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Autism and Inclusion in England's Multi Academy Trust: A Case Study of a Senior Leadership Team

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Autism and Inclusion in England's Multi Academy Trust: A Case Study of a Senior Leadership

Team

by

Danielle Lane

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in Curriculum and Instruction with an emphasis in
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Dedication

To Sophia, thank you for sharing your journey and opening my eyes to the world of autism.

Acknowledgements

Today is your day!
You're off to Great Places!
You're off and away!
Dr. Seuss

Today may be my day, but I wouldn't be here without the support of many friends, family, and mentors.

To my wife, thank you for your patience, understanding, and support throughout the dissertation process. Thank you for “holding down the fort” while I was thousands of miles away conducting my study. Thank you for being my constant and growing with me throughout this journey. I would not be off to great places if it wasn't for you!

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Abstract

In this study, I explore how the senior leadership team at an Academy Trust in England understands and operationalizes inclusion, particularly for pupils whose learning profile includes autism. England's policies regarding inclusion appear to focus on the placement of pupils with disabilities in the mainstream provision; however, the Academy Trust, a specialist provision, suggests their school is inclusive. Gaining insight into the senior leadership team's understandings and operationalization of inclusion will provide further understandings of inclusion in Multi Academy Trusts that are specialist provisions. In this study, I examine the understandings of eight members of a senior leadership team at a Multi Academy Trust. Participants were recruited through the Director of Research and Development at the Trust during their regularly scheduled meetings. Data were collected and triangulated through interviews, document reviews, and a focus group. Data was analyzed through qualitative thematic analysis. This study highlights the importance of strategic planning, Trust structure, pupil placement, curriculum, and evaluation systems in operationalizing inclusions for pupils with disabilities including autism. The findings also suggest inclusion, for senior leaders at the Multi Academy Trust, means meeting the individual needs of pupils, facilitating pupil voice, facilitating a sense of belonging, promoting independence, and maximizing pupil potential.

Chapter One: Introduction

This chapter outlines the dissertation by providing a statement of the problem, purpose of the study, theoretical framework, and the rationale for the inquiry. The guiding research questions are presented, and definition of terms are explained. This chapter begins by providing a background of the current diagnostic criteria and status of autism in England. Pseudonyms are used throughout this discussion to ensure anonymity.

Autism is a developmental disability. Individuals with autism may struggle with social-emotional reciprocity, nonverbal communication used in social interactions, developing and maintaining relationships, repetitive speech (e.g. echolalia), movements or use of objects, change in routines or habits, fixated interests, or sensory input (Carpenter, 2013). The characteristics of autism an individual has may vary in severity and are rarely similar across cases. Under the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Five (DSM-V), an individual diagnosed with autism may be identified as severity level one, two, or three. A diagnosis of autism at the first level is the least severe; however, suggests the individual requires support in social communication and restricted interests and repetitive behaviors (RRBs). The second level of autism indicates the individual requires substantial support in social communication and RRBs, while the most severe level of autism, level three, requires very substantial support (Carpenter, 2013).

The rate of autism in England is tracked every seven years through the Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey: Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing (APMS). The survey outlines the prevalence of psychiatric disorders, including autism, in adults age sixteen and above. The 2014

survey indicates approximately 0.8% of the English adult population has a diagnosis of autism (Brugha et al., 2016). While statistics on the prevalence of children under the age of sixteen diagnosed with autism are not readily available, the Department of Education reports 1,244,255 pupils (14.4%) have special education needs (SEN) (2017b). 11.6% of the entire population of pupils receive SEN supports without an Education, Health and Care plan (EHC), while the remaining 2.8% receive supports through an EHC or Statement (Department for Education, 2017b).

The January 2017 Special Educational Needs in England report states that of the 242,185 pupils with a Statement or EHC, 26.9% have a learning profile that includes autism. An additional 5.2% of pupils, without an EHC or Statement, receive SEN support under a diagnosis of autism. Further, autism is considered the primary type of need for pupils with an EHC or Statement (Department for Education, 2017b) in the English education system.

England's education system is run through a wide variety of school settings and governance structures to provide pupils a plethora of educational opportunities. More specifically, England has community schools, foundation schools, voluntary schools, academies, multi Academy Trusts, grammar schools, faith schools, free schools, maintained schools, special schools, and the list continues (GOV.UK, 2018). Within England's school structure, pupils with disabilities have access to the mainstream classroom alongside their peers who are typically developing when deemed appropriate. For pupils with disabilities, for whom the mainstream setting is not appropriate, settings such as a special school may be considered. Special schools provide provisions to pupils with disabilities in an environment independent from the mainstream school. Currently, 1,037 state-funded and non-maintained special schools are in

operation in England with the most common provision approval category, as stated by the Department for Education (2017b), being autism.

Statement of the Problem

As I completed my doctoral coursework, I found myself more than 4,000 miles from home, studying special education practices in the United Kingdom. I spent two weeks with a small group of colleagues and my instructor, visiting schools that serve pupils, from reception (age 4 to 5) to thirteenth year and beyond, with a wide variety of educational needs and disabilities including autism. We visited mainstream schools, special schools, and Academy Trusts. In visiting these schools, we explored the continuum of provisions for pupils with autism. Throughout every school tour or observation, I encountered the same terminology I typically hear in the states: Inclusion, special school, special education needs, pupils with severe and complex needs, and the list continues. “Nothing new to learn here!” I thought to myself.

The last school visit, however, led me to Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust, which includes four schools serving pupils from age three to nineteen. The academy serves pupils with disabilities including physical impairments, hearing impairments, visual impairments, sensory impairments, complex needs, speech and communication challenges, and autism. Roaming the halls of the schools in Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust was nothing like I had experienced in my career. A hydrotherapy pool in a school, right next to an immersion room where lights, animations, and bubbles flowed from the floors and walls? I must have been dreaming! However, I was not dreaming. I had found in the Academy Trust an entity I had never heard of as they don't exist in the states.

My mind was already struggling to process the concept of an Academy Trust and the quantity of resources available to pupils and staff, when I heard that familiar word, ‘inclusion’,

from members of the senior leadership team (SLT). The first time I brushed it off as a mere misunderstanding on my part as the school appeared to be a segregated provision. I must have checked out on the conversation and misheard the team member. I tuned in more closely when the words ‘inclusion’ and ‘inclusive’ resurfaced multiple times. I stopped in my tracks, confused more than ever before. How were these special schools designed for pupils with disabilities, such as autism, inclusive when pupils were segregated from their peers who are typically developing?

My understanding of inclusion, up until this moment, originated from the knowledge that since the enactment of Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) of 1975, inclusive practices focus on Free and Appropriate Education (FAPE) and the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) for pupils with autism. IDEA 2004, which derives from EHA (1975) and subsequent revisions, still requires that pupil placement be the least restrictive. Additionally, placement teams must consider both academic and non-academic needs of the pupil when determining the LRE. The LRE requires that pupils with disabilities be educated with their peers who are typically developing to the maximum extent possible (Embse et al., 2011). Further, segregated settings should only be required when educational success cannot be achieved in the general education setting (Kluth, 2003). Inclusion under this legislation is not explicitly defined, rather it surrounds the settings in which pupils with disabilities are served; this tension interested me.

Reminding myself I was not in the United States anymore, I took to the United Kingdom’s statutes in search of the legal mandates the nation enforced in regard to inclusion. The Children and Families Act of 2014 Part 3, *Children and Young People in England with Special Educational Needs or Disabilities*, outlines specifications for the involvement of pupils

with special educational needs in the mainstream setting. Under the act, in the case of a pupil with an Education, Health and Care plan (EHC)

the local authority must secure that the plan provides for the child or young person to be educated in a maintained nursery school, mainstream school or mainstream post-16 institution, unless that is incompatible with— (a) the wishes of the child’s parent or the young person, or (b) the provision of efficient education for others. (Children and Families Act, 2014, p.28)

A pupil with special education needs who does not have an EHC must be educated in the mainstream school but may be placed in an independent school or special school, “if the cost is not to be met by a local authority or the Secretary of State” (Children and Families Act, 2014, p.29). My previous understandings of inclusion were unaltered as it appeared that, much like my own country, legislature on inclusion in England also focused on the environment in which a pupil with a disability is served.

I was left with more questions than answers and a nagging scribble in my field notes, “All schools, including separate special schools suggested they were inclusive or promoted inclusion.” This led me to contemplate, “How is inclusion defined?” Nearly a year later, I was still intrigued that members of an SLT at an Academy Trust in England describe their provision as inclusive and promote inclusion for pupils with disabilities including autism. I yearned to understand this more. An extensive review of the literature indicates a paucity of research on how SLTs at an Academy Trust comprised of special schools in England understand and operationalize inclusion for pupils whose learning profile includes autism. My desire to explore the question scribbled in the margins of my notebook and to contribute to the literature base served as the foundation of my inquiry on how SLTs at an Academy Trust in England understand

and facilitate inclusion for pupils whose learning profile includes autism in a special school setting.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to delve further into the questions that remain after my visit at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust. The Academy Trust serves pupils with disabilities, including those with autism in a segregated setting; however, they describe their school using the terms ‘inclusion’ and ‘inclusive.’ England’s legal definition of inclusion focuses on where pupils with disabilities are served, for example, the mainstream classroom (Children and Families Act, 2014). By legal definition, the Academy Trust is not an inclusive setting as the Academy Trust does not serve pupils with disabilities alongside their peers who are typically developing. This inquiry aims to further understand how the SLT at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust understands and operationalizes inclusion for pupils whose learning profiles include autism in a special school setting.

Theoretical Framework

In order to understand how an SLT at an Academy Trust in England understands and operationalizes inclusion for pupils whose learning profile includes autism, I employed an interpretive approach to my inquiry. In using an interpretivist perspective, I recognized that meaning is made through an individual’s active engagement with the world and the significance the person attaches to an event (Paul, 2005). “The implication is we can never completely separate what is being described and the describer. We can never distinguish unequivocally between what is in our minds and what is out there in the world” (Bochner, 2005, p.65). My role in the research process was to work alongside my participants rather than conducting research on my participants.

As I interpreted my participant's understandings, it was important to acknowledge what I brought to the table and my own reflexivity. Reflexivity is often described as, "involving an ongoing self-awareness during the research process which aids in making visible the practice and construction of knowledge within research in order to produce more accurate analyses of our research" (Pillow, 2003, p. 178). Thus, my understanding of how an SLT at an Academy Trust in England understands and operationalizes inclusion for pupils whose learning profile includes autism was interpreted through their unique experiences and interactions.

Rationale

As noted in the statement of the problem, legal descriptions of inclusion in England surround the placement of pupils with disabilities and the environments in which they are educated. The focus on pupil placement as the determining factor of inclusion suggests that a mainstream classroom is inclusive while a special school for pupils with disabilities is exclusive. Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust, a group of special schools for pupils with disabilities, including autism, under the legal definition, is not an inclusive setting. After visiting the schools in the Trust, however, I noted that the SLT used the words 'inclusion' and 'inclusive' to describe their schools. This study serves to further understand how the SLT at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust understands and facilitates inclusion for pupils whose learning profiles include autism. Further, this study serves to contribute to the paucity of research surrounding how SLTs understand and facilitate inclusion for pupils whose learning profile include autism.

Research Questions

The following research questions guide this research inquiry:

1. How does the Senior Leadership Team at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust in England understand inclusion, particularly for pupils whose learning profile includes autism?

2. How does the Senior Leadership Team at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust operationalize inclusion for pupils whose learning profile includes autism?

Definition of Terms

Academy: A publicly funded independent school that is not required to follow the national curriculum and has the freedom to set their own term times. An academy must follow the same guidelines as state schools for the purposes of admissions, special educational needs, and exclusions (GOV.UK, 2018).

Academy Trust: A group of schools, sometimes referred to as a multi Academy Trust (MAT), that are a single legal entity. Every Academy Trust has a board of trustees or directors and articles of association that serve as their governing body and document (National Governors' Association, 2015).

Special School: A school that serves individuals with special educational needs in an environment where individuals who are typically developing are not present.

Mainstream School: A school that serves individuals who are typically developing as well as those with special education needs through additional resource provision.

