

Education and Skills Committee

Focus group notes – extracts on Additional Support Needs (ASN)

Below are extracts relating to ASN from the notes of focus groups held by the Committee in January/February 2017.

Focus group of trainee teachers from the University of Glasgow on 26 January

9 trainee teachers attended the Parliament's education centre for the day. Ross Greer MSP and Daniel Johnson MSP held a focus group with them on their experiences of training including placements in schools.

When asked whether they felt supported in relation to additional support needs the trainees either said no or shook their heads. Similarly, when asked whether any of them had been in a school where those with additional support needs were sufficiently supported, they said no.

One said they had had a class of 25 where 9 had ASN and these needs are all very distinct. The trainee was given access to files for these children and then they googled these different conditions and had received no training on common conditions such as autism. Their view was that requiring a generic approach to widely varied needs was a big challenge.

Another suggested that the extent to which conditions are flagged up from the classroom and pursued to receive support for a pupil can be school resources and culture dependant and therefore unidentified ASN remain in some cases.

Focus groups of teachers and academics on 8th February

Attendees:

Helen Auld, teacher

Elaine Batty, teacher and president of Scottish Association of Geography Teachers

Anne Boyd, teacher

James Batchelor, teacher

Kate Imler, teacher

Ian McCubbin, teacher

Anonymous teacher

Dr Alan D Britton, University of Glasgow

Dr Margaret McCulloch, University of Glasgow

Dr George Head, University of Glasgow

Harry Blee, University of Glasgow

Frank Lennon, retired headteacher

Daniel Johnson MSP

Johann Lamont MSP (Deputy Convener)

Richard Lochhead MSP

Fulton MacGregor MSP

Tavish Scott MSP
Liz Smith MSP

Focus group A

Some of the group felt that certain schools were very good at managing ASN in their school environment. One person reported that they had worked in a school where about a third of the cohort had ASN status. This was managed within a classroom by using small breakout groups and a high ratio of adults to pupils; often 4 trained adults to around 20 pupils. With those ratios, "it worked." However, for some in the group, often "there are just too many kids in a class and not enough resources."

One member of the group noted the importance of the audit process for a pupil who was identified as having possible additional support needs. If the audit was done correctly and comprehensively, then that was the key to unlocking additional resources.

For others, an example of what had worked in the past within one local authority was to have a small number of schools which had a particular specialism in ASN matters (and the resources to match) whilst seeking to maintain an overall mainstreaming approach across the authority. Also, within certain schools, it was considered helpful to have different units or classes where different teaching models were available to best suit the particular needs of the pupils with ASN in order to provide flexibility in teaching approaches.

The group generally was very supportive of the way of teaching in the past which looked at providing a team-based approach within a classroom with a teacher, SLAs and ASN-trained specialists. For one of our guests, "you just can't teach a class of 30 pupils without the range of support in the classroom". For her, "the behaviour of the kids whose needs are not being met then disrupts the learning process for the rest". The group noted that teachers today "don't question the rights behind mainstreaming but they do question just how they are supposed to teach."

A central message going forward is that local authorities cannot continue to close down the special schools or units within schools, as for some pupils, this provision is necessary to best meet their needs. A view expressed was that not all pupils with ASN can cope with mainstreaming-only provision all of the time. When this fails, the result is poor service for the pupil involved and then involves a costly and time-consuming process of parents/guardians making placing requests to other schools of bringing forward legal challenges.

Focus group B

A number of participants suggested that the needs of pupils with specialist and intensive support needs were, in their experience, met, particularly in specialist units within mainstream schools. However, those who require the next level of support were less well served.

One of the main issues identified was that all teachers should have the training and support to enable them to teach single classes with a variety of needs. It was noted

however, that where this model can become difficult is when pupils with additional support needs have disruptive behavioural issues - that is one pupil's right to a broad and deep education clashes with others'.

Focus group of teachers from Dalkeith High and St David's High School on 8th February

During a visit to Dalkeith Community Campus on 8th February the Convener (James Dornan MSP), Ross Greer MSP and Ross Thomson MSP held a focus group with teachers from both of the high schools.

Dalkeith High has a support for learning teachers department and a support for learning base for pupils. It also offers shared placements with students from Saltersgate which is a special needs school also situated on the campus, and these students can be accompanied on these placements by Saltersgate staff. The base is often used so that students have some scheduled in time each week for support. Wherever possible students follow the Curriculum for Excellence and the school also offers in-house provision of activities such as the Duke of Edinburgh Awards Scheme where pupils are not as suited to more traditional formats of study or traditional subjects.

One Dalkeith High teacher suggested there was a lot of support available but not enough support to accommodate the "enormous increase" in the number of students with additional support needs.

A St David's teacher suggested that there are some children that should not have been put into mainstream high schools and that the school does not have the resources to support them. Staff do what they can to support those children but can feel they are failing them.

Teachers from both schools suggested that the situation was worse than 5 years ago and getting worse each year. One teacher from St David's suggested this was because the level of diagnosis has "grown exponentially" and diagnosis is happening earlier in a child's life.

Another teacher from St David's suggested huge levels of resource was going into support for children with autism but that this was still not enough. They suggested resources had not been cut but that they were spread thinner than before and there was a lack of training available for teaching assistants.

A teacher from Dalkeith High ended the session highlighting mental health issues saying he was "astonished" by the number of pupils who have mental health issues.

Focus group of teachers from the Edinburgh area on 8th February

A group of mainly primary and some secondary teachers attended the Parliament's education centre for a political literacy course. Colin Beattie MSP and Gillian Martin MSP held a discussion at the end of their course.

One teacher suggested subject teachers are supposed to identify a wide range of needs and then, when these are referred on to CAHMS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services) there is sometimes a year long wait due to a lack of social workers and psychologists. The main issue they suggested was the need for more resources.

When asked about training one suggested that they had a day at teacher training on additional support needs. There was lots of support when one of the MSPs suggested there was scope to overhaul teacher training back to more tutorials and practical activities. The perception from a teacher that trained in the 90s was that training is more lecture-based than it used to be.

A number of teachers mentioned that learning assistant numbers had been cut back so where children used to have protected time with assistants for 1:1 support this was no longer possible.

One suggested that there was a perception in some areas that only children with physical needs will "get the hours" and the more persistence from the family the more likely they will get the diagnosis and therefore the resources.

One perception was that Edinburgh is closing all the special needs schools but not offering extra staff or resources to mainstream schools. The same teacher suggested that they had lots of evidence of what works for students with ASN but insufficient resources to provide it. Her example was students who have conditions where noise "sets them back". There are insufficient staff at her school to provide a manned quiet room at lunch and break times so those children go into the noisy playground and the personal support assistants spend time afterwards calming them down in lesson time.