The policy to include sen pupils in mainstream education

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Introduction and Background

The broad policy which involves the inclusion of pupils who are considered to have special educational needs (SEN) within mainstream schooling across England and Wales first originated as part of the Warnock Report, 1978 (DES, 1978). However, over the years, several different codes of practice and governmental guidance documents have established strong policies and even legislation which states that it is essential in mainstream schools to provide a learningenvironmentthat is suitable for a diverse range of pupils and abilities, including SEN.

In accordance with the Education Act 1996, this requirement is a statutory requirement and therefore mainstream schools are bound to have a facility within them to deal with SEN. Despite this, there remains a seeming lack of understanding when it comes to the best practical ways in which these individuals can be managed within the mainstream environment, with a focus primarily being on ensuring that there are school level policies in place in order to facilitate the needs of these individuals, with a particular focus on behavioural concerns. In reality, however, it is suggested here that the handling of SEN pupils in the mainstream environment needs to be much more individualised, so that it can offer valuable guidance to all teachers, not simply those directly involved in the support of SEN pupils (Harden, 2003).

One of the immediate difficulties which arise when undertaking this type of research is that of defining what is meant by special educational needs, in the first place. This definition can have a dramatic impact on how the particular school or educational establishment then goes on to actually include such students. For example, there is an argument to be had that a particularly gifted student would potentially have special educational needs. If the concept of a special needs pupil is simply based on the amount of time that is required from theteacherand is based on requirements which go beyond the " average" student, these types of questions and the influence that they would have on teaching practices, in general, is potentially huge for the development of the success of the inclusion policies, started back in 1978.

Aims, Objectives and Methodology

The overall aim of the research is to determine whether or not the specific policy and now legislative requirement placed upon mainstream educational establishments to have an agenda in place to include SEN pupils has been effective or not. In order to achieve this, there are several strands to the research which need to come together through the use of an interpretivist approach, recognising that opinions and activities vary, depending on the surrounding circumstances, but with the ability to draw central themes and ideas such that the original statement can be answered.

The actual concept of special educational needs will be looked at in terms of how policy defines these pupils with recognition that this definition will have an impact on the way in which the students are to be supported under the

general inclusion of these students within mainstream education. Inclusion is a critical factor in this regard and this is also one of the strands of the research, which requires a larger amount of attention. By stating that the policy aims to include SEN pupils, it is impossible to determine whether the policies are proving successful or not, without considering what precisely is meant by inclusion and whether it is judged, based on educational achievement, or whether it is based on some softer issues such as social inclusion.

Taking an interpretivist research approach to this paper, the aim is to establish more specifically whether inclusion in mainstream education can impact on particular individuals with special needs, with the recognition that the impact will naturally vary, depending on the surrounding circumstances and it may also vary from school to school and classroom to classroom. The research question here has expanded the issue of inclusion within mainstream school by taking on an interpretive paradigm as it is thought that, in order to gain a greater understanding of the various factors that may ultimately impact on the practical application of the policies being produced.

From an ontological point of view, the research will establish an understanding of the nature of the area of special educational needs and how these pupils could potentially be integrated into mainstream education. The research will, therefore, focus largely on how special educational needs are defined and the practical ways in which the policies deal with the requirement, in order to add value to this research area. The secondary stage of the research takes a more epistemological perspective and looks at

the nature of the knowledge that has been established and whether there are fundamental flaws in the approach which has been taken, so as to question whether some of the known factors remain valid. Consideration will also be given as to whether a different form of reality within the area of special educational needs should be established.

The area of SEN within mainstream education is, potentially, relatively complex and it is therefore necessary to take a balanced approach between questioning current policies and looking at the foundations behind them and looking towards the future of how these policies could be shifted or applied, in order to achieve the underlying aim of genuine inclusion at every level.

Current Theoretical Position

The area of educational needs and the treatment of those with special educational needs have gained considerable attention from both academics and professionals, particularly since the government created a formal policy to demand greater inclusion within mainstream education. As noted during the introduction, there is now a statutory requirement on mainstream schools to ensure that they have suitable methods of provision for including SEN pupils within their organisation and this has created a large body of information and research as to how this has been implemented and whether or not it has been effective.

As part of the " general statement on inclusion" in Curriculum 2000 (QCA, 2000), some general principles of inclusion were established which argue that, if these principles of inclusion were suitably pursued, the general policies relating to the effectiveness of SEN inclusion would be achieved. The

three areas included: setting suitable learning challenges; responding to the learning needs of individuals who are often very diverse; and thirdly, recognising and putting in place processes to overcome any potential barriers (Wang and Algozzine 2008).

