

Discussion on MLD in School Education in the UK

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Abstract

The emphasis is on educating as many children as possible with special educational needs alongside others in mainstream schools, although national guidance also requires them to take into account the views and wishes of children and their parents in the choice of school, whether mainstream or special. It is likely that some children with Moderate Learning Difficulties (MLD), if not all of them, will have emotional, behavioral and physical needs that will need to be met within a broader definition of curriculum (DfES 2003). To address the issues around the idea of an appropriate curriculum and pedagogy for children with MLD, it is important to remember that a significant proportion of pupils with Special Education Needs (SEN) who attend mainstream schools will fall into the MLD category, so it is important that the curriculum meets their needs.

Keywords: MLD, SEN, special education, policies, UK

1. Introduction

This paper examines the following aspects of the educational provision made for students with Moderate Learning Difficulties (MLD, hereafter) in the UK, especially in England: policies, types of provision, funding, and also the educational practices of curriculum, staffing and staff development, and relationships between parents, schools and other statutory agencies involved. It begins with a short note on the context, estimates of the prevalence of MLD in the school population and special units or schools, and describes some of the key difficulties in gaining a fair picture of the situation. It ends with a section on issues that still need to be addressed and a conclusion.

2. Background

Pupils with moderate learning difficulties will have attainments significantly below expected levels in *most areas of the curriculum*, despite appropriate interventions. Their needs will not be able to be met by normal differentiation and the flexibilities of the National Curriculum. Pupils with moderate learning difficulties have much greater difficulty than their peers in acquiring basic literacy and numeracy skills and in understanding concepts. They may also have associated speech and language delay, low self-esteem, low levels of concentration and under-developed social skills (DfES 2003). Pupils identified by secondary schools as having MLD fall into 3 subgroups groups as illustrated below (Ylonen and Norwich 2011):

- Those with low attainment and low concept understanding and reasoning
- Those with low attainment only
- Identified as MLD but not with low attainment nor concept understanding/ reasoning.

These findings suggest that some pupils are identified as having MLD inappropriately, while for others ‘conceptual understanding and reasoning’ are not used as indicators of MLD.

Estimates of the prevalence of MLD in the UK vary from study to study. Department of Health (2001) estimates were about 25 per 1,000 population, with a higher estimate of 29.8 per 1,000 for school age children. Some studies have shown a positive association between the prevalence of MLD and lower socioeconomic class and/or parental occupation and this has an impact on how policies and funding for schools operate because the two can become confusing in practice.

In his introduction, Norwich (2004) cites Fletcher-Campbell (2004) as saying that the MLD group is widely recognized to be the largest groups within the special educational needs and noting that there is a poorly defined ‘acid test’ for inclusion.

Research by Lindsay et al (2006: p 5) cited evidence that poverty and socio-economic disadvantages are important factors in MLD as a category of Special Education Needs (hereafter, SEN) that is “strongly associated with context” and so it may be argued that initiatives aimed at providing support for all pupils experiencing that kind of disadvantage will benefit pupils with MLD.

Policies have changed significantly in recent years, from separation of children with learning difficulties into special schools, to maximum inclusion as an important national aim of educational provision. At the same time, economic pressure has led government ministers to look closely at the cost of special schools and the financial reasons for closing such schools have little to do with inclusion and appropriate educational provision. Most recently in October 2007, the National Strategies launched the Inclusion Development Program (IDP) aimed at delivering and developing a program of Continuous Professional Development (CPD) to “strengthen the confidence and expertise of mainstream staff in Early Years settings, primary and secondary schools in ensuring the progress and achievement of pupils with SEN” (<http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk>), with a focus on MLD in one of the later years. Interestingly, Devon has invested heavily for some years in such a program.

There are tensions within the present policies on inclusion, although the main trend is towards inclusion for all and meeting individual needs within a complex framework of facilities and teaching and learning strategies, there remains a strong element in favor of defining a limited number of categories of SEN (not necessarily MLD) and associated provision.

Between 1994 and 2003, at national level the number of pupils with statements fell from around 300,000 to 250,000 while the number of pupils with statements in mainstream increased by around 50 per cent from 1994 (<http://www.statistics.gov.uk>). There are around 1,492,950 (17.9%) pupils who have special educational needs in UK. This has been decreasing since 2010 (it was 21% then) mainly due to decrease in SEN without statement. The SEN (2014) shows that 2.8% pupils in schools in England who have statements of SEN. This percentage has remained the same since 2007 but the number of pupils with a statement has substantially decreased. The recent data shows that 20.6% pupils with a statement of SEN have the most common primary needs of speech, language and communication.

