

TRR 17: A case study of a structured resilience intervention programme and its impact on engagement for a child with Severe Learning Difficulties, significant challenging behaviour and experience of Adverse Childhood Experiences.

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Background/Context

There has been much research in both America and the United Kingdom linked to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), the negative impact these can have on individuals and groups and the value of a community approach working towards achieving better outcomes. During my teaching career I have supported many students with challenging behaviour and social and emotional difficulties and have had first-hand experience that developing positive attachments and increasing their resilience has a positive impact on their behaviour. In the research reported here I aimed to pursue my interest by carrying out a case study which examined the impact on engagement of a planned intervention focussed on resilience for a pupil with Severe Learning Difficulties (SLD), challenging behaviour and social and emotional difficulties.

Research Setting

This is a small-scale action research project carried out in a special school setting. The school provides special education for pupils aged 2 – 19 with an Intensive Support Provision to support vulnerable pupils with complex learning needs, social and emotional difficulties and challenging behaviours. The case study pupil has recently joined the Key stage 2 cohort from another setting, has learning difficulties, displays challenging behaviour and has social and emotional difficulties, he has high ACE score. The class team carried out planned, structured activities relating to resilience and looked at the influence on the pupil's engagement.

Research Question

What influence does a structured resilience intervention have on the engagement of a pupil who has learning difficulties and has experienced ACEs?



Members of the
National Teaching School



Review of literature

In reviewing the literature to shape my case study, I have looked at existing research in the areas of: ACEs and SEN, resilience interventions and using engagement scales:

Adverse Childhood Experiences and SEN

There has been a wealth of research into ACEs and their impact on childhood development, outcomes and future physical and mental health (Public Health Wales 2015, Felitti et al, 1998). However, there has not been as much direct research into educational interventions. One exception is the work of Smith (2018) who explores a range of approaches that have been trialled in schools to support young people with ACEs. She observes that a better understanding of the impact of ACEs on children's behaviour, social and emotional development can lead to 'more positive outcomes'. Similarly, research carried out by The Scottish Adverse Childhood Experiences Hub (2017) points to the importance of understanding child development and relationships in the light of the ACEs research.

As Freeman (2014) points out, ACEs can increase the risk of young children having learning and behavioural problems, which suggests the value of further work linked to this in SEN settings. Sunderland M, SEN magazine (2018) make some interesting points connected to misdiagnosis and suggests 'painful life experiences can result in symptomatology very similar to some of the most common child diagnoses' which she proposes can be avoided if schools are more trauma informed.

Resilience

Public Health Wales have engaged in a vast amount of research into ACEs and, more recently, Hughes, Ford, Davies, Homolova and Bellis (2018) have examined resilience and protective factors. Their results strongly suggest that those who have experienced sources supporting their resilience as young children had better mental health than those with ACEs where these other protective factors were not present. Although they noted children with higher ACE scores are less likely to engage, overall there appeared to be a strong link between resilience, and wellbeing. The six domains of resilience identified by Daniel and Wassel (2002) were used in structuring my intervention (see Figure 1).

Engagement Scales

The engagement scale is a tool for observers to record and measure the changes in a pupil's engagement. Carpenter et al. (2015) notes that engagement should focus on 'sustained interaction with a productive learning environment' which, ultimately, is what the intervention in this project aimed toward. Accordingly, the scale was selected to assess the outcomes of the resilience interventions in this case study. The elements of engagement assessed were: **awareness, curiosity, investigation, discovery, anticipation, initiation and persistence**. Staff were asked to record their

Figure 1 Domains of resilience



observations and provide a score for each element (on a scale from 0- no focus to 5- fully sustained) as well as noting other comments regarding, for example, positive behaviours observed.

Research process

The steps of the research are detailed in the table below:

