

Perspectives of SENCos and support staff in England on their roles, relationships and capacity to support inclusive practice for students with behavioural emotional and social difficulties

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With teachers under pressure to meet curriculum targets, responsibility for including students with behavioural emotional and social difficulties (BESD) in mainstream schools falls heavily on non-teaching staff. In this article, semi-structured interviews were conducted with special educational needs coordinators (SENCoS) and support staff in a small sample of secondary education settings in England, to examine their perceptions of their role, their relationships with students with BESD and their parents and their ability to facilitate inclusive practice. Despite both SENCo and support staff roles having been regarded as low-status roles in the past, findings reported here depict a set of highly skilled workers crucial to the inclusion of students with BESD. Through the creation of a nurturing environment combined with caring attitudes and accessibility, these staff were able to form positive relationships with these students and their parents. Implications regarding staffing, resources and inclusion are further discussed.

Keywords: *behavioural emotional and social difficulties; special educational needs; inclusion; support staff; special educational needs coordinators*

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Introduction

As argued by successive governments (for example, Labour Party, 2001; Conservative Party, 2010), for an education system to be socially just, all children must have the right to receive effective educational provision. For students with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESD), notions of how best to provide such an education have gone through several permutations. The recent Labour government, in power from 1997 to 2010, identified inclusion into mainstream school as the key to educating students with BESD and other special educational needs (SEN). Consequently, a number of policy changes were implemented by the Labour administration (Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 2001; Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2001, 2004) to increase the rights for children with SEN including BESD to receive their education in mainstream school. The present paper explores the issue of inclusion of young people with SEN from the perspective of special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs) and support staff on which the responsibility of educational provision for these students often rests. We examine their perceptions of their role, their relationships both with students' parents and with BESD students themselves, and their ability to facilitate the inclusion of these vulnerable young people into mainstream education.

Despite, over the past decade, the introduction of a number of policies aimed at moving forward the inclusion agenda, belief in the benefits of inclusion for students with SEN is by no means unanimous. There are great difficulties associated with researching and evaluating the benefits of inclusion, not least due to the ambiguity over what 'inclusion' means, and data that have emerged from such investigations do not provide unequivocal support for inclusive schooling (Lindsay, 2003). Indeed, the case for inclusion is often made not on the basis of the efficacy its efficacy but on the basis of the human rights of young people with SEN to have the same educational opportunities as other children and thus to be included in mainstream schools (Florian, 2008). Within the constraints of this paper and in absence of convincing evidence *against* inclusive schooling, however, this article works from the assumption that inclusion can, when effectively implemented, be beneficial for students with SEN (for critical discussions of the issues surrounding inclusion, please see Lindsay, 2003; Norwich, 2006).

An education revolution: SEN provision under the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government

In the period following the composition of this paper, a new Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government was elected. Bringing the 13-year Labour administration to a close, the coalition's education policies have major implications for inclusion of students with SEN into mainstream schools and for the role of support staff within schools.

Following the Academies Act 2010, the Conservative-led coalition has set about expanding the academies programme leading to increasing numbers of schools

becoming autonomous from the local authority (LA). This raises a number of uncertainties over the future of SEN provision. For instance, the SEN provision provided by the LA is funded with money retained from the schools budget. For the 2011–2012 financial year, funds for SEN support services will not be recouped from the LA with regard to schools converting to academies. Following this period, however, it is likely that, as more schools become academies and receive their funds direct from central government rather than via the LA, the LA funds for SEN services will decrease. Furthermore, there is a risk that the autonomy possessed by academies will materialise in unfair admissions procedures by which students with particular SEN such as challenging behaviour may not be admitted for fear that these students will impact negatively on assessment outcomes (Norwich, 2010, cited in Maddern, 2010). Increasing autonomy over admissions combined with the coalition's wish to 'prevent the unnecessary closure of special schools, and remove the bias towards inclusion' (HM Government, 2010, p. 29) indicates a move towards more discrete, specialist provision for students with SEN and away from inclusive education.

