REACH Journal of Special Needs Education in Ireland, Vol. 15.2 (2002), 87-96

Formulating and Implementing a Whole-school Behaviour Policy: Considering the Needs of Pupils with Mild General Learning Disabilities in Mainstream Schools

In this article, the author sets out to consider the challenges facing pupils with mild general learning disabilities in attempting to gain ownership of a whole-school behaviour policy in an integrated mainstream setting. In formulating and implementing such a policy, there is a duty on the part of the school to recognise the differences that exist between pupils and the need to accommodate these differences.

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INTRODUCTION

Discipline is an issue which is absolutely central to the work of schools. Martin (1997), in her survey of 250 primary and post primary Irish schools found that

> An overwhelming majority at both levels considered that lack of discipline was becoming more of an issue in recent years and that this is so, both in the classroom and in the general school environment. There is a sense of foreboding about discipline and a perception that what is not a problem today might become one in the future - a future not too far away. For schools already in the grip of indiscipline, the experience is personally harrowing and very depressing. (p.31)

Discipline is a topic which possesses the potential to evoke emotive reactions, and it is necessary to maintain a sense of perspective with regard to the incidence of disciplinary problems in Irish schools. Martin (1997) reports that

> The majority of schools, c.80%, reported that, in the main, the indiscipline could be described as low level. 20% of the respondents reported that indiscipline in their schools was of a serious nature. Respondents in this category were all working in areas of multiple disadvantage. (p.31)

However, the impact which a minority of disruptive pupils can have on the work of their fellow pupils should not be underestimated, because they invariably occupy a disproportionate amount of teachers' time and energy. It is more appropriate, therefore, to refer to discipline in qualitative rather that quantitative terms because one badly behaved pupil in a class can have devastating consequences for teaching and for learning.

THE ELEMENTS OF A WHOLE-SCHOOL BEHAVIOUR POLICY

What are the factors that a school needs to consider in formulating a behaviour policy? Following an examination of 40 school behaviour policies Morrison (1996) provides a comprehensive list of the components that go to make up a whole-school behaviour policy. He links his findings to other recent research data and concludes that such a policy is founded on the following fundamental key principles

- The need to 'promote the positive' and to build self-esteem in children
- The need to provide opportunities for children to experience success
- The centrality of motivation, interest in and enjoyment of all aspects of school life
- The need to attend to and support the 'whole-child'
- The promotion of empowerment, autonomy and responsibility in children
- The need for a consistent whole-school policy
- The inclusive nature of a policy, involving and addressing all aspects of school life and curricula, all relevant parties and all aspects of the child
- The recognition that pastoral, behavioural and academic needs exist in symbiosis with each other
- The need to promote a positive ethos and climate in the school which extends to the physical, psychological and social as well as the academic aspects of school
- The need to be proactive, considering preventative measures and measures to de-escalate trouble quickly
- The need for negotiated and agreed rules, rewards and sanctions
- The need for communication, e.g. of expectations, boundaries, responsibilities, rules, praise, feedback. (p.23)

It is clear from this summary list that attention should be focused on people, on intervention and on accentuating the positive within a whole-school behaviour policy. The range of elements on this list make obvious the fact that a behaviour policy must be a whole-school one - it would be extremely difficult for any one teacher to accommodate the wide range of issues involved.

The challenges faced by pupils with mild general learning disabilities in the context of a whole-school behaviour policy are obvious. First and foremost, a behaviour policy will contain rules, rewards and sanctions in one form or another. A clear knowledge and understanding of these three aspects are crucial for participation in such a policy. Pupils who display limited attention and retention span, allied with limited ability to abstract and generalise, will certainly need assistance if they are to gain this knowledge and understanding.

One important aspect of the nature and characteristics of pupils with mild general learning disabilities, which demands consideration, is the relationship between behaviour and learning. Charlton & David (1993) describe this relationship as follows

> Evidence from research clearly suggests that a considerable number of children suffer from both behaviour difficulties and an apparent inability to learn successfully. While it is not always clear whether the behaviour problem is a cause of, or a reaction to, the learning difficulties, findings consistently point to a strong relationship between the two variables. (p.84)

Pupils with mild general learning disabilities face many challenges in their daily lives, both in terms of their learning and behaviour. In the context of a whole-school behaviour policy, it is incumbent on those in authority to consider these challenges when formulating and implementing such a policy. A failure to do so will not only inhibit ownership of the policy, but may in fact have an adverse effect on the behaviour of such pupils.

