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## SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS AND ETHNICITY: ISSUES OF OVER-AND-UNDER-REPRESENTATION

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### Introduction

There have been concerns for some time about the attainment and progress of children from minority ethnic groups in the UK. One specific concern has been about their over-representation among pupils identified as having special educational needs (SEN). This report addresses that issue but adopts a wider perspective. Because the majority of pupils are White British (about four in five pupils) they also form the majority in absolute numbers for SEN. We have therefore investigated the evidence for both over- and under-representation of different categories of SEN (defined as receiving support at School Action Plus or through a Statement of SEN) among different minority ethnic groups compared with the prevalence among White British pupils, the general term for which is disproportionality.

Analysis of the 2005 Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC) data on 6.5 million pupils in maintained schools shows clear evidence of over- and under-representation of some minority ethnic groups among the SEN group in general and among certain categories of SEN. A literature review enabled us to identify possible reasons for these disproportionalities. A survey of Local Authorities and two focus groups with survey respondents provided further perspectives, including local factors impacting on disproportionality.

### Key findings

- Socio-economic disadvantage (poverty) and gender have stronger associations than ethnicity with overall prevalence of SEN and of certain categories of SEN. However, after controlling for the effects of socio-economic disadvantage, gender and year group significant over- and under-representation of different minority ethnic groups relative to White British pupils remain. The nature and degree of these disproportionalities varies across both category of SEN and minority ethnic group.

### **After controlling for year group, gender and socio-economic disadvantage, and relative to White British pupils:**

- Black Caribbean and Mixed White & Black Caribbean pupils are around 1½ times more likely to be identified as having Behavioural, Emotional and Social Difficulties (BESD) than White British pupils. The literature suggests teacher and school factors including racist attitudes and differential treatment of Black pupils as a reason for their over-representation in the BESD category. However, the PLASC data has not shown similar over-representation for all Black pupils, suggesting differences between Black Caribbean pupils and Mixed White & Black Caribbean pupils compared with other Black pupils. Further work to investigate this over-representation is needed. The focus needs to be on distinguishing the different needs of these pupils. Positive approaches to engage the pupils and their parents and to focus on success, perhaps modelling on 'Aiming High' but with a specific additional SEN focus, should be considered.

- Bangladeshi pupils are nearly twice as likely to be identified as having a hearing impairment than White British pupils, and Pakistani pupils are between 2 - 2 times more likely to be identified as having Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties, a Visual Impairment, Hearing Impairment or Multi-sensory Impairment than White British pupils. The literature suggests a greater incidence of genetic factors related to consanguinity (where parents are blood relations) as an important factor in the over-representation of Pakistani and Bangladeshi children for these SEN categories. However, care must be taken not to over-attribute developmental difficulties to this factor. The Department of Health needs actively to address this issue and to develop a sensitive strategy to engage the community in a consideration of risk associated with consanguinity.
- Asian and Chinese pupils are less likely than White British pupils to be identified as having Moderate Learning Difficulties, Specific Learning Difficulties and Autistic Spectrum Disorder. The literature suggests that this could be because of difficulties in disentangling learning difficulties from issues associated with English as an Additional Language (EAL) and therefore work is needed to assess whether these children's needs are being met appropriately or whether their EAL status is leading to an under-estimation of the nature and severity of cognition and learning needs. The literature also suggests that lack of early take-up of health care among EAL groups may be an additional risk factor.
- Traveller of Irish Heritage and Gypsy/Roma pupils are over-represented among many categories of SEN, including Moderate, and Severe Learning Difficulties, and BESD. The literature suggests a number of factors ranging from those associated with school such as negative teacher attitudes, racism and bullying, and a curriculum perceived as lacking relevance to factors associated with Traveller cultures, such as high mobility, poor attendance and early drop out from school. However, the research base on this group is limited and therefore these conclusions are indicative only.

## **Methods**

The evidence has been derived from four sources.

### Analysis of PLASC

We analysed the 2005 Pupil Level Annual School Census data for all children in maintained schools in England, about 6.5 million pupils. Our analyses have used a measure of effect size, the odds ratio, a measure of the likelihood of pupils in a minority ethnic group being identified as having a particular category of SEN compared with the likelihood of White British pupils being identified as having that category of SEN. As year group, gender and socio-economic disadvantage are associated with both SEN and ethnicity, we have analysed the relationship between SEN and ethnicity after having taken account of these other factors.

We have chosen as a cut-off for indicating substantial, and hence important, differences those odds ratios where pupils from a minority ethnic group are 1.5 times more likely than White British pupils to be identified with a particular category of SEN (a ratio of 1.50:1 or more) or, conversely, are 1.5 times less likely to be identified with that SEN (a ratio of 0.67:1 or less). These measures indicate over-representation and under-representation respectively.

