

Challenging Behaviour in Schools for Pupils with Severe and Profound General Learning Disabilities

Challenging behaviour has always been a difficult issue for schools and teachers. Pupils themselves are often too readily blamed for such behaviour when, in fact, a well-developed school policy could play a major role in preventing and diminishing some of this behaviour. A number of strategies are known to be effective in managing the challenging behaviour of pupils with severe and profound general learning disabilities.

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INTRODUCTION

Challenging behaviour is an issue of grave concern for all school communities. It is of particular concern in schools for pupils with severe and profound general learning disabilities (SPLD). The management of this behaviour is a source of anxiety among those who work in this area because of the nature of the pupils' disabilities and the many and varied staff who work with these pupils throughout the day, often leading to a lack of consistency of approach.

O'Brien (1998) sees every child, no matter how challenging their behaviour nor how profound their learning difficulty, as being entitled to the dignity of communication that respects them as humans and learners. He emphasises that this attitude will allow them to develop a positive understanding of their relationship with the world around them and help them to take a step along the pathway towards a sense of holistic, spiritual, moral and cultural well being which generally leads to a reduction in their challenging behaviour.

CHALLENGING BEHAVIOUR IN THE SPECIAL SCHOOL

The Report of the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) (Department of Education, 1993) recognises a continuum of disorders in the identification of challenging behaviour. The Report states that challenging behaviour is 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.

Who is Responsible for Challenging Behaviour?

Davie (1989) warns of the tendency in our educational system to lay the blame for challenging behaviour with the pupil rather than with the school which he believes is creating it. Peagam (1995) maintains that the daily experience of teachers leads them to believe that the cause of challenging behaviour is within the child. However, O'Brien

(1998) explains “... challenging behaviour can only change once it is seen as a *learning* difficulty that takes place within the context of the whole child and their whole learning” (p. 3-4). He states that a teacher in the learning zone see a pupil’s behaviour as a challenge whereas a teacher in the battle zone will see the pupil as the challenge. Charlton and David (1989) see the causes of challenging behaviour as being located as often within the teacher as it is within the pupil. They view schools as affecting pupil behaviour. “What schools offer and how they offer it, helps determine whether pupils respond in desirable or undesirable ways” (p. 4). Fogell and Long (1997) recognise schools which take the view that the problem of challenging behaviour is the pupil’s as being reactive, whereas schools which accept such behaviour as a management issue they view as being proactive schools.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF CHALLENGING BEHAVIOUR

Implications for Educational Progress

Porter and Lacey (1999) stress that challenging behaviour has a profound effect on pupils’ access to learning. They view pupils’ attention often being sustained by their challenging behaviour rather than by other aspects of the school environment. They see teachers facing the dilemma of how to promote learning for pupils with challenging behaviour without interfering with the learning opportunities of other pupils. They express the need for educators to approach the curriculum in a ‘bottom up’ manner which best supports the needs of the pupil with challenging behaviour. Harris (1995) advises that pupils with challenging behaviour are often denied access to classroom learning or are continuously removed from the classroom environment.

Implications for Social Development

Qureshi (1994) acknowledges that challenging behaviour of a persistent nature places a huge demand on staff and seriously reduces the quality of life both for the individual concerned and for other people in the setting. An additional impediment to the social integration of pupils with challenging behaviour lies in their inability to establish relationships with other people. This often leads to the presumption that they will be indifferent to being taught by a variety of adults during the school day. However this can pose many serious problems leading to a further reduction in a pupil’s ability to develop at a social level (Harris, 1995).

STRATEGIES THAT HELP DEAL WITH CHALLENGING BEHAVIOUR

Teaching Strategies

Porter (1986) believes that punishment techniques on their own do not effectively control behaviour. They must always be counteracted by the teaching of positive skills which must always be taught through reinforcement. While Harris, Cook, and Upton (1996) view school resources as impacting on the successful implementation of new teaching strategies, O’Brien (1998) warns that teaching cannot be postponed until all imaginable resources are in place. He also stresses the importance of differentiating within the

curriculum for individual pupils so that the teaching aim can be matched to the learning need. Harris et al. suggest that for pupils with challenging behaviour who do not respond well to structured teaching, it may be necessary to create opportunities for learning in more naturalistic settings such as during social routines.

