

This chapter celebrates the unique qualities of the Early Childhood Practitioner (ECP) within the arena of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), locating this within the evolution of ideas and understandings of the SEND within the wider educational sector in England. It focuses upon the ECP's expertise in supporting the extensively varied needs of individual children within the sector, whilst recognising and upholding all children's rights to quality care within the non-maintained Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector and the local authority-maintained sector, illuminating differences in degree of responsibility for SEND between the two. Drawing upon the author's involvement in the research carried out for TATYC in 2020, the chapter refers to primary research data collected from Maintained Nursery School (MNS) leaders and practitioners to demonstrate ECPs' contribution to SEND.

Introduction

During the TACTYC commissioned research into the functions of Maintained Nursery Schools (MNSs, Solvason, Webb and Sutton-Tsang, 2020), leaders and practitioners narrated their own, everyday experiences of their role and the ways in which they believed they impacted upon the lives of young children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), and their families. The challenge of SEND was encapsulated by two MNS leaders in the study: one, through her focus on the number of children with different SEND in her own setting - ranging from two-thirds of two-year-olds to one-third of three- and four-year-olds - at any one time, and the other through her exploration of the lack of clarity in the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector more generally about who should bear responsibility for SEND. She explained:

I just think there's a massive inequality issue for preschool age children with special needs. Because it's not compulsory. So settings do not have to have them [children with SEND], we often get children who've been turned

away from setting after setting. And then, at some point, somebody says, you know, who'll support you? Our nursery school.

By sharing the 'voices' of leaders and practitioners in MNSs, this chapter positions the Early Childhood Practitioner (ECP) as an expert practitioner, supporting children with SEND, regardless of the challenges within the sector generally, including practitioner's level of remuneration and professional grade or responsibility, as revealed by the data. I begin by contextualising the data and a discussion of this, by locating SEND more broadly within a literature of an evolving awareness and understanding of SEND in education and specifically within ECEC in England.

The evolution of understandings of SEND within education

The idea of an inclusive approach to children with SEND within the mainstream education system is a relatively new phenomenon. It has arisen from societal changes in the late twentieth century concerning people's attitude towards individuals with additional needs and disabilities. This came about through a shift from a broadly Medical Model of Disability to the more widely, and currently, accepted idea of Social Model of Disability (Borkett, 2021). The medical model assumes the individual with the disability has a problem that needs 'fixing', whereas a social model places the onus for change upon institutions within society (see Oliver, 1990). Historically, individual children who required specialist care were often placed in special day schools or sent away to residential institutions (Borkett, 2021). However, following the publication of *The Warnock Report* in 1978, public perception of inclusion shifted and integration of children with specific needs into mainstream schools became key to informing the ensuing formulation and implementation of The Education Act 1981. This act highlighted the responsibility of local authorities for identifying children with SEND and for arranging the necessary assessments and accommodation to take place to best suit their particular needs.

Warnock's (1978) review of education for children with SEND spearheaded changes in terminology, inclusive actions by all concerned and mainstream education entitlement for all. This included support for children in the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector with specific SEND issues, or those children who seemed not to be developing at the

same rate as their peers (Borkett, 2021). Following Warnock, increasing numbers of parents began opting for their children to be educated in a mainstream setting, rather than in a special school. Although heralded as the epitome of the social model, this has not been seen wholly as an unwarranted success, with some (including Barton, 2005; Frederick, 2005; Hodkinson, 2010) arguing that the universalist application of Warnock's principles has resulted in a disservice to some SEND children whose specific requirements are left uncatered for to the detriment of their shorter- and longer-term education and thriving. Solvason and Proctor (2021) have explored the vastly different experiences of parents with children of statutory school-age with SEND in both mainstream and specialist schools. This research has highlighted some parents' sense of a lack of training, knowledge and experience of SEND of some mainstream teachers, in contrast to the particular knowledge and provision in some specialist settings that are able to involve parents more actively as partners in the children's experiences.

