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How can we understand learner progress in special schools?:

Taking a closer look at quality indicator 1.1 (Improvements in performance) in special schools in City of Edinburgh

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This report summarises findings from a small study recently undertaken in Edinburgh special schools. The aim of the study was to provide external scrutiny on progress towards improvements in performance and to assist the development of future strategy in this area. It examined the development and implementation of a new standardised framework for improvement. The findings indicate that this development has been timely, well focused and highly successful. The introduction of this standardised framework across the special school sector represents a radical approach and leads the way for Scotland in terms of responding to the need to provide an overview of learner progress in this sector.

Key Findings

1. *The development of the new framework has led to significant improvement in the local authority overview of learner progress in special schools.*
2. *Progress is now much more systematically assessed, taking much better account of progress for groups and whole school population, though some challenges remain.*
3. *Commitment to positive leadership was essential to improvement.*
4. *Commitment to continuing professional learning was a key marker of successful leadership for improvement.*
5. *The schools in the study have identified and developed key strengths which could be more widely shared.*
6. *The head teachers in the study attribute these strengths to engagement with the broader educational field, availability of high quality training, and to increased reflective dialogue with their staff teams, with their managers and with each other.*
7. *The local authority should continue its pro-active and highly valued approach to support and challenge with head teachers.*
8. *The planning and performance team and the service manager should continue to develop their work together.*

INTRODUCTION

The City of Edinburgh Council makes provision for almost all children and young people with additional learning needs within its mainstream schools and centres. In addition, approximately 850 learners (around 2.1% of the local school population) with a complexity of significant additional learning needs are educated in 13 special schools or in specialist provision located within mainstream schools. The factors giving rise to additional support for learning needs include: social and behavioural needs, autism spectrum disorder, significant visual/sensory/health and medical needs and learning disability.

In the past, there have been significant challenges in providing meaningful and reliable comparative information about learner progress in special schools. This is partly because the schools themselves support children and young people with quite distinct sets of needs, and comparison has been seen as challenging and unhelpful; it may also relate to ways in which monitoring of achievement and progress of learners in special school settings has often been less rigorous than in mainstream, perhaps reflecting assumptions about the need to make a 'special case for special schools'. In addition, it may be because the achievements of learners in these schools tend to go unrecognised by national and international studies such as PISA and TIMSS which examine school attainment.

The study emerged from concern at local authority level that, although all school leaders wanted the very best for their young people, special schools varied widely in how they evaluated the outcomes and impact of their work and planned for next steps. This concern led to a focus on developing a more systematic, robust and meaningful process for effective self-evaluation in these 13 schools. The process began in 2010 and included development of a framework designed to support schools in how they evaluate the progress of learners. This allows key baseline comparative data to be gathered but also collates data customised to reflect the local and particular needs of each school. This data includes for example; national attainment data, achievement of individualised targets set by the school, achievement data from other awarding bodies, statistics reflecting onward destinations for those leaving school, as well as attendance and exclusion levels.

THE STUDY

The study reported here aimed to review progress in terms of improvements in performance in special schools in Edinburgh. It was undertaken following three years of focused development work in this area by City of Edinburgh.

The key objectives of the study were to:
- Provide an overview of learner progress in the special schools in City of Edinburgh
- Evaluate the progress made by schools since the introduction of the new evaluation framework

- Identify areas of strength which could be shared across these schools to help improve outcomes for learners
- Identify the support and skills needed by school leaders to further improve outcomes for learners
- Evaluate the challenges and successes of the performance framework to date and identify implications for teaching and learning
- Consider how lessons learned in this study might be applied more generally in special and mainstream schools.

The design of the study

The study had two main strands:

1. Individual in-depth interviews with a sample of five head teachers in special schools and three local authority officers with key responsibilities in this area.
2. Analysis of a small sample (two sets) of Standards and Quality reports from the last three years in these special schools.

The five schools were chosen to ensure that primary, secondary and all-through schools were represented, and that a range of provision was also represented, e.g. a school which worked with young people experiencing social and emotional difficulties, a school where the needs of pupils included autism spectrum disorder, and a school which worked with pupils with complex health and learning disabilities. The schools were selected by the local authority for involvement in the study on the basis of their commitment and progress towards improvements in performance over the last three years. The study focused on effective and promising practice, seeking to identify how head teachers' vision and leadership have helped these schools successfully meet learners' needs.

