Introduction

St. Clement’s School is a Special School serving a rural catchment area in Highland, Scotland. Pupils range from 3-19 and have a diverse range of needs. A substantial majority are autistic and many have complex needs. The school improvement process is ongoing, but Phases 1 and 2 of a focussed school improvement project (described here) took place between May 2014 and September 2015.

At the start of the project the school needed to improve in a number of areas, particularly in the provision offered to autistic pupils, a view endorsed by Education Scotland inspectors. Highlighted weaknesses included:

- some pupils “with autism spectrum disorders feel anxious during the day as their needs are not being well met”
- “For some pupils with autism spectrum disorder, staff do not address barriers or inhibitors to learning and therefore focus on resulting behaviours”.

As a first step, urgent action was taken to reduce the use of restraint in the school and child protection training and policies were reviewed. Working with inspectors, the school set a goal to:

“identify learning needs accurately and implement appropriate strategies to overcome barriers to learning, especially for children and young people with autism spectrum disorders”.

To achieve this goal, the school decided to work with an external consultant specialising in autism, Yo Dunn of Consult Yo Ltd.

Reduction of physical restraints (the last restraint was in February 2014)
The project

The focus was on increasing the professional skills, knowledge and confidence of staff in working with autistic pupils, rather than wholesale adoption of pre-set programmes or approaches.

Project structure:

- 3 full days bespoke autism training for all staff (and external partners)
- 1 ½ days parent/carer training
- 3 days of direct classroom observation and consultancy
- development of support plans for individual pupils
- strategic consultancy on policies and change management
- and project evaluation.

Key aspects of the project

Working collaboratively with staff to build a professional development culture

Research has highlighted the importance of a consultative approach to policy change in schools order to secure the commitment of staff to the process (Webster et al, 2012). Steps taken included:

- Developing a culture of staff self-evaluation gradually extending beyond teachers to Pupil Support Assistants; pupils also involved in evaluating learning activities
- Introducing distributed leadership across the teaching staff with a wider range of teachers taking responsibility for key areas of development
- Emphasis on Continuing Professional Development with autism alongside curriculum, assessment, accreditation and literacy on the programme
- Autism training and consultancy provision responsive to the needs and priorities of staff
- Staff development group for literacy across the curriculum
- confidential whole-staff questionnaire
- Pupil Support Assistant groups (PSA) (facilitated by external consultant) contributed to guiding the process of change
- specialist autism training for staff at all levels together
- encouragement of supportive and collaborative professional culture
- and goal-orientated problem solving.

St. Clements’ self-evaluation (endorsed by the May 2015 inspection) indicates that pupils are now well supported in their learning by the team of PSAs who have trained alongside teachers and have developed their confidence and skills to support pupils effectively in their learning, avoiding over supporting pupils and working as a team with class teachers to support differentiation.

**Embedding autism development within wider school improvement**

This was a key aspect of the project throughout. Development of provision for the needs of autistic pupils was fully integrated with wider school improvement and a focus on curriculum development and attainment across the school.

“Teacher development needs to be linked with wider goals of school and system development, and with appraisal and feedback practices and school evaluation.” (Webster et al, 2012).

The main changes have been:

- every child accessing their full curriculum entitlement with appropriate differentiation in how the curriculum is delivered
- focus on supporting professional skills in differentiated curriculum delivery e.g. creation of a coherent curricular pathway in literacy; work on supporting pupils’ involvement in their learning - sharing learning intentions and promoting choice and reflection on learning; use of baseline assessment to support the identification of next steps for individual pupils
- fully embedding Curriculum for Excellence and utilising its focus on skills for work and skills for life as part of a positive, inclusive, capability-focused school culture
- reworked class structure so that pupils are in appropriate classes for age/stage, and two specialist classes (one primary, one secondary) focusing on a sensory approach to the curriculum for those with the most complex needs
- introducing a broad range of qualifications and accreditation for all senior phase pupils
- progress tracking across the school through the use of a skills framework
- and appropriate use of sensory profiles of a type and level of detail relevant to the needs of individual pupils, and ensuring these are regularly reviewed and used to inform curriculum delivery approaches.