RULES, REWARDS AND SANCTIONS

Circular 20/90 (Department of Education, 1990) states the need for rules, rewards and sanctions to be part of a school policy for behaviour and discipline. It goes on to stress the need for policy to become part of the ethos of the school and to be clearly understood by pupils, parents and the wider school community. Understanding and participating in such a policy may prove more challenging for pupils with mild general learning disabilities than for their more able peers. The following are some considerations on the formulation and implementation of such a policy, which may assist these pupils in meeting this challenge.

Rules

Rules are guidelines about good behaviour and good work habits. Rogers (cited in Westwood, 1997) emphasises the importance of a consultative process when formulating rules (p.5), while O'Brien (1998) adds that "One benefit of discussing rules with pupils is that they can be written in words that the children use and identify with" (p.7). Involving pupils with mild general learning difficulties in this consultative process would greatly enhance not only their understanding of these rules but also the reasoning behind them. To further enhance retention and understanding of the rules, Clarke & Murray (1996) state

> The written rules may be rather bland, but they can be filled out either in writing or verbally with 'what this rule means is ....' If a list of rules is visible, they can be a constant reminder as well as being able to be referred to non-verbally. Misbehaviour can be interrupted with the question, 'which rule are you breaking?' requiring the pupil to think and respond rather than just stop misbehaving - thus encouraging self-discipline. (p.18)

We should, however, be very clear about the nature of this consultative process. O'Brien (1998) points out that honesty is needed about certain rules which are available for explanation and illustration, but not for negotiation (p.97).

Whether available for negotiation or for explanation only, the nature of the rules themselves will have a large bearing on their being understood and accepted, not only by pupils with mild general learning disabilities but by the pupil population as a whole. Clarke & Murray (1996) state that rules are effective when they are

- Few, reasonable and fair
- Explained, discussed with, and taught to pupils
- Simple and precise
- Enforced and enforceable
- Positive - describe the behaviour the school wants to see (p.17).

Martin (1997) recommends that rules should be "if necessary and appropriate, taught like academic content" (p.57). Pupils with mild general difficulties will also need to be taught how to generalise particular rules to different settings and contexts both within and outside the school building.

Rewards

Her Majesty's Inspectorate (cited in Jones, 1989), reporting on good behaviour and discipline in schools in Britain found that

> The balance between rewards and sanctions, in both policy and practice, is a useful touchstone of a school's approach to maintaining good standards of

> behaviour. The best results are found where schools lay particular emphasis on rewards. Pupils appear to achieve more, to be better motivated and to behave better, when teachers commend and reward their successes and emphasise their potential rather than focusing on their failures and shortcomings (p.77).

However, rewards should not be given for attainment only. O'Brien (1998) asserts that "Rewards should recognise achievement and progress as well as attainment. They can also be extremely effective in reinforcing desired behaviours" (p.98). There is a wide range of reinforcers available to the teacher and careful consideration must be given as to which ones to use if they are to prove effective. Within the context of a whole-school behaviour policy, a reinforcer, which works for most pupils will not necessarily work for pupils with mild general learning difficulties. For reinforcers or rewards to be effective, they must be appropriate, achievable and forthcoming when a desired behaviour is displayed by a pupil. If reinforcers do not fulfil these functions, they are not only ineffective but counter-productive. Lawson (cited in Gage & Berliner, 1998) explains the inherent dangers if teachers fail in this respect

> Frustration happens when expected reinforcement does not take place.
> Frustration does motivate. It does change students' energy level and direction. But it usually weakens wanted behaviour and motivates unwanted behaviour. It has proved to be a source of emotionality withdrawal, regression, hyperactivity, and particularly aggression (p.339).

