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Citation for published version:

McCluskey, G 2017, 'Mapping, measuring, monitoring achievement: Can a new evaluation framework help schools challenge inequalities?', *Improving Schools*, vol. 20, no. 1, pp. 5-17.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1365480216688552>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1177/1365480216688552](https://doi.org/10.1177/1365480216688552)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Improving Schools

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Mapping, measuring and monitoring achievement: can a new evaluation framework help schools challenge inequalities?

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Keywords Educational inequality, special education, achievement, social justice

Introduction

Mainstream education has been dominated and perhaps driven by concerns about results, performance and competition in recent years. Educational provision outside mainstream in the UK has largely resisted such pressure, often placing higher value on an ethos of care and personal and social development than on academic achievement. However, the maintenance of strong boundaries and distinctions between mainstream and non-mainstream schools but also within the special school/alternative provision sector itself, raises questions for equality of opportunity and equality of outcomes for those children and young people educated outside mainstream. This article reports on the evaluation of a small scale project led by a group of head teachers in special schools to develop a common framework within which to talk about learner progress and achievement across their very different settings. The aim was to maintain the value of an individualized focus whilst also systematizing the use of assessment and achievement benchmarks recognisable to many mainstream schools. The findings of the evaluation suggest that this approach could provide the basis for a more dynamic dialogue between special schools but also between

mainstream and non-mainstream education more broadly, about achievement as an avenue to social justice.

Context

Education has often taken the view that the progress and achievement of children educated outside the mainstream cannot and should not be judged against standards set for children within mainstream. Special school websites typically confirm an emphasis on preparation for life beyond school, encouraging independence, self-confidence, adapting the curriculum to meet the needs of all pupils, use of active learning and practical tasks. A typical 'Vision Statement' will often refer to aims associated with enabling children to live safely, happily, and attend caring, supportive schools which meet their needs so that they can learn and reach their potential. The emphasis is on progress that is sensitive to the child's unique circumstances and assessed against individual starting points. This focus is a legitimate and important one, particularly so in the context of concern about the increased pressure on education in terms of performance, competition and accountability over recent years (Ball, 2013, West, Mattei & Roberts, 2011).

However, it is also important to recognise that levels of achievement for children educated outside mainstream schools continue to be lower overall, when compared with their mainstream peers (Department for Education, 2014, National Assembly for Wales 2015, Scottish Government 2016). Given that children educated in such provision are often identified as having special educational needs or disabilities (SEND in England), additional learning needs (ALN in Wales) or additional support needs (ASN in Scotland), perhaps this is not unsurprising. An examination of the reasons children attend special provision raises some key questions about these differing levels of achievement and how this may relate to

wider inequalities in educational opportunity and outcome. A recent national Enquiry in England concluded that society ‘does not place enough value on achieving good outcomes for disabled children and children with special educational needs’ and that ‘educational achievement for children with SEN/D is too low and the gap with their peers too wide’ (Lamb Enquiry, 2009, p.2). A helpful perspective on the persistence of this gap is offered by Fendler and Muzaffar, who draw attention to society’s accommodation of ‘an acceptable level of failure for the education system as a whole’ (2008, p.63), while a range of other recent research has noted the low quality, unevenness and variability in curricular offerings (Taylor, 2012; Butler, 2011), student progress (Ofsted, 2011) outcomes (McCluskey, Riddell & Weedon, 2015; Pirrie, Macleod, Cullen & McCluskey, 2009; Audit Commission, 2002) and the training and support for staff working with children (Thomson and Pennacchia (2014) not deemed ‘suitable’ for mainstream.

Much of this research also notes the difficulty of finding reliable comparative data. Although there is a large academic literature on achievement, attainment and improvement in education generally, this is primarily concerned with learners in mainstream schools. The dearth of research and data on the effectiveness of special provision and on the monitoring of attainment, progress and achievement in relation to children with special needs has been noted by the European Commission (RAND, 2013), in the UK by Riddell (2012) and in the USA (see for example, Hanushek, Kain & Rivkin, 2002). Whatever its roots, this has, I suggest, played a key part in limiting efforts thus far to address inequalities more broadly. In a marketised educational economy this may in turn relate to ways in which the achievements of learners in such schools tend to go unrecognised and unscrutinised, and by implication, undervalued (Riddell, 2012), in national and

international studies such as PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) and TIMSS (The Trends in International Maths and Science Study).

