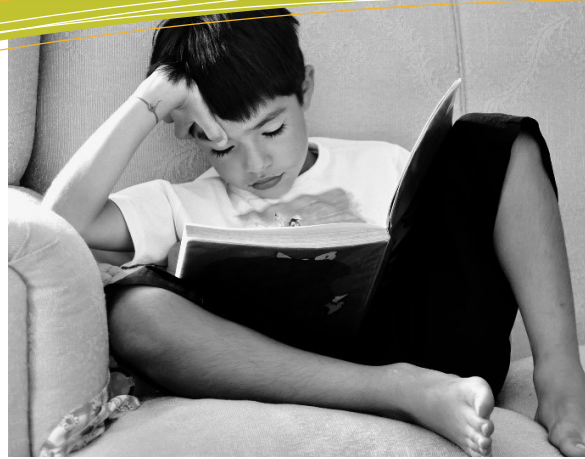




SENDISS
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Pearl Barnes is the Executive Director of SENDISS, an independent support service for all schools and colleges. Here she discusses the changes in prevalence of SEN across all sectors. Since the introduction of the revised code of practice



Changes in the numbers of people on the SEN register might not be all that they seem, writes Pearl Barnes

Is DfE data a true reflection of SEN?

Every year the DfE publishes SEN and disability data relating to the categories of need and levels of SEN and disability support. There was a dramatic shift in number of pupils on the SEN register within maintained schools following the implementation of the revised SEN Code of Practice in 2015, from over 21 per cent in 2010 to just below 15 per cent in 2015. However, since then, numbers have remained stable. New data recently published by the DfE shows a slight increase in the number of pupils identified as having SEN or being in receipt of additional support, nevertheless the percentage remains stable, at 14.4 per cent.

EHC plans

The number of pupils receiving support through an education, health and care (EHC) plan stays the same at 2.8 per cent - but there remain widely varying levels of provision across the UK, with some areas voicing concerns that accessing a needs assessment remains problematic, leading to a reduced number of EHC plans.

It is worth noting that the average age for an EHC plan is 15 years, which signifies ongoing difficulties in early identification and intervention, despite the Revised Code of Practice (and indeed the 2001 Code) supporting it.

26.9 per cent of pupils with an EHC plan have an identified primary need of autistic spectrum condition, whilst below one per cent of all EHC plans are provided for children with a multi-sensory impairment, making multisensory impairment the highest level of need.

The level of EHC plans within the independent sector has slightly risen from 4.2 per cent of pupils on the SEN and disabilities register in 2010 to 5.8 per cent in 2017, reflecting the growing need for specialist independent school places.

Gender

Boys continue to outnumber girls on the SEN and disabilities register, with 14.6 per cent of boys compared to 8.1 per cent of girls in receipt of SEN support.

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Gender

Four per cent of boys, compared to 1.6 per cent of girls have an EHC plan. With moderate learning difficulties (MLD) being the primary identified need, indicates that there remains an under-identification of SEN and disabilities in girls, since there is no evidence to suggest that boys are more likely to experience MLD than girls.



Academies

There are 12.2 per cent of pupils in receipt of SEN Support across academies in England and Wales.

The DfE warns: “Academies have exactly the same duties for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) as all other schools. All schools have a duty to adhere to the equality act for pupils with disabilities, to have regard for the SEND code of practice and to use their best endeavours to meet pupils’ needs. This means doing everything they can to meet children and young people’s special educational needs. All schools have a duty to admit a young person, where the school is named in an EHC plan and engage with parents on the support provided for their children and involve them in reviewing progress.”

Independent schools

Whilst the number and percentage of pupils on the SEN register in maintained schools has decreased year-on-year over the last five years, with a dramatic fall-off from 2014-15, when schools revised their registers in line with SEN reforms, prevalence within the independent sector has increased year-on-year. In 2010, there were 21.1 per cent of all pupils in the maintained sector on the SEN register (18.3 per cent without a statement of SEN plus 2.8 per cent with a statement of SEN) compared to 11.8 per cent within the independent sector (10.2 per cent without a statement and 1.6 per cent with a statement of SEN). By 2015, however, the prevalence within the maintained sector had dropped massively to just 15.4 per cent in total.

The independent sector, though, saw a rise of 1.4 per cent to 13.2 per cent in total. By 2017, SEN and disabilities numbers in the maintained sector had dropped further, to 14.4 per cent in total, compared to a further rise in the independent sector to 13.9 per cent overall.

Explaining this disparity is difficult. It is hard to believe that pupils with SEN have migrated from the state to the independent sector. It is possible that the independent sector has maintained its ability to identify SEND needs as it simply does not adhere as rigidly to the revised Code when formulating its SEN Register, as they are able to develop and mould their SEN provision annually, according to their perceived and identified need. Moreover, it is possible that of this increase in number, their level of functioning may not be equivalent to those within the maintained sector; in essence, the bar for support is substantially higher within the maintained sector than in the independent sector, as reflected through the decreased access to it.



Reality Check

In my experience, it is the drive to revise SEN registers, to reflect those who are receiving additional support (as opposed to those with a diagnosis or who are behind in their learning), which has led to this dramatic fall in numbers. It isn't possible for seven per cent of all children to suddenly not need additional help or support. The revised Code of Practice changed the categories for provision from three to two: SEN Support and an EHC plan; whilst previously there was an additional layer of School Action. When revising their registers, most schools appear to have lost those who might need monitoring or who dip in and out of services but are not categorised as weak enough to receive the ongoing additional support.

However, this dramatic reduction in numbers has also come about at a time of increased austerity and cut-backs in services. If there is less money for support and provision, less money to fund intervention groups, there will automatically be fewer pupils who can access it. The availability of provision dictates the number of pupils who can access the support, leading to a reduction in the number placed on the register. In a similar way, closing libraries in the local community denies the community access to that service, it does not necessarily mean that the service is no longer required. Research shows that children and young people with SEN and disabilities are more likely to develop conditions such as depression, and are ten times more likely to end up in the criminal justice system and three times more likely to end up as NEET (NAO, 2011).

Essentially, cutting back provision, in my view, appears to have led to a dramatic decrease in the number of pupils identified as in need of additional support, leaving children and young people open and vulnerable. More training and support is needed, not less, to ensure children and young people are able to reach their true potential, to live fulfilling lives and to avoid the onset in later life of secondary (and more harmful) mental health conditions.

Further information

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