

Behaviour, Discipline and Special Educational Needs: Some Considerations for Second Level Schools

In this article, which was written prior to the publication of *School Matters: The Report of the Task Force on Student Behaviour in Second Level Schools, 2006*, the author considers a number of important issues for second level schools. In the context of the recent publication of the Task Force Report it may be timely for schools to consider some of the issues raised in this paper in planning to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population. The author concludes that there is a need for significantly increased awareness of the nature of special educational needs and he questions the appropriateness of a “one size fits all” approach to the development of policy and practice in relation to student behaviour and discipline.

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INTRODUCTION

The establishment of the Task Force on Student Behaviour in Second Level Schools in January 2005 provides an opportunity for debate on one aspect of an education system which overall has witnessed many changes in recent decades, including

- increasing numbers remaining in second level education and aspiring to continue to further and third level education and training
- a policy of inclusion of students presenting with special educational needs
- new curricular programmes.

This has resulted in a school-going population with a far more diverse profile than previously was the case and with a wider range of expectations and needs.

While many changes have occurred in recent decades, it is, however, not true to say this of every aspect of the education system, particularly at second level. While change has occurred, it is also true that the majority of second level students are presented with a broadly similar experience in their day-to-day engagement with the education system as would have been the case for many of their teachers. While new curricular programmes have been devised, e.g. Leaving Certificate (Applied), Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP), and new syllabi have been introduced in many subjects, teaching methodologies and assessment procedures remain largely unchanged.

The school day, also, remains largely similar. Students continue to spend a considerable period of time in highly structured environments, regulated by strict timetables, organised in relatively large groups with little flexibility, and engaging in teaching and learning experiences, and assessment procedures, that are based, with too few exceptions, on lecturing, reading and writing.

It is not untrue to say that the second level system is one where organisational structures and the implementation of new methodologies, assessment procedures, etc. have not kept pace with the wider range of needs and aspirations presented by an expanding and increasingly diverse clientele. It is timely, therefore, for consideration to be given to areas of concern that exist in this reality.

The Task Force on Student Behaviour in Second Level Schools was established to consider one such area of concern. Its terms of reference indicate a focus on a particular issue:

- to examine the issue of disruptive student behaviour as it impacts on teaching and learning
- to consider the effectiveness of strategies at present employed to address it
- to advise on existing best practice both nationally and internationally, in fostering positive student behaviour in schools and classrooms
- to make recommendations on how best to promote an improved climate for teaching and learning in classrooms and schools. (Department of Education and Science, 2005, p. 2)

This paper does not presume to pre-empt its final report and recommendations. However there are issues that require consideration when student behaviour in second level schools is discussed, some of which will hopefully be addressed also in the Task Force's final report.

BEHAVIOUR AND DISCIPLINE

The issue of behaviour is an emotive and complex topic for schools, affecting staff, students and parents, each presenting different perspectives stemming from different expectations, emphases and previous experiences (Cole, Visser and Upton, 1998; Cooper, 2002). While considerable attention tends to be afforded these different perspectives, consideration of the notion of behaviour itself is also worthwhile. Discussion of the idea of behaviour in the school context will tend to address not only behaviour per se, but also the issue of discipline.

“Discipline” implies order; it suggests parameters regulating a situation or a person in a situation, through self-regulation or by an external agency, i.e. the school. The term “code of discipline” is used and this can imply a willingness to comply. Many schools would base their idea of a code of discipline on this premise.

The word “behaviour” can, of itself, be viewed in a neutral way. However it is usually qualified, i.e. good or bad, acceptable or unacceptable. It is interesting that discussion around behaviour in schools frequently focuses on unacceptable behaviour. The terms of reference of the Task Force are no exception.

This qualification complicates the issue. Who decides what is acceptable or unacceptable? When does behaviour change from being acceptable to being unacceptable? In the school situation it is effectively determined by the response,

which is largely subjective. Ayers, Clarke and Murray (2001) cite several factors that influence this response, including social context, moral codes, cultural norms, etc.

Another factor affecting the response will be the context of the code of discipline within which the behaviour occurs and, of course, the extent to which the respondent accepts and works within that code. These factors exist in most schools, with differing degrees of formality. The influence exerted by the code of discipline on daily life differs from school to school. It attempts to lay down the parameters within which the school can legislate by means of a set of rules.

In some schools, the framework is not put into practice effectively; it either confuses the code of discipline for the set of rules or does not translate it into a set of rules, thus leaving the individual to interpret the code personally. In other schools, a rigid interpretation is imposed, militating against flexibility. This can sometimes lead to a similar situation, as each individual must attempt, informally, to make the system work for them. Flexibility in interpretation is often seen as a positive attribute, a hallmark of a school with a human face. However, if this is unfocused or unguided it can lead to inconsistency, again causing difficulties.

