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**Mainstreaming pupils with
special educational needs**

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Mainstreaming pupils with special educational needs

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Introduction

Section 15 of the *Standards in Scotland's Schools etc Act 2000* came into effect in August 2003, and introduced what is now commonly referred to as the 'presumption of mainstreaming' in relation to pupils with special educational needs. This means that the onus is now on education authorities to place children – including those with disabilities – in a mainstream school. According to the legislation, a decision may be made to educate a child in a special school in the following circumstances: when education in a school other than a special school would not be suited to the ability or the aptitude of the child; would be incompatible with the provision of efficient education for the children with whom the child is being educated; or would result in unreasonable public expenditure. The net effect of this is that schools are now required to provide for a wider range of pupils with special educational needs than they would have had to prior to the introduction of the legislation. Education authorities have to take account of parents' views in reaching a decision about a placement, and parents have the right of appeal if they disagree with the placement proposed by the authority.

The term special educational needs is used throughout this report, as the *Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004* was still at the bill stage when the research began. One of the changes enshrined in the new Act is the adoption of the term additional support needs, which is considerably wider in scope than its predecessor. This change in nomenclature signals a general recognition that *all* children or young people may have additional support needs at some stage in their school career. In sum, the consensus is that it is not necessarily exceptional to have additional support needs, although in some cases these support needs will be exceptional.

The main aims of the research reported here were to examine the response of education authorities throughout Scotland to Section 15; and to assess its impact on all those involved – pupils, parents and teachers, and others involved in supporting children and young people with special educational needs.

About the evaluation

The evaluation comprised four main strands.

Strand 1: comparative statistical analysis of secondary school census data (from 1998–2001),¹ and of school-level data;

Strand 2: a survey of policy and practice in the 32 education authorities in respect of mainstreaming pupils with special educational needs;

Strand 3: case-study research in 12 locations;

Strand 4: survey of free-standing special schools.

If all children can have additional support needs at some time, what does the notion of 'mainstream' mean?

¹ Statistical data on the number of children and young people with SEN in mainstream primary and secondary schools in Scotland was collected in a consistent manner between 1998 and 2001. From 2002 onwards, the number of pupils with a Record of Needs (RoN) and/or an Individualised Educational Programme (IEP) was recorded rather than the number of pupils designated as having SEN.

The historical legacy

It was widely anticipated that the *Standards in Scotland's Schools etc Act 2000* would lead to an increase in the number of children and young people with special educational needs in mainstream schools (Audit Scotland, 2003). However, the evidence from the study reported here suggests that the 'movement to mainstream' predated the implementation of Section 15, and in many cases dates back to local government reorganisation in Scotland during the period 1995–1998. In a small number of authorities (Angus, Clackmannanshire, East Lothian and Moray) specialist provision was no longer available within the new authority's boundaries after local government reorganisation; and several other authorities (for example, East Dunbartonshire, East Renfrewshire, Midlothian, Perth and Kinross, and South Lanarkshire) saw a substantial reduction in the number and range of specialist facilities available in the local area. As one local authority respondent explained: '[After local government reorganisation] ... the drive to avoid placing children in residential provision resulted in mainstreaming well in advance of the legislation' And another commented that 'one of the least satisfactory aspects of the mainstreaming policy ... is the perception that "inclusion" pupils are new to mainstream'.

What implications does the diversity of local authority responses have for the creation of a level playing field in respect of inclusion?

