



# Needs

# must



By claiming an epidemic of overdiagnosis, Ofsted risks depriving children with SEN of the specific support they require to achieve, argues **Jenny Thompson...**

**O**n 14th September 2010, the Ofsted Review focusing on Special Educational Needs and Disability was released, claiming that hundreds and thousands of children were being misdiagnosed with special educational needs, and that the underlying problem was simply the need for better teaching or pastoral care. One question is the supposed aim of this review to offer a broad and balanced analysis of the SEN system in place in the UK and its benefits and limitations, as instead it seems determined to place the blame on teachers – professionals, who do a great job in often very difficult circumstances to meet the needs of all their pupils.

It might be useful for Ofsted to consider instead the training offered to teachers, and whether this is sufficient to support children with SEN in the classroom. All too often schools are in a position whereby they do not have the necessary

back-up and resources required. Teachers are by no means specialists with the ability to diagnose complex SEN, but they are highly skilled professionals, who more often than not have a very heavy workload. Many habitually work through their meal breaks and after school for no pay to support the children in their care and ensure that they are enabled to learn and develop. We need to address the gaps in training for these teachers, as the current process can be variable, despite a growing and increasingly complex group of children with SEN in UK schools. Although early identification of SEN children continues to pose a number of challenges, appropriate training will better equip teachers to spot pupils who may require interventions, and support them in achieving their maximum potential.

Ofsted seems to be missing a deep-seated issue that needs addressing: it is not only teaching

and pastoral care that is required, but a national programme of screening children's developmental status at the time of school entry, and effective systems for recognising early signs of SEN through infancy. Early intervention is essential in order that prompt action be taken in order to obtain specialist advice, support and resources for the child. Although the review highlights issues in relation to school practice, what it fails to consider is the extent to which teachers may be assisted to make sense of how and why some children are not making the expected progress at school and do not develop in what are considered 'normal' ways. Effective monitoring is crucial, with improved communication between professionals including educationalists, health specialists and psychologists to provide effective treatment or successful interventions. In order to ensure successful practice is developed, school networks where mainstream

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and special schools work in partnership are crucial to help staff develop a greater knowledge and understanding of specific needs, which help them to respond more appropriately for each child.

According to Ofsted SEN appears to be a 'choice'; however, in my experience of working in schools, it is by no means easy to get children onto the SEN register or to have them statemented. In over 10 years of teaching, I have never come across children in any way supported (or over-supported) without this being in order to address a genuine need. In a good school, teachers will identify pupils with SEN by close monitoring and assessment, whereby the needs of a child will be met at School Action Level or School Action Plus Level if the need arises, as teachers demonstrate a commitment to ensuring all pupils achieve in line with Every Child Matters. As a result of this early identification and teachers' responses to any special needs that arise, it may well be that more children are being diagnosed. However, instead of suggesting that this means excessive labelling is taking the place of improved teaching, the Ofsted report should really give consideration to the level of support required for children with SEN – which may take the form of counselling or mentoring – and whether overworked teachers are being given the resources they need to provide it. The key to effective inclusion is making sure all children get what they need, not that they all get the same. The 'label' is a part of ensuring that pupils with SEN are included from the start – and by taking it away, these children's needs are unlikely to be met.

### Getting it right

As the following case study shows, when teachers and schools are fully supported, a multi-stranded approach – including identification of SEN – can provide an effective, inclusive environment for all children.

#### Appropriate teaching

At Hilltop Infant and Nursery School, a mainstream school in Derbyshire, headteacher Hazel Jaques demonstrates a broad commitment to inclusion, which is much reflected in the school ethos and welcoming attitude. There are high expectations in relation to behaviour; the atmosphere is very positive, with equivalent praise valuing pupils' different achievements. High quality teaching makes a significant difference to the outcomes of children with SEN. The teachers use a variety of strategies, including whole class teaching, group work, and individual work with and without adult support – mixing and matching according to what they identify as particular children's needs at specific times.

#### Agency cooperation

SEN Support services attend Hilltop Infant School on a regular basis and



work with and alongside staff to provide specialist advice and support. Staff work very closely together to track and monitor the progress of each individual child and within six weeks of starting at the school, every pupil is screened in order to highlight any learning difficulties that may be apparent. Cooperation with agencies including speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, support for visual and hearing impairments, triple SEN teachers and the LA, ensures a collaborative approach to including children with SEN in the mainstream educational setting (using flexible provision where appropriate – for example, some pupils may also attend a school with specialised facilities to meet physical needs).

#### Parental partnership

Hazel Jaques highlights the importance of involving parents and carers all the way and building good relationships, with initiatives like the Reading Partnership scheme, where parents can come in weekly and read with their children; without this joined up approach the effective inclusion of SEN is less likely.

### About the expert

Jenny Thompson is a senior lecturer at the University of Derby on the Education Studies programme, and author of *The Essential Guide to... Understanding Special Educational Needs (£16.99)*, one of a series of books from Pearson Education Ltd, aiming to translate current thinking and debate into accessible classroom strategies.

