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Improving services for pupils with social, emotional and behaviour difficulties: Responding to the challenge

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This paper considers some of the major challenges facing key stakeholders, including teachers, professionals working in support services, parents and pupils, as they strive to improve services for children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD). For each of these challenges (working with families, low educational attainments, including pupils with SEBD in mainstream schools, transition from school to college or employment, early intervention and prevention) we review research evidence, mainly from the UK and USA, and discuss possible solutions. A key theme in the paper, discussed in the concluding section, is that governments, local authorities and schools, should use the research evidence to develop carefully planned and evidence based interventions that will lead to sustained improvements being made in the education of vulnerable young people.

Keywords: SEBD, services, interventions, schools, pupils

Introduction

For many years teachers, psychologists, local authority administrators and government officers from all over the world have been concerned about the most effective way to educate pupils with social emotional and behavioural difficulties. This high level of concern is also reflected in the academic and professional literature and in the media. Indeed, in the UK, hardly a day goes by without an article appearing in a newspaper which complains about, for example, the increasing levels of violence and disaffection in school, the continuing problems teachers experience when teaching 'unruly children', or about the lack of specialist provision to cater for 'disturbed youngsters'. These media reports, though often

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exaggerated, do perhaps reflect the fact that this group of young people continue to present many challenges for parents, teachers and the community and that current services are not all that successful in combating the problem. This is evidenced by the fact that, in England and Wales, a high proportion of special schools for such children have been judged as being unsatisfactory by government inspectors and there is ongoing concern about the large numbers of pupils who are excluded from mainstream school because of their disruptive behaviour. Indeed, it is argued (see Bowers 2001; Fletcher-Campbell 2001; Farrell et al. 2004), that government legislation in the UK, which has introduced a "market led" philosophy in which mainstream schools compete with each other for children, where exam results are published and where "excellence" in education tends to be measured solely on academic criteria, has led mainstream schools to be increasingly reluctant to cater for pupils who may be disruptive. In this context mainstream schools are, understandably, increasingly reluctant to admit pupils with SEBD (Evans and Lunt 2002).

Ongoing concerns about how to improve services for children with SEBD, their families, schools and communities present a whole range of complex and interconnected challenges for service providers. In this paper we will discuss some of these challenges in more depth, with reference to research evidence, and suggest some approaches that might help to improve our practice. Clearly, given the complex nature of the problem, there is insufficient space in this article to deal adequately with all the various issues that are of current concern. We have therefore chosen to address the following five areas: working with families, the educational attainments of children with SEBD, inclusion and children with SEBD, the transition from school to college/work and early intervention and prevention. In each of these areas there is emerging evidence which points to ways in which services for this group of children and young people can be improved.

Working with families of children with SEBD

There has been a long and illustrious history in relation to the positive benefits that arise when professionals and parents work together and collaborate with regards to the education of children with special educational needs (see for example Mittler and Maconachie 1983). However, for the SEBD population such examples are hard to find. Indeed schools and local authority personnel often complain that parents of children with SEBD are the least likely to appear at school parents' evenings or to work with teachers in supporting a child. And there are many reasons why this is the case. Extensive research on the characteristics of families who have children with SEBD, reviewed by Cooper (1993), indicates that such families are characterised by inconsistent and ineffectual parental discipline, a lack of

overtly displayed parental affection, and parental indifference which is sometimes associated with hostility or rejection. In addition some families can live in an atmosphere where there are violent displays of behaviour from parents that reflect emotional tensions and disagreements within the house. Furthermore, in such families, one or both parents may be absent for long periods of time. It is understandable that families living under these circumstances may view their child's problems at school as being of minor importance and consequently they may be unwilling, or not have the time to, cooperate with schools. It may also be the case that the parents of children with SEBD tend to live in areas of social and economic deprivation, where there is not always a culture of home school cooperation. These parents may themselves have done badly at school, have poor memories of the experience and of the teachers who taught them. Hence they may feel uncomfortable visiting schools to discus their own child's education. This can give the impression that they are not interested in the progress, or lack of it, that their child is making.