Analysis of inter-authority placement patterns in the 12 authorities that comprised the former Strathclyde Region revealed that the number of children with special educational needs placed in mainstream and in special schools outside their home authority in 2001 and in 2003 has remained relatively constant. These patterns account for some of the variation between local authorities in respect of the percentage of pupils with special educational needs educated in a mainstream setting. The cities of Glasgow and Edinburgh continue to act as magnet providers of special school placements. Professor Sheila Riddell of the University of Edinburgh described the situation that obtained in the late 1990s as 'high mainstreaming in outlying areas, low mainstreaming in cities' (Royal Society of Edinburgh, 2001). The evidence from this study suggests that this pattern has persisted to some extent. In 2001, 33 per cent of pupils recorded as having special educational needs were being educated in mainstream schools in Glasgow (and 14 per cent in mainstream schools outwith the authority). However, in that same year – prior to the implementation of Section 15–72 per cent of pupils with special educational needs were being educated in mainstream schools in Edinburgh, and 93 per cent in Dundee. These data reinforce the point that the movement to mainstream predated the legislation. They also underline the extent to which local authorities have responded to inclusion in different ways, depending on the situation that has prevailed in their authority since local government reorganisation.

Is it feasible (or desirable) to break the pattern of 'high mainstreaming in outlying areas, low mainstreaming in cities'?

Moving to mainstream

So what has changed? The evidence from the survey of local authorities certainly suggests that there have been substantial efforts to provide for children with moderate learning difficulties, and those with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, visual or hearing impairments and autistic spectrum disorders in mainstream settings; and indeed that this is their initial placement. However, it should be borne in mind that very few authorities were able to provide an estimate of the number of children being educated in mainstream schools who would previously have attended special schools or units. This is clearly an issue that will need to be addressed in future if there is to be effective monitoring of the impact of the new legislation.

What resources need to be put in place if authorities are to monitor effectively the systemic impact of the presumption of mainstreaming?

The need for clear definitions of 'resourced provision'

One possible explanation for the apparent absence of this type of monitoring at local authority level is that 'resourced provision' (variously described as 'cluster bases', 'specialist bases attached to the mainstream' or 'pupil support units' in the responses to the local authority survey) is a rather fluid concept. The development of this type of provision was widely attributed to local government reorganisation. Private Finance Initiative (PFI) and Public Private Partnership (PPP) projects were also considered to have provided further impetus to these developments. The continuum of provision visited in the course of this study encompassed everything from a largely self-contained unit for pupils with autistic spectrum disorders located within a mainstream secondary school to a learning support base within a mainstream secondary that provided an alternative curriculum for about 35 pupils in S1 to S4. In the latter case, there was some input from subject specialists to enhance the curriculum provided by the Support for Learning Department. We also visited a unit for children with severe motor difficulties located in an urban primary school. Here the model of inclusion was that all teaching and learning should take place within the mainstream classroom.

Inter-authority variations

The large variation in the number of special units in each authority (according to the data provided by the local authorities themselves) appears to support the recommendation put forward by the authors of *Moving to Mainstream* (Audit Scotland, 2003): namely, that the Scottish Executive 'should clarify the definition of a mainstream school and the status of special units and bases in mainstream schools' (p 17). The following quotation (from a respondent to the local authority survey) certainly suggests that the rationale for the development of unit-based provision for children and young people with special educational needs may not be quite as 'inclusive' as it first appears: 'we have developed more special units, but this is more to take the pressure of mainstream schools ...'

How can the 'inclusiveness' of 'resource-based' provision be monitored?

Monitoring

Local authorities were asked whether they routinely monitored the experiences and outcomes of children who had transferred from special schools/units into mainstream provision. The responses indicate that this was the case in the majority of authorities (22). The mechanism through which this was generally achieved was the annual review. This may be taken as evidence that at the systemic level, the focus is still rather on meeting the needs of individual pupils than on monitoring and evaluating possible changes in placement patterns across the board.

Fluid conceptions of 'main difficulties of learning'

The statistical evidence from the school census data indicates that local authorities may be operating with rather different constructions of some of the 'main difficulties of learning'. For example, the 2004 census data show large inter-authority variations, not just in the number and percentage of children described as having social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, but also in respect of those with moderate learning difficulties and specific learning difficulties in language and/or mathematics (including dyslexia). These too are rather fluid concepts. As Wilson (2002) has pointed out, 'whether someone has a special need is not a matter of empirical fact: it calls rather for a judgement of value'. These inter-authority variations are further evidence of the fluidity of concepts such as autistic spectrum disorder, and more especially social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. As the evidence from one of the case study schools suggests, children on the autistic spectrum may exhibit behaviour that is incongruous and challenging, and which

severely disrupts teaching and learning. It is possible that the perceived rise in the incidence of challenging behaviour in schools, and indeed in the overall incidence of social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, is related to the reported increase in the number of children on the autistic spectrum. However, as MacLeod and Munn (2004) point out, there is also a 'lack of consensus as to what SEBD actually is' and 'broad agreement in the literature that the definition of SEBD is problematic' (p 71).

