



Don't let cuts sever the lifeline of ASL provision

Putting landmark legislation back into focus would offer far-reaching benefits

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ARGUABLY one of the Scottish Parliament's greatest achievements during its first decade was the 2004 Additional Support for Learning (ASL) Act. What distinguished it from other nations' legislation – its “magic” – is that children not reaching their learning potential “for whatever reason” are now equally entitled by law to receive the extra help they need to succeed.

Receiving additional support suddenly became more than an aspiration for young learners. It became a “must-do” for schools and other public services, rather than languishing on the “would be nice to do” list.

Throughout Scotland, ASL was no longer just a good idea – it became the law.

Thirteen years later, it remains the law and a lot has been achieved. All concerned should be proud of the times when good intentions translated into equally good realities.

Many children and young people who, in the past, would have been marginalised, miseducated or essentially written off have received valuable assistance and support through the act. Scottish students are increasingly seen and treated as people with strengths as well as weaknesses – providing real potential, not just challenges.

Nevertheless, in political terms, the act has been eclipsed by newer laws, policies and priorities. In practical terms, implementation has been patchy and too often inadequate in meeting students' needs, parents' hopes and the goals of teachers and specialist staff. The promise of the act has been compromised.

It came to be regarded by many public officials as a landmine, rather than a landmark. This happened, in part, because they saw that genuine adherence to the letter and spirit of the act was neither cheap nor easy – and that half-hearted implementation could blow up into costly legal liabilities and unwelcome disputes.

But the bigger reason was that the legislation itself, as well as subsequent legal proceedings, made it plain that ASL assessments, services and support could not be denied or diminished on financial grounds. Yet it is commonly acknowledged that decisions about providing the required additional support for learning are routinely based on money, rather than need or entitlement. This should be unacceptable, but it continues to take place.

Exacerbating current cutbacks in immediate provision is the fact that too little has been invested for too long in the diverse professionals required for the act to deliver the goods for every pupil, day in and day out. Without at least adequate initial preparation, meaningful CPD and ongoing help for those supporting students, ASL implementation will predictably underperform.

The postcode lottery within ASL implementation can also be found in Curriculum for Excellence, *Girfec* (Getting It Right for Every Child) and other governmental priorities sharing the same admirable progressive ethos. The fundamental answer is not to kick the act into the long grass, but rather to remember it is not replaceable by the strategies, laws and policies that have come later.

It is time for the act to return to the limelight. A recent spate of media stories and the brief inquiry by the Education and Skills Committee are welcome. The point is to move the act beyond its current landmine reputation, so that it can – finally – live up to its potential as a lifeline for Scottish students, education and society.

At least three next steps are required, above and beyond the necessity to invest more fully and wisely in ASL implementation throughout Scotland.

From mental health to family poverty, today's headline issues all could and should benefit from a rejuvenation of additional support for learning. Devoting more resources to getting ASL implementation right today will lower the human, educational and societal costs tomorrow.

First, students with ASL needs – short or long-term, profound or less severe – must be properly assessed and assisted as early and fully as possible. Some 24.9 per cent of all pupils are recorded as having additional support needs; Scotland's attainment and achievement gaps cannot be closed without helping those pupils. There is no such thing as sinking a quarter of a boat.

Waiting until problems worsen before intervening is an albatross around the neck of Scottish social and education policy. That was the Christie Commission's fundamental conclusion, as well as the reality driving the Scottish government to declare – but not yet deliver on – prevention and early intervention as their top priorities.

Second, the widespread practice of stopping the ASL assessment process when only one diagnosis or difficulty is identified must be replaced by a far more holistic understanding of pupils whose learning journey is heading for a dead end. In the real world, ASL needs are very often multiple and complex. It is far from rare that children must contend with both circumstantial issues (from poverty and parental substance abuse to domestic violence) and significant medical conditions.

Even within the health arena, co-morbidities are common: for example, two or more neurodevelopmental concerns such as ADHD and fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) existing side-by-side. The internationally renowned research of Glasgow professor Christopher Gillberg is particularly helpful, but largely unused in Scottish ASL practice (see bit.ly/Gillberg).

Third, directly or indirectly blaming children for the consequences of the bad hand they been dealt early in life is both cruel and ineffective. This most powerfully applies to the many “leftover” children that are officially recorded as being in the ambiguous, unhelpful, catch-all categories of “social, emotional and behavioural difficulties” and unspecified “learning disabilities”. They do not generally receive the most meaningful assessments, actions and evaluations of progress. That may explain why more than one-third of all excluded students come from one-tenth of ASL categories.

Bridging Scotland's “attainment gap” – a key priority of the current Holyrood government – will take enormous action; finally keeping the promises made in the ASL Act would be a giant step towards that goal. Providing the extra help some students still require can dramatically improve their school and life trajectories. Supporting them fully and effectively will, in turn, enable additional support for learning to become a shining example of governmental accomplishment and professional pride throughout our nation. ●



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