

Article

The Behavior Specialist in Inclusive Schools: Navigating Power, Support, and Intervention for Behaviours of Concern

Miriam Colum * and Shauna Cullen

Department of Inclusion, Religious Education and Student Life, Marino Institute of Education, Dublin D09 R232, Ireland; shauna.cullen@mie.ie

* Correspondence: miriam.colum@mie.ie

Abstract: Behaviors of concern (BoC) may be defined as persistent behaviors that impact the daily functioning and learning of children. They are behaviors that could pose a risk to their own safety or the safety of others. Supporting children with BoC is vital for student learning, success, and inclusion in both mainstream and special settings. Traditionally, the onus has been on the teacher to support and manage a classroom and all behaviors within that classroom. However, with an increase in BoC impacting school and class activities, targeted support in schools has become more common. Many factors have accelerated this shift, particularly the rise of burnout, lack of confidence, and aggressive behavior in schools, particularly in special school settings. The current study, through a Foucauldian power/knowledge and disciplinary theory paradigm, investigated whether having one specialist in the school aids the children and staff. A focused case study was conducted via seven semi-structured interviews with staff at one special school in the Republic of Ireland (RoI) with a full-time behavior specialist (BS) on site. The findings revealed that (1) the role of the BS is based on identifying BoC and implementing support, (2) having a behavior specialist is key for supporting children and staff in schools, (3) support and interventions are more sustainable once there is the presence of a specialist, and (4) challenges such as a lack of space, inadequate funding, large caseloads, staff shortages, and lack of time are a reality in the school setting. The main conclusion derived from this study is that having a BS in the school has a positive impact on the children, staff, and attitudes, providing both practical and pastoral power, which are essential for effective inclusive practices.

Keywords: behaviors of concern; challenging behavior; behavior specialist; behavior analyst; special educational needs; inclusion; special school; Foucault; Foucauldian theory; power; knowledge; discipline; surveillance



Academic Editors: Ahmed Bawa Kuyini, Maxwell Peprah Opoku, Ajay Kumar Das and William Nketsia

Received: 27 January 2025

Revised: 10 April 2025

Accepted: 22 April 2025

Published: 25 April 2025

Citation: Colum, M., & Cullen, S. (2025). The Behavior Specialist in Inclusive Schools: Navigating Power, Support, and Intervention for Behaviours of Concern. *Education Sciences*, 15(5), 531. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15050531>

Copyright: © 2025 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

The debate on appropriate, effective, supportive, and inclusive education is ongoing, persistent, and contentious in relation to terminology (National Disability Authority, 2022), policy, provision, and practices. It is and always will be a topic of discussion, research, revision, and study as the world strives to support children and individuals with special educational needs (SENs). This is imagined internationally, as per the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) human rights treaty, and nationally in Ireland's various legislative and policy documents and guidelines (Republic of Ireland [RoI], 1998, 2000, 2004a, 2004b, 2012, 2015, 2018; Department of Education & Skills [DES], 2017; Department of Education [DoE], 2024a; Republic of Ireland [RoI], 2023). In line with the international landscape, the hope is for a "fully inclusive school system" (National

Council for Special Education [NCSE], 2025a), as set out in the overarching principles of inclusive education of the UNCRPD. Ultimately, this is a “global mission” (Tsafrir & Bocos, 2023, p. 213).

However, the tension between the ideologically fully inclusive school system and the reality of “doing” inclusion exists. Ireland still has a model predicated on a special setting system and there has been an increase in special schools and classes in Ireland over the past decade. Currently, funding for five new special schools and an additional 400 new special classes for the 2025/2026 school year was allocated in Ireland’s Budget 2025. This builds on the accelerated provision of almost 1700 new special classes over the past 5 years, meaning that there will be over 3700 special classes available for the 2025/2026 school year (Department of Education [DoE], 2024b). While some research finds that special schools have strengths for the inclusion of children with SENs (Colum, 2020), the move to a fully inclusive system is widely welcomed but is not without its complexities, and seems to have staggered in recent times given the dichotomy of adhering to the UNCRPD but still opening special settings. Notwithstanding the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a pause in the logistics of how this will play out in Ireland—challenging infrastructure, poor resourcing, and inadequate teacher education and training remain some of the barriers to the implementation of the New Brunswick model in Ireland, and the consideration of school staff is at the heart of it.

As such, one cannot discuss how to include children presenting with behaviors of concern in any school setting without including this nod to the construct of inclusion. That said, the current paper is not concerned with a “battle on behalf of the truth” (Foucault, 1977, p. 765) of inclusion; instead, it considers how we can bridge the gap between policy intentions and practical application. The conceptualization of “fully inclusive” as a macro state (a system where all children are educated in one setting) and a micro state (within the school bounds) offers a paradigm where we can investigate how this may be achieved. For the purpose of this study, we examine this through a lens into the latter and narrow it down to “doing” inclusion within the school. Essentially, we consider if BoC can be effectively supported and whether inclusion can become a more achievable and seamless endeavor, ensuring that inclusivity is not merely a theoretical ideal but a lived reality for our schools. This is in line with recent national proposals, such as new guidelines from the Department of Education (Department of Education [DoE], 2024c) and the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) Relate Initiative (National Council for Special Education [NCSE], 2025b). It is noteworthy that neither document was published at the time of the current research, yet the current research reflects the approaches outlined. These approaches “focus on creating inclusive environments which can respond to need and build on good practice including prevention and de-escalation” (Department of Education [DoE], 2024b, p. 13) and “put relationships and regulation first, recognizing that true inclusivity is built upon understanding and connection” (National Council for Special Education [NCSE], 2025b, p. 6).

Behaviors of concern (BoC) may be defined as persistent behaviors that interrupt the daily personal, social, and academic school patterns for some children and can be categorized as both internalizing and externalizing. As Chan et al. (2012) state, they are behaviors that may be a risk factor to the safety of themselves or others. Addressing BoC comes in the form of cognitive, behavioral, therapeutic, and emotional evidence-based interventions (Cooper & Jacobs, 2011). One approach that is examined in this paper is that of the presence of a behavior specialist in the school. While some studies will define the behavior specialist as a behavior analyst, the current study looks at this support through the lens of someone with a specialist education in behaviors and is present in a special school, mirroring similar research (Pitts et al., 2019). Internationally, for example, in the United

States, there is encouragement of a clearer conceptualization and more effective utilization of behavior analytic practices in inclusion-oriented schools (Giangreco et al., 2023). The role of a behavior analyst is mainly the delivery and support of applied behavior analysis (ABA) approaches, and such approaches intersect closely with multi-disciplinary services and whole-school positive behavioral support and interventions (Shepley & Grisham-Brown, 2019; Simonsen & Sugai, 2019). At this point, it is important to note the terminology in this paper—we use the term “behavior specialist” and not “behavior analyst” as this is the term that is used in the school setting and reflective of an individual with a specialism and experience in behavioral support. While some approaches may have a foundation in ABA, this paper is not focused on ABA or on the support or criticism of ABA. The role of the BS in this school is one who supports children and staff holistically—it is akin to the role of the special educational needs coordinator (SENCo) in Ireland—a role that is vital but essentially does not exist in our legislation and policy at the primary level (Colum, 2023; Colum & Mac Ruairc, 2023; Gallagher, 2023) or at post-primary levels (Fitzgerald et al., 2021; Fitzgerald & Radford, 2022). The BS potentially could be considered a “behavior practitioner” as per the Department of Education (DoE, 2025). The role of a BS was sanctioned by the DoE in this school to support staff and children due to an increase in the number of BoC.

