

Understanding Challenging Behaviour from an Educational Perspective

Education and educators have much to offer in working with pupils with severe learning difficulties whose behaviour is considered challenging. Until recently, the field of research and intervention has been largely dominated by psychologists, who, in the main have adopted a behavioural approach to understanding and intervening with children with challenging behaviour. This has often encouraged those who work with pupils with challenging behaviour to concentrate on the behaviour alone, whilst paying little attention to the causes of the behaviour, its function for the individual and how more acceptable alternatives can be taught.

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INTRODUCTION

Educators are practiced in focusing on what pupils can do, and on how skills and understanding can be developed further and it is on this that we expand in this article rather than on how we can eliminate undesirable behaviour. We will explore an educational perspective for pupils with challenging behaviour by examining some of the research and discussing the implications for the teacher in the classroom.

WHAT IS CHALLENGING BEHAVIOUR ?

The term challenging behaviour is now widely used to describe often extreme and seemingly bizarre reactions by pupils with learning difficulties. It is not a precise term, nor one on which there can be complete agreement. Most of us have moments of displaying behaviour which could be described as challenging - for example we may exhibit self-injurious behaviours biting our nails to the quick, poking a sore tooth with our tongue, or picking at a piece of loose skin or a spot ! People may also display stereotyped behaviour, that is behaviour which is highly repetitive. Motor acts such as finger or foot tapping could be described as this, as could rocking or twirling behaviour. It is often the frequency, intensity and duration of the behaviour which leads to it being a cause for concern in pupils with severe learning difficulties and the fact that it continues often in the absence of

other more adaptive behaviours. Harris, Cook and Upton (1996) suggest that there is cause for concern if pupils' behaviour if it:

- **prevents participation in educational activities**
- **isolates them from their peers**
- **affects the learning of other pupils**
- **drastically reduces their opportunities for involvement in ordinary community activities**
- **makes excessive demands on staff and other resources - places the child or others in physical danger**
- **threatens the prospects of future placements**

It is helpful for schools to reach a consensus about behaviours which are a cause of concern to determine when a more thorough investigation should begin. This will then influence when or if a detailed intervention programme should be introduced.

INDIVIDUAL APPROACHES

Before looking in more detail at the research it is important to note that there has been an important shift, in working with pupils whose behaviour is considered challenging, towards identifying factors which contribute to the behaviour of individuals. There is a recognition that each person's sensitivity to elements of the environment and the nature of his or her response to it is likely to be somewhat different (Dunlap, Kern-Dunlap, Clarke & Robbins, 1991; Kern, Childs, Dunlap, Clarke & Falk, 1994). It is helpful for educators to be aware of this, despite the fact that they are generally working with groups of pupils, rather than with individuals. Despite the need for an idiosyncratic approach, however, it is possible to identify a number of elements that may increase or decrease the likelihood of challenging behaviour within the classroom. It is encouraging to see that many of these factors can be associated with the development of good teaching and learning.

CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

One factor concerns the curriculum offered to pupils with severe learning difficulties. Researchers and writers have focused on the suitability of curricular emphasis and activities for individuals and how these have affected their behaviour.

Clements, Clare and Ezelle (1995), who write with respect to adult services rather than schools, suggest that we need to adopt a curriculum which is "based upon building and developing relationships" and where communication is central. In many respects this describes an essential element of the classroom ethos and is consistent with much of the literature which points to the importance of giving and listening to choice in intervention programmes for pupils with challenging behaviour. Harris (1995) also points to the need for a pupil with challenging behaviour to build an interactive social relationship with one particular adult.

INTERVENTION STUDIES

A number of intervention programmes have adopted the approach that the behaviour considered challenging is communicative (or at least potentially) and pupils have been taught a more acceptable, alternative means of sending the same message. For example, one of the pioneering studies which was carried out by Carr & Durand (1985) who taught pupils with a variety of challenging behaviour (aggression, tantrums and self-injury) to use language to communicate their needs through phrases such as, "Am I doing good work" or "I don't understand." More recently Sigafos and Meikle (1996) describe how they taught two pupils with a range of challenging behaviours to request either attention or tangible items that they wanted. Other studies demonstrate pupils being taught a protest function to language as a way of stopping a situation or bringing a pause in an activity which they find aversive (Wacker et al 1990). Signing or switches with prerecorded messages are also used as an alternative to vocalisations. Success of the approach lies in part in correctly identifying the function of the behaviour in order to teach an appropriate communicative alternative and, just as importantly, ensuring that staff respond to pupil initiations of this kind with a positive response to their request or protest.

