Developing More Inclusive Schools For Pupils With Special Educational Needs through Local Area collaboration

Aims and objectives

This paper will provide an outline of a unique local area project of school improvement for inclusion and special educational needs called the 'SEND Peer Challenger programme' so that its principles might be understood and/or emulated by school leaders who are looking for new ways to improve provision for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SENDs) in general classrooms. Its aims are to:

1. Provide an example of how researchers in universities, front line educationalists and local governors can collaborate to deepen the reach of school improvement initiatives for SEND and inclusion in mainstream schools.

2. Share the findings of a research study that cast light on the character of effective leadership and management for high quality SEND provision in mainstream education.

3. Explore the implications of these findings for researchers, local governors, and school leaders through:

   Understanding the elements of high-quality SEND provision in general classrooms.

   Operationalising leadership and management approaches to improve SEND provision in general classrooms

Context: A local area collaboration between schools, local governance and a university.

The research took place at the end of the first phase of a 30-month research and development project. The project was funded by England's Department for Education (DfE) as part of a national policy known as the *Opportunities Area (OA) programme*. Using a range of indicators (e.g. school quality, quality of life after education), the DfE identified twelve regions where social mobility was lowest. Additional funding was provided to support school lead projects that would improve opportunities and outcomes for young people such that upward social mobility was supported.

School Leaders and Local Governors had identified that pupils with SENDs were particularly vulnerable to disadvantage and poor opportunities. To tackle this situation, a bid for funding was made and this focussed on school improvement for SEND was developed and awarded to form a project, 'Whole School SEND and Inclusion. The funding was awarded and the project was designed to improve the capacity of mainstream schools to include pupils with SENDs effectively through a) developing a stronger leadership culture in mainstream schools that promotes SEND achievement and inclusion and b) increasing the amount of direct work in mainstream schools that effectively improves SEND outcomes. To achieve this level of culture change, the project integrates the following overlapping elements.

- A programme of Whole School SEND Peer Challenge Reviews to reach 14 Secondary Schools and 50 primary schools in the city, implemented and quality assured by the University in collaboration with a Management Board representing all partners.

- A training programme to prepare Peer Challengers and Lead Challengers for their role in the SEND Challenge process to be delivered by members of the Management Board, including the University

- Network meetings for all SEND Co-ordinators in the City to include national and regional updates and opportunities for development led by the University in collaboration with the Local area governance.

- SEND practice improvement networks for SENDCos led by Teaching Schools, focussed on localised need with City wide training on IL.

- Evaluation and Research led by researchers at the University to provide formative direction and accounts of impact. This is supported by Data monitoring by the Local Authority.

- Annual Whole School SEND conferences led by the University and based on findings from Evaluation and research.

Perspectives and theoretical framework.

The reported study is situated in wider explorations of school leadership and school improvement for inclusion. This field often adopts a pluralist, dynamic and participative framework to understand the principles and practices that are most likely to support successful inclusion. In an early iteration of scholarship in this field, Dyson and Millward (2001) present a case for focussing on the *character* of inclusive schools rather than their *characteristics.* They argue that it is more helpful to think of inclusion as an outcome of complex actions and interactions within a school rather than as an inherent, stable characteristic of it. The processes of *change management* and *dilemma management* are important mechanisms for securing inclusive (or exclusive) outcomes. For example, schools may find themselves conflicted by pressure to achieve good results in high stakes assessments (such as exam results published in league tables) and the need to provide a