There is much research on the challenge of including children who present with behavior difficulties in mainstream and special school settings, both nationally (Colum, 2020; Colum & McIntyre, 2019; Shevlin & Banks, 2021) and internationally (Buttner et al., 2016; McKeon, 2013, 2017, 2020). The literature suggests that there can be a tendency to focus on the disability, on the “challenge” of children with behavior difficulties, as opposed to the behaviors that are exhibited (Garwood & Van Loan, 2019). In doing so, children are often viewed as a “problem” to be removed from the classroom (Orsati & Causton-Theoharis, 2013). In addressing these challenges in Ireland, there was a move towards more in-school support, with an emphasis on therapeutic (physiotherapy, speech and language therapy, and occupational therapy) approaches via the pilot School Inclusion Model (SIM) (Gardiner, 2023). Building on the SIM, in 2024, the DoE announced the launch of The Educational Therapy Support Service (ETSS) with the appointment, on a permanent basis, of 19.5 occupational and 19.5 speech and language therapists, as well as five behavior practitioners, to the NCSE (DoE, 2025). The focus of these roles is to collaborate with schools, improve learning outcomes for students, ensure teachers are better equipped to support all students, and reduce the demand for additional resources in schools, including applications for additional SNAs (DoE, 2025). Some studies also call for further research on behavior support when delivered in schools and by a non-specialist (for example, a psychologist) (Watson & Hayes, 2024). Within this context, the current study looks at the role of a behavior specialist in supporting both staff and children in a special school setting.

As the thrust of this paper is on supporting school staff in a special school, we will examine how having a BS provides support and guidance not only professionally but also personally. Their presence in a school may be gleaned as a factor for inclusion, as the reality is that teachers still feel unprepared in the SEN space. In Ireland, newly qualified teachers (NQTs) report a lack of competence and confidence in supporting children with SENs in their classes (Hick et al., 2019; O'Reilly & Colum, 2021). Likewise, the growing rate of concern for teachers working in both mainstream and special settings is how to support children with BoC (Colum, 2023; Collins & Colum, 2024). Scholars such as Ainscow (2024) call for a change of mindset and the need for a common positive attitude towards inclusion for any school to be effective in its practice. In light of this supposition, this paper explores the attitude towards a BS as a component for the inclusion of children with BoC.

The aim of this study is to investigate, via a Foucauldian lens, the concept of having a BS present in schools by engaging in a case study approach in one special setting in the ROI

and begin to address a gap in the research. The researchers sought to unearth (1) if the role of the BS supports school staff and children, (2) if the staff feel that the BS is a factor for effective inclusion and how this is imagined, and (3) what challenges (if any) exist. This study suggests that having the BS on site provides a sustainable model for supporting children with BoC and for inclusion.

2. Materials and Methods

Foucauldian theory was utilized to offer a critical lens on the power dynamics between school staff and the behavior specialist, questioning the knowledge of the expert (behavior specialist) and how that is imagined by non-specialists (Watson & Hayes, 2024). Foucauldian theory was deemed most appropriate given the application of his concepts by many scholars in education. This may be gleaned in the analysis of leadership in education (Mac Ruairc, 2011; Niesche, 2011; Colum, 2023; Colum & Mac Ruairc, 2023), and the policy and language surrounding inclusive education (Mac Ruairc, 2013). Brennan and Mac Ruairc (2017) use Foucault to conceptualize how principals' emotional experiences are influenced by contextual factors, shedding light on the complexities of educational leadership. Foucauldian theory is also used to understand the impact of neoliberal policies on education and power dynamics in education (Ball, 2012, 2013, 2017, 2019), and other scholars use his concepts to analyze policy texts in education (Graham, 2005; Graham & Slee, 2008). O'farrell (2005) and Walshaw (2007) both apply Foucauldian theory to education, providing a multifaceted framework for analyzing power relations, identity formation, and pedagogical practices. These perspectives encourage a critical examination of how educational systems operate and how individuals navigate and are shaped by these structures, ultimately contributing to more informed and transformative educational practices.

Foucault's concept of power/knowledge shapes the current research as power is not only exerted through a top-down structure but also through the knowledge production of behavior approaches, shaping how school staff understand and manage behaviors in the school. There is specialized knowledge about behavior management, constructing the behavior specialist as an authority in guiding the staff on how to respond to children with BoC. The research highlights positioning the specialist as providing not only practical support but also providing the staff with an expert who will disseminate knowledge (strategies/interventions) and exercise power by reframing certain behaviors. This duality is essential in understanding the social construction of "appropriate" behavior within the school environment. The specialist, armed with expertise in behavior analysis or psychology, may influence how staff perceive the behaviors of children and the interventions they consider "appropriate".

In essence, the behavior specialist is seen through a hierarchical lens of being the one with all the answers but transcends beyond giving hope to the school staff, providing a model where there is sustainable support for both children and school staff. It underscores the need for school staff to check their practices with that one person and highlights the power of the behavior specialist construct.

However, power dynamics can also emerge through the normalization of certain practices. Foucault's concept of "disciplinary power" is relevant here: the behavior specialist helps shape and normalize practices that govern behaviors and essentially how children are managed, observed, and assessed, thereby influencing the educational system's overall approach to inclusion and behavior management. Through this lens, power is not just about control but also about shaping how knowledge about behavior is produced and enacted.

In order to examine the production of this power, a qualitative case study with a convenience sample of one special setting in the Republic of Ireland was deemed appropriate.

2.1. Case Study Design

This research employed a case study design, providing a detailed study of the complex and context-dependent role of a behavior specialist within the special school setting. It enabled us to examine a real-world intervention (Yin, 2017) and explore the nuanced and individualized nature of behavioral support, allowing for rich qualitative insights into the specialist's strategies, interactions, and impact. Flyvbjerg (2006) argues that case studies challenge theoretical assumptions by offering concrete, context-sensitive knowledge, making them ideal for examining power dynamics in schools through a Foucauldian lens.

2.2. Participants, Research Setting, and Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews recorded on a dictaphone were conducted with seven participants working in a special school categorized for children with a dual diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder and moderate general learning disabilities. The convenience sample of three special needs assistants (SNAs), two teachers, the deputy principal, the principal, and the behavior specialist ensured the representation of different levels of experience, perspectives, and professional training within the school setting. Inclusion criteria included geographically convenient schools in the Republic of Ireland with an in situ behavior specialist, and exclusion criteria deemed schools without a BS to be non-accessible.

Semi-structured interviews are deemed suitable as a research tool as they provide flexibility and allow probing beyond the answers, encouraging the expansion of thoughts and knowledge on the questions asked (Cohen et al., 2018). They also allow for a flow of conversation, an exploration of participants' thoughts, feelings, and opinions, and the interviewer "to explain or clarify questions or answers, thereby helping to increase the accuracy of the collected data" (Alamri, 2019, p. 66). The interviews covered topics such as the nature of the behavior specialist's role, collaboration with staff, strategies used in addressing behaviors of concern, and the impact of these behaviors on students' learning outcomes. Example questions included: "Can you describe how inclusive you think this school is for children with behaviors of concern?" and "What is your understanding of the role of the behavior specialist?" Interviews lasted between 30 to 60 min and were conducted in a private and quiet location within the school to ensure confidentiality and comfort for participants. The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were reviewed for accuracy. The data were collated on NVIVO-64.

