



Accessibility Plans as Effective Tools for Inclusion in Schools: Are They Working?

A Project Report for 'Disability Research on Independent Living and Learning (DRILL)' – September 2019

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on behalf of
The Alliance for Inclusive Education
(ALLFIE)



Dedication

This report is dedicated to all the Disabled young participants who confront disabling barriers in the education system every single day, yet are determined to fight for their rights to be included in the mainstream along with their peers, and to put an end to segregation.

Acknowledgements

On behalf of the Alliance for Inclusive Education (ALLFIE), I would like to express gratitude to Disability Research on Independent Living and Learning (DRILL) for funding this project. On a personal level I would like to thank ALLFIE for giving me the opportunity to research and manage a project that has always been so close to my heart. I thank ALLFIE staff and trustees for supporting me during the project. I am grateful to the members of the Project Advisory Group, who came together monthly on a voluntary basis: Michelle Daley, Interim Director of ALLFIE; Tara Flood, Director of ALLFIE; Dr. Miro Griffiths, Academic Advisor; Dr. Navin Kikabhai, Academic Advisor and ALLFIE Chairperson; and Tanya Smith, Parent Advisor. Their invaluable contributions, advice and guidance have been vital to the project and very helpful indeed on a personal level. I appreciate all the assistance I have received from my team of competent and dedicated support workers. My thanks extend to David Wheatley, for all his support and encouragement throughout. Last but by no means least, I would like to express my appreciation to all the individual Disabled young people, parents and education professionals who gave up their time to participate in this project. Without your insightful contributions I could not have written this report and for that I am deeply indebted to you.

About the Author

I acquired my impairments when I was 13 years old. I lived in a country in which it was unheard of for Disabled people to live independently. Accessing mainstream education was a near impossibility for me. After an initial attempt to attend a disabling mainstream school, which was ultimately unsuccessful, my loving parents were left with no choice but to educate me at home. This early and formative experience of social exclusion left deep scars. I was cut off from my friends and peers and I experienced isolation, which had a significant impact on my mental health and emotional wellbeing.

I travelled to the UK in 1996 where I attended a 'College for the Blind.' The segregated environment I found here was socially damaging and helped very little with my attempts to be included with the outside world. I progressed into higher education within a mainstream university, and later carried out an MA and a PhD in Disability Studies in a more inclusive institution. My PhD research was in the field of inclusive education and examined a group of Disabled students' access and participation in higher education.

Traditionally led by non-disabled academics, social science research has historically alienated Disabled people's experiences, defining 'disability' as an individual or welfare problem. I have been recruited by the Alliance for Inclusive Education (ALLFIE) to lead this research project into the effectiveness of Accessibility Plans in English secondary schools, exploring various barriers affecting the educational journeys of Disabled young people. ALLFIE is a Disabled People's Organisation (DPO), led and controlled by Disabled people, campaigning to remove barriers in Disabled people's participation in mainstream education. As a DPO we have meaningfully adopted the 'Nothing About Us Without Us' approach throughout this project.

Further, as a Disabled researcher, conducting politically committed research, I have firmly located the current project within the social model of Disability, presenting an alternative to mainstream analysis with a view to empowering Disabled participants. In this report I have documented the collective experiences of Disabled young people, and parent participants, of disabling barriers in the current educational system.

Having personally experienced home education, as well as special and mainstream education, I am acutely aware of how crucial it is for Disabled young people to be included in mainstream settings and not left behind by the system. My aim in carrying out this project has been to make a far-reaching positive change, so that Disabled young people may have entirely different and more positive experiences, and can be fully included in their school communities alongside their friends and non-disabled peers.

Armineh Soorenian, October 2019.

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List of Abbreviations

Alliance for Inclusive Education (ALLFIE)
Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
British Educational Research Association (BERA)
British Sign Language (BSL)
Children and Families Act (CFA)
Disability Discrimination Act (DDA)
Disability Research on Independent Living and Learning (DRILL)
Disabled People's Organisation (DPO)
Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP)
Equality Act (EA)
Freedom of Information (FOI)
General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)
General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE)
Local Authorities (LAs)
Local Education Authorities (LEAs)
National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC)
Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED)
Physical Education (PE)
Project Advisory Group (PAG)
Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB)
Special Educational Needs (SEN)
Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND)
Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDa)
Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO)
United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)

Glossary of Terms

The medical model

Historically, disability has been seen as a problem to be tackled by medical professionals – by curing the person’s impairment. Disability lies with the individual and the individual must be changed.

The social model

In the 1980s, the Disabled people’s movement developed a different view: the social model. Society currently does not consider the needs of Disabled people, and this is what disables them, not their impairment.

Impairment

In social model terms, impairment is defined as a condition or diagnosis a person has, such as a physical or sensory impairment, learning difficulty, a form of neurodiversity or mental health issues.

Disability

In the social model context, Disability lies not with the individual but with society. What disables people are the barriers that society creates for people with impairments. Society must change to accommodate Disabled people’s requirements.

Disabled People’s Organisation (DPO)

A DPO is an organisation which is run and controlled by Disabled people. Traditionally many disability organisations have not been run by Disabled people but by non-disabled people on behalf of Disabled people. We feel that organisations run by Disabled people are in a better position to understand Disabled people’s lived experience and to speak for them. They are an important voice which needs to be heard.

ALLFIE is a DPO.

Introduction

Background

The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995 as amended by the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA) 2001 set out the requirement for all the schools and education authorities in Britain to have a legal obligation to increase accessibility for Disabled pupils and students (DfES, 2002). Since September 2002 schools have been required to produce Accessibility Plans for their individual settings, and Local Education Authorities (LEAs) are under a duty to prepare accessibility strategies covering the maintained schools in their area. The Equality Act (EA) 2010 and Children and Families Act (CFA) 2014, replicated and reinforced this duty by making it compulsory for all education and training providers to develop and publish Accessibility Plans, outlining how they intend to make their settings more accessible over time. Further, education and training providers have a duty to demonstrate how they engage with Disabled pupils and students, and their families, to make the whole learning experience accessible and inclusive (DfE, 2015b). Accessibility Plans should focus on improved physical access to learning environments and on the development of a fully accessible curriculum. Therefore, an effective plan will address not only physical barriers, but also potential obstacles created by the institutional structures, teaching, learning, and assessment practices of a school.

Specifically, schools and LEAs are required to have strategies in place to enable the following:

- Increased access for Disabled pupils and students to the school curriculum – this covers teaching, learning, assessment and the wider curriculum such as participation in after-school clubs, leisure and cultural activities, and school visits;
- Improved access to the physical environment – this covers improvements to the built environment of the school and physical aids to access education; and
- Improved delivery of written information to Disabled learners – written information (e.g. handouts and timetables) should take account of the access needs and preferred formats of pupils, students and parents, and should be made available within a reasonable timeframe (DfES, 2002).

Scope and aims of the project

The specific focus of this research project is Accessibility Plans put in place by secondary schools, as required by the EA (2010), the CFA (2014) and the school reporting requirements of Section 6:79 of the SEND Code of Practice: 0 to 25 years (January 2015). The researcher held focus groups across five regions of England to assess how effectively Accessibility Plans have worked in practice for participants. The focus groups were made up of Disabled young people, parents of Disabled young people, and education professionals. The researcher took participants' experiences and evaluated these against national and international legal requirements and recommendations, specifically the four key articles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006) (Articles 5, 7, 9, and 24). Later chapters discuss findings and insights from the project and outline recommendations to inform practice and policy.

Why this research matters to ALLFIE and the Disability community

The Alliance for Inclusive Education (ALLFIE) believe that, when used effectively, Accessibility Plans can be a driver for positive change. For ALLFIE, as a national organisation explicitly concerned with Disabled pupils and students' rights to inclusive education, this work has been particularly significant. ALLFIE campaign for the right of all Disabled pupils and students to be included in mainstream education, and for an end to segregation. Opportunities to learn in such detail about the education barriers parents and Disabled young people experience on a daily basis allow us to strengthen our advocacy and campaigning work and to engage in positive dialogue for change with policy-makers and education providers. By disseminating the findings and recommendations of this project widely, we not only plan to raise awareness about current disabling school practices but also to fuel action for change. ALLFIE hope this research will re-energise current national debates around inclusive education and how to make the curriculum and physical environment more accessible within the English education and training system. Better understanding in this area will also help to enable Disabled learners and their families to challenge inadequate Accessibility Plans.

Reflections

Throughout this project, the researcher and advisory group made key decisions, and reflected on lessons learned, through a deliberative, ongoing and iterative process of self-monitoring. Through monthly meetings the group assessed and reflected on situations and issues that arose and kept a detailed log of lessons learned. The log was updated as the project evolved, with a view to benefitting future research projects and ALLFIE's wider work.

Key issues

This project has identified significant gaps in the current delivery of Accessibility Plans in English education settings, when compared with the requirements of national and international law.

The issues identified include:

- Notwithstanding regional differences, it appeared that schools attended by Disabled young participants had made little effort to publicise Accessibility Plans.
- Disabled young participants with an ongoing need to receive information in alternative formats felt that such provision was not standard practice in their schools.
- Lack of disability support within mainstream schools was a great concern for parents, and brought about dilemmas concerning their children's educational, social and emotional needs.
- When advocating for their children with regard to the removal of access barriers, parents were met with staff non-compliance and inflexible attitudes.
- Disabled young participants reported that support received in relation to exams was unpredictable and inconsistent.
- Disabled young people encountered social barriers when trying to feel included in the social community of their school.

Outline of the report

The following section documents and reviews legislation and some of the literature in the field. The section after that discusses the methods used in the project. Chapter One focuses on participants' views on, and awareness of, Accessibility Plans, as well as discussing the visibility and strengths of the plans. Chapter Two concentrates on access to information, taking account of any challenges participants have experienced. Chapter Three discusses schools' admissions processes. Chapter Four considers physical access barriers. Chapter Five highlights different teaching, learning and assessment practices and difficulties faced by participants. Chapter Six explores Disabled young people's social inclusion in their school community. Chapter Seven, the final section, summarises the project's findings and offers insights to help inform local, regional and national decision-makers. The recommendations in Chapter Seven aim to promote positive change within the current model of accessibility planning, in support of Disabled young people and their access to an inclusive learning experience.

Legislation: The Status Quo

Research questions

Schools are required to produce written Accessibility Plans for their individual settings, and Local Education Authorities (LEAs), which existed until 2010, were under a duty to prepare accessibility strategies covering the maintained schools in their area (DfES, 2002). An Accessibility Plan is a plan that sets out how, over time, the school is going to:

- Increase access to the curriculum for Disabled pupils;
- Improve the physical environment of the school to increase access for Disabled pupils; and
- Make written information more accessible to Disabled pupils by providing information in a range of different ways.

The nature and content of Accessibility Plans depend on the size of a school and the resources available to it (*ibid*). As part of their inspections, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED) monitor LEAs' accessibility strategies and schools' Accessibility Plans (*ibid*, 3). LEAs were, and schools are, required to make their plans publicly available as follows:

- Maintained schools have a duty to publish information about their Accessibility Plans in their governors' annual report to parents;
- Non-maintained special schools are required to reproduce their Accessibility Plans in their annual prospectus;
- Independent schools have to make their Accessibility Plans available to interested parties on request in a reasonable timeframe;
- LEAs were required to make their accessibility strategies available for inspection to interested parties in a reasonable timeframe (*ibid*). LEAs were abolished under The Local Education Authorities and Children's Services Authorities (Integration of Functions) Order 2010, with responsibilities transferring to local authorities (LAs).

Accessibility Plans cover a three-year period. The first plans had to be published in 2003. New plans are due again in April 2021. Plans must be reviewed and revised as necessary. The duty to have Accessibility Plans in place does not require a separate planning process. Even though Accessibility Plans can be published as standalone documents and must be published on a school's website, they can be published as part of another document. For example, they can be dovetailed into school equality schemes or school development or improvement plans, e.g. by including a new section on access planning within the special educational needs (SEN) report (DfES, 2002).

In 2014, the Children's Commissioner for Wales reported that not every school in Wales had produced an Accessibility Plan, as was their statutory duty. The researchers corroborated their findings by sending out Freedom of Information (FOI) requests. Where school Accessibility Plans were in place, families generally felt that they were not implemented or not regularly reviewed (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2014: 9).

During the course of the current project, the researcher learned, also via FOI requests, that not all LAs in England had information on the number of schools in their area that had Accessibility Plans in place. Of the 127 LAs in England that responded, almost two thirds did not hold this information, as there was no requirement for them to do so. LAs were also asked for a copy of their accessibility strategy. Not all of the 152 LAs who were contacted responded. Only 127 (79%) responded; 86 (55%) confirmed that they had an accessibility strategy, whereas nine (6%) suggested it was in development and would be published at a later date. Twenty-three (15%) did not hold the information and nine (6%) did not answer the question. Further information is available in the Appendix.

The Children and Families Act (CFA) 2014 is considered to have amended the SEN framework and brought in responsibilities for LAs to secure special educational provision for Disabled children and young people as well as those diagnosed with 'SEN' (Stobbs and CDC, 2015).

In particular, the CFA expects LAs to take into consideration the key principles set out in Section 19, including the importance of taking into account the views, wishes and feelings of children and young people and their parents; their full participation in decision-making; information and support to enable them to participate in decision-making; and support to achieve the best possible educational and other outcomes.

The CFA expects the appropriate authority to designate a member of staff at each school as having responsibility for the provision of support for pupils labelled as having 'SEN.' The staff member is to be known as the 'Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator' (SENCO) and must have prescribed qualifications or experience, or both.

The CFA further stipulates that schools can anticipate the need to co-operate with the LA as part of its duty to co-operate with local partners (CFA, 2014, Section 31:198). Specifically, schools can anticipate the need to co-operate with the LA in identifying Disabled children and young people, and in ensuring that Disabled children, their parents and Disabled young people know about the information and support available locally and know about the range of services available to them through the local offer. Schools can also anticipate that they will be expected to co-operate with the LA in meeting high standards of participation, and have respect for the views, wishes and feelings of Disabled children and their parents in securing the best possible educational and other outcomes (CFA, 2014).

On 1 September 2014 transitional arrangements came into force to facilitate the changeover from the statement system to the Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) system in a phased manner. The legal test of when a child or young person requires an EHC plan was said to remain the same as that for a statement under the Education Act (1996): 'Therefore, it is expected that all those who have a statement, and who would have continued to have one under the current system, will be transferred to an EHC plan – no one should lose their statement and not have it replaced with an EHC plan simply because the system is changing.' (DfE, 2015b: 15). Headline figures on EHC plans and SEN statements are available in the Appendix, using data from the Department for Education.

The Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Code of Practice: 0 to 25 years, published in 2015, provides further statutory guidance on duties, policies and procedures relating to Part 3 of the CFA 2014. It also includes associated regulations for organisations in England that support children and young people diagnosed as having 'SEND.'

Of specific relevance to this research are some of the legal obligations that schools and post-16 institutions have towards Disabled children and young people under the Equality Act (EA) 2010, also outlined in the Code of Practice (DfE, 2015b). They are noted here and some will be examined closely in the final chapter of the report:

- They **must not** directly or indirectly discriminate against, harass or victimise Disabled children and young people.
- They **must not** discriminate for a reason arising in consequence of a child or young person's disability.
- They **must** make reasonable adjustments, including the provision of auxiliary aids and services, to ensure that Disabled children and young people are not at a substantial disadvantage compared with their peers. This duty is anticipatory – it requires thought to be given in advance to what Disabled children and young people might require and what adjustments might need to be made to prevent that disadvantage.

Public bodies, including further education institutions, local authorities, maintained schools, maintained nursery schools, academies and free schools are covered by the Public Sector Equality Duty and, when carrying out their functions, must have regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, promote equality of opportunity and foster good relations between Disabled and non-disabled children and young people.

The duties cover discrimination in the provision of services and the provision of education, including admissions and exclusions. All providers must make reasonable adjustments to procedures, criteria and practices by the provision of auxiliary aids and services. Most providers must also make reasonable adjustments by making physical alterations. Schools and local authority education functions are not covered by this last duty, but they must publish Accessibility Plans (and for local authorities, accessibility strategies) setting out how they plan to increase access for Disabled pupils to the curriculum, to the physical environment and to information.

School governing bodies and proprietors must also publish information about the arrangements for the admission of Disabled children, the steps taken to prevent Disabled children being treated less favourably than others, the facilities provided to assist access for Disabled children, and their Accessibility Plans.

The guidance related to teaching, learning and assessment relevant to the current report includes the following:

‘The quality of teaching for pupils with SEN, and the progress made by pupils, should be a core part of the school’s performance management arrangements and its approach to professional development for all teaching and support staff ...’

‘All pupils should have access to a broad and balanced curriculum. The National Curriculum Inclusion Statement states that teachers should set high expectations for every pupil, whatever their prior attainment. Teachers should use appropriate assessment to set targets which are deliberately ambitious. Potential areas of difficulty should be identified and addressed at the outset. Lessons should be planned to address potential areas of difficulty and to remove barriers to pupil achievement ...’

‘Class and subject teachers, supported by the senior leadership team, should make regular assessments of progress for all pupils. These should seek to identify pupils making less than expected progress given their age and individual circumstances. This can be characterised by progress which:

... can include progress in areas other than attainment – for instance where a pupil needs to make additional progress with wider development or social needs in order to make a successful transition to adult life.’

‘All those who work with children and young people should be alert to emerging difficulties and respond early. In particular, parents know their children best and it is important that all professionals listen and understand when parents express concerns about their child’s development. They should also listen to and address any concerns raised by children and young people themselves.’ (DfE, 2015b).

On an international level, the United Nations Convention on The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) provides a recognised standard for Disabled people’s human rights. Governments that sign up to and ratify the UNCRPD must work to this standard, which safeguards the human rights of all Disabled people. The UNCRPD includes Article 5 – Equality and non-discrimination, which guarantees:

1. States Parties recognise that all persons are equal before and under the law and are entitled without any discrimination to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law.
2. States Parties shall prohibit all discrimination on the basis of disability and guarantee to persons with disabilities equal and effective legal protection against discrimination on all grounds.
3. In order to promote equality and eliminate discrimination, States Parties shall take all appropriate steps to ensure that reasonable accommodation is provided.
4. Specific measures which are necessary to accelerate or achieve de facto equality of persons with disabilities shall not be considered discrimination under the terms of the present Convention.

The UNCRPD also includes Article 7 – Children with disabilities, which guarantees:

1. Parties shall take all necessary measures to ensure the full enjoyment by children with disabilities of all human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal basis with other children.
2. In all actions concerning children with disabilities, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.
3. Parties shall ensure that children with disabilities have the right to express their views freely on all matters affecting them, their views being given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity, on an equal basis with other children, and to be provided with disability and age-appropriate assistance to realise that right.

The UNCRPD includes Article 9 – Accessibility, which guarantees to enable persons with disabilities the opportunity to live independently and participate fully in all aspects of life:

States Parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure persons with disabilities have access, on an equal basis with others, to the physical environment, to transportation, to information and communications, including information and communications technologies and systems, and to other facilities and services open or provided to the public, both in urban and in rural areas.

Also included in the UNCRPD is Article 24, which guarantees all Disabled pupils and students a right to participate in all forms of mainstream education with appropriate support. When the United Kingdom government signed the UNCRPD in March 2007, and subsequently ratified it in June 2009, it placed two restrictions on its obligations in relation to Article 24.

The first changed the UK's definition of a 'general education system' to include segregated education: 'The United Kingdom Government is committed to continuing to develop an inclusive system where parents of disabled children have increasing access to mainstream schools and staff, which have the capacity to meet the needs of disabled children. The General Education System in the United Kingdom includes mainstream, and special schools, which the UK Government understands is allowed under the Convention.' (Interpretative Declaration on Education – Convention Article 24 Clause 2 (a) and (b), 2007).

The second reserves the UK's right to send Disabled children to special schools outside their local area: 'The United Kingdom reserves the right for disabled children to be educated outside their local community where more appropriate education provision is available elsewhere. Nevertheless, parents of disabled children have the same opportunity as other parents to state a preference for the school at which they wish their child to be educated.' (Reservation: Education – Convention Article 24 Clause 2 (a) and 2 (b), 2007).

In August 2016, the UN Disability Committee published a General Comment on Article 24 setting out how governments can move towards greater inclusion. The UK does not appear to have engaged with this process and remains out of step internationally (UNCRPD, 2016).

The UK government's reservations and interpretation clearly contradict the reading of the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities so far as Article 24 of the UNCRPD is concerned. The Committee's General Comment number 4, asserts at Section 2 (8), that Article 24, paragraph 1 of the UNCRPD

requires that 'States parties must ensure the realization of the right of persons with disabilities to education through an inclusive education system at all levels, including pre-schools, primary, secondary and tertiary education, vocational training and lifelong learning, extracurricular and social activities, and for all students, including persons with disabilities, without discrimination and on equal terms with others.'

Further to this at Section 9 (9), the Committee's General Comment number 4 asserts that 'The right to inclusive education encompasses a transformation in culture, policy and practice in all formal and informal educational environments to accommodate the differing requirements and identities of individual students, together with a commitment to remove the barriers that impede that possibility. It involves strengthening the capacity of the education system to reach out to all learners. It focuses on the full and effective participation, accessibility, attendance and achievement of all students, especially those who, for different reasons, are excluded or at risk of being marginalized.'

In October 2017, the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities scrutinised the UK government's implementation of the UNCRPD. They have now published their Concluding Observations, which highlight the UK's failings across all convention articles, including Article 24. The UN committee chair Theresia Degener pointed out: 'You [the UK] believe that the right to education entails a choice between mainstream and special education ... [but] article 24 is not about choice. It is about the right to inclusive education' (UNCRPD, 2017). The UK Government's Office for Disability Issues rejected this, refuted all the findings of the report and claimed that the report did not reflect the true situation for Disabled people in the UK (ODI, 2018). To date, no actions have been taken as a result of the UN Disability Committee's findings, meaning that the infringement of the human rights of Disabled people is still ongoing in the UK.

That said, the SEND Code of Practice: 0 to 25 (DfE, 2015b) claims that 'as part of its commitments under Articles 7 and 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the UK Government is committed to inclusive education of disabled children and young people and the progressive removal of barriers to learning and participation in mainstream education.' The document states: 'The Children and Families Act 2014 secures the general presumption in law of mainstream education in relation to decisions about where children and young people with SEN should be educated and the Equality Act 2010 provides protection from discrimination for disabled people.'

The discussion section in Chapter Seven of this report will revisit and engage with the pieces of legislation outlined above.

Research questions

The main question this research sought to address was whether participants felt that Accessibility Plans were effective in driving inclusive education. To explore the matter fully, the researcher asked participants for their views, not only on Accessibility Plans, i.e. whether participants were familiar with, or involved in, developing their school's plans – and how easy it was to access them – but also on various school practices.