While it will be some time before the full impact of this change in the conceptualisation of SEN education becomes apparent, the effects from changes to the funding of support staff training are likely to be more immediate. Following the election of the coalition government in May 2010, the School Support Staff Development fund for financial year 2010/11, a grant previously awarded to local authorities for the purpose of training support staff was cut (Department for Education, 2010b) and the School Support Staff Negotiating Body was abolished (Department for Education 2010a). As discussed in the present paper, the role of support staff in the inclusion of students with SEN such as BESD is crucial and, with no opportunity for training and no security of standardised pay and conditions, the costs of these changes to both young people with SEN and support staff themselves are likely to be vast.

Obstacles to providing an effective education to students with BESD

Before reflecting on how support staff and SENCos may facilitate the inclusion of students with BESD in mainstream school we must first consider why students with BESD are likely to experience difficulties during schooling. Characteristics of BESD include lack of concentration and the presentation of challenging and disruptive behaviour (DfES, 2001). Hence, established school norms setting out how a child is expected to behave in the classroom environment (Thornberg, 2009) may be particularly difficult for a child with BESD to adhere to. Difficulties with schooling for BESD students are reflected in disproportionately high exclusion rates (Jull, 2008). Furthermore, students identified as having BESD are far less likely to achieve government curriculum targets with just 7.4% of BESD students achieving five GCSEs grade A–C including English and mathematics in the 2006/07 academic year compared with an average of 53.9% for non-SEN peers (based on GCSE performance in maintained schools in England: Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), 2008b).

Bearing in mind the barriers to achievement that exist for students with BESD, the challenge for schools is to include them effectively, providing an education in which

their individual needs can be catered for. Whilst the recent Labour government was very outspoken about its goals for inclusive schooling (for example, Labour Party, 2001), policies focused on raising student performance are not necessarily supportive of these goals. Teachers and schools are under increasing pressure to meet government curriculum targets. Despite the link between SEN and low educational attainment (Strand & Lindsay, 2009), government benchmarks for student attainment do not make any allowance for the impact that the presence of students with SEN might have on attainment figures. Hence, a tension exists between government policies about inclusion and those aimed at raising standards (for example, Burton *et al.*, 2009). With teachers accountable for student attainment within the context of meeting government curriculum targets, teachers may concentrate their attentions on those students who have clear capacity for reaching high standards to the detriment of students with BESD and other SEN who are less likely to reach such standards or whose potential for achievement may be masked by disruptive behaviour and poor concentration.

The role of SENCoS and support staff in the inclusion of students with BESD

With large class sizes and a pressure to meet targets, the extent to which teachers can effectively include these vulnerable young people is then questionable. Thus, responsibility must fall to other, non-teaching staff. Since 1994 all maintained schools are required to have a SENCo who is responsible for coordinating provision for students with SEN (DfES, 1994). Since its introduction, the description of the SENCo role has gone through various permutations. For instance, the 2001 code of practice raised the notion of SENCoS being part of the senior management team within a school, an idea further reinforced in the 2004 'Removing Barriers to Achievement' paper: 'we want schools to see the SENCo as a key member of the senior leadership team' (DfES, 2004, p. 58). Despite these changes, Layton (2005) reports that the extent to which SENCoS are viewed by colleagues as being 'senior staff' varies widely. Regardless of the issues surrounding responsibilities and status of the SENCo role, however, SENCoS do play a significant role in the inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream school.

With regard to other non-teaching staff involved in the inclusion of students with BESD and other SENs, there has been growing recognition over recent years of the role of support staff in enabling inclusion of children with additional needs in education (for example, Blatchford *et al.*, 2009; Veck, 2009). Since the introduction of 'teacher aides' over 40 years ago (Central Advisory Council for Education, 1967), a multitude of support staff roles have been identified such as teaching assistant (TA), learning mentor and learning support assistant (LSA). In some cases, a responsibility for the welfare of BESD students is specifically referred to in the descriptions of these individuals' roles as in the case of learning mentors (TDA, 2010). Research has shown support staff to play a key role in the including (Groom & Rose, 2005) and engaging (Blatchford *et al.*, 2009) students with BESD and other SEN in mainstream school. Through interviews across different educational settings, this article aims to investigate the perceptions of SENCoS and support staff on their roles, relationships

and capacity to support inclusive practice. We consider their concerns regarding the status and recognition of their role and, for support staff in particular, their concerns regarding lack of accreditation and clear career progression. We describe their ability to form positive relationships with students and with the parents of these students. We also explore their understanding of BESD and the needs of BESD students as well as their perceptions of their own responsibilities toward these students.

