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Resource

Mainstream inclusion, special
challenges: strategies for children
with BESD

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Abstract

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 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.

Although the sample was small, care was taken to ensure the validity of the results and so limited conclusions can be drawn. Schools were generally in agreement regarding the main challenges of including BESD children; namely, disruption to classes, increased stress for staff and impact on other children. However, all had successful strategies in place to combat these, the most effective being where a whole-school approach was taken, with the leadership team clear about their vision for inclusion and leading by example.

Introduction

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

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

Ellis & Tod 2009: 29

and one of the most recent expressions of this is in the Department for Education’s (DfE) (2010) white paper [The Importance of Teaching](#). The white paper suggests that those children who behave badly can ‘cause serious disruption in the classroom’ (DfE 2010: 9) although the DfE do acknowledge that it is only a small minority of pupils who contribute to this. The government’s green paper on special educational needs (SEN) (DfE 2011) identifies that between 2005 and 2010 there was an increase of 23 per cent in the number of pupils classified as having BESD.

A review of the literature indicates that the attitude towards children with challenging behaviour has evolved since children with differing needs first began to be categorised. Behavioural difficulties are now seen as a special need that requires provision, in the same way as those with reading or writing difficulties might be supported. 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 suggest that there are still many challenges to be faced when seeking to include a child with BESD in a mainstream primary school. Since 1989, policy and guidance has raised the alarm about the possible negative effects which behaviour is having on:

‘Pupils’ learning, recruitment and retention of teachers and the needs of society’

Ellis & Tod 2009: 44

These concerns have been raised by teachers and also by the DfE (2010). The inclusion of BESD children in mainstream schools may have an impact on the rest of the school community; hence the onus then rests with the leadership team to recognise this impact and seek to minimise or maximise it as appropriate.

Many of the recommendations made by policies and research over the last two decades have followed similar themes, for example a focus on whole-school approaches, explicit teaching of social and emotional skills (increasingly as individualised programmes) and maintaining a balance between discipline and pastoral care (Ellis & Tod 2009). It therefore seems unlikely that any effective new principles are about to be discovered through this research. However, all schools have their own individual contexts, and therefore school leaders will be interpreting the guidance to suit their own circumstances. This study aims to explore and analyse these differences in practice to understand what is working practically in schools, and which leadership skills have been employed to enable this success.

This study researches how practice is currently being led in mainstream primary and middle schools. Supported by the relevant literature it aims 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?

Literature review

Children with SEN have long been categorised; prior to the landmark 1978 [Warnock Committee Report](#) (DES 1978) such children fell into categories such as ‘maladjusted’ or ‘educationally sub-normal’. Warnock paved the way for inclusion as we know it today, and with the introduction of the national curriculum in 1988 (DfES 1988), the entitlement of all children to a ‘broad and balanced curriculum’ was made clear. Coinciding with the release of the national curriculum was the publication of the [Elton Report](#) (DfES 1989) that responded to media interest in the alleged worsening of behaviour in England’s schools. The report concluded that poor behaviour was not a ‘new problem’, nor was it a problem limited to England and Wales. The report also focused on the importance of personal and social education in improving behaviour.

The [Code of Practice](#) was launched in 1994 (DfE 1994a) that coincided with the signing of the groundbreaking ‘Salamanca Statement’, both of which continued the case for inclusion. ‘The Salamanca Statement’ asserted that:

‘...those with special educational needs must have access to regular schools which should accommodate them within a child centred pedagogy capable of meeting these needs.’

UNESCO 1994: 8

The [Code of Practice](#) agreed that as there was a ‘continuum of needs and provision’ most children would benefit from being educated in a mainstream school. With the [Code of Practice](#) in 1994 came new categories for children with SEN, among them behavioural, social and emotional development, more commonly known as behavioural, social and emotional difficulties (BESD) which encompassed the category of children known as ‘maladjusted’ in the pre-Warnock era. Although the use of the BESD category has been continued in the recent green paper on SEN (DfE 2011), its usefulness is being questioned via the consultation process.

The 1999 [national curriculum review](#) (DfES 1999) placed the responsibility for educating all children within a mainstream school firmly at the feet of the class teacher when it stated that there is ‘a statutory duty of all teachers in mainstream schools to be teachers of SEN’. However, as Cole and Knowles (2011) recognised, this was a period during which segregation continued for BESD pupils, and in some cases increased, with the ‘rapid expansion’ of Pupil Referral Units (PRUs).

