Special educational needs and disability

Research priorities and questions

March 2014

Contents

General approach to research needs and priorities

This paper is one of a series of 15 which aims to:

- promote the importance of robust quantitative evidence, in combination with other methods, to increase understanding of 'what works' in education and children's services;
- identify evidence gaps and promote discussion of them with the research community, practitioners and other stakeholders;
- initiate collaboration with the research community, practitioners and other stakeholders to research these issues; and,
- support work that helps understand and tackle the barriers to evidence based practice, including how to make evidence accessible to practitioners.

The principles behind the department's research strategy are inspired by Ben Goldacre's vision[1] in the Department for Education Analytical Review[2]. In future, the development and use of evidence should be increasingly driven and owned by the research community, sector bodies and practitioners.

The published suite of priority and question papers between them cover the department's key areas of work and provides a coherent strategic context for the research community, sector bodies and practitioners as well as the department, to plan and prioritise research. The department will continue to commission research, informed by the published priority questions

Views about the research questions and priority papers, recent findings, on-going research or evidence gaps are warmly welcomed. We will also be arranging a series of discussions throughout 2014 with practitioners, the research community and other stakeholders to discuss views and help shape departmental plans to filling evidence gaps. If you want to be involved please email us at: Research.PRIORITIES@education.gsi.gov.uk, follow us on Twitter (@educationgovuk) or like us on Facebook (www.facebook.com/educationgovuk).

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[1] Goldacre, B.(2013), Building Evidence into Education
[2] The Department for Education (2013), Analytical Review: The Department

Special Education Needs & Disability: the policy context

The Green Paper: Support and aspiration: A new approach to special educational needs and disability (March 2011)[3] signalled the start of a radically different system. The case for reform is that:

- Too many children and young people who are disabled or identified as having SEN and disability do less well than their peers at school and college and are more likely to be out of education, training and employment at age 18;
- Children and young people's needs are often picked up late;
- Families and young people have to battle to find out what support is available and to get the help they need from education, health and social care services;
- Schools can focus on the SEN and disability label rather than meeting the child's needs; Teachers and lecturers often feel they lack the skills and confidence to meet those needs;
- Young people over age 16 with SEN and disability have weaker entitlements to support in colleges than if they had stayed at school.

The reforms are being taken forward through the Children and Families Act[4], which has been informed by 20 local pathfinders established to test out the reforms across 31 local authorities. The pathfinder programme is subject to a major evaluation lead by SQW[5].

The Government is reforming the special needs system to:

- Replace the separate SEN statements and Learning Difficulty Assessments with a new birth-to-25 Education, Health and Care Plan, giving new rights and protections to 16-25 year olds in further education and training; and offer families personal budgets to give them more control over their support;
- Improve cooperation between all the services that support children, young people and their families, in particular, local authorities and health authorities, so that they work together to provide the right support when it is needed; and
- Make sure local authorities involve children, young people and parents in reviewing and developing provision and publish a clear and transparent 'local offer' of support across education, health and social care.

The SEN and disability reforms are taking place in the context of wider reforms, including reform of: school and college funding, introduced in April 2013; the school curriculum and

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[3] Department for Education (2011)Support and aspiration: A new approach to special educational needs and disability.

[4] DfE (2013) Evidence Pack – Special Educational Needs: Children and Families Bill

[5] Evaluation reports to date can be accessed at the gov.uk website.

assessments; teacher education; infrastructure, with increasing numbers of Academies and Free Schools; and changes in the organisation of health services. The Adult care system is also being reformed significantly through the Care Bill and close alignment between the two new systems is vital if young people with SEN aged 18-25 are to get coordinated help and support. In both the health and care systems, managing the transition from children's to adult services will be a major factor in ensuring the SEN reforms are a success.