Individual face-to-face interviews with head teachers were undertaken in their schools. The interviews with key local authority officers took place in a range of locations. Each of the interviews was digitally recorded with the participant's permission. All were then coded and major patterns, themes and issues identified. It was recognised from the outset that it would not be possible to guarantee complete anonymity with such a small group of interviewees working in a specialised area within one local authority. However, pseudonyms are used in this report and no quotations are directly attributed to individuals.

The Standards and Quality Reports were analysed using the same coding framework, allowing for consideration of similarities and differences in the two sets of data. By examining the Standards and Quality Reports written over the three years since the introduction of the new processes for evaluating improvements in performance, it was possible to distinguish features that have evolved, those that built on previous development, as well as features that represent a more radical departure from older approaches. Although this was a small study, it was seen as helpful to draw on both qualitative and quantitative data in this way to provide a robust evaluation overall.

THE FINDINGS

The findings reported here combine results from both the qualitative and quantitative analyses and are organised in line with the key objectives of the study set out earlier, that is:

1. An overview of learner progress in the special schools in City of Edinburgh
2. Progress made by schools since the introduction of the new evaluation framework
3. Areas of strength which could be shared across schools to help improve outcomes for learners
4. Support and skills needed by school leaders to further improve outcomes for learners
5. Challenges and successes of the performance framework to date, identifying implications for teaching and learning
6. Lessons learned in this study and how they might be applied more generally in special and mainstream schools.

1. An overview of learner progress in special schools in City of Edinburgh

The schools which participated in the study are now able to provide a much more accurate overview of learner progress than in the past. With the assistance and support of local authority staff, head teachers have developed a template for gathering relevant data that allows them to collate information within a coherent, standardised framework that also has the flexibility to include customised data reflecting the particular needs of each school and its learners. The data set now includes:

- Attainment data relating to National Qualifications and the achievement of individualised targets set by the school within the individualised educational programmes.
- Achievement data from other awarding bodies e.g. Caledonian Awards, Junior Award Scheme Scotland (JASS), Duke of Edinburgh Scheme.
- Whole school awards e.g. Rights Respecting Schools, Health Promoting Schools, Eco Schools
- Statistics reflecting:
    - Positive destinations on leaving school
    - Attendance levels across each session
    - Numbers of exclusions
- Additional information relating to other aspects of achievement, including the number of learners who become independent travellers, successfully complete a work experience placement, participate in a forest schools project.

The introduction of this standardised framework across the special school sector represents a radical approach and leads the way for Scotland in terms of responding to the need to provide an overview of learner progress. Education Scotland, and the Schools Inspectorate in particular, have taken an active interest in developments in City of Edinburgh in this area, and in the external evaluation provided by this study.

> *The development of the new framework has led to significant improvement in the local authority overview of learner progress in special schools.*

2. ***Progress made by schools since the introduction of the new evaluation framework***

Most head teachers interviewed admitted an initial reluctance to engage with the new standardised framework. However, each of the head teachers commented on the distance they felt they had travelled since then towards a much more critically engaged understanding of what was meant by 'learner progress' and how to assess it meaningfully.

Most also talked about their increased level of skill and confidence in working with and understanding datasets in general. This progress is clearly reflected in the differences between the 2009-10 S&Q reports and improvement plans and the most recent reports and plans for 2013-14. The earlier reports were largely descriptive and contained little assessment or evaluation. They emphasised narrative and offered little disaggregated information on individual learners' attainment or on analysis of trends and patterns in learner progress over time. By contrast, in the best of the most recent S&Q report and plans, the data is detailed, sources of evidence are robust, and the analysis is both thorough and sensitive. The impact on forward planning is very clear.

The head teachers in the study all felt that a key factor in helping them make progress in improvements in performance, was the nature of the support and challenge offered by local authority officers. This support was highly valued for its consistency and rigour but also for the understanding shown of the complex role of head teachers in such challenging times.

