Special educational needs in mainstream education

Introduction and background

Across all schools in England, the number of pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) has increased for the third consecutive year. In 2019, 14.9 per cent of all pupils in England were categorized as having SEND, and 3.1 per cent had an Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan.

This report from the Education Endowment Foundation puts forward 5 recommendations for mainstream primary and secondary schools seeking to improve their provision for pupils with (SEND). These recommendations are based on a focused review of the best available evidence on improving outcomes for pupils with SEND. It was undertaken by the Centre for Educational Development, Appraisal and Research (CEDAR) at the University of Warwick. Some of the recommendations will also be helpful for pupils in special schools, although approaches may need to be adapted and supplemented with specialist support for pupils with profound learning needs.

Some of the advice given in this guidance report overlaps with the content of other EEF reports; schools should also consider these reports when planning their SEND provision.

Key points

Recommendation one: create a positive and supportive environment for all pupils

- Schools need to be inclusive by design, placing support for pupils with SEND at the heart of school priorities; it is imperative that leaders are proactive in embedding this culture. One example is taken from Totteridge Academy, where staff noticed a few Year 7 pupils who needed support in developing friendships with peers. A number of clubs were established in different parts of the school. Staff noted how friendships developed and pupils' confidence grew along with their happiness levels.

- Inclusive practices involve every part of school life. An example cited in the report involved a pupil with communication and interaction difficulties who was given a locker at the end of the row and at eye level, reducing anxiety created by physical proximity and noise. It also made it easier for the pupil to arrive in class on time.

- A further example involved a school's approach to seating plans. A number of factors were considered, including whether a child has better hearing in one ear than the other; whether pupils can all see the teacher's face; and the need to minimise glare and reflections.

- Research has highlighted the importance of teachers' attitudes toward pupils with SEND. A systematic review of the inclusion of children with SEND in mainstream classrooms found that teachers with positive attitudes towards the inclusion of these children had better quality interactions with pupils overall.

- An inclusive school environment for pupils with SEND is beneficial for all pupils. One recent metanalysis explored the impact of inclusion on pupils without SEND and concluded that such an inclusion policy resulted in a weak but positive impact on their academic outcomes.

- Any school that is considering its approach to inclusion should ask itself how it can maximise access to high quality teaching for all pupils, especially those with SEND. Too many pupils with SEND spend a large part of their time away from the mainstream class, often with other pupils with SEND and with less experienced teachers.

- A proactive, positive, and supportive approach to behaviour benefits all pupils. It is important to reward positive behaviour through clear systems and to support behaviour which aids learning such as listening to the teacher or persevering with a task.

A holistic understanding of pupils and their needs

- Diagnostic labels have benefits, especially for certain conditions such as hearing or visual impairment. A diagnosis can provide a general indication of what a pupil's educational needs are likely to be and help them to understand why they might experience the world differently to their peers. However, a diagnosis can be less helpful for making day-to-day decisions about teaching.

- Diagnostic categories are not discrete—for example, pupils diagnosed with autism and pupils with Speech, Language, and Communications Needs (SLCN) could have similar educational needs relating to language and communication. A diagnosis can provide some information about what a pupil's educational needs might be but does not provide the whole picture, for example, the severity or the types of challenges faced.

- Schools should aim to understand individual pupil's learning needs using the graduated approach of the 'assess, plan, do, review' approach as recommended in the SEND Code of Practice. In the 'assess' stage, staff build a holistic picture of the child's learning needs. In the 'plan' phase, this information is used to generate a

University of
BRISTOL
School of Education

hypothesis of what could work, including interventions and targeted teaching. The plan is then implemented (the 'do' phase) and in the following 'review' phase, staff will consider whether the support has worked and whether the desired outcomes have been achieved.

- Assessment should be regular and purposeful; there is a strong consensus across America and England that a structured process of formative assessment is a sound logic model for identifying, and then addressing, learning needs. The process needs to be repeated regularly as pupils' development is not linear and pupils' needs will vary in patterns of development over time.
- As recommended in the SEND Code of Practice, pupils, parents, and carers must be actively involved in the assessment and decision-making process for pupils with SEND at all stages. Information gathering should include an early discussion with the pupil and their parents or carers. Schools should talk to parents regularly to set clear outcomes and review progress towards them, discuss the activities and support that will help achieve them, and identify the responsibilities of the parent, the pupil and the school. Schools should meet parents at least three times each year.
- Teachers need to feel empowered and trusted to use the information they collect to make a decision about the next steps for teaching that child.

