SEN, school life and future aspirations

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"The greatest danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high and we miss it, but that it is too low and we reach it." Michelangelo

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Introduction

Recent research using the UK Millennium Cohort Study has shown that children with special educational needs (SEN) in primary school attain less well in education than other children with similar academic ability (Parsons & Platt, 2017), have a more difficult time at school in terms of being bullied (see e.g. Chatzitheochari, Parsons & Platt, 2016) and exhibit more behavioural problems (Fauth, Platt & Parsons, 2017).

Building on this earlier analysis, we have looked at how teenagers with persistent SEN – that is, those with identified SEN at both primary and secondary school – felt about school, their academic ability and their future educational and occupational aspirations. This work is part of the Cross Cohort Research Programme, based at the Centre for Longitudinal Studies and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

Key findings

We found that teenagers with SEN had a more difficult transition to secondary school, even though they remained more likely to be interested and to try their best in school. Specifically, teenagers with SEN:

- were more likely to be unhappy at school and feel less happy with the quality of their schoolwork overall and specifically in English and maths;
- had less desire to remain in education or to pursue higher education opportunities; and
- had lower ambitions for a 'good', economically rewarding job.

This was still the case even when we took into account their responses at age 11 and their cognitive ability, and controlled for their gender.

Our approach

Using information from the age 11 and age 14 surveys of the MCS, we look at how children with SEN anticipate and experience the move from primary to secondary school. We first describe experiences at both age 11, when the children were still at primary school, and at age 14 when the children had moved to secondary school. These experiences and expectations are shown in Table 1.

We then look specifically at questions that were asked at both 11 and 14. For each outcome at age 14 we ran regression models, controlling for responses to the same question at age 11, together with the teenagers' gender, cognitive ability and SEN status. This allowed us to identify whether SEN status is significantly associated with the age 14 outcome, even given the differences between children with SEN and no SEN at age 11.

To illustrate the strength of the association between SEN and each outcome, we used these regression models to estimate the probability of a teenager with SEN reporting the outcome, compared to an otherwise similar teenager without SEN. These 'predicted probabilities' are shown in Figure 1.

How many teenagers had persistent SEN?

Among the 10,000+ teenagers who contributed to the survey at age 14 and previously at age 11, 7.1 per cent had a SEN at both 14 and 11. SEN status was very heterogeneous, with many needs not directly associated with learning difficulties. The most identified needs were dyslexia, dyspraxia, ADHD, autism, behaviour problems and speech/language difficulties. More boys than girls had a persistent SEN status – 9.8 per cent compared to 4.2 per cent – which is in line with previous findings (Parsons & Platt, 2013).

The data

The Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) has been following the lives of over 19,500 children since they were born in the UK at the turn of the new century. It is one of four longitudinal studies managed by the Centre for Longitudinal Studies.

Data have been collected when the children were aged around 9 months, 3 years, 5 years, 7 years, 11 years and most recently 14 years (Calderwood et al, 2015).





Attachment to school

We first look at the simple differences between children with and without SEN. Table 1 shows that significantly more teenagers with SEN had not liked their primary school 'at all' and were not 'at all' looking forward to going to secondary school. They were also significantly unhappier with the secondary school they went to, and significantly more reported being unhappy at school 'all of the time'. There was little difference by SEN status in how often teenagers tried their best at school or found school interesting, though by age 14 significantly more teenagers with SEN did find school interesting 'all of the time'. However, more teenagers with SEN were unhappy with their schoolwork at both primary and secondary school, and significantly fewer 'strongly agreed' that they were 'good' at the core subjects of English, maths or science at both ages.

Age 11		Age 14	
No SEN	SEN	No SEN	SEN
5.0	16.1*		
4.2	9.5*		
5.9	10.2*	5.9	11.0
1.2	6.4*	2.6	5.8*
57.4	56.6	31.6	37.5
14.6	17.9	4.8	12.2*
3.4	8.8*	4.8	7.8
26.6	22.5	22.7	12.6*
43.1	43.4	27.6	17.0*
25.0	33.9*	24.9	20.6
	Age 11 No SEN 5.0 4.2 5.9 1.2 57.4 14.6 3.4 26.6 43.1 25.0	Age 11No SENSEN5.016.1*4.29.5*5.910.2*5.910.2*5.96.4*57.456.614.617.93.48.8*26.622.543.143.425.033.9*	Age 11 Age 14 No SEN No 5.0 16.1* 1 4.2 9.5* 1 5.9 10.2* 5.9 1.2 6.4* 2.6 57.4 56.6 31.6 14.6 17.9 4.8 3.4 8.8* 4.8 26.6 22.5 22.7 43.1 43.4 27.6 25.0 33.9* 24.9

*Indicates significantly different from children with no SEN at p<.05

We then turn to our results for outcomes at age 14 that adjust for the child's sex, cognitive ability as measured at age 11, and their response to the same question at age 11. Figure 1 shows that teenagers with SEN were around twice as likely to be unhappy with the school they go to and also to report being unhappy at school 'all of the time', compared to otherwise similar teenagers with no SEN. Teenagers with SEN were also unhappier with the quality of their schoolwork and were between eight to ten percentage points less likely to think they were good at English or maths. However, it is important to note that teenagers with SEN were more than twice as likely to find school interesting (10.5 per cent compared to 4.2 per cent) and eight percentage points more likely to always try their best.