Inclusion: For the purposes of this study, inclusion is viewed through a broader lens than pupil placement in the mainstream classroom, separate classroom, or the special school. Inclusion is a "system of policy and practices that embraces diversity as a strength, creates a sense of belonging, equal membership, acceptance, and being valued, and involves fundamental civil rights" (Jones, Fauske & Carr, 2011, p. 9).

Senior Leadership Team (SLT): The SLT refers to the members who comprise the Academy Trust's leaders and may include individuals such as the CEO, Principal, Vice Principal, Heads of schools within the academy, Head Teacher, and the Director of Research and Development.

Pupils Whose Learning Profile Includes Autism: For the purposes of this study, pupils whose learning profile includes autism is any pupil, including those with multiple disabilities, who has a diagnosis of autism. They may or may not have an Education, Health and Care plan (EHC). The autism diagnosis does not have to be the primary diagnosis.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

In this chapter I review the literature that offers context to the present study. I begin by clarifying the geographical context of the study, progressing to a discussion of international understandings of inclusion and the subsequent policy discourse as it relates to England and the United Kingdom. I will then discuss pertinent issues related to autism in England, namely the diagnosis of autism and issues related to school placement in the English education system. I will then discuss the movement in England towards Academy Trust schools and the push for academies, which will proceed to a discussion of academies that serve pupils with autism. This will naturally lead to the heart of this present study: How is inclusion understood and enacted in a large Academy Trust in England.

The United Kingdom (U.K.), often called Britain, is an island to the North West of Europe. The U.K. is comprised of Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and England. The capital of the U.K. is London, which served as the primary location of this inquiry (United Kingdom, 2018). Educational policies in the U.K. guide educational practices in each of the above listed countries. With this, studies, policies, and practices centered on the U.K., Scotland, England, Wales, and Northern Ireland are applicable to the current study.

International Inclusion Policies

Recently, the idea of disability has been further conceptualized as a human rights-based paradigm within a socio-political range of interest (UNESCO, 2014). Policy makers and international agencies like the United Nations and The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) have become influential advocates for inclusion as a core

principle within the international education system (Armstrong, Armstrong, & Spandagou, 2011). In 2006, the United Nations adopted The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and its Optional Protocol. The Convention has eight guiding principles to include (1) respect for dignity, individual autonomy, and independence, (2) non-discrimination, (3) full inclusion and participation in society, (4) acceptance of individuals with disabilities as part of humanity, (5) equality of opportunity, (6) accessibility, (7) equality between genders, and (8) respect for the developing capacities of adolescents with disabilities and for their right to maintain their identities (United Nations, 2017a).

On March 30th 2007, the highest number of signatures obtained on opening day of a treaty was reached with 82 signatories to the Convention, 44 signatories to the Optional Protocol, and one ratification of the Convention. Currently, there are 160 signatories and 173 ratifications to the Convention. Additionally, there are 92 ratifications of the Convention and Optional Protocol (United Nations, 2017b). The Convention sets the tone for international organizations such as UNESCO - “the Convention is the first human rights convention of the 21st century and the first legally binding instrument with comprehensive protection of the rights of persons with disabilities” (United Nations, 2017a).

UNESCO serves to create cooperation at the international level in the areas of science, education, communication, and culture (UNESCO, 2017b). The aims of the organization are to ensure every child and citizen has the ability to have access to a quality education, to a basic human right and an indispensable prerequisite for sustainable development, to grow and live in a cultural environment rich in diversity and dialogue where heritage serves as a bridge between generations and peoples, to fully benefit from scientific advances, and to enjoy full freedom of expression; the basis of democracy, development, and human dignity (UNESCO, 2017b).

UNESCO is the only United Nations agency mandated to address all aspects of education. As such, the organization spearheads the Global Education 2030 Agenda through Sustainable Development Goal Four (UNESCO, 2017b). The Global Education 2030 Agenda replaces the 2000-2015 initiative Dakar Framework for Action, Education for All: Meeting our Collective Commitments. Under the 2000-2015 agenda, the second goal was universal primary education. The 2015 EFA Global Sustainability Report disclosed that adjusted net enrollment increased in 17 countries between 1999 and 2012; however, a plateau began in the last eight years of the initiative. In 32 countries, pupil dropout before the end of primary school remained a concern with approximately 20 percent of pupils not completing the last year of their primary education. In 2012, an estimated 58 million pupils were still excluded from a universal primary education indicating a need for increased focus on promoting universal primary education for children who are marginalized, to include those with disabilities (UNESCO, 2015).

Previously, there was concern that the Education for All (EFA), while aiming to advocate for individuals with disabilities, may increase exclusion by focusing on a general right to education rather than inclusion. Further, “by focusing on *individual groupings*, such as disabled children, rather than examining the system as a whole, we run the risk of reinforcing existing dichotomies between access to learning opportunities (quantity) and knowledge acquisition or competence development (quality)” (Miles & Singal, 2010, p. 12).

The 2030 agenda addresses these concerns as it moves towards a new framework to meet Sustainable Educational Goal Four, which aims to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (UNESCO, 2017a, p.12). The goal encompasses ten targets, seven of which are outcome based and three that are implementation based (UNESCO, 2017b). In addition to universal primary education, the goal outlines a target

for gender equality and inclusion. The target requires that those participating states will, “By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations” (UNESCO, 2017b).

Unlike the 2000-2015 agenda, Education 2030 mandates equal access for all including pupils with disabilities. Pupils with disabilities are outlined, but is access enough? In 2017 UNESCO released *A Guide for Ensuring Inclusion and Equity in Education* that not only answers this lingering question, but also addresses previous concerns and criticisms of the shortcomings on Sustainable Development Goal Four. The guide defines inclusion as “a process that helps to overcome barriers limiting the presence, participation and achievement of learners” (UNESCO, 2017a, p.5). In juxtaposition, the guide defines integration as individuals with ‘special educational needs’ being placed in the mainstream classroom with some accommodations and resources with the expectation that they will function within the pre-existing structure and environment (UNESCO, 2017a). The overarching theme throughout the policy is that “every learner matters and matters equally” (UNESCO, 2017a, p.13).

The three implementation targets, which include effective learning environments, scholarships, and teachers and educators, provide a guide for states in working towards more inclusive schools (UNESCO, 2017b). To begin reaching the implementation targets UNESCO suggests that school personnel move away from a medical model of needing to ‘fix’ pupils and instead embrace their differences as an opportunity to enhance the learning environment. The organization emphasizes collaboration between stakeholders, collaboration between schools, and ensuring human resources are plentiful and used effectively.

Further, schools must move toward viewing special schools as a resource center in an effort to transition towards inclusion. Teachers need to monitor their effectiveness in meeting all pupil needs in the classroom (UNESCO, 2017a). In order for teachers to be prepared to instruct for all learners, they must engage in pre-service and in-service training that takes place within the classroom setting, build on the expertise of individuals in the school, embrace collaborative teacher planning and sharing, create a shared language of practice, and facilitate engagement with evidence to promote reflection and experimentation (Mesiou & Ainscow, 2015).

UNESCO (2017b) reported that despite the gains in enrollment, an estimated 61 million pupils were not enrolled in primary school during the 2014 school year with Sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia accounting for more than 70 percent of pupils not enrolled. There continues to be concerns with teacher quality and access to resources including economic means of individual families. Furthermore, official development assistance (ODA) decreased by 200,000 dollars with Australia, France, and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland having the largest impact on the decrease (Secretary-General, 2016). Two years into the 2030 agenda it is evident that states have a long way to go in meeting Sustainable Development Goal Four and to truly embrace inclusive education worldwide.

England's Inclusion Policy

The 1978 report from the Warnock Committee (Lauchlan & Grieg, 2015) is a landmark policy regarding inclusion in the United Kingdom. The report outlines the committee's recommendation to include the term *special educational needs*. This terminology focuses on educating children with these needs in mainstream schools and supporting parental participation in the decision-making process (Norwich, 2008). The introduction of the terminology special education needs, a focus on mainstreaming, and increased parental involvement informed the

framework for the 1981 Education Act and served as a catalyst for changing attitudes towards inclusion with specialist provision to be available, when possible, in mainstream schools (Lauchlan & Grieg, 2015).

The neo-liberal approach during the Labour period of government from 1997-2010 is evident in the 1997 Special Educational Needs Green Paper, as it adopted the principles of inclusion endorsed by the United Nations Salamanca Statement (Norwich, 2014). The historic Salamanca Statement, referred to as “the most significant international document that has ever appeared in special education” (Ainscow & Miles, 2008, p.16), argued for inclusion:

Regular schools with this inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society, and achieving education for all; moreover, they provide an effective education to the majority of children and improve the efficiency and ultimately the cost effectiveness of the entire education system. (UNESCO, 1994, p. 3)

Significantly, Norwich (2014) notes this was the first time the terminology *inclusive education* appeared in policy, yet there was little direction or clarification of placement in either special or regular mainstream schools. This policy direction led to the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (2001) compelling schools to acknowledge their responsibility regarding pupils with special educational needs (Norwich, 2014).

The U.K. statutory system, until recently, has identified special educational needs at three levels dependent upon the need for increasing support: School Action, School Action Plus, and then Local Authority involvement to determine the need for a Statement. With further reform needed, the British Government introduced the SEN Code of Practice enacted to incorporate a

larger group of policies for pupils having special educational needs but without a formal Statement (Norwich, 2008).

Reform initiatives currently implemented under the new Special Educational Needs and Disability System (SEND) include the Children and Families Act 2014. The 2014 act suggests that a pupil with an Education, Health and Care plan (EHC) must be educated in a mainstream school unless the parents choose a special provision or the mainstream provision is not compatible with the efficient education for other pupils. A pupil with special education needs who does not have an EHC must be educated in the mainstream school but may be placed in an independent school or special school under specific circumstances, such as a need for an EHC assessment (Children and Families Act, 2014).

Autism

Autism is a developmental disability in which an individual has “persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across context not accounted for by general developmental delays” (Carpenter, 2013, p.1). Under this domain, an individual must meet all three of the diagnostic criteria to include challenges with social emotional-reciprocity, non-verbal communication, and developing relationships. Additionally, an individual diagnosed with autism must display “Restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities” (Carpenter, 2013, p. 3). In the area of restricted, repetitive behaviors, an individual must display two of the following criteria: (1) stereotyped speech, movements, or object use, challenges in routine changes, (2) routine patterns of language use, or struggling with change, (3) restricted or fixated interests, and (4) difficulty with sensory input (Carpenter, 2013).

Many challenges arise while diagnosing autism. “One of the most common mistakes made by clinicians lacking autism experience is to make a number of observations that don’t take

the issues related to autism into account” (The National Autistic Society, 2017), meaning clinicians may diagnose an individual with a disability such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder while missing the primary disability of autism. Further challenges occur as the DSM-V does not account for challenges with play, challenges with imagination, social anxiety, delays in language and development, and behavioral difficulties such as tantrums, all of which may be characteristics of an individual with autism (Carpenter, 2013).

Individuals diagnosed with autism may share some commonalities in characteristics, such as challenges in social skills; however, autism affects each individual in a different manner. With these variations in presentation as well as the various diagnostic approaches used for identifying autism, there are a plethora of terms used to describe an individual who is autistic, such as classic autism, high-functioning autism, and autism spectrum disorder. Recently, the changes to the DSM-V, one of the main manuals used for diagnostic criteria, has removed diagnoses such as PDD-NOS and Asperger’s, which will result in the term autism being the primary diagnosis an individual may receive (The National Autistic Society, 2017). While autism is becoming the primary diagnosis, clinicians are still using previously used terms such as PDD-NOS to describe the type of autism an individual has, causing confusion during the diagnosing process.

Autism and School Placement

Currently, there are an estimated 700,000 individuals on the autism in the U.K. Further, it is estimated that 2.8 million people, to include families and caregivers, are affected by autism on a daily basis (The National Autistic Society, 2017). According to the Department for Education, autism remains the primary area of need for pupils with an EHC (2017b). Since 2010, the number of pupils with a statement or EHC plan attending maintained special schools has continuously increased. More specifically, in 2010, 38.2% of pupils with a statement were

enrolled in a maintained special school and currently 43.8% of pupils with a statement or EHC plan are enrolled in a maintained special school. Additionally, there has been a 1.6% increase in the number of pupils with a statement or EHC plan attending independent schools between 2010 and 2017 (Department for Education, 2017a). In 2017, 12.2% of pupils with SEN support were enrolled in a primary academy and 10.5% in a secondary academy. Further, 1.3% of pupils with an EHC were enrolled in a primary academy and 1.6% in secondary academies. In some cases, enrollment in an academy school may also mean enrollment in a specialist segregated provision as an academy trust may also be a special school.

