NCSE PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH PROGRAMME 2025/26

SCHOOL RESEARCH SUMMARY

School name: Welchtown N.S

Practising teacher lead: Julie McGee

Research theme: The Impact of Sensory Movement Breaks on Focus and Behaviour in a Primary School Classroom

Research aim:

- To explore how sensory/movement breaks can be effectively implemented within the primary school day.
- To assess the impact of these breaks on pupils' ability to regulate emotions and behaviour.
- To examine changes in pupil focus, participation, and engagement with learning.
- To evaluate teacher and SNA perspectives on the practicality and effectiveness of implementing these interventions.
- To inform future inclusive practice in the school and contribute to the school's SSE process.

Methods

- Observations of classroom behaviours before and after implementation.
- Teacher and SNA interviews to gather reflective feedback.
- Pupil feedback (where appropriate) using visual supports or short structured activities.
- Review of relevant documentation (e.g., Individual Education Plans, behaviour support plans).
- Participants included two special needs assistants and 4 pupils (2 boys and 2 girls):
    - Boy A, age 9 (Autism diagnosis)
    - Boy B, age 8 (Autism and ADHD diagnosis)
    - Girl A, age 12 (Autism diagnosis)
    - Girl B, age 9 (Autism diagnosis).

Research findings

The study demonstrated that the planned, consistent use of structured sensory/movement breaks had a positive overall impact on pupils' ability to regulate their emotions, sustain attention, and engage more effectively in classroom learning. The pupil with Autism and ADHD (comorbidities) benefited least noticeably from the intervention. It must be noted that only pupils in our school with at least one diagnosed additional need were used in this study.

Overall, the findings highlighted that sensory/movement breaks are a practical, low-cost strategy that can be embedded into the school day to support inclusion, well-being, and positive behaviour for learning.

The research also showed that when these breaks were proactively planned rather than used reactively, there was a reduction in dysregulation, fewer behavioural incidents, and smoother transitions between activities.

The boys appeared to benefit less from the more structured sensory break, such as the one used in this study, which set out a clear plan for each day. The girls, however, seemed to enjoy the structure included in this type of break, following the next step meticulously and in order. The boys are younger than the girls, and this may have been a factor. Boy A, age 9, Boy B, age 8. Girl A, age 12 (A.S.D diagnosis), Girl B, age 9 (A.S.D diagnosis).

All pupils enjoyed "deep pressure exercises," such as rolling a yoga ball over their backs, and actively requested them daily. This was the most enjoyable activity for the pupils and produced the best results in terms of more regulated behaviour afterwards for all pupils.

Research findings

The study also highlighted that boy A, in particular, struggled with gross motor skills, making some activities, such as crouching to move through a tunnel, very difficult.

Boy A (A.S.D. diagnosis) was always more regulated upon returning to class.

Boy B showed some improvement in regulation after the sensory breaks, but on most occasions, the breaks had no impact on his return to the classroom. Boy B has been diagnosed with A.S.D. and ADHD. The intervention involving movement-based sensory breaks did not improve classroom regulation for him or task readiness for Boy B. This lack of response could perhaps be attributed to the co-occurrence of ASD and ADHD, where high-intensity movement may have caused overstimulation or transition difficulties rather than the intended physiological regulation.

For dually diagnosed children, standard movement breaks can sometimes increase arousal levels beyond the "optimal window" for learning, making the return to sedentary classwork more challenging.

Some days, the length of sessions/tasks felt too long and needed to be adjusted, as and when required, based on the pupils' demeanour that day or when other school activities were taking place.

We found it difficult to complete all scheduled sensory breaks during the week leading up to the Christmas break due to other activities and trips.

My top three findings

Improved focus and engagement
Overall, most pupils demonstrated some increased on-task behaviour following sensory/movement breaks. Teachers and SNAs observed longer periods of concentration during lessons, particularly after movement-based activities were embedded into the timetable.

Enhanced emotional regulation and behaviour
Overall, there was some reduction in incidents of dysregulation, frustration, and withdrawal for most pupils. Pupils were better able to self-regulate and transition between activities, resulting in a calmer, more positive classroom environment.

Positive staff and parent feedback
Teachers and SNAs reported that the sensory breaks were easy to implement and effective in supporting pupils' needs. They noted time as a factor, as the withdrawal of individual pupils, while worthwhile, is time-consuming. Also noted was the timing of the breaks. The timing needed to be seen as fair, i.e., children weren't missing art or P.E. subjects they usually look forwardto.

Parents noted improvements in emotional regulation and behaviour at home, particularly in pupils' ability to cope with school-related stress and routines.

Impact of my research

The findings have informed changes in classroom practice, with sensory/movement breaks now planned as a regular, proactive part of the school day rather than used only when difficulties arise. Structured movement activities have been incorporated to support predictability and transitions for pupils with additional needs.

The research has also contributed to staff-level discussions on inclusive practice, supporting emotional regulation, and developing consistent approaches across classrooms. The findings will feed into the school's School Self-Evaluation (SSE) process and future planning for inclusion and well-being.

As the yoga ball deep-pressure activity proved to have the most relaxing and regulating benefits for our pupils, we have asked the P.T.A.to purchase a "Squeeze machine"for use in our sensory room to support our pupils who actively seek sensory input to regulate.

Benefits of my research

Increased teacher confidence in using evidence-based sensory strategies to support pupils with additional needs.

Improved pupil well-being, engagement, and participation in learning.

Stronger collaboration between teachers, SNAs,parents, and schoolleadership-Greater value being placed on the S.N.A voice in our school.

A greater shared understanding of the importance of proactive sensory support. Practical data to supportinclusive practices and inform futureschool planning and SSE priorities.

The staff have increased curiosity about why the child with diagnosed comorbidities has not become as regulated as other pupils, given the same activities, and have a heightened awareness of how difficult this child finds it to concentrate for the school day. The staff is actively reviewing the student's response to intervention to understand better why their regulation remains atypical compared to the cohort, particularly in light of their diagnosed complex needs

Overall,the research strengthened the school's capacityto support inclusionand promote positivelearning experiences for all pupils.