relevant, valuing education for diverse learners. Where schools prioritize the first above the second, it might have inclusive consequences for some and exclusive consequences for others. Where schools prioritize the second, the same is likely to be true. Dyson and Millward (2001) conclude that inclusive schools are those that can find resolutions to such dilemmas in ways that maximize inclusion rather than diminish it. Though it is important to acknowledge the complexity and instability of the so-called 'inclusive school' as Dyson and Millward (2001) have encouraged us to do, there are some illuminating and helpful findings emerging from contemporary research about the character of such schools. Another early scholar of the field, Corbett (2001) presented a rich and enlightening case study of an inclusive school. She spent extended time in a primary school and observed and participated in the day-to-day life of this setting. Corbett (2001, p.11) concluded that an inclusive school was one that went beyond what she called the 'dump and hope' model. She argued that part of their character was to make an energetic, reasoned and determined effort to ensure that practice was transformed in genuine response to diversity. In Canada, Villa and Thousand (2005) drew on a range of case studies and combined these with interviews they carried out with children and young people to develop an account of the character of inclusive schools. These studies took place in Canada. Villa and Thousand (2005) place much emphasis on the belief systems operating within inclusive schools and the way in which people work together to secure inclusive outcomes. The authors asserted that Inclusive schools adopt and apply certain beliefs about students and their capacity to learn, notably the belief that all students can learn and have valuable contributions to make. Hence inclusive school that were successful in framing effective provision for SEND in a general classroom were those that maximised participation and engagement for all. This disposition was also identified as a central feature in the character of successfully inclusive schools by Black-Hawkins, Florian and Rouse (2007 and 2017) who constructed case studies of schools within one local education authority

in England. Black-Hawkins et al. (2007) concluded that the achievement and inclusion is supported in an environment where leadership and management of staff, systems and processes enables all to take responsibility in a context where shared ownership of SEND is promoted.

Proposed for inclusion is a model that combines *transformational leadership* (TL), *instructional leadership* (IL), and *distributed leadership* (DL) (Oskarsdóttir et al., 2019) and this will henceforth be termed the 'integrated model'. Though TL is less likely to be directly associated with positive student outcomes (Robinson et al., 2009), it is regarded as essential in the formation of inclusive schools (Villa and Thousand, 2017; Corbett, 2001; Jordan et al., 2009). IL theorises the school leadership as a learner centred with a role that promotes high quality teaching, learning and curricula toward identifiable positive outcomes for pupils. There is evidence that when TL and shared IL are integrated, they have a substantial positive influence on student achievement (Day, Gu, and Sammons, 2016).

Distributed leadership theory is concerned with collaborative approaches where leaders draw on the collective talent and ability of all actors in a learning community, including parents and pupils (Oskarsdóttir et al., 2019). Distributive leadership is theorised as collective responsibility expounded through a culture of trust, autonomy, and ownership and with this, a willingness for shared accountability. There is evidence that distributed leadership has a positive impact on the morale of teachers because it leads to a greater sense of team work, community, and collaboration (OECD, 2016) and it has also emerged as a prevalent approach in inclusive schools (Florian, Rouse and Black-Hawkins, 2017).

In the context of the local collaboration for SEND and inclusion researched in this study, the findings support further identification of what approaches to leadership and management are

most likely to support high quality SEND provision in a whole school and general classroom context.

Overarching question to be explored by the research

The SEND Peer Challenge Programme was followed up by systematic research into its impact by researchers at the University of Derby. The focus was on the impact of the programme as a whole. A formative, interim evaluation of impact was carried out in May and June of 2019 to evaluate the programme's first year of activity and this is the phase reported in this paper. A final evaluation will take place between April and July resulting in a published full report in September 2020.

The central question posed by the first stage of the research were as follows and had a formative intention:

- What can we learn about what needs to be operationalised to support continuing improvement in SEND provision and outcomes for pupils at school and local level and what are the key messages for school administrators and local governors?

- What can we learn about the character of leadership and management most likely to bring about improvements in SEND provision in the general classroom?

Design

The interim evaluation methodology used was cross-sectional and employed mixed methods that included primary qualitative data and secondary qualitative and quantitative data.

Methods

Interviews with Challengers and Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators from Challenged Schools.

Primary data was captured through semi-structured interviews with a large sample of challengers and lead challengers (10 challengers including 3 lead challengers) who had conducted reviews and a large sample of SENCOs whose school had been reviewed (24 schools had been reviewed to date, 9 SENCOs were interviewed). Interview schedules can be seen in the Annex 3. These were conducted by two members of the evaluation team using a prepared interview schedule and were conducted over the telephone. Participants were provided with information sheets and consent forms prior to interview.