This paper examines the findings from one small study which offers an example of promising practice in thinking through the complex issues associated with the use of data on assessment and attainment as one way of challenging inequality rather than reinforcing it. It is clear that there are significant challenges in providing meaningful and reliable comparative information about learner progress outside mainstream schools and much debate about how best to do this (Thomson & Pennacchia, 2014; Chapman, Ainscow, Miles & West, 2011). An excellent exception is offered by New Zealand's 'Narrative Assessment' guidance for teachers (2009) though, significantly for my argument in this article, its focus is on support for children with special needs, rather than all children. The framework examined in the current paper, and the findings about its development and use may provide one possible way in which mainstream and non-mainstream schools, broadly conceived, could find common cause and common ground. This is important for the opportunities it may raise for children and young people to move more easily across sectors, for staff working in the different sectors to forge stronger connections, and for the greater opportunities for educational success this may then offer children and young people, wherever their education takes place. Importantly, rather than the data being used to reinforce a school's public profile by massaging statistics and the 'stage management of events' as Stephen Ball has described it (2004, p.150), this paper argues that mapping and measuring progress has the potential to challenge a culture of performativity and contribute to a much more important purpose; offering a forum for dialogue between different kinds of school about the relationship between the learning experience of the unique, individual

child in the classroom and the wider patterns and trends that relate to concerns about educational inequalities (see for example, Shaw *et al.* 2016).

The evaluation

In 2012, a large urban Scottish local authority commissioned University of Edinburgh to undertake an evaluation of a project focused on learner progress and achievement in its thirteen special schools. By that point, the project had been in place for three years. The local authority in this area makes provision for almost all children and young people with additional support needs within its mainstream schools. However, approximately 1000 learners (2.1% of the local school population) identified as having a complexity of significant needs are educated in 13 special schools.

The project itself emerged from a concern at local authority level about the isolation experienced by the 13 head teachers, and the unevenness in the way that these schools evaluated the outcomes and impact of their work. This concern led these head teachers to seek ways to develop a more systematic, meaningful process for reflection on, and evaluation of, their own work to support children and young people's achievements. They developed a framework based on a template which allowed for collation of key baseline comparative data, recognisable to mainstream schools, but also for the gathering of data reflecting the local and particular needs of each school population. The template was shared across the schools in the form of a word document called 'the data set', which each school then used to develop their approaches to tracking and monitoring student progress. This tracking and the development of the additional indicators relevant to each school was informed by regular face to face discussion with the local authority's special schools manager and by 'cluster' meetings of the head teachers, where questions, concerns and

suggestions were shared. More detail on the data set itself is offered in the reporting of the findings below.

The evaluation of the project was undertaken at the end of three cycles (i.e. three consecutive years) of data gathering and analysis and reflection. Its key objectives were to:

1. Evaluate the progress made by schools since the introduction of this evaluation framework.
2. Identify areas of strength which could be shared across these schools to help improve outcomes for children and young people.

Method

The evaluation had two main strands to its design:

- Individual in-depth interviews with a sample of five head teachers in special schools and three key local authority managers.
- Analysis of a sample of annual reports from the previous three years in these special schools.

This was a small-scale evaluation and so it is important to acknowledge the limits to the more general lessons that can be learned from it. Nonetheless, it is hoped that the report of the findings and the discussion of possible implications will offer a helpful contribution to the field, and raise questions which may be useful more broadly.

The five schools involved in the evaluation included two primary, two secondary and one all-through school for children aged 4-18 years. The characteristics of learners in these schools reflected the range of barriers to learning experienced more generally by children educated outside mainstream schools in the UK, ranging from those experiencing social, emotional and behavioural difficulties to global learning difficulties and complex

health and learning disabilities. The wide variety of factors resulting in placement in these schools reflects the broad categorisation of special needs at this local level, but also continuing debates and shifting parameters of special needs nationally and internationally (RAND Europe, 2013). However, it is worth noting that, in keeping with national trends and patterns, the most common reason for children and young people being educated in these schools was identification of social, emotional and behavioural difficulties.