Methodology

The present, small-scale study was conducted with four SENCos and eight support staff: learning facilitator, LSA, bilingual TA, two learning mentors, higher level teaching assistant (HLTA), inclusion manager and student support manager. Due to the inconsistency across schools in the terms used for different support staff (Open University, 2005) and with little research conducted on the effectiveness of distinct support staff other than TAs, the generic term 'support staff' will be used within this paper as an inclusive reference for all non-teaching staff involved in supporting young people with BESD. Although the latter two members of support staff had 'manager' in their job title they were not senior members of staff within the school. They held similar responsibilities to other support staff interviewed (e.g. engaging in one-to-one support with students, communicating with parents), were managed by the SENCo and were not qualified teachers. Thus, throughout this paper they are classified as members of support staff.

Interviewees were employed across four secondary education sites: three schools and one academy. This research was conducted as part of larger study into educational professionals' perceptions and experiences of including students with BESD in mainstream schools. In addition to support staff and SENCos, the wider study also included interviews with the following staff from each institution: head teacher/a deputy head teacher, subject heads and classroom teacher. Additionally, the wider study included interviews with staff from a pupil referral unit.

Schools were situated in the Merseyside and West Midlands areas and all performed below average on GCSE outcomes. The percentage of students achieving five Grades A–C including English and mathematics in the previous academic year (2008/09) ranged between 18 and 34%, with three of the sites performing below the government benchmark of 30%. A purposive sampling strategy was used with education settings chosen on the basis that they included students with SEN and that they experienced some level of social deprivation as measured by student free school meal (FSM) entitlement. In all of the participating education settings, intake of SEN students was above the England average, the percentage of students with statements or on School Action ranging from 15 to 32%. FSM entitlement was well above average for all sites as reported in 2010 OfSTED reports. For two of the sites, FSM entitlement was over three times the national average.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in the summer term of the 2009/10 academic year. Interviews lasted up to one hour and were audio-recorded. Interviewees were asked about their perceptions of students with BESD and how they felt

these students could be best included in mainstream education. They were asked about their experiences of communicating and working with students with BESD in a mainstream setting. They were also asked about their experiences of communicating with others regarding the well-being and education of BESD students both within (e.g. teachers) and outside (e.g. parents) the education setting. All interviewees were given an opportunity to read their transcripts and make any amendments if they wished to do so. Responses to transcripts were positive and no amendments were made. Following transcription, interviews were analysed using thematic analysis. Individual transcripts were read several times to identify themes within the text. These themes were then cross-referenced across the transcripts so that connections and patterns within the data could be identified and an initial list of categories could be created. This initial list was further scrutinised for links between categories that would allow them to be grouped together before a final comprehensive structure of headings and subheadings was formed.

Findings

SENCo and support staff perceptions of their roles

Interviewees often reported feeling unappreciated in their roles. Both support staff and SENCos raised concerns over not being treated with the same respect as teaching staff:

And then learning the hierarchy in schools in that ‘all staff’ means teaching staff, and then you’ve got other staff. So I can get called to a staff meeting for all staff and be told, ‘oh no, it’s just teaching staff’ and it’s like working in prison. (Inclusion manager, School P)

There was a sense among SENCos and support workers that their role is not perceived by other staff as being as important and that there was little understanding of how difficult their roles actually were:

It’s not seen as valuable. That’s it. You don’t feel valued. (Student Support Manager, School A)