LEARNING ACTIVITIES AND SOCIAL ROUTINES

Harris, Cook and Upton (1996) point to the need to utilise social routines to develop occasions for learning and to introduce the curriculum via the pupils' preferred interests and activities. A series of studies by Rincover and his colleagues (Rincover, Cook, Peoples & Packard, 1979) suggested that the stereotyped behaviour of some pupils may provide important clues about the type of sensory consequences they find most interesting. For example a pupil whose behaviour involves some form of hand waving or eye poking may be well motivated by visual stimulation. Learning activities which employ this mode of input may be an important starting place for the pupil. Murdoch (1997) discusses

a range of ways in which one might build on stereotyped behaviour of pupils who are deafblind including encouraging the development of communication through using the behaviour as a signal to repeat an activity, imitating the child and promoting the development of a burst pause pattern to their behaviour.

NEED FOR BREADTH IN THE CURRICULUM

The implications discussed so far are very compatible with a flexible child centred approach. There does however need to be a way of ensuring that the curriculum is not overly distorted and that there is a growth in the breadth of the curriculum received by individual pupils from what may needfully be restricted beginnings. Other research suggests aspects to consider with respect to achieving balance within the curriculum.

INCREASING PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

A number of successful intervention studies have increased opportunities for physical activity and thereby reduced behaviour that was challenging. For example Lancioni, Smeets, Ceccarani, Capodaglio and Campanari (1984) described how they increased the number of gross motor activities by extending the motor requirements to tasks that normally would require little. This included creating obstacle courses within the classroom as a way of extending the effort expended in carrying out simple activities ensuring that simple tasks such as plant watering required physical effort. Others have introduced daily sessions of physical exercise, including jogging and aerobic activity (Bachman & Sluyter, 1988). This is a helpful reminder of the importance of gaining a balance in the curriculum for pupils with challenging behaviour. Teachers can monitor the school day to examine how much physical activity pupils are getting, and how much time is spent on more sedentary table top activities. An additional factor to consider is the length of time pupils have spent in being transported to school. The introduction of 20 minutes of exercise can help to shift the balance and help to prevent challenging behaviour.

Finally, research by Ferro, Foster-Johnson and Dunlap (1996) suggests a strong association between the type of curricular activity and the behaviour of the pupil. A study of 64 classrooms led them to suggest that activities should be as similar as possible to those of their peers in mainstream, should encourage interaction with peers and help learners to take part in the community. These are useful criteria for a school to use to judge curriculum materials and activities.

TEACHING STRATEGIES

Other aspects to consider when working with pupils with severe learning difficulties and challenging behaviour are those pertaining to teaching and learning. Munk and Repp (1994) review the literature on a variety of aspects of teaching which have been associated with challenging behaviour. One important area is the provision of choice. This has been used successfully as part of an intervention programme with pupils showing a range of challenging behaviours, such as aggressive, self-injurious and disruptive behaviours. It is important to note the caution provided by Dyer, Dunlap and Winterling (1990) that for one pupil the behaviour increased when choice was provided and then taken away. Opportunities for choice in the classroom are considerable and can include choosing which tasks to undertake, their order, where to sit and who to sit next to, materials to use and how long to spend on a task.

REGULAR QUALITY TIME WITH AN ADULT

Early studies have indicated the importance of access to stimulation, especially with respect to stereotyped behaviour, although the results are by no means clear cut. A review by Lagrow and Repp (1984) found that five of seven studies indicated the importance of opportunities for pupils to interact with the environment or an adult. Clearly, in some instances it is not enough that materials and equipment are available but that encouragement and staff attention are needed. An observational study by Baumeister, MacLean, Kelly and Kasari (1980) found that the lowest levels of stereotyped behaviour were in those activities in which the child was actively participating. This raises the important question of how the classroom is organised, including the allocation of staff roles. A system which ensures that each pupil has regular quality time with an adult, even of a short duration, will help to increase participation in activities. Staff may find it useful to consider a system such as room management (Sturmey and Crisp, 1992; Ware, 1994) to ensure that those pupils with the least ability in the class are provided with optimum levels of staff attention. Ware (1996) provides a useful guide to staff in creating a responsive environment, one in which staff become sensitised to pupil initiations and behaviour.