The schools were invited to participate in the study on the basis of their positive commitment to the development of this common framework over the previous three years, as shown through their annual reports. In the first strand of the evaluation, individual face-to-face interviews with head teachers were undertaken in their schools. In addition, individual interviews took place with key authority managers, including the area manager for special schools, a seconded head teacher working with her on this specific development, and the team leader of the local authority educational planning management team. Each of the interviews was digitally recorded with the participant's permission. All data 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 were used in the final evaluation report (McCluskey, 2014) and no quotations directly attributed to individuals.

The second strand of the evaluation involved analysis of the annual reports which all schools, (across primary, secondary and special sectors) are expected to produce as part of the statutory obligation on local authorities to report on progress towards meeting both national priorities and local improvement objectives (Scottish Parliament, 2000). These annual 'standards and quality' reports were analysed using the same coding framework as

for the in-depth interviews, allowing consideration of similarities and differences in the two sets of data, looking for features of practice that had evolved, building on previous developments, as well as for features that represented a more radical departure from previous 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 strong evaluation overall.

Findings

The key findings to emerge from analysis of all the data indicated that the framework put in place in the special schools had led to a number of key achievements: enabling clearer oversight of learner progress and achievement; increasing understanding and use of evidence to inform planning and reporting; and helping to clarify the support and skills needed by school leaders to make improvements to the learning experiences on offer. The findings also revealed a range of challenges: including difficulties in engagement with the common framework by schools, especially in the early stages; frustration caused by lack of baseline data on learners in special schools locally and nationally; and the lack of 'fit' with many aspects of the broader national education policy agenda. These key findings are reported in detail below, followed by discussion of the questions and issues that flow from these findings.

Clearer oversight of learner progress and achievement

Findings indicated that the five schools which participated in the study were increasingly able to provide a much more accurate overview of learner progress than in the past. In interview, the local authority manager with responsibility for special schools noted that the

schools had tended in the past to ‘err up’ when they evaluated their own work. When asked why this might be, she explained,

‘Head teachers have been able to look around and ask, “are learners happy?” ... “are staff working hard?” ... “are parents happy and supportive?” When the answers to these questions are all positive, then the head teacher has felt confident in saying that the school is doing well’.

Using the new framework, these head teachers developed a common dataset that allowed them to collate standardised information but also included customised data reflecting the particular circumstances of each school and the barriers to learning faced by the children and young people in each school. The common data set included:

- Attainment data relating to national qualifications and the achievement of individualised targets set by the school within the individualised educational programmes (IEPs)
- Achievement data from other awarding bodies e.g. Caledonian Awards, Junior Award Scheme Scotland (JASS), the Duke of Edinburgh Scheme, the Prince’s Trust XL Club¹
- Whole school awards e.g. Rights Respecting Schools, Health Promoting Schools, Eco Schools
- Statistics reflecting:
 - Positive destinations on leaving school

¹ These awarding bodies include a range of national and UK based awards, typically focused on regular physical activity, exploring a personal interest, working for the good of the community or the environment, and/or completing an outdoor activity or challenge.

- Attendance levels across each session
- Number of exclusions.

In addition, the two local authority managers supporting the schools worked with the head teachers to build a shared understanding of the more local data relevant for each individual school and which could contribute to a more rounded picture of student achievement. The head teachers were encouraged to then start to collate this ‘customised’ achievement data, as they called it, such as the number of restorative meetings requested by learners, the number of learners who became independent travellers or successfully completed a work experience placement or participated in a ‘forest schools’ project or performed with Scottish Opera outreach. The schools also used the framework to bring together information on a broad range of approaches which they found significantly helpful to their new focus on learner progress. These included, variously, a tracking and monitoring system for end of unit assessments, use of the ‘Boxall Profile’ (Bennathan and Boxall, 2013) for identifying needs and setting targets, use of whole school programmes such as ‘MOVE’, (a mobility and independence programme for children with disabilities), a ‘return to mainstream’ checklist, weekly child planning meetings, development of use of visual data e.g. a ‘learning ladder’ for each child, daily and monthly learner evaluations, active connections with local voluntary, community and business groups, use of restorative practices with children with very challenging behaviour and public celebration of achievements. Often these approaches and interventions were already in use or in development in the schools, but interestingly, had not previously been considered as potential contributions to an account of learner achievement overall in the school.

