

Research briefing: Educational attainment and progress of primary school aged blind and partially sighted pupils in England

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Introduction

In 2010 RNIB commissioned Statsconsultancy Ltd to carry out detailed analysis of government statistics relating to the educational progress and performance of blind and partially sighted pupils of primary school age in England.

A previous research study for RNIB into the educational attainment of older pupils had found that the attainment gap between blind and partially sighted pupils and those with no special educational needs (SEN) appeared to be present from an early stage in their education, before they started secondary school (Chanfreau and Cebulla, 2010).

This second study was carried out to find out whether the attainment gap is present when children first start school, whether it remains the same, increases or decreases with age, and the effect of other factors such as having another SEN, gender, ethnicity and social disadvantage. This research briefing gives a summary of the main findings.

Method

Data from the National Pupil Datasets provided by the Department for Education (DfE) was analysed. The data related to all pupils in maintained, mainstream schools in England who completed the reception year, years 2, 6 and 9 during the school year in 2008/09. Pupils with SEN included only those with a statement or at School Action Plus.

Pupils were divided into the following groups:

1. "No SEN" – pupils with no recorded SEN, and pupils at School Action
2. "All VI" – all pupils with a visual impairment
3. "VI only" – pupils with a visual impairment as their only SEN
4. "VI plus SEN" – pupils with VI plus an additional SEN
5. "All other SEN" – all pupils with an SEN (excluding VI)
6. "Other SEN only" – pupils with a single SEN (excluding VI)
7. "Other plus additional SEN" – pupils with two recorded SEN (excluding VI).

Key messages from the research

- Overall, around half (50 per cent) of pupils with a visual impairment had an additional SEN.
- Pupils with visual impairment were more likely than pupils in the “no SEN” group (which included those at School Action) but less likely than pupils in the “all other SEN” group to experience social disadvantage. For example, for Year 2 pupils:
 - 27 per cent of pupils with visual impairment were entitled to free school meals compared with 31 per cent in the “all other SEN” group and 16 per cent with “no SEN”
 - 27 per cent of pupils with visual impairment, 28 per cent in the “all other SEN” group and 19 per cent with “no SEN” lived in the bottom fifth most deprived area in the country.
- There was a higher proportion of male than female pupils with visual impairment:
 - 57 per cent of reception year, 59 per cent in Year 2 and 61 per cent of Year 6 pupils with a visual impairment were male.
- As had been found for the secondary school aged pupils, for younger pupils with a visual impairment there also appears to be a large difference in educational outcome between those with and those without an additional SEN. At all ages, pupils with “VI only” did better than pupils with “VI plus SEN”. Although pupils in the “no SEN” group did best, the gap between these pupils and pupils with a visual impairment was reduced when additional SEN was taken into account. For example, the proportions of pupils achieving the target level in English were:
 - at the end of reception year: 54 per cent with “no SEN”, 23 per cent of “all VI”, 34 per cent with “VI only”, 7 per cent with “VI plus SEN” and 12.5 per cent “all other SEN”
 - at the end of Year 2: 84 per cent with “no SEN”, 47 per cent of “all VI”, 68 per cent with “VI only”, 21 per cent “VI plus SEN” and 30 per cent “all other SEN”
 - at the end of Year 6: 87 per cent “no SEN”, 48 per cent “all VI”, 72 per cent “VI only”, 25 per cent “VI plus SEN” and 30 per cent “all other SEN”.
- More detailed analysis found:
 - When pupils with a single SEN were compared, the “VI only” pupils achieved significantly better results and made better progress than the “other SEN only” group
 - The “VI only” pupils performed significantly worse, and made less progress, than the “no SEN/School Action” group
- For all pupils, having an additional SEN had a negative effect on attainment but this was particularly evident for the “VI plus SEN” pupils:
 - while pupils with “VI only” had lower attainment scores than pupils with “no SEN/School Action” the gap was far larger for pupils with “VI plus SEN”
 - while pupils with “VI only” did significantly better than the “other SEN only” pupils, there was little or no difference in performance between the “VI plus SEN” and “other plus additional SEN” pupils.

- These effects were still significant when other factors such as social disadvantage and ethnicity were taken into account.

In summary

- By analysing some of the national government statistics on primary aged pupils in England we have added to our understanding of some of the factors that affect the educational attainment of blind and partially sighted children and young people.
- Primary aged pupils with a visual impairment are more likely than pupils with no recorded special educational needs (including those who are supported at School Action) to experience social disadvantage.
- While pupils with a visual impairment have higher attainment and make better progress than other SEN groups, they have lower attainment scores at the end of reception when compared with pupils with no recorded SEN/at School Action and this gap appears to increase with each key stage.
- As had been found with older pupils, for pupils with visual impairment the most important factor is whether or not a pupil has another SEN in addition to a visual impairment. Pupils with a visual impairment as their single SEN do much better than pupils with a second SEN.
- Having another SEN has an even greater negative effect on pupils with visual impairment than pupils with other types of SEN.

To download the full research report visit:

rnib.org.uk/aboutus/Research/reports/sightloss/education/Pages/education.aspx

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