As Cole reports, despite the importance of the SENCo role, the position is typically perceived as ‘low status and operational rather than as a senior, strategic management role’ (2005, p. 299). This sense of dissatisfaction regarding lack of recognition and appreciation for one’s skills was, however, particularly pronounced amongst support staff. As Ebersold (2003) argues, support staff are viewed as subordinate and the specific skills they bring to their post can go unrecognised by teachers. The lack of mandatory qualifications required for entry level teaching assistant posts (TDA, 2010) is likely to contribute to perceptions of the role as unskilled. Although there may be training available to support staff that might assist these staff in working with students with BESD, staff responses suggested, however, that they were not entirely sure of the professional development routes available to them and that the qualifications currently available did not include accreditation of specifically working with students with BESD:

I mean you don't need a certificate but there is nothing at the end of it to say that you are competent at delivering this sort of plan to the children so I mean when you come for an interview, you come for a job and they've just got to take your word that you're good at your job. (LSA, School B)

Previous research has highlighted similar concerns. For example, TAs in Farrell and Balshaw's study (2003) raised concerns over the lack of opportunity for accreditation for learning support staff. Similarly, in a case study conducted in an English sixth-form college, Veck (2009) comments that the role of LSA is low in status, lacking in relevant training and career progression opportunities and is not subject to standardised and nationalised rates of pay.

Facilitation of inclusive practices

Understanding of BESD. In order to effectively meet the needs of students with BESD, those individuals who work with them must have an understanding of the nature of BESD and the range of issues that BESD students face. When discussing their roles, both SENCos and TAs tended to emphasise the factors that underlie BESD; for example, the ways in which problems of social deprivation and familial instability could lead to BESD but also how the difficulties presented by students with BESD in the classroom setting were very often caused by events or situations that occur outside of the classroom.

I think people need to have a greater understanding that when a child is standing in front of you screaming, that that's not the reason. There actually, by them standing there screaming, there may actually be other issues going on. (SENCo, School B)

Support staff tended to view their own understanding of BESD as differing from that of teaching staff. Teaching staff were perceived as being more focused on the behavioural manifestations of BESD rather than on the condition itself:

I think that because I'm not a teacher I have a different perspective on it so I don't immediately look at 'oh their behaviour is really bad and therefore they're doing it willfully'. I'll try and look 'well, there must be a reason behind the behaviour' (Student support manager, School A)

This perceived difference between support staff and SENCos' understanding of BESD and teachers' understanding BESD may be explained, in part, by the different pressures and priorities of teaching versus non-teaching staff. SENCos and, in many cases, support staff have a special responsibility for students with SEN. Indeed, the defined role of SENCos is to coordinate provision for students with SEN (DfES, 2001) and, in the majority of cases, SENCos will have received some specialist training to increase their understanding of SEN so they can undertake their role effectively. Teachers' roles, however, are increasingly determined by the pressure to meet government set curriculum targets for GCSE outcomes (Galton & MacBeath, 2008). This pressure is particularly great for schools in socially deprived areas, as is the case with participating education providers, with social deprivation linked to poorer performance on standardised assessment (Goodman & Gregg, 2010). With teachers'

own performance judged in terms of their students' grades, teachers may evaluate SEN not so much in terms of why the SEN is present but rather in relation to how these needs may impact upon the meeting of curriculum targets. Hence, when students behave in ways that compromises the learning environment, rather than focusing on the causes of such behaviour, it may be the behaviour itself that teachers focus on as this is what creates the obstacle to meeting targets.

Staff background. Within the research conducted in this article, support staff were often from the same community as the children they support and in several cases had attended the school in which they were employed. Support staff spoke of possessing a knowledge of how the community works the issues that these children face, which allowed them to communicate with children and parents in a way that engaged them and addressed what matters to them rather than what matters to the school:

I live in this area so I know what impacts on the community here and sometimes I feel when they make comments about it, teachers make comments I don't think they realise what drives the area, I don't think they understand the people and sometimes I think we need to understand the community before we make decisions. (Learning facilitator, School A)

The value of local non-teaching staff was also recognised by Groom (2006), who observes that TAs often possess local knowledge and experience of the community that allows them to facilitate in the identification of needs and concerns of students with SEN.

In accordance with the understanding that young people with BESD require a caring environment, the majority of non-teaching staff interviewed reported originating from social care background. Such a background is not only likely to impact on how they view the children they work with but also provides an indication of why they entered their post as mentor. The seriousness of issues that students may disclose to staff and the emotional and behavioural needs that they display are likely to utilise the skills that staff learn from social care roles.

