

Residential schools and disabled children: decision-making and experiences

A previous stage of this research explored the policies and practices of 21 local authorities on placing a disabled child at residential school (see *Findings* 420). Follow-on research in four authorities explored the circumstances in which disabled children and young people came to be at residential school. The study involved observing at decision-making panel meetings, interviewing key professionals, parents and also disabled children and young people currently at residential school. The researchers found that:

- f** Most disabled children and young people had very mixed feelings about going away to residential school.
- f** Some disabled children and young people said that having opportunities to make friends and have more independence was one of the best things about their school. Homesickness was common and all the children and young people that did so said it was great to go home at weekends or holidays.
- f** For the overwhelming majority of parents residential school was not a preferred option and a very difficult decision to make.
- f** Parents and some disabled young people cited bad experiences in local special and mainstream schools as one of the main reasons for considering residential schools, along with inadequate support to families in meeting their child's needs.
- f** The local authorities were generally opposed to residential school placements. Panel meetings usually had little opportunity to consider the needs of individual children: there were often disagreements between education and social services, inadequate information about children's needs and circumstances, and not enough time for a full discussion. Decisions could be delayed for many months.
- f** Most placements solely funded by education authorities had little input from anyone in terms of monitoring care standards and children's welfare. Social services departments followed a variety of different practices, but very few children received the full protection of the Children Act.
- f** Parents received little help in keeping in contact with their children or in attending reviews.

Introduction

Despite increasing commitment by government to the inclusion of children with special educational needs in mainstream services, significant numbers of disabled children remain in specialist residential school placements. Very often such placements are in schools a long way from home and children can be at school for up to 52 weeks of the year. This research looked at how effective legislation was in protecting the welfare of disabled children at residential schools by talking to decision-makers, professionals, parents and disabled children and young people at residential school.

Why are placements made?

Education and social services professionals tended to feel that parents were committed, at an early stage, to the idea of a residential placement. In contrast, the general message coming from parents was that this was an option they only reluctantly considered.

Educational reasons

One of the main reasons parents cited for a residential placement was what they saw as a failure of local schools to meet their child's educational needs. Education officers talked of the difficulties that schools have in meeting the needs of children who have more than one impairment, whether in a local special or mainstream school. Sometimes a local special school placement meant travelling long distances to and from school; this proved too difficult for some families.

Issues for Deaf and hearing impaired children

There were differing opinions amongst both social services and education professionals in terms of whether Deaf and hearing impaired children benefited from being in a school which caters only for this group of children. Some education professionals worried about the segregation of Deaf children given the loss of links with a local community. In contrast other professionals were of the firm opinion that children for whom BSL was their first language should be educated in a signing environment from as early an age as possible and that this could not be achieved within local schools.

Children's social and emotional needs

Both parents and professionals identified the social and emotional consequences for children when local schools struggled to meet children's needs. For example, not having access to peer groups who have the same experience of impairment can lead to isolation. Some parents and young people said there had been bullying at their local school. For some young disabled people going to residential school was an opportunity to be more independent. Occasionally

concern about a child's welfare at home meant that residential school became seen as a good way of a child having a better standard of care and better educational opportunities.

Support to parents

Many of the parents spoke of not getting the support they needed if their child was to remain at home. A number of parents felt that a failure to meet their child's needs at school could create such emotional distress that their behaviour outside school became very difficult to deal with. In these instances it could become impossible to separate out social and educational needs or their consequences for a family's support needs.

Parents wanted respite care but said there was not enough on offer. Shared care had generally not worked because other families had been unable to cope. Most social services professionals admitted that support services might not be enough to ensure that all children were able to stay at home.

The process of decision-making

Parents were overwhelmingly critical of the decision-making process. Agreement could take a number of years and sometimes led to tribunals. Parents were not given clear information about the process or proper feedback about decisions. Neither were they given clear guidance or effective help in choosing an appropriate school. Most social services and education professionals admitted that they had insufficient time to support parents properly through the decision-making process or in finding a school.

Generally, professionals had an inherent opposition to residential school placements. However, most admitted that there were insufficient educational and family-based support services to meet the needs of all disabled children at home or locally.

All the case study areas reported a reduction in the number of placements over recent years and an increase in collaboration between education and social services. The main mechanism for joint decision-making was monthly panel meetings. However, there were still disagreements about whether an application for a placement was based on educational or social/support reasons.

Parents and some professionals felt very remote from the panel. There was rarely anyone attending who knew the individual children. As a result decisions were sometimes made without much awareness of the children's particular needs.

Children and young people's experiences of residential schools

Most of the children and young people said that they were anxious about going to residential school and

had been very homesick. Some had bad experiences of local schools or had not been able to make friends and were therefore positive about the opportunities that they felt residential school gave them. However, most would have preferred to be at home. The children and young people missed their families but also the ability to have their own space and routines. Some children communicated that there was nothing at all that they liked about being at residential school.

Most, but not all the children, went home for visits during term and in the holidays. All those that did go home were positive about it.

