School Based Positive Behaviour Support: A Model of Support for Children with Challenging Behaviour

It can be difficult to know how best to respond to children who present with challenging behaviour, particularly children with intellectual disabilities. Some strategies fail to teach the expected behaviour, and may inadvertently contribute to the maintenance of the problem behaviour. Yet, successful alternative approaches can be difficult to find. This paper discusses the adoption of Positive Behavioural Support as an effective school-based response to challenging behaviour.

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INTRODUCTION

Following the occurrence of challenging behaviour shown by a student with an intellectual disability, school personnel routinely find themselves in a position of having to respond to such behaviour. Typical responses include staff discussion about future strategy, consultation with clinical services, involvement of parents/guardians, the allocation of 1:1 time with a special needs assistant and loss of privileges and isolation (Kelly, Carey and McCarthy, 2004). An additional and relatively commonly implemented consequence is short term exclusion from school. Irish special schools are not unusual in this respect as several other studies, particularly in the USA, report exclusion as a common response to significant challenging behaviour (Oswald, Safran and Johanson, 2005; Lane and Murakami, 1987). Unfortunately, both exclusion and the strategies identified above are unlikely to be effective with children who present with significant intellectual disabilities and challenging behaviours.

The strategies outlined above are at an increased risk of failure because they primarily rely on the premise that the student with an intellectual disability knows what is expected, how to do it and is properly motivated to engage in appropriate behaviour. Collectively, the underlying failure with these strategies is that they fail to teach the expected behaviour (Sugai and Horner, 2002). Furthermore, an unfortunate commonality across these responses is that they may actually serve to maintain the occurrence of problem behaviours (Gresham, 1991; March and Horner, 2002). There is now a substantial body of evidence that the most common function or cause of challenging behaviour is what is referred to as *escape/avoidance* with rates as high as 70% (Hanley, Iwata and McCord, 2003; Grey and Hastings, 2005; McClean, Grey and Murray, 2005b). Consequently, reactions that serve to remove the student from educational domains or tasks may inadvertently contribute to the maintenance of such behaviour over the longer term. Such a finding is unlikely to generate surprise amongst those working with students who display challenging behaviour, likely as it is to fit with their own explanations for the cause of such behaviours. However, the fact that the responses typically employed may

serve to maintain the problem suggests that many may be struggling with what to do instead. This paper discusses the adoption of Positive Behavioural Support as a school-based response to challenging behaviour.

POSITIVE BEHAVIOUR SUPPORT

Positive Behaviour Support (PBS) has emerged over the past ten years as an effective method of supporting individuals with intellectual disabilities across residential settings, day services and schools (Hieneman, Dunlap and Kincaid, 2005; McClean, Dench, Grey, Shanahan, Fitzsimons, Hendler and Corrigan, 2005a). It is the result of a fusion between the research and practice of applied behaviour analysis and the values based movement associated with both normalization and person-centred planning. It also eschews the use of what are termed aversive interventions. Behaviour Support Plans developed from a PBS framework reflect three key goals: the reduction of challenging behaviour, an increase in appropriate behaviour and an increased quality of life (Crone and Horner, 2000).

In order to achieve these goals, PBS has a number of core practices associated with it. These are: (1) the use of functional assessment to identify the function of challenging behaviours, which in turn forms the basis for behaviour support plan development; and (2) the use of proactive, educative interventions designed to increase adaptive skills and reduce challenging behaviours. More specifically, this involves changing ineffective practices taking place with the child and altering deficient skill repertoires. Being able to make modifications and adaptations to general education curriculum remains one of the most crucial jobs done by teachers to ensure meaningful learning and classroom participation by students with intellectual disabilities (Janney and Snell, 2004). PBS promotes both proactive and reactive strategies but a heavier emphasis is placed on the former. The implementation of proactive strategies is designed to eliminate or reduce as much as possible the factors contributing to the occurrence of challenging behaviours via teaching, changing practices and increasing use of effective sources of motivation. This emphasis stems from the fact that children with significant intellectual disabilities are unlikely to learn from reactions to challenging behaviours, even if these reactions are repeated frequently and are even socially commonplace.

FUNCTIONAL ASSESSMENT

Functional assessment is the bedrock of PBS. It addresses a number of basic questions including what typically triggers the problem behaviour? What events increase the sensitivity to triggers? What pay-off does the student typically receive from the behaviour? These and other questions are designed to identify the underlying communicative message of the behaviour (Carr, Levin, McConnachie, Carlson, Kemp and Smith, 1994). The use of the word communication in this context does not mean that challenging behaviour is used intentionally to communicate, rather it means that if the behaviour were to be interpreted, what might it be considered to be saying? In this way,

we might identify functions such as 'I don't want to do that task', 'I don't understand that task, 'this is boring' or 'when is this going to be over'.

Functional behavioural assessment is the means used in order to determine which combination of interventions will be the most effective for an individual student within a specific school setting. Its effectiveness when linked to the development of behaviour support plans is reflected in relatively recent US legislation. Amendments to the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) (1997) in the United States require that a functional assessment is needed before a school suspends (for more than 10 days) or expels a student (Sugai and Horner, 2002). Contemporary functional assessment practices extend beyond the perhaps somewhat stereotypical ABC analysis to include a comprehensive background assessment. This assessment identifies what cognitive, communication, environmental and behavioural factors predispose the child towards engaging in challenging behaviour.

