

SEN support: a survey of schools and colleges

Introduction and background

SEN support is the term given to children and young people who have special educational needs or disabilities and require support, but who do not have an Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan or Statement of SEN. The vast majority of children and young people on SEN support are educated in mainstream schools or colleges, rather than specialist settings. Schools and colleges have freedom in how they support these pupils, within the framework of the SEND Code of Practice. They can 'buy in' particular professional/specialist support or programmes, or provide their staff with training in particular areas. This report was published in response to a need to understand how students on SEN support are currently supported, and how this practice can be shared, improved and developed. Evidence was collected by means of an online survey sent to primary schools, secondary schools and colleges throughout England. In total, 1566 settings were contacted and 219 members of staff completed the survey. The research was carried out between January and March 2017. The survey was open to all members of staff including teaching assistants, teachers, Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) and members of senior management teams. The survey asked about the identification of students with SEN, the support put in place for them, the barriers to supporting students on SEN support, the deployment of teaching assistants, and what resources are used to develop understanding of how to support students with SEN. The sample is not intended to be representative of all staff in school and college settings – the views of staff in certain roles and from certain settings for example, are over- or underrepresented. It is also important to note that the research and views expressed do not represent Government policy. Strategies and interventions described in the report provide examples of practice in schools and colleges, but they have not been robustly evaluated.

Key points

Identification of SEN

- A third (33.8%) of staff in a range of job roles across all phases and settings said they did not have any responsibility for identifying students with SEN. Respondents who did report responsibility for identifying SEN pupils used different methods for doing so, depending on whether they were SENCOs or other members of staff.
- SENCOs received referrals regarding potential SEN students from a variety of sources, including parents, teachers and professionals from outside the school setting. They used a variety of assessment methods, including standardised tests, and referred to documentation recorded throughout the school year on whether students were making expected levels of progress. They also had recourse to observations of the students in lessons and information gathered during the transition process when a pupil moved to the next phase of education.
- Most other members of staff reported that if they identified a student as potentially having SEN, they would pass this information to their SENCO. They would then implement appropriate strategies to support the student, often with advice and guidance from the school or college SENCO.
- SENCOs in all settings said that once they had been approached about a child who may have SEN, they would take the information provided and, if necessary, gather further evidence. This could involve discussion with parents and/or gaining more detailed information from a class teacher or previous settings. It could also involve the SENCO conducting further assessments or arranging for assessment from other professionals such as Educational Psychologists, Speech and Language Therapists or Occupational Therapists.
- Once further information had been gathered, SENCOs in all settings described how they would provide additional support for students. This could involve supporting class teachers with additional teaching strategies, through the setting of targets, the provision of interventions and additional staff input. In college settings, staff reported that it was important for students to be involved and in agreement with the decisions being made in relation to the support they required. They also highlighted that the provision of support should be monitored closely through regular tracking and review to ensure that it is working.
- In primary and secondary settings, it was noted that the involvement of parents in the planning of support was important. In college settings there was a focus on consulting with the student about potential support. In two colleges, staff said they would seek the student's consent to share information about their SEN with other members of staff.

