Closing the Opportunity Gap for Learners with SEND Beyond the Pandemic

30 JUNE 2020

QUEEN STREET GROUP

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Purpose

As schools begin to welcome more pupils back, this think piece from the Queen Street Group considers the implications for learners with SEND and seeks to support school leaders and teachers in ensuring no child is left behind in the post-pandemic world and that gaps that were evident before Covid-19 are not allowed to grow and further distance learners with SEND from their peers. However, what is also important is to understand and recognise the significance and value of learners with SEND; it doesn't mean a sympathetic acceptance of limitations but a tough-minded determination to show that **all learners with SEND are capable of excellence** (DfEE, 1997) and are therefore afforded the same opportunities for success. For transparency, this think piece will focus on pupils in mainstream education identified as requiring SEN support and concludes with a series of recommendations captured in the following graphic.

Closing the Opportunity Gap for Learners with SEND Beyond the Pandemic

The principles for teaching learners with SEND are simply good teaching for all; we cannot see learners with SEND as an 'add on' when pre-pandemic research suggests 1 in 5 will require some sort of additional support during their education - this number is likely to go up and so we need to adapt responsively.

Provide additional training to staff so that all have the knowledge and understanding to teach learners with SEND

- Staff need to be confident in scaffolding and modelling to develop knowledge and understanding in pupils
- Recent NQTs have lost at least a term of their training and will have gaps in their own learning, but with an appetite to develop further

Ensure behaviour expectations and routines are explicitly taught to all

- You cannot assume implicit understanding by osmosis
- Focus on developing resilience and forging strong and trusting relationships

Analyse and understand where the gaps are

- The multiplier effect can exacerbate difficulties in readiness for learning
- Are the gaps academic or pastoral?

Ensure the curriculum offer is well structured and sequenced

- Learners with SEND should have access to the full curriculum, unless they have a specific cognitive impairment
- Learners with SEND need to know and understand the connections in knowledge to build on prior learning

Ensure learners with SEND have access to Quality First Teaching

- Good teaching for SEND is good teaching for all
- Support understanding and mastery through pre-teaching and over-learning
- TAs should complement not replace teachers

Focus on reading as the key to wider curriculum access

- Fluency and stamina will have been lost
- A focus on reading comprehension will also be of benefit

Be aware of early indicators of additional support needs

- A 'trauma informed' staff body is better equipped to identify a child in crisis
- Early and responsive teacher intervention can effectively address misconceptions and prevent gaps from emerging

Look to collaborate and form meaningful partnerships

- Specialist providers will be able to signpost a wide range of additional support; particularly around social, emotional and mental health needs
- Working in collaboration with families allows for a shared and consistent approach to fully meeting the needs of individuals in a holistic way

Whilst it is clear that the pandemic has presented ever-growing challenges for the sector, we have witnessed strong leadership in action, driven by a sense of duty and moral purpose. The bravery that schools and leaders have shown has led to creative approaches, the creation of structure within chaos and the addressing of problems with new perspectives. (West-Burnham, 2015) And yet, there is still much to do. In a world that continues to change and challenge we have an opportunity to reflect on the practice that was – and innovate the practice that is soon to be. Decision-making in this respect needs to be underpinned by

strong principles of equity, resilience and flexibility so that resources meet need and solutions found which best serve the interest and future success of pupils, parents and communities. (CST, June 2020)

Context

Throughout the pandemic there has been much discussion of the disadvantage gap and the digital divide that has grown between the rich and the poor. The fear of the long-term impact is real, and it is right to be discussing this; however, another key group of children are at risk of falling further behind their peers and they have been rarely discussed. Schools have been open to children of key workers and to vulnerable children, including those with Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) throughout the UK lockdown. In some instances, due to the complexity of need and the negative impact on health and safety, special schools have closed, whilst the majority of children with EHCPs educated in mainstream schools have also stayed at home.

Meanwhile, unless the child of a key worker or known to children's social care, the children identified as requiring SEN support have remained at home. This therefore means that around a million[1] children with additional educational needs, across primary and secondary education, have been at home since March 2020 – without the targeted support they need in order to *access* education and be successful. Add in the multiplier effect of also being disadvantaged or being known to Children's Social Care, and we begin to see this as a moral imperative to take action on behalf of this key group of learners.