### Literature review

We undertook a review of literature published mainly in the period 1990-2005 primarily in the US and UK. This focussed on publications that address the relationship between SEN and ethnicity although we also include some literature that examines the attainment and progress of the full range of pupils from different minority ethnic groups.

### LA Survey & focus groups

In addition the current perspectives of senior practitioners in Local Authorities (LAs) were identified by use of a survey and two focus groups. The survey comprised a postal questionnaire to the SEN adviser (or comparable role) and Principal Educational Psychologist for each of the 150 LAs in England (response rate 27% of LAs).

Additionally, two focus groups were organised one for the north (in Manchester) and one in the south (in London) attended by those among survey respondents who expressed interest in contributing further and

who were available, a total of 13 senior professionals representing 10 LAs. The focus groups focussed on participants' local knowledge and explored the nature of over- and under-representation in their LAs; data collection and analysis; perspectives on reasons for any disproportionality in the LAs; and both local and national issues in general. Given the relatively small sample size for both survey and focus groups, these findings are indicative only.

## Detailed Findings

- Analysis of PLASC data identified that socio-economic disadvantage (poverty) and gender have stronger associations than ethnicity with overall prevalence of SEN and of certain categories of SEN, and that year group is also associated. For example, **among all ethnic groups:**

- The identification of SEN is highest in Y6, with both younger pupils and older pupils being less likely to have identified SEN.
- Boys are over-represented relative to girls for most categories of SEN<sup>1</sup>. The differences are most pronounced for ASD where boys are over-represented relative to girls 6:1 and BESD where boys are over-represented 4:1. For SpLD and SLCN boys are overrepresented 2.5:1 and for MLD/SLD by about 1.75:1. There is no over-representation of boys in the more clearly 'physiological' categories of SEN, i.e. sensory or physical needs and PMLD.
- The most prevalent categories of SEN (BESD and MLD), which together account for 52% of pupils with SEN, are the most strongly associated with socio-economic disadvantage. Some categories have a significant but lower level of association (SLD, PMLD, PD, MSI, SpLD, and SLCN) and others have a weak relationship with socio-economic disadvantage (ASD, HI and VI).

The associations with year group, gender and socio-economic disadvantage need to be taken into

<sup>1</sup> MLD: Moderate Learning Difficulties; SLD: Severe Learning Difficulties; PMLD: Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties; SpLD: Specific Learning Difficulties; BESD: Behavioural, Emotional and Social Difficulties; SLCN: Speech, Language and Communication Needs; ASD: Autistic Spectrum Disorder; VI: visual Impairment; HI: Hearing Impairment; MSI Multi-sensory Impairment; PD: Physical Disability.

account when examining the relationship between ethnicity and SEN. When this is done in our 'adjusted models', significant over- and under-representation of different minority ethnic groups relative to White British pupils remain but the associations between SEN and ethnic group are reduced. The extent of the remaining disproportionality varies by minority ethnic group and by category of SEN.

### *With respect to overall rate of being at School Action Plus or with a Statement*

After controlling for year group, gender and socio-economic disadvantage, and compared to White British pupils:

- Traveller of Irish heritage and Gypsy/Roma pupils are 2.7 and 2.6 times more likely than White British pupils to have SEN
- Black-Caribbean pupils have similar rate of identification to White British pupils;
- Black African pupils are less likely than White British to have identified SEN.
- Indian, Bangladeshi and Chinese pupils are less likely than White British pupils to have SEN; Pakistani pupils are under-represented but not to a substantial extent.

### *With respect to particular categories of SEN*

After controlling for year group, gender and socio-economic disadvantage, and compared to White-British pupils:

- Traveller of Irish heritage pupils are more likely to have SEN in relation to MLD, SLD, SpLD and BESD, and less likely to have SEN in relation to ASD.
- Gypsy/Roma pupils are more likely to have SEN in relation to MLD, PMLD, HI and SLD and less likely to have SEN for ASD.
- Indian pupils are less likely to have SEN in relation to BESD, SpLD, ASD and MLD.
- Bangladeshi pupils are more likely to have SEN in relation to HI and less likely to have SEN in relation to BESD, ASD, SpLD, MLD and PD.
- Pakistani pupils are more likely to have SEN in

relation to PMLD, VI, HI and MSI, and less likely to have SEN in relation to BESD, SpLD and ASD.

