

Turning it around – going from failing autistic pupils to ‘outstanding progress’ – case study of a special school

We wish to thank the Scottish Government (Scottish Strategy for Autism) for grant funding phase 2 of the project and all the staff, parents and pupils who continue to be involved in transforming St. Clement's into an Autism Centre of Excellence for the local area.

Introduction

St. Clement's School is a Special School serving a rural catchment area in Highland, Scotland. Pupils range from 3-19 and have a diverse range of needs. A substantial majority are autistic and many have complex needs. The school improvement process is ongoing, but Phases 1 and 2 of a focussed school improvement project (described here) took place between May 2014 and September 2015.

At the start of the project the school needed to improve in a number of areas, particularly in the provision offered to autistic pupils, a view endorsed by Education Scotland inspectors. Highlighted weaknesses included that some pupils “with autism spectrum disorders feel anxious during the day as their needs are not being well met” and that “For some pupils with Autism Spectrum Disorder, staff do not address barriers or inhibitors to learning and therefore focus on resulting behaviours.”.

As a first step, urgent action was taken to reduce the use of restraint in the school and child protection training and policies were reviewed. Working with inspectors, the school set a goal to: “identify learning needs accurately and implement appropriate strategies to overcome barriers to learning, especially for children and young people with autism spectrum disorders”. To achieve this goal, the school decided to work with an external consultant specialising in autism, Yo Dunn of Consult Yo Ltd.

Reduction of physical restraints (the last restraint was in February 2014)

2012/13	7
2013/14	2
2014/15	0

The project

The focus was on staff development as a means of better meeting the needs of pupils and improving outcomes. Taking into account factors including the rural location of the school and the particularly diverse spread of pupils across the autistic spectrum, a conscious choice was made to concentrate on increasing the professional skills, knowledge and confidence of staff in working with autistic pupils, rather than wholesale adoption of pre-set programmes or approaches.

Project structure:

- 3 full days bespoke autism training for all staff (including staff from partner schools and allied health professionals) – 1 day bespoke general autism; ½ days each sensory,

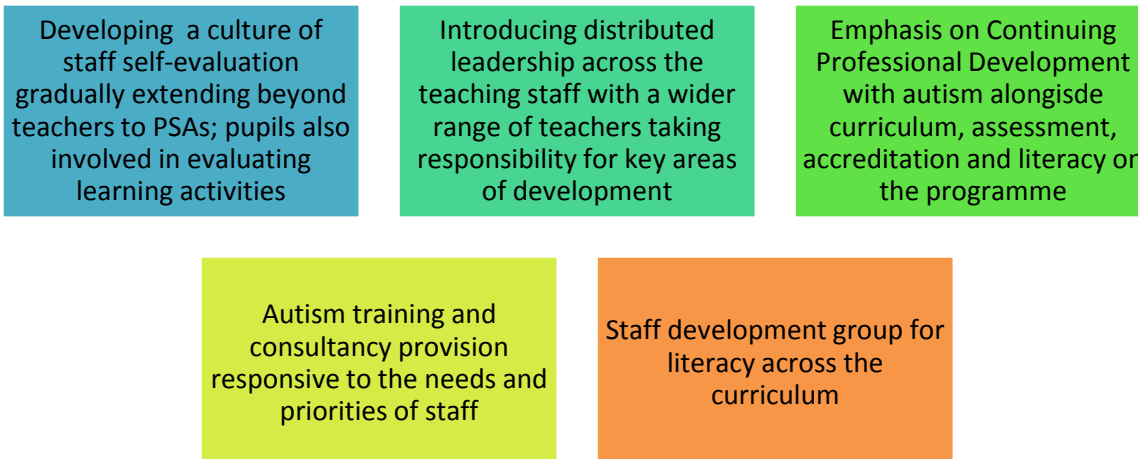
communication, primary, secondary. [Following the initial full day, topic selection responded to professional development priorities identified by staff]

- 1 full day parent/carer training focussed on practical topics including areas requested by parents in response to questionnaire. Additional drop-in session and outreach for parent/carers.
- 3 days of direct classroom observation and consultation in relation to specific pupils. Two goals: to support staff in developing strategies to address particular issues with specific children and, in parallel, to embed training by supporting teachers in applying their learning to practice. This aspect of the project was expanded and extended in response to staff requests.
- Ongoing consultancy with individual teachers and Head Teacher on individual case work. This mostly consisted of research support (identifying evidence-based strategies to address specific needs) and the development of bespoke support plans to address particular needs for some individual pupils.
- Ongoing consultancy supporting Head Teacher at strategic level with change management and embedding the autism project within wider school improvement. Included: review of staff professional development needs; policy and curriculum development; staff ethos and communication; improvements to the physical and communication environment; development of sensory profiling; supporting the school's self-evaluation.
- Evaluation of the project.