**Extending the change beyond school out into the community**

Parental engagement is a powerful factor in raising attainment in schools generally (Harris and Goodall, 2007). A parent/carer questionnaire was used to identify topics of most relevance to parents, and training was responsive throughout.
The provision of parent/carer training by an ‘outsider’ rather than a member of the school staff appeared to be perceived by parents as particularly supportive. We felt that this provided opportunities for parents to discuss concerns freely in a deliberately non-judgemental atmosphere.

Multi-agency links, especially important in a rural area, were strengthened to improve support for families and improve outcomes. The links included

- open access to training for staff from mainstream schools, local authority Additional Support Needs (ASN) staff and allied health professionals
- establishing an autism working group.

**Practical focus of the training and consultancy**

Staff worked (initially with support from the trainer) on re-framing issues to focus on goals, and evaluating strategies in terms of effectiveness at achieving those goals.
Example: Jason struggles with the language used to express a maths question and is not sure what the question is asking of him. He is looking around the room constantly.

Current strategies:

- rewards for remaining on task
- encouragement to make eye contact
- and verbal explanations of word problems.

Refocus on goal. Is the goal:

- to support the pupil to engage with the maths question?
- to get the pupil to stop looking around the room?
- to get the pupil to make eye contact?

Chosen goal: ‘to support the pupil to engage with the maths question’.

Is the current approach effective in achieving the goal? No

What appear to be the barriers to achieving the goal? Background noise, language processing issues.

Proposed strategies:

- reduce background noise (eliminate where possible, noise-cancelling headphones?)
- visual supports
- explicit teaching of relevant forms of language (e.g. different words for ‘add’) 
- and working with the pupil to develop personal strategies to identify maths required in word problems.

Staff reaction to the practical focus of sessions was strongly positive:
“the tasks made us reflect on our practice and also see things from an autistic perspective”
“filled in gaps between what I have been taught about autism previously and trying to work with practically”

Beyond one-off training

A crucial aspect of the project was embedding training days within the broader school improvement programme. The nature and quality of training may be more significant than the overall amount. It has been found that professional development activities that take place at regular intervals and involve teachers in a stable social and collaborative context (i.e. networks or mentoring) have a significantly stronger association with improved teaching practices than one-off workshops or courses (OECD, 2009).

“Effective professional development needs to be on-going, include training, practice and feedback, and provide adequate time and follow-up support. Successful programmes involve teachers in learning activities that are similar to those they will use with their students, and encourage the development of teachers’ learning communities.” (Webster et al, 2012)

There were some encouraging indications that the training had influenced the thinking of many participants:

“really opened my eyes to the autistic world. Many times I misinterpreted what kids were communicating and this has now given me food for thought and I will change my approach.”

“Examining the sensory environment around pupils – trying to find the sensory reasons behind many behaviours”

Evaluation

Improved staff knowledge of barriers to learning for autistic pupils

Staff at St. Clements are clearly engaged with and enthusiastic about an ongoing learning process in relation to autism – some are now studying for specialist postgraduate qualifications. Evaluation to date suggests that the initial knowledge gain was high, however ongoing evaluation will be needed to assess embedding over the long term.

One teacher reflected (Sept 2015) that she has become more aware of the difficulties faced by more verbal autistic pupils: providing one with more detailed information about the purpose and learning focus of tasks; and making time to address the sensory needs of another – recognising that doing so is likely to improve the pupil’s ability to learn, even though it requires taking time away from the delivery of curriculum subjects.

Improved staff confidence in working positively with autistic pupils
Actual practice with autistic pupils appears to be steadily progressing towards more consistent, constructive and positive approaches.

For example, a pupil who had been constantly out of lessons and about whom staff had been expressing negative views, is now reliably remaining in lessons and engaging with learning. Several staff members attribute this shift to their own change in practice, consistent implementation across the staff team of a behaviour management plan developed during the consultancy work. The resulting enhanced confidence amongst staff of the potential for successful intervention using positive, goal-orientated approaches has continued to spill over into work with other pupils.

The best long term support for improved staff confidence will be peer support from within the staff team.

**Whole school change towards a positive, more inclusive culture**

Recent visitors to the school have commented on a calmer, more purposeful atmosphere and feedback from parents and staff is also positive. Much of this change has been brought about by the attitude and approach of the Head Teacher and would likely have occurred without the project. However, enthusiasm amongst the staff for the direct involvement of an autistic professional has grown over time as we have worked together and, along with the specific positive messages imparted through training, has continued this process.