The [Code of Practice](#) was refreshed in 2001 (DfES 2001), and supported in 2002 with the [Index for Inclusion](#) (Booth & Ainscow 2002) that gave advice to schools on developing their inclusive policies, practices and culture. By 2004 the previous government had moved towards a more socially inclusive approach, with its [Removing Barriers to Achievement](#) publication (DfES 2004). This built on advice already given by Ofsted (2000), and to some extent by the national curriculum (DfES 1999); namely, that there are numerous issues which may affect a child’s achievement. Many of these may be caused by factors external to the child (for example, looked after child [LAC] or English as an additional language [EAL] status) and require a change in provision in order for the child to succeed. Throughout this period behaviour in schools continued to be presented as a concern, as it frequently is (Ellis & Tod 2009), leading to the commissioning of previous government reports [Managing Challenging Behaviour](#) (Ofsted 2005) and the [Steer Report](#) (DfES 2005). Both reports confirmed that behaviour in most schools is good.

The work of [Removing Barriers to Achievement](#) (DfES 2004) has been continued through the roll-out of the Inclusion Development Programme (IDP) by the National Strategies. The IDP provides a programme of continuing professional development (CPD) ‘designed to increase the confidence and expertise of mainstream practitioners in meeting high incidence of SEN in mainstream settings and schools’. One of the most recent modules is titled [Supporting Pupils with Behavioural, Emotional and Social Difficulties](#) (DCSF 2010).

The exact definition of BESD is a much-debated subject – even the arrangement of the B, E, S and D varies between organisations. The previous DCSF, and currently the DfE, prefer to use the acronym BESD, while SEBDA (Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties Association) argue that ‘the “social” and “emotional” generally give rise to the “behaviour” and should be stressed first’ (Cole 2006: 1). The view can also be taken that placing the B first, draws unnecessary attention to the behaviour, detracting from the emotions behind it (Cole & Knowles, 2011). Although there is much merit to these arguments, for consistency the term BESD will be used throughout the rest of this report, unless referring to a quote that does otherwise, as the focus of the work will be in schools.

When the category was first introduced, the former DfE (1994b) began by advising the following with respect to a definition for BESD:

‘Such difficulties lie on the continuum between behaviour which challenges teachers but is within the normal, albeit unacceptable, bounds and that which is indicative of serious mental illness.’

DfE 1994b: 7

A more recent definition has not been settled on, although the revised [SEN Code of Practice](#) (DfES 2001) does offer a guide to symptoms of significant BESD:

‘...clear recorded examples of withdrawn or disruptive behaviour; a marked and persistent inability to concentrate; signs that the child experiences considerable frustration or distress in relation to their learning difficulties; difficulties in establishing and maintaining balanced relationships with their fellow pupils or with adults; and any other evidence of a significant delay in the development of life and social skills.’

DfES 2001: 83

The IDP refers practitioners back to this definition, but also makes reference to later guidance provided by the DCSF in 2008, which reiterated the above and added that:

‘Whether a child or young person is considered to have BESD depends on a range of factors, including the nature, frequency, persistence, severity and abnormality of the difficulties and their cumulative effect on the child or young person’s behaviour and/or emotional well-being compared with what might generally be expected for a particular age.’

DCSF 2008: 13

Ellis and Tod (2009) acknowledge that as a result of such broad definitions, ‘there may be very little that pupils sharing the SEBD label have in common’ (2001: 244). With definitions that are so context-dependent, it is not surprising to find that categorisation of children varies from school to school.

Ekins and Grimes’ (2009) recent work in schools suggests that BESD children do feature highly in schools’ inclusion agendas, as ‘challenging behaviour’ was one of three areas of focus commonly referred to by schools when talking about inclusion. Macbeath et al (2005: 60) found that, in general, most teachers have a positive attitude towards inclusion; however, the area they expressed most concern about was the ‘ability of schools to provide a suitable education for children with complex emotional and behavioural needs’. According to Ekins and Grimes (2009), little seems to have changed in this area over the last five years; in the schools they worked in teachers often associated ‘inclusion’ with ‘exclusion’, and were anxious about the pupils exhibiting challenging behaviour. It seems that this anxiety may be justified; Kalamouka et al (2005) found that ‘at primary school level, the impact of inclusion of students with EBD [emotional and behavioural difficulties] on results for other children can sometimes be negative’; while Ellis and Tod (2009) state that one of the distinguishing features of a pupil with BESD is the negative effect they may have on their peers and teachers. The ongoing media interest in these issues shows no signs of abating either – Chris Woodhead spoke out on The Big Debate in 2006 and claimed that inclusion of SEN pupils could have a detrimental effect on the other pupils:

‘...the teacher has only finite time and energy, the school has finite resources, and the more children with special educational needs that the school tries to educate the more difficult it is to cater for the mainstream children in that school.’

