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Background

In the UK there has been an increasing number of children being excluded from mainstream education, with 35% being excluded for persistent disruptive behaviour (DfE, 2021). The Timpson Report (DfE, 2019) highlighted the need for effective and feasible interventions to prevent issues from escalating to the point of exclusion (DfE, 2019).

Adolescence was identified as peak age range for exclusions (DfE, 2021).

A Collaborative and Proactive Solutions (Greene, 2009) inspired intervention was selected to explore its impact on reducing externalizing behaviours & increasing adaptive executive functions, since it is proactive, thus focusing on skill building when the brain is in a receptive state (Siegal & Bryan, 2012); relationship-based, with positive relationships implicated in improved executive functioning (Diamond & Ling, 2016); & problem-solving oriented, due to the link between executive function and problem-solving and the literature linking social problem solving interventions to reduced externalizing behaviours (Merrill et al., 2017).

Methodology

This study employed a two-phase explanatory sequential mixed-methods design with a single case experimental design with multiple baselines followed by semi-structured interviews.

The participants were three Year 9 pupils at risk of permanent school exclusion from a mainstream secondary school accompanied by a school-based mentor/teacher.

- Specific behaviours identified as externalizing behaviours contributing to the risk for permanent exclusion were observed during baseline and intervention phase for each student. Analysis: Visual analysis (Law & Gus, 2013) & Tau-U (Parker et al., 2012).
- Pre and post questionnaires of externalising behaviour Strengths & Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (Goodman, 1997) and executive functioning (BRIEF-II) (Gioia et al., 2015) were used Analysis: Reliable Change Index (Jacobson & Truax, 1991).
- School behaviour data collected at pre and during intervention. Analysis: Descriptive statistics.

A Collaborative & Proactive Solutions (CPS) (Greene, 2009) inspired approach was used:

- 2 to 6 assessment of lagging skills and unsolved problems sessions per student led by the researcher followed by 4 to 5, 1 hour weekly joint problem-solving sessions with each student/teacher pair led by the researcher.

Results

Visual Analysis & Tau-U effect size:

Large Effect size for decrease of % Total Challenging behaviour.

Medium Effect size for % disruptive & % off-task

Small Effect size for % non-compliant behaviour – which was lowest during baseline.

Adaptive Executive Functions: Reliable Change Index - Indication of enhancement of adaptive executive functioning – with a more pronounced effect on teacher ratings which were also more elevated at pre-intervention

Clinical Category reduction for every elevated score at pre-intervention (other than S3 ERI – sig. reduction but not clinical descriptor reduction)

Strengths & Difficulty Questionnaire: minimal statistically significant change and reduction in critical criteria on conduct subscale for each student and on hyperactivity subscale for two students.

School Data_Decrease in behaviour concerns, offsite exclusion & lessons impacted by behaviour difficulties. The students with the highest pre-intervention % of concerns/exclusions saw the biggest impact during intervention...

Conclusions

- Extends CPS evidence base and applicability & generalizability to UK secondary school context for reduction of externalizing behaviours and recognises real world impact on reducing discipline referrals.
- Highlights the holistic positive impact of a proactive discipline model focused on relationships and joint problem-solving.
- Recognition of wider ranging impact especially the teacher/mentor factors.
- Initial indications to the enhancement of adaptive executive functioning skills indicating need for further research to understand the mechanisms and replicability.
- Continues to highlight importance of empathic relationships and relational approaches and the strengths of a CPS based intervention.

Highlighting of the implementation barriers, and gives Educational Psychologists a guide to consider when negotiating the implementation of proactive behavioral interventions.

References: