



A mother's plea for support

A specialist teacher who is the mother of a two-year-old with Down's Syndrome has written to education secretary John Swinney imploring him "to guarantee the continued funding of the services she will need to uphold her right to achieve in all areas of her life".

Lauren Elliott Lockhart is a teacher in a school for children with vision impairments and additional needs. She says in an open letter to the education secretary that, with recent budget cuts and changing priorities, vital support services for schools are falling by the wayside at the same time as pupil census figures show 24.9 per cent of children in Scotland have additional support needs.

Classroom teachers are entering the profession with "limited resources" to deal with this range of pupils, says Lockhart. She adds: "I want [Trudy] to go to her mainstream school but I also want her to have access to teachers who have in-depth knowledge about how best to teach my child...All of this is not possible without the expertise and knowledge of our specialist teachers and the provision of our special schools. My daughter will not thrive in mainstream without this."

Interview

'Inclusion isn't a problem – the issue is consistency'

Mainstreaming is threatened by 'the practice gap', warns Professor Lani Florian

EMMA SEITH

SHRINKING BUDGETS and research that reveals many children with additional support needs (ASN) are failing to flourish in mainstream schools have caused some people – including teachers – to question the presumption that children, wherever possible, should be educated in mainstream schools.

But to ask that is to ask the wrong question, says Professor Lani Florian, an expert in inclusive education and the Bell Chair of Education at the University of Edinburgh. She argues that mainstreaming is not the issue: it is

consistency. How do we ensure all children in all schools receive a quality education?

Florian believes the answer lies in looking at the teachers who succeed in catering for the needs of every pupil in their class, arguing that we need to "shift our gaze from where a child is placed to what happens in that place".

In an interview with *Tes Scotland*, Florian says: "There is a worry out there that inclusion has failed. In unguarded moments, teachers will express that. But it's consistency that's the problem. There is variability in terms of

practice, but variability suggests that we do know how to do it.

"We need to ask: what can we learn from the people who are managing to do well for all the kids and learners in their classroom?"

ASN pupils 'lack support'

The "presumption of mainstreaming" was introduced in Scotland in 2000, but has been shown to be failing some children with ASN.

Research into inclusion conducted last year by learning disability charity Enable Scotland

found that more than half of pupils who have learning disabilities or autism spectrum disorders, or both, feel they are not getting the right support in school. It also found that 62 per cent of teachers had experienced stress and anxiety worrying about not having the right support to meet all ASN pupils' needs.

However, Florian points out that while things might not be perfect, "what makes anybody think the quality of provision is better elsewhere?" She says: "Special schools have problems, too."

Florian qualified as a special needs teacher in the US in 1978 but became interested in inclusion because of a growing body of research that showed special schools "served to perpetuate marginalisation".

When school inspections body Education Scotland summed up what it had learned from four years' worth of school inspection, between 2012 and 2016, it said pupils in secondary were "generally well motivated to learn, achieve and succeed" but that the "quality of learning and teaching was commonly found to be too variable in schools".

However, secondaries, overall, outperform special schools on the five quality indicators that the inspectorate homes in on when

judging a school's performance. A higher proportion of special schools were rated "satisfactory", "weak" or "unsatisfactory" than secondary schools, including when it came to learners' experiences and meeting learning needs (see graphic, above).

Teachers under pressure

The fact that the presumption of mainstreaming is being questioned is a sign of the times, believes Florian, who has been researching inclusion for the past 25 years and who moved to Scotland a decade ago.

Teachers are under pressure, she says. Education budgets have been hit hard and teachers are less supported, not only in terms of material or human resources, but also in the CPD they receive to help them cope with the wide range of needs in their classrooms.

Florian even questions whether initial teacher education is providing as solid a preparation as it once did, given that the higher education sector is also experiencing a squeeze on budgets.

The current focus on how well – or not – the Scottish education system is performing is also working against inclusion, she adds. The last round of Programme for International Student

Assessment (Pisa) results, published in 2016, showed a dip in Scotland's performance. This prompted education secretary John Swinney to say he would push ahead with "radical" and "controversial" reforms in an attempt to turn things around.

One outcome has been the creation of the National Improvement Framework – the Scottish government's way of monitoring the success of the system. The framework, which has led to the introduction of national standardised assessments in literacy and numeracy, is in and of itself not a bad thing, says Florian, but such a narrow view on driving up attainment can have knock-on effects and unintended consequences.

Children with ASN can be marginalised when there is so much focus on attainment targets, she says.

We have all heard of the attainment gap, but Florian puts in a plea for increasing the focus on another gap: "the practice gap". In other words, reducing the variability in the quality of the teaching between classrooms.

If we do that, "the quality standard assumed by the presumption of mainstreaming can be met", she insists. ●

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