



Leading Learning through  
Action-led Research and Innovation

# Celebrating Research that gets Results

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A collection of evidence-based research

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2021

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The Laurel Trust is an exciting educational charity founded to support research and innovation in schools and academies in areas of multiple deprivation through the creation of partnerships with them to secure improvement.

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Leading Learning through  
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# Welcome

**BILL GODDARD | CHAIR OF TRUSTEES**

**I would like to welcome you to this collection of summaries of recent school research and development projects which have been done with some grant funding from The Laurel Trust.**

What you will see here is the evidence of considerable energy and creativity together with perseverance and sustainable activity. Schools and their partners have worked tirelessly on developing teaching and learning strategies in order to benefit their pupils, teachers, and their communities. Each project represented here was developed by a consortium of schools which consisted of a mix of primary and special schools. Projects engaged not only the teachers and pupils but also parents/carers, family support workers, universities, local authorities, and health services. These collaborations have demonstrated the rich possibilities of working together for the greater good. You will read about the specific focus of each project, together with the outcomes and sustainable activity. You will discover or learn about how teachers, pupils, and parents/carers have been encouraged and inspired to develop teaching strategies and supportive resources and the enthusiasm which this has engendered amongst so many in these communities.

In terms of practical action each project was the result of an anonymised application



process and the rigorous application of a research and development process which was all documented by each of the projects. It was important that the process was valid in terms of its enquiry, ethics, impact and the development of outcomes so that the potential of each project was transferable as much as possible within variable contexts to other schools. Throughout the projects there were constant links with the Trust which included supportive visits by Trustees. Dissemination of the projects was one of the key requirements required in the application process and this publication is one iteration of that process. This was to engage and benefit the maximum number of schools locally, regionally and in some cases nationally.

There is information and contact details about each project which may serve to encourage readers to follow up with their own enquiries. The Trust will continue to offer grants for future projects and up-to-date information can be seen on the Trust's website later this year.

I hope that you will enjoy reading about the industry of so many teachers and parents which is evidenced in this publication.



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# REACH FOR THE STARS

**Schools fostering the aspirations of SEND children**

This introduction to The Laurel Trust research projects highlights the multiplicity of challenges faced by schools in improving the life chances of children with SEND. These challenges are exacerbated in areas of deprivation. The key themes in The Laurel Trust 2020 research projects have been drawn together in this overview and some fundamental questions that emerge from the research have then been posed for schools to consider.

**David Bateson OBE, Chair of the National SEND Forum**

**England has an atomized school system with high levels of autonomy and accountability. The system is arguably so diverse that it is not so much a system as a random mix of public, private, faith, phase, academy, maintained, non-maintained, special and mainstream schools. Like a sky of scattered stars, large and small, some are single, some in small groups, some in constellations, some bright, some hard to see. It is a system reliant on school leadership willing to work in partnership to drive change and improvement, searching out what works well and how to share it for best effect.**

This leadership quest is especially vital for pupils' life chances in a country with a long tail of under-achievement and increasing special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). This set of research papers reflects the school-led system's concern for the individuals they serve. Children and young people who largely live in areas of deprivation and whose socio-economic conditions, personal circumstances and learning characteristics place barriers between them and their opportunities and outcomes.

Each of these pieces of action research from nursery, primary and special settings tacitly acknowledges that schools on their own don't know enough and don't have enough. Encouragingly, however, this does not prevent their indomitable will to work with others to improve provision and outcomes for the good of

**“England has an atomized school system with high levels of autonomy and accountability.”**

vulnerable children and their families: to become more than the sum of their parts and to realize a partnership dividend. Teachers show they are keen to learn and co-operate as do parents, carers and other agencies, particularly health professionals, whose expertise is often central to pupil wellbeing and progress. This collaborative action and reflection on the part of everyone is essential to agreed and consistent changes to practice.



The scale of the challenge is vast. The areas of deprivation in these studies have enduring and endemic social exclusion problems of poverty, unemployment, crime, housing, family breakdown and engagement with universal services. Health and educational outcomes are poor. There is often low aspiration, well-above average pupil premium and free school meal eligibility and a high prevalence of SEND and school exclusion. All this in a world of variable provision, inequitable assessment and funding, a lack of joined-up multi-agency working and a lack of applied evidential research in practice. Schools and agencies working in these areas offer hope.

These papers exemplify or allude to particular SEND and under-achievement issues. There are increasing identification, novelty, frequency, severity, complexity and longevity of SEND. Meeting these needs is accompanied by issues of assessment, funding, multi-agency working and consistency

of practice. Underlined is the importance of senior leadership in supporting special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs) on whose shoulders the increasing demands fall. All of this research shows professionals keen to respond to the voice of the child and their needs at the earliest opportunity.

Schools are the focus for learning, care and health and need to be clear about what they do for whom and why. Underachievement and SEND are often wrongly conflated. Those in England's long tail of low attainment need assessment that distinguishes between the two. The tail is longer than the 15.5% identified with SEND of which formal identification in an Educational Health and Care Plan (EHCP) is 3.3% (all schools, Special Educational Needs and Disabilities in England, DfE 2020). SEND itself is often used as if a homogeneous term but it brings together the broadest range of abilities and disabilities, including those with and without cognitive impairment.

**“All of this research shows professionals keen to respond to the voice of the child and their needs...”**

Nearly all these pieces of research aim to improve practice and outcomes for those with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) and those with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) whether formally identified in an EHCP or not. ASD has seen the most rapid increase and prevalence, now 30% of all those with EHCPs. The second most prevalent is SLCN, 15% of those with EHCPs. Those diagnosed as having ASD or SLCN do not form a homogeneous sub-set of SEND. They can represent the full gamut of cognitive ability but the ASD pupils in these studies share learning characteristics that affect their rate of progress, social interaction, understanding



and behaviour. They are prone to anxiety and require routines and differentiation that promote emotional regulation and stimulus control with a reduction of triggers, notably noise, and increased predictability. Adult signing, physical signage and consistent use of tone, language and task presentation across staff teams working with other agencies and homes are key.

A failure to thrive is a calamity for any child and for their families but the stakes for these children and their families are even higher regardless of cognitive ability. They, in common with others with SEND, are far more likely to be unemployed or not keep a job for long and far more likely to be over-represented in prisons (Department of Work and Pensions, Ministry of Justice). At a basic human level, they are far more likely to be unhappy and suffer from mental health issues. Early effective intervention is essential. To be truly

effective the child and parent voice must be heard and championed. This research then is important, not only because of the findings, but because of the process and what it demonstrates: the best endeavours for, and belief in, those we exist to serve. We see the best aspirations of a school-led system with leadership that forges partnerships of schools, between schools and other agencies and universities and strengthens the collaboration within staff teams. We see schools embracing parents as equals.

**“A failure to thrive is a calamity for any child and for their families but the stakes for these children and their families are even higher regardless of cognitive ability.”**

We see the focus on assessment of need and provision designed around the needs of the child and the importance of the consistency of practice. We see that good practice for the most vulnerable and those with SEND is often good practice for all; that staff grow in professionalism and self-respect through pooling their knowledge and modelling of learning; and that we can be jointly accountable for children in a family of schools.



**“Inclusion is being connected and feeling a valued participant. Inclusion is beyond a political statement or the naivety that sees equality as meaning the same.”**

This research is also important because of the questions it prompts.

**HOW GOOD IS THE STRATEGY AND QUALITY OF OUR SYSTEM FOR THOSE WITH SEND OR CLASSED AS VULNERABLE?**  
Can this research feed into our knowledge of present and future needs and numbers; early identification; multi-agency effectiveness, especially during schooling; transition to a fulfilled post-school life; the effective and dignified means to meet these needs and support those concerned; and a minimum entitlement for all?

**DO WE HAVE A CLEAR IDEA OF WHAT EQUALITY IS?**  
Is it seen banally as meaning the same or is there a concept of both what a bespoke entitlement to integrated education and care and its resource might be and the parts that education, health and social care must play? Is there to be an end to the present lack of clarity about needs and the disparity in funding levels and bands across the country?

**DO WE KNOW WHAT ORGANIZATIONAL TYPE OF PROVISION IS THE MOST EFFECTIVE?**  
How does provision within and between regions, types of schools, LAs and health authorities best serve children in a pluralist, atomized system?

**HOW DO WE LINK KNOWLEDGE, RESEARCH AND TRAINING?**  
How do we bring together higher education, initial teacher training, specialist providers and teaching schools with in-service professional learning and relate it to pedagogy and outcomes?

**HOW DO WE MAKE BEST USE OF RESOURCES?**  
How do we make cost effective use of capital, revenue, human and practice resource underpinned by agreed criteria for the assessment of primary and secondary needs and the level of funding required?

**WHAT DO WE MEAN BY INCLUSION?**  
Often this is mistaken for being synonymous with mainstream placement but it is so much more and is at the heart of all education, most acutely in areas of deprivation. Inclusion is a state of being, not place. It is the flexible process on a continuum of provision that brings about the right provision at the right time in the right place with the right people. Inclusion is being connected and feeling a valued participant. Inclusion is beyond a political statement or the naivety that sees equality as meaning the same. Inclusion accepts the cognitive, access and behavioural needs as givens but majors on the personalised and the affective. It trumpets how far forward one moves and not how high one jumps. It neither condones nor confirms failure but sets high and personally rewarding challenges that lead to an engaged and fulfilled sense of purpose.

**Inclusion values both the quality of process and outcomes. It has an eye on the future but makes the most of the moment. Inclusion maximises learning both for its own sake and for its usefulness. It prioritises engagement and enjoyment. It demands empathy, intellectual rigour, resilience, good humour and a belief in bringing the best out of everyone and that everyone has something to give.**

**Inclusion is the holy grail: a sense of individual purpose, recognition and belonging brought about by differentiation of provision, method, task and outcome. Inclusion is not the preserve of those with special educational needs and disabilities but, in pursuing excellence for those who have these needs, all pupils in the system will benefit.**

# THE VOICE OF THE CHILD



**Croyland Nursery School & Camrose Early Years Centre**  
in partnership with The Laurel Trust



## CONTEXT

**Of the eight Northamptonshire maintained nursery schools (MNS) participating in this research, five are in Northampton, two in Wellingborough and one in Kettering. The schools have a history of good and outstanding Ofsted judgements and of joint working. Several of the schools are located in areas of significant disadvantage. The lead MNS is in an area of significant deprivation and low social mobility, one of the 10% most deprived areas of the country.**

**“Several of the schools are located in areas of significant disadvantage.”**

The general features of the area are low income, high unemployment, high levels of lone parent families and of Black and Minority ethnic families, high numbers of children eligible for free school meals, low levels of education, training and skills and high levels of crime. Lower than local and national levels of development and attainment are seen from the Foundation Stage onward. The associate lead school in Wellingborough is in a similar demographic area.