There are therefore many reasons why it may not always be possible for professionals to work in collaboration with parents of children with SEBD and, indeed, it is sometimes tempting to castigate the family as being part of the problem. But this may be too simplistic. Boreham et al. (1995) carried out a study which explored the thoughts and feeling of parents whose children were being assessed by educational psychologists (EPs) because of their behaviour problems. Each stage of the assessment of seven children was observed and interviews were held with all relevant parties. Hence, for each child, interviews were held with key personnel (e.g. the EP, teacher, parent(s) and the child – if appropriate) at the time of referral, immediately before and after each meeting, and after a decision about what to do had been made. Not surprisingly, given the intrusive and time-consuming nature of this research as well problems in gaining access to families who were willing to take part, it was not possible to collect data from a large sample. Although the families displayed many of the characteristics that one would expect from the research literature referred to above, there were other factors that might well explain their seemingly uncooperative behaviour. In particular their views of teachers, EPs and local authority personal were characterised by feelings of vulnerability. They were very anxious about meeting other professionals whom they perceived to be more clever and articulate than they were. They frequently felt tongue tied in their presence and unable to explain things fully. In addition they felt totally disempowered, not in control of their child's destiny, and as if they were to blame for the current problems. These findings suggest that professionals working in the SEBD field need to aware that their stereotype of families of children with SEBD may actually act as a barrier to productive cooperation. Indeed the findings indicate that it is vitally

important for professionals to understand how vulnerable families may be feeling. In particular it may be counter productive to begin discussions with families by listing the latest misdemeanours that their son or daughter may have carried out. This is likely to increase the parents' feelings of disempowerment and that they are to blame.

The educational attainment of children with SEBD

For many years concern has been expressed about the link between low achievement in basic academic skills and SEBD (see, for example, Lambley 1993; Laslett 1989; Chazan, Laing and Davies 1994). Much of the hard evidence on pupil achievement and EBD, however, was reported over 30 years ago. For example, Roe (1965), Petrie (1962) and Critchley (1969) all provide data on the limited educational progress made by 'maladjusted' pupils, and Rutter et al. (1975), in the Isle of Wight survey, found that 40% of pupils with anti-social behaviours had severe reading problems. Further, more objective data, based on pupils' test scores, is provided by Ramsaut and Upton (1983) who found that the mean reading quotient (standard score) of boys in schools for the "maladjusted" was 77.8, while their mean maths quotient was 87. Grimshaw's (1995) research suggests that the situation may not have changed since these earlier studies were carried out. She found that a clear majority of pupils in residential EBD schools had reading ages below ten years when the average chronological age of the sample was 12 years. These studies reflect concerns expressed by other authors, for example, Maras (1996), who suggested that many pupils with EBD may have undetected learning difficulties, and Smith and Cooper (1996) who comment that children with emotional and behavioural difficulties rarely perform to their full potential.

Farrell, Critchley and Mills (2000) carried out a further study of the basic attainments of pupils in a day and residential school for children with SEBD. This was a boys' school catering for children from 8 to 16 years that had received good reports from government inspectors. Eighty-nine pupils completed basic tests of literacy and numeracy, the Wechsler Objective Reading Dimensions (WORD - a test of attainment in reading accuracy, comprehension and spelling) and the Wechsler Objective Numeracy Dimensions (WOND – a test of skills in arithmetic and number). Both WORD and WOND have a mean standard score for the "normal" population of 100 with a standard deviation of 15. The findings indicated that nearly half the pupils (48.3%) achieved a composite WORD score of 70 or less. In the population as a whole this figure should be 2%. On the WOND, the pupils performed slightly better, with nearly a quarter (23%) achieving a composite score of under 70. Very few pupils' scores

were over 100 (11% on the WORD and 8% on the WOND). Taken as a whole these findings confirm other research evidence on the relationship between SEBD and academic achievement.

This research and other studies have implications for the theoretical and conceptual bases that underpin intervention for pupils with EBD. First, there is the question of causation. There are some who may argue that a child's failure to learn the basic skills of literacy and numeracy in their early years at school may result in them developing behaviour problems. On the other hand, there are others who might say that these children have social and emotional difficulties in the first place which results in them developing literacy and numeracy difficulties. There is almost certainly some truth in both these positions but the clear, and unsurprising, conclusion is that it is vitally important for schools to help children to get off to a good start in schools both in relation to learning basic academic skills as well as in developing as well adjusted children and young persons. This relates to the issue of early intervention to which we will return later in this paper.