Academy Trust Schools

England employs a seemingly complicated and controversial educational structure in which there is a move towards privatization through the introduction of academies. Currently, there are approximately eleven legally defined school types in England to include the academy (Courtney, 2015). Including variations in gender and age, there are an estimated 70 to 90 types of schools in England (Courtney, 2015). Additionally, there are a total of 152 Local Education Authorities (LEAs) serving schools in England (Eyles, Machin, & McNally, 2017).

Academies were introduced into the school landscape in 2002 under the Labour government (Andrews, 2016). “Academies were meant to replace schools in areas of high socio-economic disadvantage, with failing intakes and poor results, and which are increasingly spurned by local parents able to find an alternative school for their child” (Gorard, 2009, p. 101). Eight years after the introduction of the academy, Parliament passed the Academies Act 2010. The act allowed for primary and secondary schools with an ‘outstanding’ rating to convert to academies first while a push for poorly rated schools to be forced into academies persisted (Andrews, 2016). While there is continued push for all schools to convert to academies, the current 2016

Education and Adoption Act states that any school that receives an ‘inadequate’ rating from Ofsted will receive an academy order (Andrews, 2016).

In the 2015 to 2016 academic year, 5,758 of the 21,525 state-funded schools were academies. A total of 4,140 academies were part of a Multi Academy Trust (MAT) (Department for Education, 2017a). By 2016, approximately two-thirds or 973 MATs were operating in England (Andrews, 2016). In 2017, approximately two-thirds of secondary schools and one-fifth of primary schools were designated as academies (Eyles, Machin, & McNally, 2017).

The Push for Academies

As England continues to focus on the move toward academies, controversy regarding the model is rising. In fact,

recently, the UK government has had to back out of a policy to force all schools in England to become academies by the end of 2022 because of fierce hostility to this by the educational establishment (although the current government vision is still to encourage all schools to become academies). (Eyles, Machin, & McNally, 2017, p.109)

Much of the controversy regarding the academies movement surrounds the mixed evidence of the program’s success (Chapman, 2013).

In converting to an academy, schools are not required to use the national curriculum, are not governed by the LEA, receive additional funds to cover services provided by the LEA to non-academy schools, may change school times and academic calendar schedules, and have greater financial flexibility (Eyles, Machin, & McNally, 2017). Heilbronn (2016) suggests these freedoms may have potential negative impacts in equity, democracy, and resources. Issues of equity may arise in the academy admissions process. She states, “...because academy schools are outside local education authority control there is no means of balancing the intake of students

across a locality... so neighbouring LEA schools must take students rejected by academies” (Heilbronn, 2016, p.313). Further, pupils with higher needs of support cost more, take more time, and require specialized skills. With this, academies may view pupils as a test score rather than an individual who deserves an education (Heilbronn, 2016).

Concerns continue when considering democracy and resources within academies. Issues with democracy arise in considering the structure of governing bodies of academies. Typically, academy schools governing boards are comprised mostly of school sponsor representatives, which creates obstacles for community involvement and conflict of interest in decisions that are educational in nature and those that are corporate in nature (Heilbronn, 2016). Aforementioned, academies have greater financial flexibility and are in control of their own budgets. While financial freedom may be viewed as a benefit of an academy, if an academy struggles with finances, management, or has educational challenges the academy must report to the Secretary of the State of Education as the LEA does not have the right to get involved in matters of the academy (Heilbronn, 2016). Further, as public resources such as land and buildings become privatized it is nearly impossible to revert the resources back to public control (Heilbronn, 2016).

Skepticism about the move toward all schools converting to academies is further complicated by the notion of pupil outcomes. It is often asked if the academy is increasing outcomes for pupils; however, findings are unclear (Gorard, 2009). Most recent data from the Department for Education indicate that criticism of the academy may be warranted. Key Stage Two assessments show that 30.5% of academies scored significantly below average in Reading. Additionally, 23.2% of academies scored significantly below average in Writing and a total of 22.1% of academies scored significantly below average in Math. Pupil outcomes in Key Stage Four indicate greater concern as 51.1% of academies scored significantly below average on

Progress 8 (Department for Education, 2017a). Gorard's (2009) study found that academies that struggle were no more successful than schools that do not have academy status, which indicates "that the programme is a waste of time, effort and energy at least in terms of this rather narrow measure of KS4 outcomes" (Gorard, 2009, p. 112). Further, he asserts that the academies experiment is impacting pupils' one opportunity at an education and that the funding associated with the movement could be better utilized in refurbishing schools or following pupils that are most disadvantaged (Gorard, 2009).

The research regarding academies, as noted previously, is mixed across the literature. While issues of equity, democracy, resources, and pupil outcomes are evident, there is also evidence of benefits for schools converting into academies and MATs. In one case of a struggling school pairing with an effective school, it is reported that benefits of the conversion include shared resources, subject leaders being responsible for two sites, improvement in the physical appearance of the schools, the atmospheres of the schools, teaching within both schools, and the leadership in both schools. Further, "the ethos and branding of the successful schools seems to have permeated into the struggling school" (Chapman, 2013, p. 340). In merging into an academy trust there is also increased opportunities and diversity, which promotes change and extension of a school's vision and values beyond the school and the community that school serves (Chapman, 2013).

The reasons for academies within a MAT converting to an academy further highlights some of the benefits of the academies movement. For 43% of academies in a MAT, the ability to collaborate with another school site was the primary reason for conversion. For 13%, independence from the LEA was the main determinant in converting. Further, 11% of academies within a MAT converted for the freedom to determine the use of funding and 9% converted in

order to obtain more funding for front-line education (Cirin, 2017). Academies who opted to join a MAT viewed a shared vision (50%), benefiting from another school's support (16%), and helping support another school (10%) as some of the primary reasons for their participation in a MAT. Additional benefits for becoming an academy or joining a MAT included increasing efficiency in savings, reduction in bureaucracy, and closing geographical proximities between academies in a trust (Cirin, 2017).

It is without question that the legislature in England supports the conversion of all schools in their educational system. It is also undeniable that such an agenda is controversial and receiving backlash as indicated by Parliament's change in policy that would have required all schools to become academies by 2022. The literature suggests that there is no concrete answer as to whether converting all schools into academies is the change needed to increase pupil outcomes as evidence regarding the benefits and outcomes of academies are unclear.

Understandings of Inclusion in England

Across the globe, there are differing opinions in regards to the definition of inclusion in education, specifically as it refers to children with special educational needs (Norwich, 2012). Spratt and Florian (2015) contend inclusive education is a debated topic beset by problems of definition and interpretation. There continues to be no single perspective on inclusion within a country, much less within an individual school (Ainscow & Miles, 2008), and understandings of inclusion may take different forms across various contexts (Miles & Singal, 2010). As Sikes, Lawson, and Parker (2007) note, "...understandings of inclusion are not fixed and definite, rather are 'becoming', developing and changing as they are articulated and lived..." (p. 367).

Hornsby (2011) presents the continuing debate around the terminology of inclusion: Is inclusion about placement of all children in mainstream classrooms; is it based on an inclusive

society or focused on children with diverse needs; or is it a process involving systemic reorganization? While England subscribes to UNESCO's Global Education 2030 Agenda policies, such as the Children and Families Act 2014, current understandings of what inclusion is appear to center on the setting in which a pupil is served. With this, a pupil with a disability served in the special school setting in England is not experiencing an inclusive environment while a pupil with a disability served in the mainstream school experiences inclusive practices.

Conclusion

The education system in England is complex and offers a plethora of options for parents and pupils. Despite the wide variety of schooling options currently available, parliament aims to convert all schools to an academy or Multi Academy Trust structure. The move toward the academy serving as the primary school structure in the education system is causing much controversy, resulting in changes to recent legislature that would have required all schools to convert by 2022. The English school system has continuously worked to evolve their policy, which embraces inclusion throughout the system. Inclusion, in the current system, appears to surround pupil placement in either a mainstream setting or a special school, which serves pupils with disabilities, including autism, alongside their peers who also have a disability. For pupils with disabilities, exposure to an inclusive classroom is dependent upon family choice as well as whether the placement in a mainstream provision is compatible with the efficient education for other pupils (Children and Families Act, 2014).

While it is evident there is a push for inclusion and academies in the English education system, what is not clear is how inclusion is understood by schools who are not mainstream. Schools such as the special school are, by legal definition, exclusive as they do not serve pupils who are typically developing alongside pupils who have disabilities. There is a paucity of

research on how inclusion is understood by SLTs serving pupils with disabilities, including autism, in a Multi Academy Trust comprised of special schools.

Chapter Three: Methods

This chapter outlines the purpose and methodology of the study. Participants, methods for data collection and analysis, and ethical considerations are also described. The research timeline is also presented.

Purpose of the Study

Policy regarding the inclusion of children with disabilities in England surrounds the environment in which pupils with disabilities are served, for example the mainstream classroom (Children and Families Act, 2014). Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust is, by policy definition, an exclusive setting as pupils with disabilities are served in a specialized environment and are not enrolled in mainstream classes alongside their peers who are typically developing. More specifically, the Academy Trust includes four special schools for children with disabilities including autism. The Senior Leadership Team (SLT), however, describes the schools in their Academy Trust using the terms ‘inclusion’ and ‘inclusive.’ The purpose of this study is to further understand how the SLT at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust understands and facilitates inclusion for pupils whose learning profiles include autism in a special school setting. The following research questions guide this study:

1. How does the Senior Leadership Team at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust in England understand inclusion, particularly for pupils whose learning profile includes autism?
2. How does the Senior Leadership Team at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust operationalize inclusion for pupils whose learning profile includes autism?

Methodology

This inquiry employed Robert Stake's approach to case study methodology. Stake's approach to case study is employed as it is best for the study of programs and people (Yazan, 2015). In the Stakeian view, a case must be a bounded and integrated system such as a program or population (Stake, 1995). Case study ensures that what is and is not the case is clearly defined as to keep the boundaries in focus. "What is happening and deemed important within those boundaries (the emic) is considered vital and usually determines what the study is about..." (Stake, 1978, p.7). The case or the object (Stake, 1995) being explored in this study is the SLT at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust and their understanding and facilitation of inclusion for pupils whose learning profile includes autism. The SLT is broadly bound by their employment at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust and further bound by their membership in the leadership team.

In using Stake's approach to case study,

we try not to disturb the ordinary activity of the case, not to test, not even to interview, if we can get the information we want by discrete observation or examination of records.

We try hard to understand how the actors, the people being studied, see things.

Ultimately, the interpretations of the researcher are likely to be emphasized more than those people studied, but the qualitative case researcher tries to preserve the *multiple realities*, the different and even contradictory views of what is happening. (Stake, 1995, p.12)

Stake further states that the aim of case study is not to generalize but to gain particularization. Particularization will be acquired through case study's strength in providing depth, detail, deepness, and richness (Stake, 1995). Case study uses multiple data sources in order to

understand a given phenomenon. Further, using multiple data sources “ensures that the issue is not explored through one lens, but rather a variety of lenses which allows for multiple facets of the phenomenon to be revealed and understood” (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 544). The use of case study methodology will provide thick description, detail, richness, completeness, and understanding of the phenomenon (Flyvbjerg, 2011).

Stake states, “Standard qualitative designs call for the persons most responsible for interpretations to be in the field, making observations, exercising subjective judgment, analyzing and synthesizing, all while realizing their own consciousness” (1995, p. 41). When in the field gathering data, Stake emphasizes the importance of using interviews and document reviews as a means of data collection (Yazan, 2015) in order to understand and interpret the case. In using a Stakian approach to this study, I naturally merged my theoretical framework with data collection methods and analysis through my desire to understand my participant’s knowledge while recognizing my interpretation’s impact on my findings.