The research evidence suggests that many of the 'main difficulties of learning' are fluid concepts. What are the implications of this for policy development?

The challenges of inclusion

The evidence from the local authority survey suggests that children with physical impairments are generally considered to benefit more from mainstream provision than their peers with severe, profound or complex and multiple impairments. There was a range of opinion on how effective mainstream provision was for children with autistic spectrum disorders. This may be explained in part by differential diagnoses for this condition. One local authority respondent noted that

...some children with autistic spectrum disorders (such as those with Asperger's) can be accommodated within the mainstream. However, children with classic autism struggle to benefit.

Who's afraid of the big bad wolf?

We were told time and time again that it was much easier to include a child with physical or sensory impairments in a mainstream setting than to include a child with challenging behaviour. The staff at Assam PS had prepared meticulously for the arrival of Alister, who has cerebral palsy, and whose parents wanted him to attend a mainstream school in their own community. The DHT, the class teacher, the PT learning support visited the private nursery he attended with an occupational therapist and a physiotherapist, and the video footage recorded there had helped other staff (particularly the learning support auxiliary) in their preparations. Alister presented relatively few behavioural challenges. His needs were predictable, as were the practical and social implications of his inclusion in a mainstream class. He presented relatively few challenges to the value system of the school. The main challenge facing the senior management team was to ensure that Alister did not achieve mascot status, and was not singled out for special treatment. The local authority had offered practical support by capping class sizes to accommodate the additional equipment and staff in Alister's classroom.

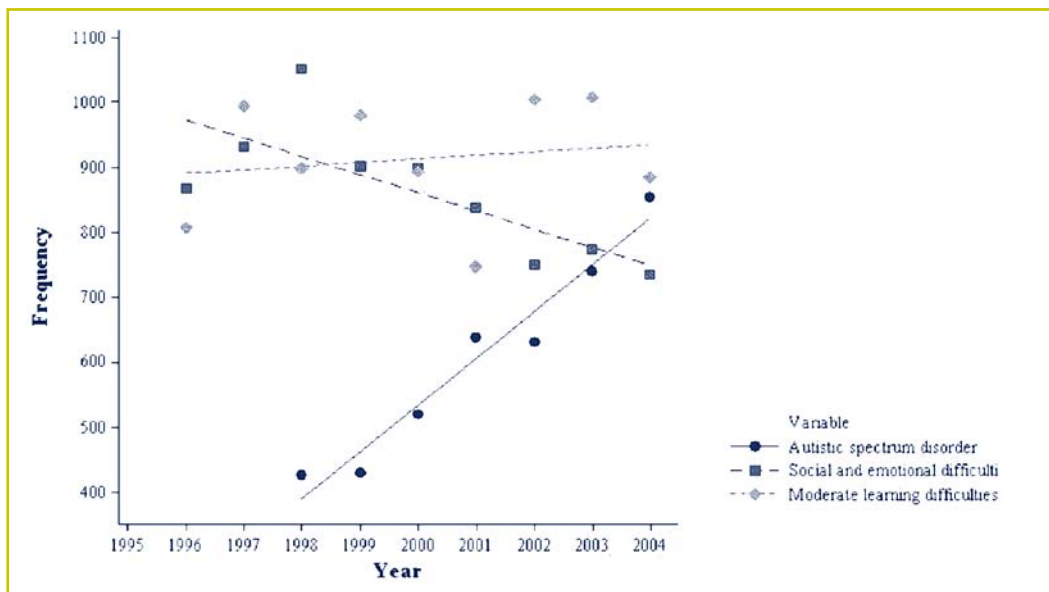
Similarly, Jackie, the DHT in Jasmine PS reported that David, a child with brittle bone disease elicited a kind of engagement and commitment from staff that was not always there for children with communication difficulties, or whose behaviour disrupted the normal flow of events. David has a very visible, very striking disability and his staffing allocation is 'written in tablets of stone.' The fact that he had such an engaging personality (shaped, no doubt, by the positive climate at home), and that he posed no threat to the culture of the school, reinforced this positive commitment. He was widely considered an asset to the school. Jackie was clearly taken aback by the negative attitudes of some teachers to children who present with behavioural difficulties. She reported a tendency to talk about the child rather than the behaviour, and reiterated that children without any clearly visible disability tended to elicit less sympathy because they could make teachers' working lives very hard. She also thought that other children also had a more negative view of those who were disruptive.