The methods used for data collection were focus groups, interviews and online questionnaires, and discussion topics were based on the three areas that Accessibility Plans are required to focus on, namely information delivery, physical access and curriculum. By way of example, participants were asked whether their schools provided information in their preferred format and in a timely manner. They were also invited to discuss any barriers they had encountered in the physical environment of their school and when using physical aids to access education. Further enquiry centred around learning, teaching and assessment practices, and included questions such as 'Are your or your child's needs considered in the design, structure and flexibility of teaching methods and delivery?' The project also explored Disabled young people's social participation at school, and questions in this area included, for example, 'How included do you or your child feel in the school community?' Participants were encouraged to think about any recommendations they might have which would improve both Accessibility Plans and school practices generally.

Data collection and analysis

To recruit participants for the focus groups and interviews the researcher employed a snowballing method, using the Alliance for Inclusive Education (ALLFIE)'s existing contacts and applying networking and chain referral techniques (Blaikie, 2009; Morgan, 2008); the researcher also approached regional 'Parent Carer Forums.' Data were collected between October 2018 and March 2019.

As a strategy for collective data generation, 12 focus groups were carried out in seven cities across five regions of England (the North East, South East, Midlands, North West and South West). Wherever possible, separate groups were held for each of the following participant categories: Disabled young people, parents of Disabled young people, and education professionals. Group size ranged from three to 14 participants. The first focus group acted as a pilot study and

participants' views were sought on the relevance of the topics and questions. In one of the parent focus groups, an advocate was present to help with translation; her extensive experience supporting parents and their Disabled children was indispensable, as was her knowledge of relevant cultural, linguistic and religious issues. With their consent, the researcher also included in the project experiences shared via email by a number of additional parents and professionals.

The interviews conducted by the researcher consisted of five in-depth semi-structured dialogues and were underpinned by voluntary responses. This method of data collection was used alongside the focus groups to enhance the investigative, exploratory aspects of the study. In the interviews, parents of Disabled young people were invited to share their own stories, as well as those of their children, on a range of school related topics.

All focus groups and interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and anonymised. The researcher applied pseudonyms for all identifiable features to ensure anonymity. To safeguard against contrivance or misinterpretation of participants' accounts, participants were asked to read through transcripts, and to make any amendments as they saw fit. The researcher then reviewed the validated transcripts and manually coded them according to theme; themes were derived from field literature and current legislation. Once the data were organised into the various categories, they were cross-checked for accuracy. The analysis of the data involved a process of ongoing comparison between the five regions and the three participant groups to uncover emergent patterns.

In addition to the focus groups and interviews, two sets of digital questionnaires were produced and publicised on relevant online platforms. Over a three-month period, targeted groups of parents and professionals were encouraged to complete a questionnaire, choosing the survey most appropriate for their circumstances. Questionnaires could be part-completed and saved for a later date if desired, and questions were listed in order of priority. Even in cases where a respondent did not complete the entire questionnaire, the researcher was able to access responses to the most important questions. Of the 237 parents and 96 professionals who responded, one third completed the whole survey. Answers were organised into the same themes, and analysed in the same way, as in the field study.

Alongside the primary qualitative approach, the researcher also used various sources of quantitative data, including the statistical analysis of responses to Freedom of Information requests provided by local authorities (LAs) across England relating to Accessibility Plans. Percentages were created to demonstrate the engagement levels of LAs in relation to Accessibility Plans and wider accessibility strategies.

Reflections and co-production

To ensure co-production, this project was led by a Disabled researcher, speaking directly with Disabled young people and their families. The project was conducted on behalf of ALLFIE, a well-established Disabled People's Organisation (DPO) in the field of inclusive education. Disabled people are optimally placed to design, develop and produce Disability research with a commitment to improving Disabled people's life opportunities (Oliver & Barnes, 1997). Disabled participants were involved in the various stages of data collection and validation, and where possible, all participants were given the opportunity to lead discussion. Throughout the study, a Project Advisory Group (PAG) met monthly to make collective decisions about the direction of the research and to advise and support the researcher. In addition to the project researcher, the PAG included a parent of a Disabled young person, the ALLFIE director, a Disabled academic, and a researcher in the field of inclusive education.

The researcher's personal experience of 'Disability,' and of attending school as a Disabled young person, helped create a safe space in which participants felt comfortable to share detailed and personal accounts of their experiences. This aspect of co-production contributed greatly to the richness and quality of the work. During the course of the study, Disabled young participants would often thank the researcher for providing a platform through which their voices could be heard. They also appreciated the empathy of a fellow Disabled person. For many of the parents, this was the first time they had come together with other parents of a Disabled child. The emancipatory approach of this project, and the commonality of 'Disability' experience amongst participants, benefitted both the participants and the research in equal measure.

Ethics

The researcher kept a robust risk log throughout the project and recorded new risks to discuss with the PAG. Therefore, all risks remained low impact; they were effectively mitigated, and valuable lessons learned. The key ethical issues centred around sensitivity towards individual needs, and around the access requirements of the Disabled young people, parents and education professionals. Every effort was made to make the focus groups as inclusive as possible and to meet participants' diverse needs. Each group was accommodated in an accessible 'safe space' to meet and share, and given refreshments and breaks. Participants' support workers were made welcome, and in one established group, parents brought their children which removed a barrier to participation. In response to feedback about obstacles preventing attendance in person, online questionnaires were developed, and online interviews conducted.

Prior to taking part in the research, participants were given an information pack in their preferred format, including large print and easy read versions. The pack outlined project details and practicalities, such as the fact that discussions would be audio-recorded. Participants were encouraged to read the information sheet and accompanying General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) policy before consenting to take part. Importantly, participants were reassured of confidentiality and that all data would be kept anonymous. Participants were asked to provide their continuing consent at various points during the project. The information sheet explained that participation in the project was entirely voluntary and participants were free to withdraw or remain silent at any point. It also outlined what would happen to their responses if they decided to withdraw part way through the study, and if they took part fully. They were informed that project findings would be disseminated through a range of channels, in a variety of accessible formats, to stimulate campaigns and legislative action. Disabled young people and parents were given gift vouchers as a thank you for their time. They were also offered reimbursement for their travel expenses.

The research design was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of the funding body, Disability Research on Independent Living and Learning (DRILL). The DRILL reference number for the project is 2C1\100031. The project has adhered to the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) Ethical Guidelines. It has also complied with the Ethical Guidance for Research with People with Disabilities, published in 2009 by the National Disability Authority of Ireland, as well as the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC, 2012) ethical guidelines on research with children. These ethical guidelines have been applied throughout the research process and beyond the life of the project.

1

CHAPTER ONE Accessibility Plans Awareness, Visibility and Strength

Key findings:

- Notwithstanding regional differences, it appeared that the schools attended by the Disabled young participants had made little effort to publicise Accessibility Plans.
- Whilst the Disabled young people and their parents were uninformed about Accessibility Plans, most of the professionals taking part in the focus groups had some level of awareness. However, this contrasted with the results of the online survey.
- Parents had great difficulty finding Accessibility Plans on school websites. Only professionals with direct involvement in the development or review of the plans knew how to access them, and even they acknowledged that the documents were not readily available.
- Whilst no Disabled young person or parent participant spoke of being involved in the development or review of Accessibility Plans, a number of participating professionals suggested there had been co-production; a number of other professionals present conceded that the quality and extent of co-production varied greatly depending on the culture of a school.
- Almost all of the participants agreed that Accessibility Plans were ineffective in driving inclusive education unless the content of the plans was firmly embedded in school practice. No parent participant had ever challenged a school or knew anyone who had used an Accessibility Plan to appeal against a school's disabling practices.
- Neither the Department for Education nor the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED) monitor the provision and application of Accessibility Plans.

The findings across the three groups

Awareness

In the field study, when Disabled young participants were asked if they had heard of Accessibility Plans, no one was able to answer positively. Certainly, no Disabled young person was involved in the development of a plan in their school, or consulted with during the process. Although the Disabled young people were interested in learning more about Accessibility Plans, their contribution was very limited when the subject was discussed.

Nearly all of the parents participating in the field study were unfamiliar with Accessibility Plans, and most stated that the first time they had heard of the documents was through the Alliance for Inclusive Education (ALLFIE)'s publicity for this project. Within the parent groups, Adam was not alone in articulating the following sentiment:

“ ‘I certainly didn't [know the plans existed]. The first I heard about it was probably the email that you sent which said, “Have you heard of the Accessibility Plan?” And I thought, “Oh, what's that?” I looked it up on the website and found it there.’ ”

Of 239 parents who responded to this question online, only 51 (21.3%) had ever heard of Accessibility Plans. Forty-two parents then answered the question of whether they had actually read a school's Accessibility Plan, and, of these, 22 (52.4%) answered 'Yes.'

The professionals taking part in the field study were generally more aware of the existence of Accessibility Plans, but their knowledge varied widely depending on their role. An Access Officer working in a north eastern city talked about her involvement:

“ ‘Accessibility Plans play quite a big part of my role ... We encourage our schools to update them annually now, and to produce an action plan as a result of the audit – so their audit will give them the action plan, as in what improvements they may need to make immediately, or in the future, or just to have in mind in case they get a child with a specific physical need, for instance. I can provide schools with a template for the accessibility audit, and I encourage them to do them.’ ”

By contrast, another professional, who was based in a north western city, made the following comment:

“ ‘When I first looked at what this project was about and I read “Accessibility Plans,” I thought, “Oh my goodness, I’m on a senior leadership team and I don’t think I know what this means ...”’ ”

Of the 96 professionals responding to this question online, only 35 (36.5%) said that they had heard of Accessibility Plans. The level and detail of their knowledge appeared to vary and was context specific, as evidenced by the following comment:

“ ‘I am a School Governor so very aware of the AP in this role. As an LA consultant on SEN provision I am aware my schools should have one but may not be familiar with individual settings.’ ”

Ease of access

Parents participating in the field study did not think that Accessibility Plans were easily or readily accessible, as expressed by a parent living in a north western city:

“ ‘It [the Accessibility Plan] is on their website, but it’s not easy to find. You have to dig around, and you have to really look for it, if that makes sense. It’s not just there. You really have to look for it ... I mean, I’m quite familiar with their website, because obviously all the parent platforms, you know, for the children’s reports, you access via their website – and it took me a good 30 to 40 minutes to find it.’ ”

In the online survey, of the 51 parents aware of the existence of Accessibility Plans, 29 (56.9%) reported that their school’s Accessibility Plan was easy to find. Around half of those parents had accessed the plan via their school’s website, whilst a number had received a copy from their school’s Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO), or along with a school prospectus. Of the 41 parents answering the question of whether Accessibility Plans were available in alternative formats, such as Braille, large print, audio or electronic, 12 (29.3%) stated that it was.

Professionals taking part in the focus groups thought that they would be able to find Accessibility Plans if only they knew what they were looking for, as indicated by Peter:

“ ‘Management do know exactly where to find it [the Accessibility Plan] and it will be on the staff shared drive, but I don’t think many staff would be able to access, would be able to read it fully, I don’t think.’ ”

Amongst the professionals, there seemed to be a general consensus that Accessibility Plans would be available to pupils and parents on request.

In the online survey, of the 30 professionals who responded to the relevant question, 18 (60%) stated that their school’s Accessibility Plan was easy to find. The majority had accessed the plan on their school’s website. Of the 29 respondents who answered the question regarding alternative formats, only four (13.8%) reported that alternative formats were available.

Working together

No parent from the field study said that they had been informed by their school about the availability of an Accessibility Plan, or that they had been involved in the development or review of the plan, or consulted during the process. One parent remarked:

“ ‘I don’t think the school would ever ask me ... because I have some very differing views to them, shall we just say, on what they should and shouldn’t be doing. I don’t actually think that there were any parents involved with it [the Accessibility Plan]. I know quite a lot of the parents with children with additional needs, and I don’t think any of them have been involved in it either.’ ”

It later transpired that it was not only individual parents who had not been involved in the development of Accessibility Plans; none of the national parent carer forums, in which focus groups had been held, had been consulted about the development of the plans either.

One particular parent, who had contacted the researcher from a region outside the remit of this study, had taken on the task of investigating the accessibility of local schools for her child. Consequently, she had become involved with a local government committee, on additional learning needs, and she soon became a lone parent voice. This parent commented:

“ ‘... but they think they’re being very far out there by having a parent on, but they don’t have any children [on the committee].’ ”

She did go on to explain, however, that the accessibility strategy subgroup had consulted a group of children, with a range of impairments, via interviews:

“ ‘... they had a really good spread and they just went in and out of these schools, talking to the children, and they’ve also run workshops in lots of schools and they’ve got some feedback on that as well. So, they did a reasonable job actually of engaging with children and parents and talking about the Accessibility Strategy. But it’s just taken forever.’ ”

Just six (2.5%) of the 239 parents responding online on this topic reported that they had been involved in the development of an Accessibility Plan. Of the 112 respondents who addressed the question of whether their children had been given opportunities to input into developing or updating their school’s Accessibility Plan, only eight (7.1%) said that they had.

In the focus groups, professionals were asked whether Disabled young people and their families were involved generally in the development or review of Accessibility Plans in their schools, and responses varied greatly. According to an outreach teacher, Olivia, in a north western city, it very much depended:

“ ‘In the inclusive schools, yes. In other schools, not. It’s just very different, depending on ... the culture of the school, I think.’ ”

Anne, another professional from the same region, described her school’s plans to set up an accessibility steering group, in which pupils would identify next steps by doing their own walk-arounds and taking responsibility for facilities available in classrooms.

Another teacher from the same city expressed a different viewpoint:

“ ‘... with regard to what input the pupils have had, I would say is probably very limited, in that we have one [Accessibility Plan], but I don’t think the children will have had that initial input into it ... I wasn’t involved in the Accessibility Plan myself, but I do know that our director of SEN will have had input into that.’ ”

Professionals also talked about the fact that their school governors were not actively involved in the development or review of Accessibility Plans. Participants agreed that a more open approach, in which governors were consulted and involved in the process, would provide ‘a fresh pair of eyes’ and would help to embed policies around Accessibility Plans into practice.

Of 36 professional respondents online, only 16 (44.4%) answered that they had been involved in the development of a school’s Accessibility Plan. Of the 35 respondents who answered the question of whether Disabled young people had been given opportunities to input into developing or updating their school’s Accessibility Plan, only five (14.3%) said that they had.

Analysis of the findings

The findings of this chapter were that parents had a generally low opinion of Accessibility Plans. Many parents thought that certain sections of the Accessibility Plans had not been updated in a methodical way; they were seen to be cut and pasted from previous versions or other documents, almost like an exercise in ticking boxes.

Parents were unsure of the application or effectiveness of Accessibility Plans, as expressed by one parent:

“ ‘... they can make it sound wonderful. But if they don’t actually do it, then it’s a worthless piece of paper.’ ”

The parents were not aware that schools were under any obligation to put in place lifts, ramps or other reasonable adjustments. One parent went as far as saying that schools can use Accessibility Plans to avoid putting reasonable adjustments in place:

“ ‘... the plan can say, “We’re not going to do anything,” as long as there’s a plan.’ ”

Parents were in agreement that the culture and ethos of a school would likely determine their willingness to embed plans and put them into practice.

Of 117 parents who responded to the online question, ‘Since the introduction of Accessibility Plans, have opportunities increased for your child/children to participate in school activities equal to their non-disabled peers?’ only 23 (19.7%) responded positively. Of the 90 parents who answered the question, ‘Do you feel the Accessibility Plan and subsequent support improve access for your child/children?’ only 21 (23.3%) answered ‘Yes.’ Moreover, the majority of the accompanying comments were negative, for example:

“ ‘It seems the same as before. Teachers don’t have the time or resources or understanding to ensure this.’ ”

Parents were also asked whether they, or anyone they knew, had used a school’s Accessibility Plan to challenge school practice; six (6.7%) of the 90 parents who responded answered ‘Yes.’ However, the scope, extent and nature of these challenges were not fully elaborated upon in the questionnaire and therefore remain unknown.

In the focus groups, professionals talked about the application and practicality of Accessibility Plans and whether they functioned effectively. The professionals all agreed that some schools were more proactive than others with regard to developing Accessibility Plans, often with reinforcement from a school’s senior leadership team. One professional said:

“ ‘Generally there are quite a few schools that have the documents, but only a limited number of schools embed into practice, and therefore there are very few schools where it actually functions.’ ”

An outreach teacher highlighted the need for an effective monitoring system, with the capacity to challenge how Accessibility Plans work in practice:

“ ‘One of the questions we now always ask on our initial visits to schools is, “Do you have an Accessibility Plan?” And I can say, nine times out of ten, the first response is, “Oh, I don’t know.” So that tells you, when you do sometimes uncover the Accessibility Plans, actually it’s just a paper document. It doesn’t reflect what’s actually happening in the school. Schools are not anticipating that they might need to meet a wider range of needs than they currently are, and that is part of the Equality Duty. So, I think part of the issue is there is not a system for challenging schools on, one, whether they have an Accessibility Plan, a formal system, and two, whether that Accessibility Plan actually reflects what’s going on in schools, because I can tell you that they don’t, most of the time.’ ”

This evidence conflicts with the professionals’ level of awareness of Accessibility Plans in the focus groups, but does correspond with the results of the online survey. It clearly shows that more needs to be done to make education professionals, at all levels, more aware of the existence and practical use of Accessibility Plans.

Another conflict arose when an Access Officer present in a focus group made the following statement:

“ ‘OFSTED is now asking for those plans when they do their inspections, so it is mandatory for schools to have them.’ ”

An email communication received by the researcher in June 2018, directly from OFSTED, suggested that this was not the case. Prior to the field study, the researcher had sent a number of Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to OFSTED, asking about the proportion and number of schools, grouped by local authority (LA), that had Accessibility Plans in place, and the proportion and number that had updated their Accessibility Plans in the previous 12 months.

OFSTED had responded:

“ ‘There is no requirement for schools or academies to share this information with us. Schools must, and academies should, publish such information on their websites and this may be something considered by inspectors as part of the pre-inspection analysis, carried out prior to commencing an inspection; however the information is not routinely recorded or collated centrally.’ ”

Given the comments by the Access Officer in the focus group for this study, a further FOI request was sent to OFSTED in June 2019 to check if the situation had changed. OFSTED was asked for the proportion and number of schools, grouped by LA, that had Accessibility Plans in place, to which OFSTED again responded that it did not hold that information. Interestingly, during the relevant focus group, the same Access Officer reported that the local council in their area generally considered it unnecessary to monitor Accessibility Plans, because plans were a mandatory requirement; therefore it would be the responsibility of a school to put a plan in place, and publish it on their website, as part of the school's Equality Plan.

Of 37 respondents from the professional group who answered the online question, 'Since the introduction of Accessibility Plans, have opportunities increased for Disabled children in your school to participate in school activities equal to their non-disabled peers?' 18 (48.6%) said that they had. The comments accompanying this question were generally positive, as in the following statement:

“ ‘I feel the culture has changed and school staff are more aware of the needs of CYP and more willing to include them.’ ”

Professionals were also asked whether they felt that Accessibility Plans, and related support, improved access for Disabled young people in the schools they worked with. Of the 29 who responded, 15 (51.7%) answered 'Yes.'

In reference to the question, 'Do you know of any families who have used their school's Accessibility Plan to challenge any of the school practices?' 29 professionals responded, and only three (10.3%) answered positively, however no details were given.

Conclusion

There is legal provision in place to help ensure that inclusion in schools becomes common good practice. An example of this is the legal obligation to introduce an Accessibility Plan, which falls under the Equality Act (2010) and requires education providers to evidence how they engage with pupils and parents/families to make learning experiences accessible, and to identify and remove barriers to inclusion.

This chapter has highlighted the fact that Disabled learners and their parents are largely uninformed about the existence of Accessibility Plans and are rarely involved in their production, development or review. Disabled young people and their families are certainly not using the plans as a means of challenging disabling practices.

Whilst education professionals seem to be aware of their duties with regard to Accessibility Plans, providers on the whole are making little effort to publicise the documents or to use them proactively.

Accessibility Plans are a legal requirement, but the monitoring and collection of statistics on the interpretation, implementation and enactment of these documents does not appear to be mandatory.

There is therefore evidence of a functional gap in the system, potentially requiring policy change and legislative reform.

The following chapters discuss participants' perspectives on the application, or lack thereof, of Accessibility Plans and their use in driving the provision of reasonable adjustments and the transformation of school practices in the direction of inclusion. The next chapter deals specifically with information provision.

2

CHAPTER TWO Information Provision

Key findings:

- Disabled young participants with an ongoing need to receive information in alternative formats felt that such provision was not standard practice in their schools.
- Parents of Disabled young people had mixed experiences with regard to the level and quality of communication from schools.
- Whilst parents participating in the field study were generally satisfied with the provision of accessible information in their schools, parents who completed the online questionnaire had different experiences. Most comments indicated that parents received minimum information from their schools and needed to search actively for details.
- Although professionals in the focus groups recognised that accessible information was not always readily available, citing time pressure as a key obstacle, professional respondents in the online questionnaire felt that practice in this area varied greatly between schools, and information would often be provided upon request.

The findings across the three groups

In the field study, participants were asked a number of questions around access to information in their schools both pre and post-admission. Young participants with visual impairments talked about their information access needs and whether their schools made reasonable adjustments for them. At Moni's school, large print documents were not offered as standard, and were not available for all students; need was considered on a case by case basis. Moni was required to put in a new request every time she needed an adjustment, which took up valuable education time, with teachers having to leave lessons frequently to adapt materials. Mostafa stated that he regularly struggled to see and read text in some of his classes, when the print was not in large font.