What we have also learned; however, is that for some learners with SEND, the access to home learning has provided additional opportunities and a richer engagement with learning, as the sensory demands of the school environment are no longer a barrier and work can be completed within a flexible window rather than within the constraints of a lesson, as examples (Anne Harvey, June 2020). And so perhaps this presents an opportunity to reflect on existing pedagogy and practice and consider what education and learning might look like in the near future.

Shining a Light on the Opportunity Gap

The SEND Code of Practice (2015) requires reasonable adjustments are made so that learners with additional needs can access the mainstream education and therefore make progress in line with their non-SEN peers, based on individual starting points; however, even before the pandemic, both the National Audit Office (2019) and the Education Select Committee (2019) had identified systemic failings in the approach to supporting and enabling these learners – particularly those requiring SEN support. In a damning appraisal of the current education system and its approach to supporting these pupils, plus the lack of accountability illustrating how this generation is being let down, both reports struggle to find evidence of impact and clarity of thought from policy and practice as to what success actually looks like for learners with SEND.

Extensive research undertaken by Blatchford, Webster et al (2009, 2013, 2017) highlights the flaws in an educational model which sees large numbers of learners with SEND taught by teaching assistants without the subject and pedagogical knowledge required to ensure appropriate progress is made. The lack of teacher interaction and reliance on small group withdrawal not only hinders the development of healthy peer relationships and an

understanding of appropriate classroom behaviour but also limits the stretch and challenge that a subject specialist can provide. This is not to say that teaching assistants do not add value to learning – they do – but as a complement to the teacher's instruction and not as a replacement. The EEF recommendations (2018) also reiterate this point and encourage educators to make explicit connections between everyday classroom learning and teaching, as well as through specific targeted and appropriate interventions.

The Timpson Review (2019) identified that learners with SEND currently account for 45% of all permanent exclusions and 43% of all fixed-period exclusions in England; multiple vulnerabilities, such as poverty and unsafe family environments increases the risk of exclusion further. In particular, pupils with social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs are almost four times more likely to be excluded. The very real risk here is that the most vulnerable learners in society are also the ones most likely to be excluded from it.

What these reports show is that learners with SEND were already missing opportunities for success even before the pandemic and rather than deferring to the status quo, we have an opportunity to shake things up, move things forward and build back better.

Some learners with SEND, if not appropriately supported, can struggle to follow the pace of the lesson and this is where gaps can grow. To be clear, the gaps are not necessarily due to a lack of potential but often of a lack of time needed to teach the concrete before the abstract, for direct instruction, and to give opportunities for repetition and review. However, the annual NQT survey (DfE, 2018) regularly reports a lack of preparedness for managing behaviour and teaching learners with SEND. The pandemic is likely to result in a group of NQTs who need support to re-build confidence, skills and awareness of Teachers' Standard 7; *manage behaviour effectively to ensure a good and safe learning environment*, as their final two terms of this academic year have forced them into a theoretical space rather than that of practitioner.

However, this generation of NQTs have absolutely had to demonstrate flexibility, resilience, independence in spades, and this will likely serve them in good stead over the first few weeks, months and years of their teaching career. They will have also spent time accessing a wide range of professional development opportunities which support them to demonstrate sound understanding of Teachers' Standard 5; *adapt teaching to respond to the strengths and needs of all pupils*.

We are not without support and guidance; many key providers offer access to high quality support, resources and professional development to enhance the provision and knowledge base of the sector, an example of which can be found via the NASEN SEND Gateway, as part of the Whole School SEND collaborative; offering a suite of condition specific introductory training videos for NQTs to provide helpful pointers, techniques and advice on inclusive teaching strategies.

The Way Forward Post-Pandemic

We do not yet know what the 'new normal' will be, but there are some things we can prepare for across the sector, given our knowledge and understanding of our own schools and the communities we serve. It is already apparent that the number of vulnerable children is increasing through family financial instability, cost of living increases and job instability, as well as pared back services resulting in some children slipping under the radar of social

services. (The Children's Society, April 2020). Given the disruption, fear and negative impact on health this pandemic has created, it is also likely that more of our learners will suffer or will have suffered from trauma, and the likelihood of more learners being identified as having SEND is likely to increase.

