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Supporting pupils with emotionally based school avoidance and SEMH needs through a bespoke curriculum

Re-engaging learners through curriculum adaptation

School/Background Context

Beacon Academy is a vibrant and inclusive primary school with a dedicated Special Resource Base that supports pupils with learning difficulties specifically in the area of communication and interaction and cognition and learning. There are approximately 360 pupils on roll with 36 of these pupils being within the dedicated Specialist Resource Base. The school is situated in Loughborough and mainly services pupils and families from Shelthorpe estate, an area of high deprivation.

44% of the pupils at Beacon are or have been eligible for free school meals which is above the national average and highlights the levels of disadvantage and need within the local community. The school has a predominantly White British student body with families rarely leaving the Shelthorpe estate and have little experience of different communities to that of their own. The percentage of pupils from a minority background is 24.5% and growing each year enriching the community's diversity. Currently, 30% of pupils have been identified as having a SEND and 17% have an EHCP. These large percentages are due to the school having a specialist resource base but is also inclusive of and demonstrates the high levels of SEND needed throughout the mainstream school. In the mainstream school the primary area of need is communication and interaction but increasingly social, emotional and mental health.

The early-years provision at Beacon Academy features a separate Nursery that offers pre-schooling for up to 76 part-time children aged two to four. Additionally, another Specialist Resource Base which accommodates 12 pupils with complex needs, ensuring comprehensive support from the earliest stages of education.

The school last had a Section 5 inspection in November 2021 and the school was judged to be Good.

The Challenge

When reviewing the SEND and Inclusive provision at Beacon Academy we found that we had a small number of children in Year 5 who were not accessing their classroom and were showing possible Emotionally Based School Avoidance. They were either absent from school, refusing to enter school or significantly dysregulated when they were in school; this largely looked like walking round the corridors, finding quiet rooms to do things they wanted to and telling staff to leave them alone using swear words and profanities. At the time of the project starting the 4 children had become so dysregulated that they were posing a safeguarding risk to themselves and others in school (both part of this small group and others they could encourage to join.) The question that we asked ourselves was how can we support children with significant Social, Emotional and Mental Health needs to access a curriculum that supports both their SEMH needs but also increases their academic attainment?

The Challenge (continued)

Why?

- 4 children in year 5 specifically are absconding from the classroom and are disengaged with their learning.
- Children are working significantly below ARE in all areas of the curriculum
- $\frac{3}{4}$ Identified children do not have EHCP or top-up funding
- Children are at risk of exclusion

What They Did

As a result of analysis of data and pupil voice it became evident that the children were really disengaged with their mainstream education and were trying to find ways of getting out of class, comments such as 'I hate Miss x' and 'I don't care what you say, I am not doing it' became part of the day to day, lived experiences of these children.

We used pupil and parent voice to ascertain what it was that the children felt they needed. 100% of the children stated that they wanted a more hands on and practical curriculum, 100% of children suggested lessons such as cooking and forest school.

Leading from these baseline surveys we:

- Developed a bespoke curriculum to meet the wide range of needs of the children initially focusing on SEMH needs of the children. This was initially done through the use of Thrive Online and their profiling and action plans. We utilised our SEMH TA to run daily afternoon sessions. The identification of the specific areas of needs of each of the children through Thrive allowed us to plan lessons around their interests that were purposeful and directly addressed their individual needs.
- Bespoke EBSA group with ELSA were planned and timetabled weekly to gain further insight into what it was in school that was a barrier for those children. Initially this, for all children, was relating to the trust of their new class teacher.
- Leading on from the initial baselines we developed a PFA curriculum which largely focused in the areas of independence and healthy me, around the children's interests. We taught Coding, Cooking and Forest School as these were areas the children had expressed interest in. As time went on we thought about how we can progress each of these areas to incorporate more time in the classroom presenting their findings and their learning.

Outcomes and Anticipated Impact

Anticipated Impact

When we started this project it was hoped that we would see a decrease in:

- Absence of the children
- Behavioural incidents in school



More inclusive ethos/culture in the setting



Increased attendance of learners with SEND



Increased engagement of learners with SEND

Outcomes and Anticipated Impact (continued)

There will be an increase in:

- Attendance
- Engagement in class
- Attainment
- SEMH development

Outcomes and future implications

The project on the whole was very successful. The children initially had a block of support whereby they were using the Preparation for Adulthood Curriculum every afternoon with the support of the SEMH TA. Through this curriculum we heavily focused on how we could incorporate what they were learning in these sessions into their main classroom. The children completed a range of projects which they then shared with their classes and their class teacher. One of the biggest successes was the work the children did to develop a Dragons Den style pitch and presentation to the senior leadership team to gain funding to develop the Forest School Area. This was then shared with a local business who have sponsored the work the children have planned for.

The SEMH TA also supported the children in the morning for short bursts of time to model the regulation strategies that were being taught and implemented in the PFA sessions. It was crucial that we built time into their mainstream classroom as well as time away from the classroom. As time progressed the children were spending more time in the classroom and so the PFA sessions in the afternoon were reduced to 30 mins per day, plus additional Thrive time and a social communication group or sensory circuit with the class TA. Although this was initially met with negativity from all children they have settled well into this routine. 2 of the 4 children are still accessing these sessions on a daily basis but are now in class 100% of the time in the morning. 2 of the 4 children have requested that they can choose when they access the PFA sessions in the afternoon as they 'enjoy the afternoon lessons in class'. 100% of the children are in class in the morning. There are still some days where the level of engagement in the morning is below average and requires high levels of adult support but there has been a significant decrease in the number of behavioural incidents for all children.

The attendance for 3 of 4 children has shown an increase, child A has gone from 75.6% to 90%, child B has remained the same at 95%, child C has increased from 91.5% to 93.6% and child D has increased from 72% to 84.5%.

The parental response has been overwhelmingly positive with parents stating that initially their child's engagement was, on a scale of 1-5, around 1 or 2. At the end of the project this had increased to 100% of parents reporting that they felt the PFA curriculum was a) appropriate and b) had supported their child to be more engaged in school moving towards a 3 or 4 on the 5 point scale.

The project has been successful but it has to be questioned whether there were other factors involved in this success as well. The school recently invested in a Therapy Dog who has supported ¼ of these children to come to school in the morning supporting the drastic increase in his school attendance. The dog has also played a role in their bespoke PFA curriculum and all children report time with Pan as a positive influence on their school experience and that they 'want more time scheduled with Pan'.

Moving forward the PFA curriculum will be rolled out across more year groups as there are groups of children identified across the school as needing an alternative pathway to support their academic achievements. This will be formalised in a progressive PFA curriculum which all staff can access. It will also be important to develop a formalised assessment method to track the progress of the children accessing this pathway.