The ‘learning ladder’ referred to above, for example, was a simple visual tool developed by the staff in one school as a way for learners and their families to be able to

see and measure small daily steps of progress across a range of curricular areas. The head teacher explained,

‘So for me, for every single learner in every single learning area, I can say a child’s name, have the main progress... ‘Where are you?’ ‘Here I am’. ‘Where were you before?’ ‘There’s where I was’. ‘Where are you going next?’ ‘Here’s where I’m going’.

She added,

‘As I walk around school and walk past all of these learning ladders, I see every young person’s journey on a daily basis. So I can see the progress. I don’t have to wait till we’re collating data at the end of a session’.

With greater communication between the schools as part of the project, head teachers had the opportunity to hear about how the learning ladders worked in practice and how staff, children and their families valued them.

The findings also revealed the ways in which the schools were increasingly able to identify specific areas of success for individual learners but also for groups of learners within their schools, leading to clearer understanding of patterns and trends. While the schools had long been able to track individual progress, the interest in tracking groups, patterns and trends was new and often more challenging for schools where this had not been seen as possible or indeed desirable in the past. Often, they were now able to provide evidence of increases in levels of national qualifications, improving on prior levels of attainment, or other national and international accreditation such as Quality Mark. Other examples included data on increased numbers of children moving on to mainstream secondary schools, a decrease in exclusion rates and an extended range of informal learning

opportunities. While this represented a significant advance in itself, the value of the framework, according to these head teachers, was as much about the structured expectation to provide a narrative based on evidence to support the data and for that narrative to be seen to be as significant as the data itself. This was seen as a welcome counterbalance to general policy expectations on schools to make continuous year on year improvement, firstly because it provided a way of accounting for times and places when there was no quantifiable ‘improvement’ and secondly, because it often provided a rationale for a more finely tuned, granular analysis of learner progress.

Increased understanding and use of evidence to inform planning

Four of the five head teachers interviewed admitted an initial reluctance to engage with the new framework, seeing it as the imposition of further bureaucracy, with one saying,

‘I was saying where on earth am I going to start? I was flung figures, all the pointers...all the percentages. I was thinking this is a load of ...tosh. It doesn’t mean anything’.

However, each of them also commented on the distance they felt they had travelled, with the support of the two local authority managers, and their head teacher peers, since then towards a much more critically engaged understanding of what was meant by learner progress, and how to assess and discuss it meaningfully. Most also talked about their increased level of skill and confidence in working with and understanding data sets in general. Analysis of the early reports (2009-10) and comparison with the most recent reports and plans (2013-14) clearly reflected this. The earlier reports are largely descriptive and tend to be characterised by generalisation and assumption, with little disaggregated information on individual learners’ attainment or analysis of trends and patterns in learner

progress over time. By contrast, in the best of the most recent reports and plans, the data was detailed, sources of evidence more robust, the narrative underpinning the data more coherent and the analysis more thorough and sensitive. The impact on forward planning was clear.

One head teacher talked about how the framework acted to *'nurture and engage'* all members of the school community. Another talked specifically about the need to *'first challenge but then support'* school staff's own expectations of children and young people as one of the most effective ways to raise children's expectations. Two also referred with pride to feedback from national inspection visits, where inspectors had commented positively on use of the new framework and its use as a basis for evaluation. From the interviews, it was clear that the head teachers had begun to see the data as a support; a *'living document'*, over which they and their school had ownership, rather than an externally imposed task to be completed mechanistically.

Clarity about the support and skills needed by school leaders to improve outcomes for learners

The head teachers each noted the need for continued support from the local authority special school managers (locally these were called *'validation'* visits). The head teachers in the study all felt that a key factor in their progress was the nature of the relationship with the two managers supporting the special schools. Their support was praised for its consistency and rigour but also for the understanding shown of the complex role of head teachers in such challenging times. They talked about how they felt schools were *'awash with data'* but also how the use of evidence and their growing skills of data analysis and

critical evaluation still often felt '*alien*' and that they needed the support offered by these visits to help embed and sustain their work.

They also talked frequently about the new connections being built across special schools, and how they saw this as a major support to new initiatives and creative thinking. One of the points head teachers made repeatedly was about their increasing trust of each other as critical friends. Where previously they had felt that the children's needs in their particular school meant they had little in common with other special schools, they talked about the support they felt they gained from being able to work with other school leaders facing what they now understood to be similar challenges. Again, the persistence of the local authority in nurturing these connections was seen as essential, putting schools in touch with each other and facilitating contact and visits.

