

## **What Affects Teachers' Confidence in Dealing with Challenging Behaviour in Schools?**

**The issue of challenging behaviour in schools is currently on the educational and political agenda in Ireland. This small-scale study explored the factors that affect the confidence of teachers in the management of behaviour in schools. The capacity to communicate within schools with colleagues, pupils and parents appears to be a strong predictor of teachers' confidence in dealing with challenging behaviour.**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The term 'challenging behaviour' was introduced for people with severe learning difficulties but challenging behaviour can be found in a wide range of settings (Porter and Lacey, 1999). The implicit message in the term 'challenging behaviour' is that the behaviour is not a characteristic of the person, and that the context needs to be considered in intervention programmes. There is an implication that given the appropriate services and approaches to meet the needs, the challenges might disappear or at least be greatly reduced. There are many definitions of challenging behaviour in the literature. For the purposes of this study, the term 'challenging behaviour' has been defined as:

*"...behaviour, within the context of your school, which prevents participation in appropriate educational activities; often isolates children from their peers; affects the learning and functioning of other pupils; drastically reduces their opportunities for involvement in ordinary community activities; makes excessive demands on teachers, staff and resources; places the child or others in physical danger; and makes the possibility for future placement difficult"* (Harris, Cook and Upton, 1996, p. 23).

### **EFFECTS OF CHALLENGING BEHAVIOUR ON STAFF**

Although much progress has been made on understanding challenging behaviour and providing effective prevention and intervention, it is not certain that recommended practices have been widely adopted across all educational settings. Recent developments have highlighted the issue of challenging behaviour in schools and the negative effects on teachers and other staff members (Kelly, Carey and McCarthy, 2004; Strain and Joseph, 2004; O'Brien, 1998; Harris, 1995). O'Brien (1998) defines challenging behaviour as "any behaviour that prevents new learning, reinforces a child's low self-esteem and presents threats to individual staff or staff teams" (p. 21). Consequently, he argues that an individual staff member should not be expected to "unravel the constellation of complexities of challenging behaviour on their own" (p. 21). It is also unacceptable, according to O'Brien, that a pupil or teacher should be "abandoned in isolation amongst the emotional and physical bruising that challenging

behaviour can create” (p. 21). This concern about the effects of challenging behaviour on staff is reiterated in other studies. Challenging behaviour is seen as a major contributor to teacher stress, low staff morale, high staff turnover and absences and the development of negative attitudes and feelings towards the individuals who present with challenging behaviour (Bell and Espie, 2002; Hastings, 2002).

Recent developments and publications in Ireland have also highlighted the issue of challenging behaviour in schools and the negative effects on teachers and other staff members (Kelly et al., 2004; Department of Education and Science, 2006). The comprehensive study by Kelly et al. (2004) set out to identify the prevalence and extent of challenging behaviour in special schools in Ireland and the effects on pupils, teachers and managers. A significant finding was that the majority of principals indicated that incidents of challenging behaviour increased stress levels for teachers. A majority of principals felt that teachers were under pressure and felt emotional exhaustion leading to a lack of confidence in their ability to teach and manage their classrooms. Enabling factors to provide an effective education for pupils who present with challenging behaviours were identified by principals. These enabling factors, which are also supported by the literature, include an adequate physical environment (Porter and Lacey, 1998), adequate staffing levels, effective communication within schools (Harris, 1995; City of Birmingham Education Department, 2003), staff training (Strain and Joseph, 2004; O’Brien, 1998; Harris, 1995), effective communication with parents (Smith and Cooke, 2000; Keen and Knox, 2004) and appropriate and effective intervention policies (Ireland, 2000; DES, 1991; Galvin and Costa, 1994). This small-scale exploratory study focuses on the enabling factors from the literature and the effects on teachers’ perceptions of their confidence in dealing with challenging behaviour in classrooms.

## **METHODOLOGY**

A quantitative design using a self-completion questionnaire was used in this study. The respondents, a convenience sample of 80 teachers, were enrolled in Diploma courses in Special Education in three third-level institutions. A pilot version of the questionnaire was tested on four teachers who were not included in the sample and who were teaching children with special educational needs. Some minor changes were made to the layout, wording and content of the questionnaire following the pilot study.

A self-completion questionnaire and envelope were distributed to each teacher on all of the three courses. A definition of challenging behaviour was given at the beginning of the questionnaire. The purpose of the questionnaire was explained and confidentiality, anonymity and non-traceability were guaranteed.