All these schools work with and identify children who may have special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). SEND is increasing in England and those who do not have their needs met adequately are more likely to perpetuate the cycle of deprivation that characterises these schools' contexts.

## RESEARCH FOCUS

The research focus was to find out if and how the Voice of the Child (VoC) impacts on the children's learning, development and wellbeing of children under 5 with emerging or established special educational needs. Sampling was also carried out with children under 2 with emerging or established SEND.

All MNS use different approaches, documentation and staff to capture the VoC. The project needed to retain flexibility whilst enabling comparisons between settings. The research intended to evaluate practice, identifying and understanding the different procedures and purposes of eliciting the VoC. The intention was to see how practice might be improved, how best to involve parents and carers, and the difference it might make to short-term and long-term outcomes.

## WHY IT IS SIGNIFICANT

**Early communication development and engagement is central to learning, interaction, wellbeing and life chances. Encouraging the VoC develops confidence, resilience, community participation and choice. The process recognizes the pluralism of individual voices and necessary adaptation to their requirements.**

**“Children with SEND generally have poorer life chances.”**

Children in MNS may be pre or non-verbal but their 'voice' must still be heard, especially if they require an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). The needs, wishes and

feelings of the individual child and young person should sit at the heart of the assessment and planning process. How and by whom the VoC is best captured and used, especially for these children in MNS areas of deprivation is not well understood. Nor is the relationship between the VoC and their learning and development and the role of parents and carers in the process.

## METHODS AND PARTICIPANTS

The primary intention was to explore how practice might be improved across the Early Years schools and Centres in Northampton and to underpin the improved practice with an agreed set of strategies and documentation. The resulting documentation would be used across all nursery schools and centres in Northampton and give coherence across schools and other specialist agencies.

The headteachers selected 19 pre and non-verbal children, over the age of 2 and with emerging or established SEND. Their families would be approached for approval and involvement.

**“The research was designed to evaluate current practice and then provide a more focused and targeted set of interventions to support individual children.”**

To this end, the research brought together staff, pupils and families from eight MNS; the LA Specialist Support Service, Early Years Team and Educational Psychologist; and the University of Northampton (UoN). An Educational Psychologist was instrumental in the training. In addition, further training was delivered by the Local Authority specialist support team and a speech and language therapist. It was the first time that these agencies worked together on a particular topic. The research was designed to evaluate current practice and then provide a more focused and targeted set of interventions to support individual children. The multi-agency approach was a strength as the research team involved schools/centres, Early Years' practitioners, specialist support and caring agencies and academics whose specialism is Early Years and includes SEND.

The approach was qualitative and inductive. A steering group was to plan, review, reflect and support to decide on changes to practice and the action researchers had regular access to them. The group also used training with practitioners to inform changes to processes and documentation, agree the One Page Profile and to involve families sooner. Data was collected before and after the project from parents; schools' information about learning, development and wellbeing; and practitioners. Methods included semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, written feedback and moderated school analysis of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and Leuven Scale data.

Local network meetings were held to gather the views of early years providers about the VoC and to lay the foundations for dissemination and improvements to the practice for the children. There was a presentation at a conference workshop at the UoN and a workshop with trainee SENCOs in collaboration with the LA. There was a professional development session for the practitioners working with the children on the project and a joint training day for all MNS staff. Headteacher researchers met with a diverse range of staff and students to look at the different perceptions of the VoC and how their practices varied. The involvement of parents and carers was integral to the success of the research as one of its key aims was to support parents and carers to meet their children's needs more effectively, for them to understand the importance of listening and hearing and to be able to contribute more meaningfully to the review and development of EHCPs. The project's overall aim was to support all those connected with the care of very young children with SEND to elicit the VoC in more creative ways which would impact on the individual child's progress and well-being. The results of the interventions are illustrated in the impact section of this summary and in the appendices in the full report which appears on The Laurel Trust website.

## IMPACT

**The research demonstrates how vital it is to capture the VoC and to include the parent/carer in the process. Listening to children helps us to understand child's personalities, talents and abilities. The research shows the importance of learning from one another in a rational, evidence-based way that promotes consistent good practice and that SEND is everyone's responsibility.**

On the Leuven Scale, children's Wellbeing and involvement improved significantly. The 19 children made progress in the EYFS profile, not least in Communication and Language. In Personal, Social and Emotional Development there were significant improvements in Managing Feelings and Behaviour and Making Relationships. This was especially important because 27% of the 19 children have a diagnosis of Autistic Spectrum Disorder. Self Confidence and Self-Awareness (SC&SA) supported the Leuven findings.

Practitioners gained understanding, improved their listening and used the VoC in pedagogy.



They learned through reflection and collaboration, removing inconsistencies and employing shared and best documentation and practice. The training and discussions developed practitioner confidence in finding a way to take note of the VoC and talk about the children's needs, interests and ideas and helped with language and practical ways to talk to parents/carers and other professionals.

Parents identified varying degrees of improvement in their children's happiness, progress and confidence. There was appreciation that the VoC could be identified through gesture and body language and that schools were receptive both to parents and their children's needs.

Parents help their children to thrive best when there is mutual collaboration and support between home, school and community. They felt they were listened to and that they gained a greater understanding of their child. Some parents delivered training.

There was a positive impact on leadership at all levels: at system level between schools, parents,

other agencies and the university; at a senior level initiating the project and modelling its importance; and as researchers, Steering Group members and staff teams. Leadership resulted in practitioners becoming more knowledgeable, sensitive and reflective, and through this influencing and enthusing others in their practice.

Professional Development was the foundation for the improvement in learning and teaching. This research and training was not only practical but also provided a clear opportunity to think about the ethos and principled practice behind it. It enabled dialogue about what was important to be in place for children to learn and develop, with a strong sense of wellbeing and involvement.

The research helped create a cohort of head teachers and practitioners in MNS who with key LA and University colleagues have the potential to effect change more widely. It demonstrates the benefits of pulling together whole staff teams, the structured involvement of parents/carers, keeping the child at the centre of what is done and of having a clear picture of a child's needs. It recognises the importance of wellbeing and involvement, learning and development, thus enabling the child to be more confident, part of community, with a strong sense of self and strong sense of what they are able to contribute.

**“Every child with ASD is different and it takes time to get to know both child and family.”**



## NEXT STEPS AND SUSTAINABILITY

**The learning from this project has been shared and could continue to be so by working with other disciplines and practitioners to provide training, leading network meetings and being part of Educating Northants; being part of the Local Authority SENCO training; and training-the-trainers to draw upon the expertise within the steering group to up-skill practitioners. It is intended to present the project at the European Early Childhood Education Research Association (EECERA) Conference in September 2021 and to use the partnership to establish training and publish findings in website journals and magazines.**

A cohesive training plan for and from the MNS schools would give them a clear, strong voice, and alongside the children and their parents/carers, a clear message: giving children meaningful involvement in their education, and where relevant, their EHCPs and their Child Protection plans, promotes capable, confident children as both part of a community and individuals in their own right.

The work of this research partnership could be developed and disseminated regionally and nationally through the development of a tool kit. This would have several formats, with supportive materials and literature to develop a clear ethos and philosophy around capturing the VoC and how best to use that to inform pedagogy and to involve the home.

The involvement of leaders and practitioners at all levels enabled system and shared leadership, building capacity and confidence. To sustain this across the system, Initial Teacher Training providers, LAs and Multi Academy Trusts should ensure that the VoC is an integral part of training and practice, reinforcing the findings and ethos of this research and addressing some of the SEND and under-achievement issues in schools. Students and staff need to be sensitive, knowledgeable and creative listeners, tuned into very young children and those with SEND. Then learning environments might meet children's needs, reflecting, developing and challenging their

**“Students and staff need to be sensitive, knowledgeable and creative listeners, tuned into very young children and those with SEND.”**

learning and development. This in turn enables children to become sensitive and knowledgeable.

**This project is about early years' professionals understanding that communication happens in multiple ways, not just verbally, and that we must listen to our children by seeing and observing their behaviour and wellbeing in order to build a more reliable picture of their emotional state and needs. A lack of language does not allow us not to listen.**

Note: all of the images used in this summary are stock images



Confident parents at the end of the programme

# STRONGER TOGETHER

## Measuring the impact of support and collaboration with parents and carers of children with special educational needs and disabilities: a Family Support Action Research Project The Dales Teaching School Alliance

### CONTEXT

The Dales Teaching School Alliance (TSA) is based in Blyth, south-east Northumberland, an area with a long history of significant socio-economic deprivation. This has had a negative impact on educational performance, aspirations for future employment and health and wellbeing. Schools in Blyth have a high percentage of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) both formally and informally identified. Nationally, children with SEND and their families are particularly vulnerable to social deprivation and this exacerbates inequalities.

The Dales TSA has a collaborative commitment to 'combat disadvantage and reduce barriers to learning'. Schools have appointed Family Support

Workers (FSWs) to identify and support families, aiming to improve their child's learning outcomes, engagement and overall care. The Family Support Action Research Project aimed to achieve these improvements through a comprehensive support and development programme for parents and carers of children with SEND.

### RESEARCH FOCUS

The hypothesis was that parents and carers of children with SEND and behavioural issues require in-depth knowledge and understanding of SEND and behaviour to enable them to successfully use strategies that support their child's learning, well-being and behaviour management.

The initial research questions were:

- 1 What strategies work to aid learning and break the cycle of deprivation and educational disengagement?
- 2 What strategies work to support parents to engage in their own learning to support their child?
- 3 What can be done to break the deprivation cycle that leads to ongoing under-achievement and dysfunction?
- 4 What are the aspirations of parents/carers/children from disadvantaged backgrounds? Can they be challenged and supported to move beyond their comfort zone?
- 5 What enables some parents and carers and their children to overcome disadvantage and to have high aspirations and learn effectively?
- 6 How can we unblock the barriers of disadvantage and further enhance the learning journey of children and parents?



