

What learning theories influenced your practice in order to improve the learning of two students with similar specific educational needs? Critically evaluate and analyse the contribution of these theories and their application to students' learning.

Introduction:

This essay will begin with a discussion of the current national and local policies that influence the learning experience of students with Behavioural, Emotional and Social Difficulties (BESD). Through a close case study involving two students with BESD I will determine how classroom practice can be altered and developed in order to improve the attainment and enjoyment of students with BESD within an urban academy. I aim to explore the progress of the two selected students with similar educational needs through managed interventions and personalised learning programs. I will also evaluate the current support given to the two students and suggest what improvements could be made using pedagogical theory to inform my ideas.

Part One: Context

BESD

BESD is an umbrella title that can be used to describe all students that suffer from emotional disorders, conduct disorders and hyperkinetic disorders (DfE 2008, 13). This includes a wide range of symptomatic traits spanning from hyperactivity disorders (ADD/ADHD) to depression and isolation from peers. Despite the sheer range of characteristics attached to this disorder, it is well-recognised in the media as a contemporary barrier to learning in the modern school environment. The Department for Education states that the behaviour of children with BESD 'presents a barrier to learning and persists despite the implementation of an effective school behaviour policy and personal/social curriculum.' (DfE 2010) However despite this negative definition of the disorder there have been several national initiatives that look into the support that can be provided for students with BESD.

National Issue

The recent growth in interest surrounding the number of students who fail to achieve five or more GCSEs with a C grade, has caused a public debate regarding the provision for students with special educational needs (SEN) in state schools. Televised programmes such as 'Jamie's Dream School' have highlighted the fact that some schools fail to raise the attainment of disengaged pupils as well as drawing attention to the issue of behaviour in British classrooms. Although the disruptive behaviour displayed by some of the students was presented as a barrier between themselves and their education, the programme also acknowledged the responsibility of teachers to engage pupils affected by BESD and unidentified special educational needs. Jamie Oliver himself has become an advocate for students who find themselves struggling to participate in a curriculum and institution that does not cater for their special educational or social needs - 'I left school with basically nothing, I was a special needs kid. I did feel as though my school had let me down' (Oliver, J. 2011).

The previous government's policy – Every Child Matters (ECM) – would suggest that something was already being put in place with regards to those suffering from behavioural and emotional issues. ECM Encouraged teachers to expand their focus beyond the traditional curriculum and consider their social duty to their students, ensuring that pupils were: 'being healthy; staying safe; enjoying and achieving; making a positive contribution and achieving economic well-being'. (DfES, 2004, 6-7) These aims reflect the government's concern that schools take on more responsibility for the wellbeing of each child. Although they were not primarily created to support students with BESD, the social nature of the foci reflects the need of such pupils. The government's promise of greater behaviour management support provided within LEAs and further spending on support workers for students at risk of anti-social behaviour suggest that the need for additional resources for those with BESD had been recognised.

Furthermore the SEN and Disability Green Paper (DfE 2010) also highlighted SEN provision as an area for development under the new government. The paper suggests that teachers need more flexibility and funding in order to plan lessons that suit SEN students and do not create obstacles to their learning (DfE 2011 .23). However, the paper offers no practical guidance on

how extra time and money will improve the classroom for those with unstatemented SEN. Rather, the sharing of best-practice is encouraged between specialist schools, schools that specialise in particular provision and those that are underperforming in these areas. This reflects the need for a study which explores how everyday classroom teaching can be made more accessible to those with BESD.

Local Issue

The necessity for effective and diverse support systems for pupils with SEN was highlighted in a consultancy document published by The Borough (The Borough, 6, 2007) that acknowledged the high number of statemented pupils as being greater than that of neighbouring boroughs. Nevertheless SEN provision has been recognised as a falling short of what is expected within the community: The Borough recorded in 2006 that many parents felt their children were not given the correct amount of support whilst attending mainstream comprehensive schools. As a teacher at The Academy, this encourages a direct inquiry on my behalf into the ways in which I accommodate students with special educational needs during my lessons.

Although these studies have highlighted the general lack of dedicated support for SEN students in general, this essay will focus in particular on those affected by BESD. Whilst there is a great amount of support provided for students in the Academy that have recognised SEN, there is a lack of support for those without statemented needs.