Progress has also been assisted by validation provided by positive responses from national inspection visits to use of the framework and data sets as a basis for evaluation, so that the head teachers have moved to see the data as a support; a 'living document', over which the school has ownership, rather than an externally imposed task to be completed mechanically.

KEY FINDING:
> *Progress is now much more systematically assessed, taking much better account of progress for groups and whole school population, though some challenges remain.*

3. **Areas of strength which could be shared across the schools to help improve outcomes for learners**

The schools had developed a range of tools which they found significantly helpful to their focus on improvements in performance. These included, but were not confined

to, the following: a tracking and monitoring system for end of unit assessments; use of the 'Boxall Profile'; use of whole school programmes such as MOVE, a 'return to mainstream' checklist; weekly child planning meetings; development of use of visual data e.g. through a 'learning ladder'; daily and monthly pupil evaluations; dynamic connections with community and business groups; the use of other head teachers as a critical friend; the use of educational psychology links to help with team building in school; the use of restorative practices in challenging circumstances; public celebration of a broad range of achievements. These areas of strength and success have the potential to be shared more widely across the schools but also with other special and mainstream schools and units. They offer an effective set of responses to broader concerns in Edinburgh and beyond, to the need to address the needs of the lowest attaining learners in education.

The emphasis on reflective professional dialogue also represents a key area of strength in the work of the schools. In the three years since the introduction of the framework the head teachers and schools have made a significant and successful set of changes within the schools.

Most of the head teachers interviewed were ready to point to times when they had taken risks in trying a new approach and also to times when they had in their own words 'got it wrong'. Some of the head teachers were emphatic about the importance of failure as a stepping stone to success. They actively encouraged their staff teams to 'step out of your comfort zone'. As one said, 'It's about saying to staff, don't be frightened to go out, see it through… and be prepared to catch them if it fails'.

They also often talked about these strengths in terms of their own learning and opportunities for professional development within school but also in the wider educational arena. Three of the head teachers had direct and current experience of working outside special provision, for example with the national inspection team or as a SQH field assessor, and saw this as a major contribution to their strength. One commented, 'You learn about teaching through teaching, but you don't learn how to be a good head teacher through teaching'. Such training and professional opportunities, they felt equipped them to lead change and improvement, using evidence as a basis for conversations with class teachers and subject specialists.

KEY FINDING:
> - *Commitment to positive leadership was essential to improvement.*
> - *Commitment to continuing professional learning was a key marker of successful leadership for improvement.*
> - *Schools in the study have identified and developed key strengths which could be more widely shared.*

4. **Support and skills needed by school leaders to further improve outcomes for learners**

The head teachers all noted the need to continue the validation visits which offer the necessary support and challenge to sustain and embed their understanding of strong sources of evidence and their skills of data analysis and critical evaluation.

The connections now being built across special schools were seen as a major support to new initiatives and creative thinking about improvement. Interestingly, these new connections were not always between schools which might in the past have been considered to have most in common with each other.

The support of the local authority in nurturing these connections was seen as essential. The work of Education Scotland in putting schools in touch with each other and facilitating contact and visits was also seen as highly valuable.

Most also noted how much they valued the support offered by having a clear reporting cycle with explicit outlines of activities and expectations for the schools, local authority officers and the service manager.

One head teacher identified a need to develop an alternative senior phase for young people who have had interrupted learning. Such a development would seek to raise aspirations for young people after age 16, an aspect of provision that has often been marginal to special provision in the past. This focus would be in keeping with the aims of the Children's and Young People's Bill currently making its way through Parliament.

KEY FINDING:
  ➢ *The local authority should continue its pro-active and highly valued approach to support and challenge with head teachers.*

5. **Challenges and successes of the performance framework to date, identifying implications for teaching and learning**

Challenges identified through the study were many, perhaps unsurprisingly at this stage of development of the new framework. However, the successes were also significant.

From the interviews with head teachers and local authority officers and from analysis of the S&Q reports, it is clear that progress was slow in the first year and use of the new framework variable. As a result of this, local authority officers then worked to review and refine the framework itself and intensified their support to schools through supportive visits with individual head teachers. These visits focused on the development of more evaluative, evidenced based S&Q reports. This dialogue was informed by the local authority officers' recognition that they had been 'too product focused' and now needed to 'change both culture and experience'.