Qualitative Content Analysis of Reports

The individual school reports produced by the lead challengers were used as a source of secondary data. All school reports were carefully read by the researcher for familiarisation with the data. Twenty-two school reports were then robustly analysed through the employment of qualitative content analysis to examine trends and patterns in the documents. An inductive approach was used to form a set of codes and categories from which a coding agenda was formed. The coding agenda was applied to analysis of those parts of the school reports that identified strengths, areas for development and recommendations. It was assumed that this would represent a shared view of what schools *were doing and should be doing* to improve to include pupils with SENDs more effectively. At the second stage, researchers coded the content of the reports using NVivo so that the prevalence of items could be counted and merged to identify dominating themes and patterns in the strengths, areas for development and recommendations recorded for schools on the reports. This also supported analysis of a local theory of effective leadership for SEND and inclusion.

To ensure reliability of coding, the researcher analysed school reports at two different points in time to check the extent to which findings are replicable. Researchers compared coding decisions to ensure validity and consistency across the data set.

Findings and Discussion

In the 22 school reports analysed for this study, the most prevalent areas identified in need of improvement (either noted as an area to develop or a recommendation in the reports) were *sharing and developing, knowledge, skill and ownership of SEND across the whole teaching/provision team* (n96), *Monitoring and evaluation across the whole provision: accountability for all* (N82), *Leadership and management* (45), the need for *professional development for teaching staff* (n45), *Quality of identification, assessment and the graduated approach* (n44), *participation of pupils and parents* in decision making (n34), and *effectiveness of the SEND Senior Leadership Team.* It is important to note that there was some overlap in strengths and those noted as areas to develop/recommendations. This means that in the City, there are schools that model good practice in ways that will be of value to other schools in their development.

The more detailed insight into the pattern of strengths and areas for development identified in the report provided by Table 1indicates that the following approaches to practice by school administrators emerge as pivotal to high quality SEND provision:

- Robust monitoring and tracking to ensure that SEND actions are implemented and their impact evaluated (n132).
- An approach to leadership that develops (across the whole provision team) shared knowledge, expertise, ownership and contribution (n127) enabled by accurate, valid and up to date SEND information that is accessible to this team (n76) in a context where leaders promote SEND is a school priority (n95). This is demonstrated in the School improvement plan (n35) and in the school's ethos (n44).

- High quality identification, assessment and planning that enacts a graduated approach (n36) and that involves the participation of class teachers (n13) and parents & pupils (n62).
- Recognition of and support for the SENCO role by the SLT (n47) with SLT collaborating with the SENCO to ensure that SEND is one of its key priorities (n38)[1]

This has implications for the operationalisation of continuing improvement in SEND provision since there is some emphasis on the role of the leader as distributive. For example, developing shared knowledge, expertise and ownership across the learning community is one of the most prevalent themes and this reflects current theories of effective leadership for inclusion (Oskarsdóttir et al., 2019). However, in this local context, leaders are also asked to investigate the reach and impact of this distributed activity and a strong call for accountability is made (through robust monitoring). The important role of middle leaders (in this case the SENCO) is emphasised in the content of the reports and leaders are asked to position this role centrally such that its importance and status is upheld. This is in the context of a 'least restrictive environment' which in England is expressed through the term 'graduated response' which is to ensure that pupils with SENDs are in the main classroom with their peers as much as possible. In this locality then, leaders are being praised for (or encouraged to) take responsibility for SEND, share this responsibility with others and put management systems and structures in place to enable others to take responsibility for inclusion. However, they are also being asked to use careful monitoring to ensure that a culture of inclusion is embedded and working. This implies that at the local level, distributive leadership is considered to be necessary but not sufficient. Operational efficiency and careful accountability is also needed

to ensure that everyone can join in a project of vigilance such that all pupils (including those with SEND) are supported and doing well at school.

Conclusion

Essentially indications about the character of inclusion-promoting school administration are that cultures of shared knowledge, accountability and ownership are central. In the school reports, the content analysis has revealed that this culture of shared ownership can be operationalised by a distributive approach to SEND leadership, accurate SEND information shared and contributed to by all members of the provision team, robust monitoring and high-quality systems of assessment and planning that are owned by all. A further enabler is in staff training and development focussed on SEND. All of these combine into a message about making SEND everyone's business and the role of school administrators in amplifying it as a serious, priority issue worthy of close attention to detail in the management of schools. The research has highlighted the pivotal role of key SEND leadership staff in securing high-quality provision and the importance of their status in both their school and in the local area. Challenges have proposed developments to key operational processes (such as systems of sharing SEND information, reference to SEND in staff performance appraisal and attention to detail in monitoring and evaluation) to enable this shared responsibility to be enacted. The message for school administrators is that SEND provision will be of the highest quality when everyone in the school owns it and is enabled to own it through carefully designed, accessible and participative systems and processes.

