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Including older pupils with challenging behaviour: a case study within a secondary school in England

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Context

The Royal Boulevard Academy, Ullbridge, is a grand name for a school situated across two mainly social-housing estates on the edge of this market town, 35 miles north east of London. It has 960 students. The original building was opened by Princess Margaret in 1966, hence the ‘Royal’. The current school, which has been subject to many ‘improvement efforts’ over the years, is the result of a recent amalgamation of two secondary schools; it is housed in new buildings and on two sites. The Upper School, for 300 students from ages 14 to 18, is on the site of what was historically the most ‘difficult’ school in the area and had the lowest examination results. The new building, renaming and amalgamations can do nothing for the deprivation on the local estate though. Suffering through the closing of major manufacturing and a decline in ferry port activity, unemployment is high and there are significant social and family challenges: four times the national percentage of households claiming housing or unemployment benefit; incapacity benefits at three times the national rate; and assessed achievement of five year-olds entering primary school is already very low—the same applies at age 11 when they enter secondary school and at age 16 the percentage achievement of GCSEs (General Certificate of Secondary Education) stands at a little over half the national average. The author has written about one such school and its environment (Parsons, 2012).

Lynsey Hanley writes that, in England, “Council estates are ... a physical reminder that we live in a society that divides people up according to how much money they have to spend on shelter”, and that living on a social housing estate (housing project) "is a lifelong state of mind the wall in the head" (2007, p4).

The upper school has a unit, the Achievement for All (A4A) centre, across the playing field at some distance from the main site, and this is where the problem lies. A4A caters for up to 30 problematic 14-16 year-old students. It was ‘inherited’ from before

the amalgamation and has been seen as a way of coping with some of its most challenging and troubled older students. Sally, the head teacher, with qualifications in social work and experience in both therapeutic education and in schools with a significant number of challenging pupils, is concerned that this centre, though *containing* students and *protecting* the rest of the upper school from disruption may be ‘ghettoizing’ (her word) those students. There is opposition from significant, long-serving staff in the main school about making changes, and also from the A4A staff who are a caring, cohesive, and determined work unit who want to be there and work hard to ensure that their students want to be there and are prepared for the next stage post-16.

The problem

Sally wants the centre to be more integrated with the main upper school, for there to be more lessons in mainstream classes, and more organized transition so that some students might move back to mainstream classes full-time and benefit from the better academic outcomes achieved there. This principled, inclusion position is opposed by most staff in both the main school and in A4A, as well as the students in A4A. Voluble staff have complained publicly about how their lessons would have to be more controlled and didactic, would probably be disrupted any way, that they were there to teach their subject, had never been equipped to teach ‘special’ students, and had no desire to acquire those skills. The A4A students have experienced rejection from, and ‘feel’ antagonism from, main school staff whenever they appear there. A4A centre staff sympathise with their students and are protective towards them. Sally, with a small team sympathetic with her goal, is still pondering how far to extend the school’s ‘reach’ to effect meaningful, sustainable change in the young people and the school organization which she wants to serve them.

The A4A centre clientele, staff and activities

The centre staff try to address the multiple overlapping problems of low attainment, poor attendance, and behavior and mental health difficulties ranging from ADHD through Aspergers to quite serious social deprivation and mental health conditions. Beyond having diagnostic and therapeutic abilities, the A4A staff are determined and committed, with great empathy for troubled students. The social problems of the residential area reinforce their problems, and are part of the ‘ecology of deprivation

and despair' (Sally's words again), which have to be taken into account if meaningful solutions are to be found.

Students in A4A attend from 9am until 1pm rather than for the full school day. However, optional activities are timetabled for the afternoon, and there are arrangements made with other education providers, including the Further Education College (FE Colleges cater mostly for post-16 students for vocational courses); small groups go there to do Health and Beauty or Construction. There are also work experience opportunities where students can have a placement that might be part of a route to an apprenticeship or employment. In order to use the resources in the main school, groups are regularly timetabled there for ICT.

The Centre's students' problems are exceedingly varied, but in educational terms are to do with oppositional behavior; a failure or unwillingness to conform to school rules and classroom expectations, and sometimes use violence or threats to teachers and other students (Mattys & Lochman, 2017). This is not the inevitability of education for estate young people, however, the world over, they occur disproportionately where poverty levels are high. Three examples are given briefly below.