Concrete steps have included the adoption by St. Clements of a ‘Respectful Language Policy’, developed with consultancy support, which supports positive and inclusive practice. Other schools and organisations in the area have been provided with copies through the working group, and are considering whether to adopt similar approaches.

**Earlier and more appropriate interventions**

The early reduction in the use of negative interventions such as restraint has been sustained. Feedback from training and examples from casework illustrate that the project has been successful in supporting staff in maintaining zero restraints and in developing more focussed and appropriate positive interventions to put in their place.

**Improving outcomes for pupils (within and beyond school)**

This is the area which is most difficult to assess at this early stage. Casework suggests some small immediate improvements for pupils, such as sensory needs being met more effectively and improved understanding of communication needs. Self-evaluation and inspection feedback are strongly suggestive of a much improved school environment which it is reasonable to believe will ultimately result in improved outcomes for pupils.

Feedback from parents also suggests some improvements for pupils in their home situations:

“from now on I will allow my son more time to answer and not bombard him with questions”

“made me think about how I explain things to my son”.

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Parents also felt that the support had helped them to feel more positive about their parenting and their autistic children:

“focus on not to be disheartened when it feels like we don’t have all the answers”
“very helpful and also uplifting!”
“massively delighted I am going in the right direction for my brilliant son”
“you’ve made me so much more proud of my son!”

However the small number of leavers each year and the short period of time since the process of change began mean that there is not yet sufficient data on attainment in external qualifications, nor on post school destinations to reach firm conclusions regarding the impact of the long term outcomes for pupils.

**Dissemination of knowledge and a positive, inclusive culture to partner schools and wider community**

Staff from a large number of schools across the area, staff from partner agencies and parent/carers accessed and worked together during the training sessions. An area working group for autism formed towards the end of Phase 2 including St. Clements’ Head Teacher and one of the principal teachers; representatives from the learning support departments of two local mainstream secondary schools; an ASN officer from the local authority; the area educational psychologist and 2 colleagues from the primary sector. It is now intended to expand membership further to include a parent/carer representative; a member of the adult autistic community from the local area (through Autistic Rights Group Highland); local health and social care professionals.

This will further develop St. Clements’ role in supporting partner schools who are keen to improve provision for autistic pupils in their schools but face barriers in doing so.

**Pupils achieving their potential**

Long term data is not yet available. However, autistic young people’s learning at St. Clements is now structured and they progress in clearly defined ways towards achievable goals. All pupils in the senior phase are working towards SQA certificated courses as well as awards including the John Muir Award, Saltire Award, Caledonian award, Duke of Edinburgh and the Growing hub award.
St. Clements’ recent self-evaluation, endorsed by inspectors in May 2015, indicates that pupils are learning effectively at a level appropriate to their needs and have positive learning experiences. Most pupils now experience the full curriculum in line with the 7 principles of curriculum design, and their learning and achievements are celebrated.

All pupils have a package of documentation to support consistency of approach and maximise the effectiveness of support from allied health professionals and other partners.

The school continues to develop a range of partnership activities with the wider community ensuring that pupils have access to a wide range of experiences and opportunities to prepare them for life beyond school and are fully included in their community. This includes close working partnerships with schools where there is a shared placement.

**The Inspector’s view – May 2015**

“Children and young people now have much better learning experiences as a result of the many improvements introduced by the headteacher and staff.”

“Those with autism spectrum disorders feel less anxious as a result of the increased expertise of staff and more appropriate programmes of learning.”

“Staff benefited from very effective external training and consultancy on autism.”

“As a result of the excellent leadership provided by the headteacher, staff have evaluated well their classroom practice and put in place many changes which have improved the experiences and outcomes for children and young people.”

“As a result of the outstanding progress made by the school as outlined in this letter, we will make no further visits in connection with this inspection.”

**Future developments**

Phase 3 of the project is planned and currently awaiting a funding decision. It is hoped that phase 3 will improve links and coordination between agencies involved in all aspects of the lives of autistic young people in the Highland area and enable further outreach work with mainstream schools and addressing the needs of parent/carers.
We wish to thank the Scottish Government (Scottish Strategy for Autism) for grant funding phase 2 of the project and all the staff, parents and pupils who continue to be involved in transforming St. Clement’s into an Autism Centre of Excellence for the local area.

References