- Black Caribbean and Mixed White & Black-Caribbean pupils are more likely to have SEN in relation to BESD.
- Black African pupils are less likely to have SEN in relation to MLD, SpLD, BESD and PD.
- Black Other pupils are less likely to have SEN in relation to MLD, VI and PD.
- Chinese pupils are more likely to have SEN in relation to SLCN, but less likely to have SEN in relation to BESD, SpLD, MLD and PD.
- Past evidence of over-representation of Black Caribbean pupils in the MLD category has not been supported by the PLASC analysis: Black Caribbean (and Mixed White & Black Caribbean) pupils are represented in comparable proportions to White pupils.

#### *Reasons for disproportionality*

- There is strong evidence from our analysis of two broad groupings of SEN which differ with respect to the relative influences of physiological and societal/contextual factors.
  - Those categories where the nature of the SEN has a stronger physiological element e.g. profound hearing loss, and where the context is a relatively less important factor in the cause of the difficulties (although it is, of course, of great importance in terms of action to address the SEN).
  - Those categories of SEN that are more related to context, e.g. BESD. There are two relevant factors. Firstly, these SEN are defined in terms of the pupil's actions within a context, mainly the school and classroom. Furthermore, these needs are socially constructed in the sense that pupils' behaviour is interpreted in terms of expected patterns (norms) of behaviour. Secondly, there is evidence of a strong relationship for these categories with social disadvantage.
- The PLASC analysis shows that Black Caribbean pupils (and to a lesser extent Mixed White & Black Caribbean pupils) have a higher likelihood of being identified as having BESD than White British pupils; there is also evidence from national statistics (DfES, 2005) of similar patterns of over-representation of Black Caribbean pupils among excluded and low-attaining pupils. The literature has suggested teacher and school factors including racist attitudes and differential treatment of Black pupils as a reason for their over-representation within the BESD category. However, the fact that the PLASC analysis shows no over-representation for other Black groups raises questions about any simple conclusions based on this research. Rather, an interaction between a number of inter-related, and often self-perpetuating, factors seems more likely, including: teachers' perceptions and expectations of minority ethnic pupils, their understanding of different cultures, pupils' responses and reactions to this, and teachers' reactions to behaviours which they consider challenging.
- The research suggests greater incidence of genetic factors related to consanguinity as an important causative factor in the over-representation of Pakistani children for VI, HI, MSI, and PMLD and Bangladeshi pupils for HI. However, this is a complex field and care must be taken not to over-attribute these difficulties to consanguinity.
- The under-representation of all Asian groups and Chinese pupils for SpLD and ASD could suggest that there are sometimes problems in distinguishing learning difficulties from issues associated with English as an Additional Language.
- Late and low levels of take-up of health care among Asian groups because of poor communication (which could be due to EAL), low levels of knowledge of services and delays in diagnosis have been identified as additional risk factors.
- The high levels of SEN among Traveller groups appear to have a number of determining factors. These factors range from factors associated with school such as negative teacher attitudes, racism and bullying, and a curriculum perceived as lacking relevance to factors associated with Traveller cultures, such as high mobility, poor attendance and early drop out from school. However, the research base is limited and so conclusions for this group can only be indicative.

- Parent support within minority ethnic groups overall is equally as high (if not higher) than for the White population but some parents may experience barriers to involvement as a result of language difficulties.
- Poverty and socio-economic disadvantage are supported as important factors in those categories of SEN that are strongly associated with context: BESD and MLD.
- Poverty and socio-economic disadvantage appear not to be as important for those categories of SEN with strong physiological (within-child) causes, particularly sensory and physical needs, PMLD and ASD.
- The above results give a picture of the national situation regarding over- and under-representation of different minority groups with regard to SEN identification. However there is also substantial variation between LAs in these data. For example, while in general Pakistani pupils and White British pupils do not differ substantially in the likelihood of having an identified SEN, in 10 LAs Pakistani pupils are half as likely as White British pupils to have an identified SEN while in four LAs Pakistani pupils were 1.5 times more likely than White British pupils to have an identified SEN. Identifying and exploring such variation may help us to better understand the reasons for over- or under-representation.

## Recommendations

Where possible we present recommendations targeted either at the Local Authority/Children's trust or at the national level, primarily DfES but also Department of Health (DH) and Teacher Development Agency (TDA). However, generally for all of these recommendations it will be important to ensure engagement at national and local levels and to engage all education practitioners including teachers, educational psychologists, advisory and support staff and health professionals (e.g. speech and language therapists, paediatricians).

### Developing strategies within each Local Authority/Children's Trust

Local Authorities/Children's Trusts should:

- work together to consider the LA's analysis of

its PLASC data against the national dataset in order to identify local patterns of over- and under-representation and to formulate appropriate action.