Key aspects of the project

Working collaboratively with staff to build a professional development culture

Processes of change in organisations are notoriously difficult - a 70% failure rate is reported generally (Balogun and Hope Hailey, 2004). We believed from the beginning that a collaborative professional development culture was essential in order for significant change to become successfully embedded. Steps taken included:



Research has highlighted the importance of a consultative approach to policy change in schools order to secure the commitment of staff to the process (Webster et al, 2012). There was potential for differing levels of engagement with the process of change amongst the staff team. Some staff

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(primarily teaching staff) had been newly appointed by the incoming Head Teacher, but the school retained many valuable staff members with long service for whom transformative change posed greater challenges. Ideally this would have been addressed at an earlier stage in the project. The professional development of teachers had been an early focus and some Pupil Support Assistants (PSAs) may initially have felt somewhat left behind as rapid change took hold. However, we did recognise this issue and took further steps to involve all staff fully with the process of change through a variety of measures including:

- confidential whole-staff questionnaire to assess and encourage open discussion of attitudes and assumptions about autistic pupils;
- a series of focus groups consisting of PSAs (facilitated by external consultant) without the presence of teaching staff or the Head Teacher which encouraged the open expression of concerns and developed a dialogue which enabled the PSA groups to actively contribute to guiding the process of change;
- specialist autism training open to all staff;
- encouragement of a supportive and collaborative professional culture across the whole staff team to minimise defensive reactions;
- strong focus on goal-orientated problem solving ensuring evaluation of strategies in terms of usefulness in achieving goal, rather than in terms of individual staff performance.

St. Clements' self-evaluation (endorsed by the May 2015 inspection) indicates that pupils are now well supported in their learning by the team of PSAs who have trained alongside teachers and have developed their confidence and skills to support pupils effectively in their learning, avoiding over supporting pupils and working as a team with class teachers to support differentiation.

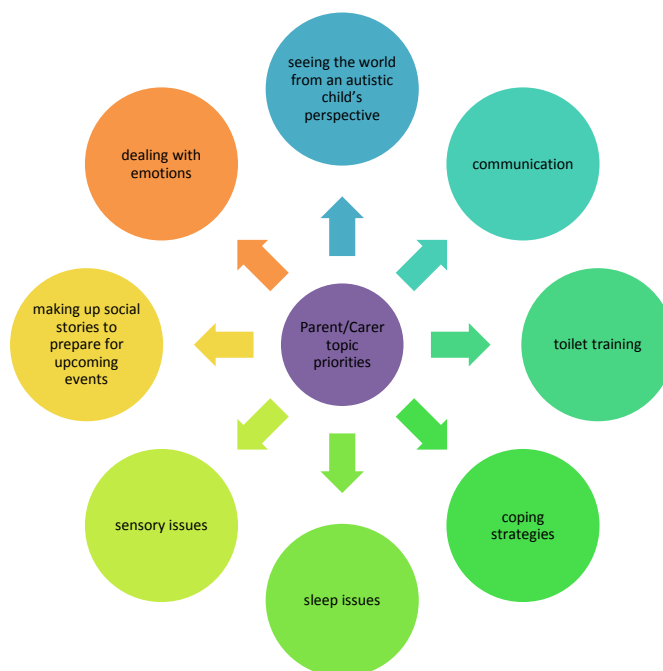
Embedding autism development within wider school improvement

This was a key aspect of the project throughout. Development of provision for the needs of autistic pupils was fully integrated with wider school improvement and a focus on curriculum development and attainment across the school. "Teacher development needs to be linked with wider goals of school and system development, and with appraisal and feedback practices and school evaluation." (Webster et al, 2012). The main changes have been:

