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Schools and academies

Research Associate Summary report

Hannah Peaston

Deputy Headteacher, Herne Church of England Junior School, Kent

Resource

**Mainstream inclusion, special
challenges: strategies for children
with BESD**

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Introduction

This study investigated the leadership strategies that are currently being used in mainstream primary and middle schools to effectively include children with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESD). The impact that this inclusion has on other members of the school community was examined, and any strategies in place to ensure that the experience was as positive as possible for all were also considered.

Four schools in South East England were visited, and interviews carried out with members of the leadership team and support staff working directly with BESD children. The schools had nominated themselves on the basis of their good practice in this area.

‘Pupil behaviour in schools is frequently presented as a concern’

Ellis & Tod 2009: 29

and the most recent expression of this is in the Department for Education’s (DfE) (2010) white paper [The Importance of Teaching](#). The white paper suggests that the minority of children who behave badly can ‘cause serious disruption in the classroom’ (DfE 2010: 9). Research points towards mainstream school staff accepting the need to include these children in their schools. However, ongoing media interest in the ‘behaviour problems’ in the nation’s schools, coupled with the significant section of [The Importance of Teaching](#) (DfE 2010) dedicated to improving behaviour, perhaps suggests that there are still many challenges to be faced when seeking to include a child with BESD in a mainstream primary school.

Supported by the relevant literature, this study aimed to answer the following questions in order to provide other practitioners with recommendations for effective adaptation of policy guidance:

- How has the inclusion of BESD children in mainstream schools evolved?
- What challenges are faced today by mainstream schools seeking to include children with BESD?
- How does the inclusion of BESD children impact on other pupils and staff?
- What leadership strategies are required to effectively meet these challenges while ensuring that the impact on other pupils and staff is as positive as possible?

Findings

Do we know enough about BESD?

All of the schools in this study were fortunate to have at least one, if not more, members of staff with a good understanding of the nature of BESD. The special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs) interviewed were all able to describe robust systems for identification of possible children with BESD, and were also keen to explain the importance of involving other staff and parents in this identification.

The continuing professional development (CPD) done by SENCOs to achieve this level of understanding ranged from formal courses, to in-house training (the Inclusion Development Programme [IDP] was popular) and informal chats with colleagues. It was recognised by several interviewees that training was very effective when it could be personalised to a specific child or situation.

How do we develop an inclusive ethos?

An overwhelming theme from the vast majority of the interviews was the positive attitude of staff towards inclusion. All those interviewed were able to clearly explain what inclusion meant in their school, and these messages were communicated throughout the school, to teaching staff and teaching assistants (TAs) and to parents. This process was usually led by the SENCO, regardless of whether or not they were part of the leadership team.

All of the senior leaders interviewed spoke confidently about involving teaching staff and TAs in the process of developing an inclusive ethos. However, it was felt that there was a lack of understanding of BESD issues among staff such as office staff, ICT technicians or cleaners. Despite these members of staff having little regular, direct contact with the children, there is still a place for them to contribute to the overall ethos of the school.

The impression was that inclusion was a team effort. Staff attitude was seen as vital, and in the best examples a positive attitude was modelled and promoted by the leadership team.

How do we cope with the disruption?

Much of the literature (see DfES 1989; DfE 2010) flags up disruption as a cause for concern when including BESD children in mainstream schools. When questioned about challenges, almost all staff interviewed mentioned the disruption caused in the classroom.

The difficulty in planning for such events was seen as a further challenge:

“... it’s such a disruption... If it’s managed well then it doesn’t have to be but generally with those higher profile children we have here they are so unpredictable themselves it’s very difficult to plan for that.”

SENCO, junior school

A crucial factor in managing, and ultimately reducing, disruptive behaviour was getting the staffing right. All of the schools had appointed staff with specific responsibility for BESD children. These roles were highly valued by the schools, and worked best when the member of staff was flexible and ‘on call’ throughout the day. The staff needed to spend enough time with the children to build up a meaningful relationship with them.