- make more use of the extended codes to examine the particular characteristics of their communities at a level of detail (e.g. the origin and demographics of groups such as Black African and Black Other will vary in different areas).
- examine the SEN-ethnicity interactions for their locality, seek to identify whether there are local factors of importance, and address emerging issues.
- Ensure that training and support is provided to schools to optimise the accuracy of identification of category and level of SEN.
- establish a two-way flow of information between those responsible for collecting and analysing PLASC data and other sections of the LA who provide services where the data are relevant. Thus (1) those delivering services (e.g. School Improvement Services, School Improvement Partners, Educational Psychology Services, Ethnic Minority Advisory Services and Education Welfare Services etc) should receive appropriate analyses of SEN and ethnicity data and (2) the services should provide feedback to help the LA/Children's Trust in the interpretation of the data.
- use the evidence produced in this report to support the development of Children's Services that meet the needs of children with SEN from minority ethnic groups.
- use the evidence to plan resources and commissioning strategies for pupils from minority ethnic groups identified as over-represented, e.g. Pakistani and Bangladeshi pupils for sensory impairment and PMLD.

### *Developing initiatives at a national level*

- The DfES should work together with the Teacher Development Agency and the National Strategies to ensure that initial teacher training and guidance to schools include information about the influence on the identification of SEN of poverty, gender and ethnicity and to develop and disseminate strategies to address disproportionality.

- As the groups most characterised by over-representation, special attention is required to address the needs of Travellers, both those of Irish heritage and Gypsy-Roma, particularly with respect to Cognition and Learning Needs and BESD. A national approach is required to support teachers in further developing their understanding of the Travellers' cultures, including the variation within these two groups, and the development of positive curricular and teaching approaches to enhance these pupils' learning and reduce disaffection. In addition, further work is necessary with Traveller families on the value of education and access to education during periods of mobility.
- Further work is required to reduce the over-representation of Black Caribbean and Mixed White and Black Caribbean pupils identified as having BESD. As this is not the case for Black African or Black Other pupils, an approach focussing on reducing racism against Black pupils generally is insufficiently focussed. Attention is necessary to distinguish the different needs of these groups. Positive approaches to engage the pupils and their parents and to focus on success, perhaps modelling on 'Aiming High' but with a specific additional SEN focus should be considered.
- The over-representation of Pakistani children for SEN concerning sensory needs (VI, HI and MSI) and PMLD, and of Bangladeshi children for HI, requires the active engagement of the Department of Health (DH). If, as appears to be the case, these children are at particular risk of sensory impairment as a result of consanguinity then this requires a sensitive strategy engaging the community in a consideration of risk associated with current practices.
- The over-representation of Pakistani pupils for sensory impairment and PMLD requires consideration in the national/regional planning of resources to meet the needs of children with these developmental difficulties.
- The over-representation of Chinese pupils with SLCN requires attention by the DfES and DH. The suitability and accuracy of assessments and intervention by speech and language therapists and educationists requires further research to ensure that different needs arising from the children having English as an Additional Language, compared with or in addition to developmental language difficulties, are recognised and addressed appropriately.
- The under-representation of all Asian and Chinese groups with respect to MLD, SpLD and ASD requires investigation of whether these children's needs are being appropriately recognised, or whether their EAL status is leading professionals to under-estimate the nature and severity of cognition and language needs. This will require investigation of the processes of identification and assessment, particularly those at School Action Plus and SEN statutory assessment.
- The PLASC dataset provides an important source of information and should be continued; DfES guidance to LAs/schools should be reviewed on a regular basis to optimise levels of accurate submission of SEN and ethnicity data.
- The effectiveness of LAs in providing training and support to schools regarding their PLASC data should also be monitored.
- Further research is necessary to utilize fully the unique national dataset offered by PLASC. For example investigation of the significant variations across LAs could provide a rich seam for better understanding of some of the origins and causes of disproportionality.
- A full analysis of PLASC can also be used to formulate specific research questions to be explored by further research. Examples of possible studies include:
  - The reasons for differential rates of BESD among different Black groups.
  - The effectiveness of support for Travellers.
  - The effectiveness of provision for parents with EAL, including inter-agency collaboration.
  - The effectiveness of provision for pupils newly arrived from other countries.
  - Patterns of different over- and under-representation for particular categories of SEN between LAs and an examination of the reasons for these.

## Reference

DfES. (2005). Ethnicity and education: The evidence on minority ethnic pupils (Research Topic Paper RTP-01-05. London: DfES

## Additional Information

*Copies of the full report (RR757) - priced £4.95 - are available by writing to DfES Publications, PO Box 5050, Sherwood Park, Annesley, Nottingham NG15 0DJ.*

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