Academy Policy

The Academy policy (2010) reflects not only the wide range of learning difficulties experienced by our annual intake but also the amount of funding available for special provisions. All statemented students on roll benefit from a teaching assistant who follows their progress and regularly reviews their needs in the classroom. The Academy provides nurture programmes that allow for small group teaching as well as an alternative curriculum that focuses on basic skills such as literacy and numeracy. There is also the opportunity for KS3 students to attend weekly learning sessions at a local school that specialises in education for those with severe

learning difficulties. All of these measures focus on making the curriculum fully accessible to students with statements of special educational need.

Unfortunately, despite the high level of support given to some, there is little offered to those who have not been granted a statement of special educational needs. The pastoral teams for each year seem responsible for monitoring pupils with BESD as it is they who are often communicating with parents/carers about behavioural issues. However their influence tends to be remedial as they deal with aggressive incidents or difficulties in the classroom after the event, and use restorative techniques to resolve disruptive situations. BESD students are often given red cards that they can use when they need to leave a classroom to calm down. Though beneficial for diffusing situations there is no guidance instructing teaching staff about how they are then expected to manage the student's return. Further training or policies that operate academy-wide could offer the students with BESD more continuity and better routines.

As a classroom practitioner I have found the expectation is that I will develop my own teaching methods and routines to support students with BESD. The Academy does not provide guidance on how teaching should or could be altered but teachers have access to SEN records that detail any observations made regarding how each student learns. Part Two of this essay will detail the ways in which I have developed my teaching strategies and classroom management in order to aid those with BESD.

Part Two: Case Study

This section will detail the aims and methodology used during a small-scale study into the theories and strategies that could be put in place to improve the learning experience and attainment of two students with BESD.

Aims

The aims of this study were:

- To identify the barriers to learning experienced by students with BESD
- To investigate the strategies that could improve the learning and attainment of students with BESD within the classroom
- To evaluate the effect of the strategies employed on the learning and attainment of two students with BESD

Context

The Academy is a comprehensive secondary school that caters for 11 to 18 year olds and is located at the centre of a large urban council estate. It has a sports specialism and is not affiliated with any faith. Although non-selective academically, it does accept a large number of sport scholars each year from beyond its catchment area. Students are placed in mixed gender form groups but core subjects are taught in separate gender, ability-streamed classes from year 7 to 11. An average English class is 27 pupils strong and teaching assistants tend to shadow only the pupils with statements of special educational need. The Ofsted inspection completed in 2008 recorded that the Academy needed to improve the literacy and numeracy of those with disabilities or learning difficulties (Ofsted 2008).

As I have already stated, the policy regarding support for BESD students seems to be a weak area in the Academy's guidelines. As there are too few teaching assistants in the Academy for each class to benefit from that extra support during lessons, this study aims to identify what strategies could be put in place by classroom teachers to support those with BESD.

This study took place during the Spring Term at the Academy and focused on the activities undertaken by a group of GCSE foundation level male students in year 10 for whom I am the soul teacher. The students were working towards completing a controlled assessment centring on the Shakespearean tragedy 'Macbeth'. The class is the fourth of five sets and includes FFT (Fischer Family Trust) grades that range from an F to a B. The presence of one statemented student means that a teaching assistant supports the boys' learning during three of our five lessons each week. However the majority of the class are entitled to support for mild learning difficulties during examinations and have primary learning difficulties noted on their school records.

Student Selection

I have chosen two students who, despite coming from different home backgrounds, both suffer from BESD which has a detrimental effect on their learning and attainment. Both pupils are in their first year of studying for an English GCSE and have been completing controlled assessments that will take the place of the traditional English coursework. Due to their shared learning difficulty both students often find it difficult to concentrate during lessons and can become aggressive when provoked by their classmates.

Pupil A

Pupil A is a 14 year old male who comes from a white-working class background and lives near to the Academy site. He has a twin brother who also attends the Academy and despite the two working within the same grade boundary, due to behavioural issues, they are not allowed to be placed in the same class. Although Pupil A has an FFT predicted GCSE grade of D he has been working at an F throughout the year. He shows signs of ADHD and finds it difficult to work independently. He benefits from having instructions repeated to him and prefers active and oral tasks to written work.