Henry and Michael, who lived in two different regions, had both experienced scenarios at school in which they had informed professionals of their visual impairment, and their need for information in an alternative format, but had not been believed by those professionals. Before his vision was tested, Henry experienced the following:

“ ‘I just kept on struggling and struggling, and the teacher was just saying I was lazy and not reading it. But actually, I couldn't read it.’ ”

Of the small number of parents in the field study whose children needed information in alternative formats, most were satisfied with the information provided. Mandy's comment was an example:

“ ‘... they've given her stuff in visuals [communicated in print], so when she started – she's only been there a few months – but she's so anxious. So, there was gonna be a change in staff, so they made her a visual of what was gonna happen the next day.’ ”

Parents felt different degrees of satisfaction with the way in which their schools communicated with them. Nora, for example, shared her experience of contact with her daughter's school on the revealingly worrying trend of school bullying. Even though schools are duty bound to prevent all forms of bullying, Nora praised the school for providing her with regular updates:

“ ‘I get weekly phone calls, I get emails, I get text messages. If she’s having a few issues – at the moment she’s being bullied so I’m getting communication every single day to find out how she’s dealing with the bullying ... they are doing everything they can and so the communication is brilliant. It’s not the same with every child. I think she’s just got a really good teacher that is really hot on communication. The one that she had before wasn’t so good on communication, so it does depend on the child, on the teacher, whoever they’ve got at the time as well.’ ”

Conversely, Alex expressed strongly that lack of communication between their family and their school had impacted negatively on their son:

“ ‘This was a new, inexperienced teacher who would not read the information I gave her to make it easier for them, as well as him. And it just all went nuts. And within a few weeks – oh, they dropped half of his support. So, he went from having full-time support – they dropped the support to half.’ ”

It appeared from discussions that engagement between parents whose children used ‘special educational needs’ transport or were on ‘part-time contracts’ and other parents was sporadic and minimal. This was even the case between parents of Disabled children and the school itself. As Kevin articulated, parents often felt misinformed and isolated because:

“ ‘When you ask for more communication from the teachers, ours have been unwilling to do it ... It’s a chore, providing the information ...’ ”

To give himself the opportunity to interact with staff and other parents, Kevin occasionally collected his child from school himself:

“ ‘Just a few minutes conversation, you get so much more sorted out than them having to think about what they write, how they write it and all of this. You go, “What about this?” And they go, “Ah, blah blah blah.” Done. Sorted.’ ”

For the same reason, Emilie chose to become friends with another parent. The two mothers communicated on Facebook to exchange information:

“ ‘... just to check the night before, “Was it red trousers tomorrow, or was it green?” Because you feel lost because you don’t meet the mums at the school anymore to find that information out. So, that took quite a few months to meet a friend and then we would text, email or Facebook message each other. Before that I felt very alone.’ ”

Of 201 parent respondents to the online questionnaire, only 30 (14.9%) said that their school provided information in a format accessible for their child (without them having to make an additional request). Of the 77 parents who responded to the question, ‘Do you have to make an additional request to get information from your child’s school in a format that is accessible for your child?’ 41 (53.2%) said that they did. Of 34 parents responding to the question of waiting times, three (8.8%) typically had to wait a few days for information to be sent out following a request, six (17.6%) had to wait around a week, three (8.8%) waited for a couple of weeks, two waited for up to a month (5.9%), and 20 (58.8%) said they typically waited a month or more.

The majority of parents reported that in the absence of adequate provision of accessible information they were often forced to scour a school’s website hoping they had not missed news regarding school activities. Some said they had to ask staff or other parents repeatedly for the information; for others, news would often come as a surprise or be found out by chance. A number of participants reported finding out about school events one to two weeks later than other parents because the school had only given the relevant information to their child, instead of informing the parents too as per reasonable adjustment requests that had been submitted.

In the focus groups, Anne represented the professionals, who were positive about the provision of accessible information in their schools:

“ ‘... we would enlarge worksheets for pupils. We try to encourage the teachers though to print them still on A4 at the size that the child needs, because just enlarging something to A3 does not necessarily make Open Type easier to access, because actually they’ve got bigger space they need to read. So, to have the same sheets, if they need a couple, but to enlarge it to a font size that has been agreed.’ ”

Anne's school had also produced Braille materials for an individual student 'with severe visual impairment' in the previous year.

As a further alternative format, Anne's school was in the process of trying to obtain a software licence for a new product called Splashtop, which could show the contents of a learning whiteboard on an iPad. Toney, another professional from the same school as Anne, discussed the fact that every printer in the school had a sign above it saying: "Have you remembered your VI pupils and sensory printing?". However, he also recognised that:

“ ‘... often the trouble is you just go into auto-pilot, and [they] can't blame you, there's so many stresses, that nobody actually reads that and goes, "Oh yeah," you know, so then it is, "But let's take it back and get it put onto A3," because that's the short-term solution to the problem.’ ”

In the same focus group, Peter pointed out an interesting trend that appeared to be developing amongst pupils with visual impairments. He made the following observation, even though the school in which he worked produced information in a range of formats with the help of the reprographics team:

“ ‘... last couple of years there's been a culture – pupils who struggle, that need larger font and things like that, but they don't want to seem to be different from their peers, and even though we've had – and teachers do this with their work in class – they won't want to access it. So, even teachers have done the whole class, or half the class having big copies and it's normal, just so it doesn't highlight any difficulties, but you can still see the pupils who've got visual impairments won't want to access the large copies, they'll still take the smaller ones ... we've had several pupils that have gone through and it's got all the way through to year 11, and they still won't access the larger print, or on different backgrounds, even coming up to doing their GCSE exams ... I think there's – for some of our visually impaired pupils there's still a bit of a stigma of, "I don't want to seem to be different from," and it's an ongoing issue I seem to have.’ ”

Most of the professionals agreed that accessible information was one of the weakest areas of all in terms of planning, specifically with regard to information visible around school, not only for students but also for parents and visitors who had different information access needs. A professional was aware of the non-compliance in his school in terms of provision of information, and proceeded to justify this by commenting:

“ ‘I think there is a school in the area where children with visual impairments do go to, that does cater for them specifically ... I think that's the whole thing – they would just go there.’ ”

However, he did go on to acknowledge that such an approach was not acceptable under the Equality Act (2010), in terms of driving inclusion:

“ ‘But then, at the same time, well, all schools should be accessible.’ ”

Of 66 professionals who responded to the question, 'Does the school(s) you work with provide information in an alternative format, where a need has been identified (without an additional request being made)?' 27 (40.9%) said that they did. However, the comments accompanying the question suggested that provision of accessible information varied from school to school and would often only be available upon request. The phrase 'upon request' was repeatedly used in the accompanying statements, emphasising its significance for professionals. Furthermore, one response pointed out a particularly unjust practice leaving individuals to find their own solutions, unfairly:

“ ‘Many children and parents say their homework was not enlarged to the correct size of print needed. Children say they have to copy it to the required size they need themselves.’ ”

In contrast, the following stood out as good practice:

“ ‘All our students' individual needs are published in a booklet each year, including access requirements. When these change or new students arrive, we are updated.’ ”

Of the 38 professionals who addressed the question of whether students could access information in an alternative format if they so requested, 23 (60.5%) said it was possible and only one (2.6%) said it was not. The rest of the professional participants did not know. When asked how long it took to make the adjustments, of the 22 professional respondents, only four (18.2%) said the typical waiting time for accessible information was a few days, ten (45.5%) noted that their students had to wait around a week, six (27.3%) thought the waiting time was close to a couple of weeks, one (4.5%) said their pupils had to wait up to a month, and one professional (4.5%) had observed typical waiting times to be a month or longer.

Most accompanying comments suggested that students needed to make a request for accessible information at the outset, and it would be provided, for example:

“ ‘I am not aware of a case where information has not been passed on in a way a disabled person can access it, on request.’ ”

Other professionals’ comments suggested, however, that it was not always standard practice even to provide accessible information upon request, and to obtain information some pupils were forced to rely on peers and friends.

Analysis of the findings

Although ‘Improved delivery of written information’ was required to be an area of focus within Accessibility Plans, there was a general consensus amongst the Disabled young participants that the provision of information in alternative formats was unsatisfactory, notwithstanding regional differences. Moreover, Disabled young people experienced negative attitudinal barriers, at times with questions of disbelief about their impairment. They then had to find their own solutions having received inaccessible information, despite the fact that provision of accessible information is a reasonable adjustment which schools are duty bound to make. Parents’ responses were more varied, however, and this discrepancy could point to differences in level and type of need, lack of parental involvement in the process of requesting and receiving accessible information, or differences in the quality of information provided to the different groups. Most participants, in both of the groups, experienced long delays before the requested information was delivered. As the accessible information received was often limited or of poor quality, most parents said that they actively sought out additional or alternative ways to obtain the

information. Such experiences showed significant barriers preventing parents and children from engaging with schools on an equal footing to their non-disabled peers. Neither the Disabled young people nor the parent participants discussed requiring, requesting or receiving easy read materials.

In the focus groups, the professionals who acknowledged that there were shortcomings largely attributed them to a lack of specialisation in the field, or pupils feeling stigmatised and not wanting to access information in alternative formats. School demands and time pressures were also cited as significant responses. There did not appear to be any recognition that a school’s unwillingness or inability to make reasonable adjustments resulted in difficulties for a Disabled young person trying to participate.

Professionals were more candid in their responses via the online questionnaires, however, and responses suggested that accessible information was often provided inconsistently, on an ad-hoc basis, in response to requests from individual students. In these cases, little attention was given to pupils who needed the information in alternative formats but were unable to make requests for provision; pupils may well be unwilling to stand out by requesting information in their preferred format, owing to fear of stigmatisation. Stigma focused on impairment, triggered by disability aids and adaptations, does not just lead to bullying but can also act as an obstacle to social interaction between Disabled and non-disabled people (Shakespeare, 2014).

Conclusion

This chapter has documented a range of reasons, put forward by Disabled young people and some of the parents, for their dissatisfaction with schools’ provision of accessible information. On the whole, however, professionals participating in the project did not share the opinion that such limitations existed. The experiences discussed in this chapter point to the need for stronger, more robust Accessibility Plans with appropriate implementation, monitoring and enforcement mechanisms in place. The next chapter will focus on participants’ experiences relating to school admissions processes.

3

CHAPTER THREE Admission

Key findings:

- Disabled young participants did not feel they were supported to make informed choices about their school admissions processes. Professionals generally made decisions for them, and they were sent to a particular school regardless of their individual preferences.
- Parents expressed a strong desire for their Disabled children to have the same access to mainstream schools as other children.
- Parents felt it was essential that they receive clear and transparent information from schools about the support available for their children.
- Parents were frequently confronted with attitudinal barriers in the admissions process, even going as far as having their children actively denied access to their school of choice.
- Lack of disability support within mainstream schools was a great concern for parents, and brought about dilemmas concerning their children's educational, social and emotional needs.
- Restrictions in choice had forced a number of parents to take their children out of school and educate them at home. For others, the decision to de-register from school had been made by the local authority (LA).
- Parents said they wanted to see an education system in which mainstream settings provided appropriate support for their children.
- In general, education professionals were confident that their schools were equipped to admit Disabled students. In most cases they felt that there was no difference in the admissions process for Disabled children.

The findings across the three groups

Awareness

In the field study, Disabled young people and parent participants were invited to talk about their experiences of school admissions processes, in particular whether they had been given choice and support at that key time. The Disabled young people discussed the information they had received from schools prior to admission. Russ felt that he had been misinformed about the special school he attended:

“ ‘... the first day I realised it was like “special needs plus.” Like, people who’ve been kicked out of other schools, so more severe, like kids who get more in trouble.’ ”

Henry had refused to attend the special school he had been sent to:

“ ‘Because when I found out some of the people that went there were actual people that bullied me in my primary school, so then that just stopped me altogether from going to there.’ ”

Duncan was the only person from his primary school to attend mainstream secondary school, where he did not feel supported. He elaborated on his experience:

“ ‘... the system shock caused me to pretty much melt down for about a week solid. Just, I was not functioning. And that was just, you know, a bell going off every 45 minutes in a group of children.’ ”

Brian and Henry pointed out that as well as support provision, the size difference between a special school and a mainstream school could have a real impact, specifically on students with autism.

School and class size was also a matter of concern for parents, who discussed how mainstream schools with large class sizes lacked appropriate support and resources for their children, such as a care suite or other facilities. Mandy was critical of the mainstream set up:

“ ‘There was no autism training. It’s like they didn’t understand child development. They didn’t understand how to deal with children who are anxious.’ ”

Shirley’s son often played on his own in the mainstream school playground and Shirley felt the school did not make any effort to include him during play time. Likewise, as a parent, Alex talked about how upsetting it was to see Nicholas not included with other children at all in school; instead, he would sit in corridors with a support worker or be left on his own. Another parent explained how one of her sons was sent home most days and was not fed at lunchtimes, while her other son had been left to soil himself even though he had asked the teacher if he could go to the toilet as he was desperate. He had then been made to sit in soiled clothing for an hour. Jenny summarised most parents’ experience with regard to school provision:

“ ‘... mainstream schools don’t seem to take on board the fact that things that help children and young people with additional needs also help children who don’t have any acknowledged additional needs.’ ”

Conversely, Hannah believed that even some of the special schools that she had looked around did not seem to be designed with children with sensory needs in mind:

“ ‘So, they can be really, really noisy, not very good acoustics ...’ ”

In Eveline’s case, the special school routine, low expectations, and the lack of interaction between her son and other children in his age group worried her:

“ ‘It’s [special school is] only supposed to be for three to six months, to possibly a year, but the way that they, kind of – their routine and their structure is so liberal and I fear when he goes to mainstream school, he’ll still get a shock and it’s, kind of, setting him up to fail because the routine won’t be the same. They’re saying that they’ll put into place learning supports but where this school has been so liberal with him, the school won’t be able to achieve as much as what this one is doing at the moment. So, I don’t know. I didn’t really want him to be at this additional school anyway.’ ”

Almost all the parents were faced with similar dilemmas when making decisions about their children’s schooling. In their interview, Alex voiced the following:

“ ‘... it would take a minimum of maybe two years for him to get anywhere close to some sort of level of support that met his needs, and that would exist only in a special school, which, as far as I’m concerned, that doesn’t meet his needs as a human being.’ ”

Despite receiving little support from his LA, Rashid was adamant:

“ ‘I will never send my child to a special needs school.’ ”

Parents agreed that their children were increasingly being forced out of mainstream schools to attend special schools because there was not adequate funding in mainstream schools to implement inclusive education practice and support their children’s needs, as highlighted by Adam:

“ ‘We had one headteacher tell us that our child would effectively be too expensive. He said that he could be instructed to take our child, but he’d prefer not to. I’m paraphrasing, they weren’t exactly his words.’ ”

Parents were in agreement that there were not enough special school places available and that existing schools were working to absolute capacity and beyond. Emilie's son, for example, went to a nearby special school which was attended not only by local children but also children from across the county. Another parent was told by his County Council that he needed to send both his sons to a special school 18 miles away, which at rush hour would have involved a one-way journey of up to an hour:

“ ‘Now, bearing in mind Bob is probably going to “attack” the driver and anyone else in the car, it is a disaster waiting to happen. Not that we want Bob to go that distance. He doesn't want to be far away from us. He has to be with us 24/7. One of us has to pick him up from school, and probably be with him at school ... So, to think that all of a sudden, he's going to, one morning, just get into a taxi and go off 18 miles away from us beggars belief. And the same with Freddie, who hasn't been out of the house, how do they think somehow a taxi will turn up, and he will mysteriously go into the taxi?’ ”

These parents' experiences were supported by a recent publication by the National Audit Office (2019), which indicated that the funding arrangements, for 2018-19, 'may incentivise [mainstream] schools to be less inclusive, by making them reluctant to admit or keep pupils with SEND who can be costly to support.' (NAO, 2019: 7). However, the report also stated that such thinking could amount to a false economy. The report estimated that in 2017-18, 'the cost per pupil in an independent special school was £50,000, compared with £20,500 per pupil in a state special school, and up to £18,000 per pupil with an EHC plan in a mainstream school.' (NAO, 2019: 8).

It was evident from discussion that most parents had a general preference for mainstream education for their children, but they often chose a special school because they lacked confidence that the support available in mainstream would adequately meet their children's needs. In her interview, Helen talked about the inaccessibility of a local school for her child, and she was not the only parent to share such an experience.

Helen commented that her son would have been the first wheelchair-user to attend the school in question, had they allowed him to attend:

“ ‘The high school wouldn't bring any classrooms – the classrooms were upstairs. The outside of the building, as you go into the main entrance, was accessible, and they was very proud of that, that was accessible. But it was split level inside the building. They [students with mobility impairments] wasn't included, because there was no lifts.’ ”

Despite continuous efforts by Helen's family to involve others, including local councillors, in their campaign, it was the council who refused to support them, saying:

“ ‘... there was two adequate schools in the area, and he would have to go to one of those schools.’ ”

Helen explained her argument:

“ ‘It was all very well my son wasn't going to that school, but if, for example, a child in that area who'd gone up through primary school with their peers, all going to this particular school, then they couldn't go into that school. They would have to leave their peers and go to – and there's a couple of families that I do know, that are due to be going up to that school and can't go to that school because it's not wheelchair accessible ... it wasn't fair on other children, who had been with their friends, to split them up.’ ”

Most significantly, parent participants did not choose special school provision for their children; they wanted to have the same choices as other parents in terms of access to mainstream schools.

Hannah's son was desperate to go to the same mainstream secondary school as his brother, however:

“ ‘The school [had been] saying that they don't think he's gonna cope in mainstream secondary ... I have been going around and visiting all the specialist schools that I know, what the options are ... they're definitely giving me a very strong message that they don't think he's going to last very long if he goes to mainstream secondary.’ ”

Participants talked about the attitudinal barriers they had faced whilst trying to navigate the admissions process in mainstream schools. They felt that, against their children's wishes, they were being forced to send their child to a special school. Jean had encountered a Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) who was not willing to be open and flexible:

“ ‘... when we were looking at high schools ... it was quite clear they didn't want my child ... We looked, and the SENCO's words, out of her mouth, when I explained what Matt's conditions were, she went, “I just don't know how we would deal with that.”’ ”

Another parent had been confronted with similar barriers:

“ ‘But the first one I went to, which was our catchment school, the headteacher there just basically said, “Well, we've got an additional resources base for children with, you know, additional needs,” and she just assumed that my daughter would have to be – not integrated into the mainstream class, but would have to be in a unit in the school. So, I didn't like that because I thought, actually, you're just making an assumption about her ability to integrate without really knowing very much about it. She wasn't interested, really, in telling me what the mainstream classes were doing.’ ”

Sylvia wanted to look around a school for her child, but the receptionist politely refused her access:

“ ‘... they didn't even let me go through the gates, let alone look. I've seen schools where they won't let you go in, then they come back and give you stories about numbers, that they've got too many numbers, already got this amount of kids with this condition. Then when you find out, and realise that they just don't want you. So, what they tell you is, they've got them, so they can't take yours. But they don't have any. I remember going to [name of school]. I'd spoken to them on the phone. I said to her, “My daughter is not walking right now.” That's the only thing that was wrong with her. “Oh, I'll speak to the headteacher about taking her on. Come in, pick up a form,” or whatever. When I got to the gates, they said, “I can't let you in because I haven't spoken to the headteacher yet.” I knew from then she just wasn't interested. And that's just the receptionist, not even the school. She just refused access ...’ ”

Another parent did not agree that accessibility of a school should be a determining factor in deciding which school would be the most appropriate school for her child:

“ ‘... whether she should move to a mainstream school or a special school, or one with a unit ...’ ”

Parents expressed a strong desire to receive transparent and clear information from local schools about the support available, rather than schools simply saying what they thought parents wanted to hear. Mandy said:

“ ‘It feels like people want to get numbers in and they hope that your children really won't be a problem, but if they are a problem, then they deal with you as a parent as being a “problem parent,” or that it's your parenting skills, rather than trying to support in the long-term.’ ”

Hannah found little information on her local council website about the special schools in her area, when researching suitable schools for her child. Adam, on the other hand, criticised his council for providing inadequate information on mainstream schools that had the appropriate facilities to support Disabled pupils:

“ ‘They knew all about the special schools, but the mainstream school information was five or six years out of date. We had to basically ring up the schools to find out what facilities they had.’ ”

One school’s website and prospectus disappointed Helen:

“ ‘They pick and choose what they want. Let’s put it that way ... everything, down to their OFSTED reports. Because I ripped it to bits [laughing] in about two minutes. When I read that, I was like, “How can you have Outstanding?” And even then, I just got told, “We’re sorry, we can’t do anything [to support your son].” So ... very frustrating.’ ”

In contrast Jan wanted to see more publicity on her daughter’s school website about their good practice:

“ ‘They don’t advertise that they take Disabled [young people] – they don’t say that it’s a multi-accessible school. There’s nothing, there’s no pictures anywhere to say the schools can take children in wheelchairs.’ ”

Lack of any real choice had forced a number of parents to take their children out of school, some deciding to home educate. Alex thought that home education should not be considered a ‘dumping ground’ for pupils who LAs were unable or unwilling to accommodate.

Alex continued:

“ ‘... it was a lost cause for us, and I could see what they were going to do ... As long as they found somewhere to stick Nicholas – because, I think, by that point, for a child like Nicholas, they’re just managing the situation, and they’re beginning to prepare to just manage the situation until the end. Which means my son was going to come out with a rubbish education. You can’t learn in that circumstance ... I’m a massive believer in inclusive education, having already campaigned for that, so the last thing I ever expected was to be taking my children out of school ... The trouble is, I wanted him in that mainstream – but there was no way of getting there without the two-year fight ... Even if one more tribunal was the tipping balance, it would not be fair.’ ”

Another parent expressed concern about the lack of thought that had gone into the education and future of his sons:

“ ‘... at the LA level, there’s absolutely no plan in place to get the boys back in school. They send a home tutor round for a few hours, but how’s that going to get them to school? I mean, Freddie doesn’t engage, and Bob is all over the place. What’s the plan?’ ”

In contrast to the above accounts, a small number of parents were content with how their mainstream schools had catered for their children. For most of those parents, like Sarah, satisfaction had come about after their second attempt to find a suitable school:

“ ‘So, I went to another school nearby, and that headteacher was totally different. He said, “We would do everything we could to make sure that your daughter was fully integrated into the life of the school, and we’d provide the support that she would need and the equipment and everything.” So, he said all the right things, and that was his ethos. And that drove his way of dealing with us as a family over the years.’ ”

Of the 139 parents responding online to the question about their child's school admissions process, 99 (71.2%) expressed a clear opinion about how it was managed. Of the 99, the majority of the parents, 77 (77.8%), were satisfied, including a small minority who were extremely satisfied, but 22 (22.2%) parents were dissatisfied. The following two comments demonstrate the range of parental experiences.

“ ‘Pretty well, but hugely supported and overseen by STARS and when left to decide themselves, school started trying to speed up the settling in process with disastrous results. I spoke to STARS (autism outreach) and they came in and it, in fact, took 5 months to fully acclimatise to school and this was a success. I feel like I wouldn't have been able to negotiate such a careful transition without outside help.’ ”

“ ‘My child could not attend mainstream High School because no transport was offered. She had a learning disability and could not travel independently, and I had to look after her younger sibling. I was told the council would not provide transport, while it would to a special school much further away. My daughter developed mental health problems as a result of not being with her peers, and she would have coped well if she had been able to get to the front door.’ ”

These comments are again supported by the National Audit Office report (2019: 8), which found that the 'main reason why local authorities have overspent their high-needs budgets is that more pupils are attending special schools. Between January 2014 and January 2018, the number of pupils in special schools and alternative provision rose by 20.2%.

Notwithstanding the overwhelmingly negative parental experiences discussed above, education professionals taking part in the focus groups were confident that schools in general were able to admit Disabled students.