References, Figures and Tables

Figure 1: Modus of the Peer Challenge Programme

How was the programme implemented: The timeline for individual school SEND Peer Challenges

IDENTIFICATION	TEAMS and DATES	SELF-EVALUATION	PREPARATION	SCHOOL VISIT	REPORTING	FOLLOW-UP
Identification happened prior to the start of the new school year through a) self-nomination or b) selection by the OA SEND working group using school level data on attainment and exclusions.	Challenger Teams were assembled to fit the context of individual schools. The visit date(s) were organised to suit all availabilities. Teams and timelines confirmed with all parties. Project administrator managed this process with all communications through Microsoft Teams to ensure GDPR compliance	The school completed the self-evaluation template (Appendix 1), returning this to the project administrator three weeks in advance of the school visit date(s). At the same time, the Lead Challenger receives LA school level data from the DCC data team.	The Lead Challenger: 1) Completed preparation drawing on a range of data and evidence (including school evaluation template) and shares with the team. 2) Discussed the visit schedule with the team, aligning areas of enquiry to team strengths. 3) Set up a brief team meeting (telephone, online or face to face) prior to the visit days. 4) Liaised with the school to agree the visit schedule and amend where necessary.	The visit took place	The Lead Challenger 1) Wrote the report in collaboration with the Challenger Team using a template (Annex 2) The report contained the name of the school but did not name individual staff, children, governors, or other stakeholders. 2) The School received a copy of the report which it was expected to share with key stakeholders including the Governing Body and SEND Governor 3) The dates and focus of follow up visits were agreed. 4) The school completed a stage 1	Following receipt of the report and its recommendations, the school was expected to integrate these into its whole school action plan. The two-half day follow up visits took place. Lead Challengers provided follow up reports using the template (Annex 2) sending these to the project administrator and the school. The school was asked to complete a stage 2 online evaluation of the process.

			5) Sent the final visit schedule to all parties.[2]		online evaluation of the process.[3] 5) The Lead sent the project administrator a copy of the report.	The whole programme was researched at the end of each year cycle and evaluated to identify impact and to inform the design of future strategy.
Prior to the process	Once the school visit is confirmed, week 1 of the process is deemed to have begun	By end of working week 2 of the process	By end of working week 4 of the process	By end of working week 5 of the process	By end of working week 7 of the process	Within the two terms following receipt of the report

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[2] Copying the project secretary into all planned events and related documentation throughout the process
[3] As above

