

Behaviour Difficulties: Mapping the World of the Children

Children with entrenched behavioural and learning disabilities generally have been assessed with instruments such as intelligence tests, case histories, questionnaires and rating scales. These methods rely on others' accurate interpretation of the child's overt behaviour for their validity. However, what others perceive is often erroneous. Mapping the child's inner world gives far more useful and accurate information.

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INTELLIGENCE, LEARNING AND BEHAVIOUR PROBLEMS

For many years, the persistent, disruptive and antisocial behaviour of underachieving children who showed no evidence of organic impairment was put down to limited intelligence. In the 1950's, this view was recognised as inadequate. Researchers began to look at the issue more thoroughly. Some noted that many of these children coped better with performance tasks than with those tasks which predominantly involved verbal skills. The reverse was true of other children with entrenched behaviour and learning problems. It was suggested that instead of assessing these children on verbal and performance intelligence, i.e., how they coped with specific tasks, a more useful approach would be to investigate the psychological processes that underlie and produce their behaviour. The children might then be subgrouped according to these processes (Foster, 1959). It was a good idea, but the complexity of the task was considerable.

LEARNING DISABILITIES AND UNACCEPTABLE BEHAVIOUR

The emphasis shifted to investigating whether a meaningful link could be found between personality traits and persistent antisocial behaviour and learning problems (Quay, 1987). Again as with the studies on intelligence the results were conflicting. The methods used were not up to the task. They relied for their validity upon how the teacher, or parent, perceived the child's behaviour, and the inferences that they drew from what they perceived. In some instances, self-reports or self-ratings were used to assess the child. However, even when persons believe they are reporting truthfully about themselves, often what they are asked to report is in fact not accurately reportable by the individual (Rommetveit, 1960).

WE SEE WHAT WE EXPECT TO SEE

We tend to perceive in ourselves and others what we expect to see. For example, children who are not experienced by the teacher as physically attractive are more likely to be seen as having unpleasant personalities than their more physically attractive peers (Patzner, 1985). Facial features and expressions often lead to the attribution of behavioural traits which their pupils do not in fact possess. Despite the fact that many accomplished liars are able to keep eye contact when they are not telling the truth, the view persists that poor eye contact is a sign of dishonesty. The shy, anxious or embarrassed child who does not feel liked by the teacher and who consequently avoids eye contact, is likely to be erroneously judged as untrustworthy, shy and dishonest (De Paulo, Lassiter & Stone, 1985).

There is substantial evidence that teachers (and others) construct their own "personality theories" about which traits are related to one another, and attribute them in packages to their pupils. Furthermore, behaviours and attitudes attributed to a child by a teacher often are seen as unchanging, even when the child's behaviour does in fact change (Mischel, 1968). Teachers not infrequently attribute intentions to the pupil even before any action on the part of the child has been observed (Dion, 1986). Even feelings (for example, of dislike or resistance) attributed to a child are likely to be markedly influenced by the teacher's own feelings (Schiffenbauer, 1974). These research results demonstrate that attempting to assess a child, according to personality traits, from others' observations, is highly likely to lead to misleading conclusions. Furthermore, these are likely to persist for want of more tangible evidence to refute them.

FROM THE INSIDE LOOKING OUT

A new and more reliable approach was needed that would not be based only on others' observations and interpretation of the child's overt behaviour. Using a modified form of Kelly's Repertory Grid (Kelly, 1955) and a multidimensional scaling technique (Lingoes, 1972) the author mapped out how children saw their world from the inside looking out. From these maps, the way the children made sense of their world, the criteria that they used to make judgements about that world, and the dimensions out of which their behaviour flowed, were clearly identified (Cooke, 1978, 1995).

DIFFERENT "KETTLES OF FISH"

The maps of the majority of children with entrenched learning and behaviour disorders showing how they perceived their world, when compared to those of

their well-developing peers, were different in many important ways. One subgroup of the underachieving children, the largest, had a critical dimension completely missing. The second largest subgroup, according to their maps, were using the same words as their peers and teachers, but with highly idiosyncratic meanings. That is, they were making the same sounds as others, but meaning something quite different by them. The third subgroup showed a marked and serious lack of affective development resulting in a total disregard for others. These fundamental differences were important factors in the etiology of the learning difficulties and antisocial behaviour of the children who were failing to develop well. Far from being a homogeneous group, they fell into three clearly distinct subgroups, each of which was characterised by different specific features in their meaning maps.