An Access Officer based in a north eastern city commented:

“ ‘Accessibility Plans do [improve the admissions process]. They give parents some information about a setting prior to them even having to go and visit it. It can save a lot of time from a parent's perspective, having those Accessibility Plans where they can look on the website and see what a school's got, and what a school hasn't got. So, it's better, obviously, if there's a care suite, or if there's automated door access, or ramps, or whatever that is. It certainly does help parents make a more informed choice.’ ”

The same professional did not perceive that there would be any difference in the admissions process for a Disabled pupil:

“ ‘Our parents choose their mainstream school, basically, and then we have to make that reasonable adjustment, and often we can. I think in my six years in post, there's only been three occasions where we've said we couldn't make that reasonable adjustment to that school, because it would pretty much have meant knocking it down and rebuilding it. And we were talking a very, very old high school ...’ ”

The Access Officer went on to share that, in their city, a group of professionals – including the Lead Children's Occupational Therapist and a physiotherapist – would come together every three months to discuss the Disabled children coming up to transition. The person spoke highly of the group:

“ ‘... we can now identify the children in Early Years and where the best setting would be, given their need. Their parents ask for – although we can't recommend schools – we can give them, we can tell them what a school's got. I've got an audit of all of the schools in [the city], that tells me whether they've got a care suite, ramps, whatever they've got, so I can give that information out.’ ”

The success of a child’s inclusion, therefore, will be dependent on parents’ ability to navigate the education system.

Another professional, Anne, who was based in a north western city, was convinced that her school would rarely ‘say no’ to a child ‘down to their needs or disability.’ Although Anne felt that accepting Disabled students would give a school a good reputation amongst parents and professionals, she commented on the challenges that this could present:

“ ‘But then, with the more children that we get in, it is harder because of the time and the money.’ ”

Anne’s colleague, Toney, argued that instead of automatically sending Disabled pupils to their school, the LA should be challenging inadequate school practices across the city:

“ ‘... actually, we just had a parent who came into reception having just been to a school, not too far from us, and actually said as they were being shown round, whoever was showing them round said, “This isn’t a place for your child, go down to ... our school.” So, they came straight to reception in here and said, “How do we come here?” So, there is a massive issue around, sort of, certain attitudes ...’ ”

Following the same argument, Andrea talked about a headteacher who had claimed that their school could not meet a need, without first meeting the pupil:

“ ‘... it was just based on, simply on the fact that the child was blind. So, this was nothing to do with academic ability.’ ”

Professionals’ responses to the online questionnaire were mixed. Of the 29 who commented on how well admissions were managed for Disabled pupils, 13 (44.8%) responses were positive, eight (27.6%) were negative, and the rest were neutral. The following observation by one professional, about how admissions processes were managed in their school, seemed to correspond with the experience of most parents:

“ ‘Often remarks are made particularly for the nonverbal or those with SEMH that this ‘is a strict school’ or “that the school is unable to meet need.” Which, as you know, is unlawful.’ ”

Analysis of the findings

The focus groups, made up of Disabled young people and parents, highlighted that receiving accurate and relevant information, and the appropriate support, during the admissions process was a key component of a successful transition into secondary school. Nonetheless, the provision of information and support at this crucial time was generally felt to be lacking and problematic when it came to choosing a school, visiting a school and settling in to a school. As a result of the inadequacy, a number of parents felt they had no choice but to send their children to special schools. Parents wanted to have the same choices and opportunities as parents of non-disabled children with regard to accessing mainstream education; to be enabled to do so they needed transparent information and reliable support from schools and LAs. However, it was often the case that they were confronted with prejudiced and discriminatory attitudes, and obstacles preventing them from having real choice and the ability to make informed decisions regarding their children’s education. In theory, parents were presented with a choice including mainstream education, yet in practice this only resulted in bias and frustration towards special schools. Strikingly unfair was the separation of Disabled young people from their friends, segregation by impairment and at times leading to Disabled young people experiencing mental health difficulties. In the absence of the necessary support, a number of parents had felt forced to de-register their children from school and educate them at home.

For the most part, professionals participating in the project were either uninformed or complicit in the barriers discussed above, and felt that parents had sufficient information and could make real choices during their school's admissions processes. A small number of professionals, however, did express some of the same concerns as parents, namely negative attitudes within staff teams and the reactive approaches adopted by mainstream schools in response to recent cuts to their budgets as far as the admission of Disabled students was concerned. Despite legal protection, such as the Children and Families Act (2014) stating that children with 'Special Educational Needs' (SEN) should in nearly all cases be given a place in mainstream schools, the number of children labelled with 'SEN' in mainstream education in England has dropped by around a quarter (24%) since 2012, while the number attending special schools has increased by nearly a third (31%) (Swift, 2019; Milmo and Stanton, 2019). Instead of funding inclusive and improved provision in mainstream education, the Government is dealing with a deficit in SEN places by planning new special schools.

The effect of the current funding regime of the Department for Education is that mainstream schools are being forced to be less inclusive in comparison with special schools, to which funds are being directed more freely. However, as previously noted, pupils attending a mainstream school in fact require less funding than those attending special school (NAO, 2019). Little regard is given to the concept of 'progressive realisation' (Byrne, 2019), which is 'not compatible with sustaining two systems of education: a mainstream education system and a special/segregated education system' (UN, 2016: 11). As mentioned in the Legislation section, current UK policy and legislation are at odds with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCPRD) recommendations contained in Article 24.

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on school admissions processes and has presented a list of related barriers which were identified by the three groups of field study participants. It is evident that most of the Disabled young participants and their families did not have an equal start to their secondary school education journey when compared with that of their non-disabled peers. The chapter has reinforced that Accessibility Plans must focus not only on the removal of physical barriers in schools, but on challenging attitudinal, physical, systemic, and other obstacles within the admissions process to enable Disabled learners to have a fully inclusive experience in accessing schools. The next chapter will examine physical access barriers within school environments from the participants' perspectives.

4

CHAPTER FOUR Access

Key findings:

- Disabled young people indicated that, to some extent, the design and infrastructure of various facilities within their schools were not inclusive. Examples mainly concerned students with mobility impairments.
- Parents of Disabled young people were generally critical of schools' physical structures, and barriers to access, enjoyment and participation. Barriers included noise and lighting as well as physical obstacles.
- When advocating for their children in terms of the removal of access barriers, parents met with staff bias and inflexible attitudes.
- Education professionals identified similar physical barriers to those experienced by Disabled young people and parents. They also pointed out the existence of further barriers experienced by a wider population of Disabled students.
- There was recognition amongst professionals that newer buildings were much more accessible than older buildings.
- Whilst some professionals acknowledged that lack of funding constrained their efforts to be inclusive, others described how they had found creative ways to remove some of the barriers pupils experienced.

The findings across the three groups

Awareness

In the field study, participants were invited to talk about their experiences of access barriers in the built environment. As a wheelchair-user, Carley found the physical structure of her school to be complex, and it caused her difficulty when getting around. For Lucy and Zahra, the school internal doors were too heavy for them to open themselves, which was a significant barrier to access.

The Disabled young participants also identified the absence of lifts as being a key barrier. Henry's class took place upstairs and there was no lift in his school. When Henry broke his leg, he was told to go and sit in the library and read a book rather than attend his usual lesson. Michael described the inconvenience that broken lifts could cause. At Michael's college, the regular staff had been required to wait for the Principal's arrival, so that he could call the lift company who needed his authorisation to repair the lift that Michael would use. A Disabled young professional, who had recently left school, then detailed how the broken lift in his school had presented a serious health and safety risk:

“

'It was a pretty dodgy lift, to be honest ... so, it didn't open at the right place. So, the floor was here, I was here, and the floor started about here. I thought, "Well, I've got my ingredients in my bag, I've got to make an apple crumble." So, I thought, "I can't let this go to waste!" So, I jumped up onto the floor, and then I pulled my chair up, and I went, and I did the lesson. I thought, "I don't know how I'm going to get back down." And it did work again, but it was a terrible lift! But then, really, that lift shouldn't have been in service. It should have been replaced. If there was a fire, that lift wouldn't have been a viable option.'

”

For a lift to be a viable option, they can be designed or updated to a specific standard to allow a Disabled person to be evacuated, and are known as evacuation lifts (BSI, 2012).

Physical organisation of school buildings, an excessive number of steps, and the absence of lifts were significant concerns for parent participants as well. They generally felt that there was no excuse for not putting up ramps, as one parent commented:

“ ‘Ramps and lifts are essential, because you can have the best attitude in the world, but if you can’t get in the door, you can forget it. But if you’ve got a school where they genuinely want to make it work, they can normally find a way around even quite a tricky building.’ ”

Jan thought that most of her daughter Carley’s school grounds were accessible. However, in the hilly parts, Carley struggled to push her manual wheelchair up the slopes:

“ ‘And the teacher will turn around and say, “We can’t push you up because it’s health and safety. You have to do it yourself.” ... So, we had to go begging and asking, “Can a teacher push them up, or the teaching assistant, or even the dinner lady, help push her up the ramp?” Because the only access was steps. Or go out of the building and go all the way around to come in the front door.’ ”

Lydia recounted an instance when her daughter’s school went out and bought new benches for the cafeteria, which presented a barrier to participation for Lydia’s daughter. She could no longer sit at tables with her peers and was put into a corner to eat:

“ ‘... she really hated it. So, we went and talked to the SENCO about it, and I was very struck that the SENCO is within an institutional framework of mind, and she can’t step out of it to say, “Ok, I see this child, I see what I’m doing to this child, so I really need to go back and say, these benches need to be removed.”’ ”

The school of Sarah’s daughter also showed reluctance to remove barriers, and Sarah was outraged:

“ ‘... the fact that, “Would she stay at the school, wouldn’t she?” – “Would she cope with it from a learning point of view?” – as a reason to delay putting an accessible toilet in ... because I thought, actually, it’s not, the toilet isn’t for her. It’s everybody who would need to use that facility. So, that’s when I started really pushing it. Eventually they did put a Disabled toilet in.’ ”

Although Kevin recognised the challenges around installing accessible changing places and toilets in every school, nevertheless he felt strongly that under the Equality Act (2010) there should be a requirement for schools to have them. He explained that accessible changing facilities are more than just accessible toilets for Disabled people; they are larger spaces and can include a hoist and/or a changing table. They allow a young wheelchair-user to use the facilities independently. Kevin expressed his dismay:

“ ‘Every school I know of has said, “That’s too expensive and we don’t have students that would use it.” ... I can’t change my daughter at this event because I have to take them home because I need a hoist. They are being exclusive of the children, other children, who are part of their same community.’ ”

Kevin mirrored a number of parents’ views when he observed that many mainstream schools lack the understanding of the time it takes for Disabled children to get between lessons. According to Kevin, it is often the case that, instead of allowing Disabled children the extra time to avoid queues:

“ ‘[They are] penalised and they end up with exclusions or they end up in detention because they’re actually activating their self-care, and they’re punished for it.’ ”

Kevin reported that this was especially the case for children who were not neurotypical.

Barriers such as noise levels and quality of lighting, specifically the use of fluorescent lighting, were noted to have a significant effect on some children's moods. Parents also thought that the way schools organised the day, often involving a large number of children all moving through the building at the same time, and queuing in various places, could be very difficult to manage for children with autism. Mandy stated:

“ ‘When we think of accessibility, a lot of people think of the physical. They don't think about the children, like my daughter, who will miss the social cues, or if something is too loud, the tension and frustration will build up and up. She won't realise it, but she'll be anxious because it's too noisy or there's too many people, there's too much going on, or something smells funny. Or there's a noise that makes them want to run away. She says, “I just want to escape.” I think it's the social thing that schools miss most.’ ”

While parents agreed that most primary schools could find a way to make accessibility a reality for children, they expressed uncertainty with regard to accessibility policies and practices in secondary schools. One parent observed that supporting Disabled students was not considered to contribute to the quality of teaching and learning:

“ ‘The complaints that you get from families about this one particular secondary school – and nothing's ever really done about it, because it gets good results, so it always does well in its inspections.’ ”

Helen was the only parent completely satisfied with the accessibility of her child's school:

“ ‘So, you can get from the main building, to another building, to the music block, to the sports hall – it's all accessible for him. Yeah, even – he can get on the sports fields too, if we change his wheelchair, to be fair ... there's a mobile hoist there if he needs it. The toilets are adequate for him ...’ ”

In the online questionnaire, parents were asked: ‘Do you feel the school buildings and the physical environment of the school are accessible and usable for your child/children? Please consider things including lighting, noise and temperature in addition to physical features.’

Of the 132 who responded, 55 (41.7%) answered ‘Yes’ and 36 (27.3%) answered ‘No.’ The remainder said ‘Sometimes.’ Most accompanying statements were on the topic of children's sensory needs and indicated that they were totally unsupported and misunderstood. One parent wrote:

“ ‘The business of the school is just too much for my kids. It is too loud, too busy, too much change, demands, and inflexibility to accommodate for these needs. Assembly, for example, involves touch, as the kids are crammed into a space. Loud singing, talking, etc. Two of my kids can't eat at school due to the smells and noise and crowds of the dining hall.’ ”

In their focus groups, education professionals identified similar barriers to those discussed by Disabled young people and parents. Professionals not only talked about the inadequate provision of accessible toilets with changing places, they also commented on the small size of some toilets, which often prevented adults from accompanying children who required personal support. Andrea explained why she thought noisy hand-dryers should be banned from open plan toilets:

“ ‘So, if you're in there as a child with a hearing impairment ... they suddenly are completely cut off from everything else. Not just from each other, but from everything else that's going on, because the volume of the hand-dryers, I would say, are probably about 120 decibels. And that's across the city, which is the equivalent of, you know, a plane taking off, and they are anti-social and they are a menace ...’ ”

Anne and Toney discussed the fire doors in their school, which opened onto the refuge points designed to protect Disabled staff and students in the event of a fire; the doors were very heavy and therefore difficult for Disabled children to open. Other professionals talked about complications with their schools' emergency evacuation plans, where there were no evacuation lifts.

References were made to specific schools with large numbers of students with mobility impairments, in which evacuating students within a suitable timeframe was envisaged to be problematic. Further, despite having risk assessments in place during lessons to assess the activities a child can safely take part in, or those which another person can be directed to do safely, professionals expressed concern about the use of certain tools in science classrooms, metalwork rooms and woodworking spaces. Pieces of equipment, such as a big saw, which would not necessarily be height adjustable, were given as examples.

Anne went on to explain why her school did not have rise and fall tables in every room:

“ ‘... a lot of that is down to cost, that isn't taken into consideration in a school budget. So, yes, we do receive extra funding for children with additional needs, but that is to cover the support that they need. It doesn't cover equipment for the school ... as a school, we are very lucky, we've got a very supportive Head, who does fund as much as we can.’ ”

Despite unfavourable funding decisions, in this example the school did improvise and provided Zahra with a stool to put her feet on, which was helpful. The height of the school chairs meant that Zahra could not otherwise sit at a desk comfortably; sitting on a smaller chair was not effective because she could not reach the desk.

Another professional reported that the Department for Education was effectively 'getting rid' of access standards and sending out the message that they were not necessary:

“ ‘Because they're going back to this idea of SEN schools, rather than mainstream schools. They've reduced the size of classrooms, which inherently means that, actually, it's not accessible. Because it's not just about wheelchair use, it's about – people have support workers in those rooms. If you've got two children, or three children, with a support worker, that's three more adults in a room that's now got smaller!’ ”

This opinion is supported by changes to the construction specifications published by the Department for Education. In 2014, the Department published Building Bulletin 102, specifically about designing buildings for Disabled children and children with 'Special Educational Needs,' containing information about both mainstream and special needs schools (DfE, 2014). This has now been withdrawn and replaced by Building Bulletin 104, which is concerned only with special needs schools (DfE, 2015a), which indicates further bias towards special education.

The mainstream school that Peter worked in was a 'new build,' but nevertheless there were times when Disabled pupils required significant physical help from their friends and from teaching assistants to get through doorways and manoeuvre around the school. Although their support needs were generally met, Peter thought that the support provided was reactive, and not available as standard. He commented that he would much prefer students to have the independence in school to prepare them for 'real life.'

When professionals were asked to comment on the availability of accessible signs in their schools, one Access Consultant said:

“ ‘That's always a problem – the signage is the thing that drops off the end, because they're running out of money ... if you're building a new school, you're trying to build it so it's fit for purpose for the next 20 to 30 years. Doesn't always happen.’ ”

According to the same professional, having embossed signs was a requirement of schools under building regulations, but not Braille or audio signs. She said:

“ ‘... but the difficulty is, when you don't get specialty access people involved, a lot of people don't even realise, so they're just putting in what the signage manufacturers give them.’ ”

She continued:

“ ‘... it's a battle to get the embossed, so I just work on getting the total contrast, getting the embossed lettering, and getting synthesised signs, so that they're actually not as complicated, because quite often people try to become designers with their signage, and they end up being unreadable.’ ”

The discussion indicated that, in contrast to practice in new build schools, schools that were housed in old listed buildings responded to the need for appropriate signage in a more reactive way, and erected accessible signs on a case by case basis only. Professional participants agreed that appropriate signage quite often benefitted parents and visitors to the schools as well as pupils, and that pupils usually learned quickly how to best navigate a building and developed patterns of moving around. The participants expressed a view, therefore, that school signs should be kept simple whilst also maintaining British Standards, adhering, for instance, to the Sign Design Guide published by the Sign Design Society and the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) (The Sign Design Society, 2014).

Anne and Toney described how, in their particular school, colour contrasting had been used to prepare for the arrival of a pupil with a visual impairment:

‘... the retained part of the building is a different colour, so it’s a lighter shade, than the newer part of the building. So, the change in light really affects his visual impairment. So, what we’ve done is, we’ve started to darken the posts, so that there’s a clear, almost, guideline for this pupil to walk down and out, and then obviously have the independence.’

The professional participants went on to talk about the fact that poor acoustics could present real difficulties for students with hearing impairments and those affected by neurodiversity. This particularly affected lunchtimes, play times and physical education lessons, which typically took place in large spaces; the sound in these rooms would bounce back and forth. Some schools had acoustic boards in place, but these would only be erected in dining rooms and entrance foyers, not in sports halls, which restricted a child’s independence to move around the whole school freely. In some schools, pupils with hearing impairments were able to have their lunch in a smaller room, along with their friends, as an alternative. Whilst on the surface this appears to be an appropriate solution, it does restrict a child’s ability to share lunchtimes with the wider student population.

In the online questionnaire, 50 professionals responded to the question of whether school buildings and the physical environment of their schools were accessible and usable for Disabled children, considering aspects such as lighting, noise and temperature as well as physical features. Of those who answered, 13 (26%) said ‘Yes,’ 12 (24%) said ‘No,’ and 25 (50%) said ‘Sometimes.’

The accompanying comments, as in the following example, highlighted a number of barriers:

‘Some schools are in very old buildings, which it is not possible to make fully accessible. Others (mostly secondary schools) have buildings with 1 or 2 storeys and do not have lifts. Even those with lifts do not have fire egress that is suitable for pupils with mobility needs.’

Analysis of the findings

In principle, Accessibility Plans ought to enable improved access to the physical environment of schools. However, the findings of this chapter show that Accessibility Plans do not always comply with legal requirements, suggesting that current strategies are not working. The groups of Disabled young people and parents identified very similar physical barriers to each other within their schools, and in addition, when parents were negotiating with schools to remove the barriers to their children’s education, they had encountered a range of discriminatory attitudes. Mostly, parents felt that they were not understood and supported when it came to difficulties with sensory overload for their children who were on the autistic spectrum. Nevertheless, Sarah represented the determination of most parent participants in confronting such challenges:

‘... an inclusive school is a great benefit to everybody – not just children with disabilities and additional needs, but it’s a great benefit to all of us, to share in our humanity ... it just makes us into better people, doesn’t it? And these are foundational years. Why would we – and this is what I’ve often said – why would we, if we want to make society a more inclusive place, why would we leave our schools to last?’

In the focus groups, there was a lack of understanding about fire evacuation procedures relating to Disabled pupils, and alarmingly this was also the case amongst professional staff. Professionals generally agreed that new builds were much more accessible for Disabled young people when compared with some older Victorian buildings, made of stone, with narrow doorways and thick, heavy doors. They recognised that when the older buildings were designed, schools had not been fully focused on how pupils with a range of impairments would be able to access and participate in school life. Of course, historically, since the beginning of mass schooling, the design of school buildings has actively and intentionally excluded the access rights of Disabled people. Professional participants discussed particular challenges, including prohibitively expensive costs when extending or modifying existing schools to make them fully accessible. They also frequently attributed the problem to a period of extremely stretched school budgets. Interestingly, this interpretation was rejected by other professionals who acknowledged that even new build schools were not always as accessible as they should be. This is a worrying trend, revealing inconsistency and a lack of commitment to ensuring that school buildings meet the access needs of Disabled people. This notion was reinforced by the analysis of the JPIMedia data unit, which demonstrated that mainstream schools in England are now the least inclusive in the United Kingdom (JPIMedia Data Unit, cited in Milmo and Stanton, 2019).

Furthermore, professional participants argued that whilst some schools were better than others in meeting the needs of pupils with mobility impairments, the needs of students with sensory and communication impairments and learning difficulties were largely unmet. It could be argued that, in this way, schools are reinforcing a Disability hierarchy in which the needs of people with physical impairments are assumed to be easier to meet than those with less visible impairments that require imaginative or creative responses, and which require further consultation with Disabled people themselves.

Some professionals showed enthusiasm about the prospect of having the voices of Disabled children and their families heard through a process of consultation and collaboration, to help build schools that are fully accessible. This would present an alternative to the current model which only seems to invite contributions from members of senior leadership teams.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined participants' perspectives on a range of barriers that restrict equal access to the built environments of schools. Although each of the three groups focused on different sets of barriers, the participants were in agreement about the existence of the same types of barriers. Whilst parents were confronted with additional attitudinal barriers when negotiating with schools to make the physical environment more accessible for their children, professional participants said they were committed to minimising the impact of physical challenges on pupils, despite budget constraints. The next chapter will examine participants' experiences with regard to learning and teaching.

5

CHAPTER FIVE Teaching, Learning and Assessment

Key findings:

- Disabled young participants reported that support received in relation to assessments was unpredictable and inconsistent.
- Disabled young people talked about teachers' negative attitudes and lack of understanding of their diverse needs.
- Parents of Disabled young people felt that some schools chose to dismiss official reports outlining children's needs in order to avoid taking responsibility for the provision of support and alternative arrangements.
- Parents were of the view that teaching assistants could be very competent and helpful, but that provision in this regard was inconsistent.
- Parents discussed the inaccessibility of the school curriculum and the physical environment of learning spaces.
- Education professionals cited a number of disabling practices within school examinations processes.
- Professionals acknowledged that exams had come to be about measuring academic achievement only, rather than showcasing skills.
- Professionals recognised the discrimination faced by some students when their medical appointments were timetabled during school lessons, as well as that experienced by some students forced into 'part-time' timetables.

