

Inquiry into post Special Educational Need Provision in education, employment and training for those with Learning Disabilities

Submission by the Centre for Behaviour Analysis, School of Education, Queen's University Belfast

About the Centre for Behaviour Analysis, School of Education, Queen's University Belfast (QUB)

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The Centre for Behaviour Analysis (CBA) at the School of Education is an international research centre with associations from across QUB, other national and international Universities and Research Centres, and the local and international community. The CBA is based on a philosophy of inclusion, evidence-based effective education, and person-centred research and practice. Our mission is to provide knowledge and skills that improve confidence and competence and lead to improvements for individuals, families and caregivers, and society. We conduct research into a range of topics related to education, including learning across the lifespan. Some of our recent research projects include

- **Empower Young People with Autism who are at risk of Educational Exclusion (2013-2016).** Funded by the Lottery, in collaboration with Parents Education as Autism Therapists (PEAT) and University of Ulster.
- **Autism in the (Air 2014-2016).** In collaboration with City Airport, Aer Lingus, and the autism charity PEAT we are helping children with autism to go on holidays.
- **Loss and Bereavement and autism (2013 – 2016).** Reports of children on the Autism Spectrum wandering off and drowning have focused attention on the question of what help can we offer in situations of loss and bereavement to families affected by Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).
- **Project ABLE: Evaluation and development of good practice strategy (2013-2014).** Orchardville provides employment support to individuals with autism aged 16+ through Project ABLE (Autism Building Links to Employment). Funded by Orchardville (Lottery funding).
- **ASSISTID COFUND (2013-2018).** The focus of this project is to maximise the impact of assistive technologies research for autism and intellectual disability. Funded by EU Commission Marie Curie COFUND.
- **Benchmarking Autism Service Efficacy [BASE] (2012-2015).** Helping the most vulnerable out of the poverty trap and reducing inequality: Policies, strategies, and services for individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder, including intellectual and neurodevelopmental disabilities. Funded by OFMDFM.

While much of the CBA's current work is clearly focussed on autism, other areas of education and special educational needs are also addressed both in the area of teaching and learning (e.g., the new MSc in ABA is applicable to any educational settings including mainstream, special and life-long education and our annual conferences and bi-monthly workshops focus on a wide variety of matters, such as the inclusive classroom or precision teaching for teaching reading and math skills) and in research (reports such as *Sons and Daughters with Disabilities: Childcare Issues Across the Lifespan* (Dillenburger & McKerr 2011a) for Changing Ageing Partnership and *What the future holds: Older people caring for adult sons and daughters with disabilities* (Dillenburger & McKerr 2009) for OFMDFM).

Comments on Terms of Reference for the Inquiry into post Special Educational Need Provision in education, employment and training for those with Learning Disabilities

1. To examine the current range of choice and opportunities available for those with Learning Disabilities on leaving full time schooling .

Nearly one in five (18.2%) school-age children are identified as having special or additional educational needs. These needs will usually continue into adulthood, and there is now overwhelming evidence that 'disabled people experience a substantially poorer quality of life than non-disabled peers' (Barnes, 1992, p.2). For parents/carers of younger individuals with ASD, there are serious issues around transitioning between children's and adult services, and accessing education that is both ambitious and effective in terms of their children's needs (Dillenburger & McKerr 2011; Dillenburger, McKerr & Jordan 2014) and where young people with ASD also have a diagnosis of learning disability, these difficulties are compounded. For adults with disabilities, education and employment are the top two barriers to participating fully in all spheres of life, and are the keys to overcoming social exclusion. Quality and availability of adult services in particular are a cause of concern to older parents seeking to establish some independence for sons and daughters with disabilities as they themselves require more support, and they also had difficulties accessing information on what actually was available (Dillenburger & McKerr 2009, 2011b). Independent research into such services should be commissioned, and this should involve a detailed analysis of available secondary data sources (see e.g., secondary data analysis re: Autism recently conducted by CBA funded by OFMDFM), with the aim of identifying gaps that prevent effective monitoring of current services.