SIMILAR BEHAVIOUR - DIFFERENT MEANING

Three children, each representing a different subgroup, could conceivably engage in what appeared to be identical behaviour, e.g., hitting other children, but that behaviour would mean something quite different to each. The behaviour of a child from the largest subgroup is characterised by impulsivity. That of a child from the second largest subgroup is characterised by confusion, anxiety and defensiveness, while insight, manipulation and negative attitudes towards others predominate in the behaviour of a child from the third subgroup.

BEHAVIOURAL APPROACHES LIMITED

Children who “play up” in school, who do not want to be there, or who are extremely difficult to teach, are the bane of a teacher's life. In the last few decades attempts have been made by educators to deal with this problem first with methods based on Behaviourism, and more recently, with techniques and approaches based on Cognitive Behaviourism.

BEHAVIOUR CHANGE FREQUENTLY NOT LASTING

Behaviour modification, involving the conditioning of overt behaviour, has enjoyed considerable favour in dealing with children with behaviour and learning problems. It is true that the techniques employed can be helpful up to a point, but they are not enough in themselves. They involve rewarding children with tokens, for example, or some other material reward, when they behave appropriately. There are several problems with this approach if used by itself. It is prone to teach children to manipulate, or to reinforce manipulative behaviour patterns where they already exist, rather than to relate. Usually, it does not produce lasting change.

When limited behaviour change does occur in one situation, it frequently fails to generalise to other situations. That is, children might learn to put their hands up in class, instead of yelling out impulsively, if every time they do put their hands up they are given lollies. However, when the supply of lollies dries up, often the desirable behaviour does not continue. They revert to the unacceptable behaviour. Even when apparent change does occur, the rest of their impulsive behaviour continues. They still push in at the tuck shop, grab whatever they want out of turn, burp aloud whenever they feel like doing so, and so on. Symptom substitution is common with behaviour modification approaches. Because the approach usually only addresses the overt symptom of the problem behaviour - the yelling out in class - rather than the underlying cause, e.g., impulsivity, usually some other troublesome behaviour arising from the same cause takes the place of the inhibited behaviour.

NOT TOTALLY WITHOUT MERIT

The Behaviour Modification approach is not totally without merit. When pupils are still at pre-operational level (Piaget, 1952; 1983) their behaviour is predominantly hedonistic and ego-centric. The majority of children, with entrenched behaviour and learning problems, that is, those falling into the largest subgroup, fail to satisfactorily make the transition from this stage. They become fixated in it (Cooke, 1997). Behaviour modification, with its emphasis on concrete, tangible pleasure and displeasure, is useful for the socialisation of these children. However, if significant people in their lives, such as teachers, do not relate to them in a way that confronts, challenges, affirms and sets boundaries, their future will continue to be fraught with problems, socially and scholastically, and appropriate maturation will not occur.

COGNITIVE-BEHAVIOURAL TECHNIQUES LACKING

In recent years the method of choice in most educational settings dealing with students who have learning and behavioural problems, has been based on a cognitive-behavioural approach. The focus of this approach is the recognition and changing of negative thoughts and maladaptive beliefs in an attempt to induce positive behavioural change. This approach works with those who are highly motivated and have positive attitudes towards changing their behaviour (Luborsky et al., 1988). Most children with behavioural and learning problems do not have these attributes. Most are not highly intelligent nor do they have positive attitudes. They are often difficult to motivate. Many are confused and have idiosyncratic word meanings (Cooke, 1997). Modest positive effects have been obtained by applying cognitive-behavioural modification methods. However, where this has

been so, the improvement has been due to the behavioural, rather than the cognitive aspects of the intervention (Weiner, 1985) and the interpersonal interaction that occurs in the process of applying the methods, rather than the methods themselves.

The Cognitive-Behavioural approach does not adequately address the problem of persistent, disruptive behaviour. It also does not deal effectively with the poor literacy and numeracy skills of the majority of these children. More critically, it does not differentiate between the identified subgroups. Techniques developed in the framework of this approach are not capable of producing affective development without which empathy, and pro-social, mutually life-enhancing interpersonal interaction cannot occur.

DIFFERENTIAL TREATMENT REQUIRED

The differences identified in the way children with learning and behavioural problems process information, the meaning they give to their experiences and the interaction with others in their lives account for their learning and behaviour problems to a considerable extent. It is obvious, that in order to facilitate positive behaviour change, much is required from the teacher, e.g. more life-enhancing development, and the resolution of learning problems, differential and specific teaching methods and relating skills which go beyond those provided by the behavioural approaches. If these are used with consistency and insight, it has been demonstrated that lasting and positive change does occur. These methods and skills, together with information on how to identify the map out of which a child is acting at any given time, are comprehensively detailed, together with practical examples, in the book entitled *Empowering educators: Learning and behaviour disorders* *(Cooke, 1997).

*Available from Cathedral Books, Dublin.

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