### **The Variables**

Quantitative design deals with the reality by translating it into variables and by measuring and comparing these variables. The first three variables in the study were concerned with yielding descriptive information such as the role of the teacher and the number of pupils with challenging behaviour in their schools. The six independent variables that follow were derived from the enabling factors from the literature that

lead to more effective educational provision for pupils with challenging behaviour and consequently less stress for teachers. The analysis sought to determine if these independent variables had an influence on teacher confidence, the dependent variable.

**Confidence Scale**

A Likert Scale, measuring teachers’ confidence in dealing with challenging behaviour in schools, was developed based on the literature. The proposed scale was tested for internal reliability and validity. The statistical tests showed that this was a reliable and valid scale to measure teachers’ confidence in dealing with challenging behaviour.

The aim of the study: If the six enabling factors are in place in schools, are teachers more confident in dealing with challenging behaviour?

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Questionnaires were distributed to 85 teachers on three courses. Seventy-eight questionnaires were returned on the same day, yielding a very high return rate. The SPSS programme for Windows was used to analyse the data.

**The Teachers**

The majority of teachers who participated in the study (56%) were resource teachers who are supporting pupils with special educational needs in mainstream schools. Learning support teachers composed the second largest group in the study (32%). These teachers are also in mainstream settings and support pupils with learning difficulties. The special class teachers (8.2%) teach pupils with special educational needs in special classes within mainstream schools and the remaining 3.8% of teachers are in special schools. The majority of teachers in the study (96.2%) are supporting pupils in mainstream schools.

**The Pupils**

Ninety-one percent of all teachers stated that there were pupils with challenging behaviour in their schools. The mean number of pupils with challenging behaviour in schools in this study was 8 with a standard deviation of 7.8. The range was from 0 to 42 pupils.

**Is there a relationship between the teachers’ level of confidence and their belief that the six enabling factors are in place in their schools?**

A measure of correlation was used to determine the strength and the direction of the relationship between the six enabling factors (independent variables) and the confidence scale (dependent variable).

**Table 1: Relationship between Teachers’ Confidence Scale and Independent Variables using a Spearman’s rho**

Independent Variables	Correlation coefficients and p values
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Q4. Are staffing levels at your school adequate to respond to the needs of pupils with challenging behaviour?	r = 0.256 p = 0.024
Q5. Is the physical environment of your school (eg. spacious classrooms, school gym, time-out room) adequate for the needs of these pupils?	r = 0.239 p = 0.035
<b><i>Q6. Is there effective communication within your school (eg. between staff, between staff and pupils) in relation to challenging behaviour?</i></b>	<b><i>r = 0.376 p = .001</i></b>
Q7. Is there effective communication with parents in relation to challenging behaviour?	r = 0.285 p = 0.012
Q8. Is there a Code of Behaviour in relation to challenging behaviour in place in your school?	r = 0.149 p = 0.193
Q9. Is there staff training available on effective interventions and strategies in relation to challenging behaviour?	r = 0.191 p = 0.094

There are statistically significant correlations between each of the questions (Q4-9) and the confidence scale except for Q8 and Q9 (Table 1). The correlation coefficient for Q4 and the scale indicates that there is a relationship, albeit a weak one, between a teacher's level of confidence in dealing with challenging behaviour in the classroom and whether they believe there are adequate levels of staffing in the school. Teachers who have low levels of confidence also tend to feel that staffing levels in schools are inadequate. By conducting a similar analysis, it can be concluded that a weak relationship exists such that teachers who have low levels of confidence also tend to feel that the physical environment of the school is inadequate, and that communication within the school and with parents in relation to challenging behaviour is ineffective. ***The strongest of the correlations was found between the scale and Q6, effective communication within the school.***

### **What is the Effect of the Enabling Factors on the Teachers' Confidence in Dealing with Challenging Behaviour?**

More advanced statistical analyses (multivariate regression analysis) were carried out to assess the effect of the six enabling factors on the confidence scale. The results were analysed in stages. The association between the dependent and independent variables is moderately strong (Multiple R = 0.577). The next stage of the analysis asked if at least one of the variables exerted a significant influence on levels of teacher confidence. **This investigation showed that only one variable,**

**communication within school, exerts a significant influence and is positively and significantly related to teacher confidence.** Communication within schools is a stronger predictor of teachers' confidence in dealing with challenging behaviour than any of the other independent variables.