Pupil B

Pupil B is a 15 year old white male and is a looked-after child. He has recently moved foster homes for the second time this academic year and currently lives a short distance from the

school. He has missed a substantial amount of school due to bullying and issues with aggressive behaviour. He has an FFT predicted GCSE grade C but he is currently working between an F and an E. Although he can be very confident when contributing to class discussions, often refuses to complete written work during lessons or writes too little to gain above an E. Pupil B's BESD means that he is easily provoked and has low self-esteem both of which have led to him failing to build strong friendships at school.

Methodology

The following case-study was aimed at identifying the needs of pupils with BESD in the English classroom and reflecting on how pedagogical theory could be used to generate effective strategies to support said pupils. This research was carried out on a relatively small scale due to the constraints of the essay question posed, however I felt that the two students would provide a challenging comparison as their BESD symptomatic traits differ. Cohen & Manion (1989, 124) define a case study as an "observation of the characteristics of an individual unit – a child, a clique, a class, a school or a community" from which generalisations can be made for a wider audience. As I have already discussed, BESD is a wide-ranging term that identifies a number of special educational needs, all of which could be very personal to the sufferer. My hope is that through working with two very different pupils with BESD I could identify some strategies that work for both or recognise the need for wholly personalised learning.

Due to the short scale of time allowed for undertaking this research I have chosen to follow Pollard's (2010) model for 'routinely occurring' research. This means that my observations are based on a pattern of studying theory, observing my subjects, followed by an open dialogue between the students, other teaching professionals and myself. The case-study includes initial observations of Pupils A and B as well as a theoretical review, both of which led to the generation of case-specific strategies.

I adopted an approach guided by reflexivity, defined by Durrant (2005) as 'reflecting, questioning and challenging the research process; looking for meanings and patterns;' Each strategy put into place in the classroom was reviewed and the behaviour of pupils A and B as

well as the work they produced was analysed before the decision was made to introduce a new strategy or develop the earlier one.

Ethical Considerations

As this research will be relating the experience of two pupils who are registered as having an SEN and exploring how their learning could be improved, I have undertaken to make them and their work anonymous to protect their confidentiality. As recommended by BERA (2004, 27) I aim to make it clear where my research can be used to make generalised judgements and where it may be simply a reflection of one specific situation.

Literature Review

After completing my initial review of national and Academy policy regarding provisions for BESD I found several analytical studies that assessed the support available for BESD students in English schools. These formed the basis for my teaching strategies and are referenced throughout the following record of case-study actions.

Observations

I completed a reflection diary for two weeks after each lesson with pupils A and B in order to improve my understanding of their learning and behavioural characteristics (Journal p99). Below is a short summary of the observations made about the two pupils. These informed the strategies implemented.

Pupil A

- Often misses the beginning of the lesson due to lateness
- Restless: often wanders around the classroom
- Avoids individual writing tasks
- Benefits from teacher-pupil dialogue about tasks
- Needs instructions repeated and time/targets set

Pupil B

- Always completes do now tasks and attempts extension work
- Does not respond well to help from the teaching assistant but will ask for teacher's approval for work produced
- Intimidated by others when giving opinions/ideas during class discussions
- Reacts aggressively to provocation from classmates
- Lacks motivation to complete extended writing tasks

Seating Plan

Noticing that the progress of pupil A was reliant on repeated instructions and specific support when completing written tasks I tried to find a practical way to resolve the situation. A renewed seating plan that grouped the pupils into worker-types and sat them near others with similar learning needs made the support of the teaching assistant more readily available to pupil A. I communicated the seating plan change to the two assistants that work with the class and asked them to focus their time and resources on those sat in a particular area. Pupil B does not work well with pupil A and so I placed him among the independent learner group to see if this would motivate him to complete tasks and broaden his approach to pair-discussion.

The new seating plan allowed pupil A to gain more support from the teaching assistant and enabled him to work with others who are progressing at the same level as him. He was still restless during written tasks and a need for further assistance when writing was identified. Pupil B displayed an ability to formulate C grade answers verbally during the lesson but has yet to demonstrate the same progress on paper. He may also need some further scaffolding in the form of worksheets or notes as he does not respond well to assistance from the teaching assistant.

