

Worlds apart? How pupils with statements lead a life away from the class: Findings from the Making a Statement project

Rob Webster & Peter Blatchford

IN FEBRUARY, the coalition government's long-awaited Children and Families Bill began its passage to Royal Assent. Its first reading in Parliament set out how services relating to adoption, looked-after children and those with special education needs (SEN) will change under the proposed legislation. Following the Lamb Inquiry into parental confidence in the SEN statementing system, and several reviews into provision for types of SEN (e.g. The Salt Review on severe, profound and multiple learning difficulties, and John Bercow's review of speech, language and communication needs), the coalition have drafted proposals that will bring about the biggest changes in SEN in 30 years. One of the most significant moves will be to replace statements awarded to pupils with the highest level of SEN with Education and Health Care Plans (EHCPs). EHCPs, like the current statements, set out a pupil's educational needs and the provision that he or she should receive to meet them. However, little is known about the day-to-day teaching and support that pupils experience once a statement is put in place. So, with such seismic change on the cards, we might ask if the call for reform is premature.

Last year, we conducted the Making a Statement (MaSt) project to find out more about the teaching, support and interactions experienced by pupils with statements attending mainstream primary schools. We shadowed 48 pupils in Year 5 who had statements for moderate learning difficulties or behavioural, emotional and social difficulties, making minute-by-minute observations. We followed each pupil for a full school week. Observations of 151 average attaining 'control' pupils were also collected to provide a reference point for comparison. We also produced detailed case studies on each of the statemented pupils, based largely on interviews with 195 teachers, teaching assistants (TAs), SENCos and parents/carers. Spending a week at a time carrying out observation and having discussions with practitioners and parents/carers, demonstrated that schools are making every effort to attend to the needs of pupils with statements amid a period of intense flux and uncertainty for schools and local authorities. However, quantitative and qualitative analyses of these data identified some overarching concerns that capture the MaSt study's key results. These results, which we describe below, will be of interest to both policymakers and professionals working with pupils with SEN in schools and local authorities.

Firstly, we found that a high degree of separation and TA support are strong and consistent characteristics of the educational experiences of pupils with statements. The pupils spent over a quarter of their time away from the mainstream class, the teacher and their peers. A clear point to emerge was the almost constant accompanying presence of a TA in relation to all the locations in which pupils worked. There is, in other words, an intimate connection between TAs and the locations, both in and away from the classroom,

in which pupils with statements are taught. Compared to average attaining pupils, we found that those with statements spent less time in lessons with teachers and other children, and were more than three times more likely to interact with TAs than teachers. The higher degree of one-to-one interaction with TAs was often at the expense of interactions with not only teachers, but peers too. Pupils with statements had almost half as many interactions with their classmates compared to other pupils. This, we argue, is likely to adversely affect their social development.

The second main finding was that TAs were found to have more responsibility for the planning and teaching of statemented pupils than teachers. Many TAs devised alternative curricula and prepared intervention programmes, and almost all TAs had a high level of responsibility for moment-by-moment pedagogical decision-making – explaining and modifying tasks set for the class by the teacher. Teachers rarely had as high a level of involvement in planning and teaching pupils with statements, and there were little or no opportunities for planning with TAs before lessons. Given what was found in relation to who has responsibility for statemented pupils, it is perhaps not surprising that our third main conclusion was that the appropriateness and quality of pedagogy for statemented pupils seemed to us very unlikely to address the gap in attainment between these pupils and their peers. Compared to the average attaining pupils, those with statements received a less appropriate and lower quality pedagogical experience. The support provided for these pupils – particularly by TAs – was clearly well intentioned, but seemed unlikely to be sufficient to close the attainment gap.

The fourth finding concerned the gaps in teachers' and TAs' knowledge for meeting the needs of pupils with statements. Teachers and TAs felt under-prepared for dealing with the challenges and complex difficulties posed by such pupils. Most teachers reported that they had had no training on meeting the needs of pupils with high levels of SEN, indicating failings in initial teacher training. As TAs held valuable knowledge about the pupils they supported, teachers often positioned them as the 'expert', despite TAs having similar weaknesses in their knowledge and training. Finally, there were also concerns about the ways in which schools prioritise meeting the needs of pupils with statements. There was little evidence of an effective and theoretically-grounded pedagogy for statemented pupils. Often, the specification on the statement of a number of hours of TA support seemed to get in the way of schools thinking through appropriate approaches for pupils with pronounced learning difficulties in mainstream primary schools.

It is worth restating how the experience of spending weeks in schools gathering data brought into sharp relief the myriad pressures on schools and teachers. The proposals outlined in the new Bill are significant not only in terms of the changes to SEN structures and processes as we know them, but also insofar as they apply to a group of pupils in mainstream schools with a much wider range of needs than was the case 30 years ago. The fact that budgets to meet the needs of these pupils grow ever tighter compounds the challenges facing schools. We recognise, therefore, that the concerns we raised above should not be taken as a criticism of schools and teachers; schools had not 'given up' on pupils with statements. Nonetheless, the findings from the MaSt project and our previous research – the Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS) project (Blatchford, Russell & Webster, 2012) – do raise questions about the appropriateness of current arrangements. Both projects show that the day-to-day support for pupils with SEN in mainstream schools is often provided by TAs instead of teachers. We have argued that this is one main reason why the negative effect of TA support on academic progress, found in the DISS project, is greater for pupils with SEN than for those without SEN. The long held

assumption that more TA support for pupils who struggle would raise standards has been exposed as an unfortunate mirage.

Evidence from our research raises two key implications for policy and practice. Firstly, with EHCPs replacing statements, a key message to policymakers is that the currency of statements should change from 'hours' to 'pedagogy'. With the Bill now on its journey through the Commons, we recommend that steps are taken to ensure that EHCPs specify the pedagogical processes and strategies that will help meet carefully defined outcomes, and avoid simplistic quantifications of support in terms of hours. Crucially though, whilst we suggest the new SEN reforms do away with quantifying support in terms of 'hours', we do not suggest they do away with TAs. Our recommendation for practice is that schools need to fundamentally rethink the common approaches to the ways TAs are deployed and prepared, if they are to get the best use from this valuable resource (see Russell, Webster and Blatchford, 2013). School leaders and teachers need to think more inclusively about pupils with SEN, and ensure their learning needs are not met principally by TAs. Schools must address the issues of pupil separation that characterise the day-to-day experiences of pupils with SEN.

References

- Russell, A., Webster, R. & Blatchford, P. (2013). *Maximising the impact of teaching assistants: Guidance for school leaders and teachers*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
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Resource

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The authors

Rob Webster co-directed the Making a Statement project and is the Institute of Education (IoE), London. Before that he worked for six years as a TA in schools in London and the south. **Professor Peter Blatchford** is Professor of Psychology and Education at the IoE and co-directed the Making a Statement project.