The wellbeing of secondary school children with Special Educational Needs (SEN)

Dr Matt Barnes and Dr Eric Harrison
Department of Sociology
Background

- Despite much research on the **personal wellbeing** of children, we know little about children with **SEN**
- Children with SEN can have a **range** of needs (learning difficulties; social & emotional; communication etc.)
- …and hence may **experience** school and other aspects of life differently from children without SEN
  - Greater risk of **bullying** (Chatzitheochari et al, 2014)
  - More likely to be **excluded** or **absent** from school (DfE, 2016)
  - Needs that may make it **harder to learn** than most children
- These factors may contribute to **lower levels** of wellbeing
Lack of data

- We have lots of data on child wellbeing
  - e.g. from surveys - BHPS, USoc, MCS, GCS, OECD, ONS

- We have data on SEN status
  - e.g. from School Census (and some ‘subjective’ measures from surveys)

- But lack of data on child wellbeing AND SEN status
  - Rarely collected in the same dataset
    - FACS, MCS5
Research Questions

- What is the personal wellbeing of children with SEN?
- Do levels of personal wellbeing of children with SEN differ from levels of personal wellbeing of children without SEN?
- Is having SEN independently associated with levels of personal wellbeing (and which other factors are)?

[We also explored children’s psychological wellbeing]

- Where is the data that lets us explore these issues?
Data source: Linked USoc-NPD dataset

National Pupil Database
- Contains detailed information on every child at school in England
- Information collected via School Census (three times a year)
- Exam results
- Attendance
- Socio and economic background, including SEN
- Does not collect wellbeing information

Understanding Society
- Annual panel survey from 2009/10
- 40,000 households
- Adults and children 10-15 years
- Socio-demographic & economic background
- Family relationships
- Health & wellbeing of parents
- Child behaviours & attitudes
- Family relationships
- Subjective & psychological wellbeing of children (10-15 years)
- Does not collect SEN information
The linked USoc-NPD dataset

Parents asked to give consent to child/ren data linking with NPD
- consent rates of 78%
- match rates of 55%

2009/10 USoc wave 1
2010/11 USoc wave 2
2011/12 USoc wave 3
2012/13 USoc wave 4
2013/14 USoc wave 5
2014/15 USoc wave 6

NPD

Asked about subjective & psychological wellbeing

Only asked about subjective wellbeing, not psychological too

Created weight to account for non-response to USoc, attrition to wave 3, non-response to 10-15 yr questionnaire, non-consent to data linking, data linking errors (see report for details) [thanks to Prof. Peter Lynn for advice!]
Measuring Special Educational Needs

- 1,600 children aged 10-15 used in analysis
- Data predates recent SEN(D) reforms
- Analysis does not differentiate support type
  - School Action / School Action Plus / Statement
  - …nor area of need
  - Learning difficulty; social emotional & mental health; speech, language & communication; hearing, visual, autism etc.
- USoc-NPD data broadly mirrors NPD
- One in five children aged 10-15 have SEN
- Boys and FSM children at higher risk of having SEN (know this from NPD data)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Special Educational Needs support category</th>
<th>Number of children in linked dataset</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No Special Educational Needs</td>
<td>1,301</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children with Educational Needs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Action or Early Years Action</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Action Plus or Early Years Action Plus</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All with Special Educational Needs</td>
<td>290</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All children</td>
<td>1,600</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Understanding Society – National Pupil Database (linked dataset)
Which children have Special Educational Needs?

- Most of the characteristics data comes from USoc.
- Children with SEN may have other characteristics that impact on their levels of wellbeing.
- Characteristics are likely to vary according to area of need.
Subjective wellbeing ('unhappiness')

- Questions in self-completion questionnaire, asked to 10-15 year olds
- Children asked about different aspects of their lives:
  - School you go to
  - School work
  - Appearance
  - Family
  - Friends
  - Life as a whole

The next few questions are about how you feel about different aspects of your life.

20 The faces express various types of feelings. Below each face is a number where ‘1’ is completely happy and ‘7’ is not at all happy.

Please tick the box which comes closest to expressing how you feel about each of the following things...