Sanctions

The term 'sanctions' has replaced the more old fashioned term 'punishment' in expressing the need to register disapproval. "The word 'sanctions' generally expresses the need more accurately than 'punishments', which implies a more or less aggressive response to the individual breaking the rules which assumes that the student is in complete control of the behaviour concerned" (Thompson & Sharpe, 1994, p.75). These are not the responses nor assumptions that a positive, proactive behaviour policy would wish to make, and therefore the term 'sanctions' is deemed to be more appropriate. Within the context of a whole-school behaviour policy, sanctions are usually graded in severity based on the repeated nature or seriousness of the pupil's behaviour. Sanctions can range in severity from a verbal warning from the teacher to possible suspension from school. Pupils with mild general learning disabilities need to be taught this graded system of sanctions explicitly, in much the same fashion as they are taught the rules. Clarke & Murray (1996) maintain that "Pupils should be able to gauge how serious things are by what happens to them. They should also be clear about the next step in the process and what they would have to do to get them there. This last point reinforces the pupil's ownership of their own behaviour" (p.22). Teachers, however, need to be aware of the possible effects that sanctions may have on certain pupils. Ginott (cited in Porter, 2000), using the more old fashioned term 'punishment', states that

> Punishment produces emotional side effects such as fearfulness and frustration from not having one's needs met. Whereas the purpose of punishment is to convince students to stop unacceptable behaviour, it is more likely to enrage them and make them ineducable. Feeling that they have failed will lower students' self-esteem and perhaps give rise to more infringements because they feel discouraged. (p.57)

These are not consequences we would wish for any pupil, and certainly not a pupil with mild general learning disabilities whose self-esteem may already be low. While sanctions are

necessary, teachers need to ensure that they are used effectively and sparingly. Westwood (1997) offers the following advice

> Punishment is most effective if it is combined with positive reinforcement. This combination brings about more rapid and effective changes than the use of either procedure alone. The child who pushes or punches other children will learn appropriate behaviour if he or she receives positive reinforcement (praise or tokens) for friendly and co-operative behaviour as well as punishment (loss of privileges, verbal reprimand, time-out) for the inappropriate behaviour. (p.57)

O'Brien concurs with this advice in asserting that "A behaviour policy should maintain a clear relationship between rewards and sanctions - my preference would be for an imbalance that is substantially in favour of rewards" (p.100).

It is clear that the needs of pupils with mild general learning disabilities must be addressed during the development stage of a whole-school behaviour policy. Developing rules in such a policy should be a consultative process and the rules agreed upon need to be clear, precise and few in number. These rules should then be taught like academic content if necessary, and generalised to different locations around the school. Rewards must also be carefully considered to ensure that they meet the requirements of each individual pupil. Sanctions, when necessary, should be applied judiciously and only in combination with positive reinforcement. Such considerations are essential if pupils with mild general learning disabilities are to gain access to the behaviour policy.

SOCIAL SKILLS AND PEER GROUP ACCEPTANCE

Pupils with mild general learning disabilities attending a mainstream school, which has adopted a policy of integration, will spend the greater part of their school day in a regular or mainstream classroom. Participating in such an environment may prove challenging for these pupils. However, facilitating social interaction will prove problematic if the pupils in question lack the prerequisite social skills necessary to form friendships and to gain peer group acceptance. The social skills in question are those components of behaviour that are important for pupils to initiate, and then maintain, positive interactions with others. Some basic social skills would include the following

- Eye contact: being able to maintain eye contact with another person to whom you are listening or speaking for at least brief periods of time
- Facial expression: smiling, showing interest
- Social distance: knowing where to stand relative to others; knowing when physical contact is inappropriate
- Greeting others: initiating contact or responding to a greeting; inviting another child to join you in some activity
- Playing with others and working with others: complying with rules, sharing, compromising, helping, taking turns, complimenting others, saying thank you, saying you're sorry
- Coping with conflict: controlling aggression, dealing with anger in self and others, accepting criticism, 'being a sport'. (Westwood, p.78)

Pupils who lack the basic social skills necessary to form friendships will certainly encounter difficulties when placed in a regular classroom setting. These skills must be taught if such pupils are to gain acceptance in such an environment. Westwood concludes on a positive note - "Much can be done to assist children with social and personal problems and teachers are recognising their

responsibility in this area" (p.81). The discharge of this responsibility will not only promote the child's social and emotional well being, but will also act as a positive, preventative strategy for discipline difficulties.