Some areas in Blyth suffer from long term poverty

### WHY IT IS SIGNIFICANT

There are increasing numbers of children with more acute, complex and abiding SEND in mainstream and specialist settings in England (Department for Education). Children with SEND generally have poorer life chances. They are, for example, three times as likely to be unemployed and 49% of those who do work don't retain that job for long (Department for Work and Pensions). The strain on the individual, their families and provision is considerable. In addition, England has a long tail of under-achievement exemplified in areas of social deprivation (Department for Education, Ofsted Annual Reports, National College for School Leadership).

Parents and carers of children with SEND have an increased need for support and partnership with educational and care professionals due to the complexity of challenges which they and their children face. It was expected that intensive parental support boosting knowledge, skills, confidence and self-esteem would, in turn, improve outcomes for their children.

### METHODS AND PARTICIPANTS

The Dales TSA comprises 15 schools from specialist, primary and secondary education including a Pupil Referral Unit and Northumberland County Council Virtual School. FSWs from 5 schools worked together as a team to design and deliver a development programme in support of the parents/carers, harnessing collaborative learning. Approximately 50 parents, carers and grandparents were involved, 35 of them regularly.

The programme covered SEND, coping strategies, emotional intelligence and ways to support children's learning at home. Related issues were explored e.g. family relationships, domestic abuse, long-term unemployment, specialisms such as Tourette's syndrome and dealing with bereavement and loss.

There were two approaches to measuring the impact of the work with parents and carers on both their child's learning and behaviour and on their own knowledge, skills, confidence, mental health and well-being.

**“The programme covered SEND, coping strategies, emotional intelligence and ways to support children's learning at home.”**

First, the TSA team and FSWs made continuous evaluations and held regular informal discussions with parents/carers after development sessions and with individuals and small groups. This information was collated in evaluation summaries and case studies highlighting parental personal journeys and progress.

Second, two Educational Psychologists carried out an external evaluation with parents participating in qualitative focus groups.

## IMPACT

There was a significant culture shift in ownership and control from professionals to families. This exceeded expectations as parents and carers took greater responsibility for the continuing development of the programme evidenced in their 'Peer-to-Peer Family Support Programme'. This exemplified the evaluation findings that parents and carers thought that the development programme had had a significant impact on their own development, self-esteem, SEND knowledge and learning and behaviour management strategies to support their child's learning. They felt that this had in turn had a positive impact on their child's learning and development and also on their ability to discuss and challenge teachers and other professionals about their child's learning and wellbeing.

The external evaluation report identified that parents highlighted that the development programme had a profoundly positive impact upon their lives and recommended that such parent partnership networks be offered in other areas on a longer-term and possibly statutory basis.

Both internal and external evaluations showed a significant increase in knowledge and skills across five themes: a sense of belonging, knowledge and understanding, self-determination, psychological wellbeing and had resulted in a positive impact on their child's wellbeing and learning.

There were measurable impacts for children. Attendance and punctuality improved and behavioural incidents reduced. Children were observed as better able to cope with social situations and to use technology more safely. Preparedness for learning was more apparent as was self-esteem and emotional intelligence. The use of visual resources at home improved behaviour, attitudes and relationships.

Parents and carers improved their attendance at school meetings. Some had their learning accredited and some went on to take GCSEs and other accredited learning. One is studying SEND law and training as a Citizens Advice worker. Their high level of knowledge about SEND conditions and coping strategies has supported their children and some have presented at conferences. They are now leading development of a Peer

**“The use of visual resources at home improved behaviour, attitudes and relationships.”**

to Peer Programme to support other parents of SEND children. The knowledge and improved self-esteem has led to better relationships, reduced anxiety, improved abilities to challenge professionals appropriately and they have organised practical activities such as coffee mornings for parents of children with autism.

FSWs echoed the parental outcomes. Their greater collaboration as a team of FSWs enabled them to improve their expertise and offer a wider and increased range of learning opportunities for their parents and carers. They felt less isolated and more confident in contributing to school aims. They felt more valued for their work and have seen an increase in capacity as a result of parental empowerment and ability to take on organisation and delivery of tasks.



Parents becoming leaders

## NEXT STEPS AND SUSTAINABILITY

The project has demonstrated that a holistic development programme, implemented over a sustained period of time has had a significant impact on parental knowledge, skills and understanding and that this in turn impacted positively on outcomes for their children.

The key to the next steps and sustainability lie in dissemination, replication and sustainability of the core learning and approaches. Harnessing the collaborative knowledge of FSWs and working in partnership with parents and carers to develop their abilities further improves culture, the balance of control, capacity and cost.

The findings have been presented to senior leaders and teachers at a regional mental health conference where 2 parents involved in the project led a session. Conference evaluations were very positive. The report outcomes will be shared with headteachers of specialist schools and other professionals through a range of organisations including headteacher groups, TSAs, LAs, the NHS and the Regional Schools Commissioner.

Sustainability lies in this work being replicated and developed further by the Parental Peer-to-Peer Support Programme and by FSWs with future parents. The approach will also be shared with other Parental Support Groups throughout the country as a means of sharing effective practice and learning from others.

The shift in the balance of power between professionals and parents and carers was not a specifically intended outcome but resulted from the relationship between them, the FSWs and other TSA professionals. A group of about 10 parents and carers decided that they wanted to share their knowledge and expertise with similar others who had not been involved in the project and perhaps had less



Final evaluation meeting: 'We are stronger together'

confidence and knowledge about how to best meet their child's needs. This Peer-to-Peer Support Programme will have facilitator training to ensure they have the means to communicate their expertise effectively to others and they will benefit from 'counselling' and safeguarding training to guide them within their new roles. They have clear ideas about how to engage new parents and carers and how they will deliver initial sessions. They want to ensure that they do not come across as the only experts and that they value the experience and skills of new parents and carers coming on board.

**“Sustainability lies in this work being replicated and developed further by the Parental Peer-to-Peer Support Programme and by FSWs with future parents.”**

Wider sustainability lies in the recognition of a programme such as this having high social and learning impact for low cost. As a school

improvement priority it can increase capacity though professional and parent and carer collaboration. It would underline for teachers the impact of parents and carers on learning and behavioural outcomes.

Local Authorities and Health Trusts could consider the strategic impact of such investment on area outcomes for SEND children. In addition to investment in such programmes, service leaders need to consider how they engage with parents and carers of SEND children in a genuine way, reflecting on their approaches and considering the shift in power from professionals to parents and carers to inform service planning and delivery.

Regionally, outcomes from this small-scale study, supported by the wider literature review, should be considered by the Regional Schools Commission to inform future national school funding policy and inspection regimens. The capacity unleashed by working in genuine home and school partnership, mutually respecting, sharing and implementing strategies with the most vulnerable children in the most difficult circumstances improves culture, process and outcomes.

# IMPROVING OUTCOMES



## Autism: Research into practice

### London South Teaching School Alliance



#### CONTEXT

**Nationally there are increasing numbers of children identified as having autistic spectrum communication disorders (ASD). They represent nearly 30% of all children with an education and health care plan (EHCP) specifying special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in England (Department for Education). There are also children that display some ASD characteristics who fall short of the threshold for an EHCP or whose parents do not pursue one. Better practice is required to improve outcomes across this continuum of need.**

To this end, the Autism Research Project (ARP) undertaken by nursery and primary schools led by London South Teaching School Alliance (LSTA) sought to develop and enhance teacher professional development by engaging schools in designing, leading and implementing their own research in this area.

#### RESEARCH FOCUS

The overarching question was: Will supporting teachers to carry out classroom research into better meeting the learning and wellbeing needs of children with autism improve learning outcomes for such pupils across their school?

In the process of schools designing their own research, five main challenges emerged: social skills and speech development; sensory needs; behaviour and emotional self-regulation; independent learning; and teacher knowledge and understanding.

**“Nationally there are increasing numbers of children identified as having autistic spectrum communication disorders (ASD).”**



#### WHY IT IS SIGNIFICANT

60% of young people with autism and 70% of their parents say that the main thing that would make school better for them is having a teacher who understands autism, and that fewer than half of children on the autistic spectrum are happy at school (National Autistic Society). Fewer than half of teachers interviewed said they felt confident about supporting a child on the autistic spectrum in their class. This evidence is corroborated locally by the anecdotal experiences of specialist teachers in schools with special needs units, who engage in outreach work with local schools.

Children with SEND generally have poorer life chances. They are, for example, three times as likely to be unemployed and 49% of those who do work don't retain that job for long (Department for Work and Pensions). 30% of the prison population has special needs

**“Children with SEND generally have poorer life chances.”**

(Ministry of Justice) and more than 60% of young offenders have literacy and/or speech, language

and communication difficulties. (Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists).

Children with ASD cover the range of academic ability. Their anxieties and behaviours make some of them liable to under-achievement in a way that is not the case for those with other learning needs.

**The Autism Research Project aims to improve the experience and/or outcomes of one or more autistic pupils in their school and to increase teacher understanding and awareness of the issues faced by these pupils.**

#### METHODS AND PARTICIPANTS

The project was designed around using Research Learning Communities to inform professional practice. Pairs of senior leaders and teachers from 12 schools took part. They attended sessions with a programme lead from LSTA, a researcher from UCL Centre for Inclusive Education and three programme facilitators from two local schools with an ASD resource base. This learning about the ASD research and knowledge base across different educational settings provided the basis for their research design and the subsequent work cycle with pupils, families and teachers in their own contexts.

This study collected data from a pre- and post-programme audit assessing

professional experience in relation to research skills and working with autistic pupils; case studies; presentations to other participating schools; interviews; and evaluation forms.

Most schools focused on a small sample of pupils ranging from one to five children. Two schools looked at the school and classroom environment. One took into account a full year group and the other the whole school.

Most schools took a multi-faceted approach but focused their interventions around one key method e.g. small group sessions primarily for speech and language development; one-to-one interaction for behaviour and emotional self-regulation;

classroom/school environment for sensory needs; emotional self-regulation and independent learning; and CPD.

Across these interventions common practice was identified. These were intended to add clarity and consistency. There was an increased use of visual prompts and Makaton to aid both receptive and expressive language. Language was modelled and verbal prompts used with greater consistency.

