

Education Studies Essay Sample

A Critique of the "Support and aspiration: A new approach to special educational needs and disability" policy.

This essay forms a critique of a recent consultation (DFE, 2011) aiming to refocus the current approach towards special educational needs and disability. As this is a large consultation, this essay primarily focuses on the section regarding early identification and support which, taken within the context of the consultation as a whole, is discussed from a social justice perspective. Judgements are then made regarding difficulties of implementation and issues surrounding what is known as the "implementation gap" (Trowler et al., 2003) in research but at ground level can feel like the difference between "text-book fantasy and real life" (Weidner, 2004 p. 49).

One of the primary aims of the consultation is to reduce the burden of assessment and bureaucracy as it frustrates parents and potentially wastes public funds. The example of unacceptable levels given is that "on average a disabled child experiences 32 assessments as they grow up" (DFE, 2011 p. 2), of which much information is found to be overlapping. In an effort to improve the situation, the consultation recommends a single assessment which creates an action plan through the learning career and into life-long education. However, this is slightly at odds with the SEN code of practice which calls for a "graduated approach" where further assessments are undertaken on an ad-hoc basis (DFES, 2001 p. 203). In practice, this requires some form of internal or diagnostic assessment (identifying the issue) before referral is made to a specialist. With developmental or PMLD barriers to learning, it soon becomes clear how such a large number of assessments can occur for these students. The new proposal for a single action plan has the potential to remove a lot of repetition and create a smoother flow of information which can be used to quickly meet changing needs.

Education Studies Essay Sample

However, relying on one document with multi-agency input has the potential for chaos if those agencies are inefficient. A delay from the LEA may, for example, delay critical payments of social benefit which would previously have been awarded independently. By seeking input by so many stakeholders, the potential for inaction and passing of blame between different parties risks decisions moving at the speed of the slowest ship, with each agency refusing to make a decision until the others have. In this case, it is worth remembering that policy changes rely upon implementation which can be strongly affected by culture - Darling-Hammond phrases this neatly by arguing that “policy is not so much implemented as it is re-invented at each level of the system” (2005 p. 362). With this in mind, the proposed policy may be more effective if the action plan were enforceable across multiple stakeholders but did not necessarily require all their input so that the decision to provide support was made independently of budget constraints.

This idea is also relevant for another key issue in the policy, the misuse of funds so that money which should be ring-fenced for specific use is wasted on bureaucracy. A single assessment is not only more cost-effective in terms of the number of assessors, but can also form a budget to keep in check deliverables for each individual so that vague wording is not used as a means of hiding where money is spent.

Both of these issues, the excessive assessment and inefficient use of funds, are significant factors in the need for effective early assessment. By getting the right support at the right time, future inefficiency can be circumvented (DFE, 2011) and barriers to learning removed so that learning needs are met throughout the child’s learning career rather than the current frustration of everything being on hold until the SEN statement is produced and the feeling of “mile long” waiting lists before any action is taken (Weidner, 2004 p. 51). In delivering early identification, however, the agencies and government must be willing to back up their targets - there is little point forcing through an efficient action plan if the action will not be taken

Education Studies Essay Sample

until a budget is approved. Westwood (2007) identifies increases in the identification and presence of special educational needs in recent years, for a variety of possible reasons, which can make it difficult for services to cope. Without the delays of assessment and bureaucracy, many IEPs or the newly proposed EHCP may be impossible to satisfy. Early identification would not be the cause of these problems, but could rapidly reveal flaws in the system and risk shifting blame onto teachers and caregivers if adequate support is not put in place. Beyond the policy goals, the stated vision of ensuring that “high quality early education and childcare is accessible to all children” (DFE, 2011 p. 16) requires more than lip-service. For this to work in practice, significant improvements will have to be put in place to make sure the higher number of SEN pupils receive quality support which may contradict current austerity policies. The pressure to diagnose early may also have the potential for misdiagnosis and burdening providers with ticking boxes throughout the learning career of a learner who is developing at or even above expected rates, particularly in social settings where there is intense parental pressure to label a child as having a syndrome or condition (Osmond, 1995).

It must be remembered that the vast majority of stakeholders are in vocations. They have no vested interest in over or under diagnosing or in delaying appropriate support. Where, then, do these bureaucratic delays and waiting lists come from if government policy is aimed at efficiency? Certainly budget constraints will be a perennial concern, but there may also be a risk of lower expectations and a lack of urgency for learners with SEN (Vincent et al., 1995) where their progress in a timely manner is not a priority. Having a long-term plan, rather than regularly renewed and replaced IEPs, may help to change this idea and could prove to be a great bonus of the proposed policy - the aim of being an independent adult in a timely manner is held firm in the sights.

Education Studies Essay Sample

In conclusion, the policy has many positive ideas and represents a more co-ordinated approach towards meeting the specific needs of learners in and beyond their school career. Where it can be more readily criticised, however, is in the constant assumption that efficiency can be gained and waste cut by creating policy. No caregivers will deliberately seek to be wasteful and it is unreasonable to assume that such “steering at a distance” policy change strategies can be effective without more fundamental change and analysis of existing practices (Ball, 1997 p. 257). Early identification has been rightly identified as an area for priority, but it will be of limited effectiveness as a policy if it is not implemented with a renewed sense of engagement and devotion for delivering real change and increased aspirations for learners with special educational needs.

Education Studies Essay Sample

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