Previous research in this area has, however, typically fallen into specific areas, namely the way in which mainstream educational establishments can provide an appropriate response to any behavioural concerns and behavioural issues within their school, as a result of the inclusion of SEN pupils (Harden, 2003). Research has also been relatively extensive when it comes to determining the impact that this additional support can have on participation and inclusion, e. g. the role of the assistant teachers. Finally, there is also a body of research which has looked at the approaches taken at school level to manage a variety of different communities which may be around them. However, whilst this point of view clearly offers valuable information as to how inclusion is achieved, it is argued here that a somewhat limited view has been taken by the existing literature in this area (Dyson et al., 2002).

Inclusion in itself needs to be questioned and there is a large volume of research which has looked specifically at whether or not inclusion should automatically be viewed as a positive aspect of these types of social policies. For example, Oliver (1996) argues that inclusion is, in fact, an automatic right for all children with any form of special educational needs, regardless of the extent of the need or the personal reasoning for each individual. Other researchers have taken a different approach and have failed to take on

board the underlying assumption that inclusion is a positive aspect, in all cases. For example, Smelter et al. (1994) argues that placing an individual within mainstream education may not always be the best approach for that individual. Therefore, the focus needs to shift towards establishing policies where the underlying aim is to provide the best possible educational environment for each individual. This would automatically mean that some pupils would not necessarily be focused upon in terms of gaining inclusion within mainstream education, but rather the policy setters would be looking at the broader issues of educating SEN pupils in such a way that they gained the best overall results and this may require a different educational approach to be taken.

The perceptions of both teachers and teaching assistants in the area of inclusion of SEN pupils are also a crucial factor and has gained some attention, in recent years. For example, the way in which support provisions are provided is in itself potentially a vitally important research area. According to the SERC Report in 1993, approximately 8, 000 SEN pupils were found to be educated in mainstream classes, within primary school education. However, only 50% of these pupils were receiving additional support which was primarily focused on learning and remedial support, rather than social needs. The way in which additional support interacts with the mainstream educational establishment is arguably a crucial aspect of this research.

The research, therefore, takes an interpretivist approach which recognises that the effectiveness of inclusion may depend on whether or not the support

structure is in place for effectively filling the gaps that would prevent an SEN pupil from struggling with being involved in mainstream education. It also looks at the underlying policies for achieving inclusion in mainstream education, and how these needs should to be accommodated within mainstream education, looking at the practical approaches taken when it comes to providing specific support that is tailored for each individual. Due to statutory requirements, it is taken as a given that inclusion is the ultimate target, yet research in this area has looked primarily at how precisely this should be achieved. INTO (2000). For example, research has looked at how SEN pupils should be accommodated within mainstream education, so that these pupils remain within the mainstream education establishment, but are required to attend special classes to assist with their specific area of difficulty. This focus is primarily aimed at establishing the resource needs of teachers who are providing support for special educational needs; however, it also gives a strong indication of how these SEN pupils can be accommodated within mainstream education, but can also have their own needs met through the use of special classes, where appropriate (Norwich and Lewis, 2001).

The increasing need to provide teachers and resources to support inclusion in mainstream education is justifiably one of the key areas of literature that has previously been established within the area of special educational needs, as the current situation seems to suggest that the need to achieve inclusion within mainstream education is a given. However, the real difficulty comes when it is necessary to this area is how to implement inclusion in the most appropriate way. It could be argued for example, that inclusion is potentially

beneficial, provided it is suitably resourced and supported, so as not to be the detriment of any pupil, whether they are SEN pupils themselves or, indeed, others within their peer group.

Conclusions

Even a cursory glance at issue of including SEN pupils within mainstream education indicates a much broader range of factors and issues which need to be considered when looking to implement such a policy. Statutory requirements for inclusion are already part of this system within the UK. Therefore, the chosen area of research is to look at how effective these policies have been, while also questioning whether indeed setting policies is the appropriate way of providing the best educational background for all pupils. The research will also look at ways in which these policies should be practically applied and the types of resources that need to be made available in order to support the inclusion of SEN pupils within mainstream education. By taking a rounded view of the issue of SEN pupils within mainstream education and even questioning the foundation of the original policy, a stronger understanding of the various different factors can be had. These finding should help prevent mainstream schools from becoming too focused on practical issues such as achieving educational results, but also recognising that issues such as social inclusion are likely to be of considerable concern, when it comes to the overall picture of achieving inclusion within mainstream education.

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