Woodhead 2006

More recently, the new Coalition government’s white paper [The Importance of Teaching](#) (DfE 2010) expresses concern about ‘poorly disciplined children’ who ‘cause misery for other pupils by bullying them and disrupting learning’ (2010: 9). The DfE (2010) also recognises that this has an impact on staff, and cites poor behaviour as the most common reason for teachers leaving the profession.

These views draw into question the positive findings of the [Steer Report](#) (DfES 2005) and Ofsted (2005), and prompt further investigation of how good practice in the inclusion of BESD pupils in mainstream schools can be effectively led to benefit all members of the school community. Through the Achievement for All framework, which particularly focuses on improving teaching and learning for children with SEN, the National College (2010) was able to identify four characteristics of effective inclusive leadership:

- a shared vision
- commitment
- collaboration
- communication

(National College 2010: 9)

It will be interesting to discover whether these also apply specifically to including children with BESD.

Methodology

The scope of this study was limited to primary phase schools. It was felt that due to their size and structure, their approach to supporting BESD pupils would be quite different to that adopted by secondary schools. Middle schools were also included as it was felt that they were closer in ethos to a primary school than a secondary school.

A number of schools nominated themselves to be involved in this research, based on their own assessment that they were successfully including BESD children in their school. From the schools who self-nominated, a final four were chosen to represent a range of school type and geographical area. The four schools were located throughout the South East of England and included two primary schools, one middle school and one junior school. The names of the schools are kept anonymous in this report.

Each school was visited once by the researcher during the academic years 2009/10 and 2010/11. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the headteacher, special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO) and a teaching assistant (TA) who worked closely with a BESD child. These three interviews were carried out in order to triangulate the results and therefore increase the validity. It was acknowledged that different schools operate different staffing structures, with different job titles, and therefore in some schools a member of staff of an equivalent standing was interviewed in place of one of the above.

The interviewees were asked about their views on inclusion in the school, before being invited to comment on the challenges of including BESD children and steps that had been taken to overcome these. The participants were also asked to reflect on the impact the inclusion of BESD children was having on the rest of the school community. Due to the scale of the study, the findings will need to be treated with caution; however, steps taken to ensure the validity of the data and to draw on practice from more than one local authority should increase the reliability of the conclusions.

Findings

Do we know enough about BESD?

Having conducted the literature review, it was anticipated that lack of a robust definition of BESD might pose a problem to schools; however, this was not named as a specific challenge by any of the schools questioned. Daniels et al (1999) found that having a 'key member of staff who understood the nature of EBD and could distinguish these from routine misbehaviour' (1999: 1) was essential if the school was to effectively support these children, and the schools in this study were fortunate to have at least one, if not more, members of staff who fell into this category.

All of the SENCOs interviewed were able to describe robust systems for identification of possible children with BESD, and were also keen to explain the importance of involving other staff in this identification in order to build a complete picture of the child's behaviour, from midday supervisors to the headteacher. Parents were also involved in the process, usually at an early stage, as all of the SENCOs recognised the value of understanding the home circumstances when exploring a child's behaviour in school. In line with the national curriculum's (DfES 1999) advice, many of the schools placed the class teacher at the centre of the identification and planning process. As one SENCO observed:

"Teachers can feel quite demoralised if they feel that they need to pass it onto someone else all the time when there is an issue."

SENCO, primary school

The CPD done by SENCOs to achieve this level of understanding ranged from formal courses (which tended to be diagnosis-specific, for example, autistic spectrum disorder [ASD] and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder [ADHD]), to in-house training and informal chats with colleagues. Some schools were beginning to use the IDP BESD materials, and SENCOs were taking the opportunity to use them as CPD materials for themselves. Informal chats with colleagues (both in school and from other agencies) and sharing of good practice in this way was highly rated. It was recognised by several interviewees that training was very effective when it could be personalised to a specific child or situation. A conversation with an experienced colleague was a useful way of doing this, and also built in some support for the staff.