2.3. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. Initial familiarization involved reading and re-reading the transcripts to gain an overview of the data. Codes were then generated inductively, reflecting participants' words and meanings as closely as possible. These codes were grouped into potential themes, which were iteratively reviewed, refined, and defined to create a coherent thematic structure. Reflexivity was prioritized throughout the process to ensure the integrity of the analysis, and detailed memos were maintained by both researchers to document coding decisions and thematic development.

2.4. Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was secured from all participants, and they were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without any consequences. All identifiable information was removed during transcription, and data were securely stored via encrypted files in accordance with MIE GDPR guidelines. Participants were reminded that their participation was voluntary, and pseudonyms (see Table 1) will be used throughout all analyses and the dissemination of data.

Table 1. Pseudonyms used.

Role	Pseudonym
Principal	Joe
Deputy Principal	Cara
Behavior Specialist	Alice
Class Teacher	Helen
Special Needs Assistant	June
Special Needs Assistant	Lisa
Newly Qualified Teacher	Ruth

2.5. Trustworthiness Criteria

The quality and credibility of this study were ensured through rigorous data collection and analysis procedures. All interviews were conducted in private, quiet locations within the school to minimize distractions and ensure confidentiality. High-quality audio-recording devices were used to capture the interviews clearly. Following data collection, the recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researchers, and the transcripts were reviewed for accuracy against the original recordings. To ensure dependability and confirmability, an audit trail was maintained, documenting all decisions and steps throughout the research process, including the development of codes and themes. Additionally, memos were kept to reflect on emerging insights and the researchers' positionality, allowing for greater transparency in the analysis.

Given both researchers' extensive experience working in special education settings, the research team was particularly mindful of how these backgrounds could shape the interpretation of the data. Reflexivity was achieved through regular and structured debriefing sessions, where both researchers discussed their personal assumptions, professional experiences, and the potential influence these may have had on data analysis. These discussions focused on how their dual roles as practitioners and academics could affect coding decisions, theme identification, and overall interpretation. To ensure transparency and reduce bias, the researchers jointly reviewed all coding decisions, comparing perspectives and reflecting on their own experiences in the field of special education. Furthermore, memos were kept throughout the analysis process to document how their individual and shared experiences might shape their understanding of participants' responses. Triangulation was employed by drawing on multiple data sources, including interviews with a diverse range of school staff, to ensure that multiple perspectives were considered and to validate the findings.

2.6. Limitations

As with any qualitative research, this study acknowledges its potential limitations. The use of convenience sampling and a small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings, as they may not fully represent the broader population of special education professionals. To mitigate this, this study aimed to include a range of perspectives from different roles within the school (e.g., teachers, special needs assistants, and behavior specialists) to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the behavior specialist's impact. Although this research focused on a single school, which may limit the transferability of the findings to other settings with different school cultures or support structures, especially those without a behavior specialist in situ, the school was selected based on its diversity of roles and experiences. This offered insights into how the behavior specialist contributes to a specific school environment, and the findings may still be relevant for other settings with similar characteristics. Additionally, this research's cross-sectional design, which captures a snapshot of perspectives at a specific point in time, was mitigated by gathering data from

multiple staff members, thus capturing a broader range of experiences. Future research is needed to explore the evolving role of the behavior specialist over time and across different Irish special schools to address these limitations. Possible limitations of confidentiality could result from the small sample size, but this will be addressed by using pseudonyms in all reporting, along with the removal of any specific identifiers from the data that could lead to deductive identification of the schools and/or individuals that took part in this project. Nothing that participants directly say or report is acknowledged with reference to their real name or location in any publication. The researchers will ensure that no links can be made between any comments made and any piece published.

3. Results

Findings from the data suggest that the role of the behavior specialist is positioned as a gatekeeper of all knowledge, and school staff rely on this specialist information to support inclusion and to reaffirm their practices. For the purpose of this paper, four broad themes were identified to capture how the BS is positioned as a support in the special school setting: (1) understanding the role of a behavior specialist, (2) guidance, support, and affirmation, (3) types of behaviors, strategies, and interventions, and (4) experiencing challenges and barriers.

3.1. Understanding the Role of the Behavior Specialist

Participants drew on the positive impact of having a BS within the special school setting, described as a key figure in managing and reframing individual behaviors; a collaborative partner with staff, parents, and external agencies to create an inclusive, supportive learning environment. June's perception of the BS's role was as an all-round support, "to help with anything, any behavior concerns we have or how to deal with like giving us different tactics maybe to understand and deal with behavior concerns".

Alice had a more refined understanding, feeling that the core of her job is developing relationships with the children, identifying the underlying causes of BoC, and implementing interventions that are individualized to meet the unique needs of each child. She explained that "It's not always about the behavior itself—it's about what the behavior is communicating", elucidating that "there are generally four functions of behavior: attention, escape or avoidance, access to tangibles or activities, or sensory stimulation (automatic reinforcement)". Alice places an emphasis on the importance of a thorough understanding of each child and their behavioral profile, which she achieves through functional behavior assessments (FBAs) to identify and consider the function behind BoC, informed by meticulous data collection. Helen noted the use of "... interval recording... The day is divided into 15 min intervals, and we note whether the behavior occurred, or we use ABC charts". These methods ensure consistency and practicality for classroom staff, enabling them to track behaviors effectively. Using these data, Alice then develops individualized behavior support plans (BSPs) that outline specific strategies for managing and reframing BoC. The use of FBAs and BSPs are used consistently across the school so that every class has a similar approach to promote an inclusive school.

However, the implementation of BSPs goes beyond simply creating them. Alice works closely with teachers, SNAs, and families to ensure the strategies are practical, feasible, and aligned with the needs of the child. Joe noted that "they might check in after a week, review the paperwork, and ensure that the data we've collected is used appropriately thereafter". This ongoing review process ensures that interventions remain effective and are adjusted as needed. According to Alice, "collaboration is key—if we don't work together, the plans won't succeed". This collaborative and data-driven approach across the school ensures that

interventions are comprehensive, addressing both the environment and the individual, and that school staff feel empowered to implement the plan effectively.

Flexibility is also integral to Alice's role. Initially, she employed a formal request system where staff would email or schedule appointments to discuss behavioral concerns. However, she found that teachers often required immediate support, leading to a more organic, on-demand response system: "Most of the time, teachers stop me in the corridor and say, 'Can you come down and look at such-and-such?'" This informal approach enabled Alice to respond quickly to emerging BoC, preventing escalation and offering timely interventions where possible.

In addition to conducting FBAs and developing BSPs, Alice also supports classroom staff in implementing the plans, providing guidance on de-escalation techniques, recommending classroom environment modifications, or advising on strategies for teaching specific skills to the children. As Lisa noted, "She supports me with her knowledge... If I have an issue or an idea, I can bring it to her, and she'll offer her opinions in return". This support is not limited to behavioral management but extends to providing expertise in teaching and classroom dynamics, ensuring that all staff feel equipped to handle challenging situations.