3. Policies on Special Education

“The National Curriculum introduced by the Education Reform Act of 1988, and obligatory in special schools from 1990, presented the great majority of special schools with a formidable agenda for change. The teaching of National Curriculum subjects had to be planned and resourced with regard for the disabilities and learning styles of special school populations in the absence of any national guidance focused specifically on the widely different needs of disability groups.” (OFSTED: 1999). This report found that although schools and teachers worked hard to implement the National Curriculum, there were several areas of problems. It described these as weak curricular leadership, timetabling done by individual teachers, “complex patterns of pupil grouping that masked imbalances”, in-year changes of pupil groups and timetables, and disrupted timetables because of therapies.

There are conflicting policy issues, such as the extent to which special schools should be preserved and the tension between the inclusion and integration agendas. The second of these is highlighted in the difference between the ‘least restrictive environment’ (United States

model, close to Warnock's interpretation 1978 and 2005), and the DfES position statement that "inclusion is about the quality of a child's experience" and providing access to "high quality education that enables them to progress with learning and participate fully in the activities of their school and community" (DfES: 2006).

In local education authorities generally, the policy emphasis is on educating as many children as possible with special educational needs alongside others in mainstream schools, although national guidance also requires them to take into account the views and wishes of children and their parents in the choice of school, whether mainstream or special. The decision on the type of provision to be made, whatever the type of school chosen, is made with reference to the individual student's needs, the needs of his or her peers and the efficient use of existing resources. The Select Committee Report of 2006 estimated that some three per cent of children would need more help than a mainstream school could provide without additional staff, equipment or adaptation to buildings.

Norwich (2002a) and Norwich and Kelly (2005) identified that the proportion of SEN pupils in mainstream and special schools varies widely from one authority to another, and that even in a single authority children with the same learning difficulties may be placed in special schools, units attached to mainstream schools or mainstream classes.

To add to the complexity, there are many voluntary sector organizations that provide support as well as statutory agencies offering services to meet physical, emotional and behavioral needs. "The voluntary sector has a unique and important contribution to make in supporting parents and providing a range of services for parents. Schools, Local Education Agencies (hereafter, LEA) and parent partnership services should ensure that families have information on the full range of support services in the voluntary sector within their area." (DfES: 2001: para 2: 15). Voluntary sector provision is even more varied.

Then there is the policy on statementing, or perhaps the lack of such a policy. Teachers and parents often consider a statement to be very important because it brings with it additional resources. At local authority level, the general view is that some local authorities with fully inclusive schools might not need to use statements, whilst an authority with more separation of provision would need to make greater use of statements.

The Department for Children, Schools and Families says it would be "extremely difficult" to draw up a national framework for statementing and adds that each individual case should be treated on its merits. However, this ignores the fact that different authorities do very different things. According to DfES (2006), just under 3% of students in England had a statement of special educational needs, but the figure that stands out is that there were also 1,293,300 students with SEN without statements, equivalent to almost 16% of the whole school population. This must include many pupils with MLS, given that they make up the largest subgroup of pupils with SEN.

Both the Audit Commission Report (2002) and Ofsted (2004) highlighted the confusion in existing provision and the long process for many children in statementing.

4. Discussion

In the light of the educational policies on MLD and the present status of special school education, the following significant factors need to be discussed at length.

4.1 Types of Provision

There are three main types of provision; full inclusion in mainstream classrooms, separate units in mainstream schools and special schools. The type of provision offered to a child with MLD following a statement of Special Educational Needs (SEN) under the 1996 Education Act will depend on what is available locally and the practice as well as the individual local education authority policy this can vary greatly, as the following examples show. This raises questions about fairness, equity and inclusion, and calls into question some of the national policies and in certain cases the lack of a national policy.

Norwich's surveys for the Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education (Norwich, 1997; 1999; 2002a) show the extent of variation between across local authorities in terms of segregated provision. This means that many children who are educated in mainstream schools in one local authority would be educated in a special school if they lived in an area served by a different local authority. As one example a disabled pupil in Manchester in 2001 was at least seven times more likely to be placed in a special school than a disabled pupil living in Newham, London. At that time, 2.64% of 5-15 year olds in Manchester attended special schools: Newham, where an inclusion policy has been pursued for many, had under 0.5% of the comparable group in special schools (Norwich, 2002a). These findings in variations are consistent with other research findings such as Ainscow et al (2000).