The findings across the three groups

Disabled young participants shared their experiences of being in the classroom and participating in learning and teaching activities, including experiences of exams. Students reported that they had received, to date, various forms of additional assessment support, including extra time, rest breaks, separate rooms, reader, scribe, prompt, laptop, spell checker and digital clock. However, they also shared that the requested arrangements were not always forthcoming. When Michelle took her exams, for instance, only some of her requests for support were granted. Similarly, not all of Henry's requested assessment arrangements were put in place. He was asked if he knew the reason for the lack of support at exam time; he responded:

“ ‘I don't know. I guess the school didn't like me.’ ”

Lucy's teacher had supported her with exam preparation for three months, and she had been allocated double the usual time to sit her General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) exams. However, Lucy had not been given additional time to complete her assessed coursework; instead, she had to sit and type like all of the other students, without a break. She had experienced aches and pains. Instead of making reasonable adjustments, teachers would comment on her poor spelling. Lucy expressed anger:

“ ‘... if it were English, I would understand. In English and Literature, it's about spelling, but not in Science, or History, or Social Care.’ ”

Teachers had suggested she use a thesaurus, but Lucy did not understand how she could use a thesaurus when she was not able to spell the initial reference word. Lucy did not feel supported with learning logs either, where she was required to log on to the school network and email work to her teachers. Lucy felt that her school gave little attention to students who might have difficulty accessing the internet.

Brian reported that no additional support had been provided during his exams. In one instance, he had been given the wrong information about the deadline for submitting an assignment; he was told the wrong time. Upon trying to submit his work, he missed the actual deadline by one minute and the online system would not accept his submission. Brian failed the assessment. Similarly, Elaine's school did not have a student support team, and she felt that her teachers were unsupportive of her needs, specifically at exam time and during English lessons.

Duncan could not understand why he had been instructed not to use a word processor during a Maths exam:

“ ‘What is the point of that? Other than possibly to stress out anyone trying to use a computer. And of course, when you've got an exam that you can barely deal with at the best of times, you know, being told, “Here's a book. Here's an exam you don't understand. Spend several hours alone with it.”’ ”

The young participants went on to describe how their own frustrations and anxieties played out in exam situations. In relation to his 'illegible' handwriting, Duncan said:

“ ‘Toss that in with social ostracisation, constant anxiety, and a voice in your head repeatedly telling you you're not good enough – it does make getting through even the basic lessons difficult, let alone an exam.’ ”

It appeared that having his particular form of difference singled out, coupled with a general perception of difference as something negative or lacking, led Duncan to internalise the resulting feeling of inadequacy. He continued:

“ ‘Whenever I went to an English lesson, I basically just permanently felt like I was going to fail. I honestly – when it came to the exam, I barely even put anything on the paper, because there wasn't any point.’ ”

Duncan clarified that as a student with autism he could not relate to the content of English lessons. No reasonable adjustments were made for him in this respect:

“ ‘... the teachers were saying, “How does this make you feel? How does this make you feel? How does this make you feel?” Ambivalent. I don't feel anything. I don't think even the exam designers even understand what it looks like, what it looks like they're trying to write. Because they say, “Do this,” and to me, it looks like they're asking ... for an exam on social skills, for a start, which is difficult enough.’ ”

In addition, Duncan felt that when the school was arranging extra exam time as part of his access provision, no consideration was given to the fact that writing an English essay, using pattern recognition, was a completely different task for him than for someone else, and it would take him longer to complete.

The Disabled young people also talked about teachers' unrealistic expectations of their exam results; instead of an honest appraisal of strengths as well as weaknesses, they were either given a false sense of security and hope, or discouraged without any constructive feedback. Michelle stated:

“ ‘When I was in English, in Year 10 and Year 11 at secondary school, I felt like I was doing well. However, when I got to exam results day, I'd got a three. And I personally feel that I was made to believe by my teacher that I was going to pass.’ ”

In contrast, Russ reported:

“ ‘I was sitting my Functional Skills Level 1 test, Maths and English. It was nearly my exam day, and they were basically like – all the practice papers that I did, I failed every single one – and they were like, “Russ, I think you're going to fail this.” And they were, sort of, running me down. But then it actually came to the result day, then I passed it.’ ”

Young participants' accounts when describing their pedagogical experiences showed that the support they received from teaching staff was inconsistent. Whilst some staff were supportive, others simply lacked the ability to recognise students' diverse needs; they were then unable to make the appropriate adjustments. Often staff lacked the understanding, for example, that students might have memory difficulties which could be triggered by anxiety, or emotional sensitivities relating to their impairments. They often failed to notice, for example, that students might feel uncomfortable in crowded or noisy places. Brian wanted the staff to know:

“ ‘I will struggle with this. I do have a difficulty around some of the stuff we do. I just want them to know that so that they can understand that I do have that issue, instead of thinking that I’m purposely not doing something or I’m trying to be a delinquent or something.’ ”

Brian recounted a time when he took a short break during a long class of over three hours, to play a game to get himself ‘out of the zone,’ as he was losing focus. He was penalised:

“ ‘And then I had this staff teacher come over to me and be like, “What are you doing?” And I was in the state of mind – I didn’t care what they think – and I literally just said, “I’m playing solitaire.” And so, it ended up in that situation of him leaving the class to talk to the higher manager, saying that that’s not what I’m meant to be doing. Because I was on solitaire for five minutes in a three-hour class.’ ”

Furthermore, Brian was very dissatisfied with how little communication there was between staff and students. He had three teachers who were in favour of independent studying; they actively discouraged the students from interacting with each other by punishing them if they talked.

Since the staff also failed to communicate with Brian during those lessons, he had no way of finding out about the content of classes he had missed or assignments that were due:

“ ‘I had explained the situation, but I wasn’t actually given anything to try and catch up, to the point where I didn’t even know what I was meant to be doing at that class, because I had done all the work before that. They didn’t tell me what to do next. And it caused panic to build up and build up, and panic and panic and panic, but I never got the chance to finish it. So, because of that, I think I failed the entire assignment ... And, because of that, right now, as it stands, I’ve failed nearly every assignment I’ve had to do, because I haven’t been explained it completely. And I’ve done about three or four. So, yeah, it’s now got to the point where I am nearly panicking every day because of it, which is not good. But there’s nothing I can do about it, because the staff don’t understand.’ ”

The Disabled young participants also gave examples of scenarios in which they had been misunderstood, shouted at, scrutinised, confined, and even humiliated. Zara shared her traumatic experience:

“ ‘... because they didn’t understand. I was sitting there telling them what I wanted – what I needed – and I couldn’t see the board and all that. And they said, “Oh, there’s nothing wrong.” And I’d had eye tests and all of that, and they said, “There’s nothing wrong with you. You’re just a trouble-maker,” and all that. And all the kids knew there was something wrong with me. A lot of them didn’t go near me because of it. The teachers didn’t know how to deal with it.’ ”

In terms of physical barriers to learning, Disabled young people reported that even when school lifts were working, it could take a fair amount of time to access upper floors. They said they would frequently arrive late for lessons upstairs, which was often the result of key operated lifts.

The physical inaccessibility of the teaching environment was also frequently a matter of size. The small size of some classrooms regularly forced Carley to retreat to a corner, separate from other children. In the same focus group, Carley's mother expressed her upset:

“ ‘So, you’re sat there with a child in a wheelchair and it’s, “Oh, how are we gonna get her in the classroom?” So, they either have to sit her by the door, which is really, really good fun when the kids are throwing pens and bits of paper because all they can see is the back of your head. So, you can’t have a face-to-face conversation with the children, you can’t join in the conversations because all they’ve got is the back of your head because there’s nowhere to turn. So, you’re isolated in a classroom of 30-odd children and a teacher that’s stood right next to you because he’s on the whiteboard asking questions.’ ”

Parent focus group participants pointed out that some schools did not provide lifts to upstairs classrooms at all. Any children unable to access the upper levels would be placed together in a single group in a downstairs classroom. The group would include children of mixed ages and abilities, ranging from year 7 pupils to those in sixth form; some of the pupils would have additional needs and others may have injured themselves playing sports. Their lessons would be handed to them in written format. One parent observed:

“ ‘It’s not even teaching. It was just literally giving them paper and saying, “This is your lesson. This is what you’re expected to do today,” and that was it. I don’t even think it was a qualified teacher in there. I honestly think it was a TA. It’s shocking, absolutely shocking.’ ”

Parents also discussed the demands of the school curriculum. Hannah wanted to have a flexible arrangement in place for her son’s double Maths lesson, but the ‘Special Educational Needs’ (SEN) department did not support her view:

“ ‘So, I said, “Could he sit in the classroom for the first period and then go and work in the SEN department?” And she said, “Oh, I really don’t think we could do that because we have this quality first teaching policy which is to maximise the amount of time that the children spend face-to-face with the teacher.”’ ”

In her interview Jean gave an account of a school’s lack of understanding of the need to be flexible. Although her son’s Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) clearly stated that the school was to give him information in small, manageable pieces, staff would often overwhelm him with too much at once. On one occasion he was punished, by losing points, for forgetting to do a piece of homework. Jean said:

“ ‘And I had a to-ing and fro-ing with one of the teachers the other week, saying, “Have you actually read his EHCP and his pupil passport? Have you any idea of his conditions? Because clearly you haven’t, because you’d know that you can’t just tell him to do something. It has to be written down. If you want him to do something that’s not standard, and is not going on the app, you need to email me so that I can remind him. Otherwise, you’ve got no chance that he will remember ... By the time he’s done, if it’s his second lesson of the day, and you’ve given him some homework verbally, by the time he’s done three more lessons, had lunch, walked home ... it’s gone, long gone.”’ ”

It is worrying and disheartening to learn that little has changed for Disabled young people over the last 13 years or so. Similar frustrations were shared by Disabled young people and their parents in a report commissioned by the then Disability Rights Commission in 2006 (Lewis, Parsons and Robertson, 2006). The 2006 report found that Disabled young people and parents were invariably very aware of their own support needs, and wanted to be involved in decision-making processes when it came to reasonable adjustments, yet often their views and experiences were overridden.

Manjit's experience was a further example of a professional health report being dismissed by school staff. An educational psychologist had assessed Manjit's son as having increased levels of anxiety with his learning, and the report stated that when he was not able to concentrate and manage his learning, he would start to demonstrate challenging behaviours as a way to escape. Notwithstanding this information, Manjit discovered that her son's one-to-one support had been cut by his school, even though the school still received funding to keep the arrangement in place. In her son's review, the teacher had told Manjit:

““Because we're lacking in support, there's no one with him in the afternoon.””

Manjit commented:

“‘Clearly, it's in black and white that he has high levels of anxiety. Him not having a structured afternoon and not having someone one-to-one to prompt him all the time, I can imagine what that child must be going through without somebody being there ...’”

In the focus groups, parents expressed the general view that some teaching assistants were very competent and very helpful, but that they were not necessarily trained in relevant areas, and provision of support in this regard was unpredictable and inconsistent. Jan commented on the importance of allowing pupils to have continuity with their teaching assistants, especially when a positive relationship was formed:

“‘Carley had one, and the school didn't like the bond, so they took her off her. And it's them bonds that teaching assistants and the child need for the child to feel confident enough to come forward and say, “Look, I'm not happy with this. Can you help me approach it in a more easier way?” Rather than having to come home to Mum and say, “I don't like it because I can't get into the bathroom,” because the children, or the teachers, use the Disabled toilet, and by the time they've finished the bathroom floors are soaking wet, they stink, or someone has weed on the floor. It's not very nice.’”

Matt's teaching assistant supported him with his emotions when he was required to interpret poetry and text during English lessons. His mother, Jean, was critical of the English syllabus:

“‘It's the maddest thing – they're doing Romeo and Juliet. And it's the worst possible thing they could give an autistic child to study, is Romeo and Juliet [laughing]! You know, it's like, “Really?” Why can't we do something like Hamlet or Macbeth, where there's not really any sort of emotion attached to it, as such? Or something – you know, Julius Caesar, or something ...? But we're doing Romeo and Juliet, so that's interesting, to hear some of his interpretations of that. He doesn't understand subtleties of emotions ... so he's not going to read what the poet's thinking or feeling.’”

Jean talked about another instance where the school failed to show sensitivity to Matt's impairment-related need to experience minimal change in his routine. Matt chose his GCSE options last year and he and Jean had met to discuss them with the subject leads, the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO), and the head of year. In the meeting, the staff agreed to accommodate Matt's chosen options; however, a few days later, Jean received an email informing her that the options would not fit together on the timetable and Matt needed to choose again. Although Jean did not believe the decision to be influenced by Matt's impairments, she was still frustrated:

“‘Why give us that, “Yes, you can do this,” if they can't? They know that, for Matt, changing things isn't the best thing ... because their brains work on, “That's what I'm doing.” And then suddenly you turn around with, “Actually, you can't.” And I don't think they quite understand that it's not as simple for an autistic child to change something as it is for a neurotypical child ... He wanted to do Art, and that was the one that he had to drop. And after he'd had to change it, he lost all interest in doing Art. He wouldn't even participate in the lesson. This is a child who spends two or three hours a night drawing.’”

A number of parent participants were told that their children were ‘difficult’ and ‘challenging,’ with certain schools stating they did not have the resources to take their child full time and were not obligated to do so. One parent noted that across the United Kingdom, it was common practice for parents to be told:

““We don’t want your child at school all the time, so please sign this contract to confirm that you agree that we don’t want your child here all the time.””

Parents explained that some of their children only attended school two or three days per week under a ‘part-time contract.’ Others would only attend for 90 minutes in the afternoon. Eveline shared that, every day, she was required to take her son to school and collect him 90 minutes later. She described the impact it had on her:

““I can’t do anything. I can’t have a life. I can’t work or anything like that.””

Kevin, another parent, thought that the Department for Education was ‘cracking down’ on this kind of activity, but that parents often felt they had no choice but to sign the contracts.

In an interview another parent described how his son was forced to leave school because the school did not understand his needs:

““The consequences are dire – it broke him. And here we are 18 months down the line. He will occasionally go out of the house, but he’s out of education; he hasn’t been to school now since May 2017. The local authority here [a second local authority] ... send a tutor round a couple of times a week, but he won’t engage with them, hardly at all. So, it’s devastating, what’s happened to him. Now his whole life has changed, and our lives have changed, and it’s horrible.””

The latest figures from the Department for Education, released in August 2019, show that ‘Fixed period exclusions rates for pupils with special education needs (SEN) increased slightly, driven by those with SEN support and those in state-funded secondary schools. However, the proportion of exclusions accounted for by pupils with SEN has fallen – 45 per cent (down from 47 per cent) of all permanent exclusions and 43 per cent of all fixed period exclusions (down from 45).’ (DfE, 2019a: 5). This information is not new, and the data has been referenced most recently in the 2019 National Audit Office report to support pupils with special educational needs and disabilities in England, and the Timpson Review of School Exclusion, published in May 2019 (Timpson, 2019). These publications use the previous data from the Department for Education (2019a), however the commentary contained in the two documents is striking.

For similar reasons relating to a lack of understanding, Alex had decided to home educate two of their three children. School had deemed their son Nicholas to be ‘ineducable.’ Alex insisted:

““My son’s doing a Chemistry GCSE right now, a year early. This isn’t how I judge his education. I’m not on an academic achievement drive with what we do. But I’m mentioning it because he’s 14, just 14, and because that is one way, at least – because it’s relevant to the school system – of showing that my son obviously is perfectly educable.””

Alex had spent some extra time with their second child, Paula, who was finding it difficult to keep up at school:

““Paula caught up and exceeded their expectations ... So, whatever was distracting her at school certainly wasn’t doing it at home.””

Alex felt that the only reason that their third child, Louise, was able to access school education was that she happened to be able to learn in the way the system wanted her to learn:

““... that ends up being what it is. It’s just a coincidence of whether you can or whether you can’t, in that sense.””

Alex emphasised that the significance of home education for a child with autism was that it was personal and individual, and it focused on social development.

Emilie was one of the very few parents in the field study who was satisfied with the way her son's needs were accommodated at mainstream school. Emilie reported that her son did not follow the usual curriculum; instead teachers relayed Maths, English and other subjects using pictures, posters and books as alternatives:

“ ‘Otherwise he'd just sit under that table all day, reading books. So, they had to do the curriculum specially for him ...’ ”

In the online questionnaire, parents were asked whether they felt that the lessons and teaching arrangements at their schools were physically accessible for their children. Of 129 respondents, 70 (54.3%) said 'Yes,' 29 (22.5%) said 'No,' and 30 (23.3%) said 'Sometimes.' When asked about the accessibility of the content, structure and delivery of the curriculum for their children, 108 parents answered the question: 11 (10.2%) said 'Totally accessible,' 47 (43.5%) said 'Very accessible,' 35 (32.4%) said 'Not very accessible,' and 15 (13.9%) said 'Not at all accessible.' When asked whether they felt a broad and balanced curriculum had been provided, differentiated and adjusted to meet the needs of individuals and their preferred learning styles, of 109 parents who responded, 42 (38.5%) said 'Yes,' 47 (43.1%) said 'No,' and 20 (18.3%) said they did not know.

Parents were asked whether suitably trained staff or teaching assistants were provided to support their children; 99 answered, of which 35 (35.4%) said 'Yes,' 20 (20.2%) said 'No,' 32 (32.3%) said 'Sometimes,' and 12 (12.1%) did not know. Another question asked was, 'Are the main staff who work with your child/children fully aware of their needs?' Of 100 respondents, 47 (47%) said 'Yes,' 18 (18%) said 'No,' 32 (32%) said 'Sometimes,' and three (3%) did not know. Parents were asked, 'As far as you're aware, with regards to exam provision, do school staff follow the advice of local authority services, such as specialist teacher advisers and SEND advisers, and appropriate health professionals from the NHS Trusts?' Of 100 who answered, 28 (28%) said 'Yes,' 21 (21%) said 'No,' 11 (11%) said 'Sometimes,' and 40 (40%) did not know.

An overwhelming number of accompanying statements to the online questions were negative. Parents felt ignored and dismissed, with damaging effects on their children's confidence and mental health.

One parent wrote:

“ ‘School refusing to differentiate. Very limited adjustment, no provision for sensory overload, teachers punish SEN pupil's behaviour instead of working on what caused outburst etc. Pupils put in isolation all day with no teaching or behaviour support. Too little support for and from SENCO department. Mainstream teachers ignore EHCP and school focus plan. Most SEN pupils have very little work in books. No handouts or worksheets given.’ ”

In the field study, the education professionals echoed some of the concerns that had been mentioned in the other two sets of focus groups. Some of the professionals referred to disabling practices during exam times. Andrea criticised specifically the lack of availability of exam papers in British Sign Language (BSL); she said she did not understand why in England children with hearing impairments were expected to take exams in a language they could not hear, and most could not read. She advocated for a move towards the Scottish system, in which children were able to take certain GCSEs in BSL, and where there was evidence that children do much better using their first language.

Anne talked about her experiences whereby exam boards had not accepted papers from children who had used a computer or a scribe, even where the children in question physically struggled to write. Anne felt that such practices were discriminatory and were testing children on their handwriting. Toney also commented on the inadequacy of certain exam boards, such as JCQ and AQA, for only offering papers in four font types. Anne reported that certain examination boards did not produce exam papers in Braille. Toney followed this up by observing that, in these cases, children were given the option of using a reader and a scribe, which in Toney's opinion could add extra stress and tension to an already pressurised exam situation. Toney said that in these instances, the school would expect students to get through the exams, and for the school to achieve the desired grade or measure of success, instead of outcomes being about life skills.

The professional participants were in agreement that instead of showcasing skills, exams had become a measure of academic achievement, attainment and were about meeting targets. One professional articulated this well:

“ ‘I think, for me, one of the biggest issues has been the change that wants to see achievement, in terms of exam levels, as opposed to achievement in terms of development. That was something that was muted, and I know that some children are never going to achieve ... GCSEs and whatever. For me, it’s about achievement, rather than that.’ ”

Participants described a particularly destructive mentality present in some schools:

“ ‘Disabled people are often viewed as bringing the numbers down.’ ”

These schools then appear to ‘lose’ certain children coming up to exam time:

“ ‘... and they’re saying they’re putting them in a nice, special school to assist them with their learning, and basically they’re taking the numbers out so that their achievements go up.’ ”

The professionals suggested that as an alternative the curriculum should be guided towards creative learning and life skills:

“ ‘... is education about learning the numbers, or is education about that child being able to put his coat on independently tomorrow, or next month, or next year? For him, that’s a massive thing, not whether or not you can count from one to ten.’ ”

Margaret, a Teaching Support Assistant, explained how she felt the education system was completely failing Disabled children transitioning from GCSEs to A-levels, at which point workloads become incredibly heavy and it becomes much more difficult to balance study skills with organisational ability:

“ ‘... you teach students with a disability, not just autism but any learning disability, then they are at a disadvantage to start with. And teachers can’t always fill that gap because they have 20 students in the lesson, and there are not enough of us to provide one-to-one or whatever. We can provide emotional support but we can’t – we are not trained teachers ... and parents also find that incredibly difficult because their child has done well at GCSE, or middle at GCSE, and they’re expecting their child to progress onto the next level, where that next level can prove almost impossible.’ ”

The professional participants acknowledged the educational and social inequalities faced by many students when they were forced to miss lessons to attend medical appointments or therapy sessions, or when they simply had to leave ten minutes early to avoid the rush of the corridors:

“ ‘All those things erode the time that children are actually getting the teaching.’ ”

The professionals discussed cases where students had missed an important piece of homework and had been penalised as a result, or where teachers’ attitudes were:

“ ‘“Oh well, don’t worry. It’s not like theirs is important anyway ...”’ ”

and they were unwilling to revisit teaching materials for Disabled students.

The issue of 'part-time contracts' and timetabling was talked about amongst the professionals, in terms of children missing out on important aspects of schooling as a result of limitations in resources. The professionals recognised that schools often anticipated extra work in terms of making provision for Disabled students and did not adhere to their legal duties. Participants unanimously agreed that such practices were unfair and discriminatory and should stop.

In the online questionnaire, professionals were asked whether they felt that lessons and teaching arrangements in their schools were physically accessible for Disabled pupils. Of 49 respondents, 14 (28.5%) said 'Yes,' eight (16.3%) said 'No,' and 27 (55.1%) said 'Sometimes.' When asked, 'How accessible are the content, structure and delivery of the curriculum for Disabled pupils and students in the school(s) you work with?' 35 professionals responded: five (14.3%) said 'Totally accessible,' 12 (34.3%) said 'Very accessible,' 17 (48.6%) said 'Not very accessible,' and one (2.9%) said 'Not at all accessible.' When asked, 'Has a broad and balanced curriculum been provided, differentiated, and adjusted to meet the needs of individuals and their preferred learning styles?' 35 responded: ten (28.6%) said 'Yes,' two (5.7%) said 'No,' 19 (54.3%) said 'Sometimes,' and four (11.4%) did not know.

