



Achievement for All: Improving psychosocial outcomes for students with special educational needs and disabilities

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ABSTRACT

Students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) are at a greatly increased risk of experiencing poor psychosocial outcomes. Developing effective interventions that address the cause of these outcomes has therefore become a major policy priority in recent years. We report on a national evaluation of the Achievement for All (Afa) programme that was designed to improve outcomes for students with SEND through: (1) academic assessment, tracking and intervention, (2) structured conversations with parents, and (3) developing provision to improve wider outcomes (e.g. positive relationships). Using a quasi-experimental, pre-test–post-test control group design, we assessed the impact of Afa on teacher ratings of the behaviour problems, positive relationships and bullying of students with SEND over an 18-month period. Participants were 4758 students with SEND drawn from 323 schools across England. Our main impact analysis demonstrated that Afa had a significant impact on all three response variables when compared to usual practice. Hierarchical linear modelling of data from the intervention group highlighted a range of school-level contextual factors and implementation activities and student-level individual differences that moderated the impact of Afa on our study outcomes. The implications of our findings are discussed, and study strengths and limitations are noted.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Students with special educational needs and disabilities

Students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) are widely considered to be the most vulnerable group of learners. Research consistently demonstrates that they are at risk of experiencing significantly worse academic and psychosocial outcomes through the course of schooling (e.g., Department for Education, 2010a; Van Cleave & Davis, 2006; Zhang, Katsiyannis, & Kortering, 2007). Such outcomes are of concern in themselves, but also have implications for later life opportunities (e.g., further study, employment) (Robinson & Oppenheim, 1998).

International estimates of the prevalence of SEND vary – for example, 21% in England (Department for Education, 2010a; Office for Standards in Education, 2010), 13.2% in the USA (Institute of Education Sciences, 2011), and 7.6% in Australia (Australian Institute of Health & Welfare, 2004). This variation is accounted for by differences in definitions of what constitutes SEND and the social, political and legal influences that affect schooling systems from country to country (Robson, 2005). Whatever the estimate in a given nation, those with SEND always represent a significant proportion of the school-aged population, and as such the development of effective models of intervention designed to ameliorate the effects noted

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above have become a policy priority in education systems across the world (Humphrey, Wigelsworth, Barlow, & Squires, 2012).

The education of students with SEND has long been the subject of considerable controversy. This has focused primarily on the issue of inclusion/inclusive education (Thomas & Loxley, 2007) and the field has seen massive debate in the last two decades that has encapsulated issues such as how SEND are defined and understood (Florian, 2007; Squires, 2012), whether the pedagogic needs of those with SEND are distinct from other learners (Lewis & Norwich, 2005), what the research base tells us vis-à-vis the effectiveness of approaches to remediating SEND (Davis et al., 2004), and the relative contributions of values and rights vs. evidence-based considerations in the determination of educational policy and practice (Norwich, 2005).

At the policy level, there has been a significant ideological shift towards the promotion of inclusion. Nearly 100 governments signed the Salamanca Statement (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 1994), and many countries have seen major SEND-related policy reforms (e.g. the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in the United States, and the Excellence for All Children Green Paper in England). There are, however, concerns that mainstream schools' capacity to cater effectively for the needs of students with SEND have not kept pace with developments at the policy level. In the UK, there has been no real change in the numbers of pupils in segregated provision (Farrell, 2012). Analysis of national statistics in England demonstrates a significant attainment gap between students with and without SEND in core curriculum subjects beginning in early primary education and remaining stable throughout the different phases of schooling (Department for Education, 2010a). Similar longitudinal trends have been reported in the United States (McKinney & Feagans, 1984) and elsewhere.

Research evidence also points to poor outcomes in psychosocial domains that are indicative of an impoverished social experience in school. For example, students with SEND are over-represented as victims (and in some cases, as perpetrators) of bullying (Monchy, Pijl, & Zandberg, 2004; Sabornie, 1994; Thompson, Whitney, & Smith, 1994; Van Cleave & Davis, 2006). Furthermore, they typically experience poorer social relationships than children and young people with no identified difficulties. Hence, students with SEND report lower peer acceptance and have fewer friends and friendship groups compared to their peers (Frostad & Pijl, 2007; Pijl, Frostad, & Flem, 2008; ValÅs, 1999). Finally, learners identified as having SEND are at an increased risk of developing behavioural/conduct problems (Green, McGinnity, Meltzer, Ford, & Goodman, 2005; McKinney & Feagans, 1984). These outcomes are, of course, deeply inter-related (Frederickson & Furnham, 2004; Kaukiainen et al., 2002; Monchy et al., 2004). So, for example, social support from peers is inversely related to exposure to bullying (Humphrey & Symes, 2010). Similarly, behavioural difficulties can undermine the academic progress among those with SEND (Humphrey & Squires, 2011a, 2011b), in addition to presenting a barrier to peer acceptance (Mand, 2007). Finally, research has established that the role of parents and their relationships with schools can mediate such outcomes (see Barlow & Humphrey, 2012).

The aetiological factors underpinning the above outcomes are likely to be complex, multi-faceted and vary as a function of a range of individual and school differences. For instance, poorer social relationships may be attributable to difficulties in social skills (e.g. empathy, co-operation) experienced by some students (Frostad & Pijl, 2007; Pijl et al., 2008), the stigmatisation associated with being labelled as having SEND (ValÅs, 1999), reduced peer acceptance of difference (Mand, 2007), and/or a variety of school processes and practices that may inadvertently hinder the quality and frequency of peer interaction, such as the way in which teaching assistants are deployed (Symes & Humphrey, 2012).

1.2. Integrated models of school-based intervention for students with SEND: the prevention perspective

The last several decades have seen the development and evaluation of a large number of interventions designed to address the difficulties experienced by students with SEND. Literature reviews (e.g. Davis et al., 2004) and meta-analyses (e.g. Kavale, 2007) have demonstrated the impact of certain strategies and have helped to organise and shape the field. However, they also serve to highlight the fact that many interventions are extremely narrowly focused, typically being targeted at a single group, risk factor and/or outcome domain. Schools often implement such approaches in a fragmented manner that is not cost-efficient and can be difficult to sustain. This is known as the 'program for every problem' phenomenon (Domitrovich, Bradshaw, & et al., 2010). What has been lacking to date is a school improvement framework that addresses both academic and non-academic outcomes for students with a variety of SEND in a way that enables them to synthesize the myriad interventions operating at different levels of the school (e.g. from systemic and organisational developments to specific, targeted strategies for students with particular needs).

The theoretical framework of school-based prevention may be a useful tool in this regard. In particular, the 'integrated prevention model' outlined by Domitrovich, Bradshaw, and et al. (2010) offers great promise. This model reflects the complexities of the aetiological factors underpinning outcomes for students with SEND outlined above, positing that a range of individual and environmental factors can place children at risk of negative outcomes, and furthermore that these outcomes are inter-related. Domitrovich, Bradshaw, et al. (2010) propose that approaches to intervention that focus narrowly on a single risk factor or outcome domain are less likely to be successful than those that target multiple factors. Furthermore, they argue that effective school-based prevention should combine universal, school-wide approaches with targeted/indicated intervention for specific groups of students. Finally, the authors suggest that an integrated model, in which independent strategies or programmes are fused into one coherent framework for intervention in a co-ordinated manner will result in a synergistic effect. The rationale for such a model is provided in terms of (a) comprehensiveness, (b) maximised intervention exposure, (c) the additive or multiplicative effects caused by the interaction of different strategies, (d) reduced 'initiative overload' and improved sustainability, and (e) improved potential for high quality implementation.

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