When we consider the seriousness of the emotional and behavioural difficulties that support staff deal with on an intense, one-to-one basis, then it becomes clear how such a role could be extremely stressful and could impact on staff members' own well-being:

There are times when I go home that I just want half an hour peace because it has been a very stressful day and there are days when I leave here in tears. (SENCo, School B)

There was a sense that, had interviewees been dealing with the same severity of issues but in a different setting or role—for instance, as a social worker—they themselves would receive more formal support from senior staff. Research examining the importance of supervisory support and appraisal for those providing support to individuals with additional needs in the social work and social care context suggests that such support is highly valued by employees (for example, Huxley *et al.*, 2005).

Relationships with students and parents

Relationships with students. Availability. There was a sense among support staff and SENCos that being more flexible with time allowed them to be more available to students with BESD, which, in turn, facilitated their relationships with these students. With few or no teaching duties, a more flexible timetable and a very favourable student-to-staff ratio, non-teaching staff were able to establish an 'open door policy' for students who needed additional support:

I always think we are in a lucky position because we don't have twenty odd other students to deal with and keep on track and everything and so when students come to us we are able to just sit down and talk to them. (SENCo, School S)

Support staff in particular relayed instances in which, by spending a greater amount of one-to-one time with students, they had been aware of subtle changes in mood or behaviour that they could then raise in discussion with them. The positive relationships between support staff and students along with the reduced student-to-staff ratio may help create conditions in which students are more likely to discuss their difficulties with staff (Rose & Doveston, 2008). Support staff are then in a position where they can identify and flag up difficulties or potentially problematic changes in the student's situation to the appropriate individuals, allowing the correct monitoring or support to be implemented.

Importance of a nurturing environment. There was a strong sense among SENCos and support staff that the creation of a nurturing environment was crucial for students with BESD. Consistent with the understanding that the problems experienced by students with BESD often stem from unstable and deprived backgrounds (DCSF, 2008a), staff felt it was important to create a caring environment in the school in which these children felt safe and secure:

We do have quite a good relationship with the pupils who are quite keen to come to us if there is a problem outside. They will come to us because they feel that they can talk to us and it's quite a safe haven for the pupils to come into and they know that they are going to be given a fair chance before they explode. (HLTA, School P)

As one member of support staff explained, children need to be educated in an environment with caring adults, not just 'crowd controllers'. Within a mainstream classroom with high numbers of students, the creation of such a nurturing environment may be difficult for teachers to establish, particularly when working under the pressure to raise standards.

When discussing their experiences, SENCos and support staff stated their commitment to improving not just the educational provision but the general well-being of individual students, often highlighting cases of children about whom they were particularly concerned.

It is this wider focus that characterised the support staff interviewed with a sense that their responsibilities to the children they worked with were far broader than facilitating their access to the curriculum. Both SENCos and support staff were confident

in their accessibility to students experiencing difficulties, thus fulfilling the role of a reliable, supportive adult who can be called on for help and advice at all times (Rose & Doveston, 2008). Interviewees appeared to genuinely care about the well-being of these students and would go beyond what their job required in order to help meet their needs; for example, designing learning materials at home and attending training in their own time to improve their ability to support these children. Thus, the roles of these staff bridged educational and pastoral fields with an overall more holistic view of the children and their needs:

I think a greater understanding that we are becoming more and more like parents. Not to think that our job is to educate just, it isn't. (SENCo, School B)

Consistent with these findings, Kidger *et al.* (2009) conducted a survey of schools across England as well as conducting focus groups and interviews with staff and students in eight of the schools, in order to investigate support for students' emotional health in secondary school. Students emphasised the importance of having someone to talk to when they experienced emotional distress. Accessibility, confidentiality and sympathetic responses were identified as key characteristics if this one-to-one support was to be beneficial to them. TAs and learning mentors often provided such a service.