Despite their acknowledged early reservations, it was notable that the head teachers each saw themselves as learners as well as leaders. They articulated a commitment to further their own learning and understanding of the role of head teacher, and perhaps most significant, they had an explicit, expressed belief in their own capacity to lead and implement change and to improve children's experiences. They all spoke of the value of professional dialogue and of sharing their experiences with other head teachers. In interview, they frequently referred to strategic but also informal discussions with national inspection teams, with local authority managers and their fellow head teachers in special schools about the data they collected and the evidence behind that data. They now expected to have such conversations and actively sought opportunities for these to happen. Most of the head teachers interviewed were also ready to point to times when they had taken risks in trying a new approach and to times when they had in their own words '*got it wrong*'. These head teachers were emphatic about the importance of failure as a steppingstone to success.

One talked about the need to actively encourage the staff team to *'step out of your comfort zone'*. Another noted, *'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'*.

Interestingly, each of these head teachers had recent experience of working in mainstream schools as well as in the special education sector, as did two of the three local authority managers interviewed. Three of the head teachers had past and/or ongoing experience of working outside special provision, for example with the national schools inspection team or as an assessor for the national qualification for head teachers. Three had also undertaken the national qualification for Headship. They saw these experiences as a major contribution to their effectiveness, with one commenting, *'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 gave them the confidence to use evidence as a basis for conversations with class teachers and subject specialists.

However, from the interviews, it was also 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 about the recruitment and retention of head teachers of high calibre in such a demanding role. For head teachers a very immediate concern related to conditions of service and their access to future high quality training and support. In these difficult financial times for the public sector, funding for professional learning and development may not be seen as a priority and perhaps even less so for leaders in schools outside the mainstream. This remains both a local and a national issue.

Challenges for the new framework

Challenges identified by participants were many, perhaps unsurprisingly at this stage of development of the new common framework. One of the most significant challenges related to engagement itself. From the interviews with head teachers and local authority managers, but also from analysis of the annual reports, it was clear that progress on use of the new framework was very slow in the first year and engagement by schools variable at best. As one head teacher admitted, *'Year one was a battle'*.

For their part, the two local authority managers talked about an early feeling of frustration and defeat. They felt that they had done everything possible to help the head teachers in the first year; providing school leaders with templates to support self evaluation exercises with the staff, offering exemplar statements, suggesting lists of sources of evidence they might use, speaking with them about the need to use evaluative language and the need to collect and keep detailed evidence overall. Despite this, change was very limited. The managers said that this initial setback forced them to reassess their approach, deciding that they had been *'too product focused'* and in order to bring about change, needed to focus much more on efforts to *'change both culture and experience'*. They then worked to review and refine the framework itself but also intensified the support to schools through more direct dialogue with individual head teachers individually and, crucially, in small groups. They talked about the need to help the head teachers to look to each other as allies, to find the commonalities rather than the differences in their work and in the young people they work to support. These visits continued to focus on the development of more evaluative, evidenced based reports, explaining how important it was to be able to show the reasons behind any changes.

A further challenge lay in the lack of data available about learner progress outside the mainstream sector. As the use of the framework by special schools increased, the profile of the schools at local authority level also increased. One of the local authority managers explained; *'a previously invisible population was now becoming a visible presence'*, making new demands on the system and highlighting where central systems of support to special schools were lacking or non-existent. She spoke, for example, about the way in which *'Each request or task was initially treated as a one off request or favour'*. She felt that for these hard won improvements in mapping learner progress to be sustained and sustainable, requests for data needed to be embedded and systematic rather than *'seen as an extra'* by the central planning management team at headquarters.

An interview with the lead officer in the central planning team revealed some of the challenges they in turn felt they faced in responding to these new demands. She expressed a concern that, while it was now possible to provide data 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. The underlying concern for her in this context related to the Government's general lack of guidance on expectations about data sharing, for example in respect of disability data where definitions and understanding differ across the health and education sectors. This concern is echoed in recent research which notes concerns about children with 'hidden' needs, in which category it specifically includes young carers (Sosu & Ellis, 2014). While the Scottish Government has recently introduced a 'dashboard' (providing national, local, school and student level data linked to socio-economic factors about literacy, numeracy, quality and quantity of attainment and school-leaver destinations), there are no current plans to make this available beyond mainstream secondary schools.

