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Author(s) :

John Griffiths

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Provision for Children described as Having Special Educational Needs in a County Primary School

Abstract :

This is a detailed examination of the processes a child can go through once they have been identified as having "Special Needs". Although the observations are from one school the detailed analysis of the official and unofficial procedures provides valuable insights into the impact of existing SEN legislation on individuals described as having special educational needs.

For further information contact:

Karen Barton (k.barton@bolton.ac.uk), Bolton Institute, Chadwick Street, Bolton, BL2 1JW, England

Provision for children with SEN at a County Primary School:

Description:

Circumstances of observation at school:

I visited a County Primary School on Monday 13th February. My visit to the school was arranged through a colleague on the course who is a parent of children who attend the school. The visit took place a week after an OFSTED inspection of the school had finished. I attended a classroom English session with one class of thirty-five, which is “about average” in terms of class size in this school. The size of the class is above the thirty pupils per class which will be the statutory limit on infant class sizes by September 2001 (Section 1 of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 and the Education (Infant Class Sizes) (England) Regulations 1998 (S.I. 1998/1973)). According to Bennett (1998), for example, a large majority of each sample from 1996 national survey in the UK indicated that classes were too large and that this had a negative impact on teaching and learning. There is an evident need for smaller classes of at most 30 students per class.

Sources of information:

After observing the class we were able to interview the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) who was also the class teacher. The roles and responsibilities of the SENCO are considerable and have increased substantially since the introduction of the 1994 Code of Practice, raising questions about the extent to which SENCO's teaching commitments should be reduced (Farrel, 1998). I was also able to question my colleague who is a parent of a child in the class who is on stage 2 in the class to avail myself of a parent's perspective and themes that have emerged in her many informal talks with both the SENCO and the school's Learning Support Assistant. Further to this the SENCO had previously answered in writing a list of questions compiled by myself and colleague, which we then followed up in our interview.

Staff involvement in provision for pupils with SEN:

Apart from the SENCO there is a special needs support teacher who works with this particular class for two sessions of twenty minutes per week, following a phonic program for literacy. Class teachers initially assess children at the Stage 1 level (in consultation with the SENCO), the SENCO is responsible for assessment at Stage 2, and an outside Educational Psychologist for assessment at Stage 3 and above.

Service users:

The class we observed served as an example for this piece of work of special needs provision and inclusion in practice, and contained four pupils on stage one and six on stage two of the identification

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procedure as laid down in the Code of Practice in the Assessment and Identification of Special Educational Needs (DfE, 1994, pi). Within the school there are two children who are statemented, although neither of these are in the class I was able to observe.

Goals of Service:

The goals of the service according to the SENCO are to provide equality of opportunity, to recognise pupils' difficulties and cater for these as best they can, and to use with the resources of outside agencies where possible. The school has a published policy for special needs provision, although this "needs updating" [SENCO interview] as it was written three years ago and was unavailable for inspection at the time of our visit.

Evaluation

Background of developments in legislation for SEN provision:

This essay will evaluate the practice of special needs provision at the School in terms of a social constructionist theoretical approach to children with SEN. The principles and definitions governing their education have developed in a way that is broadly comparable with progress in relation to other disadvantaged groups in society. At the same time, provision for children with SEN has, in the last two decades, been continuously affected by major policy changes with regard to the funding and management of schools. These include the wide and deep-ranging development of legislation which increases the control and regulation of education through central policies (Clough, 1998).

In the Education Act 1996 a child is classified as having SEN if s/he has a "learning difficulty" – defined as "a significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of children of his (sic) age" (Ch. 56, para. 312). A change in the way in which SEN is viewed within educational legislation was ushered in by the Warnock report (DfES, 1978). Prior to that decisions about children with SEN were framed by the character of individual impairments rather than by any broad principle of educational entitlement. Tomlinson (1981), for instance, showed how the assessment of children identified as "educationally subnormal" consisted of procedures for categorising educational needs in terms of "handicap". Within the Warnock report the focus was expanded not only to take into account environmental and social influences on children's difficulties at school, but also to identify schools as a context within which children's educational needs may be created (Armstrong, 1998). The 1981 Education Act took up many of the Warnock report recommendations; "special needs" were assumed to be educational rather than medical and to exist on a variable continuum. In taking this into account provision is now based upon the principle that, "so far as possible" special educational provision shall be in a mainstream rather than a special school (Robinson, 1996). As part of the 1993 Education Act, Part 3, a Code of Practice on Identification and Assessment of Special Needs is now published. This

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document, which details many of the procedures which are to be followed with regard to SEN provision, has a status between a regulation, which is mandatory, and a circular, which is advisory (Cowne, 1996). The code incorporates the principle of integration of pupils with and without SEN, within which there should be maximum participation in the national curriculum. There is a stage system (stages run from 1-5 in ascending order of need) within which a child will be placed upon assessment, which should be according to the extent of the child's needs.

