



Educational engagement, expectation and attainment of children with disabilities

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Summary

Although existing Government statistics show that children with special educational needs do not achieve as well academically as their peers, there is little evidence of how disability in early childhood affects later academic outcomes. Using a large longitudinal study, this research explored early leaving, being registered to sit Higher examinations and achieving 3 Higher passes. Limiting long-term illness in early childhood did not predict becoming an early school-leaver, but did make it less likely that children would be registered to sit Highers, or gain 3 passes. Adolescents experiencing Mental Health problems were found to have a higher probability of leaving school early and adolescents with Learning Disabilities were less likely to achieve well academically. A broader measure of disability in adolescence found that pupils with disabilities who sat Highers were no less likely than their peers to gain 3 A-C level passes.

Background

The project focussed on three main measurements:

- **Engagement** of children was measured by whether the student was classed as an 'early leaver' or not. That is to say, they left school either before age 16 or as early as legally possible as defined by age in Scotland.
- **Expectation** was examined by looking at registration of students to sit at least one Higher qualification, indicating expected ability.
- **Attainment** was defined by whether the child gained at least three 'A-C' grade passes in their Highers, considered to be a high level of academic attainment.

Methods

The research focus was different from prior studies carried out on this topic due to the use of longitudinal data allowing the long-term effects of disability to be better identified.

Another new feature of this research is the use of the 2011 Scottish Census data question on health conditions. This breaks down disabilities by category, allowing the effect of different disabilities and conditions to be looked at more closely.

A large sample of 20,000 children was included. Just under 6% of these children reported having a disability in adolescence (at 2011), and 4% reported a limiting long-term illness in 2001 when they were aged between 3 and 10 years old.

Conclusions

It was found that children with disabilities were no more likely to leave school early than non-disabled children were. Although children with disabilities were less likely to sit Highers, they were just as likely to achieve good results when they did.

Looking at different types of disability showed that children with mental health problems were the only group with a higher risk of being early leavers. The current focus on enhanced support for the mental health of school children in Scotland is welcomed and it is hoped that this will allow more children with mental ill-health to remain in education for longer.

The finding that children with disabilities who did sit Highers were just as likely to gain high marks may suggest that perceptions of the academic potential of children with disabilities may not align with their actual performance. It is recommended that further research should be undertaken to inform policy and strategy in tackling this issue. It is vital that all children have the opportunity to achieve their full potential.

The study supports the idea of a critical phase during early childhood where family composition and area deprivation can affect later academic outcomes. Children from deprived areas, living with single parents or with a parent with disability were more likely to leave school early and less likely to do well academically.

Use of the Scottish Longitudinal Study allowed the researchers to control for background factors in early childhood. The Census question on health conditions was also shown to be valuable in exposing risks for some disability types that a more global measure did not reveal, for example that disability was not a risk for early leaving, but having mental ill-health was.

Overall this research provides some key points for consideration by Scottish policy makers. In particular the use of broad measures such as Special Educational Needs as a proxy for disability may not be providing an accurate picture of the needs of children with disabilities.

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Further project information from SLS-DSU:

https://sls.lscs.ac.uk/projects/view/2015_010/

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