Secondly, the issue of poor attainment in pupils with SEBD raises questions about the approach to intervention that should be offered for these pupils. Should the approach emphasise therapy or education, or both? Are psychodynamic, non-directive methods, so popular in the early 1950s and 1960s, compatible with good basic education? We would argue that, whatever the therapeutic underpinning of a school's approach to teaching pupils with EBD, it has a key responsibility to provide high quality education in the basic skills, otherwise it becomes extremely difficult to prepare pupils adequately for adulthood. Indeed good education is a vital component of the therapeutic process, partly because many pupils enter special school with negative experiences of education, low self-esteem and an entrenched belief that academic work is not for them.

Inclusion and pupils with SEBD

In recent years the issue of inclusion has become a key feature of discussions about the development of education policy and practice around the world. The movement has been strongly endorsed internationally by the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO 1994) and reflects the United Nations' global strategy of 'Education for All'. Both have had a major impact on policy developments in many different countries. This is confirmed by recent accounts of trends in inclusion in different countries (see for example Meijer 1998; Egelund 2000; Rustemier and Vaughan 2005). There is also no shortage of books and articles that have extolled the values of inclusion and which have provided a whole range of accounts of "good practice" in inclusive education (see for example Ainscow 1999; Ballard 1999;

Mittler 2000; Farrell and Ainscow 2002; Visser, Cole and Daniels 2002). In addition there are now a number of papers that review research literature on inclusion (see for example Harrower 1999; Farrell et al. 2007; Kalambouka et al. 2007; Farrell et al. 2008). These reviews suggest that there are many benefits to be gained from inclusive education in relation to pupils with and without disabilities, their parents and teachers, provided that sufficient support is offered to schools and there are positive attitudes towards inclusion amongst teachers, parents and local authority personnel.

Until recently most UK research literature on inclusive education has, on the whole, tended not to focus on pupils with EBD, and this raises the possibility that the above findings may not apply to this population. Although there are some accounts of mainstream school staff developing their practice to foster the inclusion of children who are at risk of developing behaviour problems (e.g. Hollanders 2002; Howes, Emanuel and Farrell 2002; Rooney 2002) the majority of studies that have been carried out reinforce the general view that inclusion for pupils with SEBD poses a major challenge for schools and local authorities. For example reviews of research into mainstream teachers' attitudes, (Chazan et al. 1994; Croll and Moses 2001; Glaubman and Lifshitz 2001; Heiman 2001; Avramidis and Norwich 2002; Dyson et al. 2004; Kalambouka et al. 2007) suggest that teachers tend to have negative perceptions of, and limited tolerance for, problem behaviour in the classroom, and are therefore unlikely to have positive attitudes towards the inclusion of pupils with SEBD. These views have been strongly endorsed by the trade unions representing teachers in the UK, who have stated firmly that they are against the inclusion of pupils who have behaviour problems and who are likely to disrupt the smooth running of a mainstream school (NUT 1998). These findings are in line with those from a study of LEAs' polices and practices on inclusion (Ainscow et al. 1999) that also found that mainstream schools were, on the whole, hostile to the inclusion of SEBD pupils.

The current negative attitudes among teachers in mainstream schools could indicate that the inclusion of pupils with SEBD represents a challenge that such schools will never embrace fully. However, figures from the British Government (House of Commons Education and Skills Committee 2006) indicate that around 20,000 pupils who have been formally assessed as having SEBD are placed in mainstream school with a further 10,000 in special schools. Hence, in the UK, two thirds of SEBD pupils are currently being educated in mainstream schools, despite teachers' reluctance to cater for such pupils. The abundant evidence indicating that mainstream teachers have concerns about teaching such children, presents a challenge to them, their senior managers and to support staff to find more effective ways of supporting them through, for example, providing additional staff, special resource rooms and further training.