Professionals were asked, 'Are suitably trained staff or teaching assistants provided?' to which 31 responded. Twelve (38.7%) said 'Yes,' one (3.2%) said 'No,' and 18 (58.1%) said 'Sometimes.' Another question was, 'Are the main staff who work with Disabled pupils and students fully aware of their needs?' Of the 31 who answered, 15 (48.4%) said 'Yes,' three (9.7%) said 'No,' 11 (35.5%) said 'Sometimes,' and two (6.5%) did not know. Professionals were asked, 'As far as you're aware, with regards to exam provision, do school staff follow the advice of local authority services, such as specialist teacher advisers and SEND advisers, and appropriate health professionals from the NHS Trusts?' Of 31 respondents, 21 (67.7%) said 'Yes,' one (3.2%) said 'No,' six (19.4%) said 'Sometimes,' and three (9.7%) did not know. The following accompanying statement summarised the general tone of the professionals' written responses:

“ ‘Turnover of staff because of poor pay and conditions, management bullying and league table culture is leading to less expertise and a hostile environment for disabled students in many schools.’ ”

Analysis of the findings

The young people participating in the project were most concerned about inequalities experienced in the context of teaching, learning and assessments, particularly when it came to examinations; they were critical of schools for failing to create a level playing field.

Almost all of the Disabled young participants felt that they were better supported in college than in their secondary schools. At college they could stay in one class for their lessons, whereas in school they had been required to move around from class to class. This had presented challenges and they felt staff had lacked patience. Disabling practices in their secondary schools had affected the Disabled young participants' confidence, mental health and sense of wellbeing. The practices had also resulted in instances of bullying and discrimination. As parents suggested in their focus groups, these early experiences had the potential to 'break' their children socially and at times emotionally.

Parents' observations were consistent with the accounts of the Disabled young people. Malika shared her daughter's experience:

“ ‘... college work is a bit more to their ability, to their level. In school, it was more challenging because they've got 30 children ... The problem is they used to take them out to give them some help with a few other people, but obviously they will have different needs. She just felt she wasn't fitting in with loads of children in the class. The main teacher had known her well. She obviously had to go out of the class a lot more to get taught different things ... But college, like I said, it's slightly different. They actually treat them quite nice. The problem is, that's what we need for a longer time now and that's what we haven't got ...’ ”

The parent groups were particularly dismayed with professionals' discriminatory attitudes and insensitivity when it came to making reasonable adjustments for their children.

Professionals agreed that secondary schools presented more challenges for Disabled pupils, partly because of the large group sizes, but also the time and energy children needed to spend travelling around the schools. Professionals shared the view that having in place an effective Accessibility Plan would help schools make advance preparations for classroom support for individual students, whether through the use of resources or by making adjustments to their teaching methods. They felt that Disabled pupils would then be able to access their lessons and achieve equally to their non-disabled peers. The professionals suggested that a good Accessibility Plan would be a helpful tool for teachers when it came to planning their day.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored a range of disabling practices, from different perspectives, in the educational journeys of Disabled young people. It has also revealed a number of discriminatory practices; most worrying of all are the instances in which parents have been coerced into signing letters accepting 'part-time' contracts or endorsing their child's non-attendance. Furthermore, Disabled young people and parents experienced blatant refusals by schools to make reasonable adjustments with regard to assessments, particularly in the case of examinations. The study also revealed concerns amongst professionals relating to increasing staff turnover, growing stress levels, a reduction in the number of teaching assistants, and bullying from management. Professionals recognised the existence of almost all of the barriers and that they were discriminatory in practice. Suggestions were made for making teaching, learning and assessment environments more inclusive. The next chapter will examine the social inclusion of Disabled young people in school communities.

6 CHAPTER SIX Social Inclusion

Key findings:

- Disabled young participants said they did not receive appropriate support during school organised field trips.
- Disabled young people encountered social barriers when trying to feel included in the social community of their school.
- Parents of Disabled young people cited prejudicial attitudes, transport issues, lack of trained staff, finances, and inaccessible activities as barriers to their children's participation in school social events.
- Against their children's wishes, parents were frequently asked by schools to accompany their children on field trips.
- Almost all of the parents taking part in the field study had children who had experienced bullying.
- Education professionals acknowledged that Disabled students' access to full social participation was patchy.
- All of the participants identified Physical Education (PE) as an area that presented significant challenges.

The findings across the three groups

Disabled young people were invited to talk about their social experiences whilst at school or college, and to share how included they felt in their learning community. Participants started by commenting on school organised field trips. One participant, Russ, was not able to attend such events because his family was not in a financial position to support him during the outings. Duncan managed shorter trips, one or two days in length, but he felt that longer trips of more than a week, away from his support networks, were likely to result in a breakdown, which was a situation he particularly wished to avoid overseas. Likewise, for Henry, the length of school trips was a key factor in decision-making, especially as he did not feel comfortable spending extended periods of time in smaller groups of children who he either did not know or did not get on with. Henry revealed:

“ ‘Most people, when I was in school, weren't actually friends. They were just usually people that bullied me.’ ”

Another participant, Carley, had been on school trips before, but had to travel in taxis with a teacher instead of joining her friends on the coaches.

Brian had a negative experience during one of his first field trips, with his support being cut for a time in the middle of the trip. However, he was determined to keep participating:

“ ‘But it never stopped me ... I kept going on every trip. I've gone to trips a lot of times, but nearly every time there's been an issue of it, because of the support, or not putting something in place for me.’ ”

Brian's philosophy was:

“ ‘... if I didn't go to it [the trip], then I wouldn't know if there would be correct support or not. So, telling myself, “I can go this time,” or never stopping myself from doing it ... But it's also, like, good parenting, because Mum's never told me, “You shouldn't go on that trip,” or “I think it's a bad idea.” She's always tried to encourage me to do things, get out of the house ...’ ”

With respect to friendships and inclusion in the school environment, Lucy described how she had sat in the corner in her school building because of her experience of bullying. She was socially excluded within her school and had relatively few friends. Similarly, a new report entitled Special or Unique – Young People’s Attitudes to Disability, published by Disability Rights UK in 2019, found that Disabled pupils in mainstream schools were generally excluded from the larger social networks in their schools and had few friends (Odell, 2019). At college, Lucy faced a different barrier; she only had enough time to go and get her lunch and something to drink and then get back to the learning environment, which meant there was no time for her to socialise. Lucy explained that her inclusion in college life was also very limited because of the constant presence of her support worker:

“ ‘How can I make friends if I’ve got this shadow?’ ”

In a similar way, Linzy did not feel included in social or meal times at her school, because she needed support with cutting up her food.

Moni talked about her anxiety and the fact that she did not feel comfortable speaking out in a group. People around her did not seem to understand why she found it so difficult, which added to her discomfort. Henry also found it difficult to approach and speak to people, and he attributed this to his autism. He added:

“ ‘But if they started a conversation, maybe I’d get sort of nervous as well, unless they were talking about something ... I enjoy.’ ”

Brian felt that all the time and effort he had invested into making friends on the first day of college had gone to waste, as he was soon separated from them and put into a different group. Furthermore, his experience was that students were discouraged from interacting during lessons, which added to his feelings of isolation. In Duncan’s case, very few pupils from his primary school went on to attend the same secondary school as he did, and Duncan felt alone. He said that pupils in his year group were unable to relate to him, and he stated:

“ ‘And nobody seems to think, “Hang on, there could be something wrong.” They just start thinking, “What’s this maniac up to?” And people tend to just, sort of, back off from that, instinctively ... That does not help when your friendship group is, shall we say, limited to begin with.’ ”

It was difficult at first for Duncan to find a group of friends with whom he had things in common, but eventually he did find a circle of friends, and he expressed how easy it was to feel part of the group:

“ ‘... when you have a group of friends, it’s relatively easy to get back into the swing of things, because all you, sort of, do is just, sort of, go, “Oh, hey guys. What’s up?”’ ”

Another participant, Nancy, felt included in her college community and was proud of the friendships she had formed there, which continued via social media. Michelle had received emotional support via a professional service, and the skills she had learned through the service had helped her to make friends in the college environment.

The Disabled young people went on to discuss their participation in sport and PE lessons. Russ shared with the group that he was a talented golfer, and that he ran his own charitable project teaching golf and other sports in local schools. According to Russ, before taking up his hobby he was a shy and quiet person with high levels of anxiety; being able to talk to people about sport, and trying to understand their likes and dislikes, had really helped him to break the ice and make new friends at college. Carley reported that she had not been allowed to take part in PE exercises at school with her friends. She had been made to do the exercises outside the school building on her own. She said:

“ ‘I just couldn’t do what everyone else was doing, so I was left out.’ ”

Jan, Carley’s mother, was also critical of the inaccessible PE lessons. She said that the school’s reasoning for not allowing Carley to take part in PE was that she would not be able to get changed in a way that would tick health and safety boxes. Jan said:

“ ‘Seeing as she dresses herself every day, we couldn’t figure out why it was a health and safety issue. And I think it was the fact that they used to shove her in a little cupboard, which used to be a brush cupboard, to get changed ... And I think it was the fact that they could shut the door and not have to look at Carley getting changed. It’s sickening ... schools don’t recognise it. As far as they’re concerned, she’s in a wheelchair and she shouldn’t be doing PE ...’ ”

Jan then shared a contrasting experience in which she felt that health and safety should have been considered more carefully. During a particular PE lesson, Carley's teacher had forced Carley to climb up a climbing frame. Knowing that Carley lacked strength in her legs, the teacher had proceeded to push her up a ladder, and as a result of the strain on her arms Carley had broken her wrist.

Jan also shared that although Carley had taken part in a range of sports since she was very young, including wheelchair rugby, horse-riding, swimming, and wheelchair racing, when Carley had told her teacher that she aspired to be a PE coach, the teacher had laughed:

“How could someone in a wheelchair be a PE teacher?”

The school had been resistant to supporting Carley to achieve her goal. As part of her GCSE, Carley had been required to participate in competitive sports. She had travelled two or three hours to find a wheelchair rugby team, as the GCSE rules did not allow her to participate in a team with non-disabled young people. Jan had ended up paying for a number of lessons and sports weekends out of her own pocket, that she should not have had to pay for. Another mother wrote a disturbing story about her son's swimming lesson:

“His Learning Support Assistant once let him swim in PE shorts and dried him with his T-shirt – even though his PE kit and towel was in his bag. He has low muscle tone so she continued to shout at him whilst he cried as he couldn't hurry up and she counted to 10 or she was leaving him at the swimming pool. We were forever in school and the SENCO was inexperienced and there were a lot of lies.”

Parents of Disabled young people discussed a range of barriers preventing their children's full participation in social activities such as after-school clubs and field trips. Transport options with rigid timings limited what the children were able to do, even with the use of taxis and school transport. By the time the school bus could get Faisal's daughter to her after-school club, she had no more time to play. Jan argued that schools could be more imaginative with their choice of field trips, instead of going to the same places every year. Jan felt that no thought was given to who would be going on a particular trip, and how they would get there:

“Carley gets segregated to a teacher or a teaching assistant, in a taxi, and this trip or drive could be an hour, an hour-and-a-half away. And if your teaching assistant is not very nice, the trip there would have made it feel like three times longer.”

The majority of parents in the group expressed dissatisfaction about the availability of trained staff for social clubs and events. Lydia stated:

“... my daughter wants to be in after-school clubs. She needs somebody to go to the toilet. School is saying, “After 3:30 we can't provide that.” And then they're coming up with all these excuses why they can't, “Organisationally, it's too difficult” ... and the other thing is, they're saying, “Yeah, but this is a care issue and not an extra education issue,” which is just not true.”

Another parent, Kevin, felt that the absence of risk assessments was frequently used as an excuse to avoid taking Disabled children on trips.

The majority of the parents had been asked at some point to accompany their children on field trips in the absence of trained staff. Hannah had booked a room near to where her son's school group was camping:

“So, basically, they wanted me to be close, but what actually happened was – they wanted me to be on the spot for the whole time, accompanying the teacher and the whole class to the activities, because ... they didn't have the resources to provide a member of staff to go with my son if he left the rest of the group.”

Hannah's son had refused to go on further trips:

“... because he doesn't want to be the only child with his Mum hanging around.”

Likewise, Cathy had been required to accompany her son on every school trip to allow him to participate; she had even been forced to source childcare for her younger child to enable her to go.

With respect to further forms of social exclusion, in her interview, Jean talked about families whose Disabled children had been asked not to attend school pantomimes. She had seen posts online, on parents' forums, which went along the lines of:

“All the school are going to the panto, and I've been asked to keep him at home today, because they think he might be disruptive.”

Kevin held the strong view that formal exclusions from schools occurred more frequently amongst children with sensory processing impairments, when teachers were unable to develop inclusive teaching and learning strategies, as a result, for example, of large class sizes or the constant stimuli of schools, such as children running around in the playground. He also recognised that in some secondary schools, positive initiatives had been put in place which might, for example, see a Disabled child allocated a buddy at break times.

For Cathy's son, a buddy scheme did not work; when he sat on the 'buddy bench' waiting for someone to come and play with him, he was targeted by bullies instead. Cathy's son was severely bullied for a long time, but did not tell anyone because he did not have the awareness to know he was being bullied. Cathy said:

“ ‘He doesn't realise that people are being horrible. Sometimes he does, and then he doesn't want to moan ... He's a very strong little boy because through all of this, he refused to not go to school. He didn't have a day off.’ ”

Cathy shared the seriousness of the assault her son had experienced:

“ ‘He got beaten up, he got thrown in a river, he got attacked in a lane, he was bullied on social media ... And there's an incident on CCTV where they put my son in a bin.’ ”

Nora shared that her daughter experienced theft and intimidation:

“ ‘They used to pinch things out of her pencil case. They used to force her to bring money to school the next day, bring a snack into school the next day.’ ”

Zina's son had refused to return to school because of social pressures and negative peer relations; he had regularly been made fun of but did not want Zina to inform his teacher for fear of further threats and intimidation. These incidents were put down to general bullying, however theft and assault are criminal offences, and given that they are being perpetrated against Disabled children, they could certainly be regarded as hate crimes. The Crown Prosecution Service defines a hate crime as 'Any criminal offence which is perceived by the victim or any other person, to be motivated by hostility or prejudice, based on a person's disability or perceived disability;

race or perceived race; or religion or perceived religion; or sexual orientation or perceived sexual orientation or transgender identity or perceived transgender identity.' (Crown Prosecution Service, 2016).

Parents also talked of excessive force being exerted by school staff. Rashid's son had been isolated in a room, where he was prevented from leaving. He had been led along by two members of staff holding his upper arms tightly. Later he had been accused of breaking a staff member's hand, but no evidence of this had been provided to Rashid. There were further reports from parents of children with autism being grabbed by their arms and restrained. Most of the children in question had a sensory processing impairment and touch was their main trigger. As acknowledged by the United Kingdom Government, physical restraint is a potentially traumatic experience at this formative stage in children's development and could be very damaging and have long-term consequences on their physical, psychological, social and emotional wellbeing (HM Government, 2019).

A report produced by Positive and Active Behaviour Support Scotland, and the Challenging Behaviour Foundation (2019) showed that, of the 566 families surveyed, who had children with learning disabilities and challenging behaviour, 88% said their child had experienced some kind of restraint, 35% stating the experience was regular. Most of these restraints occurred within school settings, and only 17% of the families surveyed said that a restrictive intervention had been duly recorded. Sixty per cent of those surveyed believed that restrictive interventions were used by schools as their main method of tackling challenging behaviour, instead of as a last resort to prevent injury (Challenging Behaviour Foundation, 2019).

Jija represented her group by expressing her strong belief that bullying and exclusion rates were particularly high amongst families from a Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) background:

“ ‘... they seem to think our behaviours are the cause of our children being like this ... That's the institutional racism ...’ ”

She believed parents with diverse backgrounds were clearly disadvantaged:

“ ‘The sad bit – it’s like a double whammy because they automatically put you on child protection. I’m a mad woman because I’ve been fighting my son’s corner. I’m a neurotic Mum. I’m a mad woman, for my culture, because I’m in school so much. That’s what they label me because I suffer from depression. When you’ve had enough barriers ... I cry. Because you get tired of the barriers ...’ ”

The intersectionality of these parents’ identities, be they comprised of Disability, nationality, cultural and ethnic grouping and/or socio-economic status intensified the discrimination they faced, in some cases multiplying the disadvantages experienced and further reinforcing the barriers. The intersectionality of disability and race oppression has been discussed in detail in the well-known works of David Gillborn (2015), Ossie Stuart (1992) and Ayesha Vernon (1997).

Parents explained that because their children were not allowed to socialise in the main school, they struggled with unstructured breaks and lunchtimes. During lunch breaks, some schools provided quiet rooms for around 30 Disabled children to have lunch in and play games. Other schools kept Disabled students inside at lunchtimes and gave them activities, which parents were adamant their children did not want to do; they wanted to be running around with the other children. Hannah had made the consequent decision to pick up her son for lunch three times a week. According to another parent, Jean, her son was kept ‘imprisoned in the school’ during breaks:

“ ‘Every playtime, every lunchtime, he would be sat outside the Head’s office – which made him look like a naughty child – doing colouring or reading. Because they couldn’t allow him to go out. Because they didn’t know how to deal with him.’ ”

Jean reflected that this was how other children had gradually been distanced from her son, leaving him isolated.

Jean also talked about unlawful exclusions, whereby a child would experience a breakdown at school, often as a result of inadequate provision or support, and parents would be called to pick up their child. Jean believed that such measures were often undocumented, yet they reinforced the premise that Disabled children were different and should not be mixing with other children.

Jean had experienced an upsetting scenario in which other parents had contacted the school asking that their children not be allowed to play with Jean’s son; she felt that unlawful exclusions of the type described above, as well as negative and uninformed attitudes, contributed to the separation problem. Jean recollected:

“ ‘... a deputy headmistress telling another parent, “Well, if he was my son, I wouldn’t allow him to play with Matt” ... How is Matt going to learn social skills if he’s not allowed to play with other kids?’ ”

Jean thought that prejudice like this did little to help Matt fit in at high school, which already presented barriers to him. The school was a large building, with narrow corridors, where noise echoed loudly, and where there were a great many more children than Matt was used to. She felt that the school saw Matt as a ‘problem,’ to be removed, and that Matt himself was aware that he was different, so the effects were greater. Furthermore, Jean had noticed that children who had been around Disabled people, and spent real time with them, tended not to look and stare at Matt in the same way as other children did, those with no contact with the Disabled community. Therefore, she felt the separation was clearly counterproductive. She summarised her feelings in the following way:

“ ‘This is what they do. They grind these children down.’ ”

Lydia explained the same experience differently:

“ ‘I think it’s ... understanding how much exclusion hurts. I think that’s really, really not understood ... For me, it’s a bit like somebody is kicking you against the shin repeatedly, several times during the day. Now, if you go through several years of that, you are going to be so angry. It’s that, kind of – that this isn’t understood. And I think that you only actually start to understand it when you’re a parent and you have to feel it through your child. I wouldn’t have understood it before.’ ”

With regard to decisions made about Matt by the school, Jean herself did not feel included in the process. She did not feel welcome when she visited the school, and felt that staff did not appreciate her views about Matt's wellbeing and education:

“ ‘I get the feeling that the only time I'm ever invited into the school is when there's a problem, if that makes sense ... I feel that it's a battle of wills ... between us and the school. I know what Matt needs. I know how he works best. They don't always listen, because I'm just a Mum.’ ”

Jean had even offered to deliver training on the topic of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) for a teacher training day, but the school had not accepted:

“ ‘They wouldn't allow me to, because I'm a parent ... what would I know?’ ”

Lydia also expressed disappointment that her school had consistently denied her the opportunity to make decisions in partnership with them about her daughter.

In the online questionnaire, parents were asked, 'Do you feel that social times during the school day (such as break times) and official after-school clubs are accessible for your child/children and appropriately supervised?' Of the 127 who responded, 50 (39.4%) answered 'Yes,' 47 (37.0%) said 'No,' and the rest (23.6%) said 'Sometimes.' Parents were then asked, 'Do you feel school trips are accessible for your child/children? Please consider place, activities, subject matter, access, assistance, toilets, etc.' Here, 58 (46.4%) of the 125 parents who responded felt that school trips were accessible, but 36 (28.8%) felt that they were not. Another question on the survey asked, 'Do you feel the school has a proactive, positive and inclusive culture towards Disabled children?' In this instance, 55 (44.7%) of the 123 parents who responded felt that it did, but 40 (32.5%) felt that it did not. When asked whether they felt that their children were involved in how school activities were run, 19 (17.0%) of the 112 parents who answered felt that they did, but 63 (56.3%) said that they did not. Of 84 parents who gave their opinion on the extent to which reasonable adjustments enabled Disabled pupils and students to participate and be included in the life of their schools, 13 (15.5%) said 'Not at all,' 37 (44.0%) said 'Somewhat,' 18 (21.4%) said 'Mostly,' and 16 (19.0%) said 'Completely.'

In answer to the question about the inclusivity of schools, the following statement seemed to represent the experience of most of the respondents:

“ ‘On the surface they do. But underneath the child has to fit the box and when they don't, the child is blamed and bullied and ignored and often made to leave.’ ”

In the focus groups, when talking about access to social spaces in secondary schools, education professionals pointed out the inadequacy of the physical infrastructure in new build schools to facilitate social participation:

“ ‘I call it travel time rather than travel distance. How long does it take a child to get out to the playground, to be with their mates, to go to the toilet, to then get back into their class on time?’ ”

With regard to field trips, Olivia strongly disagreed with the practice of requesting, or insisting, that parents accompany their children. Anne and Toney felt sure that their school included Disabled students in trips and sports residential as much as possible, and raised the issue of costs:

“ ‘... when you compare the cost of hiring transport with a tail lift, compared to a coach that doesn't have one – so we paid, I think it was around £1200, yeah, one thousand two hundred pounds for a coach that possibly would have cost normally £400 ...’ ”

Anne and Toney's view was that staff generally intended to ensure inclusion of Disabled students in all activities, but that cuts to school budgets were imposing constraints which sometimes resulted in undesired outcomes. They therefore acknowledged that Disabled students' access to full social participation was patchy. The professionals said that, in their experience, certain residential activities and outdoor pursuits centres used by the schools were very accessible indeed, whereas others were still not fulfilling their legal obligations. The message conveyed was that 'pockets' of good practice existed within schools, with some teachers using inclusive methods and having positive attitudes, but such practices were inconsistent and few and far between.

Olivia thought that it was possible for sport to be a fantastic way of engaging everybody on an equal footing, if approached in the right way. She conceded that this was not always reflective of reality. Both Anna and Olivia acknowledged that initial teacher training courses did not cover inclusive PE lessons, which resulted in newly qualified teachers not having sufficient experience or adequate training in the teaching of Disabled students. Some did not even know how to make adjustments in the PE curriculum to support Disabled young people.

