

Identifying Pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

Introduction and background

It has often been claimed that being identified as "SEND" is something of a "postcode lottery". Funding for SEND varies across England, and there is a long standing concern that children's needs are not fairly and systematically assessed. Identification and support depend upon factors such as local authority, school, and pupil characteristic. This report written by Jo Hutchinson for the Education Policy Institute aims to shed light on this issue and to assess the extent to which children with similar needs are identified regardless of locality, school, school type and pupil characteristic. The research looked at both identification at the lower level (school support, assessed and provided by schools) and at the higher level (plans conveying legal rights to support, assessed and partly funded by local authorities). It tracked hundreds of thousands of children from a single year group – those who started reception in 2010-11 and reached Year 6 in 2016-17. Data was gathered from a wide range of sources including the school census, the alternative provision census and the children in need census.

Key findings

The school level factor

- The most important finding from this report is that the primary school which a child attends makes more difference to their chances of being identified with SEND than anything about them as an individual, their experiences, or the local authority they live in. Between-school differences accounted for 69 per cent of all variation at the lower level of SEND and 67 per cent at the higher level. This is in stark contrast to school attainment, where between-school differences explain only a small minority of the differences in pupil test results. This finding shows that the system of assessment is inconsistent and not well adapted to children's individual needs.
- Secondly, there is a mismatch between what schools focus on in assessing SEND needs and what local authorities focus on at the higher level of assessment. Whereas schools focus mostly on communication, language, and literacy skills, local authorities make decisions that are more aligned with personal, social, and emotional development. This is not fully explained by different primary need types at the two support levels. Many important later life outcomes such as participation in post-16 education, adult employment and wages, involvement with crime and adult health status depend on personal, social and emotional development (Carneiro, Crawford, & Goodman, 2007), but it is not a particularly strong predictor of accessing SEND support in primary school.
- Academy schools are associated with depressed chances of being identified with SEND. This is not just the case for children attending academies; in local authorities with the highest proportions of academised primary schools the chances of being identified with SEND at the higher level are just one tenth of those in local authorities with the fewest academies. This is not explained by deprivation levels, ethnic mix or a range of other factors. Additionally, at the school level, children who attend academies have reduced chances of being identified with SEND, by one third at the lower level and by one half at the higher level. These are short-term effects over the 2 years following academy conversion and it is not known whether they will persist, but given the range of controlled factors at individual and school level, they are likely to indicate under-identification.

Other factors

- Although all children living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods had a considerably higher chance of being identified with SEND, this effect was greatest for the least disadvantaged children within those neighbourhoods.



- There was also a negative effect of attending school in a local authority with high levels of disadvantage; this made children less likely to be identified with SEND than children of similar backgrounds in more affluent areas. These patterns suggest some capture of resources by the better-off in deprived neighbourhoods, and some rationing of support with higher thresholds in the most disadvantaged local authorities.
- The research found evidence of obstacles to accessing SEND support for children with less stable lives. Children who moved schools or neighbourhoods during early primary school were less likely to be subsequently identified with SEND than otherwise similar children who stayed put. The same was true of children who experienced frequent absences from school, even though children already identified with SEND are known to have raised absence rates.
- Most counter-intuitively of all, children who were the subject of child protection plans for abuse or neglect had reduced chances of being identified with SEND, all else being equal. A clue to the nature of these problems is found among children who lived in the care of the local authority; many of these looked after children had child protection plans prior to entering care, and yet it was not until after a full year in care that the chances of being identified with SEND rose above those for other children.
- Educational and residential transitions either delay or reduce access to SEND support, even where the risk of experiencing SEND is obviously high. The system is not adapted to the lives of children; it requires them to remain in one place and stay visible over long periods of time to access support.
- There is a history of misidentification for Black Caribbean children. The findings of this study indicate that this group remains over-identified after controlling for all individual child-level factors and suggest that while a proportion of the over-representation is due to greater levels of poverty, most is associated with attending schools that identify more children with SEND, or with lower attainment assessments at age 5.
- The requirement for uninterrupted visibility in order to access timely support for SEND is even more problematic in the current pandemic context where face-to-face schooling has been suspended during lockdowns and rates of school absence have been elevated. The consequences of this are likely to mean delayed SEND identification for children in the early primary year groups.
- The findings from this research identify several groups of children who are more likely to remain under-identified with SEND and who therefore access SEND support less readily than other children. Accessibility for these children could be improved through development of services and assessments capable of engaging with children at home; further research using qualitative methods to examine whether the ethnic disparities reported represent real deficits in support; and monitoring and safeguards to ensure the visibility of the most disadvantaged and geographically mobile children within the assessment system.
- SEND support suffers from a lack of accountability to families who are less willing or able to access the tribunal system. Combined with the above recommendation for a framework of national expectations, accountability could be improved in the following ways.
- School inspections should gather evidence of compliance with national expectations along with recognition of practices which exceed the expectations.
- School accountability for attainment and academic progress should be informed by the level of risk and challenge embodied in the intakes of different schools.
- The results of this research can inform better use of resources. High needs funding should be rationalised across local authorities according to the risk factors identified in this research. Additional funds should be given to areas which are under-funded relative to their risk profile.
- There is a conflict between the roles of local authorities as needs assessors and budget holders. Separating these two functions would open up the opportunity for more outcome and quality-focused practices in local authorities.
- There should be an evaluation of the possibility of class sizes of 20 or fewer in reception in the most deprived neighbourhoods, alongside better training and clearer expectations for SEND support.

Recommendations

- The dominance of school effects in explaining which children are most likely to be identified with SEND clearly points to school practices as a key locus for reducing the postcode lottery and improving the allocation of SEND support to the children who need it. Approaches consistent with greater quality and consistency in schools include provision of specialist SEND training for school leaders; increased access to educational psychologists in schools; greater use of age-standardised assessments to increase consistency; and the development of a framework of national expectations defining the kinds of adjustment and support that any mainstream school should make available as a matter of course in assessment.

The full document can be downloaded from:

https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/SEND-Identification_2021-EPI.pdf