

## Leadership for promoting achievement for children with special educational needs and disabilities

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### Background

Some schools do remarkably well with students who cope with a myriad of challenges described as special educational needs (SEN) and disability while others struggle to maximise the potential of this group of learners. The explanation for this wide variation in achievement of these students is likely to be complex and to reside in a number of school-based factors. However, it has become widely acknowledged that the quality of school leadership is closely associated with promoting educational achievement in learners. Therefore, it would be surprising if school leadership is not an important factor in promoting the achievement of SEN and disabled learners. Despite the probability of this link, to date, there has been very little research conducted into the nature of leadership practice that promotes achievement in this group of learners. In carrying out the study account was taken of the following complexities and, indeed, uncertainties surrounding policy and practice in the special needs field. In particular:

1. **Population changes** - developments in medical science have led to significant changes in the nature of the population of learners defined as having SEN. In particular, there has been an increase in pupils with more severe and complex impairments, and those with various forms of autism.
1. **Problems of definition** - making sense of these changing populations is made even more complex by the uncertainties that exist regarding how needs should be defined. This means that a child defined as having SEN in one school or local authority might not be so categorised in another context.
1. **The emphasis on inclusion** - further complexity is then added by the emphasis that has been placed on inclusive education. Once again there is considerable variation across the country with respect to how this concept is interpreted and to the extent it has informed local policies. The recent trend towards the co-location of special schools within mainstream school contexts is yet further evidence of a field that is in transition.
1. **Difficulties in determining progress** - given all of this complexity, it is hardly surprising that there is considerable debate within the field about how best to measure the progress of learners with SEN. For some groups - the usual test and examination measures are often appropriate, although there remain problems regarding how best to compare the progress of cohorts in different schools. Measuring the progress of youngsters with more severe learning difficulties presents particular challenges.

### Research Questions

The overarching aim of this project was to address the relative lack of understanding about the relationship between leadership practice that promotes the achievement amongst children with special educational needs (SEN) and disabilities. We did this by:

- Producing a review of the evidence from within the United Kingdom and more broadly internationally;

- Producing a series of 30 case studies of highly effective leadership that promotes achievement of students with SEN and disabilities in a diverse range of settings.

## Research Questions

Three overarching questions underpin this study:

1. What are the high leverage leadership practices that promote achievement in SEN and disabled students, and importantly:
  - a) How do these differ for students with different types of needs and disability?
  - b) How do these interact with school and community context?
2. How do school leaders interact with different stakeholders to promote the achievement of SEN and disabled students?
3. What are the implications for:
  - a) leadership development?
  - b) the management and co-ordination of provision to support the achievement of SEN and disabled students?

Specifically, this study will be guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the key drivers of positive outcomes for children with SEN and disabilities?
1. What approaches are important in ensuring the effective engagement of health professionals, family support workers, PCTs and GPs in the work of schools, children's centres, and pupil referral units?
1. What do parents and carers value from leaders in supporting their children's needs?
1. What do children and young people with complex needs have to say about the support they would like from leaders?
1. What leadership characteristics, styles and strategies are important in promoting these drivers?
1. How can leaders promote the integration of services to support the needs of children with complex needs eg. use of the Common Assessment Framework, equality of access to extended school services?
1. What leadership behaviours/approaches encourage a strong culture of inclusion in schools and children's centres?
1. What are the implications of the findings from this work for the provision of professional development for school leaders and children's centre leaders?
1. What are the implications of the findings from this work for Directors of Children's Services and their senior teams?

## Methods

The review of evidence focused on a range of literatures relating to educational leadership, change and improvement, SEN, disability and inclusion research. The review focused on evidence generated from:

- Independent empirical studies
- Government sponsored empirical studies
- Evaluations of intervention programmes
- Appropriate 'grey' literature

The team also interrogated wider literatures, including relevant international sources. Following the literature search, we completed a comprehensive database of sources and a review of the existing knowledge base, highlighting the key themes and important messages for policy and practice.

Phase two of the project involved collecting case study data of effective leadership practice that promotes achievement in students with SEN and disabilities from 30 different settings nationally. This included illuminating accounts of practice, including detailed insights into the nature of effective leadership in a range of settings including: primary and secondary schools, academies, federations, PRUs, children's centres and special schools.

In negotiation with the steering group, a sample of schools were selected to provide a range of contexts and leadership challenges. In addition to sampling on the basis of structural arrangements, we used maximum variation sampling:

- Schools whose examination performance for students with SEN and disabilities is improving at a faster rate than national average;
- Schools with current leadership and emotional health and well being which is judged as 'excellent' by OfSTED inspection and/or local authority/SIP/HMI/DCSF evaluation;
- Schools with different structural characteristics (phase, PRU, federation, Academy etc.);
- Schools located in a range of socio-economic and geographical settings (inner city, urban, suburban and rural)

And

- Schools with different student populations (uni/multi ethnic and religious populations)

The cases were structured to illuminate:

- How leadership practices have raised achievement among pupils with SEN and disabilities;
- The leadership qualities and practices which have raised achievement.

Phase 3 of the project tested and refined the themes, patterns and trends emerging from within and between case analysis, and explored the implications of the findings for different stakeholder groups. Focus groups with head teachers, Directors of Children's Services, students and parents of children with SEN and disabilities helped to draw out the key messages from the research and reflect on the implications of the findings.

## Frame

Our analytical framework is informed by our review of the literature in the fields of educational leadership, change and improvement, SEN, disability and inclusion research. These contrasting perspectives provide a number of lenses to interpret and understand structures and processes in action within cases and to offer accounting for similarities and differences between cases. Data

collection and analysis has been treated as a dynamic interactive process supporting the generation of emerging themes, patterns and trends in a similar vein to what has become known as "grounded theory". The final phase of this project was designed to test and refine the themes, patterns and trends emerging from within and between case analysis to generate a robust set of findings and explore their implications for different stakeholder groups including head teachers, Senior LA staff, students and parents of children with SEN and disabilities.

### **Research findings**

Emerging findings suggest leaders that promote the achievement of children with SEN and disabilities adopt a complex range of approaches tailored to their specific context. Some of these are embedded in traditional orthodoxies of school effectiveness and improvement including whole-school interventions and strategies designed to raise the achievement of different groups of students irrespective of their SEN or disability status. Other approaches appear to be specifically designed to overcome barriers to learning faced by those with SEN and disability. Data collection and analysis are on-going and due to be completed by March 2010. Therefore, it would be premature to provide detail of the emerging key themes at this stage. However, the study will be completed and written up by August 2010 and the outputs will include a thematic report accompanied by 30 vignettes for the sponsor. These will form the basis of this paper for BERA. This study will make a contribution to knowledge in the field of school leadership and improvement in terms of what leadership practice works, and why for children with SEN and disabilities.