Study Setting

This inquiry was conducted at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust in London England. The Trust serves roughly 450 pupils with disabilities in a segregated setting. Jacob Thomas School, the newest addition to the Trust was considered a failing school prior to joining Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust. In 2017, Jacob Thomas School received a rating of good on their government evaluation and continues to show improvement since joining the Trust. In the 2017, Benjamin Thomas Schools received an inadequate rating from on their government evaluation and began working to address government concerns. Prior to the start of this inquiry, the Trust rectified government concerns and received an outstanding rating, which is the highest rating possible on the evaluation.

Participants

In using case study methodology, I did not conduct sampling research in an attempt to understand other cases (Stake, 1995). In case study, sampling “applies to selecting cases and selecting data sources” (Gentles, Charles, Ploeg, & McKibbon, 2015, p. 1776). My first responsibility was to understand the selected case (Stake, 1995). The case explored in this study is the SLT at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust and their understanding and facilitation of inclusion for pupils whose learning profile includes autism. As such, the participants in this case will be the members of the SLT at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust. The SLT includes the CEO, Principal, Vice Principal, Head of Nathaniel Secondary School, Head of Paul Primary School, Head of Marcus School, Head Teacher of Jacob Thomas School, and the Director of Research and Development.

Inclusion criteria.

Participation in this inquiry was based on the participant’s employment at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust. Individuals were employed at one of the schools in the Trust to include Nathaniel Secondary School, Paul Primary School, Marcus School, or Jacob Thomas School. Employment at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust had to be paired with the participant’s identification as a member of the SLT as outlined in the Academy Trust’s organizational structure. Individuals employed at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust or one of its schools were excluded from the study if they were not designated as a member of the SLT. Participants were recruited through the recommendation of the Director of Research and Development and her presentation of the research plan at the SLT’s meeting. Participation was voluntary, and participants had the choice to withdrawal from the study without consequence.

Data Collection

Multiple qualitative data sources are used in order to capture the essence of the case (Yazan, 2015). This inquiry used individual interviews, document review, and a focus group interview to understand how the SLT at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust understands and facilitates inclusion for pupils whose learning profile includes autism in a special school setting. Triangulation of data was used to ensure credibility (Tracy, 2010). Triangulation occurred throughout the study to provide the clearest and most meaningful picture possible (Stake, 2006). The framework for triangulation in this study (See Figure 1) uses methodological triangulation, which increases confidence through the use of multiple methods of data collection such as interviews and document review (Stake, 1995). Additionally, Table 1 outlines the relationship between the research questions and the three data collection methods.

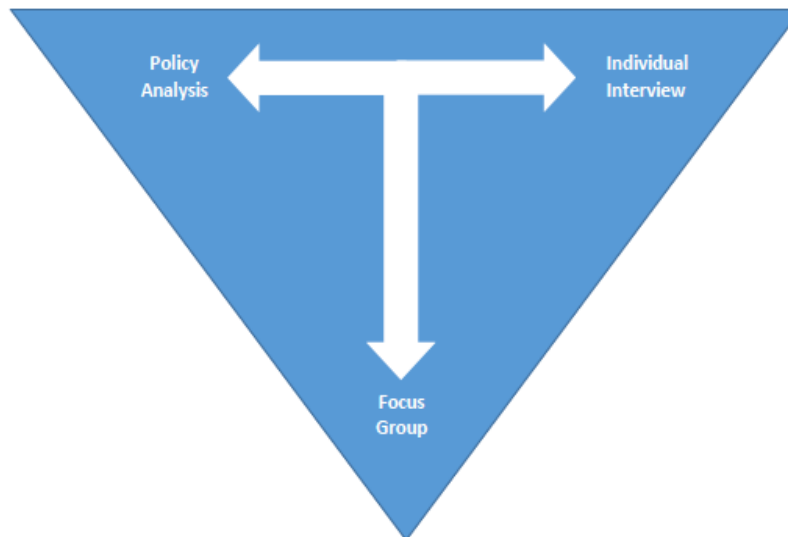


Figure 1. Framework for Methodological Triangulation

Table 1. Relationship Between Research Questions and Data Collection Method

Research Question	Individual Interviews	Document Review	Focus Group
How does the SLT at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust in England understand inclusion, particularly for pupils whose learning profile includes autism?	X	X	X
How does the SLT at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust operationalize inclusion for pupils whose learning profile includes autism?	X	X	X

As I collected data and interpreted my participant’s understandings, it was imperative that I engaged in reflexivity. Throughout the course of the inquiry I used a reflexive journal, which allowed me to identify what I know as well as how I came to know it (Watt, 2007). Further, a reflexive journal helped me be cognizant “of the reciprocal influence of participants and researcher on the process and outcome” (Jootun, McGhee, & Marland, 2009, p. 45), which is imperative to ensuring my inquiry is rigorous (Jootun, McGhee, & Marland, 2009). I used my reflexive journal throughout each stage of this inquiry in order to guide my decision-making process. I completed entries in my reflexive journal after each interview and focus groups. I used my reflexive journal during the document review process and recorded each step of the document review process. Further, I used my reflexive journal throughout the data analysis process and outlined each step I took during analysis. My reflexive journal also served as a place to pose questions and considerations I needed to take in preparing for each step in this inquiry. Ultimately, the use of a reflexive journal served as a form of checks and balances, which enhanced my ability to conduct this inquiry in an authentic and credible manner.

Individual interviews.

Interviews, according to Stake (1995), are one of the primary methods to understanding multiple realities. Individual interviews helped provide understanding of both research questions

posed in this study as two of the primary purposes of interviews are gaining “unique information or interpretations” and “finding out about “a thing” that the researcher was unable to observe themselves” (Stake, 2010, p.95). In conducting interviews with both of these purposes in mind, interviews were adapted to each individual participant, conversational in nature, and included probing questions for clarification (Stake, 2010). A semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix A) was used throughout the course of this inquiry as this approach to interviews uses the protocol as a guide while probes are used “in response to the interviewee’s description and accounts” (Roulston, 2010, p.14). Further, semi-structured interviews allow for flexibility in the order in which questions are posed and allows the participant to determine their response to questions posed (Roulston, 2010).

I conducted one forty-five to sixty-minute semi-structured interview with each participant. Each interview was scheduled during a time period that was conducive to the team member’s schedule and did not impede upon typical employment timetables. Interviews took place at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust in a location that was conducive to the team member’s preference. Locations included Nathaniel Secondary School, Paul Primary School, Marcus School, and Jacob Thomas School. Consideration for limiting distractions as well as maintaining anonymity was taken in selecting individual interview locations. Interviews were recorded using a digital recording device. Digital recordings were transferred to a password protected computer for later transcription. Once transferred to the secure device, the original recording was deleted from the recording device.

Document review.

Document review is a primary method for data collection in case study (Stake, 1995) that provides a process for evaluating documents (Bowen, 2009). Bowen (2009) outlines five uses of

document analysis to include (1) providing data on the participant's context, (2) identifying questions that should be posed in the inquiry, (3) providing supplemental data, (4) tracing change and progress, and (5) validating evidence and findings. "The emphasis is on discovery and description, including searching for contexts, underlying meanings, patterns and processes..." (Altheide, Coyle, DeVriese, & Schneider, 2008, p. 128). Document reviews provided insights for both research questions as the reviews offered insight into the policies and procedures that guide the SLT's understanding and facilitation of inclusion, particularly for pupils whose learning profile includes autism at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust.

For the purpose of this study, document reviews surrounded Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust's policies, procedures, processes, and publications related to inclusion for pupils whose learning profiles include autism. Policy documents at the government level that inform the inclusion policies at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust were also evaluated. Document review was employed in the second stage of data collection. The analysis allowed me to corroborate the information I collected from the individual interviews as well as determine necessary points of clarification (Yanow, 2007). More specifically, understandings I gathered from the document analysis informed the questions posed in the focus group during the third phase of data collection. Document analysis also provided an additional data collection method, which helped in the triangulation process. Both the process of corroborating understandings from the individual interviews and triangulation provided depth and completeness to the case. All documents used for document review were locked in a secure filing cabinet, and I replaced any identifying information with pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.

Focus groups.

In qualitative research, individual interviews are often combined with focus groups. One approach to combining the use of individual interviews and focus groups is to follow-up the individual interviews with a focus group. “Following individual interviews with focus groups allows the researcher to explore issues that came up only during the analysis of the interviews” (Morgan, 1997, p.23). Further, focus groups provide deeper understanding, new insights, and completeness of the case (Breen, 2006). A single focus group approach emphasizes the reciprocal dialogue surrounding a topic by a group of participants and facilitator in a single meeting and location (O.Nyumba, Wilson, Derrick, & Mukherjee, 2017). Focus groups typically range in size from six to twelve participants (Guest, Namey, Taylor, Eley, McKenna, 2017; Ryan, Gandha, Culbertson, & Carlson, 2014) and last one to two hours (O.Nyumba, Wilson, Derrick, & Mukherjee, 2017; Ryan, Gandha, Culbertson, & Carlson, 2014).

The purpose of using focus groups in this study was to further understand the themes that emerged in individual interviews as well as the document review. This allowed me to better understand research questions one and two by providing clarification and collective understandings of how the SLT at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust understand and facilitates inclusion, particularly for pupils whose learning profile includes autism. Additionally, information gained through the focus group served to further triangulate the data being collected and provided additional depth in understanding the case. In this inquiry, I used a single sixty minute semi-structured focus group (Appendix B) with the members of the SLT at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust. Each of the eight members of the SLT were invited to participate in the focus group and a total of seven participants were available to participate. This occurred in the

third phase of data collection after members of the team had engaged in individual interviews and I had conducted the document review.

The focus group was scheduled at a time that did not interfere with required employment activities at the Academy Trust. The focus group took place at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust in a location conducive to participants with consideration for easy access, open dialogue and anonymity. The focus group was recorded using a digital recording device. At the conclusion of the focus group, digital recordings were transferred to a password protected computer for later transcription. Once transferred to the secure device, the original recording was deleted from the recording device.

Ethical Considerations

In this study, I employed ongoing monitoring of ethical considerations. Prior to data collection, the research project was submitted to the University of South Florida's Institutional Review Board for approval (Appendix C). Participants were provided information regarding the study, specific research activities they were being asked to participate in, as well as notice that they could refuse to participate or withdrawal from the study at any time without consequence. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants in the study.

All written work, including the proposal, ensured anonymity through the use of pseudonyms and did "not include information about any individual or research site that will enable that individual or research site to be identified by others" (Walford, 2005, p. 84). All electronic documents related to this study were kept on a password protected computer. Data was stored in the University of South Florida's secure Box application. All hard copies of documents, including informed consent forms were stored in a locked filing cabinet that was only accessible by myself. Records were checked on a weekly basis to ensure security of the data.

In conducting this inquiry ethically, I aimed to produce research that is sincere and credible (Tracy, 2010). By continuously participating in self-reflexivity and being transparent throughout the inquiry, I have provided findings that are sincere. Of most importance in the area of transparency is my transparency in the methods I used as well as challenges I encountered throughout the process. Credibility was guaranteed through the use of thick description, showing rather than telling, and triangulation of data (Tracy, 2010) through the use of interviews, document reviews, and focus groups.

Data Analysis

According to Stake, there are two ways to analyze data, the use of categorical aggregation and direct interpretation (Yazan, 2015). In using these approaches,

We can look for patterns immediately while we are reviewing documents, observing, or interviewing—or we can code the records, aggregate frequencies, and find patterns that way, Or both. Sometimes, we find meaning in a single instance, but usually the important meanings will come from reappearance over and over. (Stake, 1995, p.78)

Coding is a process in which data is categorized by themes and can be organized in a variety of manners, for example, by research question (Stake, 2010). It is rare that a researcher gets coding done correctly in the first cycle of coding (Saldana, 2015). For this reason, a second cycle of focused coding is employed in which codes are removed, combined, or separated into previously determined categories (O.Nyumba, Wilson, Derrick, & Mukherjee, 2017). Throughout both levels of coding, it is imperative to keep a codebook in a separate file (Saldana, 2015).

This inquiry used coding throughout each phase of data collection to include interviews, document reviews, and the focus group. Initial coding began as data was collected and informed subsequent phases of data collection, such as the focus group. Second cycle coding took place

after all data was collected and was organized by research question. Additional cycles of coding were completed as needed until final assertions were reached. Coding was done through the use of MaxQDA software.

