Dear Convener,

Call for Evidence: Educational Attainment Gap - Role of the third and private sectors

Down’s Syndrome Scotland welcomes the opportunity to respond to this call for evidence from the Education & Culture Committee of the Scottish Parliament.

Raising attainment for all children and young people is an objective strongly supported by Down’s Syndrome Scotland which works towards helping children with Down’s syndrome to reach their full potential. There will always be differences in educational attainment between children with Ds and their peers but it is important to acknowledge that ‘attainment gaps’ between pupils can be wider than they could be if we fail to provide the right support to children with Ds.

Children with a learning disability may come from a deprived background but this does not apply to all of them and yet these children are sometimes still being left behind in schools. Children with learning disabilities need extra support in school and not providing this support can only increase the educational attainment gap that does not solely stem from poverty.

Down’s Syndrome Scotland’s involvement in schools is twofold. On one hand, we offer a variety of training courses and formal consultation visits for professionals, on the other we support families and children with Ds with any enquiry they may have about education; from nursery through to college. Many children with Ds attend mainstream schools and benefit from such a learning environment. However it is important to recognise that children and young people with Ds will need support in class to help them ‘attain’ their goals.

A few years ago, ENABLE Scotland campaigned on teacher education. At the time, the campaign highlighted a ‘basic lack of understanding of learning disabilities by some classroom teachers and support staff as being a major barrier to inclusion and
a successful learning experience for children and young people with learning disabilities’. ENABLE was then calling for ‘all staff involved in a child’s education, from head teachers to learning support assistants, to participate in mandatory professional development courses (CPD) on basic behaviour management strategies, learning disability/autism awareness and communication skills, as well as developing a general understanding of inclusion and equalities’. Through our experience, it appears that the core elements of that campaign are still relevant today.

As a result of our work, it is apparent that focusing on teachers’ training should be a priority in any process aimed at solving the educational attainment gap. The new Curriculum for Excellence aims to help every learner develop knowledge, skills and attributes for learning, life and work but teaching staff need more help to be able to meet these objectives. As far as Down’s syndrome is concerned, many professionals still lack knowledge of the condition and what it means for a child to have Down’s syndrome and their specific learning profile.

In order to fill this gap, Down’s Syndrome Scotland offers a variety of CPD accredited training for teaching, non-teaching, play staff, health professionals, health students and carers to meet the additional support needs of children and adults with Down’s syndrome as well as their families. As an example, our ‘improving Communication Skills of Children with Down’s syndrome’ course is aimed at teachers and support staff to help them achieve better communication with children and young people with Down’s syndrome. The course will suggest techniques that can easily be included in the school day and improve the communication skills of the learner with Down’s syndrome, thus minimising frustration and avoidance behaviour. Peers in both mainstream and ASN schools can easily be included in the communication activities.

Information and advice provided by DSS to schools and families also focuses on the importance of managing transition periods. Transitions are difficult times for all children but these can be extremely challenging for pupils with additional support needs. As an example, a transition may require multiple visits to the new classroom so that the child get accustomed to his/her new environment. Teachers would have to use photos and photograph books to encourage children to talk about the new school/classroom. Extra resources thus need to be allocated for pupils to get familiar with the changes and for the transition period to be handled in the most successful way.

As well as teachers’ knowledge of Down’s syndrome, schools and education authorities need to understand that transitions are key to help a child achieve his/her full potential. A transition that is badly planned will not help towards raising the attainment of a child, on the contrary it is likely to contribute to increased difficulties/barriers that a child with Ds has to overcome when it could be a much easier and rewarding process.

In theory, transitions should start to be planned at least year in advance. In practice, every year Down’s Syndrome Scotland is supporting families with children with Ds who are being told only a few days before the end of term or just before school starts who their class teacher will be and who the support staff will be, transitions are the
big steps from nursery to primary and primary to secondary but each year the child’s transitions also needs to be considered.

With regard to the interaction between third sector and education authorities, an argument could be made on the need for third sector organisations like Down’s Syndrome Scotland to be involved in teacher’s training at an earlier stage. Developing stronger partnerships between third sector organisations and universities may offer opportunities to address some of the issues that increase the attainment gap by gathering knowledge and translating it into comprehensive training courses for future teaching/medical staff on specific conditions like Down’s syndrome. Education authorities should also promote and encourage staff to engage in training on learning disabilities not just as a one-off but on several occasions throughout their career as part of CPD.

One way to reduce the educational attainment gap is therefore to provide adequate training for teaching and non-teaching staff within a school on how to work with children with Ds and work to the strengths of children instead of too often focusing on what they cannot do. Schools should encourage all children to maximise their abilities and develop new skills. Some pupils’ attainment may be lower than others but what matters is that all pupils have been given the right support to perform their knowledge to the best of their abilities, have been helped to reach their full potential and are therefore ready for life and work.

We trust these comments assist the Committee with its enquiry. Please do not hesitate to contact our office on 0131 313 7452 or by email at rachel@dsscotland.org.uk should you have any questions.

Yours sincerely,

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