However, the majority of pupils with MLD attend a mainstream school, with additional support either in the ordinary classrooms or in a separate unit. Within the ordinary classroom, the main forms of support are teaching assistants, additional equipment and in some cases volunteers who may be parents or people considering teaching as a career. The role of the teaching assistants has variously been praised and valued, and questioned, for instance, whether the main role is to provide one-to-one support or help maintain discipline, whether they can supervise a class in a teacher's absence, whether they have the required specialist skills to support learners with MLD or whether that is the role of specialist teachers.

4.2 Funding

There is a complex schools funding formula for mainstream schools. This formula gives a specific sum of money for each statemented pupil who is different according to whether they are considered to have MLD or SLD. In general, the money a mainstream school receives for a Type A child (MLD) is considerably less than for some other categories, and mainstream schools receive less than special schools.

In addition, salary scales of professional staff such as Educational Psychologists (EPs) are different in different local authorities, so that a school in one Local Education Authority (LEA) may be able to buy more hours of an EP's time than a school in a different LEA. The funding formula does not take account of these variations, nor does it take account of any

significant variations during the school year.

Funding is separated from assessment in such a way that it can be hard to provide the educational services recommended on a child's statement. However, the current position does not foresee any major changes in the near future and so difficulties associated with funding seem likely to persist.

Whilst there are national funding formulas for schools, local authorities have a degree of autonomy in how those funds are used, so that it is possible for one authority to for example increase funding for primary schools whilst another does not. This can obviously affect the extent to which a particular authority invests in say the education of pupils with MLD in mainstream settings. Different local authorities have spent Standards Fund and other monies in different ways and have reserved various sums for schools in difficulty. The cost per pupil can also vary significantly, by up to £100 a year.

4.3 Curriculum

There is a legal requirement for almost every pupil to learn the full National Curriculum. However, many schools concentrate heavily on giving literacy and in some cases numeracy support to MLD pupils. The official information and support website for teachers in the UK (<http://www.teachernet.gov.uk>) notes that "Pupils with MLD have much greater difficulty than their peers in acquiring basic literacy and numeracy skills and in understanding concepts." However, the same site also notes that "Pupils with moderate learning difficulties will have attainments well below expected levels in all or most areas of the curriculum, despite appropriate interventions. Their needs will not be able to be met by normal differentiation and the flexibilities of the National Curriculum.... They may also have associated speech and language delay, low self-esteem, low levels of concentration and under-developed social skills."

This suggests that more work is needed in at least some schools or LEAs on curriculum development. There are questions about the definition of 'curriculum' to be answered: many theorists argue that curriculum goes well beyond what is taught in the classroom and encompasses the whole of an individual's learning experiences. It is likely that some children with MLD, if not all of them, will have emotional, behavioral and physical needs that will need to be met within a broader definition of curriculum, and in seeking to address the issues around the idea of an appropriate curriculum and pedagogy for children with MLD, it is important to remember that a significant proportion of the 58% of pupils with SEN who attend mainstream schools will fall into the MLD category, however that is defined and so it is important that the curriculum meets their needs.

The majority of special schools inspected by OFSTED provide a curriculum that incorporates the required subjects of the National Curriculum and RE and also is matched to pupils' needs, although they note that the curriculum in Key Stages 3 and 4 is likely to be less satisfactory than in other stages, in terms of the quality and range of learning opportunities.

(<http://preview.ofsted.gov.uk>)

Lewis and Norwich (2004) explore issues of curriculum and pedagogy within a continuum that broadly ranges from having the same general aims but different pathways or programmes and approaches to teaching, through having the areas and pathways or programmes but different approaches to teaching, to having the same general approaches to teaching with some differentiation. The outcomes of the discussions seems to be the need for a framework for designing and developing more innovative are more inclusive curricula and for a move towards more personalise learning where each child's educational and other needs and individual learning objectives are mapped onto the curriculum provision in a particular school, in short a need for much greater flexibility.

Seventy-eight per cent of ATL members working in schools in England said in a 2006 survey that the national curriculum disadvantaged SEN pupils, and little is known of the views of SEN pupils themselves, despite recent surveys which have shown that they can make useful contributions to the development of curriculum and teaching in the schools they attend (Norwich and Kelly: 2004), so the question of curriculum needs to be taken very seriously.

It could be argued that for some children with MLD, further moves towards making them meet the requirements of the National Curriculum would actually work against some of the important outcomes stated in Every Child Matters, i.e. enjoyment and feeling that they are contributing to the community, whereas the emerging concept of personalized learning is more about making the curriculum fit the requirements of the child.