Research summary and gaps

The SEN reform programme was informed by a national consultation[6] and is based on pilots, academic studies and research that show:

- Children and young people with SEN or disability perform less well than those with no identified SEN at all stages of education and are very much less likely to achieve 5 GCSE's at grade A*-C[7], or equivalent, at 16[8] and at 19[9] and are more likely to be NEET at age 19[10].

- The destinations of young people who had a statement of SEN at 16 are very different from those of their peers[11] [12]. They are less likely to be attending a sixth form college or in full time work either with or without training, despite similar scope and level of ambition at age 16[13].

- Many parents find the system for supporting children, young people and families overly complex, bureaucratic and adversarial and want better information[14] [15] [16] [17].

- The most important factor in determining the best outcomes for children with SEN is the quality of the provision made to support their needs but that quality can be very variable[18].

- Parents with disabled children have higher levels of stress and lower levels of wellbeing than parents with non-disabled children[19].

- There are a number of preventable costs to the family such as lost earnings, sick days, residential care and family breakdown costs that could be saved if the stress

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[6] DfE(2011) Support and Aspiration: A New Approach to Special Educational Needs and Disability – Consultation results

[7] DfE (2013) Children with special educational needs: an analysis - 2013

[8] 58.2% for those with any SEN and 27.4% for those with a statement compared to 90.1% for pupils without SEN. The gap between those with SEN, including those with statements, and those with no identified SEN is slightly reduced from 2010.

[9] 35.1% for those with a statement of SEN compared to 90.7% for those with no identified SEN, a gap which has remained stable since 2010.

[10] LSYPE and YCS data from 2009/10 reported in DfE (2011) Children with special educational needs: an analysis - 2011

[11] DCSF (2007) Statistical bulletin: youth cohort study and longitudinal study of young people in England: The activities and experiences of 18 year olds: England 2007

[12] DfE (2009) Op. cit.

[13] Burchandt (2005) The education and employment of disabled young people

[14] Lamb (2009) Lamb Inquiry: Special Educational Needs and Parental Confidence. DCSF

[15] Boddy et al (2006) Models of good practice in joined up assessment: working for children with 'significant and complex needs'. Institute of Education

[16] Ofsted (2010) Op. cit.

[17] Campbell-Hall et al. (2009) Parental experience of services for disabled children – qualitative research (phase 2): exploring the findings from the national survey.

[18] Ofsted (2006) Inclusion: does it matter where pupils are taught? Provision and outcomes in different settings for pupils with learning difficulties and disabilities
Ofsted (2010) The special educational needs and disability review: A Statement is not Enough

[19] Emerson et al (2004) Levels of psychological distress experienced by family carers of children and adolescents with intellectual disabilities in an urban conurbation.

involved in caring were reduced, such as through provision of short break services[20].

- The average weekly income of households with disabled children (in 2000) was £50 less than that of households with no disabled child[21]. Across a range of measures and comparisons households with disabled children are more likely to be in poverty[22].

- Children and young people who report being disabled are less likely to say that they are happy[23] and children with special educational needs are more likely than others to experience poor and declining wellbeing through middle childhood and adolescence, although this does vary with specific type of need[24].

Further evidence which was used to develop the reforms to the SEN system is set out in the Green Paper[25]. The implementation of reforms is informed by the 20 local pathfinders and the department commissioned independent evaluation of the pathfinders which will continue until March 2015[26]. The reforms are also informed by the contribution of young people with SEN and disabilities through EPIC.[27]

We are interested in identifying innovative methods, particularly those drawn from outside the education sector, to determine how best to monitor the health of a SEN system that covers 0 -25 years old and how to measure the impact of the SEN reforms, including assessment of the user experience and means of comparing between cohorts and across different types of need.

We also wish to start a process of engagement with our stakeholders to examine and identify longer term trends in the SEN and disability field, to develop and promote evidence-based practice and to find ways to make better use of the evidence we already have. To do this there are a number of research gaps across the 0-25 education system to be addressed.