Beneficial to the research and analysis process is the use of analytic memos. Analytic memos may be viewed as similar to an entry in a diary. Using analytic memos provides “a place to “dump your brain” about the participants, phenomenon, or process under investigation by thinking and thus writing and thus thinking even more about them” (Saldana, 2015, p. 75). Memoing was used throughout the inquiry to provide an additional level of reflexivity and depth to the case. Memos were ongoing and captured my direct interpretations as I began to analyze interview, document, and focus group data. Memos were recorded in MaxQDA software.

Research Timeline

My research timeline is outlined in Table 2. In weeks one and two, I conducted individual interviews with the members of the SLT at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust. In weeks three and four, I conducted document review. In week five, I held a focus group with the members of the SLT. Week six served as a week to address any unforeseen circumstance in the data collection process. I prepared my final results and discussion during the Fall 2018 semester. Data analysis was on going throughout the proposed timeline.

Table 2. Research Timeline

Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Fall 2018 Term
Individual Interviews	Individual Interviews	Document Review	Document Review	Focus Group	Prepared results & discussion
Data Analysis	Data Analysis	Data Analysis	Data Analysis	Data Analysis	Data Analysis

Chapter Four: Discoveries

The purpose of this study is to understand how the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust understands and operationalize inclusion for pupils whose learning profiles include autism in a special school setting. Eight members of the SLT at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust participated in this study. Their understandings were collected through individual interviews as well as a focus group interview. Additionally, a total of 71 policy documents were reviewed in the study. These reviews provided insight into the policies and procedures that guide the SLT's understanding and operationalization of inclusion, particularly for pupils whose learning profile includes autism. This chapter presents the findings resulting from data analysis related to the following research questions that guided this study:

1. How does the Senior Leadership Team at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust in England understand inclusion, particularly for pupils whose learning profile includes autism?
2. How does the Senior Leadership Team at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust operationalize inclusion for pupils whose learning profile includes autism?

Findings are presented through interview number, focus group, and policy number. Pseudonyms are used throughout the document and have been replaced in direct quotes. These techniques are used to ensure confidentiality of school and participant information. Emerging understandings of the continuum of provisions, strategic planning, and ethos at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust are provided.

Continuum of Provisions

Members of the SLT at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust appear to recognize that a traditional continuum of provisions exists (Brock, 2018) in operationalizing inclusion for pupils with disabilities including autism. Members described this continuum in stating,

Some children with vision impairment and, or autism will be in mainstream schools, some might be in a supported resource base in a school, some will be in a special school, and some will be in a residential school. And to me, inclusion means having the range of provision. (Interview 4)

As shown in Figure 2, under the traditional continuum of provisions, the mainstream provision is considered the least restrictive environment for pupils with disabilities followed by the support base being slightly more restrictive. Moving across the continuum, the special school is more restrictive and the residential provision is viewed as the most restrictive environment.



Figure 2. Traditional Continuum of Provisions

As a provision of special schools, Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust is considered one of the most restrictive settings on the traditional continuum for pupils with disabilities, including those with autism. Despite the Trust being one of the more restrictive environments, the SLT at the Trust appear to have constructed a sub-continuum within their schools to support the operationalize of inclusion. The sub-continuum, outlined in Figure 3, does not distinguish between degrees of restriction as the belief is that all pupils work their way through the continuum in an individualized manner that is meaningful to them at any given point in their

development. Further, members say the continuum is pupil-centered as, “It’s about each child feeling first of all, part of the group that they’re part of... I guess, it’s just a series of circles, and its which circle are you in, which circle are you secure in, and can we help you to get on to the next circle” (Interview 7). Progression through the continuum is dependent upon a pupil’s security and understanding of their place in a given community.

The first level of inclusion appears to occur when the pupil understands and feels secure in their home environment. The second level of inclusion occurs in the classroom environment and is underpinned by the notion that, for some pupils with complex disabilities or medical needs, “just by coming to school they’re getting a much wider world than they otherwise would have done” (Interview 7). When a pupil is secure in their classroom community, they may move to the next level of inclusion, the Phase of Schooling circle. Pupils who are developing their understanding of their Phase of Schooling may be beginning to understand they are part of a larger school community. This community might be their current key stage or even their school group, which is identified by colors. Pupils in this level, however, are not yet prepared to understand they are part of a school within the trust, which is the fourth level of inclusion pupils experience. The fifth level of inclusion a pupil may experience along the continuum is belonging and engaging in the local community. Pupils developing in the local community level may experience the community through activities such as local neighborhood walks, working in the school garden, or taking classes in a local mainstream school. In the final level of inclusion, pupils participate in communities beyond their local community. For pupils at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust, engaging in these larger communities might involve studying abroad or exploring employment opportunities. Ultimately, members feel that “there’s a flow between all these layers... from the classroom, to the outside community” (Interview 6).

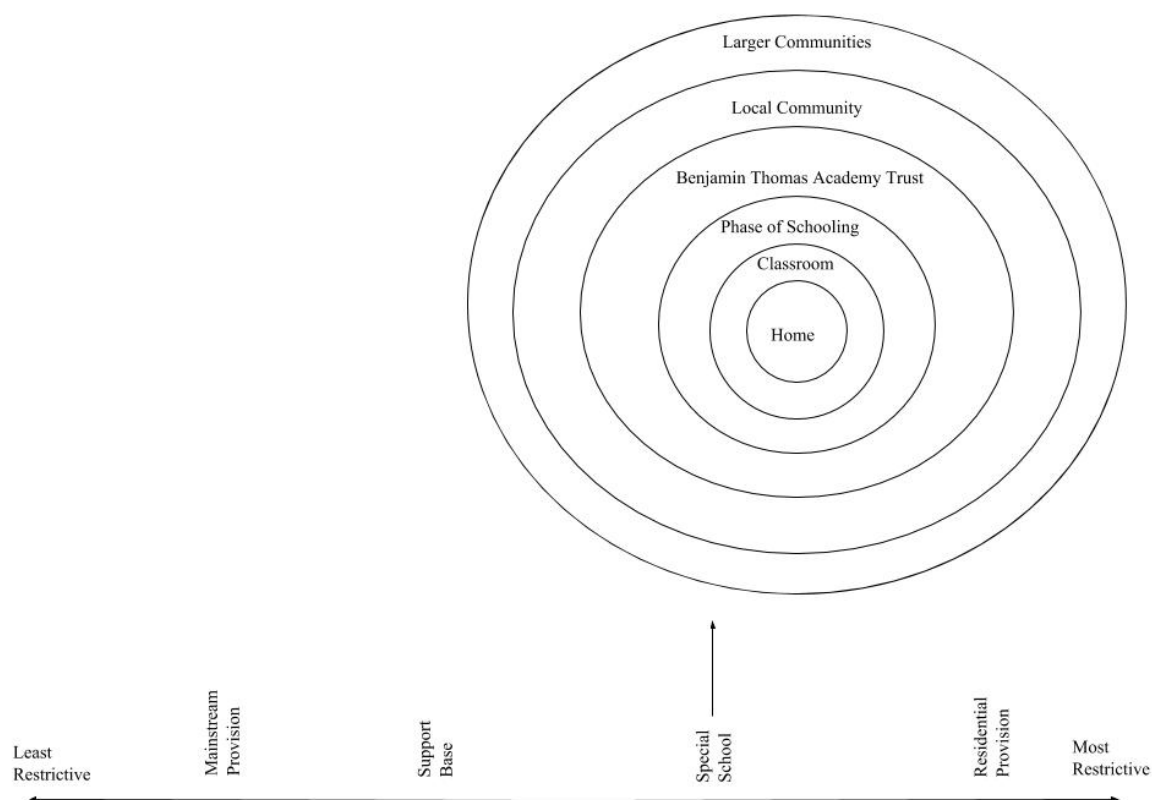


Figure 3. Sub-Continuum of Provisions

Strategic Planning

Policies employed at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust indicate the Trust’s aim to provide “opportunities for inclusion within and beyond the Trust schools” (Policy 59, p.6) through the facilitation of their sub-continuum. In order to do so effectively, members of the SLT appear to engage in ongoing strategic planning. Strategic planning, as it relates to the operationalization of inclusion for pupils whose learning profile includes autism, begins with the structure of the Trust. The SLT also appears to strategically plan for the placement of pupils within the Trust, evaluation systems, and curriculum. A discussion of each component of the Trust’s strategic planning is provided.

Trust structure.

Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust is comprised of Nathaniel Secondary School, Paul Primary School, and Marcus School, which are all considered part of Benjamin Thomas Schools. The Trust also encompasses Jacob Thomas School and the Research and Development Center. Prior to evolving into a Trust, Benjamin Thomas Schools were their own entity as was Jacob Thomas School. For this reason, the Trust added Jacob Thomas School to the structure during the evolution to an academy without altering the structural integrity of Benjamin Thomas Schools. As shown in Figure 4, the eight members of the SLT are strategically placed throughout the Trust in leadership roles.

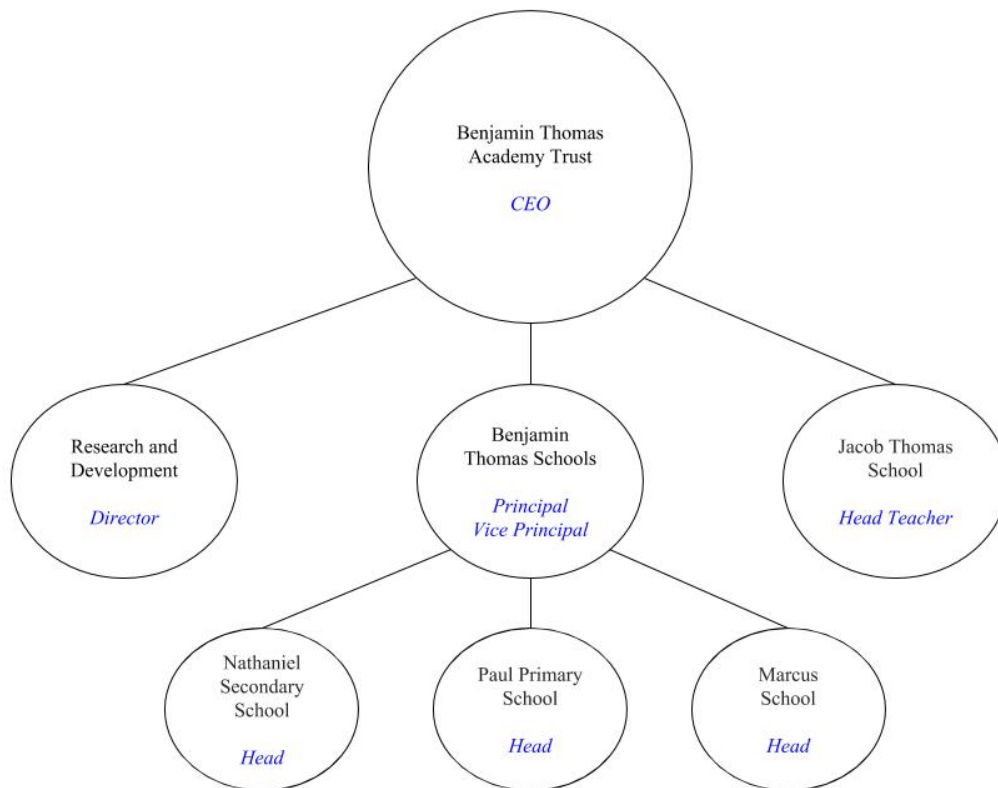


Figure 4. Trust Structure

Each member of the SLT at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust appears to play an integral role in operationalizing inclusion for pupils with disabilities including autism. Members of the team say that they “all have different areas of responsibilities” (Interview 2) such as managing assessments, behavior, international travel, training, or looked after children in their role in the Trust. While each member of the SLT may have varying areas and levels of responsibility, members frequently echoed similar priorities within their roles and responsibilities. First and foremost, members of the SLT emphasized their responsibility to their pupils. “I guess it’s my job to make sure that everybody here learns as much as they can and is as happy as they can. So, I really believe very, very strongly in this mission statement; enjoyment, achievement, wellbeing for all” (Interview 7). The team also expressed their responsibility to, “Make sure that the quality of what’s going on in the school is absolutely High Quality for the children and the families” (Interview 1). In addition to ensuring high quality, members of the SLT consider themselves decision makers for the academy and, “Make sure that everybody is clear as to what’s expected that we have the curriculum, systems, and assessments and everything is as good as they can be” (Interview 7).

