Disability Equality: promoting positive attitudes through the teaching of the national curriculum.
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ignorance, a lack of awareness and a fear of difference can lead to prejudice. It can also be the result of a number of influences that can create, maintain or reinforce prejudicial views. The way in which negative, prejudicial attitudes can influence behaviours and lead to discrimination against disabled people are evidenced in the life experiences of disabled children and adults. Promoting well-informed social attitudes to disability is central to breaking this cycle and to securing the right to equality for all disabled people. The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 2005 makes recognition of this with the introduction of the Disability Equality Duty (DED), which includes a requirement to promote positive attitudes towards disabled people. Schools are well-placed to proactively inform and raise awareness among children, young people and their families. They can promote positive attitudes and disability equality more widely by being inclusive. As part of an inclusive approach, they can promote positive attitudes through the teaching of the National Curriculum (NC).

ABOUT THE STUDY

The study that is the focus of this summary aimed to map what was currently happening in primary and secondary schools in developing knowledge and understanding of disability and disabled people’s lives through the teaching of the NC. The objectives of the research were to gain a better understanding of schools’ needs and to identify any existing good practice that could assist schools to develop their practice. There were three main strands to the methodology:

A literature review, which aimed to provide a synthesis of available guidance and teaching/learning resources that focus upon facilitating awareness and understanding of disability equality concepts.

A national survey of young people, which aimed to identify if young people had learned in class about disabled people and people with learning difficulties. The analysis is drawn from a representative sample of 10,705 young people attending year 10 and 11 in schools in England.

A national survey of primary and secondary schools, with follow up qualitative interviews, which aimed to identify if and how teachers incorporate learning about disability and discrimination into the teaching of the NC. The analysis is drawn from a sample of schools (97 primary, 83 secondary schools) located in 30 local authorities in England.

THE POLICY AND PRACTICE CONTEXT

The National Curriculum is a framework to be used by all maintained schools to ensure that teaching and learning is balanced and consistent. It sets out the subjects to be taught and the knowledge, skills and understanding required in each subject. The framework also sets out standards and attainment targets for each subject that teachers can use to measure and assess
a child’s progress and plan their future learning. National policy suggests that schools have considerable scope to develop their own curriculum within and around the NC framework. The government prescribes what is to be taught but not how. Teaching the NC carries with it a responsibility to: “promote equal opportunities and enable pupils to challenge discrimination and stereotyping, develop an understanding of where such prejudice comes from, develop pupils’ integrity and autonomy and help them to be responsible and caring citizens capable of contributing to the development of a just society”1.

This responsibility to promote equality is reinforced further with respect to disability since the introduction of the DDA in April 2005. Promoting Disability Equality in Schools (2006) provides detailed guidance to schools on their duties and explains that schools need to be more proactive, more explicit, more involved and more comprehensive in their promotion of disability equality. An integral part of the duty is to promote positive attitudes and the teaching of the NC offers one a strategic opportunity to do this.

TEACHING DISABILITY EQUALITY

There is some existing guidance, both official and other, to schools on ways to build disability equality into all areas of the school curriculum (Department for Education and Skills, 2007; Disability Rights Commission, 2007; Rieser, 2006; Disability Equality in Education, 2002). Schools can establish a strong foundation for teaching disability equality by: making it one element of a wider strategy, ensuring teachers are prepared for their role and by taking into account research findings relevant to fostering positive attitudes. Some general points to bear in mind when considering formal curriculum content and teaching are the need to: be aware of and challenge stereotypes through teaching; be critical of ‘disablist’ language; promote the social model of disability; ensure disability issues are included throughout and across the curriculum and include positive and diverse images in all materials. The existing guidance also provides pointers on teaching methods, approaches and materials in addition to topics for subject-based teaching.

KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

Coverage and nature of disability equality teaching

Over two thirds of primary schools reported that disability equality was taught through the NC. Few schools taught it across all subjects of the NC, but it was included in a number of subjects by a majority of schools at both Key Stages 1 and 2. Across the sample, all subjects of the NC had been used to teach disability equality. It appears as though teachers saw some subjects as lending themselves more readily to the teaching of disability equality: PSHE, Citizenship and PE were among the top three reported for both Key Stage 1 and 2. As neither PSHE nor Citizenship are statutory subjects, and PE arguably has a lower status than other statutory subjects, this may have a more limited impact than teaching within other subjects. Around a quarter reported the inclusion of disability equality in the core subjects English and Science at Key Stages 1 and 2. Despite these encouraging findings, it is also the case that around a quarter of primary schools reported that they did not include disability equality in the teaching of the NC.

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1 Http://www.nc.uk.net/nc_resources/html/valuesAimsPurposes.shtml
As envisaged from the outset, it was more difficult to understand the level of coverage across the curriculum in secondary schools. The questionnaire focused on teaching within Citizenship, which is a statutory subject at Key Stages 3 and 4. Over a third of respondents reported it was included at both key stages, a similar proportion reported it was included at Key Stage 3 and about a fifth reported it was included at Key Stage 4. Teachers were less able to determine whether it was taught in other subjects of the curriculum, with high proportions reporting that they did not know. Among the remainder, about a quarter reported that it was included in other subjects at each key stage. Religious education was the subject most often cited.

The separate survey of pupils, aged 14 to 16, suggests that disability equality is not taught to all pupils. Under a third of pupils responded that they had learned about disabled people in the previous year, and a similar proportion responded that they had learned about people with learning difficulties. For both groups, over half reported that they had not.

Resources, approaches and activities
Teachers in primary and secondary schools reported similar patterns on their schools’ usage of resources and in the type of activities that incorporated learning about disability. Their responses also reflected the span of resources, approaches and activities that were identified in the literature review. Schools used stories and novels, drama and performing arts, games and specific units of work to develop disability awareness. They used disability equality training to a lesser extent. Schools also reported working with disabled pupils, parents, teachers and others within their local communities to develop awareness. The most popular methods in primary schools were stories and novels, and drama and performing arts. These were also popular in secondary schools but specific, targeted schemes or units of work were cited as the resource used most often. Classroom based teaching and school assemblies were used by a majority in both primary and secondary. Smaller numbers used social activities for disability awareness. It is not possible to know about the nature, quality or effectiveness of these approaches from the data collected.

Perspectives on learning and teaching
Over half of the pupils in the survey reported that they did not want to learn more about disabled people or people with learning difficulties. The reasons for this are unknown.

It is also true that some pupils see the subject as relevant and of value to themselves and to society in general. In their qualitative responses, pupils highlighted the importance of learning about prejudice to effectively tackle it, and offered some perspectives on what they considered to be good approaches to teaching in this area. These included references to: taking a real approach; spending more time on exploring issues; using contemporary up-to-date resources, and involving people who had experienced it. These comments were made in general, not specifically in reference to learning about and tackling disability discrimination.
Teachers offered perspectives derived from their experiences on the development of good practice in relation to the development of disability equality. The enabling factors that they identified connected closely with elements that together would constitute a whole school approach. They included having: an inclusive ethos; staff teams that are knowledgeable, skilled and committed; higher levels of awareness across the whole school community; links to disabled people within the school community or beyond; a perspective on the NC as flexible and recognition of the potential in particular subject areas; and the availability of good quality resources. The inhibiting factors identified often represented the converse of these. Teachers referred to: the low incidence of disabled pupils attending schools; low levels of awareness and knowledge among teachers, which resulted in them not being confident in their approaches; a lack of ideas on how or what to incorporate into subjects across the NC; the limited time available to plan or within curriculum subjects that were already overstretched; lack of resources available to facilitating teaching; and the existence of negative stereotypes in the mass media and wider community.

The divergence of these responses raise questions about why such barriers exist in some schools while others appear to have environments that are conducive to teaching disability equality. Teachers suggested the following as solutions to barriers: training, guidance and support; resources; opportunities to have contact with disabled people and the visibility of positive role models; and wider awareness and commitment across the school community and the community at large. Teachers also felt that it would be helpful if people understood why promoting disability equality mattered.

RECOMMENDATIONS
In relation to research, three areas in particular stand out as topics for further exploration. Research is needed to: 1) understand the nature and quality of existing teaching on disability equality; 2) explore the reasons pupils do not want to learn more about disabled people and to identify what can motivate or engage pupils to learn; 3) to evaluate approaches used and their impact on pupils attitudes and behaviours.

In relation to policy, a number of recommendations emerged from the perspectives offered by teachers. Despite it being a legal requirement of schools, some teachers referred to a need to increase pressure on schools for disability equality to become a priority. This could be progressed in part by increasing awareness of the Disability Equality Duty. It could also be aided by including the wider duties of the DED as part of the performance target and inspection regime, as teachers suggested that the topics and activities that are prioritised within schools are those that pupils are assessed upon and/or schools are inspected upon.

In relation to teaching practice, teachers pointed to a number of developments that could strengthen practice. Good quality, regular disability equality training should take place for all staff within school. Teachers identified their need to be confident of their own approach and others within the school and of a need to be able to distinguish between good and poor practice. Schools should have a member of staff designated with co-ordinating the teaching of disability equality across the curriculum. Schools should audit all materials and resources to ensure that
they are not discriminatory and to ensure that they include the promotion of positive attitudes towards disability. The development of disability equality in the teaching of the NC should take place as part of a wider strategy, with schools working towards a ‘whole school’ approach and the fulfilment of the requirements of the DED. To aid school development, head teachers and staff teams should consider the CSIE Index for Inclusion, and explore how their schools can evolve within the three dimensions (Booth and Ainscow, 2000).

References


Further information
This report is published in full as The Children Society (2008) Disability Equality: Promoting Positive Attitudes Through The Teaching of the National Curriculum. This is available from www.childrenssociety.org.uk/research

A supplementary teacher resource guide is also available from the above website. This provides practical advice to teachers, and references to supporting materials, to aid teaching in Disability Equality.