Another difficulty with the idea of a code of discipline is that intrinsic to such an idea, as it is interpreted in schools, is the notion that one framework can be drawn up to which all can subscribe. As a result, codes of discipline tend to be aspirational in nature. This makes them very difficult to translate into a set of rules and herein lay great difficulties for schools. Many have tried to keep sets of rules to a minimum, using simple language, in an attempt to provide a framework to which all parties can subscribe.

But can this happen? A school is a dynamic organisation and the school-going population has never been so diverse, serving many students from a variety of backgrounds, presenting with an ever-increasing range of learning needs and expectations. The attempt to develop a set of rules in the mode of “one size fits all” can be seen to stem from an interpretation of fairness that attempts to treat everyone equally.

BEHAVIOUR, SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS AND INCLUSION

The policy of inclusion of students presenting with special educational needs has heralded much debate and considerable change in the Irish education system (Barry, 2005; Day, 2005; National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2002). The ramifications of this policy on behaviour and discipline in schools need to be addressed. Three questions can be raised in this context:

- What does the term “challenging behaviour” mean in the context of mainstream second level schools?
- What is understood by “emotional and behavioural difficulties” as a category of special educational needs?
- How does the notion of a code of discipline and a set of rules for all fit with a policy of inclusion?

The term “challenging behaviour” is beginning to be used in the context of mainstream second level education. Harris, Cook and Upton (cited in Kelly, Carey and McCarthy, 2004) define it thus:

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 possibilities for future placement difficult. (p. 6)

The *challenging* aspect of challenging behaviour can be viewed from different perspectives. On the one hand it can refer to behaviour which is, of itself, challenging, e.g. aggressive to varying degrees, potentially dangerous, consistently non-cooperative, non-compliant or behaviour that might be extremely withdrawn, non-engaging or uncommunicative.

Another perspective refers to behaviour *that challenges*. This might, of itself, be acceptable in other circumstances. However, in the particular context of the school, it provides a challenge to the situation in which it occurs and, indeed, sometimes is perceived to be deliberate. It is often seen as a challenge to the structures and authority of the school. This appears to be the interpretation taken by the Task Force (Ireland, 2005) when it refers to:

...a minority of persistently disruptive students who seem not to be responsive to any of the range of measures that schools habitually invoke to turn around seriously disruptive behaviour. (p. 29)

These represent two different types of behaviour and thus require largely different responses. An appreciation of these differences and their motivation is critical in planning appropriate responses (Fogell and Long, 1997).

A second issue is the question of what is understood by emotional and behavioural difficulties as a category of special educational needs. Cooper (2002) defines emotional and behavioural difficulties as:

...perhaps best seen as a loose collection of characteristics, some of which are located within students; others of which are disorders of the environment in which the student operates (such as the school or the family). The third...involves the interaction between personal characteristics of students and environmental factors. (pp. 9-10)

This definition allows for a highly individualised description to be formulated of a student meeting the criteria of this category of special educational needs. More importantly, this definition recognises that factors outside the student may be contributory causes to emotional and behavioural difficulties, i.e. “disorders of the environment in which the student operates”. This could suggest, for example, that

school structures might contribute to the difficulty presented. It is logical, therefore, to suggest that changes in those structures might be required to help address the difficulty.

A definition of emotional and behavioural difficulties in the Irish context comes from the Report of the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) (1993), which defines “emotional and/or behavioural disorders” as:

...an abnormality of behaviour, emotions or relationships sufficiently marked and prolonged to cause handicap in the individual pupil, and/or serious distress or disturbance in the family, school or community. (p. 132)

This is elaborated in Circular SP.ED 08/02 (Department of Education and Science [DES], 2002) where it states that “Emotional Disturbance and/or Behavioural Problems” means that:

*Such children **are** being treated by a psychiatrist or psychologist for conditions such as neurosis, childhood psychosis, hyperactivity, attention deficit disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and conduct disorders. (Appendix 2)*

The notion that the environment in which the student operates, e.g. the school, may contribute to a student’s difficulty is one that is quite new in the context of mainstream second level education in Ireland. It is also one whose ramifications for how a policy of inclusion will be implemented may be substantial. Recent legislation suggests that such acknowledgement is a long way off. The *Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004* (EPSEN) (Ireland, 2004) defines special educational needs thus:

“special educational needs” means, in relation to a person, a restriction in the capacity of the person to participate in and benefit from education on account of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability, or any other condition which results in a person learning differently from a person without that condition ...” (Section 1, 1)

This appears to suggest that factors resulting in a person being considered to present with special educational needs reside within that person. It does not seem to allow for the possibility of contributing factors emanating from elsewhere.