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[20] Robertson et al. (2010) The impacts of short break provision on disabled children and families: an international literature review.

[21] Copps and Heady (2007) What price an ordinary life? The financial costs and benefits of supporting disabled children and their families. New Philanthropy Central

[22] Every Disabled Child Matters (2007) Disabled children and child poverty.

[23] Chamberlain et al (2010) Tellus4 national report. DCSF Research Report DCSF–RR218

[24] Gutman et al (2010) Change in wellbeing from childhood to adolescence: risk and resilience. Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning

[25] Department for Education (2011)Support and aspiration: A new approach to special educational needs and disability.

[26] Evaluation reports to date can be accessed at the gov.uk/government/collections/send-pathfinders website. Further reports are expected to be published in Spring, Summer and Autumn 2015 and Summer 2015

[27] EPIC is a group of 13 young disabled people who advised the Government on the SEN and disability reforms in the Children and Families Bill. You can find more on the EPIC website

Identification

While progress has been made in identifying impairments, including complex impairments, at an early stage[28] too often children and young people's needs are not identified early enough and the opportunities to benefit from early identification are missed[29]. Accurate and timely identification of SEN and early intervention is important as provision can be inappropriate when needs are not correctly identified (Ofsted (2010), Lamb (2009))[30].

The number of pupils with statements of SEN has remained relatively stable over time, however the number with SEN without a statement has increased considerably since 1995[31]. There are cultural and local variations in the speed and classification in identification of special educational needs[32] [33] [34] and evidence suggests that SEN may be unhelpfully conflated with 'falling behind'[35]. Pupils with SEN are disproportionately more likely than their peers to be: eligible for Free School Meals (FSM - an indicator of relative disadvantage), born in the summer, or looked after[36]. While there is a body of research which considers the relationship between FSM and SEN[37] it is not clear whether external factors (such as economic disadvantage) are causing learning delays especially at lower levels of provision. If learning delays caused by environmental influences are being systematically identified and addressed as SEN then this could represent significant inappropriate labelling and deployment of resources.

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[28] Ofsted (2010) Op. cit.
Lindsey et al (2010), Better communications research report programme: 1st interim report. DfE Research Report DfE-RR070.
[29] Bercow (2008), The Bercow Report. A review of services for children and young people (0 – 19) with speech, language and communication needs. DCSF-00632-2008
Allen (2011) Early intervention: the next steps. an independent report to her majesty's government. Cabinet Office
[30] Goswami(2008) Learning difficulties: Future challenges.
[31] DfE (1995-2013) Statistical first releases: special educational needs in England: 1995 to 2013
DfES (2004) Statistics of education: schools in England. Source data: school census
[32] Lewis et al (2010) Special educational needs and disability: understanding local variation in prevalence, service provision and support
[33] Strand and Lindsay (2009) Ethnic disproportionality in special education: evidence from an English population study
[34] Ofsted (2010) Op. cit.
[35] Lamb (2009) Op. cit.
[36] DfE (2013) Permanent and fixed period exclusions from schools in England: 2011 to 2012 academic year
DfE (2013) Special educational need in England: January 2013
DfE (2013) Special educational needs: and analysis - 2013
DfE (2013) Children looked after in England, including adoption
Read, J. (2007) Can we count them? Disabled children and their households: Full research report.
[37] Strand and Lindsay (2009) Op. cit.
Every Disabled child Matters (2007) Op. cit.
Blackburn et al (2010) Prevalence of childhood disability and the characteristics and circumstances of disabled children in the UK.

The call for views[38] which informed our SEN reforms identified that better training is needed for staff to recognise children's needs, a view that is supported by research findings[39]. However what remains unclear is what knowledge and training would be most effective in supporting identification of needs at different ages.