It may be the case that more children will exhibit challenging behaviours, as they struggle to come to terms with new rules and routines and changes to the school environment, trying to make sense of how they fit in. It is essential that all professionals understand that behaviour is communication. What we need to ensure post-pandemic is that routines are quickly established as consistent for all and that time is taken to explain any new rules – we cannot assume implicit understanding just because the majority show compliance. This does not mean; however, that we ignore challenging behaviours or resort to punitive measures, but that we provide support and guidance which encourages discipline and self-regulation; used in the right way we can ensure that our children learn what is emotionally and socially healthy and appropriate so that they, and those around them, can function at their best. (Bomber, 2020)

It is also important that a clearly sequenced curriculum, which builds on prior learning, is delivered by teachers with strong subject knowledge and the confidence to provide scaffolds and prompts that allow all learners 'a way in' to the content. If taught in a logical sequential way, a progressive and cumulative curriculum should in and of itself be the most effective resource to support learners with SEND. One way in which we can secure greater understanding and deepen knowledge is through pre-teaching and over-learning, which together produce an effective learning environment through: differentiated planning; quality assessment; and the effective deployment of staff and resources. The graphic below summarises these approaches, highlighting the benefits for all learners, but particularly those with SEND.

APPROACH	ACTIONS	IMPACT
Pre Teaching	• Introduce new vocabulary and ideas, based on what pupils already know, in order to prepare for new learning	• Ignites thinking • Develops language acquisition and recall
Over Learning	• Regular review and recall of learning over extended periods of time	• Secures knowledge and understanding rather than surface level completion of tasks • Develops mastery and confidence

Investment in the links within, across and between the curriculum helps learners (and teachers) make sense and derive meaning from their learning – within that moment and over time. It is precisely the investment in both high-quality professional development in refining practice and pedagogy, coupled with developing teacher confidence and understanding of the curriculum, over time, within and across subjects that will benefit all learners; especially those who need further support and reinforcement. Building professional commitment to and confidence in a progressive and sequential curriculum and developing banks of resources which support learning and understanding across the subjects, will result in teachers who are better able to collaborate effectively in order to refine and adapt the learning experience; a

notion which teachers and leaders who champion provision for learners with SEND will consider a goal worthy of pursuit.

The momentary pandemic pause and subsequent responsive rebuilding of learning opportunities in a largely virtual, online environment, presents a huge opportunity when considering meeting the needs of learners with SEND.   Firstly, the investment that the whole teaching profession has undertaken to develop their own practice and pedagogy during this period means we have a better-informed workforce and increased collaboration. All the research shows us that high quality teaching and learning for all, and specific and tailored provision for learners with SEND are one and the same thing. Quality first teaching benefits all – and improves outcomes exponentially for vulnerable learners.

As educators we all understand the value of reading in order to unlock the treasures of the curriculum, as well as reading for pleasure. However, it is likely that the pandemic has limited pupils' access to books and the lack of formal instruction will have impacted on their fluency and stamina; particularly for learners with SEND. In addition, learners with SEND need support in developing comprehension skills such as questioning, predicting, clarifying, summarising, inference and deduction, for them to gain confidence and skill as readers. Reading independently, and with increasing fluency and confidence opens doors for learners across every subject and out into the world. The reading continuum below shows the importance of progressive and incremental teaching and learning that supports learners to move from the beginning and early stages of reading, with high levels of dependence, into a place where they are reading independently and securely.

Dependence   Independence

Beginning | Early | Developing | Moderately | Fluent | Experienced | Independent | Mature
Reader | Reader | Reader | Fluent Reader | Reader | Reader | Reader | Independent Reader

We often become fearful of teaching learners with SEND, thinking there is a particular skill – and there is – but it's called teaching with patience, which is essential for learners with SEND, indeed for all learners; however, high stakes accountability doesn't often provide the teaching space for patience. Precision in the small steps of achievement for a learner with specific and overlapping needs sits in contrast to the many blunt and generic assessment descriptors which feature in the data tracking systems across schools and form the basis of national reporting statistics. Perhaps what policy makers and government *should* be considering post-pandemic is how to re-balance the prioritisation of accountability, so that learners engage with education in a way that is meaningful; authentic, relevant and something to be built on over time and throughout life.