Transition from school to college or employment

Perhaps the key indicator of the success of any school can be judged by the long-term outcomes for the pupils when they become adults. If pupils manage to live as independent, well-adjusted adults and are integrated within their local community, then the school, whether it be a mainstream or special school, could be viewed as being successful in helping their pupils to become fully included into society. Seen in this way inclusion is a long-term goal and education provides the means of achieving this end.

Unfortunately evidence suggests that this vision is somewhat optimistic. Research from the USA indicates that young adults with SEBD, compared to their peers without SEBD, have poorer social skills, lower academic achievement, and higher incidences of psychiatric conditions. These characteristics have been linked to lower graduation rates, limited post-secondary participation, less financial independence, and limited interpersonal relationships (e.g. Marder and D'Amico 1992; Wagner et al. 1993; Davies and Vander Stoep 1997). In addition both the American National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS) and the National Adolescent and Child Treatment Study (NACTS) have shown that, as young adults, these former pupils are more likely to be involved in substance abuse and criminal activity (Wagner et al. 1993; Greenbaum et al. 1996) and to be arrested (Pandiani, Schact, and Banks 2001). Wood and Cronin (1999), in a review of 22 follow-up studies on pupils with a range of disabilities, concluded that, after leaving schools, students with SEBD experienced a higher drop out rate in further education when compared to those from other disability groups.

Research findings also indicate that young people with SEBD have the lowest employment rates and experience longer delays in obtaining employment after graduation from school compared to their peers with and without special needs (e.g., Ward et al. 1992; Wagner et al. 1993; Malmgren, Edgar and Neel 1998). Figures from the USA indicate that unemployment rates for young adults with SEBD during the first 5 years after leaving high school range from 42% to 70%. Even for students who take part in 'model demonstration programs', unemployment rates still climb as high as 31% to 46% (Bullis and Fredericks, 2002; Bullis et al., 2002). In another study of a national sample of young people with SEBD, Blackorby and Wagner (1996) reported that only 41% were employed less than two years after leaving school. Furthermore, these studies indicate that young people with SEBD who manage to obtain employment may hold multiple short-term jobs rather than a single job over time.

In contrast to the USA, relatively few studies have focussed on transition outcomes of pupils with SEBD in the UK, although findings from studies that have been carried out draw similar

conclusions. For example, in a follow up study of 26 former pupils of a residential special school Polat and Farrell (2002) found that very few were in regular employment and living independently. Over half still experienced difficulties in forming relationships and a number had been arrested for committing petty crimes.

Given the negative outcomes of transition for pupils with SEBD, it is perhaps surprising that so few studies have focussed on the transition process itself. An exception is the research carried out by Sadao and Walker (2002) who examined what they describe as the "emancipation program" of a school in the USA offering both residential and day school intervention for students with SEBD. The research sought the perceptions of students' satisfaction with the programme and future goals. Findings from semi-structured interviews raised doubts about the quality of their preparation. In a similar study Stuart (2003) interviewed 15 secondary school girls (14-19 year olds) with SEBD and explored their career aspirations and life experiences. Although Stuart found that most students were disengaged with the academic components of their educational plans, they were extremely positive with their school-supported vocational experiences. This is confirmed in Farrell and Polat's (2003) study where many former pupils stated that they were supported by school staff leading up to the transition period. In contrast, however, they received little or no support immediately after they left their residential special school. These general views are reinforced by the findings from two large scale studies on transition for all pupils with SEN (Ward et al. 1992; Polat et al. 2001) where the clear conclusions was that the transition process for pupils with EBSD was the least satisfactory out of all the SEN groups that were studied.

McEvoy and Walker (2000) suggest several school-based strategies that might improve the post-school outcomes for students with EBD, including:

- Vocational training that provides special job training and experience through work placements, job coaching, and other related activities;
- Transition planning that identifies community agencies that can assist in meeting financial needs, provides employment training from multiple work sites, and identifies counselling agencies to assist in addressing life-stresses; and,
- Wrap-around planning that matches individual and family needs with community agencies.

These views are supported by Armstrong, Dedrick and Greenbaum (2003) who conclude that there is a need to provide comprehensive and integrated services that promote the development of

social-adaptive skills needed for the successful transition to adulthood for young people with SEBD. They stress that findings highlight a need to develop interventions that build up new skills and develop relationships at home, work, and community settings.