A further challenge lay in the provision of data to the schools. The local authority officers reported a concern about the need to be able to provide accurate data to

assist head teachers in their task, for example, from the planning and performance team e.g. about the differentiation of awards at Unit and Course level. They felt that for these improvements in performance to be sustained and sustainable, requests for data and responses to these requests needed to be embedded and systematic rather than seen as an 'extra request' by the planning and performance team.

An interview with an officer in the planning and performance team revealed the challenges they face in this respect. She expressed a frustration that, while it was now possible to provide data requested which would help identify and track some groups of vulnerable learners (such as those with child protection issues), for others (such as young carers) this was still very problematic.

A larger concern for her in this context was about Scottish Government's lack of guidance on expectations about data sharing e.g. on disability data where definitions and understanding are different in the health and education sectors.

Despite these issues, this officer talked very positively about the way the relationship between special schools and the planning and performance team has strengthened in the last three years as the new framework has developed and requests for provision of data at local authority level have increased.

Remaining challenges noted in interview included the need to consider how best to include and engage with parents on these important issues; and how to ensure the quality and accuracy of the information available on young people entering the school – this makes it difficult to demonstrate added value. Neither of these challenges is however, unique to special school provision.

Many of the challenges were being actively addressed. There was an acknowledged challenge in the broader policy agenda in Scotland. The tendency of national guidance to be aimed at mainstream schools was a concern for some interviewees; noted in respect of recent national guidance on designing school handbook, or Curriculum for Excellence, or SEEMIS data management system. The implementation of Curriculum for Excellence, for example, has been welcomed but raises particular issues for some learners with additional support for learning needs. A number of interviewees commented on the inappropriateness of terms such as 'early level' and the lack of fit with the needs, aims and targets set for learners in special provision. One important way this challenge has been overcome has been for head teachers to work with and talk about the principles underpinning CfE rather than focusing on the disconnections in terminology and practice.

The key local authority officers talked about the quality of the professional dialogue on this and other issues now taking place, and how this contributed to tackling the challenges. Head teachers felt that visits to schools had helpfully emphasised how use of the data sets could demonstrate the strengths and achievements of special schools to other schools in the authority in a way not possible in the past.

The local authority officers noted that where, for example, one school had managed to make a difference by using data and moving from 'good' to 'very good', other schools were interested and wanted to learn from that. It was felt that in the past it had proved easier for schools to identify 'weak' and 'unsatisfactory' aspects than to distinguish between 'good' and 'very good'. The increased use of robust sources of evidence and analysis has provided a much more stable foundation for assessments and more alignment with the views of national inspection teams.

The head teachers were all able to identify specific areas of success for individual learners and groups of learners within their schools and also areas where learners' levels of achievement had improved. In the best examples, they were able to provide evidence of increase in levels of SQA qualifications, improving on prior levels of attainment, other national and international accreditation such as Quality Mark, increased number of children educated in special provision who are now moving on to mainstream secondary schools, positive destinations beyond school, a decrease in exclusion rates, an extended range of informal learning opportunities and improved understanding among staff of both the opportunities and responsibilities to meet learner entitlement.

KEY FINDING:
  ➢ *The successes of the new framework are significant and substantial, though some challenges remain.*

6. Lessons learned in this study and how they might be applied more generally in special and mainstream schools.

Interviews with the five head teachers revealed some common features which may be helpful to consider in future planning. They all had experience of working in mainstream schools as well as in the special education sector (as did the service manager); they each had an explicit commitment to further their own learning and understanding of their role as head teacher; they each expressed belief in their own capacity to lead and implement change and to improve learners' experiences.

They all spoke of the value of professional dialogue, of sharing their experiences with other head teachers. In interview, they frequently referred to strategic but also informal discussions with inspection teams, with local authority officers and their peers about the data they collected and the evidence behind that data. They expected to have such conversations, and actively sought opportunities for these to happen.