Consistency, for Alice, is at the center of her work. At the outset, she ensures consistency in how behavioral strategies are implemented across the school environment, holding regular meetings with staff to explain the objectives of the behavioral plans and to provide guidance on how to apply them in the classroom. These meetings are an opportunity for staff to ask questions, discuss challenges, and receive clarification. Helen explained, "At the end of the day, she usually holds a class meeting where she explains the aims of the plan. She gives a brief description of how we can achieve these goals and explains the steps to reach them". Alice regularly monitors the progress of the interventions, ensuring that the data collected through observations and recording sheets are effectively used to inform decisions. Ruth praised Alice for her regular "check in after a week, review the paperwork, and ensure that the data we've collected is put to good use". For Ruth, "follow-up is critical". This continuous monitoring and adjustment of strategies are crucial for ensuring that interventions remain relevant and effective. Alice ensures there is also consistency between home and school, and she liaises with families to ensure that behavioral strategies are reinforced across both environments. She highlighted, "Consistency between school and home approaches is critical. If parents have effective strategies, we try to incorporate them at school". This also fosters a sense of partnership, aiming to alleviate parental concerns and ensure that interventions are perceived as collaborative rather than prescriptive. This is reinforced by Cara, who stated that "consistency is the key because if everybody's doing the same thing, whether it be right thing or wrong thing, I think at least the student is not confused, but if we're all doing our own thing and doing different things, it's really hard for the student to know what's expected of them".

Alice, as a behavior specialist, promotes a culture of inclusion within the school. She employs strategies to increase positive behaviors and teach alternative skills to replace those that are disruptive or socially isolating. She explained, "I focus on increasing positive behaviors and teaching alternative skills to replace behaviors of concern". The ultimate goal of these interventions is to help the children participate meaningfully in school activities, reducing the behaviors that limit their ability to interact with peers and engage in the curriculum. Ruth reinforced this positive approach: "The behavior support plans are ultimately designed for inclusion... Over time, the plans aim to help the children become more included, such as during breaks".

Reflective of legislation and policy, Alice ensures that staff align their behavior management strategies within the broader educational frameworks. She explained that she

“works really hard to ensure we’re looking into all the guidelines and making sure everything is being followed to the best of our ability”. This commitment to good practice approaches ensures that interventions are both ethical and evidence-based and aligned with national policy.

3.2. *Guidance, Support, and Affirmation*

A key facet of Alice’s role is being people-centric. Lisa explained, “. . . [Alice] supports me personally. If I ever experience tough incidents or difficult days, she’s the first person I turn to”. The findings indicate that this type of emotional support maintains staff well-being, mitigating feelings of isolation when faced with challenging situations. Alice’s presence provides reassurance and comfort and sustains morale in the face of difficult classroom dynamics, creating a sense of shared responsibility for both successes and challenges. Lisa explained, “If something doesn’t go well, it’s coming from the specialist, and that’s supporting the staff”. This alleviates feelings of blame and failure, helping staff to remain motivated and focused on finding solutions rather than dwelling on setbacks. Alice’s willingness to stand by staff and take collective ownership of the process fosters a positive inclusive environment where everyone is supported and accountable for their role in inclusion.

Alice is also committed to supporting school leadership in implementing school-wide policies, particularly when it comes to managing classroom dynamics and promoting inclusion. Her expertise in behavioral profiles is particularly valuable when grouping students, as they can provide insights into which students are likely to thrive together, and which pairings may lead to disruptions. She explained, “I’d say, ‘Look, that child’s not going to work in the same class as that child... actually putting all those kids together is going to be a disaster in a couple of months’”. This proactive approach ensures that students are placed in environments where they can succeed and minimizes the potential for behavioral challenges. She works on fostering a culture of support and mutual respect among staff where they feel safe to express concerns and seek help without fear of judgment. Helen observed, “there’s a culture in the school of being supportive and a no blame culture as well. So, we all know that if anything happens we’re in a supportive system, you know, we’re not we’re not left floating alone, not knowing what to do”. This culture is essential for maintaining a positive, collaborative atmosphere where staff feel empowered to address behavioral challenges without fear of criticism or failure, and they are affirmed in their practices for inclusion. This approach is particularly important in high-pressure situations, where the risks of burnout or discouragement can be significant. Alice is a reminder of collective strength and the shared goal of inclusion. By alleviating the pressure to “do it alone”, Alice empowers and affirms the power of collaboration for inclusion.

Helen regards Alice as a “go-to person” for guidance on how to address specific behavioral issues as they arise. Teachers and SNAs turn to the behavior specialist for immediate advice, knowing that they can rely on her expertise to develop quick, effective solutions. Alice was exalted as a source of guidance: “If something happens and we don’t know why it’s happening or what caused it, we’ll go to her, and she’ll then put a plan in place for us to look at the appropriate recording method to sort of see what the purpose of that behavior is and then obviously then set up a plan to support the child.” (Helen). This accessibility ensures that behavioral challenges are addressed in real time, preventing issues from escalating and disrupting the learning environment. By being consistently present on site, Alice can provide hands-on support when needed. This accessibility is crucial for addressing spontaneous behavioral challenges, whether in the classroom or during unstructured activities such as break times or transitions. Having a dedicated

and experienced professional who is readily available enhances the staff's confidence in handling a wide range of behavioral concerns.

All participants (n = 7) revealed that Alice uses her extensive knowledge and hands-on expertise to offer practical, actionable solutions, praising her ability to assess situations quickly and provide effective recommendations. Ruth remarked, "She came in, observed the situation, and offered practical solutions, like adding a break visual to the student's table or rearranging the classroom layout. She's brilliant at providing useful suggestions". These practical interventions help staff manage the classroom environment more effectively and prevent behavioral issues from escalating.

There is also follow-through after challenging incidents, where Alice holds debriefing sessions. Here, the school staff evaluate what worked well and what could be improved. Helen stated, "If staff may have been injured or upset after an incident, she helps us debrief, to see how we are after the incident and to see what we could do differently next time or what might work better". There is also a sense that Alice is reaffirming in her approach here, drawing on the no-blame culture mentioned above. This reflective process allows staff to grow professionally and emotionally, reinforcing the idea that challenges are learning opportunities rather than failures. This practice not only promotes professional development but also helps to alleviate stress, ensuring that staff feel supported and prepared for similar situations in the future.

Alice's approach to guidance, support, and affirmation is fundamental to the overall success of managing BoC in a special school setting. By providing personal and emotional support, explaining and refining behavior plans, and fostering a supportive, no-blame culture, the behavior specialist empowers and affirms staff practices to manage behaviors of concern effectively. In doing so, they employ various strategies and interventions to support BoC in the school.

3.3. Types of Behaviors, Strategies, and Interventions

There was a common understanding from the participants of the types of behaviors that occurred in the school. These comprised "hitting out, biting, throwing stuff around the room" (June), with Lisa acknowledging that "some of the behaviors we see across the school include self-injurious behaviors, which are the most extreme". She noted that "aggression and avoidance are also common" and that "these three are the main types we see". Lisa elaborated on these behaviors as manifesting "in physical ways, such as biting, punching, head-butting, kicking, scratching, and hair-pulling. We also see behaviors like scraping or hitting oneself". She also listed "biting, punching, spitting, throwing, whether it be objects, whether it be, you know, tables" as some of the common behaviors of concern.