Extra attention was given to pupil observation and relationship building to aid understanding and to direct relationships with parents to better understand how the child behaves in the home environment and vice versa, and to develop a set of consistent approaches across both home and school environments. There was a focus on wellbeing, self-regulation, independence and sensory needs as a first step towards addressing academic progress and teacher CPD to aid understanding of ASD pupils and introduce them to strategies; with the aim of developing a consistent approach across the school.



## IMPACT

**Pupils improved in their speech and language development and their interactions with peers. There was more turn-taking, engagement, verbal initiation and reflection on behaviour. Greater independence was seen in both teacher-led and imaginative play activities as was taking cues from other children. Alongside this, pupils used language and symbols to show their emotions and self-regulated by taking time out or going to a calm play area. The reduced defiance, acceptance of wrongdoing and logged poor behaviour was matched with apparent increased happiness.**

The focus on learning behaviours made reporting on the impact on academic performance more difficult. Measurable progress, however, was seen in the EYFS PSED baseline assessment measures; working at greater depth in age-related expectations and accelerated progress in writing and maths.

Participants stated that their schools showed increased awareness and understanding of ASD. The research evidence showed the need for replication of the interventions in school practice. This case for change and sharing a common approach was underpinned by the personal learning of the importance of focusing on individual ASD needs and building a relationship with pupils and their parents. Teachers had learned new strategies, kept the research small and manageable and brought colleagues with them. They recognized the amount of time needed to allocate to the importance of not overlooking high-functioning ASD pupils.

If advising other schools, participants would emphasise how building expressive language supports wider development and that relationships



with other services such as Educational Psychologists, Speech Therapists, Occupational Therapists and the Autism Service are key.

In terms of practice, consider the school environment: use texture and colour when redesigning spaces, bring nature into the environment, make school environments as predictable as possible for pupils. Set clear expectations and use consistent visuals, language and strategies inside and outside of the classroom. Facilitate this by making resources readily accessible.

Clear targets are needed. All those involved need to know what is to be developed and achieved. In pursuing these targets, allowing some free choice for pupils can create greater acceptance of the non-negotiables.

Changing practice requires collaboration, time, modeling and persistence to achieve staff 'buy in'. Their ownership can be reinforced by joint development of resources and interventions and by focusing on the small victories.

Other schools would also be advised that it is through understanding the pupil that effective individual interventions and support strategies can be designed. Every child with ASD is different and it takes time to get to know both child and family.

The project design was thought to be a good fit for the existing community of schools in the alliance. The time to reflect outside of the classroom enabled by a coach and the opportunity to visit other schools was valued. Participants increased their knowledge and confidence to better teach those with ASD and also learned that this would help them with those with social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) issues too.

**“Every child with ASD is different and it takes time to get to know both child and family.”**

Project participants felt motivated and that their leadership developed too, giving them confidence to approach staff and build relationships and practice. Support from the senior leaders in their schools to participate as a duo was seen as generally crucial in the aspects of pedagogical discussion, confidence and importance of the issue. The continuous reflection and use of multiple data points to show evidence to the wider staff was also seen as effective.



## NEXT STEPS AND SUSTAINABILITY

**This programme represents a major scaling up of work with pupils with autism in these schools. The interventions generated impressive change through embedding policy and practice in school and community ownership, together with structuring of staff learning.**

The approaches and findings are sustainable and generalisable. Children with ASD are not a homogeneous group but, although knowledge of the individual is central, more 'universal' programmes used flexibly seem likely to achieve the desired outcomes for those individuals and others beyond the target group. For example, making transitions from one activity or space to another predictable and consistent; using all types of communication consistently; and designing and using sensory provision. This consistency of practice and better outcomes rely on ensuring all staff, parents and pupils are aware.

Those approaches and outcomes benefit greatly from the guidance of speech and language therapists and from monitoring progress from baseline and using such measures as those of Reynell Language Scales and Leuven Scales for well-being and engagement.

**“This consistency of practice and better outcomes rely on ensuring all staff, parents and pupils are aware.”**

The success of this project merits further investigation, not least on cost-benefits e.g. where it is decided that a child with ASD does not need an EHCP and how participating in a project like this might be part of SENDCo training.

**While celebrating the programme's success, we need to explore how the TSA's exciting work can be integrated across all schools to complement and enhance, rather than run alongside, local authority support procedures. Local authorities are responsible for EHCPs but the school-led system determines the practice and outcomes.**

## USEFUL RESOURCES:

**Full report:** [www.londonsouthtsa.org.uk/perch/resources/arp-finalreport.pdf](http://www.londonsouthtsa.org.uk/perch/resources/arp-finalreport.pdf)

**Workbook:** [www.londonsouthtsa.org.uk/perch/resources/eventDocs/autism-book-2020-for-web.pdf](http://www.londonsouthtsa.org.uk/perch/resources/eventDocs/autism-book-2020-for-web.pdf)

**Professional Development Booklet:** [www.londonsouthtsa.org.uk/perch/resources/cpd-prospectus-final.pdf](http://www.londonsouthtsa.org.uk/perch/resources/cpd-prospectus-final.pdf)

**Membership:** [www.londonsouthtsa.org.uk/membership/membership.php](http://www.londonsouthtsa.org.uk/membership/membership.php)

*Note: some of the images used in this summary are stock images*

# FRAMEWORK FIRST FOR FIR VALE



## Exploring the use of the SCERTS framework to support staff and learners in mainstream schools: an action research project.

Fir Vale Family of Primary Schools, Sheffield



### CONTEXT

The Fir Vale Family of Schools is situated in the north of Sheffield. The area is economically deprived and has a higher than average incidence of children with special educational needs and disability (SEND), English as an additional language (EAL) and those who receive free school meals (FSM) and pupil premium funding. In common with national trends (Department for Education), about a quarter of the children with SEND have social and communication difficulties often grouped with or as part of those with autistic spectrum disorders (ASD).

Sheffield's SEND Leadership was criticized in the 2019 Local Area Review (LAR). Leadership, systems and processes were identified as not meeting the needs of learners. Leadership had recently changed, systems were not functioning well or did not exist and services were fragmented with poor communication between them. A new, proactive and school-led approach, working in partnership with health and centralized services was required.

Half of LARs have found SEND provision deficient in these ways. The research would combine the recognized need for better ASD provision and practice; inter-service working; and the continued development of a school-led system. There was

**“A new, proactive and school-led approach, working in partnership with health and centralized services was required.”**

a strong moral dimension too. 70% (Department for Education) of children with ASD are in mainstream schools. They are far more likely to be excluded, possibly as a result of their special needs and, since ASD encompasses such a broad range of ability, are at significant risk of under-achievement and failure to secure employment.

### RESEARCH FOCUS

The research examined the use and efficacy of SCERTS (Social Communication, Emotional Regulation and Transactional Support). SCERTS is a research-based educational approach and multidisciplinary framework addressing the needs of those with ASD and related social and communication difficulties and of their families. SCERTS provides guidelines for helping a child become a competent and confident social communicator and mitigating behaviours that interfere with learning and relationships.

The research aimed to answer the extent to which SCERTS enables learners to develop their communication and emotional regulation skills; helps practitioners to identify needs and provide meaningful support; and leads to improved multidisciplinary working. The work also wanted to identify the positive and challenging aspects of using



SCERTS when working with children with autism.

A multi-disciplinary framework is in line with the SEND Code of Practice to ensure holistic provision and coordination of services and support and guidance from the National Institution for Health and Care

Excellence about assessment and provision for autism being delivered through multi-disciplinary working.

The framework addresses the priority areas for children with autism but also allows practitioners to use individual blended approaches by employing existing tools and beneficial methods.

### WHY IT IS SIGNIFICANT

Earlier and better intervention is required to improve outcomes for the rising numbers identified with ASD who represent nearly 30% of all children with Education Health and Care Plans in England (Department for Education). Children with SEND generally have poorer life chances. They are, for example, three times as likely to be unemployed and 49% of those who do work don't retain that job for long (Department for Work and Pensions). 25% of the prison population has special needs and more than 50% literacy and/or speech, language and communication difficulties (Royal College for Speech and Language Therapists).

SCERTS would be a new way of planning effective provision for learners with social communication difficulties. There would be expert

training for both teaching and speech and language staff and increased speech and language therapy expertise and resource in all schools. This would develop staff expertise, better meet needs and engage parents in dialogue with professionals about their children's needs. The work

**“Earlier and better intervention is required to improve outcomes...”**

would promote and improve multidisciplinary working and the research would reinforce the inclusive vision and practice within the family of schools and across the city. This growing expertise would enable better school-to-school support use of resources.

### METHODS AND PARTICIPANTS

Schools worked with families, the city support service, the lead speech and language therapist and an educational psychologist. Additional time was allocated to enable the research. Qualitative and quantitative data were drawn from learner progress, staff questionnaires, case studies, and an evaluative report by an Educational Psychologist.

Each school identified three learners with a social communication difficulty. Staff attended training events, worked with learners in individual, group and class-based contexts, and completed questionnaires.

Additional professional learning and support provided planning, training and evaluation. Central to this was shared understanding, coaching and agreement of targets with the modeling of transactional supports.

## IMPACT

**Pupils made progress in all areas of their social communication and emotional regulation. They became more active and engaged, developing resilience, independence and social relationships. They also increased their levels of happiness.**

Pupils were taught to better understand social cues and expectations. Various approaches allowed them to communicate their needs, views, preferences and emotions. They were helped to predict what would happen, important in anxiety reduction, to stay engaged with tasks and to work as independently as possible. Staff encouraged pupil initiation of interaction.

Staff knowledge, confidence and practice improved so that transactional supports underpinned the improvement in emotional regulation. Staff reported more confidence in identifying needs and in planning and presenting the curriculum in different ways to allow access to learning with a query about consistency across schools.

SCERTS' practical and broad assessment of needs was valued. There was increased understanding and use of transactional supports through multi-disciplinary working. Joint planning by teachers and therapists helped realize targets. Staff saw multidisciplinary working as more important by the end of the project but some felt it needed to be more frequent and consistent. Training and coaching was valued

**“The most significant gain was the excellent relationships that were formed across health, schools and SEND services...”**

and necessary. The most significant gain was the excellent relationships that were formed across health, schools and SEND services within the Family of Schools and across the city.