An assessment of the child's learning across key domains is also vitally important. However, the majority of cognitive psychological tests yield information that is only minimally useful for educators as these tests in themselves are not curriculum based. An additional difficulty is that these tests do not provide detailed task analysis within specific domains to guide teaching and structure educational tasks. In contrast, the *Assessment of Basic Language and Learning Skills* (ABLLS) is a specific assessment, curriculum guide and skills tracking system for children with developmental disabilities and language delays (Partington and Sundberg, 1998). The ABLLS is useful because it can provide both parents and professionals with criterion referenced information regarding current skills and provides a curriculum that can serve as a basis for the selection of educational objectives. Furthermore, each specific educational domain is broken down using task analysis. For example, the 'receptive language' section of the instrument is broken down into approximately 164 sub-steps.

Assessment information provides the critical context in which to best understand the more antecedent-consequence based analysis that is also important (see Table 1). Supplementary assessment tools available include interview formats such as the Functional Assessment Interview (O'Neill, Homer, Ablin, Sprague, Storey and Newton, 1997), instruments such as the Questions About Behavioural Function questionnaire (Paclawskyj, Matson, Rush and Vollmer, 2000) and teacher specific checklists (Crone and Horner, 2000). This process should culminate in a testable hypothesis as to what causes the behaviour which then should be confirmed by an appropriate method such as incident analysis (Carr et al., 1994). Once the function, or in many cases functions, of a behaviour are identified, a behaviour support plan can be developed.

Insert Table 1 Here

BEHAVIOUR SUPPORT PLANS

Perhaps the greatest difficulty in designing effective intervention plans is the highly variable, individual response to intervention. Strategies that may work well with one child may have no impact on the behaviour of another child who displays similar behaviour. To avoid a menu-driven approach to intervention, the selection of any intervention is based upon the results of the functional assessment. However, as stated earlier, PBS aims for three primary outcomes and to achieve this typically requires a combination of interventions to be put in place. These include: (1) procedures for preventing the problem behaviour through alteration of antecedents and what are termed setting events; (2) procedures for teaching appropriate behaviours; (3) procedures for addressing motivational factors to impact positively on challenging behaviour; and (4) identifying reactive strategies to be implemented on the occurrence of challenging behaviour (see Table 2). Behaviour Support Plans (BSP) should also identify data-collection procedures for monitoring the implementation of the BSP and for evaluating its effectiveness.

Insert Table 2 About Here

Irrespective of how well conducted a functional assessment and technically correct a BSP may be, if it is not acceptable to those responsible for its day-to-day implementation, it will be associated with a higher likelihood of failure. Sometimes, specific elements of a behaviour support plan can present difficulties to those working with children who display challenging behaviour. For instance, the idea of providing a child with challenging behaviour with higher rate access to enjoyable activities than their peers is one that many may not be immediately comfortable with. One reason for this is that the occurrence of challenging behaviour creates typically strong emotional reactions in those exposed to it especially when working with other students who do not show such behaviour. This makes it easier for us to think about punishments or sanctions that are deserved rather than using rewards for the absence of challenging behaviour or to teaching alternative behaviours (Whittaker, 2005).

Teaching alternative behaviours also requires a widening of the definition of teaching to helping a child learn how to wait, how to tolerate delay, how to cope with transitions, how to understand verbal instruction, or how to learn self-help skills. Often children with significant intellectual disabilities need to learn how to learn and, as such, using instructional methodologies that have proven effectiveness, such as discrete trial teaching and incidental teaching, can greatly aid learning. However, teachers may often find themselves caught between the pressure of implementing a general departmental-defined curriculum and teaching basic skills that typically developing children would actually enter the school with.

ORGANISATIONAL RESPONSE TO CHALLENGING BEHAVIOUR

Though function based behaviour support plans have been shown to be associated with higher levels of effectiveness, the issue that confronts most schools is how to effectively deliver positive behaviour supports. This becomes an important issue when prevalence rates of challenging behaviour in schools are considered. Only recently has good quality information regarding the prevalence of challenging behaviour in special schools in Ireland become available. Kelly et al. (2004) report that in a sample of over 3,500 pupils in special education settings in Ireland, 31% displayed some form of challenging behaviour ranging from physical aggression to non-compliance with instructional requests. When this percentage is applied to the total population of children with special needs in the Irish education system, we are confronted with a sobering figure of almost 5,000 children presenting with some form of challenging behaviour. Obviously, there is substantial variation in the degree of threat associated with different types of challenging behaviour.

Most organisations charged with the delivery of supports to those with disabilities rely on a multi-disciplinary team to provide solutions and support to the problem of challenging behaviour. In typical service settings, the psychologist routinely operates as a consultant. The difficulty with such an approach in practice is that due to increasing caseloads – an argument supported by Kelly et al. (2004) who point to a 46% increase in the numbers of students attending special schools over the past ten years – psychologists are often limited to providing a list of strategies to try. However, teachers are generally dissatisfied with this model, preferring instead that psychologists and other professionals spend more time in the classroom providing practical assistance. However, unless substantially more support services personnel can be achieved, an alternative model is to provide teachers themselves with the skills necessary to intervene effectively with challenging behaviour.

