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The cost to pupils and staff of inclusion in mainstream schools of children with SEN

Children with exceptional requirements are being admitted in the name of inclusion into mainstream schools without the proper resources to meet their needs, according to a Cambridge University report published today by the National Union of Teachers.

The report cites cases where medical conditions and mental illness put huge strains on teachers and teaching assistants.

The teachers are regularly administering tracheotomies, dealing with incontinence and nappy changing having been trained in these tasks by the children's parents.

Such responsibilities were above and beyond the call of duty and put teachers under constant strain. As one primary teacher said "It's more like nursing than education".

The report, "The Cost of Inclusion" was commissioned from Professors John Macbeath and Maurice Galton of Cambridge University. It examines the costs to schools, pupils and staff of inclusion and looks at how effective the present system is in ensuring proper provision for children with special educational needs.

The report found that while primary schools were more successful than secondary in helping young people cope successfully in mainstream classrooms, teachers parents and children alike felt the strain of inclusion. As one experienced teacher said: "I felt it was something I was failing in. I couldn't cope with it anymore".

This became more acute in secondary schools where pupils with complex needs, particularly mental health problems, were not being catered for adequately. Schools had to cope with pupils with such severe mental problems as attempted suicides, schizophrenia and self-harming.

Teachers spoke of the awful realities of some young lives that were way beyond imagination and for whom school was the only safe place. Staff often had to take on counseling and welfare roles without the proper training or even the knowledge of where the right kind of professional help could be found for these young people.

One secondary head teacher recounted the example of a girl who had been raped by her brother and then her stepfather and another of a boy who had arrived home to find his parent overdosed on the floor with a hypodermic needle in his groin. The school has to support these children as best it can as well as trying to get on with the job of teaching its pupils and raising standards.

The problems of inclusion after primary education were spelled out by parents. They described the erosion of self-confidence in their children after a few weeks or even days

in the 'big school'. One parent said that her child had gone from being a polite, shy, sensitive boy to being a boy with a criminal record. This was explained by some parents as being down to losing the support of a teaching assistant in the move. Yet parents' criticisms were not leveled at secondary teachers but at a system unable to cope with the needs of these pupils.

Other factors such as the onset of puberty, peer pressure and the more complex structure of the secondary school day were also seen contributing to SEN pupils' sense of isolation in secondary mainstream schools.

The report found that for many teachers the 'Cost of Inclusion' proved a very personal one. The strain of coping with the demands of pupils with acute SEN in an environment where there is little additional back up or outside resources to help proved all too much. Many either changed jobs or left the profession all together.

Time and again the findings of the report threw up the question of funding. School staff frequently referred to inclusion on 'the cheap'. With schools lacking the resources to attract quality staff with relevant experience, many were placed in the unacceptable situation of providing 'inclusion without education'.

It also highlighted the fact that too often SEN pupils are left with teaching assistants whose enthusiasm and commitment are essential but are not sufficient without expertise. Teamwork has to be balanced to take account of the expertise of all staff.

The Macbeth/Galton Report stresses that "Inclusion in mainstream classrooms has been welcomed by teachers. However achieving this goal depends upon issues of resourcing and expertise. It is the tensions between the two agendas – standards and needs - and the pressure exerted on teachers to meet curriculum targets in an under-funded environment which will achieve poor results for all pupils".

The report's key recommendations include special schools having a significant role as an expert resource for mainstream schools and strengthening the right of SEN children to be taught by qualified teachers.

The report concludes that:

"Competitive market driven policies impact on the most vulnerable children and penalize the most dedicated teachers. The most striking aspect of this study is the goodwill of teachers who believe in inclusion and try to make it work but do not find their goodwill repaid by the level of professional support they deserve. It is time for a thorough review of policy and practice."