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. There was a distinct feeling that inclusion was preferable to exclusion for the children they were working with. All those interviewed were able to clearly explain what inclusion meant in their school, and the definitions given had some common ideas across all the schools:

- including every child
- giving children equal chances
- supporting all children to access the same chances

These messages were communicated throughout the school, to teaching staff and TAs and to parents, although it was recognised that this was more challenging as parents' perceptions of inclusion could be difficult to influence. It was usually the SENCO who took the lead role in disseminating the vision for inclusion, and this was done through a variety of methods depending on the type of school. Individual conversations with staff were used in every school, but in larger schools it was acknowledged that keeping in touch with everyone was a challenge. Regular meetings with teaching staff and TAs were found to be essential, as was time for AOB (any other business) in these meetings for discussion of issues that had cropped up during the week; as one SENCO put it, the meeting can then "adapt to the need of the staff at that time". Email was also suggested as a useful tool in large schools, although due to difficulties with ensuring that everyone checked it regularly, it was used in conjunction with other approaches to deliver key messages.

All of the senior leaders interviewed spoke confidently about involving teaching staff and TAs in the process of developing an inclusive ethos; however, only one specifically mentioned office staff and another discussed the problems of leaving these staff out of relevant training. 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.

In the majority of schools visited, the SENCO was part of the leadership team, and it was the SENCO who tended to take the lead role in communicating what inclusion meant and looked like at each school. However, the impression was that inclusion was a team effort. In the best examples there was a clear structure of roles (for example, leadership team, Year group or Key Stage leaders, class teacher, learning mentor, pastoral manager, higher level teaching assistant [HLTA], TA, midday supervisor and so on), each playing a key part in the whole-school approach to inclusion of BESD children and others. Staff attitude was seen as vital, and a positive attitude was modelled and promoted by the leadership team.

The schools visited had identified themselves as having good practice in this area; however, they were also able to identify the challenges they faced when including these children with BESD.

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 primary schools, and a recent article in the Times Educational Supplement (2010: 16) which stated that 'disruption in the classroom is the biggest behaviour challenge to teachers' supports this concern. When questioned about challenges, almost all staff interviewed mentioned the disruption caused in the classroom. This agrees with the [Elton Report's](#) (DfES 1989) conclusion that teachers were most concerned by low level, persistent disruptive behaviour. It is interesting to note that the same concerns are still being raised over 20 years later, although it is perhaps inevitable given that the previous DfES (2001: 83) definition of BESD includes 'clear recorded examples of withdrawn or disruptive behaviour'.

Staff interviewed felt that not only was the low level behaviour a challenge, higher level disruptive behaviour also posed problems on occasion:

"... we have got another lad now... used to get into mega strops and just huff and puff and kick something and we've had to clear the class before now to keep the others safe so again that's massive disruption."

TA, junior school

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

"... 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. Their roles and job titles varied from school to school (for example, family liaison officer [FLO], learning mentor, pastoral manager, behaviour mentor, HLTA, key worker), but their key theme was that they represented a consistent adult who children could take their worries and problems to. They dealt with the full range of behavioural, emotional and social difficulties, and therefore recognised that issues underlying the disruptive behaviour seen in the classroom might stem from a variety of sources.

The majority of these staff had had CPD relevant to their role. In the case of TAs it tended to be a variety of short courses relating to various aspects of SEN, for example, ADHD, ASD and behaviour management. Learning mentors and behaviour mentors held the appropriate qualification for their job, which they felt provided them with a good basis for working with the children. All the staff had access to ongoing whole staff training, and in many cases this included the IDP as well as sessions delivered by outside agencies such as the local authority.

These roles were highly valued by the schools, and worked best when the member of staff was 'on call' throughout the day. One headteacher had already begun planning further 'behaviour staff' into a future restructure, despite already employing a FLO and various TAs as key workers for children:

"I will probably have somebody with an overview for behaviour and a behaviour mentor that is free all the time because that is what you need for behaviour; you need to have somebody to work with the children all the time not wait until things get to a peak and then deal with them."