Scaffolding

As both pupils A and B had difficulties completing written work I decided produce a heavily scaffolded task that would make the work accessible to both boys but still create challenge and an opportunity for progression. Focusing on Macbeth's soliloquy ('Is this a dagger I see before

me') I created three worksheets encouraging the students to translate and interpret Shakespeare's language, each one offering a different amount and type of scaffolding (Appendix 1). As pupil A has demonstrated a low level of literacy and a lack of confidence in his own writing, he was given the most simplified task that involved a cloze activity and personal reflection. Pupil B was asked to complete the second task that required him to research the meanings of particular words and discuss the language used with a partner because he appears to lack concentration when writing but enjoys discussion tasks.

Pupil A showed greater enthusiasm for the task than he had before and seemed to gain satisfaction from completing the cloze activity as it offered definite correct or incorrect answers. He did not however complete the personal reflection, so the task was developed by the teaching assistant so that he and some others working from the same sheet produced a group reflection. Pupil B completed all tasks and began to work with the other 'independent' learners to share extracts and discuss the language used by Shakespeare. He was evidently motivated by the challenge offered him and valued the opportunity to share ideas in a smaller less critical group.

Self-Differentiated Tasks

As both pupils showed varied interests within the classroom and reacted differently to a range of tasks I decided to test whether having a choice of activity was important to their approach to learning. Still focusing on grading and how the students could work towards a C, I created two contrasting tasks that required the students to analyse the relationship between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. The class could choose whether they wanted to draw a portrait of the pair showing their relationship visually and labelled with ideas, quotations and examples, or whether they preferred to write wedding vows from Macbeth or Lady Macbeth to their spouse, reflecting the relationship through language. Not only would this activity show me what level of work the students could produce but it would also identify their preferred method of learning – visual or verbal.

Pupil A chose to complete the visual task and created a basic but revealing portrait of the couple. Although he produced his portrait quickly and was focused he needed further

instruction and encouragement to label the work and ensure that it demonstrated the relationship between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth with reference to the play itself. Pupil B also chose to draw a portrait and included facial expressions and body language that he labelled to reflect characteristics drawn from the play. Pupil B was not as focused as Pupil A during the task and needed to be redirected towards this work but this was due to an argument with his classmates rather than an obvious disinterest in the task. In future both students could benefit from clearer noise/discussion levels during such a creative task which might create a calmer environment. The task could also be further structured so that students had clearly defined thinking and planning time before attempting the task itself.

Structured Group Tasks

Evans (2007) states that students with BESD can often have unsociable characteristics and find it difficult to interact with other students and it had been my experience that grouping pupils A and B for team tasks had often spurred negative behaviour or miscommunication. However the government policy regarding the education of children and young people with BESD encourages tasks that focus on key skills and prepare students for the workplace (DfE 2008, 25). For this reason and with the hope of engaging both pupils through 'highly interactive and well-planned group work' (DfE 2008, 121), I organised a lesson based around three group tasks which reflected three different methods of learning. Each team had to complete a summary chart using notes and wall displays (exploring and writing); create a poster showing Macbeth as a superhero or super villain including quotations from the play (visual); and produce a role play in which the characters from 'Macbeth' were guests on the Jeremy Kyle Show (verbal and kinaesthetic). The class was split into three mixed ability teams. I placed pupils A and B in separate groups so that pupil B could work with those he felt most comfortable around as can often become disengaged during group tasks because of his low self-esteem.

Pupil B completed the majority of the tasks and remained focused throughout. He openly shared his creative ideas during the hero/villain task and was supported by his team when playing Macbeth in the group role play. He showed a greater confidence in his own abilities because those around him were supportive and demonstrated the ability to engage in C grade

character analysis. In contrast pupil A found it difficult to focus on the tasks and appeared overwhelmed by the change in seating plans and order of the room. He did not wander the classroom but still refused to actively take part in tasks and had to complete his classwork during a detention. Although pupil A normally thrives when engaging in kinaesthetic activities he would not communicate with his groups.