The nature of support for different needs

- The most common action to support students with **language and communication difficulties** was to make a referral to a Speech and Language Therapist. The use of Speech and Language Therapists was explored in a recent rapid evidence assessment (Carroll et al, 2017). Research has indicated that students with language and communication difficulties who receive early speech and language therapy show better literacy skills later in school than those who do not.
- Across all settings, staff also referred to using techniques to modify the language they used to make it easier for students to process and understand. They also highlighted the usefulness of pre-teaching vocabulary and using key vocabulary lists. Other strategies differed depending on the type of setting, for example in primary schools visual aids were often used and in colleges there was greater use of assistive technology.
- A few respondents highlighted confidence building strategies, such as providing additional time with a trusted adult or using buddy systems so that the student had a good language role model.
- Research presented in the above-mentioned evidence assessment suggests that providing training to secondary teachers in language modification techniques such as teaching key vocabulary, presenting instructions explicitly and using visual planners can help students to improve written expression and listening comprehension.
- In primary settings a number of specific interventions were used to help children with speech and language difficulties. These included Language Link, Black Sheep and WellComm.
- A wide variety of classroom resources were suggested by respondents across all settings to support students with **fine motor control difficulties**, including chunky pencils and specialist pens. Staff reported providing age appropriate activities to build fine motor skills, such as threading beads or building with Lego. In college settings there was a greater emphasis on the use of assistive technology. In terms of younger students, *Big Moves FUNDamentals* was reported to be beneficial. For older students *Speed Up* was suggested. In primary and secondary settings *Write from the Start* was reported as being beneficial. This intervention is designed to develop fine motor and perceptual skills necessary for writing.
- Evidence from the above review was supportive of the use of assistive technology for students with motor difficulties, finding that touch typing has been shown to improve legibility and motivation. In addition, predictive text and speech to text software is useful. However, it was also noted that the use of assistive technology does require extensive training and supportive environments.
- A small number of respondents reported that referrals to Occupational Therapy for assessment could be beneficial (more so in primary than secondary schools). In addition to this, many of the interventions that were used within primary settings had been recommended to schools by Occupational Therapists.
- Across all settings the most frequent strategy to support students with **high levels of anxiety** was to provide a 'trusted' or 'key' adult for the student to talk to when needed. Staff also reported that providing a safe space for the student to access when feeling overwhelmed was beneficial, as was supporting the student to develop techniques to manage their anxiety such as meditation and breathing exercises. Referrals to outside professionals such as Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) or Educational Psychology Services were also reported. The use of yoga in schools is supported by

evidence reviewed as part of the above-mentioned evidence assessment. Research has indicated that yoga can have a calming effect and reduce restlessness, impulsivity and inattentiveness in pupils with ADHD. It is suitable across all education settings, however it does require a trained instructor.

- When supporting students with **reading and spelling difficulties**, the most frequently reported strategy was to provide individual or small group teaching. Respondents also suggested providing classroom resources such as word mats or key word lists. There was also a focus on using materials and strategies to develop enjoyment and build confidence when reading. The need to explore difficulties through talking to parents and making referrals to outside agencies was also highlighted. The evidence assessment found that additional small group tuition which focuses on phonics, in combination with learning key words and reading good quality texts can be beneficial.
- Respondents identified a range of strategies they would use when supporting **students who found it difficult to concentrate**. These included making adjustments in the classroom environment such as considering seating plans, providing fidget toys and breaking tasks into manageable chunks. It was also reported that staff should consider how the language they used impacted on students' ability to concentrate and attend to instructions.
- When supporting students displaying **challenging behaviour**, the most frequently reported strategy was to refer to the school behaviour policy. Across all settings staff said they would attempt to understand the causes of the behaviour and implement classroom strategies to support the student, including removing distraction and using de-escalation techniques. Staff also suggested providing a safe space, which could be accessed when needed. Building a positive relationship with the student was highlighted as important.

Teaching assistants

- Senior leaders and SENCOs reported that the main support that teaching assistants received was through training, delivered either externally or within setting.
- Class teachers reported certain barriers they experienced when deploying teaching assistants effectively in lessons for students on SEN support. These barriers included lack of time to plan together and teaching assistants not being available for entire lessons or not being consistently available due to other commitments in school, thereby rendering continuity of support difficult.

Barriers to provision of effective support

- Staff described a number of issues and barriers that impact their ability to provide effective support for students with SEN. These included difficulty in accessing outside professionals, staffing issues and difficulty in matching programmes to needs. Respondents said that implementing interventions could be difficult, often due to not having access to staffing and difficulty matching programmes to students' needs or accessing outside professionals. Lack of parental engagement was also cited and is an issue in the light of the findings from the evidence assessment about the importance of parental interest.

The full document can be downloaded from:

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/628629/DfE_SEN_Support_Survey_Report.pdf

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