Relationships with parents. A skill often emphasised by support staff was their ability to effectively communicate with parents. Communication between parents and school is recognised to be particularly important as parental involvement in a child's education is known to be positively linked with attainment and well-being (DCSF, 2007). Within this research, support staff reported having established good relationships with the parents of students with BESD and felt that these parents felt comfortable communicating with them about their child's needs and progress:

You do have a really good relationship with the parents because they've known you for three or four years and if they had a problem they'd probably come to us first because we're easier to get in contact with. (Learning Mentor K, School S)

Accessibility. There are several reasons why support staff may be particularly good at forming relationships with parents, one of which is their accessibility. For instance, in comparison with teachers, support staff are likely to have a less strict timetable and may have special responsibilities for establishing and maintaining parent contact (Mansaray, 2006). Possibly assisted by the additional time spent communicating with parents, support staff often spoke of networks formed between themselves and parents where the two parties would collaborate with the united goal of creating the best outcome for the child:

I have a home-school diary with one of the children that I work with, with his mother, so every day she writes in it if there have been any issues at home because obviously those issues are going to impact on the child when they come into school ... if there has been any issues at school I tell mum because again, he'll take those issues home. (LSA, School B)

Support staff recognised the importance of understanding what was happening in the child's home environment to be able to understand and respond appropriately to the issues the child presented in the school environment. Networks between home and school provide greater consistency allowing greater understanding of the child's needs. Indeed, Harris and Goodall (2008) reported a positive effect of parental engagement on students' behaviour at school. Students interviewed during their study articulated that, with no consequence at home, there would be little reason to cease negative behaviour in the classroom.

Approachability. A further reason suggested by support staff for their effective communication with parents is that parents do not feel intimidated by support staff in the same way as they may do with teachers:

I think it's paramount to build up the relationship with the child and build the relationship at the same time with the parent so the parent feels able to communicate and tell you if there has been any problems, they don't feel intimidated. (LSA, School B)

In a systematic review of the impact of support staff on pupils and mainstream schools, Alborz *et al.* (2009) found that TAs can establish and encourage parental contact and operate as intermediary between parents and teachers, while Crozier and Davies (2007) report the importance of bilingual teaching assistants for providing an important link in engaging parents.

Discussion

Changes in inclusion policy under the Labour government led to increased rights for students with BESD to receive their education in a mainstream setting (for example, DfES, 2004). Yet, with teachers' roles dominated by the pressure to meet government curriculum targets (Galton & MacBeath, 2008), the responsibility of effectively including this group of students falls heavily on support staff and SENCos. The research reported in this article explored the perspectives of SENCos and support staff on their roles, relationships and capacity to support inclusive practice for students with BESD.

Far from the image of the SENCo and, in particular, support staff as unskilled roles, this article depicts a set of highly skilled individuals committed to the inclusion of this group of young people. Interviewees' ability to communicate and engage with students, their capacity to involve the parents of these students in their child's education and their understanding of the nature of BESD meant that these non-teaching staff played an invaluable role in the effective inclusion of this vulnerable group of young people.

Although a series of interviews with support staff and SENCos across secondary education settings, the findings of this study portray these non-teaching staff as being highly involved in the provision and inclusion of BESD students. The individual attention that support staff and SENCos were able to provide helped create a setting in which students feel more able to express issues or seek advice from an

adult. With BESD linked to family instability, having an adult outside the home environment to which they can speak to about their difficulties and concerns is likely to be highly valued by students (Kidger *et al.*, 2009). An implication of the high level of contact time and communication BESD students have with SENCOs and, in particular, support staff is that these staff are likely to be aware of changes in behaviour or situation that could lead to difficulties for the student and to identify these to appropriate individuals so that appropriate monitoring and intervention can take place.

Communication between students and non-teaching staff is likely to be further facilitated by the caring approach that can be developed within one-to-one work and by efforts to help students feel secure in their environment. According to TDA (2007) teaching standards, teachers have a duty of care for students' mental and emotional well-being as well as for their educational attainment. But, with so many pressures to raise standards, it is usually students' educational attainment that takes centre-stage so the provision of non-teaching staff is a particularly vital buttress.