Peter was picked up by the police in the town centre, and found to have a quantity of cannabis; it was judged to be too much for his own use and therefore he was considered to be 'dealing'. He was also brought home after midnight, after being among a crowd of young people in town where fighting broke out: he said, 'It was nothing to do with me'. In the classroom he was referred to as 'a nightmare', refusing to work, annoying others, throwing things, and walking out. A4A admitted Peter, after long discussions with him and his father. There was an offer of counselling, which was refused, although in an informal way Special Needs staff did counsel him. Like all the other 14 to 16 year-olds in the unit, Peter has a personalized curriculum, usually taught in groups of about five. Most of the English, maths and humanities subjects are taught in this way. Peter is actually keen to get a good grade in maths, and is aware that the examination course is better taught in the main school. A number of others join mainstream classes for specialisms that they have a particular interest in or talent for - music and IT are examples.

In Alice's final year in the lower school she began to withdraw to the extent that she hardly attended; she then was referred to a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) as a school

refuser, where, perhaps both predictably and ironically, she attended for only 50% of the time. She finds A4A better, as proven by her current attendance at the Centre of 100%. Alice's home life is not regarded as satisfactory; her mother has left and she lives with her father and two brothers, both older, and does lots of skivvying.

From A4A she goes to college every Tuesday with five other students doing health and beauty. The Centre manager accompanies them in and stays for the first hour. It has made a difference to Alice and the staff are flexible in supporting her. Alice does not like crowds, and does not take well to any sort of rebuke or punishments like a detention or losing a break for infringements. However, with the work they have put in, staff are confident Alice will be able to cope; she's been to the college, knows the routines, and has been set up to succeed. Staff at the Centre have helped her to apply for college for the following year and will accompany her to the open days.

Bert would prefer to be in school for just one hour a day. He is reported to display oppositional behavior in classroom for anything outside sport and music, subjects at which he excelled and impressed. He reported quite openly that he never concentrated for all the other subjects and 'just mucked about'. He judges that many of the students in the Centre would not be at school at all if it were not for the provision of A4A. Bert is relatively unsupervised at home, fends for himself in terms of food (which he does quite sensibly), 'sofa-surfs' such that his whereabouts are often unknown to his mother and step-father.

It is common to situate a unit like the A4A, for students judged disruptive, away from the main teaching block, thus keeping 'problematic' students away from others. It is also common to find Units like the A4A poorly maintained; damage, graffiti or breakages are only slowly fixed. The students had negative comments to make of both the state of the A4A building (broken windows, chipped paintwork) AND the unwelcoming reception they got when going up to the main school for occasional lessons. Added to this, they felt that the assistant head responsible for special needs visited seldom. It is interesting, if not unusual, for them to list complaints regarding the school without reflecting back on *their* responsibility for anything (e.g. the broken window, which was Peter's doing). A4A staff feel that this is the best setting for many of these students, concur with students' complaints about the state of the building and the lack of welcome from staff in the main school, but are also sympathetic with the position and attitudes of their mainstream colleagues.

Problem Statement

Sally wants to ensure that students in A4A are integrated at certain points with the mainstream students but has significant resistance to this from all school participants.

Questions

1. In reflecting on possible reorganization or resiting of the A4A, Sally (head teacher) thinks about selling the 'inclusive' change to staff. How could Sally address the staff resistance to the inclusion plan, and what would her first steps be? Would she need to address the staff at the Main Site differently than those in A4A?
 - i. How could Sally address how students in A4A are feeling about the inclusion plan?
 - ii. How could Sally address the A4A students' negative feelings and beliefs about school?
2. There is a plan to review the staff expertise mix across the spectrum of student need.
 - i. Is there enough counselling, mentoring, psychotherapy, and mental health inputs (in the UK - CAMHS Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service)?
 - ii. Should a school 'buy in' or 'make its own'?
3. The student's problems, in Sally's view, are rooted in the students' wider 'ecology'. What is Sally meaning when she indicates the "wider ecology," and are there solutions to be realistically identified and addressed in the wider ecology and if so what staffing and funding are needed?
4. What are the quick wins Sally can bring about in one term and what should she aim to celebrate communally at the end of one year?

References

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