Figure 2: Content Analysis: Strengths, Areas to develop and Recommendations in school reports
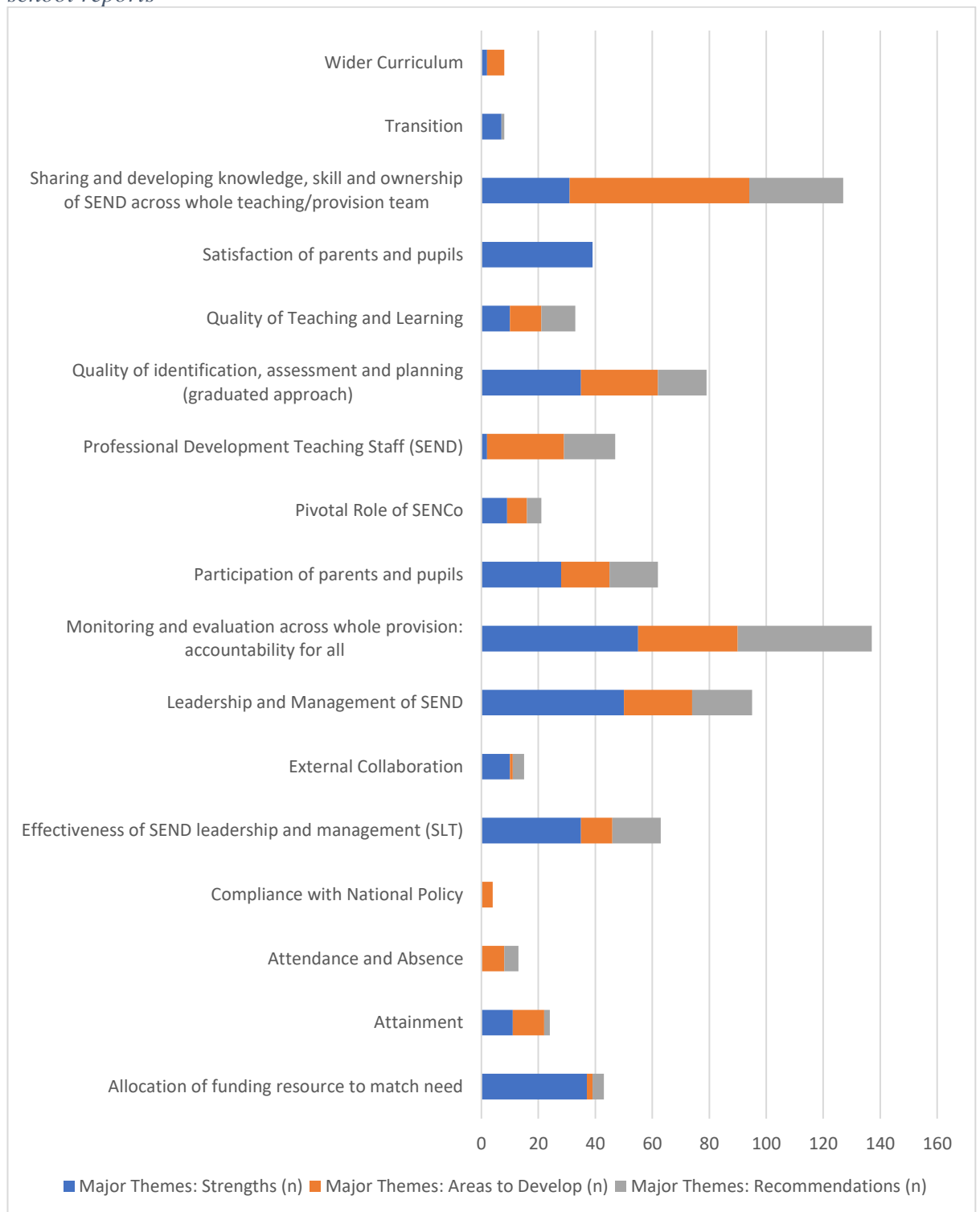
Table 1: Summary of content analysis in 22 school reports.

Category	Sub- Category	All items (n)	Strengths (n)	Areas to Develop (n)	Recommendations (n)	Example Item
Allocation of funding resource to match need	Allocation of funding resource (awareness and match to need)	43	37	2	4	Area of Strength, "Leadership Team understands and tracks SEND funding allocation", Area to Develop or Recommendation, "SENCOs awareness of City's local funding"
Attainment	Academic outcomes	24	11	11	2	Area of Strength, "Positive academic attainment", Area to Develop or Recommendation, "KS1 gap in reading"
Attendance and Absence	Attendance and Absence	13	0	8	5	Recommendation, "Continue to focus on reducing persistent absence"
Effectiveness of SEND leadership and management (Senior Leadership Team)	Effectiveness of SEND leadership structure (including SENCO)	63	35	11	17	Area of Strength, "Close collaboration between senior staff", Area to develop or Recommendation, "Distribute SEND leadership more effectively"
External Collaboration	Collaboration with other schools	5	1	0	4	Strength and Recommendation, "Collaboration with other schools"
External Collaboration	Engagement of external specialist	10	9	1	0	Area of Strength, "Effective employment of outside agencies for support and assessment", Area to develop or Recommendation, "Seek identification advice from external specialist"
External Collaboration		**15**	**10**	**1**	**4**	
Leadership and Management of SEND	Quality of SEND provision	18	13	5	0	Area of Strength, "Outstanding provision for SEND", Area to Develop or Recommendation, "Improve provision for SEND"
Leadership and Management of SEND	Whole school Approach Mental Health)	2	0	0	2	Recommendation, 'Develop whole school approach to Mental Health'
Leadership and Management of SEND	Whole school approach (inclusive ethos and commitment)	44	37	7	0	Area of Strength, "There has been whole school environmental change to support SEND", Area to Develop or Recommendation, "Enhance