This educational crisis has brought out the best and worst in people as fear and uncertainty has stimulated the fight, flight or freeze trigger in our brains. In the best, we have seen resolute determination to make things work even when the guidance has either been lacking or overwhelming – and with that determination we have seen the power of collaboration and support. As we enter the next stage of this unknown journey, the need to collaborate is even greater for our learners with SEND. Networking across mainstream and specialist colleagues is essential if we are to capitalise on the expertise of each other in order to prevent further gaps in opportunity, achievement or health and well-being. If we as a sector are truly in this

together then we must learn from each other; the best mainstream schools know how to develop a meaningful and stretching curriculum and the best SEMH schools know how to support and engage learners who have experienced trauma, as just two examples. Together, we are a powerful force for good.

When considering the notion of building back better and stronger for learners with SEND, we have the opportunity to maximise on the partnership work between schools and Local Authorities. Where this is working best, the pandemic period has brought about the opportunity for schools to work in genuine partnership with SEND teams, in a way that the 'local offer' element of the Code of Practice (2015) had intended. A further silver lining through this period can be found in the highly effective partnership work with families of learners with SEND. For many schools, the last few months have strengthened trust, given rise to greater understanding and enhanced the development of a shared approach to meeting the learning, social and emotional needs of children as learners, as individuals.

Summary

The principles for teaching learners with SEND are simply good teaching for all; we cannot see learners with SEND as an 'add on' when pre-pandemic research suggests 1 in 5 will require some sort of additional support during their education – this number is likely to go up and so we need to adapt responsively.

Provide additional training to staff so that all have the knowledge and understanding to teach learners with SEND

- Staff need to be confident in scaffolding and modelling to develop knowledge and understanding in pupils
- Recent NQTs have lost at least a term of their training and will have gaps in their own learning, and yet this will be coupled with a powerful appetite from many NQTs to enact their deep investment in theory

Ensure behaviour expectations and routines are explicitly taught to all

- You cannot assume implicit understanding by osmosis
- Focus on developing resilience and forging strong and trusting relationships

Analyse and understand where the gaps are

- The multiplier effect can exacerbate difficulties in readiness for learning
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Ensure the curriculum offer is well structured and sequenced

- Learners with SEND should have access to the full curriculum, unless they have a specific cognitive impairment
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Focus on reading as the key to wider curriculum access

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Be aware of early indicators of additional support needs

- A 'trauma informed' staff body is better equipped to identify and manage a child in crisis
- Early and responsive teacher intervention can effectively address misconceptions and prevent gaps from emerging

Look to collaborate and form meaningful partnerships with effective special schools, with Local Authorities and with parents/carers of children with SEND

- Specialist providers will be able to signpost a wide range of additional support; particularly around social, emotional and mental health needs.
- Working in collaboration with families allows for a shared and consistent approach to fully meeting needs of individuals in a holistic way

We will continue to teach both for knowledge and resilience; educators and learners alike have shown remarkable flexibility and adaptability in the last few months and therefore we should not underestimate our ability to continue to do the same – but to flex and adapt for the purpose of innovation and advancement and not just to manage in a crisis; however, if and when the next crisis comes – we'll be ready.

Queen Street Group

This think piece is for discussion put out by the group as a whole and should not be seen as a reflection of specific policies adopted by any of the named member Trusts.

28th June 2020

[1] The QSG member Trusts educate 214,000 pupils across 393 schools. The members are:

Academies Enterprise Trust; Astrea Academy Trust; Brooke Weston Trust; Cabot Learning Federation; Creative Education Trust; Dixons City Academy Trust; Education South West; The First Federation Trust; Future Academies Trust; Lead Academy Trust; Leigh Academies Trust; Oasis Community Learning; Ormiston Academies Trust; South Farnham Educational Trust; Unity Schools Partnership; Ventrus Limited; The White Horse Federation.

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Additional Resources Available for Free:

Centre for Literacy in Primary Education:

Reading and Writing scales to support progression. Available at: https://clpe.org.uk/library-and-resources/reading-and-writing-scales

NASEN SEND Gateway, Whole School SEND:

Condition specific videos, as well as SEND Review tools to support leadership, teaching and pedagogy. Available at: https://www.sendgateway.org.uk/whole-school-send/find-wss-resources/