- every child accessing their full curriculum entitlement with appropriate differentiation in how the curriculum is delivered;
- focus on supporting professional skills in differentiated curriculum delivery e.g. creation of a coherent curricular pathway in literacy; work on supporting pupils' involvement in their learning - sharing learning intentions and promoting choice and reflection on learning; use of baseline assessment to support the identification of next steps for individual pupils;
- fully embedding Curriculum for Excellence and utilising its focus on skills for work and skills for life as part of a positive, inclusive, capability-focused school culture;
- reworked class structure so that pupils in appropriate classes for age/stage and two specialist classes (one primary, one secondary) focusing on a sensory approach to the curriculum for those with the most complex needs;
- introducing a broad range of qualifications and accreditation for all senior phase pupils;
- progress tracking across the school through the use of a skills framework;
- appropriate use of sensory profiles of a type and level of detail relevant to the needs of individual pupils and ensuring these are regularly reviewed and used to inform curriculum delivery approaches.

Extending the change beyond school out into the community

Parental engagement is a powerful factor in raising attainment in schools generally (Harris and Goodall, 2007) and the provision of support to parent/carers was therefore a key component of our approach. The parent/carer training was also responsive rather than focused on predetermined content. Prior to the initial session, a parent/carer questionnaire was used to identify topics of most relevance to parents.



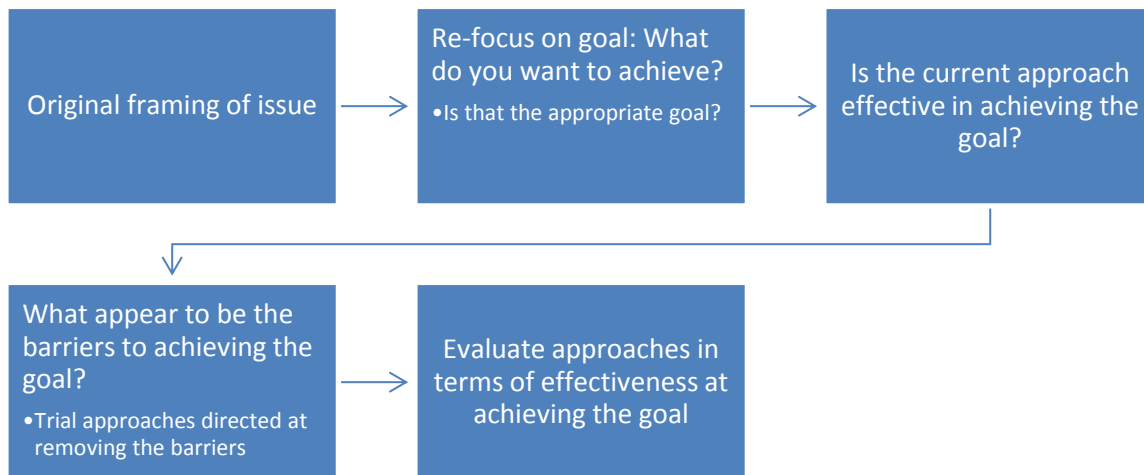
The provision of parent/carer training by an 'outsider' rather than a member of the school staff appeared to be perceived by parents as particularly supportive. We felt that this provided opportunities for parents to discuss concerns freely in a deliberately non-judgemental atmosphere.

Additional connections were built across the professional community in the local area. We considered this vital, especially in a rural area, because the work of health and social care professionals and ASN (SEN) services based in the local authority have a significant impact on the lives, outcomes and attainment of pupils in special schools. Many St. Clements' pupils have co-placements with mainstream partner schools and it is common for autistic pupils to move between mainstream and special schools as their needs change. So we provided open access for staff from mainstream schools, LA ASN (SEN) staff and allied health professionals to the specialist training sessions funded and hosted by St. Clements. We were then able to build on emerging and strengthened relationships by establishing an autism working group to further develop provision for autistic pupils across the area and to support staff working with autistic pupils in mainstream schools who might otherwise be isolated in terms of their professional development around autism.