VARIATION IN TASKS

Munk and Repp (1994) draw our attention to other important aspects of learning: the amount of variation in the type of tasks (again this is unsurprising given our awareness of the importance of novelty for engaging attention and interest), and the

length of tasks with long tasks, and a slow pace of instruction more likely to be associated with challenging behaviours than short brisk tasks. Task difficulty is a further important area with challenging behaviours being associated with hard tasks for some pupils. This may reflect the frustration of attempting to carry out a difficult task and the feelings of failure at being unable to complete it unaided. It also raises the question of the role of errors in learning, and whether the type of feedback provided to the pupil is informative of what he needs to do correctly. For example physically helping the child to do a task may ensure that it is done "correctly" but the help provided may not assist the child in learning the task. One of the challenges for the teacher is to ensure a good match between child and task, setting goals that are neither too easy or too hard. Research on ordering tasks where pupils have challenging behaviour has suggested an "easy does it" approach whereby four or five quick and easy tasks precede the requirement to tackle a more difficult task. This has been used with pupils who use aggressive and self injurious behaviour as a way of avoiding hard tasks (Horner & Day, 1991).

PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ENVIRONMENT

The final aspect we are considering in this article relates to the effect of physical aspects of the environment. Some of the earliest research that was carried out looked at the effect of the environment on behaviour, capitalising on the changes for many residents in moving from long stay hospital to other provision. One of the difficulties with this research is to isolate particular variables as a change in the environment often has a number of new or different elements; consequently a change in the environment does not invariably lead to changes in behaviour.

In parallel to the growing trend of inclusion, special schools are seeking to ensure that pupils with challenging behaviour are taught with their peers rather than in special classes but with some segregated provision for particular activities (Porter & Lacey, submitted for publication). Segregation can limit pupils in their access to positive styles of interaction and placing them with other pupils with similar behaviour can create a chaotic, unpredictable environment that is stressful for pupils and staff alike.

CLASSROOM SIZE AND PHYSICAL SIZE OF PUPILS

Physical characteristics have also been found to include overcrowding where limited space means more contact with others, thereby increasing the possibility of aggression and creating stress (Gardner & Cole, 1984). It is perhaps an important reminder that wherever possible classroom sizes need to reflect the size

of the pupils, especially where pupils spend a large proportion of their day within a single room. Alternative seating and grouping arrangements for different activities can help to ensure that contact between individuals as well as with staff is varied. This may be particularly important for those who have an additional visual impairment for whom sudden movements and contact by others may be particularly stressful.

More recently research has drawn our attention to the importance of noise in the environment - including television, radio and social interaction (Jones & Carter, 1991). This has in some instances been found to effect the rates of behaviour and also create a difficulty for the learner as sounds may mask cues in the environment which will enable them to anticipate events.

MULTISENSORY ROOMS

In contrast to aspects of the environment which have been associated with increases in challenging behaviour is the systematic use of multisensory rooms as part of an intervention programme. Withers and Ensum (1995) and Shapiro, Parush, Green and Roth (1997) describe studies which involve the use of a multisensory environment to decrease challenging behaviours. Withers and Ensum (1995) describe how the room provides a relaxing atmosphere that enables staff to interact with the person without causing him distress. Both studies involve stimulation to all senses although it is important that the amount and type of stimulation is brought within the pupil's control (Porter and Wrench 1998).

ENVIRONMENTAL EFFECTS ON STAFF

Environmental aspects will also have an important effect on staff who also may feel stressed in noisy, crowded rooms and this in turn will affect the way in which they interact with pupils. It can quickly become a downward spiral where staff respond to pupils' behaviour in a certain way (as they feel pressurised) and this then leads to more extreme behaviour still from the pupil. Wherever possible it is hoped that schools recognise this effect on staff and provide positive support. This might include opportunities for time out, a mentor system for staff or the setting up of a support group to discuss pupils with difficult behaviours.

CONCLUSION

Traditionally most interest in and advice on working with pupils whose behaviour is considered challenging have covered the management and containment of

pupils and their behaviour. By contrast, an educational perspective can be seen to be firstly about prevention of the behaviours and secondly about teaching acceptable alternatives. In terms of prevention, it is important to create classroom and curricular conditions which obviate the need for unacceptable behaviour. For example, if a pupil is aggressive because he feels threatened by sitting too close to others, then providing seating which enables him to feel comfortable may prevent outbursts. Or if another pupil finds difficulty in sitting still during circle time, it may be helpful to offer her specific jobs to do which legitimately allow her to be out of her place.

Teaching acceptable alternative behaviour is primarily focused on developing and improving communication, although it may also include the introduction to activities which either render the behaviour considered challenging unnecessary or incompatible. What is important is increasing the repertoire of skills and understanding and thus the variety of ways in which pupils interact with the world around them. It is not necessary to throw equipment or scratch people when they have the means by which to indicate their meanings.

There is still much to be learned from educational aspects of working with pupils whose behaviour is considered challenging. Further research into and evidence of good practice is needed, but it is encouraging to educators to feel that they do not have to wait until the behaviour is acceptable before they can begin teaching, but that good teaching can contribute centrally to changing that behaviour.

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