This leads to the third question, how does the notion of a code of discipline and set of rules for all fit with the policy of inclusion? The EPSEN Act’s reference to an inclusive environment states:

A child with special educational needs shall be educated in an inclusive environment with children who do not have such needs unless the nature or degree of those needs of the child is such that to do so would be inconsistent with –

*(a) the best interests of the child as determined in accordance with any assessment carried out under this Act, or
(b) the effective provision of education for children with whom the child is to be educated.* (Section 2)

This policy, while going a long way towards establishing the rights of children to be educated in mainstream schools as long as this is compatible with their best interests, also appears to qualify those rights by suggesting that they will only be supported where they do not compromise the rights of other children.

The full ramifications of this wording on the policy of inclusion will become clearer over time. This paper is concerned with identifying some possible ramifications in the context of students presenting with emotional and behavioural difficulties. As part of their planning process, the *Education Act*, Section 21, 2 (Ireland, 1998) obliges schools to develop a policy on special educational needs. At a school-wide level this is feasible. A code of discipline, as has already been discussed, can be drawn up in aspirational terms. However, at the level of the day-to-day running of the school, it is difficult to translate into a set of rules for all, policies that acknowledge diverse situations.

So, can a policy of inclusion, in the context of the issues of behaviour and discipline, actually be translated into a tangible and feasible set of rules that takes cognisance of the diverse situations presented by all students? Before this process commences, does there need to be an acknowledgement of the reality of emotional and behavioural difficulties and a heightening of awareness of their characteristics?

SCHOOL-BASED INTERVENTIONS AROUND BEHAVIOUR AND DISCIPLINE

There are three areas that second level schools might address when considering policies and interventions regarding behaviour and discipline:

- the readiness of students to take responsibility for monitoring and controlling their own behaviour
- the teaching of skills to assist students in this endeavour
- planning around behaviour per se

When students enter second level education, considerable effort is made to ascertain their general level of ability and their skills in such areas as literacy and numeracy. Support is available in many schools to enable students to overcome or compensate for difficulties in these areas, as they interact with the curriculum.

However the situation is different in relation to behaviour and discipline. It is often presumed that, while some students may not necessarily display acceptable behaviour on entry to second level, they do possess relatively sophisticated understanding in this area. Social interaction in a variety of settings, for example, is an area in which it is assumed most adolescents are relatively competent and, by and large, this is true.

For most students this competency is something which develops almost incidentally, in the same way that most other learning occurs for them. However, this is not true for all. Many students presenting with general learning disability, for example, may find

these skills difficult to assimilate and may require direct instruction and substantial practice if this is to occur. Such may be the nature of their learning disability (Westwood, 2003).

The teaching of social skills tends not to be a priority of second level schools for the majority of students, therefore lessening the chance of such skills being identified or being provided for, as a need, for these particular students. Appropriate behaviour is an area in which it is often assumed that students have more than sufficient basic skills to deal with what often constitute very complex social situations. Teaching the skills required to make sense of and negotiate these situations tends not to be addressed in a sufficient or structured way in second level schools, although it is true that some schools, e.g. those catering for students presenting with moderate general learning disability, have taken up the challenge.

It can be argued that similar initiatives are essential for other categories of students, e.g. those presenting with a mild general learning disability, Asperger's Syndrome, Attention Deficit Disorder, etc. In many second level schools the only formal structures that address behaviour are those that monitor, reward or sanction it. However, these structures are based on the premise that students know how to behave in an appropriate manner and, ultimately, can decide to comply or otherwise.

In the context of the EPSEN Act (Ireland, 2004) planning for the individual needs of students will become a feature of school life (Sections 3 and 8). Where behavioural issues are identified as precluding the student from benefiting from education and participating in the life of the school (Section 9, 2, e), structured procedures for the implementation of interventions to achieve stated targets will be required. This will necessitate, for example, the drawing up of individual behaviour plans.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Whereas the inclusion of students presenting with special educational needs in mainstream second level schools is generally accepted as the way forward, little consideration has been given to the ramifications of a policy of inclusion. This is particularly the case in the context of students presenting with emotional and behavioural difficulties.

In order for effective policies on issues such as behaviour and discipline to be developed and implemented, considerable intervention will be required in order to heighten awareness of the nature of such difficulties in the context of a very diverse profile of learning needs represented in the school-going population. New paradigms of expectations around behaviour and school-based responses to it will have to be developed to replace the "one size fits all" approach that has been taken heretofore.

This paper attempts to raise some of the pertinent issues in this debate. This is particularly appropriate in the context of the current DES initiative on student behaviour in second level schools.

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