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in brief...

Every child matters? The impact of 'special educational needs' programmes

There is much debate in education about remedial policies for pupils with learning difficulties. **Sandra McNally** and colleagues provide the first comprehensive evaluation of 'special educational needs' programmes, the highly decentralised policy adopted in England and intended to address the specific difficulties of each of these children.

Around one in five pupils in England benefit from 'special educational needs' (SEN) programmes. These consist of asking schools to identify pupils with learning difficulties and having them adapt teaching to their specific learning difficulties with the help of the SEN Code of Practice.

Led by a SEN coordinator, interventions are decided and conducted at school level and include one-to-one tuition and teaching assistance. The SEN team typically receives resources from the school budget to address the needs of SEN students. The amount of funding dedicated to SEN pupils is decided by the school. Overall SEN expenditure amounts to about £1,400 per SEN pupil on average (although this varies between schools). Notionally, this is about 30% of overall school funding per targeted pupil.

SEN programmes are designed to address the specific difficulties of each pupil. They are targeted at individuals, rather than whole classes or schools. But while this is potentially an attractive feature of the policy, it may also generate individual stigma and, by labelling pupils with relatively minor difficulties as 'SEN', could be counterproductive.

The second basic feature of SEN programmes is that they are largely defined at the local level by head teachers. The obvious advantage of such decentralised policies is that they can better take account of local constraints and better use local resources.

One potential issue is that the policy may become context-specific. For example, a child with significant learning difficulties may nevertheless not have access to a remedial

programme if she attends a school where there are a lot of children with learning difficulties of whom only a proportion can be funded by the SEN budget. Conversely, a child with only moderate learning difficulties may have access to a remedial programme in a school where very few have learning difficulties.

To what extent is access to SEN programmes context-specific and what is the net effect of such a highly decentralised programme on pupil performance? Our research sheds light on these fundamental issues using the National Pupil Database conducted in England each year since 2002.

First, we show that there are very significant inequalities in the probability of being labelled as SEN across children with similar learning difficulties at age 7 but attending different schools. Importantly, these differences are much less significant for pupils who achieve relatively good performance or relatively poor performance early on in primary school than for pupils in between these two extremes.

Pupils who achieve relatively good performance at age 7 are almost never labelled as SEN regardless of their school context. Similarly, pupils who achieve very poor performance at age 7 are almost always labelled as SEN regardless of their school context.

In contrast, the gap in access to SEN is very significant for pupils with moderate difficulties. These pupils are much more often labelled as SEN when they attend a 'high-context' school (where the average level of age 7 test

School context generates huge differences in access to resources for children with moderate learning difficulties early on in primary school

There is no net effect of being labelled as SEN ('special educational needs') on the performance of pupils with moderate difficulties

attainment is relatively high) than when they attend a 'low-context' school. The decentralised design of SEN policy generates significant inequalities in access to remedial resources across children with similar (moderate) difficulties at age 7.

Second, we show that, surprisingly, the specific inequality across schools in access to SEN resources for pupils with moderate difficulties early on in primary school does not generate any specific variation in academic performance at the end of primary school. In other words, the school context generates huge differences in access to SEN resources for children with moderate difficulties early on in primary school (compared with other types of children), but no difference at all in performance at the end of primary school.

This result suggests that there is no net effect of being labelled as SEN on the performance of pupils with moderate difficulties. Thus, SEN programmes do not have the desired effect of improving the attainment of targeted pupils, relative to their situation had they not been

targeted. In our study, this 'null effect' is identified for children with less serious 'special needs' (who make up a large proportion of the overall SEN population).

The analysis suggests that remedial programmes are not working for a significant proportion of children labelled as SEN. The UK government has endorsed an 'every child matters' policy agenda. Our results suggest that the means through which this is realised for vulnerable children needs to be reconsidered.

This article summarises 'Every Child Matters? An Evaluation of "Special Educational Needs" Programmes in England' by Francois Keslair, Eric Maurin and Sandra McNally, a forthcoming CEE Discussion Paper.

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