Recommendation:

- ***Research into current provision should also include an analysis of international best practice and a comparison with NI current provision, especially where this falls short of international best practice.***

2. To seek the views of young people, family carers and groups representing children and young people with learning disabilities what services they would like to see in place and how the current situation meets their needs.

This should constitute the main driving force of any inquiry, rather than a tokenistic addition to pre-determined decisions. Our own research has indicated that young people with SEN and/or autism are just as involved as others of their age with information technology, and given the appropriate initial support, are passionate self-advocates. Any consultation should include as wide a variety of research tools as possible- including the use of focus groups, short on-line surveys (with assistance from independent researchers with completion if appropriate) and social media so that the views – especially of young people and their family carers- shape future policy.

Recommendation:

- ***Substantially increase involvement of young people with learning disabilities and their families in service review and design by allowing a wide and flexible range of formats for participation***

3. To research best practice in post school provision for those with learning disabilities.

We have been commissioned by OFMDFM to conduct extensive research regarding services for individual on the autism spectrum (see BASE project; qub.ac.uk/cba). Similar research should be commissioned for individuals with SEN more generally. Our final report will be available by December 2014.

With regards to post-compulsory designation, we conducted a secondary data analysis of the School Leavers Survey (SLS) that identified differences and similarities of qualifications and destinations of young people with ASD (CWA) and young people not on the autism spectrum (COA), when they leave mainstream education. The SLS did not include special schools, so unfortunately these findings cannot be generalised.

We found that CWA who attended mainstream schools were less likely than COA to achieve well at school and go to University. Young people with autism were most likely to attend training/further education, rather than University. While young people with Asperger's Syndrome did attend University, they did so less frequently than COA.

These findings were not surprising in light of findings of the literature review and the general population survey we conducted as part of this OFMDFM funded project, which showed that CWA tend to come from more deprived backgrounds and miss a considerably greater amount of school days than COA. Of course, the recent study by Ambitious about Autism (2014) confirms these concerns.

Recommendation:

- ***A comprehensive review of the background to school attendance figures for young people with SEN should be undertaken to establish the reasons for absenteeism; in particular to determine if schools, by failing to meet the educational and social needs of these young people, are contributing to a subsequent lack of choice in post-school opportunities.***

4. To examine if the quantum and quality of post school provision for those with Learning Disabilities is meeting the demand and develop recommendations to address barriers to participation and delivery of high quality provision.

Post-school education

For our secondary data analysis regarding Further Education (FE) we used figures produced for us by Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) using the Further Education Statistical Record (FESR). The data were quality assured by DEL in accordance with the Official Statistics guidelines (UK Statistics Authority, January 2009). We were able to provide Northern Irish enrolments data for SWA that were much more detailed than the available data for England (Data Service, 2014), specifically with regards to types of courses; level of study; mode of attendance; achievement rates; and retention rates. The data show that students with ASD (SWA) and students not on the autism spectrum (SOA) had very similar achievement and retention rates, although, while SWA tended to study courses at a variety of levels, they were more likely to study Level 1 and entry level courses than SOA.

Recommendation:

- ***This kind of research should be commissioned for SEN more generally.***

Employment routes

In another project, we researched available employment routes for young people with ASD and found that there are already some innovative approaches to post-school delivery of skills and qualifications for young people with ASD which could inform a wider discussion on provision for individuals with support needs. For example the Print Room in Armagh has 'bought in' accredited

education providers who deliver education courses to trainees in a familiar and supportive environment; the trainees are also working on the site and are gaining employment experience.

Education provision should be broadened to include comprehensive 'life skills', and these should include opportunities to undertake physical activity and enhance social and communication skills as suggested in the terms of this inquiry for the Committee to consider. This is particularly important for those young people with behaviours which challenge; interventions to address such behaviours should be evidence-based and delivered by suitably trained professionals.

A number of Supported Employment schemes currently operate in NI, in co-operation with the department for Employment & Learning (DEL), such as Work Connect. There is increasing evidence that where such schemes are tailored for individuals with ASDs, they can be effective in gaining and maintaining employment. For example a number of evaluations on the mainland UK 'Prospects' program showed substantive benefits over 'generic' disability employment services (Howlin, Alcock, & Burkin, 2005; Mawhood & Howlin, 1999; Research Autism 2009), and this is a service design issue which should apply to all young people with disabilities- it should never be a 'one-size fits all' service.