FIGURE 1:

Attachment to school at age 14: predicted probabilities of the outcome net of child's previous response, cognitive ability and sex, by SEN status



Aspirations for the future

We then turn to simple differences in children's aspirations for the future. Table 2 shows that significantly fewer teenagers with SEN at age 14 and 11 felt that they would stay on in education full-time post-16, with fewer also expecting to go on to university – a view also held by their parents. Teenagers with SEN were less likely to agree that qualifications were necessary for

a worthwhile job, compared to their peers without SEN, and, as such, fewer had aspirations for a professional or managerial occupation at age 14 or at age 11. There was no significant difference in the average wage of jobs teenagers aspired to, although not as many teenagers with SEN wanted to work in occupations that had a higher share of women in the workforce.¹

1 At both age 14 and 11, teenagers were asked "When you grow up what would like to be?" These aspirations were first coded to four-digit standard occupational classification (SOC) codes and then linked to measures of labour market segregation and pay in these jobs using information from the Quarterly Labour Force Survey (LFS) covering the period of the cohort children's childhoods. Pooling LFS quarters ensured enough observations to construct robust measures of average wages and share of women in the occupation. Average hourly wages in each occupation were log-transformed, given the skewed distribution of wages. The share of women in each occupation was measured as a proportion from 0-1 (none to 100% female).



TABLE 2: Aspirations for the future by SEN status

Aspirations for the future by SEN status	Age 11		Age 14	
	No SEN	SEN	No SEN	SEN
Do you want to stay on at school or college full-time when you are 16? % yes	57.5	44.4*		
How likely do you think it is that you will stay on at school after age 16? ² [0-100%] (mean)			87.2	75.9*
You need qualifications to have a job worth having. % agree / strongly agree			85.9	75.3*
How likely child will go to university? % not at all	3.2	25.6*		
How likely do you think it is that you will go to university? [0-100%] (mean)			68.9	49.9*
When you grow up what would you like to be?				
Professional or managerial occupation %	34.1	23.4*	36.7	24.0*
Average gross hourly wage of occupation \pounds (mean)	25.06	23.50	21.00	19.83
Average share of women in occupation % (mean)	43.1	35.9*	44.4	32.7*

*Indicates significantly different from children with no SEN at p<.05 2 Year 11/Fifth Year/Year 12 [Scotland]

Figure 2 shows that teenagers with persistent SEN were seven percentage points less likely to want to stay on at school and 12 percentage points less likely to expect to go to university, compared to those without SEN, once we had adjusted for their earlier responses on these questions, their cognitive ability and their sex. Teenagers with SEN were eight percentage points less likely to aspire to a professional or managerial occupation. They also now aspired to occupations that command lower wages, on average; £1.97 (9.4%) less per hour than the occupations aspired to by teenagers with no SEN but similar cognitive ability. If we assume a 37-hour working week, this equates to £3,790.28 less per year. However, teenagers with SEN were still less likely to aspire to a female dominated occupation.

FIGURE 2:

Aspirations for the future at age 14: predicted probabilities net of child's previous response, cognitive ability and sex, by SEN status



*Average hourly wage displayed, (log of) average hourly wage in aspired job used in regressions.

Conclusions

It is important to emphasise just how many children this research may relate to. Government figures show that 14.4 per cent of school age children in England currently have special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) (Department for Education, 2017), but as many as 40 per cent of children at school in England are identified with SEND at some point during their school career (Hutchinson, 2017).

Here we have found that the move to secondary school does not improve the negative self-evaluative consequences of having SEN in primary school. Nor does it appear to encourage children with SEN to aim as high as their peers without SEN. These results clearly highlight the lower academic and occupational aspirations held by children and teenagers who were identified as having SEN in both primary and secondary school, compared to other children with similar academic ability but not identified as having SEN. Some differences are substantial and have the potential to cast a long shadow over the opportunities and experiences that present over a lifetime. For some, the shadow will be even darker. A certain level of understanding and ability was required in order to fill in the self-completion questionnaire, and as such this research does not speak for those with more complex or multiple SEN.

Authors

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