Headteacher, junior school

Once these staff were in place, flexibility in their role was essential both in terms of time and strategy. As one learning mentor pointed out, "you can't pigeonhole them into 'oh this worked before for this child that had ADHD'" – new strategies need to be developed for each child even though they may present as the same on paper. In some schools staff worked to a skeleton timetable but were able to abandon this if needed; others were led day to day by the needs of the children. The staff needed to spend enough time with the children to build up a meaningful relationship with them, and this time was spent with them in a variety of ways, usually dictated by the needs of the child.

Some children received regular one-to-one support in the classroom, although this wasn't seen as an ideal strategy for all BESD children. One-to-one sessions were also provided outside the classroom, for example to discuss particular emotional or social issues. These sessions were most commonly scheduled in for first thing in the morning (particularly on Mondays, which many children found difficult), or after breaktimes to resolve any playground conflicts and ease the transition back into class.

In addition to the one-to-one sessions, many group interventions were also being run, covering a wide range of behavioural, emotional and social skills. Formal programmes used successfully by the schools included:

- Circle of Friends
- Hot Thoughts, Cool Decisions (anger management, provided by outside agency)
- Let's Chill
- Restorative Justice
- SEAL (social and emotional aspects of learning)
- Speech and Language (various programmes covering expression of emotion, provided by the local speech and language therapist)
- Socially Speaking
- Time to Talk

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, from the headteacher to the midday supervisors, throughout the school. This allowed the child to apply their new skills in context.

"I did a lot of anger management stuff with them... it's been backed up by the teaching staff, the deputy head, the FLO, the SENCO, so we are all doing the same thing so the children are all getting the same advice... they are able to think it through and be a bit more reflective as they've got older through the school."

TA, junior school

The success of the programmes was also increased when they were designed to develop the independence of the children participating in them. One school using the 'Let's Chill' relaxation programme made it available to all the children via the school's computer network; children in need of some time out could then access the programme in a quiet corner of the classroom in addition to their daily sessions. In another school a group of boys had made so much progress on their anger management course (provided by an outside agency) that they were able to be involved in planning with the SENCO how to carry on the work within the school.

Communication between all the staff working with these children was seen as essential for the plans put in place to have an impact; however, this was also raised as a challenge due to the hectic nature of the role of most behaviour staff. Possible methods of keeping communication about children going were offered earlier; it is likely that face-to-face conversations are the most appropriate in this case as the situation will be constantly changing during the day, and day to day. A pastoral manager had found her own solution to the dilemma of how to feed back to teachers:

"What I normally do is, I would jot it down on a piece of paper. I always have paper on me in my pocket with all the notes so I don't forget and as soon I see them I grab them and give them my message."

Pastoral manager, primary school

In addition to allocating specific staff to support the BESD children, schools also found it useful, where possible, to designate a special place for these children to go to, to do their one-to-one or group work, or just for some time out. It is likely that having a 'place' of their own, as well as an adult to rely on, increased their sense of security and therefore began to address some of the emotional issues they may have been facing. Some schools were fortunate enough to have a spare room to use for this, which could be made into a comfy and relaxing place for the children to be, with bean bags, cushions, throws etc. Having somewhere like this allows the staff who are 'on call' for behaviour to remove children from class if necessary and to take them elsewhere, therefore providing support for both child and teacher.

It is not only lessons that are prone to disruption; children with BESD can find lunchtimes very difficult to cope with. Managing interactions between BESD children and other children throughout the day was highlighted by a TA as a real challenge. Interventions such as social skills groups will support this, but strategies can be put in place to support the children during the lunch break; in one school visited the behaviour mentors ran a Lunch Club for children who weren't able to manage on the playground. Another selected group of children had a space and a TA to go to if the playground got too much for them. Often providing support at unstructured times can avoid some of the 'triggers' that may cause the child more problems later in the day.

What about the other children?

Having established that disruption is a concern when BESD children are included in the mainstream primary and middle schools in this study, it seems likely that this disruption to lessons would have an impact on the learning of other children, despite implementation of the various strategies outlined above. Kalambouka et al (2005) concluded this from their study, and Cooper (2007: 159) also states that 'such disruption interferes significantly with the learning and teaching processes'. This view is supported by the staff interviewed for this project.