Practical focus of the training and consultancy

Whilst the training did cover key background theoretical information and relevant aspects of the evidence base, sessions were very practically focussed. A collaborative problem solving approach was developed for day to day classroom practice and used to support practice improvement in a

diverse range of areas including behaviour management, addressing sensory needs and raising attainment. Against a background of a wider programme of increasing skills in de-escalation approaches and techniques and developing staff confidence in improving and managing challenging behaviour, staff worked (initially with support from the trainer) on re-framing issues to focus on goals and evaluating strategies in terms of effectiveness at achieving those goals.



Goal-focussed strategy evaluation

Anonymised Example: Jason struggles with the language used to express a maths question and is not sure what the question is asking of him. He is looking around the room constantly. Does he have a sensory difficulty and is being distracted by background noise or is he wanting to distract himself so will not give eye contact and looks around to avoid the language in the question? Current strategies: rewards for remaining on task, encouragement to make eye contact, verbal explanations of word problems.

Refocus on goal. Is the goal:

- to support the pupil to engage with the maths question?
- to get the pupil to stop looking around the room?
- to get the pupil to make eye contact?

Chosen goal: 'to support the pupil to engage with the maths question'.

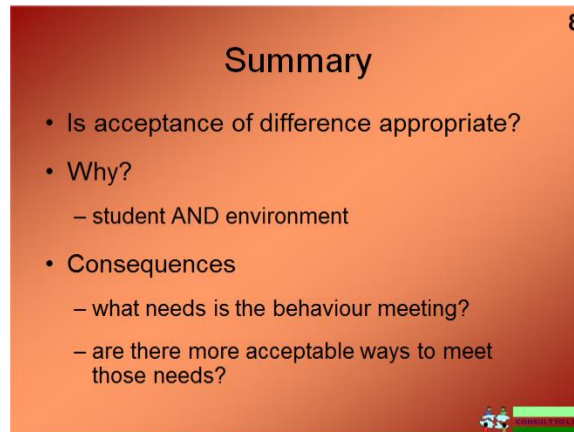
Is the current approach effective in achieving the goal? No

What appear to be the barriers to achieving the goal? Background noise, language processing issues.

Proposed approaches:

- Reduce background noise (eliminate where possible, noise-cancelling headphones?)
- Visual supports, explicit teaching of relevant forms of language (e.g. different words for 'add'), working with the pupil to develop personal strategies to identify maths required in word problems.

A similarly practical approach was applied to problem solving behavioural issues.



Staff reaction to the practical focus of sessions was strongly positive:

“the tasks made us reflect on our practice and also see things from an autistic perspective”

“real scenarios ... extremely helpful to understanding”

“different from previous training which has tended to follow same pattern”

“solutions to specific difficulties experienced by ASD pupils”

“very refreshing to be part of training that does not necessarily stick to text book answers”

“it has given me new ways to approach situations”

“provided lots of very relevant and practical advice, guidance and strategies to use”

“really thinking about the pupils we work with”

“filled in gaps between what I have been taught about autism previously and trying to work with practically”

“discussing actual cases, strategies and possible outcomes”

Beyond one off training

A crucial aspect of the project was embedding training days within the broader school improvement programme as part of the ongoing professional development culture amongst staff. Training courses in isolation are acknowledged to be limited in their ability to impact on practice in the longer term (Webster et al, 2012). The nature and quality of training may be more significant than the overall amount. It has been found that professional development activities that take place at regular intervals and involve teachers in a stable social and collaborative context (i.e. networks or mentoring) have a significantly stronger association with improved teaching practices than one-off workshops or courses (OECD, 2009).

The provision of more specialised training and in-classroom consultancy was in direct response to staff requests and the ongoing casework collaboration between teachers and the external consultant provided continuing opportunities to apply learning to practice and enhance professional confidence. “Effective professional development needs to be on-going, include training, practice and feedback, and provide adequate time and follow-up support. Successful programmes involve teachers in learning activities that are similar to those they will use with their students, and encourage the development of teachers’ learning communities.” (Webster et al, 2012)

Significant impact on practice cannot be inferred from practitioner feedback at the time of attending training. Nevertheless there were some encouraging indications that the training had influenced the

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thinking of many participants and, at least in some, resulted in reinforcement of existing good practice and/or intentions to change practice in some specific, concrete ways.