These local authority managers and some of the head teachers also noted a further obstacle arising from the generic data management systems (often purchased from a private company such as SEEMIS), commonly used by education authorities but which were seen as insufficiently sensitive to the work of special schools. These systems did not, for example, allow for inclusion of information about achievement at ‘unit’ level, but only at the overall ‘course’ level. The head teachers talked about the need for this to change. They noted that many young people experiencing difficulties in education, regardless of the source, benefit from identifying and working on small, clearly identified learning steps with regular opportunities for success. The capacity of generic data management systems to record achievements of individual elements of a course would offer just such an opportunity to demonstrate success. These comments highlighted the need for national systems to more accurately reflect the diversity of student attainment and achievement.

The head teachers and the local authority managers raised one further challenge associated with data sharing. This related to a need to improve the quality, consistency and accuracy of the information available about young people on arrival from mainstream schools, a concern raised in much previous research. Here, this seem to suggest that, as these schools improved their own analyses of learner progress and achievement, they became much more conscious of the gaps in the overall picture for children and young people who move across sectors.

All those interviewed also acknowledged in some way, the challenges posed by the broader national education policy agenda which focused primarily on mainstream schools. In the same way as the generic schools’ data management system lacked the fine-tuning helpful to schools outside the mainstream, the tendency of national guidance to be aimed at mainstream schools was frequently seen as problematic. Concern was voiced, for example,

about national curriculum policy and advice. Although this advice was generally welcomed, it was felt to raise particular issues for some learners with special needs. One head teacher commented, for example, on the negative connotations of recently introduced terms such as ‘Early Level’, which they felt were inappropriate and disrespectful when used to refer to the achievements of, say, a young woman of 15 years old. Such comments were also part of a general concern about what they saw as a lack of curricular fit with the needs and learning targets of learners outwith mainstream schools. The local authority manager commented,

‘This then leads lead staff working in special provision to distance themselves from policy and from its underlying principles. Part of my task has been to ask head teachers to think about the principles rather than the obvious disconnects in practice and terminology etc. and look at how to make Curriculum for Excellence or the Equality Act for example, work for them in their setting’.

In summary, the findings from the study overall reveal both challenges and successes for these schools in their efforts to build a new common framework with which to talk about learner progress and achievement. This framework was based on a deep and broad understanding of achievement, taking account of the narrow definitions often seen in mainstream schools, but not confined to this. The local authority managers frequently talked about the quality of the professional dialogue now taking place, and how this contributed to tackling such challenges. For their part, the head teachers reported that the continuing support from the local authority had begun to make a difference to their work; to how they understood data and evidence and how they could use data to track progress and achievement, use evidence to inform planning and support and develop skills to improve

outcomes for learners. This allowed them to demonstrate the strengths and achievements of learners in special schools in a way not thought possible in the past.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate success for the new framework in these schools, but this very success points to larger issues about ‘what counts’ in schools and how we might talk about mapping, measuring and accounting for learner progress in ways that are sensitive to the individuality of children and their families, but also help to address the continuing inequalities in education.

The first key issue relates to the need to realign and indeed to raise expectations of and within schools outside mainstream provision. This emerges from the study’s findings about the ways in which many current policies and initiatives act to replicate and reinforce a notion of ‘difference’ and ‘exception’ in relation to the special school sector. This traditional emphasis on difference has the effect of obscuring a legitimate requirement to have high expectations of such schools. Francis and Mills (2012, p. 584) ask whether efforts to ‘provide ‘engaging’ curricula to disadvantaged children entrench[es] disadvantage?’ (Francis & Mills, 2012, p. 584). This is an apposite question, given the known relationship between disadvantage, discrimination and achievement. However, the findings here suggest that this need not be the case when the curriculum is underpinned by a systematic and shared understanding of achievement, asserts the rights of learners to positive outcomes and is predicated on the value of including rather than excluding children and young people in education.

Florian helpfully considers a need to ‘differentiate between forms of provision and the teaching and learning that occurs within them’ (2008, p. 204), and so draws attention to

the way that a concern with exceptionality has, however inadvertently, come to refer not only to the child, but to the school and the special school system itself. While this has permitted special schools to escape the often unhelpfully narrow focus on attainment targets prevalent elsewhere in education, it has also shaped and stratified ideas about achievement and progress.