Assessing a child as having SEN:

Taking a social constructionist approach to evaluating SEN provision involves an expansion of the field of inquiry beyond just the specific classroom and school being observed. As Burr (1995, pg. 5) puts it, "knowledge and social action go together". The question we pose and the answers we obtain are framed in ways which are fundamentally related to the activities which are being carried out (Nightingale & Crombie, 1999). The categorisation of children as having SEN is a highly political act. It also has implications in terms of resources which may be allocated to provision for SEN. The wider the definition, the larger the demand for extra resources that may be created. The figures in the Warnock report which have been widely accepted, suggest that 2% of children will have SEN to the degree that statementing is required, whilst 20% of children will at some point in their school trajectory come within the classification of having SEN. Since SEN are not now solely organised in terms of organic dysfunction or "handicap" within individual children, the assessment children for SEN may be recognised as being a site of social and political construction, the ramifications of which can be debated and challenged.

Theoretically, the fact that stage 1 SEN pupils are in large part assessed by class teachers, and stage 2 pupils by SENCO's responds to demands that there should be careful and consistent monitoring procedures prior to the formal assessment of a child's needs by an educational psychologist at stage 3. It was apparent from the school visit that in practice a child's being put forward for assessment for stage 3 SEN is dependent not just on their SENCO's judgement of their needs, but on their position relative to other children in the school for a limited number of "places" available for assessment by the educational psychologist. This reflects an increasingly stringent allocation of resources by the LEA; the school is now allocated approximately 28 hours per year of the educational psychologist's time. "It didn't used to be like that it used to be according to need but now we've got so many hours of her time... so if we get any children to put forward for testing half our time goes because she has to work out the results and everything and the paperwork back in the office... she counts that as her time... well you can knock four of those off (the 28 hours/year) or five, six off... just have two planning meetings... and we're expected to prioritise the children... that we think are the greatest need in the school er... but that doesn't mean that we've not got other children that we think need

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support... we just can't put them forward... there isn't time" [SENCO interview]. In this way the theoretical role of the SENCO is qualified by limitations on local authority resources.

The SENCO at the school identified the arbitrary nature of the 2% figure (of children expected to be classified as stage 3 or higher) as having further practical effects that impede provision for SEN at the school. The 2% figure is not merely descriptive of the percentage of pupils that will need statementing. It is used in practice as a cut off to which pupils can be statemented. Children who are put forward to be assessed by the educational psychologist undergo testing which results in a standardised score that can be compared to national figures. If the child achieves a score which is "in the bottom 2% of what the population scores on any particular test then they will accept them as they do need extra help... if they get 3%... which basically means they can't do... they can do very little... then they're not accepted for extra support.. and that's the criteria that Manchester have got at the moment" [SENCO interview]. Davie (1996) indicates that the number of pupils requiring statements is 2.86% of the school population, and that this will vary from region to region. Over 248000 pupils or 3% of all pupils in schools had statements of SEN in 1999 (DfEE, 1999). An individual child's classification at level 3 is therefore not just a reflection of his or her needs but the result, according to Galloway, Armstrong & Tomlinson (1994) of a political compromise based on a statistical artefact.

A social constructionist approach is useful here because it allows for the conceptualisation of assessment as being much more than a value neutral activity in the way that psychologists looking for more traditional psychological frameworks would tend to. The blocks to assessment at stage 3 impact on the classroom I observed in that there are no children at stage 3 in it, although according to the SENCO some of the children do need extra help as provided for at stage 3. The child at stage 3 and beyond is positioned as having certain moral rights in legislature beyond those of other children. Whilst the Code of Practice was established at a national level, the resource implications are at local and school level. It can be seen that children who are not recorded or statemented, but who are seen by parents or professionals as having SEN by parents or school professionals are thought to be disadvantaged by not having a label which distinguishes them clearly from other pupils. As Allan (1996) points out, in a climate of resource constraints, distance from the norm has become valued.