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

Headteacher, junior school

“It’s hard because if you have a child like that in your class who is constantly taking your time you actually have a huge responsibility to the other 31 children, let’s say, in your class who you are there to work with as well.”

Year group leader, middle school

Similar concerns were raised by all of the schools interviewed, but these concerns were greatly reduced in the schools where the strategies outlined in the previous section 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.

Having established an inclusive ethos in the school, staff inevitably find themselves in situations where they have to prioritise one child’s needs against another, or perhaps one child’s needs against those of the rest of the class. Several leadership team members interviewed felt that it was important to have strategies in place which would allow all children the best possible results if a situation should arise:

“If it’s far more appropriate for the child to be working in a small group on their social skills rather than tearing a classroom apart and stopping other children learning then so be it.”

SENCO, primary school

The SENCO quoted here was eager to emphasise that for their school, inclusion did not have to mean remaining in the classroom, and therefore for that child being removed from the curriculum to complete a social skills session might be their best hope of inclusion, while allowing the rest of the class to continue their learning. The flexibility of staffing and timetabling described earlier that allows for this therefore not only benefits the BESD children directly involved, but the rest of the children are also indirectly supported.

Prioritising staffing to allow this to happen is another tricky area for leadership teams, increasingly so as schools face cuts to their budgets. Supporting children with any special needs is time consuming for adults, but it could be argued that this is especially the case for children with BESD due to the unpredictable nature of their difficulties. Allocating adults to work specifically with these children has been shown to be effective in the schools studied, but it is unavoidable that doing so within a limited budget removes the support from another child, group or class. One primary school SENCO felt that getting a statement of SEN allowed the child to get the support they needed, “which has a massive impact on the whole class”.

The whole picture needs to be considered when attempting to prioritise support. When asked about potentially taking TA support from a class to work with a BESD child, a junior school headteacher explained that leaving the child without support was not an option because of the ‘profound’ effect a BESD child can have on a class. The headteacher felt that unless the BESD child was adequately supported, interventions for the rest of the class would be ineffective. In contrast, the impact on a class once a BESD child is adequately supported and becomes more settled can be huge.

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, often as a result of the interventions and whole-school approaches which are put in place. Staff felt that steps taken to promote inclusion and acceptance of diversity throughout the school had had a positive effect on all pupils. 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. Children were provided with the opportunity to develop their own social and emotional skills in ways that would perhaps not have been open to them otherwise. They consistently demonstrated caring and understanding behaviour towards those who were having difficulties.

“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, I don’t think he is actually crying but pretending to cry for attention seeking purposes and 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

This example also demonstrates the power of peer support; with the help of his classmate the boy was able to remain in the lesson, needed no extra adult intervention and the teacher was able to continue with her lesson. Using the peer group as positive role models to support a specific child was recognised as a strategy in more than one of the schools studied, with the clear benefit that it provides a boost to the self-esteem of the other children.

“We are trying to use the other children as positive role models for those children, so it actually lifts their self-confidence and self-esteem that you are actually having a conversation saying ‘we need to try and support so and so because we need you to model your really good behaviour’ and that can have a positive impact.”

Assistant headteacher, middle school

A common strategy used with BESD children in the classroom is a reward scheme of some sort, for example a sticker chart leading to reward time. This can prove problematic for the other children in the class, however, who are not rewarded for the same things, or as frequently as the child they perceive to be ‘behaving badly’. Again, involvement of the peer group to support the reward scheme was seen as important, as well as ensuring all children are equally rewarded (if not necessarily for the same things).

“It’s about when we have had to use reward charts and behaviour charts for some of the children in the class but it’s also about including the others, if you can support you can all receive a reward so that they are all in it together really.”

Assistant headteacher, middle school

Many of the group interventions used to support BESD children will involve non-SEN children as good role models, with a similarly positive impact. ‘Circle of Friends’ was named specifically by one of the schools interviewed, which had been used to try and close the social gap between a child and his class. The assistant headteacher acknowledged the positive effect this programme had had on all of the children involved.

Once an atmosphere of mutual support and acceptance has been established in this way, it is much easier to help the children deal with disruptive incidents that do occur. There may well be occasional incidents of highly disruptive behaviour (such as the one described earlier by a junior school TA), which again, looking back to the definition of BESD provided by the DfES (2001), would seem to be unavoidable. After such an incident the staff usually involved in working with the BESD children may also have a role to play in working with the whole class:

“I’m always quite amazed how understanding the other children are, when some children are misbehaving we sort of talk to the class and generally say we are really proud that you are ignoring this and getting on with your work.”