Access to high quality teaching

- There is no 'magic bullet' for teaching pupils with SEND; good teaching for pupils with SEND is good teaching for all.
- The evidence review conducted for this guidance report found strong evidence that high quality teaching for pupils with SEND is firmly based on strategies that will either already be in the repertoire of every mainstream teacher or can be relatively easily added to it. These are outlined below.
- Research has suggested that streaming, whereby pupils with SEND spend much time with other low attaining pupils can be detrimental to some pupils' learning and may have longer term negative effects on attitudes and engagement with education. An alternative approach might be to allocate pupils to groups flexibly based on needs that they share with other pupils at a particular point in time. For example, a small group of pupils might share the need for more explicit instruction to understand a specific concept.
- Teachers should encourage and develop pupils' cognitive and metacognitive strategies. This includes teaching them how to plan, monitor and evaluate their learning.
- Explicit instruction is an effective strategy which refers to a range of teacher-led approaches focused on teacher demonstration followed by guided practice and then independent practice. Several reviews of the research on effective support for pupils in mathematics and reading have provided support for explicit instruction.
- 'Scaffolding' is a metaphor for temporary support that is removed when it is no longer required. Initially, a teacher would provide enough support so that pupils can successfully complete tasks that they could not do independently. If the teacher is supporting a pupil with SEND, that scaffold may be in place for longer.

Group work and one-to-one interventions

- Small-group and one-to-one interventions can be a powerful tool but must be planned and used carefully through identification and assessment of need. Ineffective use of interventions can create a barrier to the inclusion of pupils with SEND. When planning an intervention, there are 3 key questions which a school should ask: Is this the right intervention for the pupil? Can the school provide the support required to deliver the intervention well? Is the school able to dedicate the time and resources required to implement the intervention well?
- Although high quality teaching should reduce the need for extra support, it is likely that some pupils will require high quality, structured, targeted interventions to make progress.
- A tiered approach should be used. The first level is whole class teaching; if it appears that a pupil needs additional support, the starting point should be consideration of the classroom teaching which that pupil receives. If pupils require support beyond what can be offered in whole class teaching, a targeted, one-to-one or small-group intervention could provide the intensive focus required for the pupil to make progress. The third tier involves specialist support delivered by a trained professional, such as mobility training or speech and language therapy.
- Interventions should be applied using the principles of effective implementation described in the EEF's guidance report Putting Evidence to Work: A School's Guide to Implementation.

Working effectively with teaching assistants

- Effective deployment of teaching assistants (TAs) is critical. School leaders should pay careful attention to the roles of TAs and ensure they have a positive impact on pupils with SEND. The EEF has identified a number of examples of ineffective deployment of TAs. These include: pupils with SEND working with a TA on tasks which are inappropriately targeted, repetitive or undemanding; TAs conducting 'stereo-teaching' where their interactions with the pupil cut across the teacher's whole class delivery; and TAs taking on a primary teaching role with pupils with SEND when they have not been trained or supported to provide effective teaching.
- TAs should supplement, not replace, teaching from the classroom teacher.
- The EEF's guidance report Making Best Use of Teaching Assistants provides detailed recommendations for the effective deployment of TAs as outlined below.
- TAs should not be used as an informal teaching resource for low ability pupils.
- TAs should add value to what teachers do, not replace them.
- TAs should be used to help pupils develop independent learning skills.
- Schools should ensure that TAs are fully prepared for their role in the classroom.
- TAs should be used to deliver high quality one-to-one and small group support using structured interventions. Schools should adopt evidence-based interventions to support TAs in their small group and one-to-one instruction.
- Schools should ensure that explicit connections are made between learning from everyday classroom teaching and structured interventions.
- The website Maximising the Impact of Teaching Assistants offers a range of free resources to support evidence-based TA deployment.