Despite the lack of UK research in this area, there is growing interest from schools, LEAs, the Further Education sector and government to find ways of improving transition policies and practices for all young people. The evidence would suggest that, for pupils with SEBD, this represents a major challenge but one which is crucial to take on if we are to prevent the good work that was done at school, being left behind as these young people struggle to adjust to adult live as well adjusted citizens.

Early intervention and prevention

In the UK children who are formally identified by local authorities as having SEBD tend to be nine years old or above. This is reflected in the fact that most of the specialist resources for these children, such as special units or schools, tend to cater for children between the ages of 9 and 16. But, as Farrell and Polat (2003) indicate, many of these children have been identified as having problems long before they are formally assessed and alternative provision made for them. In their sample of young people with SEBD, the two authors reported that the mainstream schools had raised concerns about their emotional and behavioural problems when they were 5 or 6 years old. This raises the question as to whether it is possible to develop early intervention programmes where children with SEBD can be identified when they are much younger and when their problems tend not to be so severe and hence easier to deal with. Successful early intervention programmes should have a dramatic impact on improving the quality of life for vulnerable children and their families, reduce pressures on mainstream schools and save local authorities considerable sums of money.

In this section we will refer to two contrasting programmes that are currently being implemented in the UK, Nurture Groups and the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) programme, both of which, in their different ways, focus on early intervention and prevention.

The first nurture groups were established by Marjorie Boxall in inner London over thirty years ago (Bennathan and Boxall 2000). Their theoretical foundation lay in attachment theory with the premise that some young children in infant schools could be identified as displaying insecure or inappropriate attachments and that, through being placed in a nurture group in the same mainstream school on a part time basis for a relatively short period, typically under a year, their attachment difficulties could be addressed and they would become more adjusted to life at school and home. In

addition it was projected that such children would not develop severe emotional and behavioural difficulties when they were older. Despite their initial success, there was no major expansion in the number of groups being established, with fewer than 50 groups in existence in 1998 (Cooper, Arnold and Boyd 1998). Since then however, there has been a steady expansion of, and a growing interest in, the establishment of nurture groups throughout the UK with, according to the Nurture Group Network, over 300 groups in existence at the present time. A key strength of the way nurture groups have been established is the availability of a certificated four-day training course which provides preparation for staff that run the groups. Hence nurture groups offer a distinctive opportunity for vulnerable young people to receive an educational and therapeutic experience which is theoretically coherent and run by appropriately trained staff.

Studies into the effectiveness of nurture groups have tended to be of two types, those that focus on pupil progress on a rating scale, typically the Boxall Profile, and those which consider the long term outcomes in relation to the educational provision that these children receive after they have left the nurture group. Evaluations of pupil progress on the Boxall Profile (e.g. O'Connor and Colwell 2002; Cooper and Whitebread 2007) report statistically significant improvements for children attending nurture groups. In Cooper and Whitebread's study, these improvements are matched by similar statistically significant findings for nurture group pupils' performance on the Goodman Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). Furthermore, this study, like that of Reynolds and Kearney (2007), also employed control groups, hence adding greater credence to the findings.

One well known study, which focused on the longer term impact of nurture groups on the future educational provision (Iszatt and Wasilewska 1997), found that 83% of pupils, who had previously attended a nurture group, were still placed in full time mainstream provision well over a year after they had left the group. This was in contrast to a non-matched comparison group of pupils who were thought to need nurture group provision but could not be placed, only 55% of whom managed to maintain a place in a mainstream setting. This positive finding is encouraging and suggests that nurture group provision is effective in maintaining pupils who are at risk of developing social emotional and behavioural difficulties in mainstream schools. However, the findings have to be viewed with caution due to difficulties in matching the two groups in the study.

Other studies have focused on teachers' and other professionals' perceptions of the value of nurture groups. For example, Cooper et al. (1998) found that successful nurture groups placed considerable emphasis on the emotional development and needs of the children and that they were fully

integrated within the work of the mainstream school. This is reinforced by other accounts of nurture groups in action (e.g. Doyle 2001, 2003) which show how the nurture group approach can inform whole school strategies for supporting children who may have social and emotional difficulties within mainstream classrooms. Taken together, these studies suggest that the impact of nurture groups is extremely positive in relation to pupils' gains on measures of emotional health and wellbeing, in terms of the wider impact on the schools in which they are based, and on the longer-term placement of pupils who have attended these groups.

