



The Special Educational Needs in Secondary Education (SENSE) study

Executive Summary

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Introduction

Little is known about the educational experiences of pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) over time, and how inclusive these experiences are relative to those without SEND. The SEN in Secondary Education (SENSE) study was conducted following extensive reform to the SEND system in England, and at a time when schools were implementing a wider set of policies and adjusting to funding constraints, the consequences of which are likely to impact on the sustainability and quality of inclusive education.

The SENSE study builds on our earlier Making a Statement (MAST) study, which collected systematic data on the educational experiences of pupils with Statements of SEND in primary schools. Our aim was to extend our understanding of the day-to-day educational experiences of pupils with Statements into mainstream secondary schools and special schools by gathering minute-by-minute data on pupils' interactions with teachers, TAs and peers, and the contexts in which they occurred.

The SENSE study's longitudinal component additionally provides insight into the educational journeys of 30 young people with SEND, between 2011 and 2016. While not the principle focus of research, the study also presented an opportunity to collect data on schools' and families' experiences of transition from primary school, and their views and experiences relating to the implementation of the 2014 SEND reforms, which were introduced after the MAST study and before the start of the SENSE study.

Methods

The analyses are based on data collected on pupils who were in Year 9 over the 2015/16 academic year. Fieldwork was conducted in 43 schools across England: 34 state-funded mainstream schools (18 of which were academies); eight state-funded special schools; and one independent special school. Findings are based on results from extensive systematic observations of 60 pupils with Statements or Education, Health and Care Plans (herein, referred to jointly as Statements), and 112 average-attaining 'comparison' pupils.

Observation data were supplemented with detailed, individual case studies on each of the 60 pupils with Statements, based largely on 295 interviews with teachers, TAs, SEN/SEND co-ordinators (SENCOs/SENDCOs), parents/carers and the pupils themselves. Data collection involved researchers shadowing pupils over one week each. Below, we present the key

findings, drawing also on results from the MAST study observations and case studies, which were collected when this cohort was in Year 5 (2011/12). The two projects together involved a total of 1,340 hours of observation, making this research arguably the largest classroom observation study ever conducted in the UK on pupils with SEND.

Pupils with Statements (and SEND generally) are not a homogeneous group. The majority of pupils in the SENSE study sample had a primary need related to cognition and learning. The results, therefore, do not claim to be representative of other types of complex SEND for which Statements are granted. The school and classroom processes and practices identified in our research relate to pupils in Year 9. Processes and practices may differ in other secondary year groups within and across the schools we visited, but this was outside the scope of the study.

Key findings

1. Organising for learning: from separation to segregation

We found that in mainstream secondary schools, the educational experiences of pupils with Statements are characterised by being taught together in small, low-attaining classes, with at least one TA present alongside the teacher. Their average-attaining peers, meanwhile, are taught together in larger classes, with just the teacher present. For the core subjects of English, mathematics and science, pupils with and without SEND were taught in discrete attainment groups in at least 85% of instances. Pupils with Statements were taught in classes of 16 or fewer pupils in 54% of instances (vs. 11% for average-attainers), and in classes of 21 or more pupils in 26% of instances (vs. 69% for average-attainers).

At Year 5, pupils with Statements spent the equivalent of over a day a week away from the classroom, their teacher and their peers. When they worked in groups, it was mostly with other pupils identified as lower-attaining and/or as having SEND. While the mainstream experience at Year 9 for pupils with Statements features more in-class, teacher-led teaching, they are taught mostly in whole classes with other low attainers and those with SEND. This segregation is very close to a form of 'streaming'. Secondary schools view this as part of a wider strategy for teaching and learning. However, some pupils felt stigmatised by being in the 'bottom sets'.

2. Teaching assistants are central to SEND provision in mainstream schools

Average-attaining pupils have vanishingly little interaction with TAs, as TAs are not typically present in their lessons. However, TAs are a consistent and central feature of the educational experiences of pupils with Statements in mainstream schools. While the proportion of time they spend interacting with TAs is less in Year 9 compared with Year 5 (18% vs. 27%), it nonetheless accounts for around one-fifth of all their interactions (vs. 1% for average-attainers), and outweighs peer interaction. Their interactions with teachers are largely as part of the class audience, but with TAs, interactions are more active, as they are more often the focus of attention.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that primary and secondary mainstream schools view the employment and deployment of TAs as a key strategic approach to including and meeting the educational needs of pupils with Statements. TA support was identified as an important factor in pupil progress, with school staff and parents indicating that pupils would be unable to 'cope' in a mainstream setting without it.