There were significant challenges in the organization, demands and time to train and implement SCERTS. Two

schools were unable to participate, reducing the initial 24 pupils to 18, and there was a danger that the project could be seen as an additional rather than an integral practice. Further improvements in multi-disciplinary working are needed. This is a systemic challenge and not unique to SCERTS. Also systemic are staff turnover and the time needed to absorb and implement new pedagogies in an effective and consistent way. New practice must be embedded in ethos rather than seen as an individual activity or intervention in which a few children participate. Embedding can require a change in attitudes and perceptions of the need for new approaches.

Limitations to this research include the small number of pupils, lack of control groups, difficulty in attribution of progress to a particular intervention or training and possible observer and subjective bias. There were fewer staff questionnaires post-project than before and families were not involved in the way that would be desirable.

Notwithstanding these limitations, SCERTS has been adopted by all of these schools. It has ensured key staff, Speech and Language Therapists and Educational Psychologists have attended SCERTS expert training and that they have, along with staff in other schools, benefited from ongoing, practical, further training. Some parents have attended workshops. Staff can better identify and meet needs using transactional support in a multi-disciplinary approach. They understand autism better and can plan to develop learners' social communication and emotional regulation skills. The research has extended beyond Fir Vale and a citywide SCERTS implementation group has been set up.



## NEXT STEPS AND SUSTAINABILITY

**The Fir Vale Family of Schools is to continue to use the SCERTS Framework to understand, assess and plan for learners and to create a common language to support parents, children and staff. It could and should be a central resource for the city and work has begun at a Strategic and Citywide level to ensure this.**

Local schools have attended training and others have requested information. The Strategic Citywide SCERTS group wants a continuous programme of training and follow-up Transactional Support Training for all levels of staff. It wants to extend the work of Speech and Language Therapists to incorporate SCERTS into their advice and reports.

The group wants the SCERTS Framework to be used consistently and to engage the leadership of health professionals to maximise impact for children. SCERTS should

be embedded in health contexts and provide a more coherent experience for families. It could influence joint health and education commissioning in Sheffield in order to improve services for children and young people, families and schools and to provide adequate time for staff training, reflection and planning.

School improvement beyond one school requires capacity, professional dialogue within and across agencies and links with those in strategic positions in order to bring about the change we would like to see.

Embedding SCERTS requires training, multi-disciplinary co-operation, a common language and coaching. It also requires leadership commitment and the training of leaders to ensure the structures and supports are in place: the vision of good practice enabled by an Autism Champion network. Then all classrooms and spaces might be communication friendly with transactional supports in

**“The group wants the SCERTS Framework to be used consistently and to engage the leadership of health professionals to maximise impact for children.”**

active use in a world where parents and staff from different agencies are focused on similar approaches and outcomes.

This research was conducted against an unpromising strategic context and has created a robust approach using SCERTS which is now a central resource for city-wide improvement. The SCERTS framework could be used in similar contexts to promote multi-agency collaboration and to support systematic improvement.



Note: some of the images used in this summary are stock images

# PULLING TOGETHER



## Exploring how common SEND approaches and interventions can be developed and embedded across a range of settings

### Rother Teaching School Alliance



#### CONTEXT

**Rother Teaching School Alliance (TSA) is a group of primary and secondary schools in East Sussex working as part of the school-led system. Twenty two of the wards in which the TSA works are amongst the most deprived in the country. One of their concerns, within the context of higher expectations and demand from diminishing resource, was special educational needs and disability (SEND) provision particularly in the early years (EY).**

Circumstances had created a cohort of children whose SEND did not meet the threshold for external agency intervention and that these children were in danger of making a poor transition into school. There was a perceived risk that each early years setting would be reactive to need and that successful approaches would not be systematised nor their impact known.

Rother TSA intended to address this issue through the Early Years Excellence Hubs as part of the Rother and Rye Education Improvement Partnership (EIP).

**“Twenty two of the wards in which the TSA works are amongst the most deprived in the country.”**

#### RESEARCH FOCUS

The research set out to explore how common SEND approaches and interventions could be developed and embedded across a range of settings in the Rother and Rye area. The findings would then be disseminated across the providers.

#### WHY IT IS SIGNIFICANT

There are increasing numbers of children with more acute, complex and abiding SEND in mainstream and specialist settings in England (Department for Education). The greatest increase has been in Autistic Spectrum Disorders and associated social and communication difficulties. Early identification and intervention

can improve their life chances and also distinguish between under-achievement and SEND.

In a context of diminishing educational resources it is imperative to maximize the cost-effectiveness of interventions through systematised and evidence-based approaches. The demand on staff

**“The greatest increase has been in Autistic Spectrum Disorders...”**

expertise and time is great and no individual will have the knowledge and skills to meet the range of SEND. Collaboration is key.

#### METHODS AND PARTICIPANTS

The research was conducted using an action learning methodology with an inductive focus. Participants were self-selecting and divided into two geographically based action learning sets working over two academic years. The two sets provided a range of experience, broadly representative of the range of provision in the area and the cohort of children accessing early years provision.

The project engaged a range of providers in exploring the strategies that worked for their cohort of sub-threshold SEND children. It built on prior work of the EY action learning set exploring effective strategies for school transition. The settings included private and county-funded establishments, covering rural and urban areas within Rother and Rye EIP.

There were four school-based early years practitioners and eight pre-school early years practitioners. They ranged from highly experienced leaders with responsibility for multiple sites, through to relatively new practitioners in small settings. Practitioners were seeking to identify sustainable approaches in their setting that could be applicable in others and accessible to school-based contexts. An agreed journal was employed by all of the participants as an aid for reflection and a tool to support their part in the project as a whole.

The journal specified the overarching question of the research, ensuring

that this remained a focus throughout. The participants defined a setting-based issue that tied in with the key question. The issue was explored and formulated through dialogue in the initial set meeting.

The research assumed that participants were experts, able to apply a reflective approach to strategy development in their setting and sufficiently professionally robust to support and challenge one another. It was also assumed a willingness on behalf of parents to engage in the strategies that were developed, and that they had the capacity to feedback on their effectiveness.

The research was principally qualitative. Firstly, the children had multiple issues impairing their learning and social skills. It would

have been problematic and reductive to attempt a quantitative definition of those issues and the small steps interventions that formed a part of the strategies developed and deployed. Secondly, the operation of an action learning set is one where the richness of dialogue becomes a feature. The action learning journal, with its field observations and periodic reflections, forms the principal mechanism to capture thoughts, activities and interactions between the sessions.

Thirdly, while the action learning cycle provided some opportunity for summative assessment, the participants felt that it was potentially disingenuous to suggest a quantitative correlation between the strategies employed and the outcomes achieved. Fourthly, sample sizes are too small to make viable claims. Rather, these findings are offered to the reader to triangulate with their own experience.



## IMPACT

**The project achieved improvements in practice brought about by sharing and reflection. There was better alignment around the needs of the child. There was some impact on speech and language development and improved behaviour for learning that extended beyond the focus cohort. Transition improved and better parental and professional connections were made.**

Journals had themes of which four were dominant. These were the consistency of practice through the application of data, professional dialogue, relationship with the new setting, and the engagement of parents.

The most notable aspect of achieving consistency was the importance of recording information that supports next steps in interventions and the effectiveness of strategies. Accumulating sufficient accurate evidence of this enabled these strategies to be distinguished from relatively ineffective ones. More systematic formats saved time, duplication and systematised existing support. One leader converted information into a whole setting agreement about what effective practice would look like, thereby benefiting children beyond the target cohort. Leaders being clear about benchmarks that record and celebrate positive impact is beneficial especially given the turnover and mix of experience of full and part time staff.

Linked with consistency of practice is the quality and application of data. To be effective the data needed to be definable, sharable and relevant. Several participants recorded that the greatest progress was achieved when the range of strategies could be evidenced and was kept focused.



There were three aspects to professional dialogue: as a development strategy for staff; as an evidence-supported means to challenge features that hinder progress; and to enable transition to the next school.

The garnering of small steps data provided immediate evidence of the adverse impact of staff absence on progress of focus group children. Two of the setting leaders recorded that they felt more empowered to challenge staff absence and evidence of inconsistent practice in the setting.

All of the settings had strategies for information sharing with schools to which children would transition. The action learning focus cohort made clear the potential for regression when a child enters a new setting, especially where distance prevents accurate and detailed effective strategies that being passed on. One participant noted that, because of the project, this was the first time that the setting decided to bring parents into the discussion with the new setting.

The engagement of parents had been enhanced through having a focus cohort. This encouraged more regular and targeted dialogue improving the understanding of the child's needs in the setting and at home. The small steps approach was shared with parents to apply at home. This created a developmental

**“Transition improved and better parental and professional connections were made.”**

and experimental partnership approach. Two settings adopted the practice of bringing parents into setting to observe strategies in action, others created an individually specific pack of activities for home use in holiday periods and shared information on a Facebook page.

Minor themes included the benefits of external learning environments, funding, the use of IT and the need for CPD.



## NEXT STEPS AND SUSTAINABILITY

**Consistency of practice through the application of data, professional dialogue, engagement of parents and the relationship with the new setting provide the best approach to SEND systems in Early Years settings. These processes are best supported through the creation of small-scale communities of professional learning, such as action learning sets.**

First, focused interventions have a broader impact. A number of interventions became generalized and this suggests that individual or small cohort interventions, well-managed, have a tidal effect in that what raises one raises all.

Second, commonality is to be found in the processes, more than interventions. Three processes in particular are powerful and sustainable for pupil progress and system improvement: moving from

parental engagement towards parental participation; small step cycles of identification, intervention and reflection; and professional development and communication even operating at a small-scale.

To build on this work, consideration should be given to encouraging cross-setting professional learning groups that develop professional confidence and practice, supporting bespoke strategies for individual children and families.

Small scale funding is required to offset the cost of releasing a member of staff from each setting to support training action learning facilitators, to guide professional learning groups, collate findings and to create a support pack for professional learning groups.

Settings leaders should focus on

**“These processes are best supported through the creation of small-scale communities of professional learning, such as action learning sets.”**

a limited number of aspects to develop. Staff confidence improves when activities appeared achievable and workload not increased and parents are engaged when aspirations are shared.