Although Simon believed that certain criteria for higher marks in PE, at GCSE and A-level, were not physically attainable for many students with physical impairments, and that therefore the way the grade boundaries worked was discriminatory, he did not agree with segregating Disabled pupils during lessons. Simon made reference to his past school experiences and said that he was in favour of having equal opportunities to be able to challenge himself as a Disabled person. He said:

“ ‘I thought, “Well, there’s always going to be the person who’s the best at PE, but there’s also going to be someone who’s the worst in the class, regardless of whether I’m there or not. Not everybody can be the best at everything.” So, it doesn’t matter whether you come first, or you know, you’re not able to be as good as the next person, because maybe that’s just their thing. They should be allowed to be better than you in something, and you should – you know, a part of sport, especially in school, is just about learning. It’s also certain things about communication, team-building – there’s loads of things that you learn other than just the physical elements ... It shouldn’t just be, “Oh well, this is all that they can do, so we’re just going to let them do that.”’ ”

In the online questionnaires, professionals were asked, ‘Do you feel that social times during the school day (such as break times) and official after-school clubs are accessible for Disabled pupils and students and appropriately supervised?’ Of 49 who answered, 14 (28.6%) said ‘Yes,’ 16 (32.7%) said ‘No,’ and the rest (38.8%) said ‘Sometimes.’ Professionals were then asked, ‘Do you feel school trips are accessible for Disabled pupils and students? Please consider place, activities, subject matter, access, assistance, toilets, etc.’ Of 49 responding, 15 (30.6%) said that they were, but seven (14.3%) said that they were not. The rest (55.1%) said ‘Sometimes.’ Another question asked was, ‘Do you feel the school has a proactive, positive and inclusive culture towards Disabled children?’ Here, 20 (40.8%) out of 49 professional respondents felt that it did, but eight (16.3%) felt it did not; 21 (42.9%) said ‘Sometimes.’

Professionals were also asked, ‘Do you feel Disabled pupils and students are involved in how school activities are run?’ Of 36 respondents, 13 (36.1%) said ‘Yes,’ 16 (44.4%) said ‘No,’ and seven (19.4%) said ‘I don’t know.’ Of 37 professionals who gave their opinion on the extent to which reasonable adjustments enabled Disabled pupils and students to participate and be included in the life of their schools, none said ‘Not at all,’ 12 (32.4%) said ‘Somewhat,’ 13 (35.1%) said ‘Mostly,’ and 12 (32.4%) said ‘Completely.’

The following accompanying statement from a professional highlighted the patchy provision of support during school field trips:

“ ‘Again, this varies from school to school. I know of schools who plan well in advance and have arranged portable hoists to ensure pupils in wheelchairs will be able to have their needs met during a whole school visit. Another school sought specialist advice 3 days before the visit (only after a parental complaint), in this instance the issue could not be resolved.’ ”

Analysis of the findings

Disabled young people and parent participants said that prejudicial attitudes, inadequate transport, lack of trained staff, limited finances, and inaccessible school activities prevented their full participation, equal to that of their non-disabled classmates, in school organised activities. This social exclusion had undesirable consequences not only in terms of family dynamics, but also in terms of damage caused to young people's confidence and self-esteem.

Parents reported that the effects of unlawful and disabling school practices included the painful experience of being bullied, either by other students or by adults in the school environment, despite the fact that under the Schools Standards and Framework Act 1998, governing bodies are expected to ensure that policies designed to promote good behaviour and discipline are pursued in schools. Moreover, under Section 61 of the Act, headteachers are duty bound in 'preventing all forms of bullying among pupils,' yet parents repeatedly felt blamed, were accused of bad parenting, or were labelled as a 'troubled' family. Disabled mothers, especially those from BAME communities, felt the discrimination even more acutely, and on multiple levels, as they feared child protection services would become involved with their families.

Professionals shared the concerns of the other field study participants with regard to inaccessible social venues and activities, and lack of appropriate and accessible transport to facilitate Disabled children's social participation. Cuts to school budgets were identified as one of the key barriers to full social inclusion. According to data from the School Cuts Coalition, £5.4bn has been cut from overall school budgets in England since 2015 (National Education Union, 2019). Also the Special Educational Needs and Disability reform funding via implementation grants for local authorities is decreasing, down from £40m in 2017/18 to £29m in 2018/19 (DfE, 2018b). That said, the Department for Education has announced a programme to build a number of new special needs schools (DfE, 2018a). With funding for mainstream schools decreasing, and new special schools proposed, the implication is that funding for the new schools is going to come out of mainstream budgets, which will further increase segregation and social exclusion of Disabled young people. From their experience, professionals discussed cases of good practice within schools, but they generally acknowledged that inclusive and flexible practices were unpredictable, inconsistent and not carried out as standard.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed a wide-ranging set of issues impacting on Disabled children's social inclusion in the school community. The three groups pointed to some of the same barriers, the most significant being inflexible and discriminatory attitudes held by staff, which contributed to the exclusion of Disabled students from full participation in school life, and perpetuated inequalities. It was evident that schools were failing in their duties under the Equality Act (2010), in creating accessible and enabling teaching/learning and social experiences. Parents were left having to accompany their own children on field trips if their child was to have any chance of being included. The intersection of disablism and racism was seemingly ignored by the professionals, which was disturbing. Inappropriate use of restraint was a key part of the assault taking place on Disabled young people. Also, alarming were incidents involving the use of isolation booths, and as a result, reports of mental health difficulties being experienced by Disabled young people. Experiences of theft, assault/battery, and intimidation were masked behind the more generic term 'bullying,' even though they could certainly be categorised as hate crimes against Disabled people. Despite such a hostile 'learning' environment, some Disabled young participants reported they had managed to develop friendships that were meaningful and reciprocal.

Even though social inclusion is not one of the key areas that an Accessibility Plan is required to focus on, from the accounts in this chapter it is evident that schools should be obligated to work towards full social inclusion and participation, in order to reduce rates of exclusion and maximise potential achievement for Disabled young people. The next chapter will explore insights and recommendations when it comes to combatting barriers.

7

CHAPTER SEVEN Conclusion and Recommendations

The Alliance for Inclusive Education (ALLFIE) led a project funded by Disability Research on Independent Living and Learning (DRILL), examining whether Accessibility Plans were effective in driving inclusive education in English secondary schools post Equality Act (EA) 2010. The project researcher used 12 focus groups, five semi-structured interviews and two sets of online questionnaires to explore various topics based on the three key areas that Accessibility Plans are required to focus on, namely information delivery, physical access, and curriculum. Disabled young people, parents of Disabled young people, and education professionals took part in the project, and made up three separate participant groups. The researcher also used quantitative data derived from various sources to support the field study findings.

From the findings reported in Chapter One, it was evident that Disabled young people and their parents had limited awareness of the existence of Accessibility Plans and were hardly ever involved in their production, development or review. They had not used the plans to challenge their schools' disabling practices and were unsure of the effectiveness of the documents. All the participants agreed that Accessibility Plans were completely ineffective in driving inclusive education if the content of the plans was not firmly embedded into school practice. The majority of parents felt that however well written an Accessibility Plan might be, if a school lacked the drive to adhere to the plan and develop its culture according to principles of equality and inclusion, then the plan would become a 'worthless piece of paper.' As demonstrated in subsequent chapters of the report, reality for most Disabled young people, in terms of school access and provision of support, did not correspond with the rhetoric contained in their schools' Accessibility Plans.

Even though 'Improved delivery of written information' was an area that Accessibility Plans were required to focus on, participants' accounts of this service were very variable, depending on which group they belonged to. As evidenced in Chapter Two, notwithstanding regional differences, Disabled young participants generally agreed that the provision of accessible information was poor. Parents' responses were more diverse. Professionals recognised that the delivery of information in alternative formats was reactive and inconsistent, but for the most part, the professionals did not take responsibility for the shortcoming themselves, or assign responsibility to their institutions; instead they felt factors such as lack of funding and insufficient uptake by pupils were more significant.

Chapter Three examined participants' experiences of school admissions processes. Here too, Disabled young people and their parents felt discriminated against. They were not only denied support and transparent information, but in most cases confronted with prejudicial and negative attitudes from staff. Some parents felt like they had no choice other than to take their children out of mainstream school to educate them at home, whilst others sought places in special schools when it was not what they really wanted or what their child wanted. However, the professionals participating in the study did not recognise or acknowledge any of the barriers that Disabled learners and their families described when it came to admissions. The experiences reported in this chapter supported the case for a specific focus on accessible admissions processes within schools, and for admissions policies to be developed and included within Accessibility Plans as a central component of a child's positive school experience.

In Chapter Four all of the project participants identified similar physical access barriers within their schools. Some parents pointed out additional sensory obstacles. For parents, these were often exaggerated by professionals' inflexible and unhelpful attitudes when it came to working together to remove the barriers. It was evident that Accessibility Plans did not always comply with legal requirements in relation to physical access, demonstrating how current wider strategies are not working.

As shown in Chapter Five, in the areas of teaching, learning and assessment, Disabled young participants felt that there was no level playing field in respect of their ability to participate in classroom activities and the school curriculum, particularly in the context of assessments. Parents were frustrated with professionals' insensitive attitudes in making reasonable adjustments to meet their children's impairment-related needs. For their part, the education professionals felt that an effective and fully implemented Accessibility Plan would be a useful tool to promote and ensure equality in teaching.

With regard to social inclusion, as discussed in Chapter Six, the Disabled young participants reported that they were denied full participation in their school community and faced a number of barriers, including prejudicial attitudes, inadequate transport facilities, lack of trained staff during social time, limited finances, and inaccessible school activities. This led to Disabled young people feeling isolated and excluded, and frequently being targeted, assaulted, harassed, restrained and bullied which had a long-term impact on their confidence and self-esteem. The trauma of such incidents also had lasting painful effects on parents and the wider family. The professional participants conceded that inclusive practices to help with Disabled children's social inclusion were ad-hoc and inconsistent. These accounts show that social inclusion in a school community should be included as a key part of Accessibility Plans, and not a side issue, to foster a culture of acceptance and equality among peers, and to help prevent discrimination and the frequent bullying and exclusion of Disabled young people.

In all the areas covered by this project, notwithstanding regional differences, the Disabled young people and the parent participants felt let down by their schools and expressed dissatisfaction about negative attitudes amongst staff and a lack of understanding of their individual needs. One mother described in detail the cruelty and abuse her son had endured whilst at school, in the care of education professionals. She referred to the experience as 'barbaric,' and added: 'How are these people who are caring for our children behaving horrendously?' Whilst some professionals were aware of the shortfalls and put them down to recent cuts to school budgets, other professionals refused to recognise, or denied, gaps in access and the provision of support services. As was revealed in the project, there are growing pressures on schools and professionals, with the introduction of more accountability measures, and with increasing levels of stress and bullying amongst staff. However, discrimination against Disabled young people and their families is wholly unacceptable and should not be tolerated under any circumstances.

All schools are required by law to promote equality and to have respect for human rights. By failing to publicise their Accessibility Plans, and failing to embed their principles firmly in school culture and practice, schools are non-compliant with the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA) 2001 and the EA (2010). There is a continuing legal requirement to increase accessibility for Disabled pupils over time, and this requires the production, development and review of Accessibility Plans that work (DfE, 2015b). Accessibility Plans are not currently routinely monitored for their impact or their compliance with legislation.

Participants' experiences suggested that other national statutory requirements had not been given due regard either. The Children and Families Act (CFA) 2014, for example, expects schools to 'have respect for the views, wishes and feelings of Disabled children and their parents in securing the best possible educational and other outcomes.' However, many of the parent participants shared that they were not consulted with when it came to making decisions about their children and their education.

The Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice: 0 to 25 years (DfE, 2015b) stipulated that 'They [schools] must not directly or indirectly discriminate against, harass or victimise Disabled children and young people,' yet the accounts from Disabled children of being routinely discriminated against, bullied and permanently or temporarily excluded from education told a different story. Similarly, participants' experiences of teaching, learning and assessment did not correspond with the legal requirements set out in the Code of Practice (2015b), as noted in the Legislation section of this report.

Furthermore, the disabling practices of schools, as experienced and discussed in this report, provide a stark contrast to the requirements of international legal instruments such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD):

- In contravention of Article 5, the Disabled young participants were frequently discriminated against on the grounds of their impairments, and had no equal and effective legal protection against discrimination.
- In contravention of Article 7, the Disabled young participants were not able to fully enjoy all human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal basis to other children. They were often denied opportunities to learn and play with their friends and receive peer support from people of their own age in the school environment, which could amount to segregation and is not compatible with inclusive education.
- In contravention of Article 9, the Disabled young participants were denied the right to access, on an equal footing with others, information provided by schools on lessons, activities and events. Not having equal access to information resulted in Disabled young people and their families being at a disadvantage, unable to feel fully included in the school community. They were also frequently excluded from accessing the physical environments of their schools, further contravening Article 9.

- **In contravention of Article 24, Disabled young people were denied their right to participate in all forms of mainstream education with appropriate support. Their individual requirements and needs were not taken into account and therefore they were not enabled to reach their full potential. The support provided was often inadequate, and they were forced to consider home education as an alternative to school. In cases where Disabled young people received appropriate support, they flourished socially and thrived academically.**

Based on the findings of this study, the insights and recommendations below could help to address some of the educational, social and physical inequalities in schools, deliver vast improvements in experiences and outcomes, and ensure the rights of Disabled young people are not only protected but fully realised. Some of the recommendations are specific to school practices and their impact could therefore be immediate and achieved in a shorter time frame, whilst others refer to the education system in general and are therefore recognised to be long-term solutions.

Teaching, learning and assessment

Schools must, as standard practice, adopt a range of inclusive, creative and flexible teaching/learning methods and assessment procedures, as recommended by various educational bodies, in buildings that are made accessible, not just physically but also in terms of sensory experience, with the use of appropriate equipment. In this way, no child would be excluded from the curriculum and teaching/learning process, as Carley put it:

“ ‘Thinking about more ways to make it accessible, taking account for the kids like us and not just the able-bodied kids.’ ”

Programmes should be put in place automatically to adequately support Disabled young people, ensuring a consistent and rights-based approach to education. Teaching, learning and assessment procedures must be responsive to and support every child's needs rather than following the same practice for all pupils. Teaching must be adapted to fit the needs of the child rather than

trying to fit children into neat learning boxes, making fixed and pre-determined assumptions regarding the pace and nature of the process. The pace of learning should encourage meaningful participation. The English syllabus, for example, should be mindful of students' diverse needs, especially those with autism, and should, when appropriate, include emotionally accessible content. Sign Language should be introduced into schools just like modern foreign language options, as British Sign Language was formally recognised as a language in its own right in 2003.

In her focus group, Olivia suggested an alternative curriculum structure in secondary schools, where children would stay in the same classroom for most of their lessons. This alone would reduce the number of barriers associated with ensuring reasonable adjustments, as well as reducing travel time and minimising any mobility difficulties. Jenny wanted to see movement breaks introduced as part of lessons:

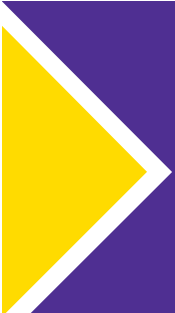
“ ‘Especially in secondary school when you've got kids doing a double period, two hours of learning with no movement. Can you imagine? It would help everybody. It's not just gonna help somebody who's got ADHD.’ ”

Recommendation:

- **Teaching staff must structure their pedagogical practices around a strong commitment to maximising all students' learning experiences by using such methods as multi-level instruction, co-operative learning, individualised learning modules, activity-based learning and peer tutoring. They must also incorporate Disability history into the curriculum to challenge the negative narrative around Disability.**

Consultation

To prevent assumptions being made, the voices of Disabled young people and parents need to be heard both via formal consultation processes and informally in student and staff meetings. Students’ concerns must be accurately recorded and acted upon, with regular monitoring in place to oversee progress. This has to be coupled with an effective review system to measure the attendance and educational performance of Disabled young people.

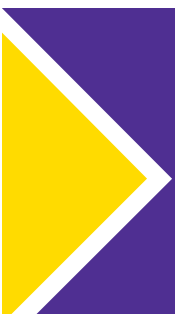


Recommendation:

- Disabled students need to have regular opportunities to give feedback and express their views on teaching practices. Greater openness is needed between schools and Disabled young people with meaningful engagement.

Inclusive initiatives

Special schools should be transformed into resource and training centres for the use of professionals who work in fully inclusive mainstream schools. Local initiatives should be identified and developed to support this model. Attempts should be made to use minimal additional resources, with careful planning, to promote sustainability.




Recommendation:

- All schools should be created, built and planned with the needs of Disabled young people in mind. The result would be increased benefits and better outcomes for everyone, not only for pupils with acknowledged additional needs.


Training and communication

Disabled young participants talked about integrating support networks into schools, which would enable more efficient communication of their support needs. This would avoid them having to explain their specific needs every time a new service was required. Parents were of the opinion that inclusion tools, such as pupil passports, should be made compulsory elements of any Accessibility Plan. These would outline individual pupils’ impairments and support needs so that a supply teacher, or a different staff member, would know how to approach a child and optimise their experience.

Parents also said they wanted to have more opportunities to meet other parents of Disabled children. They suggested meeting up with groups of Disabled people to learn more about the social model of Disability. Alex had previously tried to empower a group of parents:



‘Because the parents were just blown away by it. They were like – they’re used to being taught their kids are wrong and broken and inadequate, and whatever language people hide it in, it always just means “wrong” or “outside.” And then someone coming in and going, “No, our kids are fine. Honestly, no, your kids are fine. It’s the school that’s wrong.”’



Professionals also emphasised the importance of having opportunities to connect. They expressed interest in meeting fellow professionals from different educational institutions, and in schools sharing good practice models in order to learn from each other as opposed to operating as separate, competing entities.

Disabled young participants and parents suggested that teachers, educators and even headteachers and senior management teams needed to receive regular impairment-specific disability and inclusion training, and for content to be updated continuously. Duncan wanted some of the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) training sessions to be focused on mental health difficulties.

Another key point discussed by all participants was the inadequacy of postgraduate teacher training courses in preparing newly qualified teachers to address SEND and differentiation issues; new teachers need to know not only how to make school buildings accessible but also how to include students with diverse needs in the classroom and curriculum. As a parent, Jean explained:

“ ‘I think what needs to happen is, from my perspective – and I’ve worked in education, I worked in post-16 – teachers need to be forced to retrain. It needs to be compulsory that they have to do training in special needs. Otherwise they should not be allowed to practise ... and I think they need to change teacher training. Because there’s not an awful lot – if you look at the syllabus for teacher training – there’s not an awful lot in there on special needs. Yet new teachers are going to come across more children with special needs now than they would have done when that syllabus was written, 20 years ago, or whatever it was ... Everything I know about special needs has come from having a child with special needs, not from being trained in it.’ ”

Recommendations:

- Training packages – to include the identification of teaching, learning and assessment barriers, the exploration of holistic classroom approaches, and a greater understanding of socially just pedagogies – need to be made compulsory for teachers, headteachers and senior management teams, with regular mandatory updates. This training must constitute a key component of any Accessibility Plan.
- Disabled people need to be employed in positions of influence within schools and education policy-making platforms.
- Parents could be actively involved in (mandatory) Disability Equality training, drawing on their potentially insightful and powerful personal experiences.
- Opportunities should be created to improve communication between parents and professionals, parents and parents, and professional to professional.

Accessibility Plans

Participants in this study expressed their disappointment that the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (OFSTED) did not seem to take its monitoring duties seriously. Professionals thought that Accessibility Plans should be much higher on the OFSTED agenda. The participants also suggested that any decision-making about a school’s Accessibility Plan should be done in consultation with, and held accountable to, a student council body, fully representative of all students’ voices, including those with a range of impairments, and also including parents and school governors.

One professional described a good working model within their local authority (LA): when the governing bodies of individual schools submitted their Accessibility Plans to the council’s planning officers, they also had a duty to comply with the ‘Design for Access’ Regulations, which were documents developed a number of years previously by local organisations made up of Disabled people with a wide range of impairments.

As a parent, Kevin wanted his LA to take a more active role in overseeing how schools published and maintained their Accessibility Plans. Another parent wanted to see Accessibility Plans, as constantly evolving documents, showcasing practical examples of how schools can fulfil their commitment to equality by accommodating individual pupils with different impairments.

ALLFIE are calling for the development of a new and comprehensive set of national guidelines to support schools in the production of robust Accessibility Plans which are regularly and effectively monitored to protect the rights of Disabled young people and are compatible with national and international human rights legislation.

ALLFIE are calling for a new national focus on the enforcement and monitoring of effective Accessibility Plans, so that Disabled young people are no longer excluded from education, and no longer experience discrimination in the system.

Recommendations:

- Effective Accessibility Plans need to be understood, developed, implemented, monitored and reviewed to ensure that a tangible difference is made to Disabled pupils' education and supports their access to, and full participation in, school life alongside their friends, siblings and peers. The documents must contain practical detail, timescales for action and dates for regular review. The substance of the plans must be updated on a regular basis to demonstrate their practical usefulness.
- The Department for Education needs to monitor, promote and enforce the positive and continuous development and implementation of Accessibility Plans.
- There has to be a legal duty placed on OFSTED to routinely monitor the impact and implementation of Accessibility Plans, and to include their findings in school inspection reports. This will help to ensure that schools are fulfilling their duties to have Accessibility Plans which work to improve and increase accessibility for Disabled children and young people.
- Schools and LAs need to fully involve and consult with parents and Disabled children, as well as professionals, in the production, development and review of Accessibility Plans.
- Schools must ensure that the vital rights and mechanisms contained in the UNCRPD, which provide important protection for Disabled children and young people, are well recognised and upheld.
- Legislation, policies, frameworks and action plans need to address the education inequalities experienced by Disabled young people, and their real-life impact on this group needs to be monitored and evaluated on a regular basis.
- Unlawful and disabling practices must be challenged, which should be primarily the responsibility of LAs. There must also be a statutory route for parents and Disabled young people to initiate challenges themselves, and if necessary to legal redress.

Knowing the law

Parents were confused about their legal rights. They wanted to learn more about their right to challenge unlawful disabling practices and to feel motivated to support their children's educational achievements and outcomes. One parent, Lydia, felt that professionals should be advocating more for parents, by saying, for example:

“

“Yes, this parent is right.” She added: ‘And they need support to have the confidence to go in there and say, “Yes, this is the law,” because this is really hard to do.’ That said, Lydia was aware that not every parent was able to understand the law and fight for their children, a situation which she referred to as ‘incredibly unfair.’

”

Recommendation:

- For ALLFIE to be given the opportunity to deliver training on their Accessibility Plan Toolkit, covering topics such as the educational rights of children and their parents as well as the legal obligations of schools and LAs under the SENDA (2001), EA (2010) and CFA (2014).

Social time

As a Disabled young person, Duncan expressed a desire to try out shorter school trips to see if they would work for him. In terms of social activities, parents wanted to see a variety of activities offered to their children. One parent talked about the option of a board games club for children who could not take part in outdoor physical activities, to know that:

“

‘... there's a space for them to go where they feel they're included with something to do.’

”

Another parent stressed the importance of Disabled children having opportunities to socialise with non-disabled children:

“

‘You need to see more Disabled people having fun and being out there and taking up the space. That’s it, really. You need to see that this is not a poor, poor person. It’s actually just another person who is getting on with their lives, and they should have the same right and space to do that.’