EFFECTIVE TEACHING AND CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

Two of the most immediate environmental factors which impact directly on the behaviour of pupils with mild general learning disabilities are the teaching strategies and classroom management skills employed by the class teacher.

Effective Teaching

Promoting genuine success in learning for pupils with mild general learning disabilities requires effective instruction on the part of the regular class teacher. With reference to pupils with learning disabilities placed in a mainstream setting, Westwood (1997) notes that these pupils achieved better results than would be expected when taught by teachers who demonstrated a greater understanding of the special characteristics of these pupils. In particular these teachers

- More often modified instruction on the basis of student responses
- Used a vocabulary, oral and written, more appropriate for the age or ability level
- Adjusted the level of questions for different ability levels in the class
- Presented materials at an appropriate level of difficulty (p.5).

A very specific type of teaching which has been proven to be very effective with pupils with learning disabilities is explicit or direct teaching. Explicit teaching does not leave learning to chance. As the term 'explicit' implies, the pupils are given very clear instructions, demonstrations, explanations, practice and collective feedback for each new step in learning. The benefits accruing from this type of teaching are described by Westwood (1997) as follows; "Where explicit teaching is used, students with learning difficulties appear to make much better progress, and they later become more confident and effective learners" (p.7). In summary, providing an environment where pupils with mild general learning disabilities can experience success is probably the single most effective way in which a regular class teacher can promote positive behaviour. This fact is borne out by what Docking (cited in Varma, 1993) has to say

> So often, the actions which promote good behaviour in school are precisely those which promote effective learning. This is not surprising since children who believe that they can succeed at school and achieve status legitimately are less likely to want to misbehave. One sure way by which teachers can pre-empt misbehaviour, therefore, is to 'match' tasks to children's attainment levels and so provide opportunities for success. (p.176)

Classroom management

Apart from using effective teaching strategies, the regular class teacher also needs to be skilled in what Charlton & David (1993) describe as preventive approaches to disruption. They emphasise a number of basic classroom procedures, which help to keep pupils on task, leaving little time for other activities likely to interfere with the smooth running of the class. Kounin (cited in Varma, 1993) describes effective classroom organisation in terms of 'smoothness'.

> 'Smoothness' is the success of some teachers in sensitively managing occasions when misbehaviour is most likely to arise. Moments of this kind include transition from one type of activity to another, explanations about what children

> are going to do and how they are to get started, putting children into groups, preparing the class to move to a different room, and children finishing at different times. Smoothness is also a function of the manner in which the teacher responds to behavioural incidents. Making a public issue of incidents, impetuous reactions and refusing to back down over misunderstandings are examples of teacher behaviour which militate against smoothness. (p.173)

It is our professional responsibility as teachers to continuously seek to improve our classroom practice. While perfection is a fantasy, an attempt is a duty. The regular class teacher, who creates a supportive, accepting environment in which successful learning can be achieved, will do much to meet the needs of pupils with mild general learning disabilities. For these pupils, genuine success in an environment which fosters and promotes social integration can only impact positively on their behaviour. Such an environment will not only break the 'cycle of failure', but will go some way towards creating a 'cycle of success'.

CONCLUSION

This duty begins with the formulation of a behaviour policy. A policy containing rules, rewards and sanctions which fail to accommodate differences, will not only disenfranchise the pupils in question, but may very well have an adverse effect on their behaviour. The needs of these pupils must also be accommodated in the implementation of the behaviour policy. The environment created by the teacher in the regular classroom, where these pupils will spend the greater part of their school day, is of crucial importance. Accommodating the needs of pupils with mild general learning disabilities requires a serious investment of time, energy and painstaking work, not only on the part of the regular class teacher, but the school community as a whole. However, the gains accruing to these pupils, and indeed to society in general, will be incalculable, and well worth the investment.

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