The fact that Cooper et al. (1998) and Doyle (2001, 2003) stressed that the work of a nurture group can have a positive impact on whole school strategies on social and emotional well being, suggests that there is an overlap in the underlying nurture group philosophy with that underpinning the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) materials that are currently being widely used in primary schools in England and Wales.

The SEAL materials have been introduced to virtually all primary schools in the UK and are now being launched in the secondary sector as well. They combine whole school approaches with tailored support to small groups of children. Each SEAL school has a person responsible for implementing the programme and they receive advice and support from a designated member of staff from the local authority. The implementation of the programme reflects a current trend of increasing emphasis on emotion within education policy and practice (Weare and Gray 2003; Humphrey 2004; Humphrey et al. 2007). Part of this upsurge in awareness has resulted from Goleman's (1995) work in the popularisation of emotion through the term 'emotional intelligence'. This has resulted in a resurgence of interest in the concept of emotion as being key to understanding and improving the overall quality of education and to reduce the incidence of children experiencing emotional and behavioural problems in school (Weare and Gray 2003; Zeidner, Roberts and Matthews 2004). The concepts of 'emotional literacy' (Sharp and Herrick 2000; Sharp 2001) 'socio-emotional learning' (Elias et al. 2001) and 'emotional intelligence' (Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso 2000) are examples of this phenomenon.

The SEAL initiative has been linked with research on identifying 'how children's emotional and social competence and well being could most effectively be developed' (Weare and Gray 2003, p. 5). The research literature exploring the impact of work aimed at developing pupils' social and emotional skills is, however, inconsistent at best (Zeidner, Roberts and Matthews 2004). Methodological, conceptual and practical problems have dogged empirical inquiry in this area (see Humphrey et al. 2007, for a review). As a result, the claimed benefits of socio-emotional interventions (which include

improved social and emotional skills, increases in attendance and academic achievement, and reductions in problem behaviour, amongst other variables) (e.g. Zins et al. 2004) as yet remain unproven. At Manchester University we are undertaking two mixed methods longitudinal studies of the impact of SEAL in both primary and secondary schools. Both studies look at pupil and whole school outcomes and the findings for the primary study were published in November 2008 (Humphrey et al. 2008), with the secondary study reporting in 2010. The main aim of the Primary study was to assess the impact of SEAL on children requiring support in small group work in developing their social and emotional skills. Key findings indicated statistically significant evidence that this small group work had a positive impact in at least one of the domains measured, although the average effect size was small. This impact was sustained over a seven week period following the end of the intervention. Evidence from a series of case studies suggested that small group work was most likely to be effective if there was sufficient allocation of time and space for small group work, the group work facilitator had a strong rapport with the children and was able to model social and emotional skills in an effective manner, there was additional support back in the classroom and that the small group work was delivered with a high degree of fidelity to the SEAL materials.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed some of the key challenges facing teachers, other front line staff and policy makers at local authority and government level who wish to improve services for children with SEBD. In so doing we have referred to relevant research evidence and have suggested some ways forward. As stated at the outset, there is insufficient space in this paper to discuss all the many important challenges that need to be addressed. In particular we have not referred to concerns about the gender imbalance in the population of children who are labelled as having SEBD, to important findings from research into pupil voice, to the training and role of support staff, and to the impact of different therapeutic interventions.

As we continue to find ways of improving services and provision, it is vitally important to draw from research findings on each of these challenges and to adopt a positive stance which emphasises the potential for all of us to make a difference. Governments, local authorities and schools need to commit themselves to long term and sustained investment – both in prevention and intervention. For, given the nature of the problems faced by this vulnerable group of young people, it is important to recognise that there are no instant solutions. New interventions need to be carefully panned and implemented over a

long period of time and they need to be rigorously evaluated. Furthermore, the issue of improving services for children with SEBD is a whole community problem and should not simply be restricted to education. All services need to find ways of supporting communities as well as schools, and at the same time be open to new ideas and to learn from each other as well as from pupils and parents.

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