Throughout the data collection process, members of the SLT emphasized the importance of collaboration and communication in their ability to fulfill their roles and responsibilities as well as in the operation of the Trust. According to the Trust’s policies, the team acknowledges “the benefits of a team approach. As well as the crucial partnership with parents... the Trust schools make every effort to build strong partnerships with other professionals” (Policy 59, p.8). The facilitation of this team approach appears to permeate throughout the Trust and extend beyond the physical walls of the schools. Members of the team feel, “You need everybody working together and everybody kind of connecting too. It’s not just an SLT thing” (Interview

8). Further, members indicated that “it’s about all the agency work, its having the parents involved, its having other professionals involved and making sure the information that gets shared is what’s needed, but is to the benefit of the child” (Interview 5). This idea was expounded on during a member’s recount of a recent experience. In the focus group, the member shared that “I had to prepare a document for the next director's meeting on partnerships that we have, and I was surprised myself, seeing the list of how many partnerships we have with other organizations who we're reaching out to them or them to us, to support wider access for our young people” (Focus Group). A sample list of partnerships, shown in Table 3, reflects the key stakeholders that members of the SLT mentioned they are likely to work with strategically in order to support the Trust’s aim to provide inclusive opportunities for pupils. Holistically, SLT members feel there are a lot of people working collaboratively to ensure Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust is “a very good multi-professional school” (Interview 8).

Table 3. Stakeholders

Stakeholders	
Within the Trust	Members of the SLT Middle managers Teachers Assistants Support staff Music therapist Research center Pupils Parents and families Family Support Team Teaching school
With Outside Organizations	Mainstream schools Nursing schools Employment location personnel Local colleges International Schools Resource bases Physical, Physio, and Occupational therapists Local hospitals Local Education Agency (LEA) Visual Impairment (VI) Outreach Service

In considering the Trust's structure and collaborative nature, members of the SLT discussed the role of communication in operationalizing inclusion for pupils whose learning profile includes autism. In describing communication across the Trust, the team said, "Our discussions within schools are very much open discussions and open forum" (Interview 5). Members also showed the flow of communication in stating, "We have a constant dialogue about how things are going and what our expectations are for the young people. And so that way, and that could be about curriculum, it can be about safeguarding, and it can be about any, a lot of those things. So, there is a constant flow of information and a constant dialogue" (Interview 1). While the structure of the schools and leadership team might portray a hierarchy, members of the team embrace an open door policy to ensure that stakeholders across the Trust have access to the information needed to be successful in their position. In an interview, a member stated, "They know I have an open-door policy, so they know they can come and go and ask me anything" (Interview 1). It appears that communication is central to the Trust's structure and collaborative nature and that the constant dialogue across stakeholders works to support the Trust's aim to provide inclusive opportunities for all pupils.

Pupil placements.

Pupil placement at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust appears to be strategic in nature and support the operationalization of inclusion for pupils whose learning profile includes autism. As indicated by the structure of the Trust, pupils may be placed in one of four provisions. Within Benjamin Thomas Schools there are "three schools and one primary, one secondary, and one all age" (Interview 3). The fourth school, Jacob Thomas School has both a primary department as well as a secondary department. According to the Trust's policies, pupils may be enrolled in Benjamin Thomas Academy Schools if they have,

Special educational needs in one or more of the following areas: Autistic Spectrum Disorder, Speech Language and Communication, Severe Learning Difficulties, Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties, Multisensory Impairment, Visual Impairment or Hearing Impairment. Children and young people with more than one area of difficulty may be described as having complex needs. (Policy 71, p.3)

The Trust's policies also outline that, in order to enroll at Jacob Thomas School, a pupil must have,

Special educational needs in one or more of the following areas: Vision Impairment, Autistic Spectrum Disorder, Speech Language and Communication Needs, Severe Learning Difficulties, Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties or Multisensory Impairment. Children and young people with more than one area of difficulty may be described as having complex needs. (Policy 36, p.3)

Pupils whose learning profiles include autism may be placed in any one of the four provisions. Members say children with autism “are placed in two kind of discrete schools, with a school, not labeled that they're schools for children with autism, but they are schools for children with autism and learning difficulties” (Interview 8). The schools described by the member are the primary and secondary schools that fall under Benjamin Thomas Schools. Pupils in Benjamin Thomas School's all age school “have profound and multiple learning difficulties that may or may not include autism” (Interview 3). Jacob Thomas School has some pupils

Who have autism and that's their primary disability of need and we have autism that has arisen as a result of their vision or other impairments. And we have young people with autism that might be less severe than others. So, we, in our school we have the complete

ability range, the complete range of vision or not vision and severe autism or less severe autism. (Interview 4)

Dialogue with each member of the team confirmed that individuals with autism as a primary or secondary diagnosis may be placed in any one of the four provisions; however, the primary and secondary schools under Benjamin Thomas Schools appear to be the most frequently considered placement for pupils with a primary diagnosis of autism.

For members of the team at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust, it appears that having four provisions for pupils whose learning profiles may include autism is only the beginning of understanding pupil placement. In fact, members suggest, “It is a bit of a jig saw every year to get the groups working, but we work according to what the children are focused with” (Interview 5). In order to determine pupil placement and make the puzzle work, members cite a variety of factors that are typically considered. Pupil grouping appears to start with “age first and then within the age group seeing how individual needs can be met. And teacher strengths, support staff strengths, and often continuity” (Interview 7). In considering pupil needs, members stated, “We look at communication, we look at behavior, we look at sensory needs, and so we look at each pupil as an individual” (Interview 2). Additionally, members stated that they also analyze pupil “curriculum ability, their social interactions.” (Interview 5). Members noted that in determining pupil placement by individual needs, “We have sometimes moved pupils out of key stages” (Interview 2). While individual needs appear to always be considered in creating class groups, members indicated that

For most of primary there are parallel classes and it’s a question of just trying to make a cohesive group. As you get into secondary, then they do divide according to the different

curriculum pathway again so the children can experience the curriculum that they need.

(Interview 7)

The flexibility and focus on individual pupil needs, specifically in solving the placement puzzle within the Trust, appears to serve as a foundation for operationalizing inclusion as the placement in which a pupil is educated seems to play a role in the Trust's sub-continuum of inclusion.

Curriculum.

The curriculum at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust appears to promote the understandings of inclusion the SLT shared with me for pupils with disabilities including autism. Members of the SLT suggest,

We have our own curriculum and the curriculum drives inclusion as well; its we start with what we value, what is important for our children, then its we make sure we have the curriculum that delivers and teachers to the children and what and we teach, what we value, and then we have something to measure what we value, what we teach anyway

(Interview 3).

Members indicated that "Our curriculum is designed out of the needs of the children and is very much driven by the children and the teaching staff" (Interview 5). Further, members stated,

The whole curriculum is designed to meet every individual's needs. So, we've got the four strands. So, all children will fit in to one of those school strands. So, it meets their needs. So, a 5-year-old, a 10-year-old, and a 15-year-old might all be working within one aspect of the curriculum because that curriculum meets their needs. Whereas the national curriculum might say at 7 all children are doing this. Here, we say all right at 5, or 15, or 10 these children are doing this so they need these resources, this curriculum. (Interview 8)

Each of the four curriculum paths at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust aim to develop pupils who are successful life-long learners, responsible citizens, confident, and effective communicators (Policy 10). The first path is focused on sensory learning in which pupils with the most complex disabilities learn through routines, sensory experiences, and adult interactions (Policy 10). The second path is exploratory in nature and embraces learning through exploring, play, practical activities, and involvement in the community (Policy 10). In the third path, “Pupils access the National Curriculum Programmes of Study and the syllabi for examinations, adapted and augmented in the light of individual needs. They also follow personalized programmes of study developed within the school for non-examination subjects” (Policy 10, p.6). The fourth and final curriculum path in the Trust is designed for pupils who are post 16 and focuses on life after school. Specifically, the curriculum aims to prepare pupils for work, college, and supported or independent living, or independent living (Policy 10).

Members of the SLT indicated that access to “ordinary” life experiences, appropriate to the need of each pupil, are integrated throughout the different curriculum paths in order to operationalize inclusion for pupils whose learning profiles might include autism. Members stated,

So, we try to tailor the curriculum in such a way, especially when you go out to more senior years, that teaches the children the skills they need to operate in society and they go out to the community a lot and we have that infrastructure for the children to enable them to go out in the community irrespective of what is the level of need. We provide these opportunities for all the children. For some it will take a long time compared to some others. Some of those may never be able to go out into the community independently or with support. (Interview 3)

Within the Trust, experiences might include attending assemblies, participating in presentations by community members, visiting the school garden, participating in school-based meet and greets, cooking food, or walking around the block. Outside of the Trust, pupils might attend courses in a local mainstream school, attend supported college courses, facilitate presentations, study abroad, participate in full time employment, participate in sports competitions, or visit local shops and cafes. It appears the Trust's "aim would be to get all classes off site to something positive in the local community or to follow up on their Science or Maths or something in the real world" (Interview 7). According to the Trust's policies,

Educational visits and partnership activities are an important part of our children and young people's education, giving them opportunities whilst being as safe as reasonably possible to:

- to enjoy new and interesting experiences
- to learn about the environment
- to learn to negotiate their environment
- to learn about the local community
- to practice and progress their skills in real-life situations (Policy 13, p.3).

In providing these experiences, members appear to constantly be "thinking what is the next step is for access to ordinary life experiences for that child" (Interview 4). As such, these experiences appear to support the Trust's sub-continuum of inclusion.

Evaluation systems.

Members of the SLT at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust described a robust evaluation system as essential to their operationalization of inclusion for pupils whose learning profiles include autism. Evaluations across the Trust appear to assess practices as well as pupil progress.

In order to evaluate practices, members of the SLT described lesson walks and formal observations as two sources of data. In responding to what types of evaluations the Trust uses members stated,

Lesson observations, learning walks, we've just looked at are children engaged... and then we have more formal lesson observations where we would watch one teacher for between twenty minutes and half an hour and the key thing in there is seeing all the children engaged, is differentiation effective? (Interview 7)

Members also indicated that the school improvement plan guides the evaluation of practices across the Trust. It appears this improvement plan is the foundation for the standard items that the team consistently monitors. In describing these standard items, members stated,

We look at what's happening in the school, we look at teacher planning, we look at behavior, and we look at everything else that is current and anything else that may perhaps, or there is a very solid plan of what needs to be achieved, and we then rubric that down and everything else that needs to be discussed. (Interview 3)

Further, members stated that “focus groups that discuss policies” (Interview 6) are often used to evaluate practices. At the governmental level, the Trust also uses the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted) inspection reports as a major tool to monitor practices across the Trust.

In describing the philosophy of pupil assessments, the Trust’s policies state,
Assessment is not an end in itself; its purpose is to support teaching and learning.
Accurate assessment supports planning by enabling class teams to identify the strategies which overcome individual barriers to learning and which motivate pupils to engage in

learning activities. Assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning which teachers plan for in every lesson. (Policy 3, p.4)

Discussions with members of the SLT regarding pupil assessments appear to reflect the Trust's assessment policies. Members stated, "I would say our assessments are very individualized because of our pupils being so particular in the way they learn, we cannot do a kind of blanket assessment" (Interview 5). Members of the SLT highlighted an extensive list of pupil assessments used across the Trust to measure progress. These assessments might include P-scales, which are "a recognized and common language, if you like, nationally and where the children are at, and this is what special schools have been using for a long time" (Interview 3). Additionally, pupil assessments might be about "pupils being able to engage with the environment around them, with the people within their environment, with their peers within their environment, and most of that evidence comes through staff observation and the assessment data that they write up" (Interview 5). Further, teachers and members of the SLT use an evaluation called

Factors, FAPLS, Factors Affecting Progress and Learning and we'll comment them down and look at a way reversing that, looking at a way of actioning, what is it? Is it to do with the family? Is it a certain thing to do with the children? Is it to do with behavior? And what is behavior, behaviors communication? What is that telling us, so it's all quite finely and accurately and there are specific weeks in school that we must have that information by so nothing can slip for that child. (Interview 1)

Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust also monitors measures related to attendance, behavior, and "individualized objectives or targets" (Interview 1).