Curriculum and pedagogy are closely linked, and so it is worth looking at one of the fundamental issues concerning pedagogy. There are national developments in distinct pedagogies for different subjects, with the initial focus on literacy and numeracy, followed by science and modern foreign languages. However, the intention is to extend the range of specialist pedagogies across the whole range of curriculum subjects over the coming years and to ensure that teachers are trained in generic pedagogies, and at least one specialist subject to degree level, with that specialism incorporating its own pedagogy. However, there is debate about the usefulness of seeking special education pedagogy. As Davis and Florian (2004: p. 34) note, investigations into the existence or merits of a separate pedagogy for special education are unhelpful "The more important agenda is about how to develop a pedagogy that is inclusive of all learners."

Lewis and Norwich (2000) conducted a review of pedagogies organized according to the following categories of learning difficulty; low attainment, specific learning difficulties, moderate learning difficulties and severe, profound and multiple learning difficulties. They also found that the evidence did not support the idea of a separate pedagogy for special education but that there was some indication that particular teaching strategies might apply to particular difficulties. They recommended 'continua of teaching or pedagogic approaches' but acknowledged a tendency to separate these into categories, with a focus on pupils at the higher and lower end of attainments.

Lewis and Norwich (2004: pp 183-184) confirm these earlier findings, noting that considerations of what constitute an effective pedagogy for special education apply to teaching in general and observe the lack of studies into "different effects/outcomes of

different provisions” (2004: p 185), also commenting that such research as has been done has not produced consistent findings. This means that the way in which children with MLD are taught can vary considerably, along with the curriculum, hence a potentially wide variation in what two children with the same learning difficulties may receive even in different mainstream schools within the same authority.

4.4 Staffing and Staff Development

It has been recognized for some years that there is a shortage of specialist teaching and support staff for pupils with SEN, including those with MLD. It has also been recognized that much more in-service training needs to be provided for teachers in mainstream schools who do not have the knowledge or expertise. There are a number of useful resources available on the internet but there are not enough opportunities for teachers to discuss their own experiences and develop their professional practice in this area for example through networking or mentoring. Devon has in comparison with many local authorities a tradition of high quality training and exchange of good practice among teachers and teaching assistants.

Another key area is the relationships between parents, schools and other statutory agencies involved. The quality of relationships seems to vary greatly depending on the LEA and the individual school. A report from Hansard

(28 November 2006) (www.publications.parliament.uk) states that some parents are not told about special schools that are available in their area, whereas some parents enjoy a very good relationship with their child’s school.

Relationships between schools and the LEA or another agency such as a Primary Care Trust can be difficult, as has been reported in the case of Educational Psychologists. Relationships can be negatively affected by policies, issues of ‘professionalism’ and the overall system. For example, a single parent may have to take a child out of school for speech therapy and therefore not be at home for another child who is ill, or may have to take the child to after-school sessions and therefore be unable to meet the second child from school. Frustration with the whole system can be the result of this. Teachers and other education professionals need training and development in establishing and maintaining relationships with parents.

There are further needs for training provision, for example support teachers (as distinct from teaching assistants), learning mentors, English as an additional language (EAL) assistants (where a child has EAL and MLD needs). In this context, it is not surprising that as mentioned earlier some local authorities have diverted funding away from the classroom: training and development are expensive.

5. Implications

From the previous sections, it is clear that more work is needed on all of the areas mentioned above. Firstly, on policies, greater clarity is required about how inclusion is to be interpreted and implemented, and about required consistency of provision across authorities, also on

statementing and individual educational plans, for example whether every child should have one. Secondly, on types of provision, serious discussions and decisions need to take place about the range of quantity of provision, with associated estimates of resourcing, but also in the light of research into the comparative effectiveness teaching strategies and outcomes in different types of provision. Thirdly, funding issues need to be resolved and ideally a comparable rate per pupil in mainstream schools based on regional or area costs set at national level, with separate central funds set aside for staff and school development and statemented children. Fourthly, further research and debate on curriculum and pedagogy can lead to firm recommendations.

6. Conclusion

This assignment has briefly examined a number of key areas and issues in the educational provision for children with MLD. There are no clear arguments in favor of one particular type of provision other than the human rights and moral arguments for inclusion set against the economic arguments of higher educational attainment at lower cost. The unresolved issues mean that it is not possible to recommend a way forward, except to say that more research and evidence is needed to support whatever developments are proposed for the future educational provision for children with MLD.

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