Joe described "avoidance" as "another big challenge" and explained:

"It often looks like a child isolating themselves from the class or from the programs being offered to them. This is difficult to manage because unless we find something or someone that the child is interested in, it's very hard to engage them. Our kids tend to be very protective of their own space; they don't need other people or things and are very content being on their own. It can be tough to find a way into their world so they can avoid isolating themselves". (Joe)

Joe gave examples of "hair pulling, scratching, hitting other pupils, other staff" and emphasized that "the hair pulling and the scratching would be directed usually towards staff". He described "the more severe assault" as "very full-on hair pulling, hitting, depending on the size of the child", as well as a mention of witnessing "self-injurious behavior". While Joe did not elaborate on the types of self-injurious behaviors, this was something that Ruth had experienced in her class. She described a child in her class who "put her head through a window" and "banged the back of her head against the window". She stated

that a child will use the “heel of her hand and bang both sides of her head. She’ll bang her forehead off, the railings, the gates, anything hard. [...] the plastic on the door frames, the handles, anything really hard, a corner of the desk and stuff. Or she’ll of kick herself”. Ruth also noted that “there’s a lot of hair-pulling” and “putting staff to the ground by their hair”. She described a situation where:

“One of the boys in my class would do a lot of hitting and sometimes it’s not even aggressive, he’s just so strong and he doesn’t realize that he’s not four anymore and he’s really strong and he’ll just be playing but he can really hurt you”. (Ruth)

Alice and Cara reiterated physical behaviors of concern such as hitting, biting, and self-injurious behaviors, with Cara listing “banging their head, biting, targeting other students, targeting staff, pulling hair, biting, pinching, scratching” as behaviors of concern.

Responding to behaviors of concern with strategies and interventions was something that the staff felt prepared for via Alice’s position in the school. Cara was clear that “it’s important for staff to be trained on what to watch out for and how to implement the behavior support plan so that we are all following the same approach”. For Cara, “recording is essential, and there are so many things we need to do to ensure we can help improve things for the next time”. She saw Alice as her ‘guide’ in that training process.

Thinking of practical strategies, Ruth identified “communication packs” and whole-school approaches, such as using “the same break visuals, which are on the doors”. Choice is also an important strategy in the school:

“Every student has a choice board with pictures representing different activities. They can take off a visual and place it on the board to indicate what they are working on. For example, one of the girls has a choice board for food and one for activities. She can choose something like “make Play-Doh” or “listen to music”. She’ll tap the picture of what she wants, and she also has a list of songs to choose from. Though she can’t speak, she can point, and this helps her calm down at times”. (Ruth)

Ruth feels that “having a behavior specialist is very helpful”. As an NQT, Alice is a source of information and support and teaches Ruth “how she records and tracks behaviors for all children in the school. Some of the behaviors are worse than I thought, and some are better, so tracking them is really beneficial”. Ruth notes that:

“it’s important to take the time to analyze the behaviors and see how they’re impacting the child and other children in the class. Then, strategies can be put in place for the whole class. For example, if a behavior is occurring at the same time every day, we can look at the timetable and adjust things accordingly. Maybe a student could work at a workstation to reduce distractions. Being flexible with the timetable and adapting to the child’s needs can help reduce behaviors of concern”.

Adapting the environment is also a key strategy for Ruth, and she gives the example of “one of the children I work with doesn’t like noise, so he does his work at the teacher’s table while the other students are in the OT room”.

Alice described a school-wide strategy they utilize for “a student who engages in significant physical aggression”. “When this happens, we take him to a safe space and stand back to give him room. We follow a low-arousal approach, avoiding reprimands or direct confrontation. We’re not saying don’t hit, stop hitting. In more severe cases, we evacuate the classroom, leaving just one or two staff members to manage the situation and ensure no one gets hurt. The key is to give the student space to calm down on their own, work through it themselves, where we can keep close proximity to them”.

Using a token system, another school-wide strategy, “for lower-level aggression, like constant pinching or light hits” and reminders to use “gentle hands” are other approaches used in the school. Alice explains that “after accumulating tokens, the student can earn a reward, like playing with a favorite toy. That would be called a DRO, but that is quite an intensive behavior strategy because it involves one person being with them the whole time”. Alice explained that a “DRO is Differential Reinforcement of Other behavior (DRO), where the goal is to reinforce the absence of the targeted behavior, such as pinching”.

“To implement DRO, we first establish a baseline to determine how often the behavior occurs. We might start with a 30 s interval, rewarding the child if they do not engage in the behavior during that time. As they improve, the interval is gradually extended. This approach requires intensive support, with one person closely monitoring the child and collecting data throughout the day. Once the child achieves 90% success, we increase the interval to maybe like a minute”. (Alice)

June described a child who “grabs clothing—sometimes his own, sometimes others”—pulls at it, wraps it around himself, and drops to the ground”. The school-wide response is to wait “for him to calm down because there’s nothing we can do in the moment”. There is a time out room for the child and the preferred strategy is to get him into the room and give him space and “if he managed to calm down, he would sit on a beanbag in the corner”. Giving children exhibiting BoC space is a core strategy in the school.

While Lisa extols “traditional teaching methods and traditional” strategies, she also identifies “play therapy” and “music therapy” as effective interventions that are used across the school in all classrooms.

3.4. Experiencing Challenges for Inclusion

Alice identified space as “a really big challenge” and explained that a BoC “can be disruptive to the rest of the class. If we have to evacuate the room regularly due to severe behavior episodes, it affects other students”. This has a knock-on effect as there is not “a separate space for each child during high-needs situations”. She described a situation where: “there’s a student in particular who has really high physical aggression and also really big movement needs. He needs to go outside and be on the trampoline every few minutes. It’s not safe to have him outside when there are loads of other kids out there, but we only have one space for him to go”.

She also noted that “staffing levels pose challenges. Even if we develop a comprehensive behavior plan, it’s hard to implement when we have fewer staff available during lunch breaks or other times”. Her feeling is that “most special schools should have one-to-one staffing, especially with this level of need” and “with the staff limitations, it’s difficult to manage”. She also noted that there are “some kids that need two people to one”, describing a student who needs “two people at once, especially if you’re going to meet his needs of requiring movement every couple of minutes. You need two staff members to go with him every time, you know. So, those are all really, really big challenges”. June draws on this “staffing crisis” and comments that “there isn’t funding for a dedicated teacher” in one of the rooms in the school.

“A lack of services [. . . .] would be another big challenge” as they are “really over-stretched as well, staff-wise. Sometimes, you might not get an SLT or an OT for one particular student for the whole year, you know. That’s another really big challenge” (Alice). She called for an on-site speech and language therapist and an occupational therapist, “along with behavior support or psychology” as “if you had somebody on-site, it would just achieve an awful lot more”. This is reflective of Alice and how her presence in the school means that there is a sense of achievement in supporting children with BoC.

Lisa felt that the large caseload is a challenge and that “is a lot of pressure sometimes” and “it’s a cry for help”. Ruth concurred, stating that “there are too many students for her to manage. The waiting list is long, and the children who come here have very high needs. I think it would be helpful if we had two or three behavior specialists, as there are about 50 students in the school. [Alice] is constantly moving between campuses and students, so she doesn’t always have the time to spend on each individual student. Having more support would definitely help”. Cara echoed these sentiments, “especially in the special school setting where every student probably needs attention, there are a lot of students. We have two campuses with over 50 students and only one behavior specialist.”

Alice stated that “time is an issue. Even when you go around to see all the students and chat with everybody, it’s fine at the moment, but then writing everything up takes so long, especially creating the behavior support plans”. It means that work interferes with life as there is “probably a lot of that done outside of school hours as well”.