The impact of mainstreaming on the special school sector

What has been the impact of the presumption of mainstreaming on the special school population? Readers may be surprised to learn that there are no straight answers to this question. This is partly because of other systemic developments that have impacted upon the sector over the same period. For example, recent advances in medical science have meant that more children with complex co-morbidities are now surviving infancy and entering the school population.

It is important to bear these developments in mind when considering that there have been only minor fluctuations in the percentage of the school-aged population in special schools in the last decade. In 1996, the special school population represented 1.05 per cent of the total school population (primary and secondary). It peaked in 2000 at 1.11 per cent, and by 2004, it had declined to 1.02 per cent. Given the developments reported above, it is perhaps surprising that there has been no steep decline in the number of children described as having moderate learning difficulties or social, emotional and behavioural difficulties who are being educated in the special school sector. It is also significant that since 1998, the year that autistic spectrum disorders first appeared as a category of main difficulty in learning, there has been a steady rise in the number of children and young people with these conditions who are being educated in special schools (see Figure 1). The evidence from the special school survey further supports the statistical evidence from the school census.

Figure 1: Characteristics of the special school population, 1995–2004



Special school rolls

It is important to state at the outset that there is no clear trend in respect of an increase or decrease in roll in the 119 free-standing special schools that responded to the survey. (The response rate for this survey was 65 per cent.). In 39 per cent of cases, there was a reported increase in the school roll over the previous five years; and in 37 per cent of the responding special schools, a decrease.

Age profile

What does appear to be happening, however, is that the age profile of the special school population is changing, and that the majority of children and young people currently attending free-standing special schools are of secondary school age. The statistical evidence relating to the age of pupils currently being educated in special schools

supports the hypothesis that the presumption of mainstreaming has resulted in the placement of more children with special needs in mainstream primary schools. One respondent to the special school survey reported that 'there are fewer children coming into the school at the P1 stage than there were five years ago.' There is no available data on the educational pathways of individual pupils. However, some of the evidence from the special school survey gives rise to the speculation that some young people currently attending special schools may have experienced a mixed economy of provision in the past.

One possible explanation for the over-representation of older children in the special school population is that the process of ascertaining the most appropriate placement can be protracted and difficult for all parties, as the following example from the case studies illustrates.

A little bit different ...

Mrs Black's son David was in S2 at Dragon Well special school. David had started off his school career in an urban mainstream school. His mother reported that he 'had always been a little bit different', but that 'things were going o.k. until the end of P4, but things really began to fall apart in P5'. Psychological services became involved at this point, but no definitive diagnosis was reached. He was referred to a specialist psychiatric unit, and diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome at the end of P6. By this stage he had become deeply distressed. His mother described him as 'depressed, unstable, and difficult to live with'. Despite the supportive attitude of the senior management team, David was excluded from school on twelve occasions. David started to attend Dragon Well at the beginning of S2. Although she reported that David still 'hated school', Mrs Black felt that Dragon Well was 'small enough to be flexible', and that the staff 'were willing to try different strategies'.

