mixture of perspectives, plus the inherent unreliability within assessment approaches for SEN, has led to confusion about the meaning and usage of the term for teachers.
- The emphasis on assessment of SEN for identifying resource needs (statement of SEN) is being reduced in favour of identifying learning needs.
- Increased emphasis is being placed on using national, local and school data sets to monitor progress and enhance provision for pupils with SEN.
- Although the label 'SEN' does not necessarily prescribe a need for a specialist pedagogy, experience of teaching SEN pupils and knowledge and qualification in SEN are linked to progress.
- There is a change in mainstream and special school populations. This change is characterised by an increase in the proportion of pupils in special schools who have in common (irrespective of cause) a difficulty in forming the social and reciprocal relationships that underpin learning and inclusion. This is increasing the demand on teachers' time and expertise. There is a demand for enhanced training in SEN for all teachers and

specialist training and experience for some.

- The label 'SEN' is limited in allowing teachers to predict and evaluate 'adequate progress'.

Teacher perspectives on SEN and inclusion

- Inclusion is endorsed as a principle by many teachers but there are concerns about the practicalities.
- Concerns regarding practicalities often relate to particular types of needs and do not represent a rejection of the principle of inclusion.
- Teachers' attitudes and values are crucial to the success of inclusion in mainstream schools.
- Teacher training should not be solely information-based but should have regard to the importance of values and attitudes and provide opportunities for trainees to work with disabled people and people with special needs.

Policy frameworks for inclusion

- Policy has been relatively consistent from Warnock (1978) onwards in recognising a small number of pupils who would require specialist provision.
- The version of inclusion presented within government documents has always involved a role for special schools, though only part of this role is in providing a placement.
- The clarity of the definition of SEN provided in the 1996 Education Act masks a range of complex issues related to the causality of SEN, in particular the degree to which SEN are socially constructed.
- In the formation of policy between 1997 and 2008 in England, the language of individual pupil needs was increasingly replaced by a policy grounded in a school effectiveness/school improvement paradigm which sought to improve pupil achievement by transforming schools. There is a potential source of confusion as the field of SEN within its history, language and processes has focused on individual need.

- This difficulty was compounded by developments that remarked upon and sought to address underachievement of pupils with SEN within the context of an SEN Code of Practice that continues to base part of its definition of SEN on making inadequate progress.

The history of local authority responses to the inclusion agenda

- There is no shortage of statutory and formal descriptions of local authorities' (LAs') functions and accompanying evaluations from inspections of LAs, but research evidence is in short supply on how this is being operationalised in different LAs.
- There is a wide variation in support service arrangements reflecting the history of the LA rather than its size or demographic type.
- There is a huge variation in specialist provision between LAs.
- Some LAs had large central services linked to classroom assistant support in mainstream schools, others had smaller central services linked to specialist or advisory functions.
- These differences in support arrangements and availability of specialist provision are likely to impact on the day-to-day experience of teachers. This is an important area for future research.
- Far more children in secondary schools have Statements of Special Educational Need (SEN) than in primary schools.
- There is a complex relationship between ethnicity and SEN.
- Children from disadvantaged backgrounds were less likely to have a statement (this has been attributed to parent knowledge and ability to challenge the system).
- Early intervention continues to represent exceptional rather than typical practice.
- There are large differences between LAs in England in the number and percentages of pupils described as having social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD), but also moderate learning difficulties (MLD) and specific learning difficulties in language and/or mathematics, including dyslexia.

Classroom practice: guidance and training for SEN and inclusion

- In England and Wales, the National Curriculum inclusion statements have established inclusive teaching as a general

teaching requirement and subsequent guidance has consistently presented the view that all teachers are teachers of children with SEN. In Scotland, guidance on the curriculum, *The Structure and Balance of the Curriculum: 5-14 National Guidelines*, makes reference to the need for the curriculum to be inclusive and promote equality of opportunity for all.

- Research suggests that there is not a distinct SEN pedagogy, though specialist knowledge is acknowledged as important.
- Guidance on inclusion in England has tended to emphasise a generic strengthening of teaching and learning (rather than specialist approaches) based on a belief that this will lead to better outcomes for all children, including those with SEN.
- There is a perception that more training is necessary in relation to SEN and inclusion, in particular in Initial Teacher Education (ITE).
- The provision of training needs be planned to build confidence as well as competence as there are important links between classroom experiences, a sense of preparedness and teacher self-efficacy.
- Where there is a lack of consensus or clarity in views on SEN, there is likely to be a mismatch between training perceived necessary and that which is delivered.
- The training model applied in initial teacher training (ITT) and subsequent professional development needs to be considered carefully in terms of pedagogy.
- Training based on low-level technical responses to need is of limited medium and long-term use, though it may provide reassurance in the short term.
- More substantial training, such as university-based courses, that fosters critical thinking and the development of reflective practice offers greater potential but may entail additional work outside course sessions for the teacher.

Behaviour, SEN and inclusion

- Official data suggests that behaviour represents a considerably greater problem in secondary schools.
- Some of the problematic behaviour in secondary schools is likely to be attributable to factors peculiar to the secondary education system.

- The label SEBD is problematic because it is largely socially constructed; it covers a diverse pupil population and encompasses everything from withdrawn behaviours through to severe 'acting out' behaviours.
- The Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) materials introduced through the Primary National Strategy in England were informed by research, have been piloted and subsequently evaluated. This is a desirable model for implementing new initiatives.
- Though teachers generally endorse the principles of inclusion, they express concern about the inclusion of pupils with SEBD.
- Training has a role to play in supporting teachers in dealing with behaviour but a 'more is better' approach in terms of either the amount of training or the range of strategies offered in it is unlikely to contribute significantly to either competence or confidence.
- The distinction between low-level behaviour and more challenging behaviour is often made. This may give insufficient recognition to the fact that the majority of more challenging behaviour will be as the result of an escalation from a more minor problem and therefore may be reduced by greater awareness of proactive, preventative measures applied at the low-level disruption stage.
- The distinction between normal naughtiness and SEBD may be unhelpful as, though expressed in terms of a continuum, it may imply a threshold past which the child requires highly specialised approaches. This may have a deskilling effect on teachers.
- Accepting that the causes of behaviour rarely reside solely in the individual pupil is potentially challenging as it can create the impression that blame is being attributed to the teacher or school.
- There is a continued tension between the needs of the one and the needs of the many within debates on inclusion. The debate is probably nowhere more sharply focused than in the area of the inclusion of children with SEBD.
- Official materials on behaviour and attendance have a lot to offer schools but schools need to have the willingness and time to engage with these.

CONCLUSION

The concept of inclusion in schools is highly contested and there is no agreed or simple definition. Huge variations exist in the incidence of SEN and responses to it both within and between the four education systems in the UK. The review emphasises the fact that the needs and characteristics of pupils in mainstream and special schools are changing, highlighting the significant demand among practitioners for improvements to the quality and availability of general and specialist training in SEN. The review found that inclusion is endorsed as a principle by many teachers but that concerns about the practicalities of inclusion are significant. The wide variation in the nature and availability of specialist provision between LAs impacts considerably on the day-to-day experience of teachers.

RESEARCH TEAM

The research was conducted by Simon Ellis, Professor Janet Tod and Lynne Graham-Matheson, Canterbury Christ Church University.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The full research report, *Reflection, Renewal and Reality: Teachers' Experience of Special Educational Needs and Inclusion*, is available from the NASUWT.

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