Alternative and Personal Target Setting

Both pupil A and pupil B have responded positively to short-term target-setting in the past. Pupil A requested that I set him behavioural challenges so that he felt motivated to improve and Pupil B has required personal targets in the past in order to encourage him to complete class work before the end of the lesson. The DfE (2008, 82) study of education for those with BESD also highlights the use of targets and constructive feedback as an essential tool to be used in creating personalised learning for students with BESD. I tested the how effective target setting could be when used more regularly by setting targets for both pupil A and pupil B before each lesson for a week. The targets were based on behaviour and performance throughout the lesson and successful completion resulted in achievement points where as failure was punished with a behaviour point.

Pupil A responded well to the targets that were set particularly if they remained simple and were based upon his behaviour. After having to remind him of his targets several times during the first lesson, I produced target cards that acted as a reminder to pupil A of what was expected of him. Pupil A's work also improved as focusing on the task in hand became part of his daily challenge. Pupil B responded well to academic targets and appeared more motivated to complete class work as a result. However behavioural targets did not change his attitude in the classroom and he was continually provoked into arguments with other students. This could be a reflection of his personal and emotional situation during the span of the case study or could reflect a disinterest in such targets.

Evaluation

Ultimately this research has enabled me to meet the needs of my initial aims through the implementation of alternative strategies as well as through reflective practice. My early observations enabled me to identify the barriers to learning experienced by students with BESD as I had the opportunity to focus solely on particular students and their experiences in the classroom. This in turn helped me to select strategies that I felt might improve their learning with the additional support of national and academy policy and pedagogical studies. Furthermore, in addition to the short evaluations that I have included after a discussion of each strategy, part three of this essay will address how each experience will affect my teaching practice in the future.

Part Three: Reflections

As a trainee teacher, this research project has provided me with an opportunity to identify and experiment with key strategies to improve the learning experience of a particular group of students. Not only has this experience highlighted how pedagogical theory and national strategies provide a means for making work more accessible for pupils with BESD but it has also highlighted areas where policy and strategies could be improved.

Although the academy policy reflects the national stance that students with statements of SEN should be supported where possible by a teaching assistant, this does not provide enough aid for those without statements. Through re-ordering the classroom I was able to ensure that where a teaching assistant was available during lessons, she was free to help both those with SEN statements as well as those with unregistered needs. Having witnessed the benefit that this additional support had on the learning of my two BESD pupils, and receiving positive feedback from the teaching assistant, I will now endeavour to create seating plans that give more freedom to the assistant.

The scaffolded tasks made the lesson accessible to all students while ensuring that both BESD students felt part of whole class activity. Although this requires extra-planning time on my own part I feel that the additional help allowed the students to build on their self-confidence through independent work. I

would recommend that more teachers recorded the learning habits of students with BESD on a central database so that all teachers are easily able to provide scaffolded tasks that suit the strengths and weaknesses of such students.

Offering a range of tasks that appeal to different types of learners has proved to be a positive way of engaging my pupils with BESD. In future I will incorporate more self-differentiated tasks into my lessons so that students are empowered to use their learning strengths to develop their understanding of different topics.

Although the structured group tasks allowed one of the BESD students to improve the grade of his work and communicate with other students, it did not suit the other focus student. This reflects the variety of issues and characteristics that come under the umbrella term – BESD. It must not be assumed that those who suffer from BESD share symptoms universally and experience the same barriers to learning. Policy must be developed to reflect the broad range of difficulties faced by BESD students rather than assuming that one strategy will suit all. In future I will offer alternative work for students who feel unable to participate in group work and produce additional instructions to make each task as straightforward as possible.

The alternative targets allowed BESD students to assess their own progress and made behaviour management less reactive and more proactive. I will definitely continue to provide personalised short term targets for my students so that expectations remain clear and realistic. BESD students evidently benefit from personalised learning and these targets provide an opportunity for open discussion with students about their needs and how they can develop.

Conclusion:

Throughout this essay I have explored the provisions suggested by both national and local policies to support students with BESD. This has led me to recognise the shortfalls of the Academy policy and the issues that arise when funding is only offered to a small proportion of SEN pupils in urban schools. The case-study enabled me to identify strategies that address the needs of BESD students without incurring extra costs to the school and borough. The implementation of small classroom based strategies that focus on personalised learning seems

to be the most effective way of providing the necessary aid required by BESD students to make their learning experience comfortable and challenging.

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