

Some pupils with SEND missing out on specialist support

Some pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) in mainstream schools are not getting enough help to support their learning and development, even when external services are involved, according to a new research report by Ofsted.

Published today, the study finds that specialist support from multi-agency services often complements the support offered by schools. Although families and school staff value this external support, it is not always timely or implemented appropriately.

Many of the schools and families participating in the research had experienced long wait times and high levels of bureaucracy in the education, health and care (EHC) plan process. In some instances, families were commissioning or paying for additional services themselves. This suggests that the playing field is not level for pupils from poorer backgrounds.

Through different case studies, the research identifies important issues that influence how in-school support, therapies and other multi-agency services are provided for pupils with SEND. The findings include the following.

- Gaps in teachers' or staff's understanding of pupils' needs has a negative impact on children's experiences at school and their learning and development. This is especially the case when pupils did not have an EHC plan or were less well known to their special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs).
- Almost all pupils who took part in the research, including those on SEND support, had teaching assistants (TAs) allocated to them. In a small number of cases, pupils had become over-reliant on their TAs, which could potentially impact on their ability to develop independence. Some parents and carers also raised concerns around social exclusion because of the amount of time their child spent out of class in small-group or individual interventions.
- Occasionally, schools were teaching a curriculum that was not properly sequenced or well matched to pupils' needs. A few pupils did not have the background knowledge and skills required, due to missed learning or unmet needs. In some cases, pupils were not always given the chance to master basics before moving forwards with their learning.
- Some parents and carers took part in decision-making around special education provision. However, others felt that they were not given enough information about their child's learning and development, or the opportunity to input into support plans.
- Some SENCOs were also full-time class teachers. This suggests that they may not have enough time to fully support pupils with SEND at their school.

Sean Harford, Ofsted's National Director for Education, said:

Many children and young people with SEND have found it harder to engage with remote education during the pandemic, so getting the support right for these pupils is more important than ever.

This research shows that high-quality education for these children is underpinned by a good understanding of their individual needs, and strong relationships between families and schools. Effective joint work between schools and other services, especially including health, is also critical to children's learning and development.

The findings from this research will be really valuable as we continue to build on our inspection practice and develop the new area SEND inspection framework.

Ofsted carried out the research in the spring term of 2019 to 2020, before the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic. It draws on interviews with pupils, parents, teachers, support staff and leaders from a sample of schools across 2 local authorities. Representatives from the local authorities and clinical commissioning group were also interviewed. The findings are based on a small number of case studies. Therefore, they are not necessarily reflective of the wider population of pupils with SEND.