Each of the above-mentioned evaluations are described as components of the person-centered review process. This person-centered review process takes place annually and is frequently referred to as the annual review. During the annual review,

Parents, therapists, teachers come together and look at the progress and what they want for the young person, what the young person themselves wants and from that we'll formulate what we can do for that young person that's in the best interest of the young person's choices as well. (Interview 1)

The annual review appears to be an ongoing process that informs the teaching and learning process, which may impact inclusion for pupils whose learning profile includes autism. Members stated,

We have high expectations and high expectations of teacher's quality of delivery, and teaching and learning. So we know where the children want to be, where they should be, we know how to get them there through the teaching and learning, and you marry those together in its continuous cycle of teaching and learning, progress measures informing the teaching and learning. (Interview 1)

Holistically, the evaluation of practices and pupil progress are described as essential to the operationalization of inclusion at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust.

Ethos

Ethos is defined by Merriam-Webster dictionary as "the distinguishing character, sentiment, moral nature, or guiding beliefs of a person, group, or institution" (Ethos, n.d.). Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust appears to embrace an ethos of inclusivity. Their beliefs of inclusion are referred to as

A thread that goes across the school and this is what we do when we get the children, when we group the children in classes. We look at what the needs are, how these children can be members of the group, how can they function in the group, and what can we do to accommodate their needs, how can we adapt our responses and our teaching style to get to where they are and pull them up and help them grow. There's a lot of pedagogy in it. It is about leading the child, and inclusion is very much what drives it. (Interview 3)

Inclusion is “not something that is separate that we think let's have a bit of this because we need to tick off the box for inclusion. It's weaved in, it's what we talk about and there's always opportunities” (Interview 1). The ethos of inclusivity is described as “an undercurrent in everything we do. Whether we directly say it in a policy or something clear. I think we just have that shared understanding that everything we're doing in life is to support these young people to access more of life in a way that meets their needs” (Focus Group). The Trust's ethos of inclusivity appears to manifest itself as pupil-centered educational experiences.

The Trust's focus on providing an ethos of inclusivity through pupil-centered educational experiences appears to begin with the Trust's mission statement: “Enjoyment, achievement and wellbeing for all” (Policy 59, p.3). Members echoed this sentiment in stating, “Happiness, achievement, and wellbeing is the overarching policy” (Interview 1). Members described a focus on individual needs, pupil voice, belonging, independence, and potential as some of the primary categories in which the Trust appears to enact the mission statement and facilitate an ethos of inclusivity.

According to the Trust's policies, the Trust aims to help pupils: a. “have their individual academic, social, emotional, medical and care needs fully met with dignity, respect and empathy”, b. “develop a ‘voice’, with the self-confidence to express themselves and make

positive choices”, c. “to be themselves and feel accepted for who they are”, d. become as independent and self-reliant as possible, and e. “make progress from their own starting points and achieve the best that they are capable of” (Policy 59, p. 3-4). Members reflected these policy aims in their discussion of their understandings of inclusion for pupils whose learning profile includes autism. In describing inclusion members stated,

Inclusion is about meeting a child’s individual needs. With the goal that people should have as ordinary life experiences and ordinary opportunities that anyone else does to the degree that it meets that individual’s needs. So, you would have the model that you would want people, as much as possible, to determine their own future, to have opportunities for work, pleasure, homes, family life, religious and other freedoms. And, inclusion, in my mind, is how that translates for an individual person in terms of access and opportunity. (Interview 4)

In meeting these individual needs, members appear to believe pupil voice is essential. “It’s actually listening to the children themselves. What they need too. That’s most important and what they want and what they need” (Interview 8). Further members stated,

A very important tool in making inclusion real is equipping our staff to communicate effectively and giving children a genuine choice, which I do believe again, from being about the school that our staff do give children a real voice and try and understand what it is they’re saying. (Interview 8)

For staff, this may mean, “using different communication modes for individual children and allowing individual children to communicate in their own way” (Interview 7).

Inclusion, as described by members of the SLT, is very much about belonging. Inclusion is “about being included in the world around them” (Interview 5). It is also about “in that

community you feeling that you belong to that community and that community welcomes you” (Member 7). In recognizing the importance of belonging in their understanding of inclusion, members state that their role in facilitating belonging means their “job is not just educational it’s social as well. It’s getting them into social settings where they’re accepted and allowed to be who they are safely. And be accepted there” (Interview 5).

It appears the SLT’s focus on meeting individual needs, pupil voice, and belonging intersect to create their ultimate goals of inclusion: Independence and pupils reaching their maximum potential. Members shared inclusion is, “Ensuring that you are putting in place everything that enables pupils to have the best opportunity, access, and enjoy, and achieve in every subject area” (Interview 2). Members added to this sentiment that inclusion “means making sure that everybody’s individual needs and abilities are met and they have the opportunities and the right resources and supports of everybody to enable them to then be independent” (Interview 8). For members of the SLT, it appears inclusion is providing pupils education experiences that meet each pupil’s individual needs, helping pupils find their voice, assisting pupils in finding the community in which they belong, and scaffolding pupil growth to maximize potential all while keeping in mind that “the ultimate end is preparing them for a life. An independent life” (Interview 1).

Summary

The findings in this study reflect Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust’s senior leadership team’s understandings in relation to the following research questions:

1. How does the Senior Leadership Team at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust in England understand inclusion, particularly for pupils whose learning profile includes autism?

2. How does the Senior Leadership Team at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust operationalize inclusion for pupils whose learning profile includes autism?

Members expressed the strategic nature of operationalizing inclusion. Specifically, members described a sub-continuum of inclusion, the Trust's structure, pupil placements, curriculum, and evaluation systems as integral components of inclusion at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust. Further, the team described an ethos of inclusivity that embraces the Trust's mission of "Enjoyment, achievement and wellbeing for all." In doing so, members emphasized their understandings of inclusion to center around meeting individual needs, pupil voice, belonging, independence, and pupil potential.

Chapter Five: Discussion

In this chapter, I discuss the findings of this study in relation to the research questions. I will also discuss the limitations of the study as well as implications for future research.

Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust serves pupils with disabilities, including those with autism, in a segregated setting; however, members of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) describe their school using the terms ‘inclusion’ and ‘inclusive.’ England’s legal definition of inclusion focuses on where pupils with disabilities are served, for example, the mainstream classroom (Children and Families Act, 2014). By legal definition, the Trust is not an inclusive setting as the Trust does not serve pupils with disabilities alongside their peers who are typically developing. This inquiry aimed to further understand how the SLT at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust understands and facilitates inclusion for pupils whose learning profiles include autism in a special school setting.

Eight members of the SLT at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust participated in this study. Their understandings of inclusion were collected through individual interviews as well as a focus group interview. Additionally, a total of 72 policy documents were reviewed in the study. These reviews provided insight into the policies and procedures that guide the SLT’s understanding and operationalization of inclusion, particularly for pupils with a learning profile that includes autism. Further, I used a reflexive journal throughout each stage of this inquiry in order to guide my decision-making process. My reflexive journal served as a place to pose questions and considerations as well as a form of checks and balances.

This study contributes to the field of education as it explores the understandings and operationalization of inclusion in a school that is viewed, on the traditional continuum of inclusion provisions, as one of the most restrictive settings for pupils with disabilities including autism. The study further contributes to the discussion on the meaning and understanding of inclusion for educators across the globe. The research questions that guided this inquiry are:

1. How does the Senior Leadership Team at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust in England understand inclusion, particularly for pupils whose learning profile includes autism?
2. How does the Senior Leadership Team at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust operationalize inclusion for pupils whose learning profile includes autism?

A discussion of the research questions is presented in relation to the study findings and literature surrounding inclusion in England.

Question 1: How does the Senior Leadership Team at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust in England understand inclusion, particularly for pupils whose learning profile includes autism?

The primary policy guiding education for pupils with disabilities in England, the Children and Families Act 2014, indicates that a pupil with an Education, Health, and Care plan (EHC) must be educated in a mainstream school unless the parents choose a special provision or the mainstream provision is not compatible with the efficient education for other pupils. A pupil with special education needs who does not have an EHC must be educated in the mainstream school but may be placed in an independent school or special school under specific circumstances, such as a need for an EHC assessment (Children and Families Act, 2014). For members of the SLT at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust, this understanding of inclusion

appears to be evident in their acknowledgment of a traditional continuum of inclusion provisions (Brock, 2018) for pupils with autism. The view of the mainstream classroom being least restrictive and the special school being one of the more restrictive settings appears to align with the government's view of a pupil needing to be educated in the mainstream classroom unless a specific set of criteria are met.

While the members of the Trust appear to understand, and validate, the existence of the national placement-based policies and the traditional continuum of services, England also subscribes to an international policy that guides inclusion. A year after the adoption of the Children and Families Act (2014), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) adopted Education 2030, which mandates equal access for all pupils including pupils with disabilities. Two years after the adoption of Education 2030, UNESCO released a (2017) guiding document, which defines inclusion as “a process that helps to overcome barriers limiting the presence, participation and achievement of learners” (UNESCO, 2017a, p.5). In juxtaposition, the guide defines integration as individuals with ‘special educational needs’ being placed in the mainstream classroom with some accommodations and resources with the expectation that they will function within the pre-existing structure and environment (UNESCO, 2017a). Members of the SLT at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust appear to embrace the international guidance in their understanding of inclusion as their ethos emphasizes inclusivity for all pupils through pupil-centered educational experiences.

The members' acknowledgment of the setting-based policies guiding the traditional continuum of provision appears to merge with their ethos of inclusivity and mission statement of “Enjoyment, achievement and wellbeing for all.” These national and international policies, as well as the ethos at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust, indicate the Trust has an understanding of

inclusion that is focused on meeting the individual needs of pupils. Florian (2014) states “inclusive pedagogy is an approach to teaching and learning that supports teachers to respond to individual differences between learners, but avoids the marginalisation that can occur when some students are treated differently” (p.289). This notion is echoed in the findings of this study as it appears the core of the SLT’s understandings of inclusion for pupils with disabilities, including autism, is the idea that the needs of pupils come first.

Further, members appear to believe effective inclusion occurs when members of the Trust are able to identify a pupil’s medical, social, behavioral, academic, and sensory needs and determine the best way to assist the pupil in developing in their unique areas of need. Members appear to believe tailoring a pupil’s educational experience to their individual needs allows pupils greater access to opportunities. For example, a pupil with autism who may have challenging behaviors might have the opportunity to study abroad as a result of the Trust identifying and meeting the pupil’s needs. Without the individualized instruction and supports, this same pupil may not have been prepared to attend a study abroad program and, in turn, would not experience inclusion to the greatest extent possible. These understandings are supported by the literature, which states, “Nothing is more essential to expanding inclusive educational opportunities than the quality of problem solving that goes into identifying and arranging supports within the context of what content is taught, how content is taught, and where content is taught” (Thompson, Walker, Shogren, & Wehmeyer, 2018, p.399).

Members of the SLT also described inclusion as being about pupils feeling a sense of belonging in a given community. This is supported by the work of Shogren et al. (2015) who reported that pupils link “their sense of belonging to the philosophy of inclusive education that permeated their schools” (p.248). A sense of belonging is defined as, “a relationally derived

psychosocial construct that has been used to describe the “sense of fit” or “feelings of acceptance” that an individual feels to one’s community” (Bouchard & Berg, 2017, p.107). For pupils at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust, it appears that the community in which a pupil belongs is often determined by the pupil’s unique needs and placement within the Trust. For some pupils, the classroom might be the community that appropriately meets their needs whereas for others, the college setting might be the most appropriate. While there is a wide variety of communities a pupil may experience at the Trust, a pupil in a college setting and a pupil in a classroom setting are both viewed by members as receiving inclusion to the maximum extent possible if both pupils feel a sense of acceptance and belonging in their given community.