With the introduction of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), the social model of disability gained further recognition, focusing on the human rights of the parent and child to participate in decision-making as affecting the child with SEND (Department for Education and Department, DfE, of Health, DoH, 2015). The Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001 (SENDA) made further changes to the Education Act 1996, which required schools to prepare for and demonstrate strategic planning for children with SEND. This focused on the need for root and branch changes to provision to ensure inclusive approaches to practice for all children, rather than just the accommodation of SEND children into existing mainstream provision and practices. According to Section 25 of the Children and Families Act 2014, local authorities had a duty to ensure integration between education, training, health and social care provision to promote the wellbeing and improve the quality of life for children with SEND, including their experience in educational settings. The concept of inclusion has now become a ubiquitous idea within education where, as Alderson (2018, p. 177) notes, all children should be respected, regardless of their 'special need' with 'each individual having a unique mixture of strengths, limitations and hopes' which can be accommodated and – indeed – celebrated. This ubiquity leads Hodkinson (2010) to therefore question the usefulness of the term 'inclusion' and whether it serves the broad spectrum of sometimes complex and distinctive needs experienced by some children. Despite the focus on inclusion

for all children, *The Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice: 0 to 25 years* (DfE and DoH, 2015, pp. 15–16) does distinguish those children with SEND as those having:

...a disability which prevents or hinders him or her from making use of facilities of a kind generally provided for others of the same age...

For children aged two or more, special educational provision is educational or training provision that is additional to or different from that made generally for other children or young people of the same age

Currently, all ECEC facilities, regardless of type, must have arrangements to support children with SEND. In addition, MNSs and other settings that are funded by the local authority to deliver early education and preschool places must all follow the *Special Educational Needs (SEN) Code of Practice* (DfE and DoH, 2015). It is general expectation that all ECECs offer a range of support for children with additional needs. With the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfE, 2017a), the statutory framework for children from birth to 5 years of age, the standards of care and education are outlined and must be met for all children, including those with additional needs. In addition, all ECEC settings must show that they provide support for children with SEND and must have a clear strategy for that support. *The Early Years: guide to the 0-25 SEND code of practice: Advice for early years providers that are funded by the local authority* (DfE, 2014, p. 9) states why this is crucial:

The benefits of early identification are widely recognised – identifying need at the earliest point, and then making effective provision, improves long-term outcomes for children ... All those who work with young children should be alert to emerging difficulties and respond early....

This means that the current EYFS framework requires non-maintained providers (those that are private, voluntary or independent) to have arrangements in place for identifying and meeting children's SEND, thereby promoting equality of opportunity for all children. This should form part of the provider's overall approach to monitoring the ongoing assessment of all children's progress and development (DfE, 2017a). Indeed, *The Early Years Workforce Strategy* (DfE, 2017b, p. 32) states:

We want all early years staff to feel confident that they can support a child with SEND to access and enjoy their early years setting. It is also important for staff to have the ability to work effectively with other professionals to meet a child's needs and engage parents positively.

So regardless of preschool type – whether maintained or non-maintained – all ECEC settings requires ECPs to have the skills and knowledge to identify young children's emerging difficulties and to be ready to respond to early concerns about developmental delay or specific SEND issues. Any concerns should be shared by practitioners sensitively with parents or carers who are deemed to know their children. This requires ECPs to therefore seek out their knowledge and perspectives and to listen to and respond empathetically to them with a view to working with them for the best possible short- and long-term outcomes for their child.

The maintained nursery school and SEND

MNSs are required to provide an integrated approach to care, education, health and other services for the children and families. They are led by specialist early years head teachers, qualified teachers and practitioners (Early Education, 2015), and they are often located within urban conurbations in areas of social and economic disadvantage. Their remit is focused explicitly on 'closing the gap' between children in their location and groups of wider peers through the quality of the services they provide; the expertise of their practitioners, including the dissemination of ongoing professional development for all ECECs whether in the maintained or non-maintained sector. However, as research has highlighted (Pascal and Bertram, 2019; Solvason, Webb and Sutton-Tsang, 2020), there are both financial and structural threats to the viability of the MNS, which includes their ability to provide outreach and wider support and integrated ways of working with non-maintained ECECs, including in the area of supporting SEND training for practitioners and support for children.

Due to the high number of local authority referrals of children with SEND to MNSs from the wider non-maintained sector, there is often a concentration of specialist practitioner expertise amongst staff which has evolved over the years. Non-maintained ECECs are not duty-bound to take children with complex SEND if they do not feel that they are sufficiently

well-equipped for the child (Early Education, 2015, p. 11) to meet the child's particular needs. This means that MNSs often take children with a wide range of SEND and complex needs (Early Education, 2015). In a survey conducted by Early Education (2018) it was reported that MNS staff qualifications were wide-ranging, with many with postgraduate qualifications in autism, medical training and speech and language therapy. The research also highlighted the opportunities for in-house continuing professional development which practitioners took advantage of to enhance their knowledge and understanding. Our own research corroborated these findings, demonstrating that, when asked about their experiences of practice with SEND, MNS practitioners were able to provide many examples of their own knowledge, as well as their sharing of practice with colleagues within their own settings, and more widely with non-maintained ECEC settings, with a view to supporting children with SEND, alongside their families, albeit against a backdrop of increasing constrained resources and local authority funding so to do.

Methodology

The data presented here is part of a wider data set from the original TACTYC research (Solvason, Webb, and Sutton-Tsang, 2020). The project built on previous research (Paull and Popov, 2019; Pascal and Bertram, 2019) with the aim of enhancing knowledge of the role and responsibilities of MNSs within ECEC sector improvements. A case study approach was adopted, with data from two contrasting local authorities, using a mixed methods approach. This involved data provided through telephone and face-to-face interviews, setting visits and focus groups with a range of practitioners of different levels and types of experience. Two hundred MNSs were invited to take part (100 in the Midlands and 100 in the South and South-East of England). There were 60 MNS leader and 55 practitioner survey responses. Themes identified within the survey data were explored further through interviews and setting visits. In the data below, for the purposes of anonymity, quotations are drawn from the original research, but not specifying details of either setting or speaker.

Data and discussion

Our research demonstrated the way in which MNS practitioners and their leaders took their SEND responsibilities very seriously. Their attention to, and knowledge of the links between disadvantage and aspects of SEND, became apparent, as well as their commitment to finding ways to support children with specific needs, even when the resources and the funding were not readily available. They focused on continuing professional development, both their own, and on finding ways to support practitioner colleagues within the non-maintained sector whenever possible. They were attuned to, and focused upon, their capacity to impact not only the child, celebrating difference and diversity and stepping up to the demands presented by a disability that had not previously been encountered within the setting. Despite financial uncertainty and the many challenges of working in areas of poverty and disadvantage, the data from our research provided clear evidence of the positive impact that experienced and knowledgeable ECPs can have on their communities, acting as 'preventative services' with the potential to mitigate against costly services for the setting and families in the future (Solvason, Webb and Sutton-Tsang, 2020). The research insights concurred with those of Pascal and Bertram (2019) who reported the benefits for children and families accessing MNSs, and particularly for those with SEND and from backgrounds of socio-economic disadvantage. The voices of practitioners are easily identifiable as they are presented in italics.

The well-informed and committed MNS practitioner

Many MNS practitioners told us about the '*moral obligation*' that they felt for the wellbeing of all children but especially those with SEND and multiple disadvantages particularly in light of the dramatic reduction of other local authority public services over the ten to fifteen years due to austerity. They saw their remit and value-system as concerned with providing '*front line support*'. As one head teacher explained, '*Our SEND children all deserve one-to-one support to achieve their full potential. We have a duty of care to help them achieve this*'.

Many also saw their role as actively concerned with inclusive curricular development for the sector. Responses to one survey question highlighted that 14% of practitioners and 16% of leaders had been involved in development activities which focused on SEND over the preceding twelve-month period. Considering their own ongoing development needs to become better informed also featured prominently in the data with one leader mentioning the enhanced specialist training that they had received in physical and sensory development

recently which had become invaluable for attending to the needs of the children in their setting. Many practitioners saw the challenge of a child with a particular SEND need as an opportunity for the setting to learn from the child, and to improve its provision and expertise more generally, as demonstrated in the account of one head teacher:

We had a little boy who was blind, so we all learned body signing. So instead of Makaton which is visual, like for 'more' he would bang his shoulder, and 'finished' he would bang on the table. ... And then things like his key person would have a certain perfume on her scarf that she wouldn't change, so that he could recognise her when he came in. We learned so much from him.

Another leader explained how she had trialled video recording of a professional development tool. This captured moments of interaction between children and practitioners to inform an approach to individual education planning for children with particular SEND needs across two of her settings. She felt this to be beneficial to practitioner knowledge and understanding of the specific needs of each child. Another practitioner explained the way in which her setting had become especially knowledgeable about autism due to the interest and commitment of staff. This had led to the setting becoming an (unofficial) specialist provider for children with autism which enabled '*Children [to] come out of their own worlds and begin to seek social and emotional interaction with practitioners*'.

