

What is the consequence of more children being sent to private special schools?

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There have been large increases in the number of children sent to non-maintained special schools in recent years. To assess the extent of this trend and its probable consequences, I and my colleagues sent Freedom of Information requests about spending on private special schools to a stratified sample of 24 local authorities in England. Their responses revealed substantial rises in spending recently, with spending of up to £0.3 million per child per annum (see [Thomas et al, 2023](#)).

We argue that the increasing reliance on private special school placement carries not only potential risks for the education, care and wellbeing of the students placed in often distant schools, with recent evidence of cases of serious neglect and abuse in such schools, but also threats to the development of inclusive practice. Current policy and its associated funding mechanisms incentivise separation and are inimical to the development of inclusive solutions to children's and young people's problems at school. We argue that systems need to be developed which enable the substantial sums currently spent on private special schools to be re-deployed to cultivate imaginative inclusive responses to the difficulties experienced by some children at school.

Our analysis draws parallels with an equivalent situation in childcare, where there has been a similarly mounting reliance on private provision. Analysis of the issue there, including an auditing of the costs and use of such provision, has pointed to the problems that emerge from this growing dependence on private rather than public resources, with inadequate regulation of the sector allowing poor practice, and, at worst, cases of neglect and abuse to occur. One of the recommendations proposed in the childcare sector – namely, the development of regional cooperatives for procurement, oversight and regulation of private provision – seems relevant also in education.

We argue that the very substantial sums currently being spent on private special school places could often be employed more fruitfully in finding inclusive solutions to students' problems – if funding mechanisms enabled this. Current systems of funding, though, make separation expedient, and even incentivise it. There is no mechanism for enabling the substantial moneys – or, indeed, any proportion of them – associated with private special provision to be transferred to the mainstream to be deployed there. Potential mechanisms for the re-direction of resources need to be explored.

A start might come in requiring LAs to make cost-benefit analyses of these placements. The very high payments made to private schools could, for example, comfortably cover the cost of full-time care at home and/or in the neighbourhoods in which students reside, alongside one-to-one teaching plus one-to-one support from teaching assistants in inclusive school placements in home communities. A cost-benefit analysis would specify the options available to meet a student's needs, such as teaching from a full- or part-time teacher, teaching assistant support, peripatetic teacher support, care assistance, attendance at therapy sessions, and part- or full-time attendance at a special facility. It would proceed to identify and assess the potential outcomes of those options including the benefit of factors such as non-removal from a student's home community, and weigh these against the cost (in financial, social and educational terms) of the various options.

But finance systems in LAs are inimical to such potential flexibility in the use of resources. Lack of coherent policy and associated administrative

infrastructure means that it is impossible to take a proactive decision to spend £250K or more on a community-based solution to a child's difficulties at school – even though this may be the price of a private special school placement if the child is ultimately removed from the mainstream. Originality and imagination in finding inclusive solutions to young people's problems at school are likely to be in short supply as long as the relatively straightforward expedient of separation to a private special school exists.

Reference

Thomas, G., Dobson, G. & Loxley, A. (2023) The increasing use of private special schools: a policy gap for inclusive education. *British Educational Research Journal*, online at <https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/berj.3901>

Biography

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