A) Your school work? YPH5W
Subjective wellbeing - average levels of ‘unhappiness’

- Higher score = more unhappy
- Overall, children happiest with family & friends, unhappiest with school work & appearance

- Children with SEN have higher levels of unhappiness, than children without SEN, with:
  - **school work** (mean score 3.1 compared to 2.5)
  - **school** (mean score 2.7 compared to 2.3)
  - **friends** (mean score 1.9 compared to 1.6)
- No difference for appearance, family, life as a whole
Subjective wellbeing – percentage ‘unhappy’

- ‘Unhappiness threshold’
  - 5+ for school, school work & appearance
  - 4+ for family, friends, and life as a whole (indifferent/unhappy)

- Children with SEN are more likely than children without SEN to be ‘unhappy’ with:
  - school (19 per cent compared to 7 per cent)
  - school work (13 per cent compared to 6 per cent),
  - friends (8 per cent compared to 4 per cent)
  - life as a whole (17 per cent compared to 11 per cent)

- No difference for appearance and family
Is having SEN independently associated with child wellbeing?

1. Linear regression model
   - Dependent variable: Unhappiness score (1-7)

2. Logistic regression model
   - Dependent variable: ‘Unhappy’ / not ‘unhappy’

- Model for each wellbeing domain
  - School you go to
  - School work
  - Appearance
  - Family
  - Friends
  - Life as a whole

Independent variables:
- Special Educational Needs
- Personal characteristics of child
  - Gender
  - Ethnic group
  - Language
- Family characteristics
  - Family type
  - Age of mother
  - Number of dependent children
  - Age of youngest child
- Family economic background
  - Highest parental qualification
  - Work status
  - Household income
  - Free School Meal eligibility

Child behaviours
- Risky behaviours (alcohol etc.)
- Amount of screen time
- Being bullied at school

Child relationship with parents
- Family meals together
- Talk about important matters

Mental health
- Strengths & difficulties

Health and wellbeing of mother
- Long-standing illness / disability
- Subjective wellbeing
- Life satisfaction
Is having SEN independently associated with child wellbeing?

- Evidence of a link between SEN and unhappiness with schooling

‘Unhappiness’ score
- After taking the other factors into account having SEN is only associated with school work (it is no longer associated with school or friends)

Being ‘unhappy’
- After taking the other factors into account, children with SEN were more likely than children without SEN to say they were unhappy with their school (it is no longer associated with school work, friends, or life as a whole)
What other factors were associated with child wellbeing?

- Factors **other** than having SEN are also independently associated with low subjective wellbeing.

- These can vary according to the **domain** of subjective wellbeing.

- Some factors are **prominent** across a number of wellbeing domains:
  - being a **girl**
  - being **bullied** (whether physical or non-physical)
  - having higher levels of **psychological difficulties**
Aside: We also looked at the association between SEN and psychological wellbeing

**Psychological wellbeing (‘difficulties’)**

Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire:
- Emotional symptoms
- Hyperactivity
- Conduct problems
- Peer relationships
  - Prosocial behaviour

- Our research shows that children with SEN have higher average **psychological difficulties** score across all domains
- Children with SEN are also more likely than children without SEN to have **high / very high** psychological difficulties across all domains
Conclusions

- New **quantitative evidence** on link between SEN and wellbeing
- Children with SEN tend to have **lower levels** of subjective wellbeing than children without SEN when talking about their **school** and their **school work** – and also with their friends (an important element of school life)
- The link between SEN and wellbeing in relation to school exists when **controlling** for other factors
  - Perhaps unsurprising given children with SEN often require additional support with **educational needs**
- Some of the other factors linked to wellbeing are **disproportionately** associated with children with SEN
- Obviously **complex** interaction between SEN and a number of other factors that can impact on children’s wellbeing
Limitations and further research

- Only secondary school children
- Likely to be differences by SEN support level and area of need
- How much less happy?
  - Difference for happiness with school work = 0.6 points (SEN 3.1 v Not SEN 2.5)
- Data linking (e.g. sample sizes, timing of information)
- New USoc-NPD data linking from USoc wave 4 consents?
- Longitudinal analysis – e.g. changes in SEN, wellbeing, other factors etc.
The wellbeing of secondary school pupils with special educational needs
Research report
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Matt Barnes and Eric Harrison
Department of Sociology, City University of London