Views differed on the quality of the education they received. Some thought that their schools at home had better teaching, for example, but had been unhappy there. Some were very happy with the education in their residential school but didn't always get all of the support they needed.

Children had different experiences of free time. Some found the time boring with not enough to do and sometimes not enough members of staff working to support them to go out. Others had quite a lot of independence and a range of things they could do after school. Children and young people often mentioned friendships as a good thing about being at residential school. However, some of the young people said it was difficult to have a boyfriend or a girlfriend.

The staff that work with and support children and young people can be very important people in their lives. It was clear that there were not always enough staff to meet children's needs and some staff confirmed the difficulties they had due to shortages. Some workers were clearly very committed and engaged with children thoughtfully. Others, the researchers observed, were disrespectful of the children in their care, sometimes making very negative comments about them and making few attempts to communicate with them.

One young person said that it was not really possible for him to stay close to his culture and religion at school in the way he could at home. Black children were often in a very small minority in their schools although they said that they had not experienced this as a problem.

Parents' experiences

Many parents spoke about the grieving process and feelings of guilt that they experienced when their children went away. Often parents felt that they were doing the best thing that they could for their child in circumstances that they would not have chosen. Most parents had found their own ways of having quite regular contact with their children once they were at school.

Though not all children went home, most did

and, whilst there were issues and concerns relating to levels of support for families when their child came home, there was an overwhelming delight at having them home.

Parents were generally happy with the relationships they had with education and care staff at their children's schools. However, it was not always easy for parents to adjust to being the parent of a child who did not live at home full-time and some parents found some schools had treated them as interfering.

Some parents had difficulties with schools when their child's behaviour had become an issue. A couple of schools had either sent children home as a punishment or not allowed them to go home as a punishment. Sometimes schools would tell parents at very short notice that their child would have to leave the school.

Parents had strong views about how they wanted schools to meet their child's needs, for example, what kind of person they wanted as a keyworker for their child. Some parents talked about the advantages their children were receiving from specialist knowledge and access to specialist equipment or therapies. Generally, parents felt that residential schools adopted a more positive approach to their child than their local special or mainstream school had done. Not all parents were happy and some were disappointed to find a lack of expertise relating to their child and a lack of preparation in anticipation of their child's arrival at the schools.

Services' involvement after placements were made

Education

In three of the case study areas, the majority of placements were funded solely by education. Education departments said that they had no formal mechanisms for monitoring the welfare of disabled children at residential schools. Education departments did not see it as part of their role to encourage contact between parents and children apart from organising transport for a child to and from school. Neither were parents given support to attend reviews – either financial or by providing interpreters for Deaf parents. Many educational psychologists said that they were unable to routinely attend annual reviews and as a whole were clear that their role was quite minimal once a child was placed out of area.

Social services

It was clear from this, and the first stage of the research, that most social services departments were not constructively using Children Act regulations to protect the interests of children at residential schools, neither were they always helping parents to maintain

their relationship with their child. There was continued confusion about when a child is 'looked after' and 'accommodated' and great variations in practice when it came to applying the regulations.

Some individual departments and social workers treated the 'looked after' status issue as a deterrent, i.e. they felt that parents would think again about residential school if they realised their child was going to face the 'stigma' of being in the 'looked after' system.

Lack of time, resources and training and the distances to many residential schools made it difficult for many social workers to have meaningful relationships with children in residential schools, especially those with a communication impairment where more time was needed to get to know the child.

Social services departments did not actively offer families support to maintain contact with their children. Parents were often reluctant to ask for help, though some that had asked had got contributions to their travelling costs.

Reviews and transition planning

Parents said it was common for professionals from their own authority to arrive at school for a review never having met them or their child before. Some parents found reviews helpful and others were very anxious about them, if for example, they were worried that the meeting might be looking for a reason to end the placement.

When it came to transition planning, both education and social services professionals said that they were not beginning when the young person was 14 and subsequent transition planning was difficult to get right for young people in out of county residential school placements.

Conclusion

Residential school was not anyone's first choice even though for some it brought positive things alongside sad emotions about being away from home.

It is not possible to be confident about the welfare of disabled children at residential schools given the wide variation in practices in following the guidance set out in The Children Act. For children in placements funded solely by education there is unlikely to be anybody other than a parent actively checking whether or not the child is safe and happy.

The researchers conclude that, in practice, the current legislative framework is not adequately protecting and promoting the interests of disabled children at residential schools.

About the study

The research was carried out by David Abbott with Linda Ward at the Norah Fry Research Centre, University of Bristol, and Jenny Morris, an independent researcher. They visited four English local authorities and spoke to a wide range of education and social services professionals. They attended decision-making panels in each authority. Thirty-four parents with disabled children at residential school were interviewed. Subsequently visits to 32 of their children were arranged. The project was guided by a reference group of disabled young people and an advisory group of professionals and parents.

How to get further information

A full report, *The best place to be? Policy, practice and the experiences of residential school placements for disabled children* by David Abbott, Jenny Morris and Linda Ward, is published for the Foundation by YPS (ISBN 1 84263 051 2, price £14.95).

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