## CONCLUSIONS

### **Challenging Behaviour in Mainstream Schools**

This small-scale exploratory study highlighted a number of issues for discussion. The majority of teachers indicated that there were significant numbers of pupils presenting with challenging behaviour in mainstream schools. There is a need for more comprehensive research, similar to the Kelly et al. (2004) study, to identify prevalence and extent of challenging behaviour in mainstream schools in Ireland and the effects on pupils, teachers and principals. The recent report of the Task Force on Student Behaviour in Second Level Schools (Department of Education and Science, 2006) has made recommendations to address this issue.

### **Need for Within-school Support**

The hypothesis in this study stated that the six enabling factors identified in the literature and the Irish study of challenging behaviour in special schools (Kelly, Carey and McCarthy, 2004) would tend to exert a significant effect on teachers' confidence as measured by a confidence scale. Some effects were found in the present study. Effective communication within the school was found to be the strongest predictor of teachers' confidence in dealing with challenging behaviour. The literature recommends a whole-school approach where staff can work effectively with colleagues, pupils and parents in developing policy and practice (Strain and Joseph, 2004; O'Brien, 1998; Harris, 1995).

There is also support in the literature for staff training, another enabling factor. Training of all staff was identified as a key factor in the future management of challenging behaviour in the nationwide study of challenging behaviour in special schools (Kelly et al., 2004). Conversely, Emerson, Hastings and McGill (1994) are unconvinced of the advantages of staff training stating that it may be "ineffectual in changing personal beliefs, attitudes or behaviour" (p. 222). According to this study, there was no relationship between staff training and teachers' confidence. Harris, Cook and Upton (1996) argue for flexibility of approach in determining staff training needs. Schools might benefit more from guided mentoring and long-term school-based interventions requiring the development of expertise within the school and effective communication between staff than from more in-service courses or experts coming to schools to solve problems (Harris, 1995).

There is an indication from the present study that research needs to be conducted on effective models of whole-school training in challenging behaviour. One such model is the *Framework for Intervention* (City of Birmingham Education Department, 2003) which aims to empower all staff in schools through a staged, systematic approach to behaviour management, with an emphasis on promoting effective teaching and learning. It is important that schools in Ireland are provided with opportunities to develop the capacity of teachers for effective communication and teamwork to deal

with challenging behaviour. There are currently structures in place in schools, for example the staged approach and school support teams in special education (Department of Education and Science, 2003), that could be built on to develop this capacity, supported by agencies such as the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), Special Education Support Service (SESS) or indeed Behaviour Support Teams as recommended by the task force on student behaviour in second level schools (Department of Education and Science, 2006). However, it is important that effective programmes already in place are recognised and that there is a co-ordinated approach to provision of support to schools.

### **Are There Other Enabling Factors?**

The six enabling factors were drawn from the recent Irish study in special schools. There is strong evidence in the literature that appropriate curriculum and teaching strategies, for example, also make a difference in the prevention of challenging behaviour in classrooms and improve the quality of life for pupils and teachers (O'Brien, 1998; Porter and Lacey, 1998). There may be enabling factors which are specific to mainstream classrooms and there is a need to explore these in a more comprehensive study.

### **LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

This small-scale study has its limitations and caution must be expressed in the interpretation of its findings. Any one way of gathering data has its shortcomings. Exclusive reliance on one method such as a questionnaire in this study, may bias or distort the findings (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000). To overcome some of these problems, multiple methods could be used. A sample of teachers and pupils, for example, could be interviewed and school policies on challenging behaviour examined, to check the concurrent validity or agreement with other measures. If the outcome of the questionnaire corresponds with those of the interviews and documentation analysis, then the researcher would be more confident of the findings.

There is also potential bias contained in the sample which may have distorted some of the results. The sample is small and opportunistic. All of the teachers in the sample are working with individual pupils or small groups rather than in a mainstream class. These teachers are also mid-way through a Diploma course in Special Education or Learning Support and thus more aware of children with special educational needs. It is necessary to conduct a similar study with classroom teachers in mainstream classrooms.

Although this is a small-scale study, it is highly significant and an important contribution in the Irish context in a climate where challenging behaviour has been identified as an issue of grave concern for all school communities. There is a serious void in the research in Ireland on current practice in relation to challenging behaviour in mainstream schools. This study has attempted to address this void and indicate directions for future research in this area.

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