**Practitioners benefit from stepping outside the day-to-day process of 'doing' the role. By participating in a collective process of reflection they created a new and supportive professional network.**

# PEER PRESSURE



## SEN Peer Review

**Rushmere Hall Primary School  
and Suffolk County Council**



### CONTEXT

**Half of the 12 project schools are in the government 'Opportunity Area' of Ipswich, a designation recognising deprivation, social issues and low attainment. The schools outside are often in villages. Suffolk Local Authority (LA) had received a notice to improve in the joint Ofsted and Care Quality Commission SEND inspection of 2016 and again in 2019, despite recognised improvements in leadership.**

Across England, there is an increase in the identification, severity, complexity and longevity of special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) with 15.5% of the school population identified as having some form of SEND and 3.3% with formal educational health and care plans (EHCPs, Department for Education). Special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs) have increased pressure on their time and expertise, exacerbated by increased paperwork, significant funding issues and changes to assessment and the curriculum.

Suffolk, in common with LAs nationally, has also come under funding and placement pressures. There has been a 46% increase in special school placements nationally since 2008 but there are children in mainstream schools

that some regard as having similar levels of need.

**“There has been a 46% increase in special school placements nationally since 2008...”**

The lead school is characteristic of these issues with high pupil premium numbers, transient children, family mental health concerns, low parental engagement and poor attendance by vulnerable children. Supporting the efficiency and effectiveness of SENCOs and retaining them at this and other schools is essential in improving provision and outcomes.

### RESEARCH FOCUS

The project developed a peer review model for SENCOs as a school led system for sustainable improvement to practices around SEND aiming to:

- 1 Improve the confidence of the SENCO and enable collaborative learning and sharing with other SENCOs
- 2 Improve progress and attainment of SEN pupils
- 3 Improve pedagogy of class teachers in supporting SEN pupils within the class



### WHY IT IS SIGNIFICANT

The increase in the prevalence and expectations of SEND demands great expertise and efficiency and for provision to be embedded in school improvement planning. LAs do not have the capacity to discharge their obligations without schools and SENCOs leading the way.

SENCOs peer review, sharing and learning, can lead to improved systems, better teaching and better support for colleagues, families and children and improved outcomes. In turn, this confidence and sense of value could improve SENCO retention and morale. It would rely on the trust and the bond created by the staff involved.

Headteacher commitment to SEND is vital to every member of staff seeing it as their concern without it being seen as adding to workload issues. Data from the locality schools also showed significant underperformance of vulnerable non-SEND groups compared to national levels.

### METHODS AND PARTICIPANTS

Four SENCO triads from 12 schools worked through 2 cycles of peer observation. The SENCOs mutually agreed the foci and all information was triangulated and collated online. The LA was supportive and the starting point was the London Leadership Strategy (LLS) SEN Review Guide. Professional development materials from the Education Endowment Funding (EEF) programme and other sources were provided.

The Michael Fullan approach to collaborative change was used in the project design. To this end, not only did SENCOs need to subscribe to the project but also governors, headteachers and fellow staff. The project was written into each schools school improvement plan and all signed an agreement. Financial support from the LA and Laurel Trust enabled full participation through release time and aid to reflection.

There would be pre- and post questionnaires on SENCO confidence in 8 areas, an interim review session and a final conference. Peer review visit evaluations recorded impact

**“Peer review visit evaluations recorded impact in schools.”**

in schools. Quantitative and qualitative measures of pupil progress were used from a baseline taken at the outset. As schools use their own assessment methods and comparable data is hard to establish, schools were invited to complete standardised tests such as reading age, spelling age, maths ages which could be compared with the children's chronological age.

The SENCOs mapped out a timeline and focus for visits to other schools and subsequently identified strengths, areas for improvement and actions (predominantly Key Stage 2 pupils) that needed to be completed to achieve these. Visits usually took the form of learning walks, lesson observations, work scrutiny, pupil perception interviews and discussions, and book talk e.g. work scrutiny completed with the children.

## IMPACT

**The impact on the SENCOs was strong with their confidence improving dramatically. There was also impact on pupils' learning despite the schools' different approaches. The evidence was most strongly seen in standardised tests where pupils narrowed the gap and in the pupils' perception of the quality of support they receive. The impact on teaching quality was less definite.**

The most powerful aspect of the project and its CPD was on the confidence and self-belief of the SENCOs. They reported improvements, most of them significant, in the quality of interaction with others and their ability to identify strengths, weaknesses and determine actions for improvements in their schools and to a lesser extent in others' schools. They felt better able to support teachers in Quality First Teaching and that their work both contributes to, and they could see evidence of, pupils' progress

and outcomes. From a low base, SENCOs believed SEND became a higher priority in their school and that the quality of provision improved. They began to develop a strategic and sustainable approach that enables vulnerable learners to develop the skills they need as lifelong learners.

**“The most powerful aspect of the project and its CPD was on the confidence and self-belief of the SENCOs.”**

An important impact of the project regarding pupil's learning, notwithstanding the improvements in standardised test scores, was the evidence that SEND is far from consistently identified, let alone provided for. This meant not only that assessment across schools was

not comparable but also that the definition of SEND varied. This is particularly important when it leads to conflation of underachievement with SEND or when, for example, contrasting the progress of a pupil with Aspergers and one with global delay.

The project promoted strategies for developing quality first teaching and therefore improved outcomes and progress for pupils with SEND via collaborative working. This is a long-term, cultural change though, and there are opportunities for important learning from observations of pedagogy and the difficulties of changing the culture. Differentiation, other than by outcome, could be extended. Progress data could be more consistent and pupil interviews showed disengagement and over-reliance on teaching assistants, reinforced by teachers indicating SEND was not their responsibility. What good practice there was, was not consistent.



## NEXT STEPS AND SUSTAINABILITY

**Headteachers will share the findings with their relevant executive bodies to gain support for continuing the work. The LA will add the project to its database that accompanies its School-to-School programme. As the LA School Improvement Partners have been heavily involved with the project there is potential that this may become a project led by the LA SEND department to improve SEND across Suffolk. The Improvement Partners will also share this with the schools they support who were not part of the project.**

The research report will be shared with the Laurel Trust and extracts or a summary version will be shared with a national SEN publisher or potentially the Head teacher magazine.

A project like this should be led by a SENCO. Any plan for SEND should avoid too many targets, use agreed data baselines and collection points and use standardised tests. Similarly, there should be agreed criteria for children to whom the Code of Practice applies and clarify the role of any partners.

The project needs to be sustainable to demonstrate longer-term gains. Many of the SENCOs do not have teaching commitments and therefore would not have anything preventing

them from continuing. Providing headteachers see the benefits and SENCOs believe in the process then this is regular CPD, collaborative working and school development on a more formal level. Smaller schools could continue with the project but would need to accept that funding for release may not be guaranteed. The school and the LA, however, are currently exploring other sources of funding in order to try and ensure the second year of this project could be funded in a similar way.

SENCOs agreed that this is probably the best CPD they have had and with average CPD course costs of £240, heads could justify continuing this project to provide a key staff member within their school with tried and tested CPD.

The end of year conference explained the benefits and challenges of the project and outlined how it could be taken forward in a manageable and sustainable way. It allows heads to take more responsibility, reducing reliance on a lead school, to use the guidance that will be collated in SEND Peer Review User Guide for schools created by the Lead School. This pack could later be modified for use by maths leads as that currently has less prominence. Alongside the pack the school could run training sessions

**“All schools could benefit from developing peer reviews to improve SENCOs confidence, skills and strategic leadership.”**

around the best way to deliver a SEND Peer review in an effective and consistent way. Feedback will allow the model, materials and training to be refined and the lead school will consider promoting it nationally.

**All schools could benefit from developing peer reviews to improve SENCOs confidence, skills and strategic leadership. Staff and pupils benefit as a result. Those benefits are best evaluated within rather than across schools because of the variability of identification and assessment of SEND. For provision and outcomes to improve SEND needs to be a priority in the school improvement plan, seen as everyone's responsibility, supported by good training, and time allocated to the SENCO to plan strategically and focus on improving teaching.**

Note: some of the images used in this summary are stock images

# EXPLORING THE BIGGER PICTURE



**PICTURING MEANING:** a project to explore the use of picture books and Philosophy for Children (P4C) as a method to improve the inference and comprehension skills of pupils in Year 4 and Year 5.

**Keele and North Staffordshire Teacher Education (KNSTE), Sutherland Primary Academy, St Luke's Endon, Ash Green Primary School, Seabridge Primary School, St Peter's Catholic Academy, The Meadows Primary Academy and Parkside Primary School**

## CONTEXT

Stoke-on-Trent is one of the most deprived areas in England with its poor educational, health and social outcomes recognised by the government in its designation as an Opportunity Area. There are high levels of poverty, under-achievement and children with special educational needs (SEND). 41% of children failed to reach the expected standard in reading and just 12% of pupils with language difficulties achieved at least the expected standard in reading, writing and mathematics at KS2 compared to 53% of all pupils.

The project alliance grew out of meetings designed to improve the evidence base of research-led practice by KNSTE and schools involved in initial teaching training working in the Social Mobility Opportunity and Achieving Excellence Areas in Staffordshire.

## RESEARCH FOCUS

The hypothesis was that the use of P4C with picture books would provide an opportunity for vulnerable children to access a range of text, reduce the disadvantage of limited objective vocabulary and enable them to fully understand that text.

The project intention was to research into whether the use of P4C by appropriately trained teachers could increase children's inference and comprehension capabilities and so reduce the geography of disadvantage.

The project sought to answer four main enquiry questions:

- 1 Can picture books improve the inference and comprehension skills of children eligible for the Pupil Premium funding and SEND pupils?
- 2 Can picture books improve the inference skills of pupils with significant learning barriers?
- 3 Can the dialogic approach to exploring inference via picture books aid pupils in expressing their ideas?
- 4 Will this ability to better express their ideas lead to better assessment data as the pupils transfer their oral skills to transcription?



## WHY IT IS SIGNIFICANT

**Social disadvantage, oracy and good teaching are key determinants of learning and life chances. The project was particularly influenced by the work of Kate Nation who contends that unless provision is directed specifically towards disadvantaged pupils then their oracy and vocabulary deficit will not reduce but widen. She wrote 'It is clear that children with low levels of spoken language are at risk for reading failure, particularly when it comes to reading comprehension'.**

The Commission of Educational Inequality (July 2017) stated that when comparing the performance of 11-year olds born in 2000 with those born in 1970 it was revealed that the geographical area a child comes from has become an increasingly powerful predictor. Children who face social disadvantage are disproportionately

**“Earlier and better intervention is required to improve outcomes for the rising numbers with ASD.”**

affected by language deficit and this is further exacerbated for children with SEND. Evidence suggests that children with better language will tend to develop better reasoning and inference skills (Law et al, 2015) and that conversational turns, which P4C encourages, are important (Romeo et al, 2018). Improvement in oracy is the first step in an improvement in the skills of both reading and writing (EEF Ks1 and LKS2 Literacy Guidance Report).