Category	Sub- Category	All items (n)	Strengths (n)	Areas to Develop (n)	Recommendations (n)	Example Item
						whole school inclusion policies"
Leadership and Management of SEND	School Improvement Plan	31	0	12	19	Recommendation or Area for development, "Develop the school improvement plan to centralise SEND and inclusion"
Leadership and Management of SEND		**95**	**50**	**24**	**21**	
Participation of parents and pupils	Participation of parents and pupils	62	28	17	17	Area of Strength, "Parents appreciate their involvement in their children's IEPs", Area to Develop or Recommendation, "Include pupil voice in the review process"
Pivotal Role of SENCO	SENCO skill and expertise	12	9	0	3	Area of Strength, "The skill and expertise of the SENCO", Area to Develop or Recommendation, "Ensure the SENCO has administrative support"
Pivotal Role of SENCO	Support for SENCO	9	0	7	2	Recommendation or Area for development, "Need for administrative support for SENCO role"
Pivotal Role of SENCO		**21**	**9**	**7**	**5**	
Professional Development Teaching Staff (SEND)	Professional Development Teaching Staff (SEND)	47	2	27	18	Area of Strength, "Need for staff training on SEND awareness has been addressed", Recommendation or Area for development, "Need to invest in CPD training for teaching staff"
Quality of identification, assessment and planning (graduated approach)	Appropriate identification of SEND	15	12	0	3	Area of Strength, "Effective identification approach from the leadership team, Area to Develop or Recommendation, "Conduct review of SEND registers"
Quality of identification, assessment and planning (graduated approach)	Match to pupil need	27	17	1	10	Area of Strength, "Robust Provision Map", Area to Develop or Recommendation, "EHC plans are not always fit for purpose"

Category	Sub- Category	All items (n)	Strengths (n)	Areas to Develop (n)	Recommendations (n)	Example Item
Quality of identification, assessment and planning (graduated approach)	Quality of assessment and planning (SEND pupils)	36	6	26	4	Area of Strength, "Regular reviews of EHCPs", Area to Develop or Recommendation, "Focus on improving school identification and assessment processes"
		78	**35**	**27**	**17**	
Quality of Teaching and Learning	Quality of teaching and Learning	33	10	11	12	Area of Strength, "Effective, inclusive teaching is a school priority", Area to Develop or Recommendation, "Improve accessibility of learning resources"
Satisfaction of parents and pupils	Satisfaction of parents and pupils	39	39	0	0	Area of Strength, "Pupils are satisfied with the support they receive at school"
Sharing and developing knowledge, skill and ownership of SEND across whole teaching/provision team	Accuracy, validity, accessibility, sharing of SEND information at all levels between stakeholders (pupil, school, city)	76	16	47	13	Area of Strength, "Updated SEND documents on website", Area to Develop or Recommendation, "Improve circulation of pupil profiles"
Sharing and developing knowledge, skill and ownership of whole teaching/provision team	SLT share responsibility for SEND with each other and in ways that promote taking responsibility for SEND with teaching staff	38	15	5	18	Area of Strength, "Good collaboration between school staff and SENCO", Area to Develop or Recommendation, "Ensure that all teachers are responsible for teaching SEND"
Sharing and developing knowledge, skill and ownership of whole teaching/provision team	Class teacher knowledge, understanding, expertise (SEND)	13	0	11	2	Recommendation or Area for development, "Need for class teachers to be aware of assessment and identification criteria"
Sharing and developing knowledge, skill and ownership of SEND across whole teaching/provision team		**127**	**31**	**63**	**33**	

Category	Sub- Category	All items (n)	Strengths (n)	Areas to Develop (n)	Recommendations (n)	Example Item
Wider Curriculum	Wider Curriculum	8	2	6	0	Area of Strength, "There is a effective, broad curriculum in place for SEND", Area to Develop or Recommendation, "Focus on attainment in foundation subjects"

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