One of the key skills that support staff and SENCOs bring to the post is their ability to involve parents in their child's education (for example, Crozier & Davies, 2007; Alborz *et al.*, 2009). By establishing contact, SENCOs and support staff were able to collaborate with parents to establish consistency in responses to student behaviour and to work together for the best outcome for the child. Furthermore, through parental contact, staff had access to information about the home life and any issues arising there that may impact on in-school behaviour. Additionally, as Westergard and Galloway (2010) report, one of the factors associated with parents' hesitance to be involved in school is the discomfort they feel around teachers, particularly if parents have not been successful products of the education system themselves. By not possessing a teaching qualification, the role of support staff as paraprofessional may benefit their communication with parents.

As is recommended in literature for working with BESD (for example, Department for Education and Employment, 2001), support staff and SENCOs were able to look beyond challenging behaviour presented by students to consider the possible underlying factors. The context in which these non-teaching staff worked with students was often outside the mainstream classroom in one-to-one settings. Indeed, in a study by Blatchford *et al.* (2007), teachers reported being unable to give individual attention to students that needed it as they had to focus their attention on the remainder of the class.

In addition to their caring attitudes and greater accessibility for both students and staff, a common factor amongst support staff particularly was the fact they were recruited from the local community in which the school was situated. By possessing insider knowledge of the culture of the community, these staff were in a better position to tailor their communications to the needs and priorities of young people and their families (Groom, 2006). Furthermore, communication is facilitated by shared knowledge (for example, Clark, 1996). Hence, the common ground shared by local support staff and students and indeed support staff and parents about their local community and the issues faced by its members is likely to further assist in engaging

parents' in their child's education. This common ground may contribute to the perceived lack of intimidation that, as identified by support staff, parents feel towards them compared with teachers.

While the present findings depict both SENCos and support staff as highly skilled roles, both positions have been deemed of low status (Ebersold, 2003; Cole, 2005). When reflecting on their own roles, interviewees reported feeling undervalued and not receiving sufficient recognition for their work. Without appropriate recognition there is a risk that SENCos may not stay in their role. Indeed, based on the results of a questionnaire study of 500 SENCos, Pearson (2008) revealed that over one-half of SENCos do not wish to remain in their roles. Heavy workload and lack of job satisfaction were identified as reasons for this. Consistently, in an examination of teachers' perceptions and experiences of including young people with BESD in mainstream schools, Goodman and Burton (2010) revealed concerns regarding the way that the SENCo role was managed. The main issue was that SENCos held many other responsibilities in school outside those required by their SENCo role, which was thought to impede the extent to which staff could carry out the role effectively. Pearson (2008) also reported that a tendency for SENCos not to be rewarded financially for their efforts persisted.

Lack of accreditation and difficulties with career progression were a particular concern for support staff, an issue previously identified by Farrell and Balshaw (2003). Whilst SENCos are recognised in policy as playing a key role in the inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream school, the importance of the role of support staff in the inclusion of students with additional needs is not necessarily reflected in policy (Blatchford *et al.*, 2009). Whilst there are TA and HLTA qualifications and certificates to verify that a member of staff has attended a particular course, there is not a competency-based approach evidencing the specialist skills that a member of staff possesses for working with students with additional needs. Lack of accreditation not only contributes to the image of support staff roles as being unskilled but also leads to difficulties for schools wishing to employ high quality support staff. Groom and Rose (2005), for example, report that schools experienced difficulties trying to employ TAs on the basis of personal qualities rather than academic qualifications. Consistent with the concerns raised by support staff in the research reported in this article, such difficulties might be eased if there was greater accreditation for support staff giving schools a clearer picture of what candidates were capable of.

A further issue raised by both support staff and SENCos that has implications for job satisfaction is the lack of formal support these staff receive. A high amount of contact time with children with BESD and other SENs has costs in terms of staff stress and well-being. Interviewees, however, reported a lack of formal supervision and appraisal that would facilitate them in coping with their stressful job roles and which, if they held the same responsibilities in a different field, they would receive. Indeed, within other fields such as social work there is an understanding of the value of appraisal and staff counselling, and research supports the view that appraisals are beneficial for staff working in emotionally stressful environments (for example, Gitterman & Germain, 2008). This absence of support, then, along with poor status

and—for support workers at least—low wages, could be a further risk factor in losing these key members of staff.