To improve practice, we need to understand how identification is currently approached across the sector, including by health professionals, in early years settings and post 16 institutions and what constitutes effectiveness. For example, which types of staff training and professional development are undertaken, from whom advice is sought, which assessments are used locally and which systems have been put in place, including between agencies. We also need to better understand what drives variation in identification, by education phase, geographically and between different groups as well as what prevents certain types of SEN being identified earlier.

What works: developing an evidence based sector

The most important factor in supporting the best outcomes for pupils with SEN and disability is not the type but the quality of the provision[40] and good teaching for children and young people with SEN or disability is characterised by the same qualities as good teaching for all pupils. Findings from Education Endowment Fund[41] evaluations of a wide range of programmes designed to support disadvantaged pupils and ongoing work to identify the most effective ways to spend pupil premium funding[42] may offer good evidence of effective practice[43]. The EEF toolkit draws on existing evidence of a wide range of interventions and approaches and may also be of use to SEN practitioners.

There are good examples of "what works" in supporting children and young people with particular types of SEN[44], and universal programmes such as Achievement for All can

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[38] DfE (2012) Support and Aspiration: a new approach to special educational needs and disability – progress and next steps.

[39] Lewis et al (2010) Op. cit.

[40] Ofsted (2006) *Inclusion: does it matter where pupils are taught? Provision and outcomes in different settings for pupils with learning difficulties and disabilities*

[41] Education Endowment Fund

[42] More details can be found in the Pupil Premium Research Priority and Questions paper.

[43] DfE (2013) Evaluation of Pupil Premium

[44] For example: Identifying and Teaching Children and Young People with Dyslexia and Literacy Difficulties: An independent report from Sir Jim Rose to the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families (2009);

Law, J. et al (2012) 'What Works': Interventions for children and young people with speech, language and communication needs, part of the The Better Communication Research Programme;

Parsons et al. (2009). International Review of the literature of evidence of best practice provision in the education of persons with autistic spectrum disorders.

show evidence of their success[45]. However, there remains scope for the generation of further robust evidence.

We are also looking for innovative and effective methods for teachers and other practitioners to access research findings and understand their applicability in order to change or adapt their approaches to identification, teaching and assessment and to evaluate whether such methods are effective in raising attainment and securing better outcomes. This drive towards increasing the use of evidence in practice also ties in with the desire for evidence based practice in teaching and social care[46] and we are keen to be able to learn from work in those sectors also.

It is well known that there is little consistency in SEN systems internationally in approaches to the education of children and young people with SEN and no international agreement of definitions and classifications[47] [48] [49]. Organisations such the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education and OECD hold details of different countries' education systems, however these are not presented in a comparative way. In order to improve the comparability of information on Special Needs Education they collect and present, the OECD is developing a contextual framework of SEN. This will allow the collection of country statistics, their associated metadata and also portray the relationships between the countries' contexts and their special needs education policies, including how inclusive their education systems are.

Medium and long-term outlook

Evidence suggests that the prevalence of conditions that result in reduced life expectancy and require palliative care services is increasing, at least partly due to improved survival of low-birth-weight babies and extremely pre-term babies[50]. Children and young people with some very complex and life-threatening conditions appear to be living longer[51]. While welcome, these medical advances have implications for the education system: in future we can expect there to be growing numbers of children with low incidence complex needs requiring support to access education. What is not clear is how to forecast this changing population to ensure adequate provision for their needs.

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[45] DfE (2011) Achievement for all national evaluation.

[46] See Research Priority and Question Papers on Teachers and Teaching and Social Work and Child Protection

[47] OECD (2008) Students with Disabilities, Learning Difficulties and Disadvantages: policies statistics and indicators

[48] European Agency for Developemnt in Special Needs Education (2011) MAPPING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF POLICY FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

[49] Evans, P. (2003) Aspects of the Integration of Handicapped and Disadvantaged Students into Education: evidence from quantitative and qualitative data.