The assessing and testing of children with SEN can also be viewed as a disciplinary technique through which they are constructed in a similar way to that described by Foucault in his analysis of groups such as the madman, the patient and the criminal (e.g. Foucault, 1973). As Allan (1996) points out, all children are the objects of scrutiny within the school system, but for pupils with SEN the gaze reaches further. They are observed not just at work in the classroom, but also during break times. Their relationships with their peers and with adults, as well as information from parents about the pupil in the home context will also be noted as part of "good record keeping" (Cowne, 1996). All

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aspects of the child's interpersonal relationships may therefore be kept under scrutiny to a degree that mainstream pupils would not be scrutinised. The 18% (using the Warnock figure) of children who do not require statementing are mostly children who would previously have been educated in mainstream schools before the policies of inclusion and integration came about. All of this focus on the individual child can serve to obscure the ways in which children with SEN as subjects are an institutional creation. Special needs are not noticed in a vacuum but appear against a background of "normal" ability and performance and it is this which gives them relief. They are noticed because students fail to meet the requirements of a given curriculum, which is increasingly an explicitly political selection from culture. The child's interaction with the curriculum, according to Clough (1998, pg.6) "tells us something about him or her, but it also tells us a great deal about the curriculum. Thus we have tended to reify a notional disability rather than attend to the broader and much more elusive curricular data of which any given failing is an abstraction."

The national curriculum elevates the cognitive-intellectual domain above others such as the aesthetic-creative, physical-motor, social-interpersonal and so on. Children with who fall in the lower percentiles of achievement in one domain would not necessarily do so in others. It is the elevation of particular kinds of knowledge that produces children who fail (Clough, 1998). Even within the cognitive-intellectual domain at the school some of the children who are recorded on the Record of Needs are, for instance "much better at maths than they are at English" [SENCO interview].

Assessment, integration and inclusion:

The space in which the child receives special education is significant in relation to claims that the child is integrated. Ideal notions of integration are largely concerned with children with SEN and ordinary children sharing spaces, with the most pervasive sharing also seen as the most successful. In this school for instance, all the children share the same classes for most of the time. Locational, social and curricular integration have a tendency to be regarded as progressive stages for children with SEN. Within this school, there do not seem to be problems with social integration in that "At the same time it is the increased physical proximity that is often cited as evidence of integration and is subjected to maximum surveillance" (Allan, 1998). Within this diverse classroom setting, however, group categorisation is still applied. Children are divided into groups based on their achievements in their SAT's, in the class I observed, the group of children with SEN was labelled the red group (the other groups were also labelled by colours). The children sit together each group at a different table (this is not the SENCO's decision), and differentiated tasks are then set for each group during the lesson; "the text is directed towards the middle of the class... so you have to then add questions on for the brighter ones and you know... even say "what does this word begin with" for the red ones" [SENCO interview]. The status in terms of inclusion of those children who cannot be put forward for

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assessment for stage 3 for the reasons described above is even more questionable, since some of them may well fall below the 2% cutoff point, yet they do not receive the legislated extra support guaranteed them when stated.

Factors which tend to maintain the child's classification once assessed:

One significant aspect of the assessment being on-going is that identification of SEN should not lead to life-long labelling (Armstrong, 1998), it being recognised that the child may in the future be reassessed and de-categorised as having SEN. Where support is needed but not provided to a sufficient extent, then again the practice of SEN provision may serve to maintain the child within the classification. Another consequence of the Code of Practice's demands for detailed assessment and planning is the effect of adding to the administrative and bureaucratic load on teachers and particularly SENCO's (Cowne, 1996). At this school the SENCO is also a class teacher; about half of SENCO's are also class or subject teachers (Evans, Docking, Bentley & Evans, 1995), and one factor that particularly impedes her work is the "lack of release time from classroom teaching" [SENCO interview]. The school cannot afford to pay a supply teacher to cover her class, so the many functions that a SENCO is supposed to fulfil as part of adequate provision for children with SEN are sometimes unachievable or only partly achievable in practice. The SENCO at ACPS has been unable, for instance to maintain an updated published policy for SEN due to simple lack of time.