TRAINING MODELS

Training is often viewed as a panacea to challenging behaviour. It is no surprise, therefore, that Kelly et al. (2004) reported that almost 90% of schools indicated that staff required staff training in dealing with challenging behaviour and over eighty percent indicated a need for training in challenging behaviour intervention programmes. In exploring the type of training required, almost 80% of principals identified PBS as the model most desired. However, the selection of type of delivery is critical.

Training models that provide actual experience in conducting functional assessment and developing behaviour support plans have been shown to be effective in reducing challenging behaviour across a variety of settings including schools (Grey et al., 2005; Grey and McClean, in press; McClean et al., 2005a). Training models that are non-skills based and reflect an emphasis on providing evidence-based information have not been shown to be particularly effective (Grey and McClean, in press). The difficulty for delivering school based, skills based training programmes is providing a training programme that is flexible enough so that it does not require the teacher to leave the

classroom for lengthy periods of time but at the same time allows them time to practice the skills.

CONCLUSION

There is no magic solution to the problem of challenging behaviour. However, there is an emerging evidence base that functional assessment and behaviour support planning, based on environmental accommodation, communication skills training and principles of Applied Behaviour Analysis, are effective in assisting students to overcome challenging behaviours. This paper has pointed to the need to train and support teachers and special needs assistants with these assessment and intervention skills. In this way, the widespread adoption of positive behavioural support could significantly improve the educational opportunity and quality of life of many students who are challenged by their behaviour in classroom settings. This is, perhaps, the single greatest challenge for special education in Ireland.

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Table 1: Comprehensive Behavioural Assessment

Method	Purpose
Phase 1: Background Assessment	
Interview with key social agents	
	Identify target behaviours, identify events associated with occurrence of behaviour, that is the events that control, increase or maintain challenging behaviours.
	Identify when and where the target behaviours occur.
Communication assessment	Identify functional communicational competencies. What is the student's current medium and fluency of communication?
	Difficulties in expressive and receptive language
Criterion Referenced Learning Assessment	Using criterion referenced assessment identify abilities in: visual performance, receptive language, imitation, vocal imitation, requests, labelling, spontaneous vocalisation, syntax and grammar, play and leisure, social interaction, group instruction, classroom routine, reading, math, writing, spelling, dressing, eating, grooming, gross and fine motor.
Analysis of previous interventions	Identify previous interventions for the target behaviour, what was implemented and what was the effect of the intervention.
	Identify resources and constraints for those delivering teaching
Motivational assessment	Identify possible activities for environmental enrichment; identify potential reinforcers.
	Identify the activities the student seeks out during their free time. Identify areas the student participates with their peers
Phase 2: Descriptive Assessment	
Description of problem behaviour	What does the target behaviour look like? identify the behaviours that come before the target behaviour and those that follow it
	Measurement; Frequency recording of behaviour or a count of behaviours as they occur or duration recording, the length of time the behaviour is emitted for.
Historical analysis	Identify historical factors associated with increase and decrease in response strength of behaviour
Scatterplot	Identify times of day associated with behaviour
Antecedent analysis	Identify naturally occurring events associated with occurrence and non-occurrence of behaviour

Consequence analysis	Identify naturally occurring maintaining events for behaviour
Ecological analysis	Evaluate goodness of fit of the environment with the needs and characteristics of the individual
Phase three: Hypothesis testing	
Hypothesis development	Synthesise informant and descriptive data; identify common themes; identify contradictory evidence; distinguish setting events and triggers; This should all lead to the formation of a hypothesise as to the function of the target behaviour
Incident analysis	Prospective test of hypotheses

Table 2: Examples of Interventions used in Positive Behavioural Support, adapted from LaVigna and Donnellan (1989)

	Proactive interventions			Reactive strategies
	Environmental accommodations	Skills teaching	Direct interventions	
Examples of positive behavioural support interventions	Activity sampling Access to food and drink Access to relaxation Pictorial activity sequencing book Adaptations to activity schedule Adaptations to instructional style Adaptations to duration and type of activities Choice making protocol Transition protocol Adaptations to diet Adaptations to physical environment Increased access to reinforcement	Picture Exchange Communication Speech training Object exchange to facilitate communication Activity training Imitation training Self-management training Self-sufficiency skills training Teaching listener skills, e.g. following directions Escape communication training Discrimination skills training Relaxation training Systematic desensitisation Conversation skills Self help skills	Differential Reinforcement of Other Behaviour Differential Reinforcement of Low Rates of Behaviour Differential Reinforcement of Alternative Behaviours Instructional control Stimulus Satiation Planned Ignoring	Active listening Feedback Redirection Limit setting Facilitated relaxation Facilitated communication Facilitated problem solving Interpositioning Breakaway techniques Non-violent crisis intervention Debriefing