For members of the SLT, inclusion appears to also be about facilitating pupil voice. This appears to begin by the Trust identifying the most appropriate communication mode that meets an individual pupil’s needs. For many individuals with autism this may mean the use of “behaviors such as pointing, reaching, eye gazing, and various facial expressions to present their needs” (Xin & Leanord, 2015, p. 4154). It might also mean considering if the pupil is a candidate for Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) (Xin & Leanord, 2015). Regardless of the pupil’s communication mode, members of the SLT do not appear to believe simple communication of wants and needs reflects the greatest level of inclusion possible. Rather, the SLT appears to believe inclusion occurs when the pupil is able to advocate for their wants and needs. This means, the goal is for all pupils to have their voice at the table when it is time for decisions to be made about their education. For pupils at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust, this might mean involvement in the annual review process where the pupil communicates “their preferences in relation to their education by reporting on their strengths, weaknesses and goals for the future” (Bergin, 2013, p.81). Ultimately, it appears inclusion means that members of the

Trust aim to help pupils have a voice in their life and educational decisions regardless of their communication mode or level of fluency.

Members of the SLT at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust believe independence and pupil potential are the ultimate indicators of inclusion. The notion that independence and pupil potential appear to be critical to the member's view on inclusion align with the understanding that, "Functional independence and behavioral autonomy are key contributors to optimal post-secondary outcomes for all students, but play a critical role in the success of students with ASD" (Hume, Boyd, Hamm, & Kucharczyk, 2014, p.104). Members of the SLT describe inclusion as effective when pupils are consistently moving toward living a life of independence to the maximum extent possible. This description is supported by Hornby (2015) who states, "The major goal of education for children with SEND must be to facilitate independence, a sense of well-being and active participation in the communities in which they live" (p. 243). For some pupils, this may mean being able to work in supported employment, attend supported college, or live in a supported housing facility. For others, this might mean being able to do a load of laundry, shopping at the grocery store, or being able to use assistive technology to communicate their wants and needs. It appears that, for members of the SLT, pupils who are independent or who are on their way to independence in any given activity are considered to be experiencing the ultimate inclusion as they are living an independent life to the maximum extent possible.

Holistically, it appears the Trust recognizes the role of placement in their understanding of inclusion but does not subscribe to the notion that inclusion is defined and bound by the setting in which a pupil is educated. In fact, inclusion can be effective in all settings on the traditional continuum if the focus is on the pupil's needs, sense of belonging, voice, and the desire for pupils to continuously work towards living a meaningful, independent life to the best

of his or her ability. These findings appear to support the belief that inclusion is viewed through a broader lens than pupil placement in the mainstream classroom, separate classroom, or the special school. Inclusion is a “system of policy and practices that embraces diversity as a strength, creates a sense of belonging, equal membership, acceptance, and being valued, and involves fundamental civil rights” (Jones, Fauske, & Carr, 2011, p. 9).

Question 2: How does the Senior Leadership Team at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust operationalize inclusion for pupils whose learning profile includes autism?

Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust is designated as a Multi Academy Trust (MAT). By definition, this means Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust is comprised of a group of schools that make up a single legal entity. As such, the Trust has a board of trustees or directors and articles of association that serve as their governing body and document (National Governors’ Association, 2015). This designation appears to be imperative in understanding the findings of this study. As indicated in the findings, Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust has a total of four provisions. Each provision plays a unique role in the school’s ability to operationalize inclusion for pupils with a learning profile that includes autism. In fact, the Trust’s structure appears to be one of the foundational aspects of the school’s ongoing strategic planning process.

When Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust strategically converted into an academy, the schools gained new privileges and flexibilities. Legally, the Trust was no longer required to use the national curriculum, was no longer governed by the Local Education Authority (LEA), received additional funds to cover services provided by the LEA, could make changes to school times and academic calendar schedules, and had greater financial flexibility (Eyles, Machin, & McNally, 2017). Further, “the ethos and branding of the successful schools seems to have permeated into the struggling school” (Chapman, 2013, p. 340). The benefits of converting into a

MAT appears to have positive implications for the Trust's operationalization of inclusion for pupils with learning profiles that include autism.

The findings of this study indicate that, through the Trust's strategic planning and structure, the school's ability to strategically consider pupil placement, the curriculum, and evaluation systems are imperative to the successful operationalization of inclusion. The findings suggest that having four provisions for pupils within the Trust allows members of the SLT to determine which provision is the best fit for a pupil. The team described working through a jigsaw puzzle in order to determine where pupils are placed. Members stated that special consideration is given to pupil needs, curriculum path, age, behavior, peer relationships, and teacher strengths. Without the Trust's structure and strategic planning, there would not be multiple placement opportunities for pupils. Without the four schools, it is likely pupils would be housed in one school regardless of need. Based on the SLT's understanding of inclusion, failure to consider individual needs in placement would also result in the failure of inclusion within the Trust.

The findings of this study also suggest that curriculum plays a large role in the Trust's operationalization of inclusion for pupils with disabilities including autism. Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust's designation as a MAT provides the Trust the flexibility to determine their own curriculum paths for pupils and are not bound to the national curriculum (Eyles, Machin, & McNally, 2017). This flexibility appears to have allowed the Trust to create the four curriculum paths used across the Trust. Findings show that members of the SLT believe the various curriculum paths allow the Trust to meet each individual pupil's needs while ensuring growth. Thus, these findings indicate that the curriculum paths are essential to the Trust's operationalization of inclusion.

The evaluation systems, like pupil placement and curriculum decisions, appear to play an integral role in the Trust's operationalization of inclusion for pupils with learning profiles that include autism. Members discussed robust evaluations of teachers and pupils as a means to understanding the effectiveness of inclusion. Specifically, these evaluations allow members of the SLT to determine whether individual pupil needs are being met and if not answer the question of "why?". Further, evaluations appear to allow the members of the SLT to identify strengths, weaknesses, and potential gaps in the delivery of curriculum and educational opportunities for pupils. Evaluations ultimately serve as a form of "checks and balance" to ensure pupils are benefiting from the ethos of inclusivity at the Trust.

Limitations

This study presented multiple limitations for consideration. This study used participant selection methods consistent with Stake's case study methodology. As such, I did not conduct sampling research in order to understand other cases (Stake, 1995). This study was conducted with the intention of understanding a single case, the SLT at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust. With this, the participants in this study were small in number and only represent individuals who are considered part of the SLT at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust. Further, this case study approach means the findings only represent the views of a single case in England. While this methodological approach did not allow for a wide variety of perspectives and resulted in a small number of participants, this approach did allow for a depth of understanding not otherwise possible.

Another limitation in this study is the potential impact of my own beliefs and understandings of inclusion. I conducted this study at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust after a study abroad experience, which left me questioning the Trust's views on inclusion. As a previous

teacher of children with autism, I have constructed my own views and beliefs about the understandings and operationalization of inclusion for pupils with learning profiles that include autism. Further, this study was conducted in an international context. As such, the potential for my own cultural understandings influencing the findings exist. These potential limitations, however, are embraced in the use of an interpretivist lens and the study design.

Implications for Future Research

Future research is needed on the understandings and operationalization of inclusion for pupils with disabilities, including autism, who are served in traditionally restrictive environments. Specifically, exploration of parent, teacher, classroom support personnel, and pupil perspectives should be considered. Researchers might consider replicating the current case study approach using interviews and focus groups in order to gain an in depth understanding of a specific group of stakeholders. Consideration of wide spread survey data collection across stakeholder groups might also provide a wide breadth of data regarding the topic.

Future research on the understandings and operationalization of inclusion for pupils with disabilities, including autism, who are served in traditionally restrictive environments should also focus on a variety of provisions. For example, in England pupils with disabilities who are not served in the mainstream setting may be served in a support base, a special school, or residential provision. Research might continue the current study in looking at the understandings and operationalization of inclusion across senior leaders in the varying provisions. Research might also focus on varying stakeholders, as described above, across the different provisions.

Additionally, research on inclusion for pupils with disabilities, including autism, who are not served in the mainstream classroom should focus on a variety of cultural contexts. While UNESCO's Education 2030 policy is an international policy, nations across the globe are likely

to have government-level policies that guide the education of pupils with disabilities across their nations. These policies, as in the case of Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust, are likely to impact the understandings and operationalization of inclusion for pupils who are served in more restrictive settings. Research into these policies as well as the understandings and approaches to operationalizing inclusion should be considered meaningful to the current discussion on inclusion.

The implications for future research are truly limitless as a paucity of research exists on the understandings and operationalization of inclusion in special schools and segregated settings. Further exploration of this topic and potential variations, as outlined above, have the potential to impact the literature base as well as practice regarding inclusion in the more restrictive settings.

Conclusion

This case study aimed to investigate how the SLT at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust in England understands and operationalizes inclusion, particularly for pupils whose learning profile includes autism. Findings of this study appear to support the minimal literature available on the topic. Further, the findings of this study serve as a starting point in addressing the paucity of research on the operationalization and understandings of inclusion for pupils with learning profiles that include autism in a more restrictive setting.

This study sheds light on the Trust's ethos of inclusivity, which emphasizes pupil-centered educational opportunities and serves as a foundation for the members' understandings of inclusion. Inclusion, for members of the SLT at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust, means meeting the individual needs of pupils, facilitating pupil voice, facilitating a sense of belonging, promoting independence, and maximizing pupil potential. Further, the study highlights the importance of strategic planning, Trust structure, pupil placement, curriculum, and evaluation

systems in operationalizing inclusions for pupils with disabilities including autism. When combining the SLT's understandings and operationalization of inclusion for pupils with learning profiles that include autism, it is evident that inclusion is not determined by placement, but rather belonging in a given community. As such, it appears inclusion is dependent upon strategic planning that promotes success for all pupils.

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Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

1. How many years have you been in the education field?
2. Please briefly talk about your path to becoming a member of the SLT.
3. Talk about your current role at Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust.
4. How would you define or describe inclusion?
5. Talk about the placement of pupils with autism in your provision.
6. Talk about the policies and procedures that guide your understanding of inclusion?
7. How do you, as a member of the SLT, operationalize inclusion for pupils with autism?
8. Talk about the types of evaluation systems or measurements Benjamin Thomas Academy Trust use to measure inclusive practices.

Appendix B: Semi-Structured Focus Group

1. Throughout my time here at Whitefield I have heard and read about the inclusion practices and policies put in place for pupils with autism. A focus on meeting individual needs, providing access to the community, pupil-centered practices, and providing opportunities that allow a pupil to have the most fulfilling life after school surfaced. I would love to hear more about what each of these mean for pupils with autism.
2. In talking with each of you and looking at the Trust's policies, I have learned about the unique role each individual on the SLT plays in operationalizing inclusion for pupils with autism. I am interested in hearing more about how the SLT, as a group, works to operationalize inclusion for pupils with autism.
3. As I have started looking at the policies and the interviews I have had with each of you, an emerging theme of the role of stakeholders has arisen. Talk about the role of various stakeholders in inclusion across the Trust.
4. The SEN policy states, "The Trust schools work with other mainstream and special schools and colleges to provide inclusion programmes and to enhance the curriculum as necessary." Talk more about what this means in practice.
5. Throughout my interviews with each of you, my review of the Trust's policies, and learning about the research center, a focus on professional development for all members of staff is evident. I am interested to hear how professional development for staff members impacts inclusion at the Trust.

Appendix C: University of South Florida's Institutional Review Board Approval



RESEARCH INTEGRITY AND COMPLIANCE
Institutional Review Boards, FWA No. 00001669
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May 22, 2018

Danielle Nowosiadlo
Teaching and Learning
4202 East Fowler Ave
Tampa, FL 33620

RE: **Expedited Approval for Initial Review**

IRB#: Pro00035343

Title: Autism and Inclusion in England's Multi Academy Trust: A Case Study of a Senior Leadership Team

Study Approval Period: 5/22/2018 to 5/22/2019

Dear Ms. Nowosiadlo:

On 5/22/2018, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and **APPROVED** the above application and all documents contained within, including those outlined below.

Approved Item(s):

Protocol Document(s):

[protocol_V1_5-19-18.docx](#)

Consent/Assent Document(s)*:

[Informed Consent_V1_5-19-18.docx.pdf](#)

*Please use only the official IRB stamped informed consent/assent document(s) found under the "Attachments" tab. Please note, these consent/assent documents are valid until the consent document is amended and approved.

It was the determination of the IRB that your study qualified for expedited review which includes activities that (1) present no more than minimal risk to human subjects, and (2) involve only procedures listed in one or more of the categories outlined below. The IRB may review research through the expedited review procedure authorized by 45CFR46.110 . The research