→ LEADERSHIP

BIO

STEVE STRAND

Steve is Professor of Education at the University of Oxford. His research interests are in ethnicity, social class, gender and school effectiveness. He has over 100 scholarly publications in these areas. He has been an adviser to the DfE and Special Adviser to the House of Commons Education Select Committee.

Ethnicity and the identification of SEN

Professor Steve Strand explores the fact that children from ethnic minorities are disproportionately identified with SEN.

Accoring to new research from Oxford University, compared to White British pupils, children from ethnic minority groups are over-represented for some types of SEN and under-represented for others. The report finds that:

- Asian pupils (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Other Asian) are half as likely to be identified with Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD) as White British pupils
- Black Caribbean, and Mixed White and Black Caribbean pupils, are twice as likely to be identified with SEMH difficulties as White British pupils
- Black Caribbean and Pakistani pupils are over-represented for Moderate Learning Difficulties (MLD), while Indian and Chinese pupils are under-represented

The report, funded by the Department for Education (DfE) and conducted by Professor Steve Strand at the Department of Education at Oxford, looks at all school-aged children from 5-16 who have been identified with different types of SEN in England. While similar research has been conducted in the US, it is the first time a study with this detail has been done in the UK.

With ethnic minority groups now accounting for approximately one-third (30%) of school-aged pupils in England, the issue is particularly pertinent.

The project involved a comprehensive analysis of the England National Pupil Database to identify ethnic disproportionality in the identification of SEN throughout the period 2005-2016. The findings show the patterns of ethnic disproportionality described above are substantial and have been consistent for over a decade.

The study also considered whether socio-economic factors such as poverty and neighbourhood deprivation, or children's early attainment/development on entry to school, had any impact on them being found to have SEN.

Ethnic disproportionality for some special needs, like MLD, can be accounted for by socio-economic background and early attainment/development on entry to school. However, this research indicates that neither factor explains the ethnic disproportionality in the identification of ASD or SEMH.

The upshot is that some Asian pupils may not be receiving the access to specialist resources and support they need for ASD, while some Black Caribbean children may be suffering an inappropriate or narrowed curriculum from unwarranted over-identification of SEMH needs, particularly in secondary school.

The report argues that in relation to the under-identification of Asian pupils with ASD, drivers may include lower awareness of autism among Asian parents, lower awareness of parents' rights regarding SEN, linguistic barriers to accessing services and cultural variation in social attitudes to disability. The under-representation seems consistent across schools, so all schools need to focus on these issues.

What lies behind the over-representation of Black Caribbean and Mixed White and Black Caribbean pupils with SEMH is not known. SEMH difficulties include displaying "challenging, disruptive or disturbing behaviour" and so the phenomena may be related to the over-representation of these two groups among pupils excluded from school. Variation between schools is more influential in the over-representation of Black Caribbean and Mixed White and Black Caribbean students for SEMH, particularly in the secondary phase and in schools with a high proportion of pupils living in poverty. Why disproportionality is higher in such schools is not known, but may reflect different contexts, such as high crime rates or gang culture, or variation in schools' behaviour policies and the strategies used.

Differences between Local Authorities (LAs) were not substantial, accounting for between two and six per cent of the of the variance in SEN identification, although this is greater than the one per cent that (LAs) account for in educational achievement at age 16. However, in some cases differences between LAs can be marked. For example, Black Caribbean pupils were less likely than White British pupils to be identified with SEMH in Newham, but three times more likely to be identified than White British pupils in Kensington and Chelsea. The project has published reports for each of the 150 LAs in England, identifying rates of ethnic over- and under-identification in each LA, which can be downloaded from the project website.

THE RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS INCLUDE:

- LAs, multi-academy trusts (MATs) and schools must have due regard to their Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) requirements and should monitor ethnic disproportionality in the identification of SEN; those with high levels of disproportionality should further investigate practices in their areas/trusts
- Schools should identify priorities for the partnerships within which they work, so they can pool resources and develop effective responses
- OFSTED should incorporate data on ethnic disproportionality into pre-inspection reports for LA SEND inspections and include the issue of ethnic disproportionality within the LA SEND inspection
- The DfE should provide guidance on definitions and criteria for defining different types of SEN.