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A View From the Office: What Principal Teachers Need to Know About Challenging Behaviour

Pupils' challenging behaviour is of increasing concern to principals and teachers. An understanding of the causes of such behaviour would benefit a staff in planning programmes and intervention strategies for these pupils. This article offers an insight into a number of underlying causes as well as helpful suggestions for managing challenging behaviour.

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INTRODUCTION

The term challenging behaviour began to filter around special schools in the early nineties. At that time, the description given by Emerson, Barrett, Cummings, Hughes, McCool, Toogood and Mansell (1987) was generally accepted as being appropriate – behaviour of such intensity, frequency and duration that the physical safety of the person or others is likely to be placed in serious jeopardy, or behaviour which is likely to seriously limit or delay access to and use of ordinary community facilities. This description focussed on three degrees - intensity, frequency and duration, and two dimensions - safety and involvement in the community. Toogood, Bell, Jacques, Lewis, Sinclair and Wright (1994) added an amendment to the effect that this behaviour, at any given point in time, rendered what would be the ordinary level of supervision/management temporarily ineffective. These descriptions were helpful, particularly for those people working with children with special needs, and were welcome in their reinforcing the emerging emphasis on the fact that it was changing or adapting the behaviour and not the child that should be the focus for teachers and others working with children who had exceptional challenging behaviour(s). It was also apparent that there was no universally accepted definition of what constituted challenging behaviour, that it was difficult to define and that it could be viewed as an essentially social concept, i.e. behaviour that was acceptable in one social situation (home) could be unacceptable in another (school).

A whole movement developed around challenging behaviour both in the U.K. and here in Ireland. Many of the voluntary agencies, notably not the DES, initiated research and programmes to address what was not a new issue but one which was being looked at afresh. The Mental Health Foundation in the U.K. in particular have done quite a lot of very good work and produced easily read and useful documents which included statements, e.g. children with severe challenging behaviours are among the most vulnerable people in our society (Lyon, 1994). This group of people was described as often having to endure management regimes which would not have been acceptable within virtually any other sector of society including prisoners in gaols. This group could be rendered essentially voiceless and those who really cared for and about them were often worn down and felt themselves at the mercy of the service providers whom they desperately needed to help them survive. It is unfortunately a reality that pupils who exhibit serious challenging behaviours are generally more restricted in choices, programmes, activities, outings and the personnel who work with them and with whom they have the opportunity to interact.

Over the years it was recognised that a number of identifiable elements of good practice could significantly improve the quality of life not only for the people with severe challenging behaviours but also for those people, both staff and families, who were working with them. These elements included:

- relevant focused training preferably of whole staff/family groups;
- comprehensive assessment and review by well informed and competent multidisciplinary teams which led towards Individual Behaviour Plans;
- review and necessary adaptation of the environment;
- providing real supports including debriefing and where necessary counselling for staff who, as Foxx (1985) said, were working in what were often extremely stressful situations as creative "behavioural artists" using "perceptive sensitivity" to manage circumstances which were generally unpredictable where other children as well as themselves were at real risk to their own wellbeing and welfare;
- establishing a culture where it was not only acceptable but also desirable that staff would agree that they must work as a real team, that they needed help and should actively seek it out without the risk of being branded incompetent;
- an acceptance that a very particular type of person was needed to work with these children – not only well trained and skilled but with an affinity towards and affection for these particularly troubled children. We now know that it is not just the number of, but also more importantly the quality of staff, which is the critical factor.

Many staff and family members hold that these particularly challenging children are really effective readers of other people, as interpersonal relationships are real strengths and that they are both extremely perceptive towards and often unforgiving of people they perceive do not like them or who do not have empathy towards them.

SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS AND CHALLENGING BEHAVIOUR

The vast majority of pupils with special needs do not have severe challenging behaviours, as described by Emerson et al. (1987). Research does indicate that the propensity towards challenging behaviour may increase relative to the degree of disability (Janssen, Schuengel, and Stolk, 2002) as the stress related to the individual's experience of their life situation can lead to increased frustrations particularly in relation to coping strategies and/or communication issues, both expressive and receptive. Recent research also confirms that a significant percentage of pupils in special schools do present with real challenging behaviours – 31% in the Republic of Ireland (Kelly, Carey and McCarthy, 2004) and 14% with severe and persistent challenging behaviour in Northern Ireland (Department of Education Northern Ireland [DENI], 2004). These reports also confirm that challenging behaviours are on the increase and are a major source of stress for principals and other staff in these schools. It is also accepted that even in schools where the percentage of pupils appears small, the impact of particular behaviours displayed will often be quite disproportionate to the actual number of pupils involved.

There is always a reason for challenging behaviour. It is generally accepted that many factors contribute to challenging behaviours and for any particular behaviour, multiple causation is likely to be the rule rather than the exception. Communication issues, both receptive and expressive, are often at the core of the problem. We must also be constantly aware that the very passive child may have needs even greater than the very active one. Therefore, a primary concern must be to try to understand the function of the behaviour for the pupil involved, i.e. what does the pupil get from this behaviour? We need to try to see the whole situation through the child's eyes. Challenging behaviours need to be identified and addressed as early as possible in a pupil's career.

All interventions should be based on a positive proactive approach. Each individual behaviour plan must include enabling the child to experience a more enriched, purposeful and fulfilling life. This involves collecting accurate and detailed information about the child's experiences and needs by a multidisciplinary team assessment. Individual pupils, where possible, their families and key, perceptive frontline staff must be consulted about the proposed interventions and their views taken into account in drawing up, implementing and reviewing any plan.