Teacher Responsibility

O'Brien (1998) notes that teachers have a professional responsibility to provide learning opportunities for every pupil. Fox, Dunlap and Powell (2002) view ineffective behaviour management by teachers as worsening children's problems. Richards (1999) explains that teachers have a responsibility for preventing challenging behaviour. This they achieve by providing motivating and enjoyable lessons rather than a system for controlling behaviour or dealing with challenging behaviour once it has transpired.

The Importance of a Behavioural Policy

Galvin and Costa (1994) support the need for a behavioural policy. They claim that if schools have an effect on the behaviour of pupils, whether they plan for it or not, it is better if the nature of this effect is planned rather than accidental. A behaviour policy that includes an element of flexibility and reflects a realistic appraisal of pupils with behavioural difficulties is seen by Richards (1999) as the best approach. He continues, "Care is taken to avoid setting expectations that these pupils will fail to meet, and if persistent problems do occur, emphasis is placed on critically re-examining policies rather than unrealistically trying to force pupils to fit" (p. 101).

THE IMPLICATIONS FOR STAFF WORKING WITH STUDENTS WITH CHALLENGING BEHAVIOUR

Effects on Staff

Challenging behaviour is a major contributor to staff stress, low staff morale, high staff turnover and absences and the development of negative attitudes and feelings towards the individuals who present with the challenging behaviour (Bell & Espie, 2002; Hastings, 2002). Because of the high incidence of challenging behaviour in schools for pupils with SPLD, Male and May (1997) cite teachers in such schools as being especially prone to high stress levels. This, they fear, results in such teachers being unable to operate to their optimum. O'Brien (1998) admits that for teachers to promote positive behaviour they often must unlearn many of their own learned behaviours. This places added stress on staff. It is therefore incumbent upon school management to meet the needs of the whole teacher as well as providing for the needs of the whole child.

Staff Training in the Management of Challenging Behaviour

Among key issues highlighted by the Mental Health Foundation Committee on Services for Children with Learning Disabilities and Severe Challenging Behaviour (Russell, 1997) was the need for training and professional development for all staff working with these children. Conversely, Emerson, Hastings and McGill (1994) are unconvinced of the advantages of staff training. They clarify "... evidence from such diverse areas as health, education and race relations suggest that information and training may be ineffectual in changing personal beliefs, attitudes or behaviour" (p. 222).

Harris et al. (1996) argue for flexibility of approach in determining staff training needs. They see different schools needing different innovations to improve their practice. While some schools might need help in developing a behavioural policy, other schools might well benefit from intensive in-service training to help staff improve their observation and recording procedures.

ASSESSMENT AND INTERVENTION TECHNIQUES AS METHODS OF MANAGING CHALLENGING BEHAVIOUR

Assessment

O'Brien (1998) sees the role of assessment as informing planning of teaching and learning as teachers plan to meet the pupil's needs. It also improves the quality of life for pupils and staff.

Intervention

McGill, Clare, and Murphy (1995) imply a need to extend the focus from work with people who already have challenging behaviour to effective early intervention. Without such a strategy, they believe, challenging behaviour will continue to develop relatively frequently in people with learning disabilities resulting in successful interventions not being maintained over time.

Poulou and Norwich (2000) emphasise the importance of successful teacher intervention for pupils with challenging behaviour because teachers are the only professionals who interact with children over a sustained period of time. Umbreit (1997) explains that some interventions can be implemented easily, consistently and for extensive periods. Nevertheless, he warns that some of the variables that are likely to influence staff compliance with extensive interventions include the time-intensiveness of the intervention, the rate of occurrence of the challenging behaviour, the effectiveness of the intervention and the acceptability of the intervention to those who must implement it. Dunlap, Foster Johnson and Robins (1990) advocate an intensive skill-based intervention as a means of preventing the emergence of challenging behaviours. Their rationale is that if people with developmental disabilities have been taught the basic skills with which to communicate with others they will have less need of challenging behaviour as they can now achieve the same ends in a more socially acceptable manner.