The changing nature of the special school population

The evidence from the special school survey points unequivocally to a perceived increase in the range and complexity of conditions catered for in individual special schools. Furthermore, a substantial minority of headteachers (32 per cent of those who stated that the needs of their school populations had changed over the last five years) reported an increase in the number of children with autistic spectrum disorders and those who presented challenging behaviour and/or were experiencing mental health difficulties. The following quotations illustrate the ramifications of the changing nature of the population in some special schools, and the need for education authorities to monitor closely the provision being made by individual schools:

Due to the complex difficulties of our pupils, the school has provided a differentiated service. This has required an increase in all staff and wider provision of therapeutic services. *(Special school headteacher)*

The range of pupils is unsuitable for one establishment. We now have potentially violent pupils alongside the most vulnerable ... The range is unmanageable, and very worrying in terms of securing the safety of some of the most vulnerable... *(Special school headteacher)*

Links with mainstream schools

The findings from the special school survey also indicate that there has been a gradual increase in the level of contact between special schools and mainstream schools. This took the form of a reported increase in the number of part-time placements and close liaison between staff in the two types of establishment. For example:

I'm completely for it [inclusion] as long as it suits the child. We have seen really positive changes in our children but we work very closely with mainstream schools and parents to ensure everything goes well. (*Special school headteacher*)

These findings augur well for the progressive re-negotiation of the role of special schools within the inclusive education agenda. It will be important to the development and maintenance of professional expertise in the following key areas: communication and interaction; cognition and learning; social, emotional and behavioural difficulties; and sensory and/or physical needs. Staff with specialist expertise in these areas are likely to play a vital role in ensuring the ultimate success of the inclusion policy. There is clearly a role for special schools as providers of advice, support and training to staff in mainstream schools who are facing new challenges in meeting the needs of increasingly diverse school populations.

What is the future role of the special school sector within a policy framework of inclusion?

The impact of mainstreaming on attainment

We encountered several examples of situations where the presence of a child with challenging behaviour was considered to have a deleterious effect. However, the broader picture is that there is no evidence from the statistical analysis of the Scottish school census data that the presence of pupils with SEN has had an effect – positive or negative – upon pupils' attainment. (As with the attendance data, univariate analysis of variance relating to attainment was confined to the years for which there were data on the number of pupils with RoN/SEN.) This is consistent with the findings reported in a study of inclusion and pupil attainment conducted by Alan Dyson and colleagues on behalf of the Department for Education and Skills in England (Dyson *et al*, 2004). The researchers found 'no evidence of a relationship between inclusion and attainment at LEA level', and 'a very small and negative statistical relationship between the level of inclusivity in a school and the attainments of its pupils.' The authors go on to observe that 'the possibility that this is a causal relationship cannot entirely be ruled out, though this seems unlikely.' (Executive Summary, p 11).

Conclusion

The historical legacy of school provision in Scotland means that there is considerable variation in the amount of political leverage afforded by the presumption of mainstreaming. There are good reasons why the pattern of 'high mainstreaming in outlying areas' and 'low mainstreaming in cities' first observed by Riddell still persists (Royal Society of Edinburgh, 2001). These have to do with the choices available to parents of children with SEN, and a number of other largely contingent variables. These include the reputation of the local school, the nature of the child's needs, the perspectives of the family and of the health professionals and educational advisers who provide counsel and support. It should also be borne in mind that another key plank of education policy in respect of inclusion is the empowerment of parents to make informed decisions about their children's future. This has been achieved through initiatives such as Enquire, the independent Scottish advice service for Additional Support for Learning, managed by Children in Scotland and funded by the Scottish Executive. There are also parents who – for some of the reasons outlined above – prefer the special school option, and the mainstreaming legislation enables full account to be taken of their views. This is one of the factors that makes inclusion a contingent, means-oriented project rather than one governed by the logic of instrumental rationality. The fact that there are two distinct viewpoints, one put forward by a group of parents who prefer specialist provision, and another by a group that prefers their children to attend their local school, presents a significant challenge for policy-makers.

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