Benefit from education is a crucial concept for teachers and schools. Therefore, while reductions in the frequency, intensity and duration of behaviours is desirable for these particular children, this does not of itself necessarily lead to more time on appropriate tasks, increased social interaction or real participation in valuable educational and extra curricular activities. We should constantly remind ourselves that boredom is often a significant contributory factor towards challenging behaviour.

Children must be accorded respect for their rights as individuals, irrespective of their abilities. No form of punishment or threat of punishment is acceptable. Responses must be based on what is in the child's best interest. Restrictive measures such as time out, using manual guidance to keep safe, using barriers or equipment to limit freedom of movement, physical containment, etc. may only be used when there is no other alternative, in the least detrimental manner and for the shortest possible time. All programmes involving any limitation of personal freedoms or rights must be clearly agreed, planned and reviewed regularly and rigorously by all the relevant parties. Individual behaviour plans and programmes must be based on the principles of the least restrictive alternative.

We also have to recognise the rights of other pupils not to have their lives unduly disrupted and to consider the levels of stress involved for them, their families and staff who are victims and/or witnesses of serious challenging behaviours. At the same time we must be aware that balancing rights is extremely complex and difficult. It may be worth noting that many people who work with pupils with severe challenging behaviours comment on the exceptional tolerance and forgiving nature of a significant number of peers while accepting completely the grave impact on others. Concerns in relation to this impact are recognised as being major stressors for many staff (Kelly et al., 2004).

DEVELOPMENTS IN SCHOOLS

In the early nineties all schools were expected to develop codes of behaviour/discipline (Department of Education, 1990) – of course many schools already did have these in the

eighties or even earlier. The significant increase in consciousness in relation to discipline in schools established the need to put structures in place that the pupils and the other partners in education – teachers, parents and Boards of Management – could understand and accept. These codes/policies have generally made a very positive contribution to understanding and managing behaviour and discipline within schools and in particular focusing attention on more positive approaches, eg. "catching the child being good" rather than the more traditional emphasis on negative consequences and reactions to inappropriate or 'bad' behaviour. In particular, those schools which adopted a whole school approach and shared in the process of developing these structures generally benefited significantly from the experience of the shared reflection on what constitutes appropriate behaviour and how we as teachers go about creating an environment which can establish, encourage and maintain a positive school experience for everyone involved.

At some point since the mid nineties, the term " challenging behaviour" became current in mainstream schools and began to be used to describe a wide range of behaviours which caused difficulty in that setting. This may have been imported alongside "integration" as it was called at the time. It may well have been added to by studies such as Harris, Cooke and Upton (1996), which focussed particularly on schools and began to include some issues which might be more appropriate in a school code of behaviour as opposed to an individual behaviour plan. This development was very understandable as it was much more acceptable to refer to a pupil with challenging behaviour than to what previously had often been referred to as a 'bold' child. However this development has contributed to a dilution of the real intended meaning of "challenging behaviour", and many would argue that this may not be to the benefit of that small cohort of pupils who present with severe challenging behaviour.

There are undoubtedly distinctions between students who present with serious challenging behaviours and those who who require good ordinary practices and approaches. One colleague recently described an example of when behaviour becomes seriously challenging – it is often when, having attempted in an appropriate manner to reason with or correct a pupil, the response you get is completely out of proportion to the situation, and the pupil suddenly becomes verbally and/or physically threatening, abusive and may physically attack you or someone nearby without any apparent provocation .

The behaviour of this particular cohort of children is qualitatively different in terms of causation and the management strategies required. Most have very significant communication issues. There are a number of identifiable underlying causes or signals, which may include:

- medical and or psychological issues, including diet and medication;
- many have experienced significant personal loss;
- many, though not all, come from backgrounds which are extremely difficult for everyone involved and which are even more confusing for a child who has a learning difficulty;
- difficulties with or the inability to interpret appropriately interpersonal social interactions;
- a short fuse – they will lose control exceptionally quickly and easily and, once aroused, their behaviour escalates rapidly;
- an exceptional need to be the centre of attention and an inability to cope with staff/significant others suddenly shifting or giving attention to others;

- many of these pupils appear to not properly understand one's message when one attempts to explain to them why their behaviour is unacceptable. They may also be unconvincing in their expression of regret or their explanation of their understanding of what they have done as being inappropriate;
- it is ineffective to reason/discuss with or correct them when they are aroused or distressed as they will be incapable of understanding or accepting what is being said to them;
- many arrive in school tired, agitated and distressed due to any number of factors including poor sleep, hunger, inappropriate breakfast or they may have been involved in real conflict during the night or even earlier that morning prior to coming to school;
- pupils who cannot be still and/or quiet for even short periods of time.

A large number of readers will undoubtedly add to this brief list from personal experience.

While we await the wisdom of the National Education and Welfare Board, who we understand are in the process of producing definitive guidelines for us all, may I offer the following ten 'Aspirations' (years ago they would have been Commandments) for Principals and other related personages.

Challenging Behaviour: The 10 'Aspirations' for Principals

1. **Be available or have some other real support readily available in a crisis.**
2. **Be aware of the realities of what is going on re challenging behaviour – for staff and for pupils.**
3. **Do not hold yourself responsible for every incident that occurs – identify and use an effective support system for yourself.**
4. **Do not put pupils or staff, including yourself, into situations which you feel are unsafe – Risk Assessments can be very helpful.**
5. **Represent the views of all the parties as clearly as you can to each other and to officialdom.**
6. **Be an effective role model, in word and in actions. Be positive, sensitive, practical and proactive in your approaches.**
7. **Put in place appropriate whole-school training which addresses causes and leads towards developing agreed, effective guidelines.**
8. **Work on developing effective behaviour plans.**
9. **Be inspired, or at least very careful, in your selection of staff.**
10. **REMEMBER – Children with serious challenging behaviour are among the most vulnerable in our society.**

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