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# Poor relations, or leading the way?

*Jon Lees assesses the intriguing relationship between BESD schools and their mainstream counterparts*

The behavioural, social and emotional difficulties (BESD) sector is at an interesting juncture. Fresh off the back of the Government's White Paper, *The Importance of Teaching*, we have now finished the consultation phase of the SEN Green Paper, *Support and aspiration: A new approach to special educational needs and disability*. In recent times, we've trodden the paths of inclusion and the Every Child Matters agenda, and the simple fact that we have an education White Paper and a separate policy paper on SEN

poses interesting questions about the usefulness or otherwise of labels for children across the education system.

The Green Paper seems to raise many questions about the BESD label itself, in terms of how it should be applied and the quality of provision for those who fall under it. This is nothing new; as far back as 1955, the Underwood Committee Report on Maladjusted Children stated that "maladjustment... is a term describing an individual's relation at a particular time to the people and circumstances which make up his environment" (the term "maladjustment"

*What appears to be a major difficulty in one school may be seen as the norm in another*

was replaced, as a result of the Warnock Report in 1978, by the phrase "emotional and social difficulties").

This is synonymous with how we attempt to define BESD. Pupils with BESD cover the full range of ability. However, their difficulties are likely to be a



barrier to learning and persist, despite an effective school behaviour policy and a personal and social curriculum. Learning difficulties and behaviour difficulties often have a reciprocal relationship. For some pupils, behaviour difficulties may frustrate the curriculum. For example, aggressive behaviour leads to exclusion from the classroom or from the school. For others, a learning difficulty may lead to or exacerbate behavioural and emotional difficulties. A child who has difficulty in grasping the basics of literacy may, for example, withdraw from lessons or try to divert attention away from the learning difficulty by disruptive behaviour. Difficulties in acquiring basic skills can also lead to low self esteem and even depression.

### Identifying those with BESD

There need not be a medical or educational diagnosis for a child or young person to be identified as having BESD. However, children with a medical diagnosis (including emotional disorders such as depression and eating disorders), conduct disorders (such as oppositional defiance disorder), hyperkinetic disorders (including attention deficit disorder or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) and syndromes (such as Tourette's) are all likely to have BESD, as defined by the SEN Code of Practice (2001).

The assessment of BESD is, by its very nature, subjective and subject bound. What appears to be a major difficulty in one school may be seen as the norm in another. Schools vary in their capacity to make provision and in their expectations and tolerances of challenging behaviour. Suffice it to say that by the time a young person has been placed in a BESD special school it is plainly obvious that mainstream options are not working and such children are therefore at the more severe end of the BESD spectrum.

## *The BESD sector has always pushed the boundaries*

Interestingly, even before the new coalition government took office, the Steer Report (2009) on learning behaviour did not attempt to delve into the world of the BESD special school sector or attempt to integrate it into its remit of behaviour in schools. This was explicit in the Report's first recommendation which was that "the DfES should look separately at how to improve the quality of provision for those with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESD), in particular the recruitment and retention of high quality staff and minimising bureaucracy."

It is a recommendation which, to my knowledge, has seen little tangible response. The last thorough official report on the sector was back in 1998, a report commissioned to look at, or some might say look for, "Effective Practice in EBD Special Schools". This was triggered by the deep concerns around the performance of the sector in relation to Ofsted findings: "Since September 1994, when special schools were first included in Ofsted's school inspection programme, a much higher proportion of EBD schools has been found to require special measures or to have serious weaknesses than other types of special or mainstream school" (*Effective Practice in EBD Schools*, Ofsted, 1998).

Indeed, the 1997/8 Ofsted Chief Inspector's report revealed that of all the special schools subject to special measures, the BESD sector accounted for a staggering half of them.

### **BESD schools today**

So what is the picture now? In truth, comparable statistics are hard to

come by. In Ofsted's annual reports, the performance of the BESD special school sector is subsumed within the figures for special schools in general.