"changed my thinking on functional/social communication"

"really opened my eyes to the autistic world. Many times I misinterpreted what kids were communicating and this has now given me food for thought and I will change my approach."

"Gave insight into the length of time autistic children may need to respond."

"Thinking about non-verbal communication ... I work in a secondary school with high functioning autistic pupils and you often assume they understand instructions and commands."

"Helped me understand better why the child I support reacts to different environments and situations and how I can now work with him"

"Examining the sensory environment around pupils – trying to find the sensory reasons behind many behaviours"

"thinking about putting myself into the place of my pupils and assess our class environment"

Evaluation

The project success criteria were:

- ***improved staff knowledge of barriers to learning for autistic pupils***

Staff at St. Clements are clearly engaged with and enthusiastic about an ongoing learning process in relation to autism – including some now studying for specialist postgraduate qualifications. Strongly positive immediate feedback from training suggested that the initial knowledge gain was high, however further and ongoing evaluation is needed to provide reliable evidence of the degree to which knowledge has been embedded over the long term. At this point there are continued indications of both increased knowledge and that knowledge being applied to practice.

For example, in the most recent evaluation (Sept 2015), one teacher reflected that she has become more aware of the difficulties faced by more verbal autistic pupils: providing one with more detailed information about the purpose and learning focus of tasks; and making time to address the sensory needs of another – recognising that doing so is likely to improve the pupil's ability to learn, even though it requires taking time away from the delivery of curriculum subjects.

- ***improved staff confidence in working positively with autistic pupils***

Again there were indications of a positive impact in this area from the immediate feedback described above. Actual practice with autistic pupils appears to be steadily progressing towards more consistent, constructive and positive approaches.

For example, a pupil who had been constantly out of lessons and about whom staff had been expressing negative views, is now reliably remaining in lessons and engaging with learning. Several staff members attribute this shift to their own change in practice,

consistent implementation across the staff team of a behaviour management plan developed during the consultancy work. The resulting enhanced confidence amongst staff of the potential for successful intervention using positive, goal-orientated approaches has continued to spill over into work with other pupils.

The best long term support for improved staff confidence will be peer support from within the staff team. This is more likely following the multidisciplinary training and whole school approach to this project.

- ***whole school change towards a positive, more inclusive culture***

This is a particularly difficult criterion to evaluate. However recent visitors to the school have commented on a calmer, more purposeful atmosphere and feedback from parents and staff is also positive. Much of this change has been brought about by the attitude and approach of the Head Teacher and would likely have occurred without the project. However, enthusiasm amongst the staff for the direct involvement of an autistic professional has grown over time as we have worked together and, along with the specific positive messages imparted through training, has continued this process.

Concrete steps have included the adoption by St. Clements of a 'Respectful Language Policy', developed with consultancy support, which supports positive and inclusive practice. Other schools and organisations in the area have been provided with copies through the working group and some are considering whether to adopt similar approaches.

- ***earlier and more appropriate interventions***

The early reduction in the use of negative interventions such as restraint has been sustained. Feedback from training and examples from casework illustrate that the project has been successful in supporting staff in maintaining zero restraints and in developing more focussed and appropriate positive interventions to put in their place.

- ***improving outcomes for pupils (within and beyond school)***

This is the area which is most difficult to assess at this early stage. Casework suggests some small immediate improvements for pupils, such as sensory needs being met more effectively and improved understanding of communication needs. Self-evaluation and inspection feedback are strongly suggestive of a much improved school environment which it is reasonable to believe will ultimately result in improved outcomes for pupils.

Feedback from parents also suggests some improvements for pupils in their home situations:

"from now on I will allow my son more time to answer and not bombard him with questions"

"made me think about how I explain things to my son".

Parents also felt that the support had helped them to feel more positive about their parenting and their autistic children:

"focus on not to be disheartened when it feels like we don't have all the answers"

"very helpful and also uplifting!"

"massively delighted I am going in the right direction for my brilliant son"

"you've made me so much more proud of my son!"

However the small number of leavers each year and the short period of time since the process of change began mean that there is not yet sufficient data on attainment in external qualifications, nor on post school destinations to reach firm conclusions regarding the impact of the long term outcomes for pupils. These very important areas will require longer term evaluation but we are optimistic that a measurable impact will be evident and can be sustained.