[50] EPICure (2008) Population based studies of survival and later health status in extremely premature infants

[51] Cochrane et al (2007) *Palliative care statistics for children and young adults.* DH

A review commissioned to inform government about the future challenges related to mental capital[52] and learning difficulties showed that advances in genetics and neuroscience, and other scientific advances, have allowed insights into the heritable basis of some learning difficulties[53]. The review suggested that in the long term improvements in early identification and support may be possible. It asserted that even for learning difficulties with a genetic influence environmental interventions can be effective. While this review started to show the relevance of neuroscience to SEN, it is now some years old. We are particularly interested in whether current findings from the field of neuroscience can be used to inform the development of teaching methods which are evidence-based and most appropriate for particular types of special need.

Wider education reform

We know that effective provision for pupils with SEN and disabilities is found in both mainstream and special schools[54], however there is also wide variation in the support provided across schools. The school network is diversifying with the number of academies and free schools[55], including those offering specialist provision, growing. We need to understand better how support to children and young people with SEN varies across different schools and colleges and different types of schools and colleges.

Research suggests that the overall level of SEN funding is not linked to the quality of SEN provision[56]. We know that flexibility in funding contributes to better provision of support for children and young people with SEN[57] and that appropriate funding and accountability systems are important.[58] It is too early to say what the impact of reforms on school and college funding, such as a move to a per pupil funding formula and changes to funding for high needs pupils, will be for pupils with SEN.

We know that staff having the capacity and skills to support children and young people with SEN and disabilities is important in securing the best outcomes[59] and that the initial training and on–going professional development of teachers and other staff in schools

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[52] Mental capital is defined as the totality of an individual's cognitive and emotional resources, including their cognitive capability, flexibility and efficiency of learning, emotional intelligence (e.g. empathy and social cognition), and resilience in the face of stress. It captures those elements that serve to establish how well an individual is able to contribute effectively to society and also to experience a high personal quality of life. (Goswami, 2008)

[53] Goswami (2008) Foresight Mental Capital and Wellbeing Project. Learning difficulties: Future Challenges.

[54] Ofsted (2006) *Inclusion: does it matter where pupils are taught? Provision and outcomes in different settings for pupils with learning difficulties and disabilities*

[55] Academies and Free Schools will be further addressed in additional papers available from the research priorities pages on gov.uk website.

[56] Lewis et al (2006) Op. cit.

[57] Ofsted (2010) Op. cit.

[58] Tissot et al (2007) Through inclusion to excellence: Moving from policy to practice

[59] Ofsted (2006) and Ofsted (2010) Op. cit.

and colleges is critical in ensuring this capacity[60][61][62]. In recent years there have been changes to ITT with training increasingly taking place in schools and resources being provided to support teachers in identifying and supporting pupils with particular types of SEN which have been reported to be effective[63].

The reforms to the national curriculum that will come into effect in September 2014[64] aim to give schools and teachers the freedom to teach in the way they know works. This ambition supports the use of evidence to determine teaching strategies, including strategies for supporting pupils with SEN. We are keen to understand how the changes to the curriculum and arrangements for assessing pupils' progress affect the support offered to pupils with SEN, how they access the curriculum and their outcomes, particularly when compared to schools that are not following the new curriculum.

The changes to the national curriculum are accompanied by reforms to GCSE assessment, introducing end of course exam based assessment. The evidence is not clear on what the impact of this may be for pupils with SEN, and as acknowledged in the equality assessment for reform of maths and English GCSEs[65] impact may be mitigated by fully considering accessibility when designing the qualifications. We are interested in understanding how the new GCSE courses are experienced by teachers and pupils with SEN and the effect on outcomes achieved by pupils.

Changes to post-16 education following the Wolf Review will also have an impact including the implementation of study programmes, funding flexibilities and how colleges can now tailor packages of education to meet individual needs with even greater flexibilities when it comes to those with more complex needs. We are interested to understand the impact of these changes and the effect on outcomes for young people.