Recommendation:

- ***Again, this kind of research should be commissioned for SEN provision more generally.***

Professional training: overcoming behavioural barriers to learning and participation

In order to work in this field, professionals should hold recognized qualifications. They should seek to obtain one of several certifications offered from the Behavior Analyst Certification Board (BACB). This organization is an accredited credentialing body (i.e. the National Commission for Certifying Agencies) based in the USA (Behavior Analysts Certification Board, 2014a). The BACB certifies the following qualifications:

1. Entry level: The BACB has a newly established Registered Behavior Technician (RBT) credential, a paraprofessional qualification designed to allow holders to work directly with clients during intervention activities under the direct supervision of a behaviour analyst.
2. The intermediate level: Board Certified assistant Behavior Analyst (BCaBA) is an undergraduate level training programme that requires direct supervision by a fully licensed analyst on a regular basis.
3. Full certification/licensure: Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA). This professional recognition requires a masters' degree in behavior analysis or a related field (e.g. psychology, education, counselling, social work, engineering, medicine or one of the natural sciences) and entitles the certificate holder to work independently as a behaviour analyst within the context of their educational and experiential competence (Behavior Analysts Certification Board, 2014a).
4. Advanced level (Doctoral): Board Certified Behavior Analyst-Doctoral (BCBA-D). This requires that a BCBA completes a Doctorate in a related field with contents in Behaviour analysis.

Although the BACB is based in the USA, the European Association of Behaviour Analysis endorses the BACB credentials and advertises training programmes through its website (European Association for Behavior Analysis, 2007). In Ireland, the Division of Behaviour Analysis (DBA) of the Irish Psychological Society endorses the BACB credentials (Psychological Society of Ireland, 2010). The DBA considers the BCBA qualification as the minimum requirement to implement the science of behaviour analysis with competence. In the UK, the UK-Society for Behaviour Analysis endorses BACB approved training and certification.

Both NI Universities offer BACB approved Masters level training as well as some undergraduate training in behaviour analysis. This training is recommended for education, health and social care staff, who work in pre-and post-SEN provider settings.

Recommendations:

- ***Examine what approaches are working nationally and internationally and what the barriers are.***
- ***Fully endorse BACB approved qualifications.***

5. Given the complex and interrelated needs of individuals in this group to identify the barriers to co-ordination across departments – regionally and locally – and make recommendations for improvement.

Communication between departments and agencies

Consideration should be given to the wording used to measure learning disability in administrative systems and surveys, as currently there is a lot of variation. For example, the NI 2011 census used the following question:

“Do you have any of the following conditions which have lasted, or are expected to last, at least 12 months?”

One of the response options to this question was:

“A learning difficulty, an intellectual difficulty, or a social behavioural difficulty”

In contrast the, Labour Force Survey asks participants if they have any long term health problems and if they say yes they are then asked if they have certain conditions (e.g. severe or specific learning difficulties: LD).

These very broad categories contrast greatly with the very detailed categories currently used by DENI. These are just some examples of variation in practice between departments, and there is also a lot of variation within departments. If departments are not measuring /talking about the same thing it will be hard to work together. Therefore, consideration should be given to how to best harmonise the recording of learning disability. It would also be useful for departments to consider using a unique identifier in their datasets that would allow data from different departments to be merged together, thus providing a more detailed picture of how well departments work together with regards to helping people with learning disability.

Recommendation:

- ***Harmonise departmental/agency recording of learning disability***

6. To report the Committee’s findings and recommendations to the Assembly.

Our final report for the BASE project will be available in Dec 2014. In the meantime, we have published some of our findings already and further papers are under review. Any future planning for SEN should be based on sound research that establishes a BASELINE of the current situation and BENCHMARKS for the evaluation of future policies. Without such data, any recommendations are without sound foundation.

Recommendations:

- **Establish BASELINE data on effectiveness of current provision so as to be able to measure growth.**
- **Establish BENCHMARKS against which to assess the effectiveness of future provision.**

In addition, the CBA would welcome the opportunity to make an oral presentation to the inquiry.

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