

Martin took the task of reviewing the wider area of Difficult Behaviour. This paper draws together a number of themes, developing the story by tracing the changing focus of the group across the year. We chose to augment the Reference List to offer a fuller Bibliography.

Coordinator

Difficult Behaviour: Issues Paper

Martin Abramson

Introduction

Many teachers and psychologists would report that, in recent years, they have been witness to a dramatic rise in the prevalence of emotional, social and behaviour difficulties among children. The numbers of exclusions from school has risen, as has the threat of violence to teachers and other people in public positions. Alongside this, there has been an increase in the frequency of violent crime and public order offences in the community.

Indeed, the latter part of the twentieth century has been a period of enormous change, which has affected all areas of our lives. It has been a time when the acceptable level of violence portrayed in the media has become more permissive, censorship has been challenged and, with the advent of new technology, access to material is becoming less easy to control. Meanwhile, traditional family structures are being abandoned, as the social and cultural expectations which have maintained a sense of order and continuity are increasingly questioned. The 'me' generation, fashioned in the 1980s has made legitimate the aim of personal progress, at the expense of responsibility towards others in society. Real or otherwise, there is a perception that we now live in a world where there is increasing alienation as well as danger, where many no longer feel they have a stake in the community, and where the link between the individual and the social, political and natural environment is being lost.

On the other hand this period may be portrayed as a time which has seen great changes in people's expectations of individual freedom, civil and human rights, increasingly enshrined in law and international convention. It is sobering to remember that it is less than twenty years ago when corporal punishment was outlawed in Scottish schools (belatedly bringing our nation into line with the rest of Europe).

The extent to which these various changes within the wider culture have a causal or merely coincidental relationship with children's behaviour is the subject of debate. It is,

however, within the context of this uneasy paradox, with its apparent extremes of individual freedom and social disintegration, that we see reflected the politics of our age and within which we are being asked to address the difficulties which prevail in schools.

The Warnock Report (1978) identified emotional and behaviour difficulties as a source of learning difficulty. Clearly the reverse can also be the case. The Elton Report (1989) stressed the strong link between curriculum content, delivery and discipline. This thinking is integral to our understanding of the way in which learning is provided in schools: the importance of appropriate and effective lesson planning, curriculum differentiation, classroom organisation, clear rules and routines, all necessary to maintain a stable environment for learning.

The issue of difficult behaviour is clearly part of this, but it goes beyond these structures. As a group of educational psychologists working on this subject, trying to identify common threads and themes, we jointly tried to secure a working definition. The attempts to fulfil this simple aim illustrate complex relationships at the level of the individual and the environment, relating to home, school and the broader community. The main characteristics, however, can be summarised in the following terms. *Difficult behaviour* is behaviour which

- has an influence upon effective teaching and learning
- causes harm or distress to an individual or others
- challenges a teacher's skills
- is resistant to usual strategies or management systems
- is beyond an acceptable level of intensity, duration or frequency

Our task has not been an easy one, even for a group of professionals with a broadly similar set of experience, values and objectives. It illustrates the importance of individual perception as to what is difficult, which may be flavoured by personal experience, as well as the prevailing values within the community or institution in which a person lives or works.

In order to encapsulate the idea of difficult behaviour within a meaningful set of factors, it is pertinent to consider various ways to look at the subject, and from this the relevant issues may emerge. Thus, we have several *windows* into the topic. Some of these can be identified as follows.

1 Portrayal by the Media

First, we might consider the issue from the most public and visible angle. This is the portrayal by the media, which emphasises increasing public disquiet about antisocial behaviour and violence in schools, reports of teacher assaults, and the stance being taken by teachers' unions. It is important to be able to question the reliability of media coverage, and identify speculation, sensationalisation, or even scare mongering. Equally, it is necessary to recognise where media coverage *does* reflect reality, and this is an issue which has been given attention by the government (Scottish Executive News Release, Feb 1999). The influence of the media on our beliefs and understanding of the world, as well as direct effects on (the effects of television violence, etc.), is something which will remain with us. However, this is still an active area for research, one where beliefs and vested interests are powerful and opinion often polarised.

2 Medical Model for Behaviour Difficulties

Twenty years after Warnock, there still exists an ethos which is primarily diagnostic and problem oriented. A medical model is very much alive: 'identify the problem, then mend it'. Our world is generally understood in terms of the simple ideas of cause and effect, and seeing the whole picture can often be viewed as difficult or impractical. We expect things to be classified and categorised, and endeavour to ensure that this is so, since it assists our thinking and planning. This may be wholly a human thinking trait, or may be particularly prevalent in our own culture. It does mean that working within a multi-agency environment, we must find common ground with a variety of professional groups, with whom we may not always share underlying precepts.

3 Influence of Legislation and Funding Initiatives

As a group we could have taken as our main focus the pathways from government initiatives and legislative framework, from which development and practice has progressed. Current priorities can be seen in terms of human rights (e.g. UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1990), in the context of recent legislation (e.g. Children [Scotland] Act, 1995), in priorities for funding initiatives (e.g. Social Inclusion, New Community Schools, Alternatives to Exclusion) and in responses and policy at the level of the Council and of the individual school.