Despite smaller class sizes and the increased number of adults in special school classrooms, we found little evidence that pupils in these settings have more one-to-one interactions with teachers and TAs, compared to pupils with Statements in mainstream schools. Interestingly, there were no explicit references to the impact of TAs or TA support in specialist settings.

3. Implicit and ambiguous notions of teaching and support

It was hard to define the pedagogical approaches teachers in both mainstream and specialist settings use to meet the learning needs of pupils with Statements. Likewise, TA 'support' is a fuzzy concept. The broad features of the TA role, as identified by staff across the schools, overlap with that of teachers. It was hard to determine the extent to which the TA role differs qualitatively and meaningfully from what teachers do. One explanation might be that teachers struggle to make the implicit explicit. Schools may be providing effective teaching and support for pupils with SEND, but staff working with them find it difficult to articulate what they do. It is also unclear how the widespread use of high amounts of individual, one-to-one support interact with the role many TAs were reported to have in developing pupil independence. Getting the right balance of adult attention and need for support seems to be a complex, on-going challenge.

4. Differentiation takes multiple forms, but practical strategies lack precision

The concept and operationalisation of differentiation for pupils with Statements was variously described as ranging from broad organisational approaches to lesson level strategies. In over half of primary schools, setting Year 5 literacy and numeracy classes by attainment (or 'ability') was described as 'first tier' differentiation, and within-class grouping in these subjects was referred to as 'second tier' differentiation. In secondary mainstream schools, allocation to lower-attaining sets is seen in some cases to obviate the need for differentiation at the task level.

At Year 5 and Year 9, some teachers provided an alternative, individualised task for pupils with Statements, but in the main they talked about differentiating tasks for groups of pupils, relative to their perceived ability. Often, however, this is not enough to reach pupils with Statements. Instead, TAs emerge as a key means of differentiation, by 'bridging' the learning in the moment. Differentiation by TAs is characterised by 'simplifying', 'breaking down' and repeating teachers' talk and instruction. It was difficult to get beyond this and uncover what these practical strategies looked like, and what drives TAs' decision-making in terms of how, when and why to use them in their moment-by-moment practice. While well-intentioned, it is questionable how successful and sustainable this is as an appropriate and as a long-term pedagogical strategy.

5. The persistent problem of preparedness

As in the MAST study, we found gaps in teachers' and TAs' knowledge concerning meeting the needs of pupils with Statements, and the acquisition of skills and knowledge relating to SEND. Some new teachers can be 'overwhelmed' or 'don't know how to start' with SEND, raising concerns over whether initial teacher education coverage and in-service professional learning is sufficient. Induction training for TAs seems rare, with some 'picking it up on the job'. Typically, training opportunities for teachers and TAs tend to be on types of SEND, with attendance voluntary. On a practical day-to-day level, teachers and TAs lack time to meet, plan, prepare and feed back either side of lessons. The general busyness of schools and TAs'

hours of work falling in line with the school day are seen as impediments to creating liaison time with teachers.

6. SEND is not a school priority

We were unable to find evidence of an effective and theoretically-grounded pedagogy for pupils with SEND in the instructional approaches used by either teachers or TAs, across all the schools that participated in the MAST and SENSE studies. In light of our findings on the organisational and operational approaches to including and teaching pupils with Statements in mainstream settings, it is difficult not to question the overall effectiveness of provision and quality of the educational experiences available to these pupils, compared to that received by their (non-SEND) peers.

At the time of our fieldwork (autumn 2015 to spring 2016), we found the degree to which the 2014 SEND reforms were understood by teachers and parents varied, suggesting more work might be needed on raising awareness. The reforms had been well received by those with a good grasp on their implications, but the overhaul to the SEND system does not yet appear to have had a profound effect on secondary school leaders' thinking and approach to provision for pupils with SEND. We are, therefore, left to query the effectiveness of leadership for SEND in mainstream schools, and its status within the drive towards whole school improvement.