Just as significantly, the head teachers had found numerous ways to challenge the 'poverty of expectation' often found in discussion about children and young people with additional support for learning needs. One talked specifically about the need to challenge and also nurture school staff's own expectations of children and young people as one of the most effective ways to raise children's expectations. Another

talked about the need to 'nurture and engage' with all members of the school community.

KEY FINDINGS:
> - *The head teachers in the study attribute their strengths to engagement with the broader educational field, availability of high quality training, and to increased reflective dialogue with their staff teams, with their managers and with each other.*
> - *The planning and performance team and the service manager should continue to develop their work together to enable this work to be embedded and sustained.*

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate strong successes and identify remaining challenges but also draw attention to some larger questions which are beyond the scope of this small study. These questions are noted below because they indicate areas which would merit closer investigation through a larger evaluation or because they emerged as potentially fruitful topics for future discussion within the local authority or more broadly with, for example, Education Scotland.

One of the first issues to emerge in this study was for local authority officers themselves, as they began to increase their demands on the authority's planning and performance management team and the need, as they saw it, to introduce an expectation that special schools were entitled to the same level of support as mainstream schools to report effectively on improvements in performance.

At the same time, another question related to the system and structures within the authority itself and specifically the ways in which these systems working within and with the Children and Families team may inadvertently replicate and reinforce a notion of 'difference' and 'exception' in planning for improvement for special schools. It could be argued that the new framework evaluated in this study has done much to challenge the invisibility of special provision and to remind key stakeholders that special schools are schools first and foremost, though the internal structures do not yet fully represent that change.

For head teachers a very immediate concern related to conditions of service and their access to high quality training and support. From the interviews, it was clear that the head teachers often performed their role at a high personal cost, working very long hours and dealing with a range of complex issues and competing priorities. This raises a question relating to the recruitment and retention of head teachers of high calibre in such a demanding role. In these difficult financial times for the public sector, funding for continuing professional learning and development may not be seen as a priority. However, research strongly suggests that teachers' qualifications account for a larger share of learner achievement than other factors such as class size and socio-economic disadvantage (Darling-Hammond et. al 2001). This strongly suggests the need to continue to invest in high quality training. This remains both a

local and a national issue.

At a different level, the study highlighted the need for national systems to more accurately reflect the diversity of student attainment and achievement. One suggested response to this need was that Scottish Government should consider collecting Unit passes for national qualifications alongside Course passes. This more fine tuned level of data collection would allow special schools to record progress and achievement more accurately at national level for the first time.

The framework developed by City of Edinburgh has the potential to be helpful at this national level. Currently, there is a lack of quantitative data at national level on learner progress in special schools. There is a marked contrast between the amount of data available to, for example, inspection teams before they go into mainstream schools and special schools.

Finally, there remains a need to consider how best to share the learning journey undertaken by the schools in the study with other schools (special and mainstream provision) and across other authorities. The team responsible for this development work for City of Edinburgh led a highly successful and well received learning event for inspectors last year, but thought now needs to be given to how the lessons learned can be shared more widely.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this small study was to provide scrutiny of progress in terms of improvements in performance in Edinburgh special school provision and to assist development of future strategy in this area. Mainstream schools are often, and quite legitimately, the focus of policy attention. However, the penalty for failing to provide education of the highest quality for learners with the greatest support needs often has a much higher cost. Research consistently points to the relationship between the economic and social costs of such failure. The focus in City of Edinburgh on improvement in special schools is therefore particularly relevant and helpful.

The findings of the study indicate that development of the standardized framework in many ways was a significant challenge to schools, but that equally significant progress has now been made. The emphasis within special schools has traditionally been on meeting highly complex, individual needs. This emphasis may have contributed in the past to a lack of experience in, and shared understanding of, the potential usefulness of collecting, collating, analysing and using data about groups of learners and the whole school population, in order to understand patterns and trends. From the interviews undertaken and from examination of the changes in Standard and Quality reports over time, this has clearly changed. There is still, and will continue to be, a concern for individual learner progress. However, the success of this new framework lies in the shift it has brought about in understanding the need to use data to understand patterns and trends over time and across groups of

learners, and how this data can be used creatively and productively to underpin planning with robust evidence for change and improvement.

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