The findings reveal other significant issues: the lack of local, national and international data available to educational settings outside the mainstream sector; the impact of this on capacity to provide evidence about learner progress and contextualise achievement; the quality and accuracy of information on children and young people moving between sectors; and the challenges posed by the lack of ‘fit’ between educational policy agendas generally predicated on a mainstream model, around which other educational settings are expected to adapt.

Such issues became increasingly apparent as these special schools began to extend demands on the authority’s planning management team and the need, as they saw it, to introduce an expectation that they were entitled to the same level of support as mainstream schools to map learner progress and achievement effectively. The difficulties they faced in doing so were significant. This finding resonates with recent research undertaken by Thomson and Pennacchia (2014), looking at alternative education, where they found that ‘there was little against which they could benchmark their own data’ (2014, p. 7). In this important sense, the problems facing alternative provision and special schools are very similar. Recent research suggests that the use of ‘timely, relevant data’ can contribute to closing the achievement gap but that ‘lack of data, research and evaluation evidence... currently hampers progress’ (Sosu & Ellis, 2014, p. 1). Talking again about alternative education, but again equally relevant for special education, Thomson and Pennacchia

(2014) recommend that there is a need for ‘consistent and centrally-held data on educational outcomes’ and that all involved should work much more closely together to develop a ‘platform for information sharing’ (2014, p. 8). This mirrors one of the key gaps identified at a European level and the need for more information about outcomes and qualifications for children and young people with special needs (Riddell, 2012). Croll has suggested that, ‘Resource allocation for special educational needs need not, for the most part, be treated separately from resourcing to address inequalities in achievement more generally’ (2002, p.43), a timely reminder of the connections between disadvantage, achievement and education outside the mainstream.

The evaluation discussed here has revealed how, despite the setbacks, the framework provided a basis for dialogue and collaboration in and between schools which had previously seen themselves as having little in common. This new open dialogue across the schools has begun a process of leverage for change and challenge to these notions of difference and exception. These new collaborations were often talked about by those who participated in the evaluation as fundamental to leading the change by the head teachers, a significant finding given Kerr and West’s argument that collaboration between schools is itself a ‘powerful strategy for tackling inequalities’ (2010, p. 9).

There is clearly potential for the framework developed here to be expanded and further developed across the special school sector and in other settings outside mainstream schools, offering a way to broaden evaluative criteria by collating data to fill gaps left in current mainstream –focused systems and processes; showing short-horizon, step-by-step improvement and by recognising a wide range of aspects to this. Challenging inequalities, challenging the accommodation of an ‘acceptable level of failure’ (Fendler & Muzaffar,

2008, p. 63) requires renewed critical engagement with the construction of notions of achievement and attainment within and across sectors.

Conclusion

Levels of achievement for children educated outside mainstream schools continue to be lower overall, when compared with their mainstream peers. The emphasis on schools outside the mainstream sector is still often 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 whole school populations to understand patterns and trends over time and across groups of learners, and how such understanding can contribute to thinking about achievement and how, in turn, this can help challenge inequalities. This article examined the work of one small group of special schools that set out to develop a framework for a broader conversation about achievement – building and adapting mainstream schools’ measures of achievement but, significantly, avoiding the ‘thinning out’ of results from data typical of test driven systems. The findings from this study suggest that a different set of expectations can contribute to addressing this challenge.

Based on these findings, this paper argues that there is a significant problem with the assumption about the need to make a ‘special case for special schools’. This is not an argument against special provision but it does suggest that this notion of the special case, which at first may simply seem child-centred, is problematic in that it reifies individualised notions of achievement, and inadvertently reinforces the persistent under-valuing of achievements for some groups of learners. It serves as justification for tacit accommodation of ‘an accepted level of failure for education as a whole’ (Fendler & Muzaffar, 2008, p. 63).

However, if concern for individualised notions of achievement can be balanced with a concern to find common cause and common ground, this could reconfigure accounts of ‘achievement’, providing a significantly different point of departure for discussion. The framework discussed in this paper, I would argue, has the capacity to begin to build the ‘platform for information sharing’ sought by Thomson and Pennacchia (2014), providing a new basis on which to challenge acceptance of failure and inequalities, offering lessons for all schools.

This work was supported by funding from City of Edinburgh Council.

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