<p>Staff Meeting/Training: The case study pupil was identified. A small group of staff supporting the pupil were introduced to the 6 Domains of Resilience and the case study's aim.</p>
<p>Activities identified: Each member of staff planned an activity linked to one area of resilience and completed a template to determine their activity and record their observations. The activities were:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Secure Base: The staff member planned activities linked to the other key adults in school, the pupil sought out information from other adults including their interests and facts about them to create secure attachments and develop relationships within the school setting. 2. Social Competencies: The staff member focussed on lunchtimes, whereby the pupil was encouraged to sit with others whilst eating lunch and develop the necessary social skills for this activity and his understanding of social situations. 3. Friendship: The staff member planned an activity where the pupil would find out about the others in his class by asking questions about their likes and dislikes to support building peer attachments within the school setting. 4. Talents and interests: The staff member supported the pupil to join a lunchtime football club alongside a small number of peers to encourage further interest and develop skills in additional extra-curricular areas. 5. Education: The teacher focussed on reading in the education area, shared a book with the pupil within a 1:1 session to develop his reading alongside his interaction and attention skills. 6. Positive Values: The staff member planned an activity about positive experiences, linked to happy times at home and in school to support him being able to identify positive experience and develop his understanding of values.
<p>Intervention programme: All staff carried out their planned activity repeatedly over 6 weeks, observed the pupil's behaviour and recorded the level of engagement. They made additional observations and recordings linked to positive behaviours and overall progress.</p>

Main Findings

The table below presents the total scores on engagement for each activity.

Session	Total score on engagement scale									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Secure base	5	11	22	12	20					
Social competencies	10	8	16	14	9	14	23	4		
Friendships	4	1	1	7	4					

Talents and interests	5	7	6							
Education	8	8	17	16	14	16	21	16	18	7

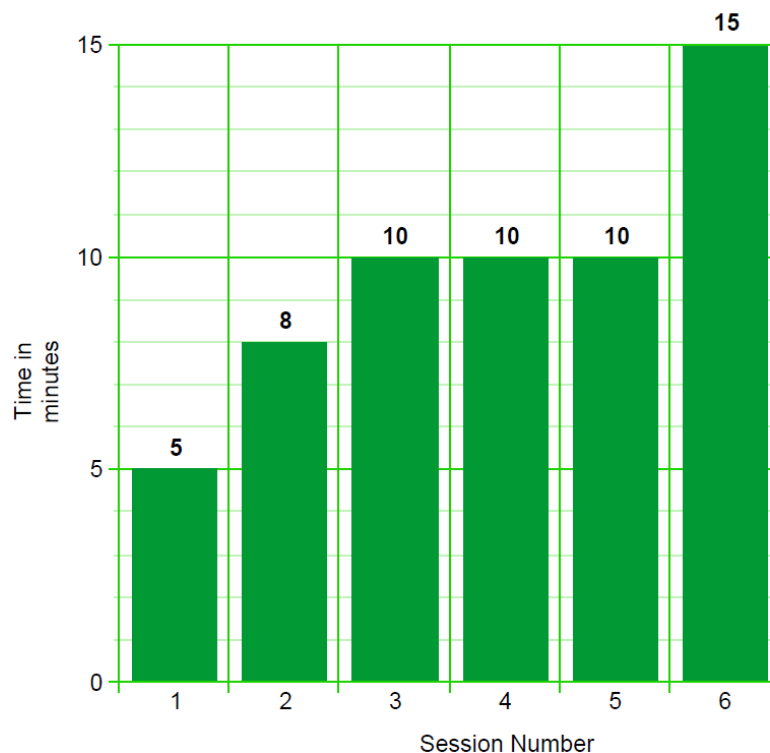
Summary of findings

- Overall engagement improved steadily over the six-week period, however not as much as expected in some areas.
- The pupil showed increased engagement in more areas of the scale during the time observed and a greater number of areas were observed during the sessions, this was more than expected across the board.
- There were some anomalies in the trend however staff had identified in the additional notes that these were down to specific changes in routine or location for the activity, thus I would expect less engagement.

Additional Findings

The time spent on the activities was decided by the individual staff members and although I didn't expect this factor to vary too much, it was observed and recorded that the time spent focussed on activities increased over the 6 weeks particularly in the area of 'Education' as shown below.

Time spent engaged in 'education' activities



The increase in time engaged in this activity may be due to this being a familiar activity for the pupil and it being delivered 1:1 by the class teacher. There was also a similar trend in the area of 'social competencies' which I would also suggest was due to the 1:1 delivery and that the pupil had

already formed some attachments with the TA delivering the sessions. These areas were also the strongest in terms of increased engagement across the scale which suggests that reducing the number of activities and running them over a longer period would be more beneficial.

Staff observed improved behaviour and recorded a range of further noteworthy factors linked to behaviour and engagement. Some of these are noted below:

‘Rather than throwing his food, he pushed it away and said, no thank you’

This observation of improved manners and increased patience has been a theme through most of the activities, the staff have all commented on how he has used manners appropriately and presented as much calmer in situations.