4 Effects of Dislocation within Society

Fundamental to the issues being explored may be cultural change in our communities. This includes a consideration of all aspects of social and economic development,

including psychology, and it is to do with how the society of school relates, or fails to relate, to the community within which it is situated. In recent years a variety of initiatives, such as the formation of *community schools*, have attempted to address this imbalance. The extent to which a community school, as an artifact of local government policy, can really reflect the grass roots community in which it exists may be questioned. To what extent, for example, are Council staff part of a local community, when they inhabit central and powerful positions in schools and management but do not live or share in that community? This is part of a much wider issue of the change which has taken place over relatively recent times, including expectations of personal mobility, breakdown of traditional patterns of local economic life, community links, belief systems, support structures, family ties, etc. The position of the school in the community has been a part of this change; the prevalence of placing requests, non-permanent teaching staff and school closures all relate to this issue. Where there is a growing alienation or dislocation of people from natural relationships with their communities and the environment, an impact is felt throughout society.

5 The School as an Ecological Community

Looking more specifically at a school, and the way in which it functions as an institution, we must consider relationships which prevail both within and outside. An incident (of difficult behaviour) cannot be viewed in isolation, but must be seen within the context of interaction and relationships within the classroom, within the wider school, within the community, or in terms of school ethos and organisation. This is a perspective of the school as an *ecological community*. In these terms, the examination of the characteristics of successful schools have been highlighted, including the essential philosophy and core principles which underpin inclusive strategies (e.g. Richards 1999; Daniels and Williams 2000).

6 Impact on Teachers

A further aspect of the difficult behaviour theme is the impact of children's behaviour upon teachers, the effect upon confidence and performance, individual coping strategies and how teacher behaviour is reinforced by the prevailing staffroom culture. Miller (1999a) points to a resistance which exists in many schools to acknowledging success when managing difficult behaviour, as this may undermine staff relationships. This reinforces the belief that difficult behaviour is unchangeable, and perpetuates the stigma of certain children as being *naughty, bad, difficult* and so forth.

7 Promoting Positive Relationships

Another general area which may be considered is the whole field of skills development (in particular social and communication skills) as a means of promoting positive relationships. This includes the attention now being given to emotional intelligence, including self esteem, assertiveness and conflict resolution (Goleman, 1998). In addition to academic ability, these skills are being recognised increasingly by employers. We may also include within this theme early social training strategies, parenting skills and certain more specific approaches, which build and reinforce skills of communication and interaction. One such example is SPIN (Kennedy et al, 1994).

8 Approaches to Behaviour Management

Approaches which emphasise behaviour management or behaviour modification include those based around analysis of antecedents and consequences, differential reinforcement and operant conditioning. Intervention techniques have been built around rewards for appropriate behaviour, minimising attention to inappropriate behaviour, and consistent, structured approaches to the application of sanctions. These range from individualised, highly structured approaches such as EDY (Manchester, Hester Adrian Institute) and LOVAAS (Lovaas 1987, McEachlin et al 1993) to packages designed for use within the classroom or at whole school level, including Assertive Discipline (Cantor and Cantor, 1992), Promoting Positive Behaviour (McLean, 1991) and Promoting Positive Relationships (McLean, 1994). Also within this theme are graded approaches to physical intervention, which may be used within a structured behaviour management programme, for example CALM (Paterson and Leadbetter, 1999).

9 Theories of Perception and Attribution

The issue of difficult behaviour can be considered from the point of view of perception and attribution. Difficult behaviour may be seen not as a characteristic of the child but as a function of adult perception. This is dependent upon the many factors to which adults attribute behaviour: the extent to which an adult perceives it as directed towards himself or herself, the ability to understand it within a given context, and so on. Appropriate intervention strategies, therefore, can be those which impact upon adults' perceptions and influence the way in which people comprehend a given incident. This has been explored by Cromby et al (1994), Daniels & Williams (2000), and Miller (1999b). Behaviour is perceived as difficult by the person who is confronted by it, while others may not share this perception. It may be seen as a characteristic of the *observer* rather than of the subject displaying the behaviour. In terms of attribution theory, we have to

consider also the pupil's perception of his or her ability to have impact upon a situation. The need to develop a no blame culture in schools, alongside competent and confident use of skills and strategies, is clear.

10 Cognitive Behavioural Techniques

Following from this are various systems based upon thinking styles and cognition, reframing (to influence perception, attitude and expectation), and learning of self-monitoring and self-management skills. Included may be anger management, solution focused therapy, and cognitive behaviour therapy, approaches which may be seen as relevant, practical and functional for both children and adults in the school context and elsewhere.

Conclusions

There are no clear boundaries between these themes. However, this has been an attempt to place some structure upon the broad subject area. Revealed are a variety of options could have been followed, indeed, early discussion in the group highlighted the strong diversity of approaches and alternatives. In the event the direction chosen was influenced by a number of factors, including the particular interests of individuals and the desire to produce material which would be practical and usable by others.. To these ends, the emphasis became focused on the more cognitive based approaches, in particular solution focused therapy, and anger management.

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