Whilst the present findings suggest that both support staff and SENCos are beneficial to the inclusion of students with BESD, there are a number of problems associated with the reliance placed on them to undertake this responsibility. First, by receiving so much of their provision in a one-to-one setting, often outside the mainstream classroom, then students with SEN are arguably not being included. As Ainscow (2000) warned, utilising support staff solely for one-to-one support can actually create an obstacle to inclusion by marking a distinction between students with SEN and the rest of the students in the class. Second, this reliance on support staff to engage children with BESD may not be beneficial to students in terms of their educational progression. As Blatchford *et al.* (2009) report, while the presence of support staff in the classroom was looked upon favourably by teachers, their presence was associated with a decline in interactions between students and teacher. By interacting with support staff instead of teachers, students with SEN may be missing out on the specialist educational input/knowledge that teachers possess. Third, the efficiency of support staff to engage with parents may reduce the likelihood of the formation of teacher–parent relationships. As Crozier and Davies (2007) note, the capacity of TAs for developing relationships with parents could be over-relied on by teachers who, in some cases, used this as a means of avoiding actively developing relationships with parents themselves. Lee and Bowen (2006) report research that found parental involvement in school has the most beneficial effect on student attainment, allowing parents to be aware of curriculum content, in turn enabling them to provide constructive assistance to the child's studies during homework sessions. As support staff are often involved in students' emotional and mental well-being rather than their educational attainment, they may be less aware than teaching staff of what the child is studying. Thus, while establishing communication between the home and school is likely to have benefits for the student, these are not necessarily the same benefits that would be generated if communication between home and school was established between teachers and parents. Finally, reliance on support staff and SENCos requires that there are enough members of non-teaching staff to undertake these duties. Following the introduction of the National Agreement for England and Wales on 'Raising Standards and Tackling Workload' (DfES, 2003), the number of learning support staff in schools increased. The recent termination of TDA funds for training support staff and the axing of the School Support Staff Negotiating Body, however, suggest that this trend is not set to continue. There is typically only one SENCo per school and although there are a number of support staff in each school, even prior to the recent changes to funding of support staff, our previous work (Goodman & Burton, 2010) highlighted teachers' concerns that there were not enough TAs to work with students with SEN.

While the research findings from this study provide interesting insights into the roles of SENCos and support staff in including students with BESD, the self-report nature of the data collected could be viewed as a limitation. Indeed, a common criticism of interview research is that it is too subjective and, if financial and time

constraints allow, a multi-method approach may be more effective for obtaining a complete picture of the situation under investigation (Blatchford *et al.*, 2007). Despite the limitations associated with our data collection method, however, the research reported in this article still holds value not only for helping to advance our understanding of the involvement of support staff and SENCos in inclusion of BESD students, but also for its potential to inform future research that may choose to investigate these issues using a quantitative approach.

To conclude, this current study demonstrates a crucial role not just for SENCos but for support staff too in the inclusion of young people with BESD. The nurturing characteristics of their role, their understanding of BESD and their prioritisation of a safe environment for young people with BESD are among the specialised skills they bring to the post. The long-term motivation and effectiveness of these staff is, however, likely to be compromised by a lack of recognition and status combined with a heavy workload and inadequate financial reward. This lack of professionalism is a particular issue for support staff who cannot gain appropriate accreditation to evidence their specialist skills in working with BESD; a situation made worse by the coalition's cuts to training funds. Over-reliance on support staff and SENCos may lead to inadequate educational input from teachers and create a situation in which these students are 'excluded' rather than 'included' in the mainstream setting. The findings of this study suggest that efforts must be made to further clarify the roles of support staff and SENCos and to increase the status of both posts. For support staff to continue to work effectively they must feel a sense of reward for their efforts and evidence for their achievements with potential career pathways clearly laid out for them. Yet, in the context of the coalition government it is difficult to imagine how this scenario could be made possible. While support staff and SENCos are key to the inclusion of students with BESD and their skills should be recognised, too great a dependence on these non-teaching staff for the inclusion of BESD students is likely to compromise the education of this underserved population.

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