”

Simon argued this was just as important for non-disabled young people as Disabled young people. He believed that lack of social or learning integration with Disabled people was as damaging for non-disabled people, often leaving them unsure of how to interact with Disabled people and therefore feeling awkward.

Recommendations:

- **For schools to create more opportunities for Disabled pupils to socialise with both Disabled and non-disabled children in fully accessible settings, including accessible playgrounds and outdoor activities.**
- **Accessibility Plans should include anti-bullying strategies. Reports of bullying must always be taken seriously and anti-bullying strategies systematically implemented to promote and ensure an inclusive school culture.**
- **For schools to encourage the formation of diverse circles of friends to foster a culture of equality and inclusion.**

What would it take to make the recommendations happen?

More research is required to improve the evidence base of experiences and outcomes for Disabled young people from a variety of backgrounds in English secondary schools.

In addition, as a vital component in developing inclusive values, and monitoring progress, school cultures, policies and practices must be radically restructured in order to respond to the increasing diversity of students.

To raise awareness of diversity issues and increase acceptance and respect for individual differences – among teachers, administrators and parents alike – all children, including those with a range of different impairments and backgrounds, must be included in such a system.

Why are they important for each group?

Increased awareness will help schools to put in place clearer guidelines when accommodating diverse needs, whilst empowering Disabled young people and their families in relation to their education rights. It will promote choice, autonomy and control for Disabled children and their families over education decisions and service provision. Better understanding in this area will also help to enable Disabled learners and their families to challenge inadequate Accessibility Plans.

What are the effects?

By embedding positive inclusive practices in schools and encouraging children to embrace Disability identity, they will learn from a very early age what inclusion is, and will grow into professionals who aspire towards creating a better world, where social justice, equality, citizenship, participation, the importance of human rights, and friendship are celebrated. More importantly, the necessary changes in the current education system will benefit all learners and help to create a stronger civil and democratic society, improving the socio-economic wellbeing of all. Through this, diversity and difference should be valued.

How will this report affect the work of ALLFIE and inclusive education as a whole, and what is its potential for Disabled People’s Organisations?

For ALLFIE, the aim of this project has been to empower participants to feel confident in taking forward their own views, experiences and recommendations for social policy and legislative improvements, in discussion with strategic leaders and those who deliver education and training services. We intend for this research to leave a legacy of increased political activism amongst participants – particularly Disabled young people. By doing so we hope to have a long-lasting impact on the Disabled community, not only nationally but also across international platforms.

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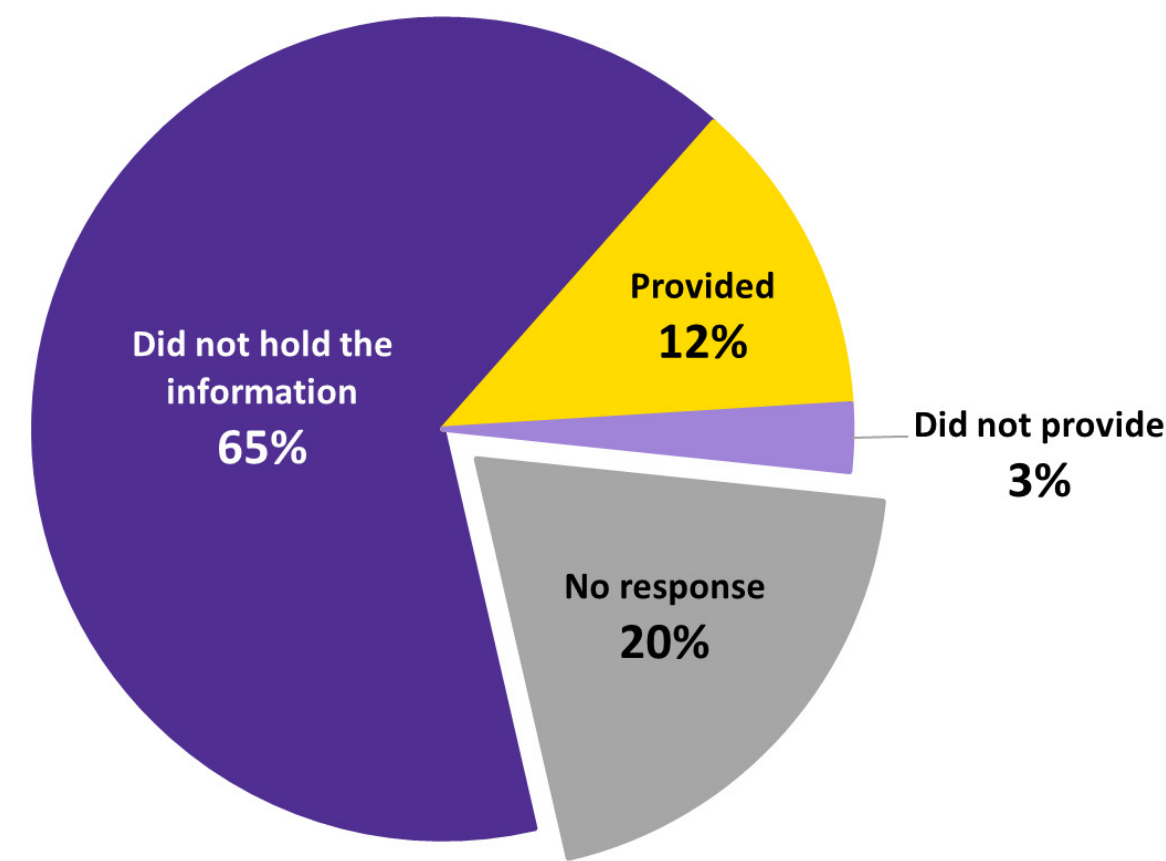
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APPENDIX

Additional Statistics

As stated in the main body of this report, the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (OFSTED) was contacted in 2018 and again in 2019 (see Chapter One). The researcher submitted Freedom of Information (FOI) requests for the proportion and number of schools, by local authority (LA), that had Accessibility Plans in place. In both instances, OFSTED replied to the researcher that it did not hold this information as it was not something that OFSTED would routinely collect and record.

As mentioned in the Legislation section, the researcher also contacted LAs in England in 2018, again using FOI requests, enquiring about the number of schools in their area that had Accessibility Plans in place.



Responses to FOI requests asking for the number of schools in the local authority area with Accessibility Plans in place

Did not hold the information	99	65.1%
Provided	19	12.5%
Did not provide	4	2.6%
No response	30	19.7%

Of the 127 LAs in England that responded, almost two thirds did not hold this information, as there was no requirement for them to do so. Whilst these figures do not take into account the 25 LAs that did not respond, even if all of those LAs held the relevant information, this would still mean that any LAs monitoring Accessibility Plans would be in the minority, which is a distinct flaw in the system.

If neither OFSTED nor LAs are required to monitor schools for inclusion, then there is no system in place to oversee whether schools are complying with their legal obligations, irrespective of whether or not the Accessibility Plans that are in place are robust enough.

Of the LAs that did respond, four did not provide figures, by not answering the question, or sending a link to a website, or by responding that the data would follow but not responding further. Only 19 LAs responded with the data, some deciding to split the data into primary, secondary and other school types, and one providing a web link to school information.

The table below shows the percentages of schools that LAs believed to have Accessibility Plans in place. Where no figure was supplied for the school type, a hyphen has been used.

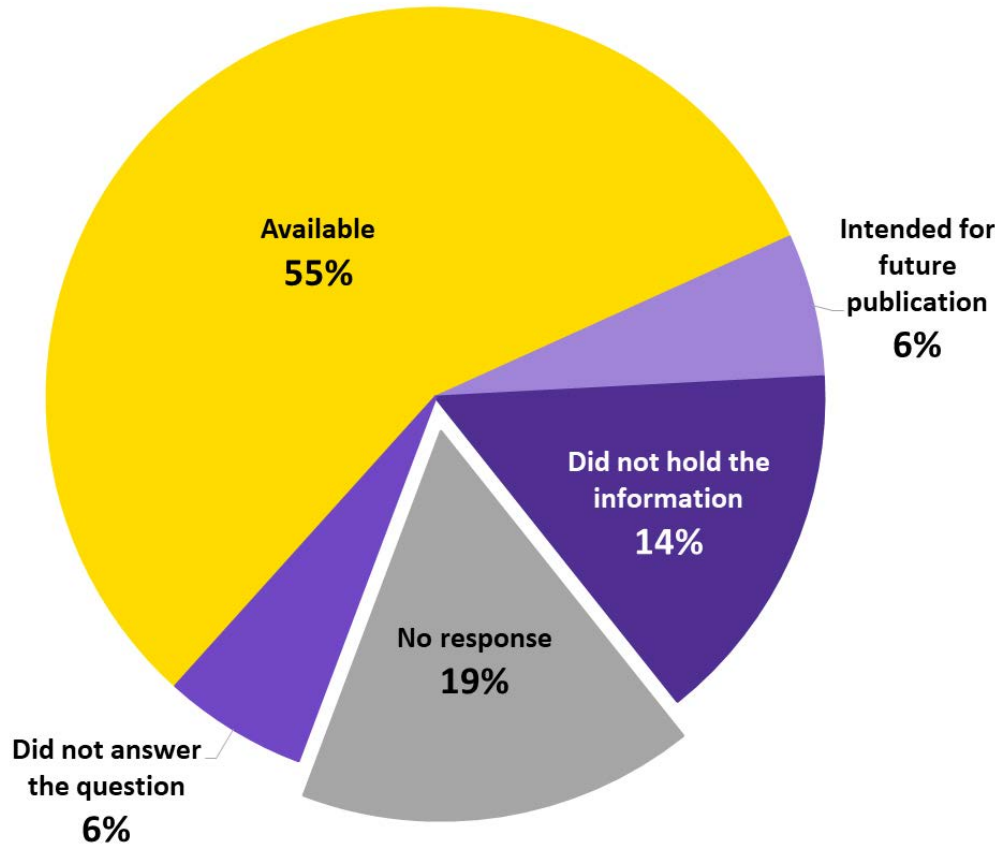
	Schools with Accessibility Plans (primary)	Schools with Accessibility Plans (secondary)	Schools with Accessibility Plans (other)	Schools with Accessibility Plans (all)
Blackpool	100%	100%	100%	100%
Cheshire East ^a	99%	72%	20%	64%
City of London	100%	-	-	100%
Darlington ^b	100%	100%	-	100%
Doncaster ^a	90%	83%	-	87%
Gateshead ^b	100%	100%	100%	100%
Haringey	-	-	-	100%
Havering	100%	100%	100%	100%
Isles of Scilly ^{a,c}	100%	100%	-	100%
Leicester ^a	58%	67%	75%	67%
Newcastle upon Tyne	-	-	-	64%
Plymouth	95%	50%	100%	82%
Reading	-	-	-	62%
Redbridge	-	-	-	81%
Southampton ^a	61%	75%	-	68%
Stockport ^a	65%	38%	-	52%
Telford and Wrekin ^a	73%	92%	60%	75%
Torbay	80%	63%	80%	80%

There are three points to note when reading these responses:

- a) No overall total was provided so the figure is an average of the previous figures.
- b) The figures for each LA only include schools that are maintained by that LA. The actual figure for all schools in an LA area may be different to what has been reported by the LA.
- c) The Isles of Scilly only have one school for pupils aged 5 to 16.

While the LAs report that high proportions of schools have Accessibility Plans, there are some notably low figures, associated with fewer Accessibility Plans being in place in secondary schools in those areas. The lowest figures were from Stockport, which reported that only 38% of secondary schools had Accessibility Plans, followed by Plymouth at 50%. As Accessibility Plans are a legal requirement, but the monitoring and collection of statistics does not appear to be mandatory, this is evidence of a functional gap in the system, requiring policy change and possibly further legislation to resolve the issue.

However, as also noted in the Legislation section, LAs do have a legal responsibility to have an accessibility strategy in place covering schools that they are responsible for. This is required under the Equality Act (2010). As part of the same FOI request mentioned above, LAs were also asked for a copy of their accessibility strategy. The responses to this request were more varied:



Responses to FOI requests asking for local authority accessibility strategies		
Available	86	54.8%
Intended for future publication	9	5.7%
Did not hold the information	23	14.6%
No response	25	19.1%
Did not answer the question	9	5.7%

While under a fifth of LAs did not respond, over half provided their accessibility strategy as a web link or an attachment, in some cases both. Nine LAs said that their accessibility strategy was intended for future publication and could not be supplied at the time. Of the 152 LAs that responded, nine did not answer the question asked of them, and 23 said that they did not hold the relevant information, contravening the legal requirement. Whilst this constituted less than 15% of the overall number of LAs, it is cause for concern.

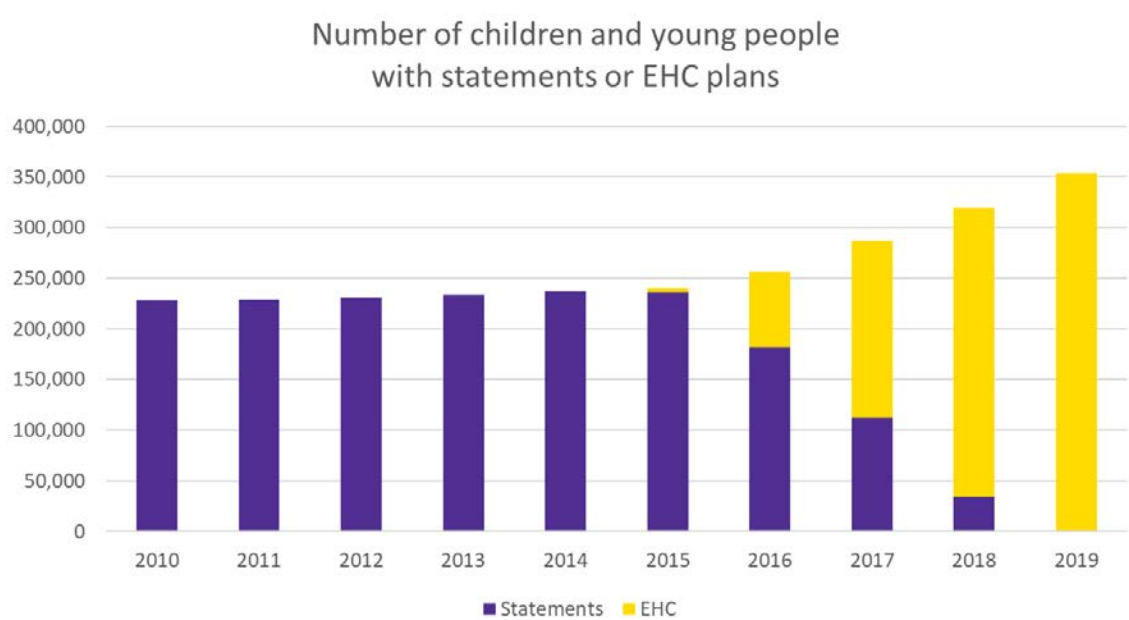
Further, whilst this report focuses on schools’ Accessibility Plans, it is important to note the number of Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans that are being issued. EHC plans have replaced statements of Special Educational Needs (SEN), which have been phased out gradually. Children and young people have been transferring from statements of SEN to EHC plans since September 2014. SEN statements were essentially the ‘passport documents’ when it came to funding for Disabled children and young people, and also when it came to discrimination legislation and requirements for reasonable adjustments by LAs. The replacement of SEN statements has meant that EHC plans are now in a similar position and are vital tools within the institutional and legislative frameworks of the education system. An EHC plan is a legal document that describes a child or young person’s special educational, health and social care needs. In principle, the EHC plan should explain the extra help that is required to meet the needs of the child or young person and how that help will support the child or young person to achieve what they want in their life. The official figures on the number of children and young people with a statement of SEN or an EHC plan in England are published by the Department for Education.

The number of children and young people with statements or EHC plans (Years: January 2010 – 2019, coverage: England)

Year	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Statements	228,221	229,017	230,156	233,431	237,111
EHC plans	0	0	0	0	0
Total	228,221	229,017	230,156	233,431	237,111

Year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Statements	235,980	182,106	112,057	34,097	0
EHC plans	4,203	74,209	175,223	285,722	353,995
Total	240,183	256,315	287,280	319,819	353,995

Source: SEN2 2010-2019, Department for Education



Source: SEN2 2010-2019, Department for Education

The above information shows how the number of children and young people receiving statements of SEN or EHC plans has been increasing year on year, by tens of thousands. As noted, the planned period to transfer children and young people with statements of SEN over to EHC plans began in September 2014 and in principle should have ended on 31 March 2018. The number of statements of SEN is therefore not included in the total. However, the official statistics note that there is a small number of children and young people still waiting to be transferred, less than 100 according to the report (DfE, 2019b).

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/805014/SEN2_2019_text.pdf

According to the response to a question asked in Parliament in December 2018, the actual figure was 67 children and young people who were still waiting for transfer to the EHC plan, which accounts for 0.01% of all transfers.

<https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2018-12-19/203903/>

The number of statements of SEN and the number of EHC plans are also available, broken down by age.

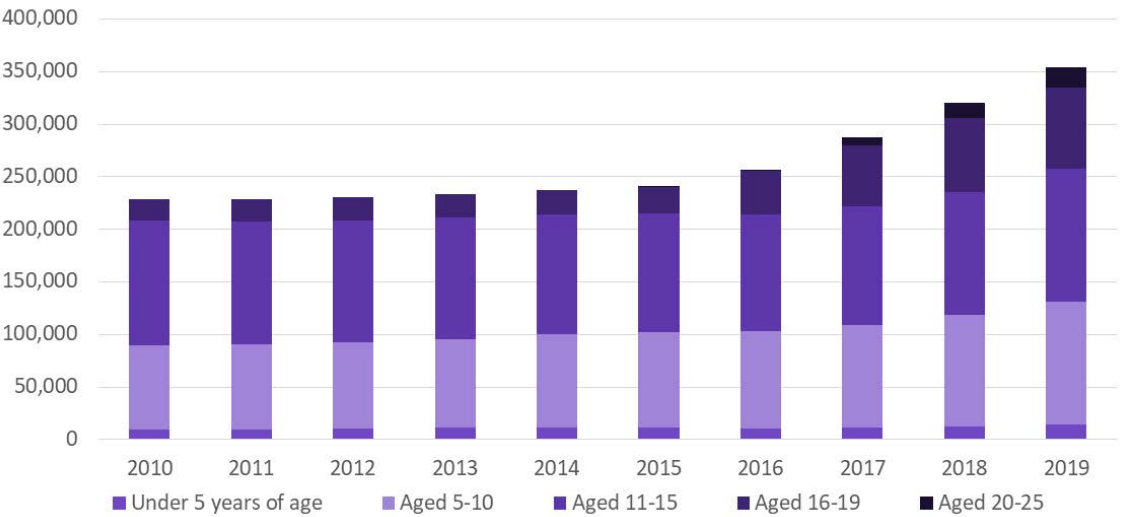
Year	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Under 5 years of age	9,433	9,674	10,416	10,944	11,482
Aged 5-10	80,635	80,724	82,360	84,843	88,732
Aged 11-15	117,934	116,791	115,992	114,966	113,796
Aged 16-19	20,219	21,828	21,388	22,678	23,101
Aged 20-25	-	-	-	-	-
Total	228,221	229,017	230,156	233,431	237,111

Year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Under 5 years of age	11,250	10,513	11,629	12,516	14,094
Aged 5-10	91,045	92,213	97,379	105,689	117,222
Aged 11-15	112,340	111,225	112,540	117,354	126,332
Aged 16-19	25,538	41,300	58,034	70,084	77,587
Aged 20-25	10	1,064	7,708	14,176	18,760
Total	240,183	256,315	287,280	319,819	353,995

Source: SEN2 2010-2019, Department for Education

Number of children and young people with statements or EHC plans by age group

(Years: January 2010 – 2019, coverage: England)

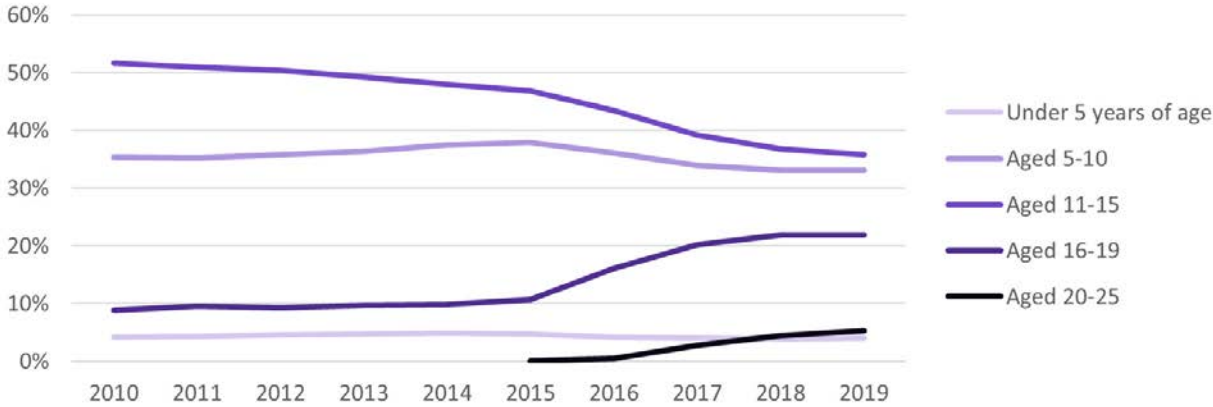


Source: SEN2 2010-2019, Department for Education

This table and chart show that, over time, the number of children aged 5 to 10 and the number aged 11 to 15 that have EHC plans or statements have become very similar; the number of 16 to 19 year olds has been increasing year on year, and a significant number of 20 to 25 year olds are also now being given EHC plans, a development first seen in 2016. The number of children aged 5 or under with plans or statements has remained fairly stable, and is certainly not comparable with the number representing their older peers. To put this in perspective, the following chart shows the percentage breakdown of all children and young people with statements or EHC plans, year on year, split into the various age ranges.

Number of children and young people with statements or EHC plans by age group

(Years: January 2010 – 2019, coverage: England)



Source: SEN2 2010-2019, Department for Education

The number of 11 to 15 year olds with statements of SEN or EHC plans has seen a marked percentage decrease in comparison with the total number of children and young people, and the number aged 5 to 10 with statements of SEN or EHC plans has also decreased in relation to the wider population, but not as dramatically. To compensate, the number aged 16 to 19 with statements of SEN or EHC plans has steadily increased in relation to the wider population, as has the number of 20 to 25 year olds. The number of under 5s with statements of SEN or EHC plans has remained relatively static in relation to the wider population.

Given that the figures show an increase in the overall number of pupils needing an EHC plan, especially those of secondary school age, if the figures relating to Accessibility Plans are added in, it reveals a distinct lack of planning and monitoring of inclusive education at a time when there is an urgent and increasing need for it.

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