All of the schools were running group interventions, covering a wide range of behavioural, emotional and social skills. These programmes were most effective when they were part of a whole-school approach to behaviour, so the principles, language and behaviours taught in the group sessions were replicated in the child’s dealings with all staff.

What about the other children?

“... they [BESD children] massively affect the learning in the class.”

Headteacher, junior school

Similar concerns were raised by all of the schools interviewed, but these concerns were greatly reduced in the schools where the strategies outlined above had been embedded for some time, combined with a whole-school inclusive ethos. These schools also reported fewer concerns about other children ‘learning bad behaviour’ from BESD children.

Some of the senior leaders interviewed discussed the difficulties of prioritising adult support, but several felt that by supporting BESD children, other children often benefited indirectly.

Many of the staff interviewed felt that there was scope for the inclusion of BESD children in mainstream primary schools to be very beneficial to other children. Staff commented that having children with BESD in the school had increased the tolerance of other children, as well as contributing to their understanding and awareness of diverse needs.

“I was observing a Year 2 class yesterday where a boy sitting on the carpet, a boy with obviously quite social problems has a habit of pretending to cry... a little girl next to him moved over next to him and put a hand on his back and just left it there for a few minutes. It was wonderful, he stopped and smiled, she took her hand away that was it. It was all done while the teacher was still taking the main teaching bit of the lesson. Fantastic.”

Headteacher, primary school

Isn’t it just too stressful?

Poor pupil behaviour is the ‘greatest concern voiced by new teachers’ (DfE 2010). Staff interviewed, both senior leaders and TAs, recognised that the presence of a child with BESD in the classroom could be ‘very difficult’ and ‘challenging’ for teachers.

“[It’s] a lot more stressful for the teachers, it’s got to be because then there is no flow to the class there, it’s constantly being disrupted.”

TA, junior school

In schools visited with an established inclusive ethos, the leadership team worked hard to keep staff motivated and focused on this vision during times of challenge. This was done almost exclusively through individual conversations. Another source of support for staff were the many outside agencies available to schools; however, there were concerns about the ease of access to these services.

Working with BESD children day-to-day requires a high level of emotional involvement from the staff, and the education sector is unusual in that there is no formal obligation to provide support in the form of supervision for staff. One of the schools interviewed had begun to put a system of supervision in place for the members of staff who worked most closely with vulnerable children.

If left unchecked, the disruptive behaviour characteristic of BESD children can create a very different atmosphere to the inclusive ethos created by the schools in this study.

Conclusions

This study aimed to identify the challenges currently faced by mainstream primary and middle schools when including BESD children, and by gathering leadership strategies already being used effectively to offer advice to other schools on the best way to maximise the positive impact of having these children in school. These challenges and strategies can be summarised as follows:

Challenges faced

- engaging non-class-based staff in the whole-school approach, for example, office staff
- disruption to learning and teaching
- influence on other children's behaviour
- allocating adult support to benefit all children
- increased stress for teachers
- potential long-term effect on the atmosphere and reputation of the school

Effective leadership strategies

- establish an inclusive ethos
- provide training and support for staff
- as a leadership team, model a positive staff attitude
- build meaningful relationships, between staff and children, and between the children themselves
- adopt a whole-school approach to interventions
- appoint staff with specific responsibility for BESD
- establish reliable systems of communication between all staff and parents
- use peer group support

The schools in the study were realistic about the challenges they faced, and as a result were able to put in place the strategies above to overcome these. There was evidence that over time these strategies did enable the successful inclusion of BESD children in mainstream primary schools.

“I think if you were to walk around and look in the classrooms you would find it difficult to identify our children [with BESD].”

Year group leader, middle school

References

- DfE (Department for Education), 2010, [The Importance of Teaching: School's White Paper 2010](#), London, The Stationery Office
- DfES (Department for Education and Skills), 1989, [Discipline in Schools](#) (The Elton Report), London, DfES
- Ellis, S & Tod, J, 2009, [Behaviour for Learning](#), Abingdon, Routledge

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Triumph Road,
Nottingham NG8 1DH
T 0845 609 0009
F 0115 872 2001
E enquiries@nationalcollege.org.uk
www.nationalcollege.org.uk

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