Engage, the National Association for Leaders in BESD, (formally NAES) represents some 90 member BESD schools and keeps updated records on its member profiles for Ofsted judgements. At the time of writing, 23 per cent of these schools are judged as outstanding, 68 per cent are deemed good or better and two per cent are on a notice to improve. The most up-to-date respective Ofsted figures for mainstream primary schools are: outstanding - eight per cent, good or better - 51 per cent, and notice to improve - nine per cent. For secondary schools, the percentages are: outstanding - ten per cent, good or better - 45 per cent, and notice to improve - 13 per cent.

Obviously, it is not clear how representative the Engage membership is of the BESD sector as a whole. Indeed, pinning down the actual figures for the sector is not easy, given that new schools are constantly opening and, indeed many have also closed, following some local authorities' over literal interpretation of inclusion. However, the sample above is significant enough to indicate that there has been dramatic change since the days of the late nineties. So what has happened and where does it leave us?

I would contend that outstanding practice, which is held up as a learning model across the education system, has always existed in BESD schools. The BESD sector has a fantastic track record in pioneer work and has always pushed the boundaries. However, in the past, it has often been viewed as separate and quirky. As we approached the end of the last millennium, the Ofsted model found many BESD settings wanting and, as a result, the sector was often seen as

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a poor relation in the education world. Such an approach was never going to reveal the secrets of how we engage and best educate the nation's children.

### An inclusive approach

Inclusion, though, has gone some way towards creating greater understanding of BESD and including the sector more widely in general education. John Visser, in his report to the International Special Education Conference (ISEC) 2000, talked about effective schools for BESD being "caring", "sharing" and "learning" schools. In reference to learning schools, the report states that "Each action by pupil and staff while seen as important within its own context is also reviewed to ascertain its wider implications for the whole school. Including pupils with EBD is not seen as separate from meeting the needs of all pupils. Knowledge, skills and understanding developed from working with the child with EBD is used to inform policy, practice and provision more widely."

In the trade, we say that if you get it right for pupils with BESD, you get it right for everyone. As Ofsted's 1998 report said: "Good teaching for pupils with

## *If you get it right for pupils with BESD, you get it right for everyone*

EBD is of central importance not only for promoting their academic attainment and progress but also for setting the climate in which they must learn self-control, build social relationships and behave well. It is in these respects that the best practice in EBD schools had special qualities which, though present to a degree in all good schools, received more emphasis."

All those who work in specialist BESD settings know that success and achievement come from placing great emphasis on the conditions we create within our school environments. Whole school culture is everything. In the broader mainstream education world, the manic pressure emanating from successive governments' attempts to justify their policies and expenditure by focusing on driving up a narrowly defined set of "standards", has effectively put the cart before the horse.

Moreover, our performance in international league tables serves to increase the frantic search for answers at government level, often by quoting systems abroad. This, in itself, can be dangerous because national cultures are very different. Japan tops the behaviour tables but, as qualities of compliance and conformity are firmly entrenched within the Japanese culture, this is, perhaps, not surprising. However, Finland performs extremely well, and a closer look beneath the surface reveals a system that concentrates on conditions; Finnish schools have a holistic, community-based and nurturing feel, where relationships are seen as the vehicle to success.

As laudable as looking abroad may be, though, I believe that the answers lie within our own shores. The work of Sir Ken Robinson and the much revered, but largely un-acted upon, *All Our Futures Report* (1999) about the importance of creativity provides a strong lead in this area. Within BESD settings, we have to embrace creativity, or we do not just come up short, we spectacularly fail.

The work is challenging, and I suspect that this is one of the reasons why most of us, once in BESD, never leave. It is good to be challenged. It is also probably one reason why there is not a great deal of movement from leadership positions in BESD back into mainstream. However, when this does occur, it can make for fascinating explorations of the potential for applying BESD expertise within a mainstream context. **SEN**



### Further information

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