Pastoral manager, primary school

Concerns were raised that other children find incidents of this sort frightening, particularly if a child is being violent. While this impact cannot be completely removed, having adults ‘on call’ to spend time with affected children may be beneficial.

Isn't it just too stressful?

School leaders are only too aware of the pressures already on their staff – impending Ofsted inspections, new targets to be set and met, let alone dealing with the behaviour of challenging children in their class. Cole and Knowles (2011) acknowledge the profound effect a child with BESD can have on the staff working with them:

'A single child's actions can cause extreme and long-lasting stress to staff, inducing feelings of inadequacy, anger and, at times, despair.'

Cole & Knowles 2011: 13

It is unsurprising then that poor pupil behaviour is the 'greatest concern voiced by new teachers' (DfE 2010). In order to successfully include BESD children in mainstream schools, leadership teams need to be mindful of the potential impact this can have on their staff and ensure that adequate support is in place.

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. An element of this challenge, and hence the stress, was identified as stemming from the difficulty of actually teaching the whole class if a child was being disruptive:

"[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

"Some staff would argue... that if these children weren't in school it would be a lot easier to teach the rest of them, but that's not what we are about."

Headteacher, primary school

Reading the TA's comment it is easy to empathise with the teacher and understand their stress at constant disruptions, which will undoubtedly begin to unsettle the rest of the class and make continuing with the lesson an uphill struggle. It is perhaps to be expected that some staff may contemplate the benefits of teaching the class without those children in it; but as the primary school headteacher comments, that is the time to remember what the school "is about".

In schools such as those 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 to support the staff, and in many cases these conversations were part of everyday practice – not just reserved for times of crisis. For example in one school the Year group leader liaises regularly with the class teachers to discuss the needs of the children in their classes. This involvement steps up if there are behaviour issues, and there is a clear leadership structure above the Year group leader to call on next.

Another source of support for staff (and ultimately for children) were the many outside agencies available to schools. These were often part of the local authority and so varied from area to area, but the schools visited were using the following as key sources of support and advice:

- educational psychology
- inclusion support team (including behaviour support team)
- PRU
- SEN adviser
- speech and language therapy

Staff who had accessed these agencies found their input to be beneficial; they offered individual advice on specific cases to teachers, attended meetings and provided whole staff training when appropriate. However, there were concerns about the ease of access to these services; it was felt that some services which schools would like more input from (for example, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services [CAMHS]) were simply too poorly resourced to cope with the number of referrals being received. It seems likely that similar concerns will be raised in the future about services that are currently working well. A SENCO was aware that one of the local authority teams the school had been working closely with had recently been reduced by 50 per cent, therefore also reducing the amount of time they could spend with each school. This will place the onus back on schools to find more of their own support for staff and children. The DfE (2011) acknowledges these difficulties in accessing services, and plans to 'improve the availability of specialist advice' (DfE 2011: 101) from voluntary and community sectors.

Other sources of information are also available to staff to enable them to prepare for the children they will be working with. Transition links were mentioned in the interviews as essential not only to familiarise the children with their new school, but also to allow the staff to plan in advance. In primary schools where there is no feeder school, communication with parents would again be valuable. Schools using transition information did issue a word of warning, however – while they felt that the information was useful, they were keen to allow children to make a fresh start and not label them too early.

Working with BESD children day-to-day requires a high level of emotional involvement from the staff. TAs, learning mentors or other pastoral staff are often working closely with these children for a long period of time. Class teachers invest a lot of time in them in the hope that improvements will benefit the whole class, but as a primary school SENCO observed, if these improvements don't come quickly "it can be demoralising". The teacher can often see the potential in the child that exposes them to extra pressure:

"The teachers... can be scared of letting this child down and their level of worry will be very very high."

Headteacher, junior school

Although each school will have its own support system in place, the education sector is unusual in that there is no formal obligation to provide emotional support in the form of supervision for staff, despite the type of incidents staff often have to deal with.

"Should there be more in place to take care of the mental health of the teachers who particularly have difficult children? I guess yes. Should they have supervision? Yes. Then again I believe everybody should have supervision at school and if I could pay for it I would have it."