This project was based upon the premise that well trained teachers can ameliorate deficits. The Sutton Trust (2015) recognises that the quality of teaching is by far the most important school-based determinant of a pupils' educational attainment and that 'teachers are the greatest drivers of social mobility'.

## METHODS AND PARTICIPANTS

The Spiral of Enquiry approach was adopted (Timperley et al) as an effective way to improve both teachers' practice and pupil outcomes.

Two teachers from each school became sources of continuing professional development. They met to discuss their experience of working with high quality picture books at the upper stages of KS2.

As a team they decided which texts to purchase as fitting the priorities and social context of their schools.

Clarity was needed in the way that picture books, inference and comprehension and P4C worked together. This was managed by the modelling of planning, led by the project lead co-ordinator and supported by teacher discussion. New learning for teachers comprised P4C Level 1 training. A series of 10 P4C planned lessons were delivered using picture books to stimulate inference and comprehension skills.

Four monitoring and support meetings were held to share project experiences and to maintain fidelity to the P4C principles and the research aims.

A range of pupils was assessed at the start and finish in reading and comprehension using the Salford Test. Case studies were undertaken and qualitative data was gathered from teachers' reflective journals and an interim report from head teachers.

## IMPACT

Across the range of pupils in years 4 and 5 there was a clear improvement in children's reading ages, their comprehension of text and the skill of inference. The use of picture rather than prose books did not slow improvement and helped children of all abilities to higher achievement in writing.

The use of picture books in guided reading and P4C lessons had a positive impact on the inclusivity for pupils with SEND. Pupils with English as an additional language, whilst accessing oral skills at a slower pace, were able to use their turn taking skills to build an inferential understanding of the visual representations within the text and

**“There was also positive impact on usually harder to reach boys...”**

use a wider selection of vocabulary. There was also positive impact on usually harder to reach boys and heightened engagement for those likely to be disaffected.

Qualitative evidence suggests that the ethos of encouraging careful responses, extending first thoughts, allows all children to participate, to take opportunities and explore

with confidence. Teachers stated that greater progress was seen in the higher ability pupil's attitudes towards their peers and the development of empathy. It was also observed that some greater synthesis of learning, an ability to integrate knowledge from a variety of sources took place.

Teachers that were introduced to the new concept of the use of picture books at the top of KS2 to support the development of inference and comprehension were professionally curious to be involved and there was an appetite across schools to work collaboratively.



## NEXT STEPS AND SUSTAINABILITY

**More rapid improvements in oracy, reading and writing are achievable. The embedding of P4C across the schools would improve the use of dialogue and vocabulary to allow for discussion leading to inference. Each year group should plan for the use of picture books as a vehicle for P4C.**

Teaching can be improved. High-quality picture books can support the development of questioning skills. Collaboration can benefit practitioners from newly qualified teachers (NQTs) to the long serving, adding to their skills and sense of wellbeing. NQTs in particular benefited from control of their own practice and from the opportunity to be part of strategic planning. Headteachers too benefit from collaboration and shared practice.

Action research projects harness collaboration to enhance pedagogy and challenge for all children, benefiting and including the most vulnerable. To maximise the impact, such projects need to be mindful of agreements about what, how and when data will be collected, and of not competing with schools' existing timelines. Projects should be wary of increasing workload.

Leaders need to give teachers the opportunities and the resources to develop a greater knowledge and breadth of children's literature and a wider variety of text including the use of picture books for older age groups. Teachers are in a position to challenge the perceived idea of older pupils requiring a dense prose text in order to improve their reading skills.

**“Action research projects harness collaboration to enhance pedagogy and challenge for all children, benefiting and including the most vulnerable.”**

Leaders should encourage a broad spectrum of approaches to reading including the use of picture books and enable collaborative planning opportunities for teachers both within their own school and externally.

The core ideas of this project are sustainable and vital. It recognised that low achievement and aspiration linked to social deprivation can be

ameliorated to a degree through new learning, collaboration, good teaching and belief. It showed improvement in reading ages and comprehension skills of a range of pupils within Year 4 and 5, demonstrating that alternative approaches to the skills of inference and comprehension may improve engagement which would improve skills and hence attainment.

The project developed teachers' pedagogical knowledge, their understanding and practice of P4C and offered them an opportunity to collaborate. It demonstrated that collaboration and support between practitioners is beneficial in terms of pupil achievement and the wellbeing of staff. NQTs were challenged to bring this new approach into their own school and to share their experiences with colleagues. More experienced staff were challenged to change their practice and therefore enhance their understanding of pedagogy.

Collaborative links between Keele and North Staffordshire Education have been built to sustain the NQTs who are involved within the project as those who approach their third year of teaching. It is hoped that this will impact upon retention within the city.



**Sustainability is aided by the use of research and evidence within schools. The project offered the opportunity to develop links between the current evidence base of reading and the practical application of this within the classroom. The work is at the heart of the hope for the future of those experiencing disadvantage and barriers to learning: it offers a practical means of realising the highest aspirations for all.**

Note: all of the images used in this summary are stock images

# FAMILY MATTERS



## Can a targeted parenting programme accelerate the language development of children identified with expressive and receptive language difficulties?

### Wexham Court Primary School & Phoenix Academy



#### CONTEXT

**In both schools, deprivation is above the national average where around 20% of families are eligible for free school meals. The effect of deprivation on child development is reflected in both settings' emotional support interventions where the majority of children are pupils identified as having special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) or siblings of pupils with SEND, within the area of speech, language and communication (SLCN). SLCN represents 15% of all educational and health plans nationally (EHCPs) (DFE, Special Educational Needs in England 2020).**

It is believed by both settings that these interventions, whilst seen as having positive results, are 'reactive' approaches. They are delivered within the school environment, severely limiting opportunities to influence positive parenting skills in the longer term. Therefore they have a limited short-term impact on pupil outcomes. Longer-term impact requires the development of clearly thought –through strategies to support families to embed the work in the home. Such an integrated approach would yield more sustainable results.

In the current financial climate, and with limited resources, access to the Local Authority Family Links programme prioritises parents who have been identified as not being able to meet their children's needs successfully. This restricts the availability of the programme to a

range of families and consequently limits the real and wide-ranging benefits to many pupils within the proposed settings and also within the wider community.

#### RESEARCH FOCUS

The research hypothesis was that children with delayed speech and language development could make accelerated progress when parents are empowered with a specifically designed set of parenting skills.

The Family Links Programme is a ten-week, group-based parenting programme that is intended to be universally available to all parents. The duration of each weekly session is two hours. It was the vehicle for assessing the impact that a parenting group could have on a child's communication skills.

#### WHY IT IS SIGNIFICANT

This research links parenting, deprivation and a significant and common special educational need.

Research shows that the quality of the role played by a key adult is a core component in the lifelong outcomes of a child's life. Lack of parenting skills, particularly in early childhood, can have a long lasting and significant impact on cognitive development, and noticeably influences the way a child's communication and emotional resilience develops. Parenting programmes are designed to improve the efficacy of parenting skills by providing clear and proven strategies that enhance communication between parent and child. Programmes are too few to meet need.

Deprivation exacerbates SEND. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2006) acknowledges the link between poverty and SEND. It identifies that 'Pupils from low-income families are more likely to be identified as having SEND, but at the same time are less likely to receive support of effective interventions that might help to address their needs'. In addition, it finds that parents of those with SEND are less likely to have the communication skills to seek help successfully.

Butler and Rutter (2016) illustrate the importance of settings to provide 'universal family support services, in particular for parents of children with SEND and parents with SEND themselves'. The Andover Project (2008) showed how parents,

on completion of a Family Links Programme, felt that they were supported by their peers, had more control over their parental role and were able to show increased empathy with their children.

More recently the 'Early Years Foundation Stage Reforms' (DfE, October 2019) highlights the impact that deprivation has on communication and literacy skills, the need to focus on these skills and that parents play a crucial role in children's early language.

**"...parents play a crucial role in children's early language."**

#### METHODS AND PARTICIPANTS

Two schools, with similar cohorts and levels of deprivation, undertook this research project to investigate the impact of the Family Links Programme on children's speech, language and communication skills.

The programme was delivered to parents of children with identified communication needs within the schools' Early Years settings in addition to the existing programmes of Emotional Literacy support. It intended to promote positive and active parenting skills and magnify the impact on the children's communication skills and life chances.

Quantitative and qualitative data was collected to determine the impact of the parents' learning on the programme on pupils' communication skills. Data was gathered from parents at the beginning and end of the 10-week programme by using strengths and difficulties questionnaires and weekly feedback forms. Their attendance was recorded as was their

confidence levels pre- and post- the research project.

To measure the impact that parental participation in the group had on their children's speech, language and communication skills, data from the child's learning profile (Development Matters in the Early Years Foundation Stage) was used to provide levels of development within the areas of: Listening and Attention, Understanding and Speaking.

In addition to this, each child was assessed pre- and post- research using the Infant Language Link assessment and their progress compared with that of their peers. This assessment is an online means of assessing concepts, tenses, instruction, negatives and questions.

In addition, the rate of progress of a control group was measured. These children had been identified through Language Link assessments as having similar needs to the focus children,



but their parents did not form part of the Family Links Programme.

Both the focus group and the control group received intervention throughout the programme to address their SLCN, as per the language link lesson plans. The children were taught in mixed groups and the interventions were regularly monitored ensuring consistency of teaching.

## IMPACT

In both settings, the focus groups achieved better outcomes in their speech and language assessments than the control group. For setting 1, the focus group as a whole scored 13 more points and in setting 2 they scored 34 more points on their final assessment when compared to those in the control group. All children whose parents were on the programme exceeded expected progress.

Where parental engagement was highest, the development of children's speech and language was accelerated, sometimes

“Where parental engagement was highest, the development of children's speech and language was accelerated, sometimes significantly, when compared with the control groups.”

significantly, when compared with the control groups. There is a very clear relationship between the progress that children made and the number of sessions attended by the parents.

Parental confidence was raised to a point that they felt able to offer advice to other parents and became more engaged with their children's education.