“There are a lot of students and only one behavior specialist. We also have some new students starting. Over on our other campus, we have a new class. Four students started in September. We have one new student starting here, and we’re opening another class with a few more. That takes a lot of time as well because the behavior specialist visits the families, visits the schools the students are coming from, and then prepares materials like slideshows or documents for the class team about each student to make the transition as smooth as possible. Okay, so that’s another job added to the role. Of course, some years we don’t have new students, but this year we definitely do, and it’s a big, important job”. (Cara)

All participants (n = 7) stated that a lack of training both pre- and in-service was a challenge. Helen felt that the staff are “always kind of playing catch-up” and “fundamentally there needs to be a lot more training and college” as teachers do not know how to work with children experiencing BoC. The data implied that there is a need for training but that alone is not enough—having the presence of a specialist is needed for ongoing and sustainable inclusion.

June noted that a “major challenge is just the title itself—behavior specialist. It kind of implies that this person has all the answers. But when something doesn’t work out, it can be really tough for the specialist. Everyone looks to them for immediate answers and results, which is just not realistic. You can’t always get immediate results”.

4. Discussion

Much of the literature implies that behaviors of concern are a barrier to the promotion of effective inclusion for teachers in schools (McKeon, 2013, 2017, 2020; Hick et al., 2019; O’Reilly & Colum, 2021; Colum, 2023; Department of Education [DoE], 2024b; National Council for Special Education [NCSE], 2025b), and looking towards an expert for support is common practice. The current research frames the role of the BS as one who identifies and presents an understanding of the child and their unique behavior, and based on that understanding, prepares adequate paperwork to guide and support staff in their practice. There is an emphasis on the relational—get to know the child first, which is reflective of research (Colum, 2023; Colum & Mac Ruairc, 2023) and the mission of the National Council for Special Education’s (National Council for Special Education [NCSE], 2025b) Relate initiative that “places relationships at the heart of all support and takes a regulation first approach in understanding and supporting students.” The BS is constructed as an almost mild disciplinary persona within the power-knowledge nexus of education (Foucault, 1975). Alice’s knowledge and expertise in behavior support position her as a welcome authority figure, shaping both understanding and control of the children’s behaviors (Foucault, 1966, 1969). Using functional behavior assessments (FBAs) and behavior support

plans (BSPs) as tools of biopower (Foucault, 1969), Alice gets to know the child and monitors and normalizes behaviors, employing a form of surveillance (Foucault, 1975) through data collection and interval recording as children are subjected to continuous observation to regulate their actions. One may view this process through the lens of Foucault's (1975) docile body, where children conform to expected behaviors through systematic interventions, and disciplinary techniques extend institutional control beyond the school and embed it into broader social structures through collaboration with external agencies and families. However, we argue that the power at play is the expert in the role (Alice), who provides mechanisms of empowerment (practices) that are welcomed by the school staff. They see each other as mutually benefitting from the power process—Alice as an “apparatus[es] of knowledge” (Foucault, 1980, p. 106) that benefits the staff, as opposed to dictating from top-down—it is an effective part of the “relationships of power” (Foucault, 1988, p. 11), thus producing effective inclusionary practices.

What is evident from this study is that Alice embodies certain characteristics that promote her effectiveness within her role as a BS in the school. She has a child-centered approach, prioritizing the safety, dignity, and individual needs of each child; she builds trusting relationships to foster emotional security and builds on a strengths-based approach, promoting a positive identity (de Swart et al., 2023). She places an emphasis on observation and assessment (Stevens, 2018; Colum, 2023) to understand the function of behaviors, uses data to inform her approaches, and ensures there is collaboration with key stakeholders. Collaboration is at the heart of her work as she advocates for the child's needs and ensures consistency across home and school environments (Collins & Colum, 2024). It is clear that Alice embodies intervention and de-escalation techniques to maintain a supportive environment in line with national policy (Department of Education [DoE], 2024a). The duty of care that Alice has for the children and staff is also highlighted in this research, and her approach of modeling, coaching, and empathy is central to her position.

We have also examined the construct of the BS as providing guidance, support, and affirmation to school staff, extending the power of the relational, and the power of creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment. Here the Foucauldian lens reveals the interplay of power, support, and regulation, enabling staff to navigate challenges within the nascent concept of pastoral power (Foucault, 1982). Alice assumes a caring yet disciplinary role, supporting staff while shaping their practices and behaviors in the classroom. Her presence reassures staff, mitigates feelings of failure, and sustains morale, creating an environment where responsibility is shared and inclusion is a shared value. Helen extolled methods such as interval recording and ABC (antecedent-behavior-consequence) charts, which allow staff to consistently track behaviors, work from a strength-based model, and feel empowered by “doing” inclusion. Lisa observed how Alice provides insights into teaching dynamics, empowering staff to handle challenges more effectively. One of the key areas in effective inclusion is a mindset or attitude change (Ainscow, 2024). Echoing the recent literature, the positive influence of having that one person for support is integral to the “doing” of inclusion (Colum, 2023). It is as Mac Ruaric (2013) has said—inclusion is won in the hearts of people. Alice works closely with teachers, SNAs, and families to ensure that the strategies are practical, feasible, and aligned with the child's needs. Joe emphasized the importance of follow-up, noting how Alice regularly checks in with staff, reviews collected data, and adjusts strategies to maintain their effectiveness. This research has highlighted that Alice has a role that integrates data-driven interventions with teamwork, practical guidance, and a focus on fostering inclusion. It is a practical approach to support the children and the school community. This is not without its challenges, however, and as June noted, the burden of the title of “specialist” is akin to the burden of being the “one expert” (Colum, 2023), which comes with the expectation of having to have all the answers and be

responsible for all inclusive practices, a role that is lonely and sometimes isolating. The day-to-day duties of supporting children and staff, reporting, ensuring that behavioral strategies align with legislative and policy frameworks, adhering to guidelines, and safeguarding interventions that are ethical, evidence-based, and compliant with national standards can be taxing and lonely for someone positioned as a leader for inclusive practices (Colum, 2023; Colum & Mac Ruairc, 2023).

It is interesting to observe the practical strategies for supporting children with BoC through a Foucauldian lens. The disciplinary use of behavior support plans, data collection (surveillance), protocols, and consistency in approaches are key to effective inclusion practices. Ruth describes the power dynamics of how communication packs, visuals, and choice boards exercise autonomy for the children while subtly directing their actions within structured boundaries. There is surveillance and regulation through the use of low-arousal strategies, token systems, and DRO at both micro and macro levels. The docile body of the child is shaped and rewarded to align with expectations. The disciplinary mechanism of adapting the environment and using timetables means that there is individual and collective buy-in for inclusion.