Implications

The SENSE study findings emerge at a time of great uncertainty. Funding for SEND and schools in general is parlous. According to the Dept. for Education's own projections (DfE, [2016](#)), the number of children needing some form of specialist education is predicted to increase by 15% by 2025. In the apparent absence of any central planning, it seems unavoidable that mainstream schools will be required to play a key role in local approaches to educating pupils with often complex SEND. We identified positive aspects of practice that suggest at least some schools seem equipped to play an effective role in a more inclusive system. For example, we found some new teachers were open to taking proactive steps to understanding the needs of pupils with Statements. Also, the process of transitioning from primary to secondary schooling seemed to have been handled thoroughly and successfully in all but a few cases.

The SENSE study findings add to a body of empirical research stretching back over 12 years (Blatchford *et al.*, [2012](#); Webster and Blatchford, [2013](#); [2015](#)), which suggests the system of support for pupils with high-level SEND in mainstream schools in England is too reliant on TAs. As schools reluctantly cut TA roles to balance budgets, we question the sustainability of this widespread approach to inclusion. Moreover, we query whether the systemic use of TAs is compensating or covering for failures elsewhere; including, for example, the continued failure to adequately cover SEND as part of initial teacher training. We do not doubt that schools are doing their best in challenging circumstances, but on the basis of the findings from the SENSE study and the earlier MAST study, it is difficult to see how mainstream schools would accommodate the inclusion and teaching of pupils with high-level SEND in the long-term, if TAs were to disappear from classrooms tomorrow.

A more balanced system is urgently required; one where effective support from TAs is part of a coherent approach to including and teaching children and young people with SEND. For this to happen, we believe that SEND must become a strategic priority.

Recommendations for local authorities and schools

Despite the overhaul to the SEND system in 2014, the evidence from our latest research suggests the association in the minds of schools and parents between statutory assessment, EHCPs and securing individual TA support is strongly residual within the reformed system, and continues to have a direct bearing on the widespread school and classroom practices described in our results. We find ourselves, therefore, restating our recommendation from the MAST study that this should be challenged. When it comes to the co-construction of EHCPs with families and schools, we recommend LAs prioritise the *quality* of support (i.e. who provides pedagogical input and how), not the quantity of support, which too often is still couched in the currency of TA hours.

An advantage of an autonomous system means that schools do not have to wait for a policy response in order to address some of the persistent problems our research has uncovered. Schools are the more effective engines of change, capable of rethinking their approach to the way provision is made for pupils with SEND. We call on school leaders to lead the way in developing a more inclusive ethos. We have advocated for some time for school leaders to rethink the role of TAs with regard to SEND, but improving how pupils with Statements are included and educated will not be resolved by this alone. On the basis of our key findings, we identify four areas for action needed to bring about a more balanced, more inclusive system.

Firstly, secondary school leaders could take the bold step of organising grouping by mixed attainment, for at least some subjects and contexts. At the least, they should adopt grouping strategies that militate against the more harmful effects of streaming or ‘hard’ setting. This would include: using only attainment data as the only basis for composing groups; ensuring porosity between groups; balancing groups on the basis of frequent assessment; and making sure the best teachers do their fair share of teaching more challenging groups.

Secondly, schools must be mindful of the classroom practices that result in pupils with high-level SEND having less time with teachers, relative to other pupils. Efficient TA deployment can help organise and maximise opportunities for these pupils to receive high quality teaching. Teachers should ensure pupils with SEND are not routinely grouped together for paired or group work, but have opportunities to interact and work with other classmates.

Thirdly, a concerted, system-wide effort to improve the confidence and competence of teachers to teach pupils with SEND seems both necessary and overdue. Beginning with what is already known about the features of high quality teaching, further research is needed to define the terms, qualities and practical expressions and indicators of effective pedagogy for SEND. Fruitful collaborations between researchers and teachers working in inclusive settings could begin to identify the characteristics of teaching and curricula for SEND, and the models needed to embed practical strategies at scale.

Finally, we need to consider the institutional levers that can influence school leaders’ decision-making and action, so that they do not lose sight of SEND as a priority. At the individual and multi-school level, governing bodies and boards of trustees, together with leadership teams, should institute career progression systems for teachers and leaders throughout the organisation, which are contingent on evidencing practice that has a demonstrable impact on outcomes for pupils with SEND.

The SENSE study was directed by Rob Webster and Peter Blatchford, at the UCL Institute of Education, and funded by the [Nuffield Foundation](#). To download the full SENSE study final report, visit <http://maximisingtas.co.uk/research/the-sense-study.php>