Headteacher, junior school

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 (HLTAs and the learning mentor). They received a fortnightly supervision session from the school counsellor. The SENCO felt that it was important for these staff to have someone outside the school to "voice their true feelings to" and ask advice from.

If left unchecked, the disruptive behaviour characteristic of BESD children can create a very different atmosphere in schools to the inclusive ethos created by the schools in this study. One headteacher described this as giving the school 'tension':

"When he [a BESD child previously in the school] was in school the school was a different place. It had tension, it had edge... Constant low level disruption, the ability just to give someone a shove on the way past, the loudness that can just put children on edge and teachers on edge."

Headteacher, junior school

While the strategies to deal with this behaviour have already been discussed in depth, there seem to be whole-school implications if it is not addressed. The junior school headteacher quoted here felt that it was in these cases that exclusion was justified, when one child was continuing to affect the entire school community despite all the interventions which had been put in place.

There were concerns that this impact on the atmosphere of the whole school could have a long-lasting effect, with implications beyond the day-to-day running of the school. Staff mentioned the perception of parents as a concern. One headteacher had experience of the parents perceiving the behaviour across the school as being poor due to reports of one child's activities; in another school parents were struggling to separate their child's behaviour from that of others in the class:

"I have a meeting arranged with parents next week where their child is struggling with his behaviour and the parent is saying it's because there is another child in the class who has behavioural difficulties."

SENCO, primary school

These misunderstandings can take a lot of time and effort to dispel, with the benefits of establishing an inclusive ethos throughout the school and communicating this to parents once again becoming clear.

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	Effective leadership strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none">— 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none">— 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

It is interesting to note the correlation between the strategies employed by the schools visited and those identified by the National College (2010) as characteristics of effective inclusive leadership. The vast majority of staff interviewed had a very positive attitude to including all children, and those with BESD were no exception. The schools were realistic about the challenges they faced, and gave the impression that in order to successfully include BESD children, commitment from all staff was needed.

This positive attitude seemed to be an essential element to creating an 'inclusive ethos' in the school, which in turn was crucial in underpinning all the work which the school did with children, staff and parents. Creating an atmosphere in which everyone feels included is not an easy thing to achieve, but having a clear vision of what inclusion means and sharing this with all interested parties was an important starting point for most schools.

Once staff had a clear understanding of 'what the school was about', they needed to be kept well supported. Schools tended to have developed their own systems for doing this, relying heavily on conversations between staff and collaborative working to share good practice. There was a feeling that more formal support for staff, for example in the form of supervision, would be beneficial, as it was widely recognised that working with BESD children adds an extra element of stress to the job.

Although none of the schools had any ‘quick fixes’ to the issue of disruption in class, a range of strategies were offered. Relationships between children and adults was key, and this usually involved allocating adults specifically to deal with BESD issues. There was evidence in all of the schools that although this might appear to take resources away from other children, the overall impact on all children was positive. Various interventions groups were being run, many of which benefited non-SEN children as well as those directly targeted. The most effective interventions were those that were part of a whole-school approach to behaviour. It is interesting to note that only one member of staff interviewed mentioned the use of sanctions as a key strategy for successful inclusion for BESD children; in contrast, all of the other strategies involved creating the right atmosphere for all of the children, and building relationships.

There are clear similarities between many of the concerns raised by the staff interviewed in this study and the concerns about behaviour in schools reported by the DfE (2010) in [The Importance of Teaching](#): increased stress for teachers, cause of disruption in class and impact on other children’s learning. However, the focus of the approaches outlined by the DfE (2010) perhaps contrasts with the strategies currently being used in schools in this study (albeit taken from a very small sample size). The DfE (2010) devotes some attention to improving the exclusion process, although among the schools interviewed only one mentioned exclusion as a possible strategy, and this was in a very extreme case, as outlined earlier. All of the schools interviewed had a good understanding of BESD as a special need, and therefore allocated provision. There is little mention in [The Importance of Teaching](#) of BESD representing a ‘need’.

There was evidence among the schools interviewed of the presence of BESD children having an impact on other children, both positive and negative. When occasional highly disruptive incidents occurred, other children were scared. However, the staff trained to deal with emotional difficulties were then able to support these children. Schools were very positive about the social and emotional skills the other children were able to develop, and the chances they had to support their BESD peers, which in turn boosted their own self-esteem.

“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

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