Strategies for Supporting Staff as Part of the Whole School Policy

Pupils who present challenging behaviour that impacts on themselves, other pupils or staff are the responsibility of the whole school (Fogell & Long, 1997; Porter & Lacey, 1999). The Mental Health Foundation Committee (Russell, 1997) recognises that supporting pupils with challenging behaviour should not be the exclusive responsibility of one staff member but emphasises the need to develop a whole school policy for the management of difficult behaviours. This policy would ensure that "... all staff are aware of new methods of work. Innovative approaches to working with pupils will be ineffective unless introduced consistently throughout the school" (p. 62).

Harris et al. (1996) describe the development of a whole school approach to working with challenging pupils as a process which begins with the identification of problem behaviours and culminates in the implementation and evaluation of intervention strategies. They stress the importance of established management systems with effective methods of communication between staff, and a principal with good management skills, as prerequisites for the successful implementation of a whole school approach to managing challenging behaviour.

O'Brien (1998) argues that whole school definitions of desirable and undesirable behaviour are necessary because they require unambiguous definition and description of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour and interventions. To ensure transparency when talking about behaviour we must monitor and analyse it in relation to improving the quality of learning for the pupil.

Relevance of the Individual Education Plan in the Whole School Policy

Assessment procedures for the Individual Education Plan (IEP) should take place within the whole school policy for curriculum and assessment. It should be closely linked to purpose, that is, recording pupil's progress, citing pupil's needs and strengths and identifying targets and strategies (OFSTED, 1996). Fogell and Long (1997) hint that the most effective IEPs will have the full support and ownership of the senior management team in the school. If this is not the case they warn that the IEP will almost certainly fail to produce results.

Cornwall and Tod (1998) see the IEP as an educational tool that can have a positive impact on a pupil's progress. They clarify, "The way we think about behaviour and describe it will change the language and kinds of targets we are likely to set for short term IEP planning" (p. 71). Nevertheless they warn that targets do not exist independently. Setting them does not in itself achieve anything, neither does it necessarily result in effective teaching. They recommend that if schools require staff members to record progress of individual pupils through IEPs there will need to be some organisational or group change in attitudes, skills and understanding.

McGill and Toogood (1994) propose that if individual curricula is to be determined through the IEP then a number of emphases need to be changed. These include the development of a relatively full curriculum which includes a range of work, leisure and self help skills of relevance to the individual; it should stress the environment in which the service will be provided and where possible, allow the person input into choosing their own activities.

O'Brien (1998) argues that IEPs are "unfortunately more often about paper work than about pupil work" (p. 5). He says that if they are to meaningfully address both teaching and learning then they must address individual needs. He stresses that "a child should be a participant in their IEP not a victim of it" (p. 13). Unfortunately, in a school for pupils with SPLD, due to the nature of many pupils' disabilities, it is often not possible to involve pupils in the development of their IEPs.

In contrast to the research expounding the advantages of the IEP, Goddard (1997) advocates that this is not the only method of organising pupils' learning. Emblem, Leonard, Dale, Redmond and Bowes (1998) agree and in the author's opinion their outlook has particular relevance for pupils with SPLD. They explain that usually targets are written in terms of child behaviour but we cannot always predict how and what a child will learn. It is easier to predict how the teacher will behave. They continue:

There's a lot to be said for writing targets for adult rather than child behaviour. We should ensure that we give enough attention to things we can directly influence – namely our behaviour and the environment we offer ... we should concentrate on creating conditions and offering activities in which learning is likely to take place. (p. 57)

CONCLUSIONS

- While challenging behaviour can be viewed as an added impediment for the pupil with SPLD, schools can make a difference.
- The responsibility of every school is to provide teaching and learning for every pupil.
- Schools for pupils with SPLD need to offer active support with well planned lessons and activities rather than a minding facility for pupils who challenge.
- Teachers must view challenging behaviour as a 'challenge' to their professional ability to provide as good an educational environment to the pupil who displays challenging behaviour as to the pupil who does not.
- The dynamic involvement of senior management in supporting staff, in providing staff training where appropriate, and in developing and implementing policies, contributes to the positive management of challenging behaviour.

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