Many research participants cited offering training to other ECEC providers in their area, sharing SEND expertise. In fact, 98% head teachers and 70% of practitioners mentioned their involvement in providing training for other non-maintained settings and families in the local community more generally. The examples they drew on included:

- Providing advice and guidance, signposting parents to services and support.
- Running community accessible groups with focus on early language and home learning.
- Working alongside other agencies including health, social care, and education to support families to engage with services to protect and support vulnerable children.
- Delivering family-support sessions including managing challenging behaviour, early language skills, literacy, and maths sessions.

In addition, some interviewees mentioned delivering outreach programmes designed to meet with parents and children with complex SEND in the community through play sessions that involved both children and parents and carers.

Making an impact for SEND

Our data suggested that many MNS practitioners not only considered their role as concerned with the immediate impact they might have upon the child and the child's family but looked longer term for ways they might help a child transition from one context to another in later life. This head teacher explained the approach taken to developing SEND for life-long resilience so that:

We deliberately work on a carousel [with all children in the nursery] so that when they [SEND children] do transition to a school, they're not dependent on one particular adult.

Our data presented many examples of ECPs recounting planning for a child's next steps, beyond the nursery to participate in wider community life. One leader described the time and effort that was put into developing individual education and health-care plans (IHCP) for children. Often these had to be drawn up knowing that the child would move on to mainstream school during the process, and that they would, nonetheless, have to find a way to carry the cost of the provision:

And often we take them at massive expense to ourselves. Because, if a child is only here for a year, well, no one gets diagnosed in a year. And nobody gets an IHCP plan in a year. So we will support them [the children] one-to-one. ... I know all the nursery schools feel the same, you couldn't not take a child because it's not in the child's best interest to be knocking around at home, particularly one with significant special needs.

Much of the data foregrounded the everyday and wellbeing of the child in the context of their family and the impact for the wellbeing of the SEND in attending to the needs of wider family members. One head teacher told us about noticing that perhaps 'Mummy needs some support, too' in terms of recognising parents' social and emotional needs.

Nonetheless, many head teachers felt that it was important to be able to account quantifiably for the leaps in achievement that children with SEND were able to make in their charge:

... there is a gap when they come ... then a vast majority of our children go out where they should be. And so it converts from being 13% on track on entry to being 70% on track on exit. And our SEND children make ... at least good progress, if not better. ... they make significant progress ... 90% are at age related expectation or above when they leave ... including children with disabilities, 90% of them are where they should be; excluding children with disabilities, 96% are where they should be or above.

The challenges to providing SEND good practice

The challenge of securing funding for children with SEND was a recurring theme of our data, and especially as this related to ongoing planning for the future needs of children and their families requiring knowledgeable and well-informed practitioners, as this MNS leader explained:

Maintained Nursery schools offer high quality education for the most vulnerable children in society. To do this, highly skilled professionals need to work together to keep updated with recent and relevant research striving for continuous improvement and growth. This requires investment in training and resourcing.

Difficulties with securing funding for IHCPs were another recurring theme as was mention of not being able to access some grant funding streams available to the non-maintained sector. However, despite the frustrations, this leader expressed the determination of her practitioners to work for all children and those with SEND:

Much like many Early Childhood Practitioners across the ECEC sector, MNS staff work long hours, for pay that does not necessarily reflect the level of work ... [with a] commitment to improving children's outcomes, practitioners continue to provide quality care and education.

Our data, similar to Paull and Popov (2019), demonstrated how MNSs were at risk of sustaining their support for all children and their families, and especially those with additional needs, vulnerabilities and SEND due to fiscal uncertainties and constraints. This question becomes more urgent in pandemic and post-pandemic contexts of fiscal public policy decision-making.

Conclusion

The MNS is ideally constituted and situated to attend to SEND with the knowledge and expertise of practitioners able to engage with children and their families; other maintained and non-maintained ECECs and the needs of children, placed as they often are within conurbations of need and social and economic deprivation in England. MNSs espouse a model of a community which necessarily values a network of practitioners, professionals, families, and wider members of communities to share concerns and passions, especially focused on the most vulnerable and those with the most challenging SEND. During the pandemic, for example, even after the government paused the shielding advice for children classed as Clinically, Extremely Vulnerable from 31 March 2021 (DfE 2021, p. 7), ECPs, regardless of their setting status, as maintained or non-maintained, continued to work with, and support SEND children and their families through digital learning platforms, demonstrating their versatility, commitment and skill in attending to the needs of SEND children.