There are many future research directions from this study, but we will note just a few. It would be beneficial to observe if a BS in a mainstream school has the same role and offers the same support, and a comparison between the mainstream and special school settings could be informative for key stakeholders and policy-makers. We ask the following questions: is it time to have a full-time BS in every single school in the country? Is this the key that unlocks the door to effective inclusion? The current study demonstrates how having that one specialist on site fosters a positive attitude towards inclusion via a constant reminder for school staff that they are doing the “right thing”. A follow-up to this research as part of a longitudinal study would reveal if having the BS for a number of years means that there can be a gradual release of power and school staff can position themselves as the experts without relying on someone with the title of “specialist”. Another point of note is the conceptualization of our BS as a “behavior practitioner”. Given the new BoC guidelines (Department of Education [DoE], 2024a) and the launch of the NCSE Relate initiative (National Council for Special Education [NCSE], 2025b), research is warranted on how a BS/behavior practitioner could support teachers with this new and much-welcomed direction. Should we learn from the past and now step up and be proactive with these new guidelines as opposed to being reactive and struggling through, as has perhaps been the case when other guidelines have been released, namely the Department of Education and Skills (Department of Education & Skills [DES], 2017) guidelines on supporting children with SENs in mainstream classes? There is also a need to redo this research but gather the voices of children (Kiely et al., 2024), the voices of families, and the views of external agencies (Gardiner, 2023). This would provide richer and deeper insight into the role of a BS and how they are seen through the eyes of others. Finally, but never final, it may be of immense (admittedly biased towards Foucauldian theory here on what may be deemed as a superfluous use of the word “immense”) benefit/interest for researchers and Foucauldian scholars to examine the role of the BS through a more detailed critical lens, using the Foucauldian concepts that have merely been touched upon in this paper.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, M.C.; methodology M.C. and S.C.; software, M.C. and S.C.; validation, M.C. and S.C.; formal analysis, M.C. and S.C.; investigation, M.C. and S.C.; resources, M.C. and S.C.; data curation, M.C. and S.C.; writing—M.C. and S.C.; writing—M.C. and S.C.; visualization, M.C. and S.C.; supervision, M.C. and S.C.; project administration, M.C. and S.C.; funding acquisition, M.C.. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was partially funded by the Conferencing and Seed funding committee in Marino Institute of Education. Funding was used for transcription of data.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the guidelines of the Marino Institute of Education Ethics Committee and approved by the Ethics Committee of Marino Institute of Education (protocol code 23A0273MIE, 29th January 2024).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the miriam.colum@mie.ie.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

ABA	Applied Behavior Analysis
ABC	Antecedent–Behavior–Consequence
BoC	Behaviors of Concern
BS	Behavior Specialist
BSP	Behavior Support Plan
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DoE	Department of Education
FBA	Functional Behavior Analysis
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
RoI	Republic of Ireland
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SNA	Special Needs Assistant
UNCRPD	United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

References

- Ainscow, M. (2024). *Developing inclusive schools: Pathways to success*. Taylor & Francis.
- Alamri, W. A. (2019). Effectiveness of qualitative research methods: Interviews and diaries. *International Journal of English and Cultural Studies*, 2(1), 65–70. [CrossRef]
- Ball, S. J. (2012). *Foucault, power, and education*. Routledge.
- Ball, S. J. (2013). Introducing monsieur Foucault. In *Foucault and education* (pp. 1–8). Routledge.
- Ball, S. J. (2017). *Foucault as educator*. Springer.
- Ball, S. J. (2019). A horizon of freedom: Using foucault to think differently about education and learning. *Power and Education*, 11(2), 132–144. [CrossRef]
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. [CrossRef]
- Brennan, J., & Mac Ruairc, G. (2017). Different worlds: The cadences of context, exploring the emotional terrain of school principals' practice in schools in challenging circumstances. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 47(1), 129–146. [CrossRef]
- Buttner, S., Pijl, S. J., Bijstra, J., & Van den Bosch, E. (2016). Personality traits of expert teachers of students with EBD: Clarifying a teacher's X-factor. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 20(6), 569–587. [CrossRef]
- Chan, J., Arnold, S., Webber, L., Riches, V., Parmenter, T., & Stancliffe, R. (2012). Is it time to drop the term challenging behaviour? *Learning Disability Practice*, 15(5), 36–38. [CrossRef]
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2018). *Research methods in education* (9th ed.). Routledge.
- Collins, A., & Colum, M. (2024). The role of the occupational therapist for primary school children: Consideration of collaborative practices with primary school teachers. *REACH: Journal of Inclusive Education in Ireland*.
- Colum, M. (2020). The inclusion of learners with moderate general learning disabilities and challenging behaviours in school and class activities in special schools. *REACH: Journal of Inclusive Education in Ireland*, 33(2), 83–100.
- Colum, M. (2023). *The Sovereign and the obedient: School leadership and the inclusion of children with emotional and behavioural difficulties in Irish mainstream primary schools* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Galway]. Available online: <https://researchrepository.universityofgalway.ie/server/api/core/bitstreams/33a12cf8-c8bc-4128-9207-219c8c00685e/content> (accessed on 17 January 2025).

- Colum, M., & Mac Ruairc, G. (2023). 'No one knows where we fit in really': The role of the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) in primary school settings in Ireland—the case for a distributed model of leadership to support inclusion. *Irish Educational Studies*, 42(4), 543–560. [CrossRef]
- Colum, M., & McIntyre, K. (2019). Exploring social inclusion as a factor for the academic achievement of students presenting with special educational needs (SEN) in schools: A literature review. *REACH: Journal of Inclusive Education in Ireland*, 32(1), 21–32.
- Cooper, P., & Jacobs, B. (2011). Evidence of best practice models and outcomes in the education of children with emotional disturbance/behavioural difficulties. In *An international review*. NCSE.
- Department of Education (DoE). (2024a). Guidelines for primary schools supporting children with special educational needs in mainstream classes. Available online: <https://www.gov.ie/en/circular/f55a5-the-operation-application-and-deployment-of-special-education-teacher-resources/> (accessed on 20 January 2025).
- Department of Education (DoE). (2024b). Press release: Ministers Foley and Naughton announce plans to establish five new special schools. Available online: <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/fb21f-ministers-foley-and-naughton-announce-plans-to-establish-five-new-special-schools/#:~:text=Budget%202025%20also%20provides%20funding,the%202025/2026%20school%20year> (accessed on 20 January 2025).
- Department of Education (DoE). (2024c). Understanding behaviours of concern and responding to crisis situations guidelines for schools in supporting students. Available online: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/78d29-understanding-behaviours-of-concern-and-responding-to-crisis-situations/> (accessed on 20 January 2025).
- Department of Education (DoE). (2025). Ministers foley and naughton announce the establishment of an educational therapy support service (ETSS). Available online: <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/7e9c4-ministers-foley-and-naughton-announce-the-establishment-of-an-educational-therapy-support-service-etss/> (accessed on 20 January 2025).
- Department of Education and Skills (DES). (2017). Guidelines for primary schools supporting pupils with special educational needs in mainstream schools. Available online: <https://www.education.ie/en/The-EducationSystem/Special-Education/Guidelinesfor-Primary-Schools-Supporting-Pupils-with-Special-Educational-Needs-in-Mainstream-Schools.pdf> (accessed on 20 January 2025).
- de Swart, F., Burk, W. J., van Efferen, E., van der Stege, H., & Scholte, R. H. (2023). The teachers' role in behavioral problems of pupils with EBD in special education: Teacher–child relationships versus structure. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, 31(4), 260–271. [CrossRef]
- Fitzgerald, J., Lynch, J., Martin, A., & Cullen, B. (2021). Leading inclusive learning, teaching and assessment in post-primary schools in Ireland: Does provision mapping support an integrated, school-wide and systematic approach to inclusive special education? *Education Sciences*, 11(4), 168. [CrossRef]
- Fitzgerald, J., & Radford, J. (2022). Leadership for inclusive special education: A qualitative exploration of SENCOs' and principals' experiences in secondary schools in Ireland. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 26(10), 992–1007. [CrossRef]
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2006). Five misunderstandings about case-study research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12(2), 219–245. [CrossRef]
- Foucault, M. (1966). *The order of things: An archaeology of the human sciences*. Vintage.
- Foucault, M. (1969). *The archeology of knowledge*. Vintage.
- Foucault, M. (1975). *Discipline and punish*. Penguin.
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Language, counter-memory, practice: Selected essays and interviews*. Cornell University Press.
- Foucault, M. (1980). Governmentality. In p. Rabinow, & N. Rose (Eds.), *The essential foucault: The essential works of michel foucault 1954–1984* (pp. 229–252). Free Press.
- Foucault, M. (1982). The subject and power. *Critical Inquiry*, 8, 777–795. [CrossRef]
- Foucault, M. (1988). The masked philosopher. In L. D. Kritzman (Ed.), *Politics, philosophy, culture: Interviews and other writings 1977–1984* (pp. 228–237). Routledge.
- Gallagher, S. (2023). *Leadership for inclusive education in Irish primary schools: An exploration of the role of the SENCO*. Inclusive Education Special Interest Group Newsletter.
- Gardiner, C. (2023). Is the 'School Inclusion Model' a pathway to inclusion in Irish schools? An analysis using the theoretical perspective of Bowe, Ball and Gold (2017). *REACH: Journal of Inclusive Education in Ireland*, 36(1), 61–76. Available online: <https://reachjournal.ie/index.php/reach/article/view/329> (accessed on 17 January 2025).
- Garwood, J. D., & Van Loan, C. L. (2019). Pre-service educators' dispositions toward inclusive practices for students with emotional and behavioural difficulties. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 23(12), 1332–1347. [CrossRef]
- Giangreco, M. F., Pennington, R. C., & Walker, V. L. (2023). Conceptualizing and utilizing board certified behavior analysts as related services providers in inclusion-oriented schools. *Remedial and Special Education*, 44(1), 73–85. [CrossRef]
- Graham, L. J. (2005, November 27–December 1). *Schooling and 'disorderly objects': Doing discourse analysis using Foucault* [Paper presentation]. Australian Association for Research in Education Annual Conference 2005, Parramatta, Australia.
- Graham, L. J., & Slee, R. (2008). An illusory interiority: Interrogating the discourse/s of inclusion. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 40(2), 277–293. [CrossRef]