- ***dissemination of knowledge and positive, inclusive culture to partner schools and wider community***

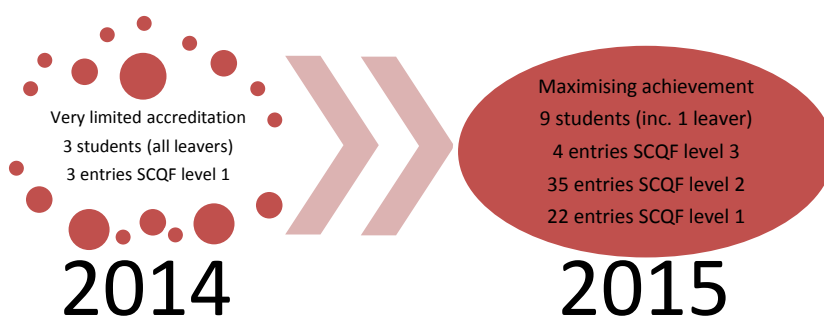
As illustrated above, staff from a large number of schools across the area, non-school staff and parent/carers accessed the training sessions. During most sessions, staff from different environments communicated and worked with each other – discussing their experiences working with autistic pupils and working together to apply strategies. Following completion of the phase 2 project, St. Clements initiated the formation of an area working group to continue its leadership in supporting and developing provision for autistic pupils across the area. Initial membership included St. Clements' Head Teacher and one of the principal teachers; representatives from the learning support departments of two local mainstream secondary schools; an ASN officer from the local authority; the area educational psychologist and 2 colleagues from the primary sector. It is now intended to expand membership further to include a parent/carer representative; a member of the adult autistic community from the local area (through Autistic Rights Group Highland); local health and social care professionals.

This will further develop St. Clements' role in supporting partner schools who are keen to improve provision for autistic pupils in their schools but face barriers in doing so.

- ***pupils achieving their potential***

It remains too soon to be possible to fully evaluate this criterion as long term data is not yet available. However, autistic young people's learning at St. Clements is now structured and they progress in clearly defined ways towards achievable goals. All pupils in the senior phase are working towards SQA certificated courses as well as awards including the John Muir Award, Saltire Award, Caledonian award, Duke of Edinburgh and the Growing hub award.

Improved access to external qualifications



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St. Clements' recent self-evaluation, endorsed by inspectors in May 2015, indicates that pupils are learning effectively at a level appropriate to their needs and have positive learning experiences. Most pupils now experience the full curriculum in line with the 7 principles of curriculum design.

Pupils learning and achievements are celebrated through displays, school assemblies, newsletters, awards. These are also tracked to contribute to reliable recording of progression. Pupils are awarded trophies and certificates at the awards ceremony in the local church.

All pupils have a package of documentation to support consistency of approach between staff and maximise the effectiveness of support from allied health professionals and other partners. This includes formal ASN (SEN) documentation and sensory/learning barriers profiles selected as appropriate for the individual child.

The school continues to develop a range of partnership activities with the wider community ensuring that pupils have access to a wide range of experiences and opportunities to prepare them for life beyond school and are fully included in their community. This includes close working partnerships with schools where there is a shared placement, whose staff have also participated in shared autism training and now share positive and inclusive attitudes and seek to work together to meet the needs of autistic pupils and support them in achieving their potential.

The Inspectors' view - May 2015

"Children and young people now have much better learning experiences as a result of the many improvements introduced by the headteacher and staff."

"Those with autism spectrum disorders feel less anxious as a result of the increased expertise of staff and more appropriate programmes of learning."

"Staff benefited from very effective external training and consultancy on autism."

"As a result of the excellent leadership provided by the headteacher, staff have evaluated well their classroom practice and put in place many changes which have improved the experiences and outcomes for children and young people."

"As a result of the outstanding progress made by the school as outlined in this letter, we will make no further visits in connection with this inspection."

Future developments

Phase 3 of the project is planned and currently awaiting a funding decision. It is hoped that phase 3 will improve links and coordination between agencies involved in all aspects of the lives of autistic young people in the Highland area and enable further outreach work with mainstream schools and addressing the needs of parent/carers.

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