Reflective points

Consider your experience of working with children with SEND.

Reflect upon any of the following as they apply to you:

1. Do you (and/or your setting) currently see working with a child with SEND as an opportunity for your own further development of skills and provision? Is this an area that you might develop?
2. What are the implications of reduced local authority funding on your setting's provision for children with SEND?
3. How do you currently work with parents and multi-agencies in identifying and supporting children with SEND? Are there areas you would like to improve or enhance? What are they and in what ways?

References

- Alderson, P. (2018). How the rights of all school students and teachers are affected by special educational needs or disability (SEND) services: Teaching, psychology, policy. *London Review of Education*, 16 (2): 175–190. doi: 10.18546/LRE.16.2.01
- Barton, L. (2005). Special educational needs – an alternative new look. <https://disability-studies.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/40/library/Barton-Warnock.pdf>
- Borkett, P. (2021). *Special Educational Needs in the Early Years: A Guide to Inclusive Practice*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Department for Education. (2014). *Early years: guide to the 0 to 25 SEND code of practice: Advice for early years providers that are funded by the local authority*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/350685/Early_Years_Guide_to_SEND_Code_of_Practice_-_02Sept14.pdf
- Department for Education and Department of Health. (DfE and DoH). (2015). *Special educational needs and disability code of practice: 0 to 25 years Statutory guidance for organisations which work with and support children and young people who have special educational needs or disabilities*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/398815/SEND_Code_of_Practice_January_2015.pdf
- Department for Education. (2017a). *Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-foundation-stage-framework--2>
- Department for Education. (2017b). *Early Years Workforce Strategy*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/596884/Workforce_strategy_02-03-2017.pdf
- Department for Education. (2021). *SEND and Specialist Settings – Additional Operational Guidance: COVID-19*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/984861/FINAL_cleared_SEND_Guidance_10_May.pdf
- Early Education. (2015). *Maintained Nursery Schools: The State of Play Report*. <https://www.early-education.org.uk/sites/default/files/Nursery%20Schools%20State%20of%20Play%20Report%20final%20print.pdf>
- Early Education. (2018). *First Choice and Last Resort: The Unique Role of Maintained Nursery Schools in England in Supporting Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)*. <https://www.early-education.org.uk/sites/default/files/SEND%20in%20MNS%20survey%20findings%20Sept%202018.pdf>
- Frederick, K. (2005). 'Let's take the special out of special needs', *Times Educational Supplement*, 15 July, 19.
- Hodkinson, A. (2010). Inclusive and special education in the English educational system: Historical perspectives, recent developments and future challenges. *British Journal of Special Education*, 37 (2): 61–67. <https://doi-org.apollo.worc.ac.uk/10.1111/j.1467-8578.2010.00462.x>
- Oliver, M. (1990). *The Politics of Disablement*. Basingstoke: Macmillan

- Pascal, C. and Bertram, T. (2019). *The Unique and Added Value of Birmingham's Maintained Nurer Schools*. <http://www.crec.co.uk/announcements/unique-hidden-value-birmingham-mns>
- Paull, G. and Popov, D. (2019). *The Role and Contribution of Maintained Nursery Schools in the Early Years Sector in England*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/912995/Frontier_Economics_MNS_report_REVI SED_v2.pdf
- Solvason, C. and Proctor, S. (2021) 'You have to find the right words to be honest': nurturing relationships between teachers and parents of children with Special Educational Needs. *Support for Learning*, 36(3): 470–485.
- Solvason, C., Webb, R., and Sutton-Tsang, S. (2020). *Evidencing the Effects of Maintained Nursery Schools' Roles in Early Years Sector Improvements*. <https://imx07wlgmj301rre1jepv8h0-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/MNS-Research-Report.pdf>
- Warnock, M. (1978). *Special Educational Needs: Report of the Committee of Enquiry into the Education of Handicapped Children and Young People*. London: HMSO.
- UNESCO. (1994). *The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education*. Paris: UNESCO.