- Hick, P., Matziari, A., Mintz, J., Ó Murchú, F., Cahill, K., Hall, K., Curtin, C., & Solomon, Y. (2019). *Initial teacher education for inclusion: Final report to the National Council for Special Education*. National Council for Special Education.
- Kiely, J., Brosnan, M. H., Colum, M., Chianáin, A. U., & Dunne, C. (2024). *Child's Voice: Consulting with children as part of the redevelopment of the primary school curriculum*. National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA].
- Mac Ruairc, G. (2011). Destination Zero-Deconstructing Inclusion. *Contemporary Management Quarterly/Współczesne Zarządzanie*, 2, 23.
- Mac Ruairc, G. (2013). Leading inclusive schools: In search of policy frameworks. In G. Mac Ruairc, E. Ottesen, & R. Precey (Eds.), *Leadership for inclusive education: Values, vision and voices*. Sense Publishers.
- McKeon, D. (2013). *Emotional and behavioural difficulties in mainstream schools in Ireland: Understandings, attitudes, and responses* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Northampton].
- McKeon, D. (2017). Emotional and behavioural difficulties: The effects of structures, ethos, and understandings on provision in Irish post-primary schools. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 32(2), 221–237. [CrossRef]
- McKeon, D. (2020). Social, emotional and behavioural difficulties in Irish schools: We need to talk about gender. *REACH: Journal of Inclusive Education in Ireland*, 33(1), 31–43.
- National Council for Special Education (NCSE). (2025a). Is a fully inclusive school system right for Ireland? Available online: <https://ncse.ie/is-a-fully-inclusive-school-system-right-for-ireland> (accessed on 17 January 2025).
- National Council for Special Education (NCSE). (2025b). Relate initiative. Available online: <https://ncse.ie/relate> (accessed on 17 January 2025).
- National Disability Authority. (2022). *NDA advice paper on disability language and terminology*. National Disability Authority.
- Niesche, R. (2011). *Foucault and educational leadership: Disciplining the principal*. Routledge.
- O'farrell, C. (2005). *O'farrell: Michel foucault*. Sage.
- O'Reilly, E., & Colum, M. (2021). Newly qualified teachers and inclusion in higher education: Policy, practice and preparation. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Leadership Studies*, 2(1), 64–78. [CrossRef]
- Orsati, F. T., & Causton-Theoharis, J. (2013). Challenging control: Inclusive teachers' and teaching assistants' discourse on students with challenging behaviour. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 17(5), 507–525. [CrossRef]
- Pitts, L., Gent, S., & Hoerger, M. L. (2019). Reducing pupils' barriers to learning in a special needs school: Integrating applied behaviour analysis into key stages 1–3. *British Journal of Special Education*, 46(1), 94–112. [CrossRef]
- Republic of Ireland (RoI). (1998). Education act 1998 [online]. Available online: <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/pdf/1998/en.act.1998.0051.pdf> (accessed on 17 January 2025).
- Republic of Ireland (RoI). (2000). Equal status act 2000 [online]. Available online: <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2000/act/8/enacted/en/html> (accessed on 17 January 2025).
- Republic of Ireland (RoI). (2004a). Education for persons with special educational needs act 2004 (EPSEN Act) [online]. Available online: <http://www.oireachtas.ie/documents/bills28/acts/2004/A3004.pdf> (accessed on 17 January 2025).
- Republic of Ireland (RoI). (2004b). Equal status act 2004 [amended] [online]. Available online: <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2004/act/24/enacted/en/html> (accessed on 17 January 2025).
- Republic of Ireland (RoI). (2012). Equal status act 2012 [amended] [online]. Available online: <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2012/act/41/enacted/en/html> (accessed on 17 January 2025).
- Republic of Ireland (RoI). (2015). Equal status act 2015 [amended] [online]. Available online: <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2015/act/43/enacted/en/html> (accessed on 17 January 2025).
- Republic of Ireland (RoI). (2018). Equal status act 2018 [amended] [online]. Available online: <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2018/act/14/enacted/en/html> (accessed on 17 January 2025).
- Republic of Ireland (RoI). (2023). Consultation Paper on the review of the education for persons with special educational needs act 2004 [online]. Available online: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/consultations/epsen-review-consultation/> (accessed on 17 January 2025).
- Shepley, C., & Grisham-Brown, J. (2019). Applied behavior analysis in early childhood education: An overview of policies, research, blended practices, and the curriculum framework. *Behavior Analysis in Practice*, 12, 235–246. [CrossRef]
- Shevlin, M., & Banks, J. (2021). Inclusion at a crossroads: Dismantling Ireland's system of special education. *Education Sciences*, 11(4), 161. [CrossRef]
- Simonsen, B., & Sugai, G. (2019). School-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports: A systems-level application of behavioral principles. In S. G. Little, & A. Akin-Little (Eds.), *Behavioral interventions in schools: Evidence-based positive strategies* (2nd ed., pp. 35–60). American Psychological Association.
- Stevens, M. (2018). School-based support for children with conduct disorders; a qualitative longitudinal study of high-need families. *British Educational Research Journal*, 44(5), 781–801. [CrossRef]
- Tsafirir, Y., & Bocoş, M. (2023). Group-Inclusion for Students with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools. *Educatia*, 21(25), 213–222. [CrossRef]
- Walshaw, M. (2007). *Working with Foucault in education*. Brill.

- Watson, E., & Hayes, B. (2024). School staff delivery of a solution focused intervention to support pupils' behaviour. *Support for Learning*, 39(2), 61–70. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Yin, R. K. (2017). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods*. Sage publications.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.