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[60] Salt (2010) Independent Review of Teacher Supply for Pupils with Severe, Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties (SLD and PMLD)

[61] Ellis et al (2012) Reflection, renewal and reality: Teachers' experience of special educational needs and inclusion.

[62] DfE (2013) Newly qualified teachers: annual survey 2013 (69% of primary trainees and 74% of secondary rating it as good or very good in 2013 up from 40% and 46% in 2002)

[63] Lindsay et al (2011) Evaluation of impact of DfE investment in initiatives designed to improve teacher workforce skills in relation to SEN and disabilities.

[64] Evidence and identified gaps around Assessment, Curriculum and Qualifications will be further addressed in an additional paper available from the research priorities pages on gov.uk website.

[65] DfE (2013) GCSE Reform Equality Analysis

Future priorities

The department wishes this Research Priorities and Questions Paper to develop a process of engagement with our stakeholders in examining and identifying longer term trends in the SEN and disability field, develop and promote effective evidence-based practice as well as finding ways of making better use of the information we already have.

These questions are intended to be reviewed at regular intervals, as gaps are addressed and new areas for investigation arise.

Measuring System Performance

- How can innovative methods be used to measure the performance of the SEN system? What additional outcome measures are available?

Identification

- What methods are schools, colleges and early education settings using to identify children and young people with SEN and what evidence are they based on? Does the method and process of identification make a difference to provision and outcomes?
- Is there a variation between local areas in identifying and classification of SEN need and level? What are the factors leading to such variation?
- What is driving the increase in identification of SEN at lower levels of provision and over and under representation of different groups of children within this cohort? What evidence is there of good practice nationally and internationally to reduce this?

What works: developing an evidence based sector

- Which approaches to teaching and learning have been demonstrated as having positive impact on educational attainment for particular groups of children and young people with SEN? Is the quality of our evidence base robust enough to make meaningful comparisons across different interventions and approaches?
- How does the approach to SEN and disability categorisation, identification, provision and planning in England compare to other countries, and what are the associated differences in outcomes? Are there any examples of best practice that can be identified internationally that would be relevant in England?
- How can developments and new research in neuroscience be utilised to inform practice in assessing and supporting young people with SEN?

Wider education reform

- What differences are there in the types of support provided in different types of schools and colleges? What impact do these differences have on the outcomes of children and young people?
- Which approaches to assessment of achievement are most effective for children and young people with SEN? Are schools and colleges changing their approaches in light of reforms of curriculum/study programmes and assessment arrangements?
- Are school and college funding reforms changing the support for children and young people with SEN in different settings?
- How are changes to teacher education impacting on the competence and capacity of the workforce in identifying and supporting children and young people with SEN and disabilities?

Medium and long-term outlook

- Has there been a cultural shift in the ways in which education, health and social care professionals work together and with families reflecting the increased aspiration and following the reforms in SEN and Adult Care?
- How can a more family focused approach be sustained over time?
- Which factors promote effective engagement with parents and young people at individual and strategic level? What impact does engagement have on outcomes?
- Which factors encourage effective collaboration between local partner organisations? What are the efficiencies and savings of integrated working?
- In what ways will the size and demography of the SEN and disability population change nationally, locally and by subgroup in the medium- to long- term? Are there effective ways of modelling this to predict future demand on services and consider the capacity needed to meet demand?
- How are the reforms to the health service and adult social care affecting the support being made available to children and young people with SEN and Disabilities?

Engaging with Future priorities

We would like individuals or organisations to respond to this and you can do this in various ways:

- Share with DfE any existing research evidence or current work relevant to questions. Email to Research.PRIORITIES@education.gsi.gov.uk.
- Prioritise research effort or bids in the light of the evidence questions.
- Debate evidence gaps and priorities with your own associations or other stakeholders. DfE would be interested to hear any views emerging - email as above.
- Follow us and join the discussion on Twitter (@educationgovuk)
- Like us on Facebook (www.facebook.com/educationgovuk)