‘Pupil was actually joining in....he was very giggly today’

As illustrated by the above comment staff have noted the improvement of his mood during most activities, he has been visibly happier and calmer during sessions which has had a significant impact on his ability to forge relationships and attachments with staff.

‘Responding to me pausing and demonstrating a good understanding of the expectations I had of him’

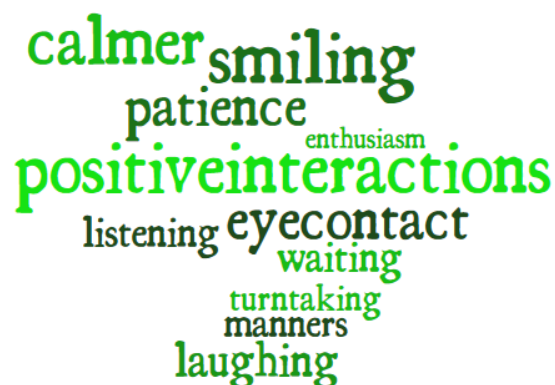
Most of the staff have commented on improved understanding and cooperation in line with routines and boundaries. This has been throughout the process and is vastly different from when he started; he is more flexible and staff are able to negotiate with him which impacts positively on his relationships and feelings of security.

There have been a number of additional findings that have become evident throughout the process mainly linked to increased positive mood, improved psychological wellbeing, positive attachments and relationships with staff and a reduction in challenging behaviour. Yet these important changes would not have been noted using only the scores on the engagement scale which suggests a need to develop the scale if it is to be used as a means for assessing progress.

Another issue raised by the case study is whether it would be beneficial to assess a pupil’s level of resilience prior and post intervention rather than only looking at engagement.

Overall, the process has been beneficial but needs refinement and moving forward needs to be a holistic approach completely individualised to each pupil taking into account their circumstances. Following this case study we will continue to record small steps linked to all areas of progress and develop some further categories that relate to what we observe with individual students. A strictly ‘outcome’ focus is not always the best approach as we may not see the benefit of these interventions until much later in the pupil’s life. As the ACEs research illustrates the negative long

Fig. 2 Observations made by staff



term effects are often seen in much later life so we must endeavour to promote and protect resilience at all times within our teaching and ultimately reduce the long term effects of ACEs on our students.

Limitations

The case study had limitations, namely the COVID 19 outbreak and subsequent closing of schools limited the revision and refinement of the study after the first half term.

Reflections and further research

On reflection there are some changes I would make to the case study:

- Limiting the number of staff delivering the intervention due to the differing levels of staff experience in supporting our most complex pupils and their levels of understanding linked to resilience, ACEs and delivering targeted interventions. Reducing the number of staff involved would also ensure an increased level of consistency.
- Refining or replacing the Engagement Scales as a measurement of progress would be definite change as although I was able to measure some progress through the scale it was by no means an exhaustive tool for measuring and recording progress made by the pupil. The additional notes and observations recorded by the staff have a much wider scope, therefore it would be beneficial to use a range of tools to measure progress for our most complex pupils in order to gain a more comprehensive account of how much they have improved.
- The observations need to be consistent in length, content, environment, and a larger data set collected than in the current study which was constrained by COVID-19.

Recommendations

Based on the results of the case study and the process I would make the following key recommendations for other practitioners wishing to develop a resilience intervention:

- More thorough training for all staff involved to ensure understanding of resilience and process of recording of observations
- Simplified procedures (e.g. scale used) and less aspects to the intervention
- Build in time for the team to reflect and refine the process to ensure the intervention is effective

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Sheet used by staff to record pupil engagement

Date Recorded	Focussed Activity/Resilience Domain	Member of staff supporting
Environment	Length of session	Other noteworthy factors
What happened during the activity?		
Which of the engagement scale aspects did you observe?	Score using 0-4 0 – No Focus 1 – Emerging/Fleeting 2 – Partly sustained 3 – Mostly sustained 4 – Fully sustained	What did this look like? Eye contact, engagement with adult, awareness of surroundings, behaviour presentation.
Awareness		
Curiosity		
Investigation		
Discovery		
Anticipation		
Initiation		
Persistence		
How successful do you feel this activity has been linked to the resilience domain identified?		
What areas do you think the pupil is making the most progress/developing in?		
Were any positive behaviours for learning observed?		
Additional comments:		



[East Lancashire Inclusion Partnership](#)

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