Conclusion:

Despite the move towards inclusive education for children with SEN, from a social constructionist point of view the maintenance of a system of categorisation and labelling in terms of achievement on a too-inflexible curriculum creates children who fail at school. A key site of contention in literature and the evolution of educational policy on SEN is the location of the problem/s of a child with SEN. Positivist assumptions within the field have traditionally legitimated a form of psychological and individual reductionism which view difficulties as residing within the child concerned. From a social constructionist point of view both research and legislation on SEN creates the objects of its inquiry or provision beginning with the first moment of identification of the topic.

In approaching the subject in this way, radical alternatives to the present organisation of provision are suggested. Reiser (1995), for instance points out that a focus on the individual child rather than the curriculum and how it needs to change has led to isolation, exclusion and separation. From a social constructionist perspective ending the categorisation and labelling of *all* pupils would be conducive to attending to children's needs on an individual basis. The curriculum should be flexible enough to fit the child, so that failure is avoided and children's strengths are developed, encouraged and given legitimacy in terms of educational achievement. Educational achievement therefore would need to be redefined across the board for all children.

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Within the classroom I observed at the school, it is obvious that such a radical change of approach would have many practical consequences, e.g. the separation into groups within the classroom based on bands of ability would need to be discontinued. In fact the changes suggested would involve a reorganisation of the entire system of education for all pupils. This reframing in terms of every individual child's needs would require much more in the way of additional resources, and this is a factor central to the problems of provision in practice even with respect to current legislation.

There are also criticisms of the anti-labelling stance of social constructionists. Soder (1989, pg. 255) for example criticises this as dangerous; "This well meaning denial of the problems of disabled people is developing as a professional ideology in a time when service structures are undergoing changes that in themselves tend to make the needs for disabled persons invisible. Segregation is abolished and integration, deinstitutionalisation and decentralisation is being implemented. The driving forces behind this development are twofold. First there is the well intentioned ideological commitment: not to label and treat separately, but to integrate. Second the financial crisis of the state that motivates the search for less expensive alternatives."

The social constructionist approach, in being able to incorporate societal and political aspects within its theoretical framework has major advantages over positivist psychological theories. The conclusions reached in evaluating provision at this school therefore also necessarily involve societal and political change. Ultimately the education system we as a society are prepared to pay for will be reflected in its ability to meet the needs of all pupils, including those of children with SEN.

In this evaluation of provision at this school, whilst I was able to speak with the SENCO and a parent of a child with a Record of Needs, I did not speak to any of the children with SEN about the issues. This partly reflects a concern on my part about the ethics of bringing up these issues with the children as an undergraduate student, and the status of this assignment as a 4000 word piece of coursework. Nevertheless, it reproduces what is the norm in research into SEN, which is the exclusion of children's voices.

From the limited extent of my observation it appears to me that SEN provision at this school fulfils the SENCO's stated goal of recognising pupils' difficulties and catering for these as best they can, and using the resources of outside agencies where possible. To summarise the shortcomings of provision I have identified, there are the limitations on access to an educational psychologist which result in children not being put forward for stage 3 assessment. The limitation, where children are put forward, of their being Statemented only where they fall below the bottom 2% of children on standardised tests. There is also the lack of release time from classroom teaching for the SENCO resulting in her struggling to combine the multitude of functions a SENCO is supposed to fulfil with normal teaching

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work. These are all resource related and point to a problem of underfunding within the present system of provision. Further shortcomings are at a more ideological level, relating to the systems of assessment and categorisation that are long standing in the developmental history of educational provision in the UK, and impinge particularly on children with SEN because they are the low scorers on current tests. The curriculum is clearly a big part of this, in that it fails to sufficiently value children whose abilities don't lie in the cognitive-intellectual domain, and fails to give them a chance of "success" at school.

Within the Education Act (1996) it is stated that children with SEN should normally be educated in mainstream schools. A child may still be educated in a special school if this is incompatible with the wishes of parents, or the special educational provision called for is unavailable in a mainstream school. Further, the efficient education of children with whom the child is educated must not be hindered nor the efficient use of resources. Inclusion, whilst described as "keystone" of educational policy (Meeting Special Educational Needs – A Program for Action, DfEE 1999) is still subject to the institutionalised separation of those whose needs are considered to be beyond what a "mainstream" school can be expected to provide. In 1998 38% of pupils with statements were placed in either special schools or Pupil Referral Units (DfEE, 1999). Shortcomings at a wider level are reflected in the absence of pupils such as these from classrooms at this primary school and mainstream schools throughout the country.

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