**NEXT STEPS AND SUSTAINABILITY**  
SLCN needs to be seen as a priority and family programmes as an opportunity to invest early to reap individual and system rewards later on. The Local Authority (LA) should make the funding available that would enable all Early Years settings to provide parenting programmes within their settings. Currently, the two settings in this research are the only way to access a Family Links Programme within the LA. If Children's Centres were funded to do so, a continuous cycle of parenting programmes could be offered.

Parents may struggle with materials and attendance. Materials that are more accessible to all parents are needed so that those with limited language or learning difficulties themselves can access them. This differentiation takes time and resource. Parents may need crèche facilities in order to attend the programme.

Sustainability lies not only in funding but in embedding ways of thinking and acting. The impact that the

programme had for our parents and their children was evident. Also evident was the impact that the planning, training, collegiate working and newly gained action research skills had on those involved in the project. It has been far reaching and has led to further research into the benefits of working closely with and empowering parents.

As professionals who undertook the Family Links training, we were given the opportunity to not only reflect on our own parenting skills but more powerfully, the parenting skills of our parents. For all who were trained, this has had a significant self-analytical impact and for some, who survived abuse and neglect, this has been life changing.

As colleagues, we now feel that we are able to confidently provide our staff team with professional training that is accurate and effective. As a result of this, the quality of support offered to our parents has become more focused.

“Sustainability lies not only in funding but in embedding ways of thinking and acting.”

The underpinning research and literature review that took place highlighted the impact that poor parenting skills have on the developing brain. The research that took place on a local level emphasised the substantial gap in the availability of good quality parenting programmes for all.

**The project clearly shows that when parents are given guidance that supports their parenting skills, their children's expressive and receptive language skills progress, some rapidly. Is it a lack of funding or lack of accessibility that prevents the delivery of good quality parenting programmes?**

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# SENSORY PERCEPTION



## Profiling Young People's Sensory Needs In Schools: a collaborative Health and Education Service approach to supporting young people's Sensory Processing Difficulties

### The Sheffield Locality C Pathfinder Group



WYBOURN COMMUNITY  
Primary School

#### CONTEXT

Locality C is a cross-phase group of 19 schools in the south east of Sheffield. The three schools involved in this action research are in areas of high deprivation. The secondary school and one primary are in the most deprived city wards and amongst the 2% most deprived nationally. The other primary is in the 6th most deprived city ward. Levels of special educational needs and disability (SEND) and eligibility for free school meals (FSM) are significantly higher than average.

Sheffield's most recent Local Area Review highlighted a number of weaknesses, including a lack of productive partnership working between Health and Education in supporting young people with SEND (Ofsted/CQC, 2019). This becomes an acute issue when, in common with schools nationally, there is an increase in the identification, severity, complexity and longevity of SEND, particularly relating to autistic spectrum disorders (ASD) and speech, language and communication needs (SLCN). ASD represents 30% and SLCN 15% of all educational and health plans nationally (EHCPs) (DFE, Special Educational Needs in England 2020).

Four locality special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs) determined to improve provision

and outcomes for those with ASD. They identified a lack of training and knowledge around sensory

**“The three schools involved in this action research are in areas of high deprivation.”**

processing needs for these young people, most of whom have these needs (McCormick et al, 2016). In addition, these needs were often identified non-specifically as requiring an unspecified 'sensory diet'. There was recognised expertise and partnership to be had in the Sheffield Children's NHS Foundation Trust (SCNHSFT), Community Physiotherapy and Occupational Therapy Team.

#### RESEARCH FOCUS

The hypothesis was that a young person's ability to engage, socialise and learn in an environment could be improved through enhanced understanding of their sensory preferences and needs.

As not all those with sensory needs would have formally identified SEND, a question of how to involve the wider school population was asked. It was also important to acknowledge the pressure on resources and

that access to Health services is not always an option i.e. how to identify and ameliorate the effects of young people's sensory processing difficulties?

It was intended that the necessary knowledge transfer, resources and strategies would enable professionals to provide support to a wide range of young people and promote their learning, engagement and inclusion within mainstream provisions.

**“As not all those with sensory needs would have formally identified SEND, a question of how to involve the wider school population was asked.”**

#### WHY IT IS SIGNIFICANT

Young people with ASD are much more susceptible to showing inattention, distraction, irritability, auditory and tactile sensitivity and sensory seeking behaviours (Tomchek and Dunn, 2007). Sensory needs can also be seen in Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and in increased anxiety (Reynolds and Lane, 2009).

Earlier and better intervention is required to improve outcomes for the rising numbers with ASD. Children with SEND generally have poorer life chances. They are, for example, three times as likely to be unemployed and 49% of those who do work don't retain that job for long (Department for Work and Pensions). 25% of the prison population has special needs and more than 50% literacy and/or speech, language and communication difficulties (Royal College for Speech and Language Therapists, 2016).

Access to expertise is also significant and, in this case, especially the partnership with health services in the form of speech and language therapists and occupational therapists.

#### METHODS AND PARTICIPANTS

SCNHSFT ran a day for SENCOs on sensory needs. Afterwards, the project group planned a line of deductive research, aiming to test if it were possible, after expert education and health advice, for education colleagues to identify, profile and support sensory needs without the requirement for direct support from Health colleagues.

**“Earlier and better intervention is required to improve outcomes for the rising numbers with ASD.”**

This approach would incorporate training, an environmental audit tool for whole school use and the creation of a 10 Step Plan by a Pathfinder Group who would reflect on the process and outcomes. This plan would be for educators to use and inform an Individual Sensory Plan (ISP).

The research group sought breadth of age and phase of tracked cohorts to see if the 10 Step Plan would support young people

in both Secondary and Primary schools. Also that the cohorts were typical of the schools so that learning could be generalised for mainstream classrooms, rather than being specific to one particular group of pupils.

The work had four strands. The first two, upskilling whole school staff teams and pastoral team training in the 10 Step Plan were for all Locality C schools. Participants would complete pre- and post questionnaires about their learning.

Strands 3 and 4, cohort tracking in response to environmental and practice changes and tracking young people using the 10 Step Plan (10 pupils), would involve case study schools. These had cohorts split across classes and included pupils with and without SEND. Pupil preferences and dislikes were triangulated through the use of the Pupil, Parent and Teacher Questionnaires and informed the ISP. Quantitative data was gathered for attendance, progress and behavioural incidents.

## IMPACT

### Strand One

18 schools attended the training for whole school teams. The training raised awareness of sensory needs and provided staff with the initial building blocks of understanding regarding Sensory Processing Difficulties, improving their knowledge and confidence to make environments more sensory friendly.

### Strand Two

30 staff from 16 schools attended pastoral team training on the 10 Step Plan and gave qualitative feedback. The plan proved usable by pastoral teams who all reported a high degree of confidence in using the environmental audit and translating it into a school action plan. Their ability to implement this well, however, was dependent on senior staff and other staff actively endorsing its usefulness and having time to do it. This was also true of ISPs, despite their confidence in identifying and providing for needs.

Staff identified strategies that already worked and attempted new approaches with children in their direct charge. The training had linked theory and practice, providing easy-to-use school based strategies and opportunities to experience practical activities such as sensory circuits.

### Strand Three

Cohort tracking showed significant improvements in pupils' sensory experience. This was more obvious in primary schools and less so in the secondary which had a smaller cohort experiencing higher levels of need and variety of environments.

Young people voiced how sensory stimulus affects them. Sometimes these preferences were obvious to staff, in others, less so. Perceptions of smells, noise and physical comfort



altered e.g. staff were 'less shouty', pupils had access to ear defenders and privacy boards in the classroom, carpet time was reduced, lining up outside stopped, corridors were quieter, the dining room less busy and home time more orderly.

The research showed, firstly, it is possible to target shared aspects of an environment and positively impact on a wide range of young people and their sensory experiences. Identifying pupils' preferences alone will not achieve this.

Secondly, each group had different sensory experiences within the same setting. This has implications for staff awareness and knowledge. It is clear that individual staff created and maintained positive changes in their own sensory environments where others had not. Consistency from staff is key to good practice.

Thirdly, where cohorts' sensory preferences are known and targeted it is possible to improve their experience of certain situations.

### Strand Four

Qualitative and quantitative data was used in the tracking of young people using the 10 Step Plan. The

ISP may have supported pupils to improve their ability to safely engage in the primary school environment. There was a reduction in negative sensory experiences, better self-regulation and some improved academic progress. In the secondary setting, the ISP was thought to be most useful in understanding what was going on for young people and their families, gaps in provision and the identification of existing good practice within the setting. The 10 Step Plan is most effective when collaboration between colleagues, parents/carers and the young person informs the ISP.

Pathfinder Group SENCOs feel that the research has supported the awareness and understanding of sensory needs and the sensory environment created. They find it easier to have professional dialogue with colleagues and have benefited from focussed dialogue with pupils' parents/carers. A particular practical impact is that of sensory circuits enabling groups of young people to attend on time more regularly and enter learning environments more calmly and resulted in less challenging behaviours



### NEXT STEPS AND SUSTAINABILITY

The research concentrated on staff awareness and tracking groups and individuals within cohorts. Some of the variable impact can be attributed to variances in the sensory experiences that young people in the same cohort may experience. Further and longer study is required, based on a whole school level of intervention and support, to assess impact across a larger group of pupils in a setting. It would also allow researchers to see how changes made to a young person's ISP, through planned periodic reviews, impact on a young person's ability to manage their sensory needs.

Training for schools on sensory processing should become a standard rolling programme. Led by expert therapists and educators it would increase knowledge and skills in identification and meeting of sensory

**“Further and longer study is required, based on a whole school level of intervention and support, to assess impact across a larger group of pupils in a setting.”**

needs and the use of the 10 Step Plan. Senior leaders should be present to underline the training's importance and to ensure whole staff buy-in, provision of time and implementation. Sustainability and effectiveness hinges on the generalisation of good sensory practice and the identification of the individual's sensory needs. Those with significant SEND will only truly benefit from an ISP if all their needs are taken into consideration.

The research is a replicable example of joint working between Education and Health. It exemplifies the possibilities of innovation in a school-led system that can assist an LA, in this case much criticised, to fulfil its legal SEND obligations. Shared understanding could lead to a more consistent and graduated Local Offer for young people with SEND and their families in Sheffield. Other local examples of good inter-service collaboration should be identified to link practitioners and improve the support these young people need.

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