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“Who needs all this book learning?” A Social Curriculum for Pupils with 'Behaviour Problems'

Are pupils with emotional and/or behavioural difficulties in mainstream schools receiving an education appropriate to their needs? Given the restrictions of time and space in the National Curriculum and the academic goals that must be achieved, there seems to be less room in the curriculum for social skills programmes. While such programmes are important for all pupils, they are essential for pupils with behavioural difficulties.

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SOCIAL CURRICULUM AND PROBLEM BEHAVIOUR

The Elton Report (1989), concerning discipline in schools, marked a major initiative by central government to address an apparently growing problem in primary and secondary schools in England and Wales - the difficulties posed by those pupils whose behaviour did not conform to the social norms and expectations of schools in general. The Report detailed the findings of the Committee of Enquiry into Discipline in Schools. Its brief was to “recommend action to the Government, local authorities, voluntary bodies, governors, headteachers, teachers and parents aimed at securing the orderly atmosphere necessary in schools for effective teaching and learning to take place” (p.11).

In all, 171 recommendations were made.

The succeeding eight years have witnessed a vigorous debate in England and Wales concerning the nature, causes and effects of problematic behaviour by some pupils in schools, the types of provision available, and the various models of intervention. This author would argue that just one aspect of these, the ‘Social Curriculum,’ should be a major point of future emphasis in addressing ‘problem behaviour,’ an issue which is “as old as education itself and is never far from teachers’ minds” (Varma, 1993).

The currently fashionable term 'pupils with problems' will be used to describe a range of pupil-behaviours which are regarded as unacceptable in school. This is in accordance with the Circulars relating to the subject (DfE, 1994a; DfE, 1994b; DfE, 1994c; DfE, 1994d), which variously relate to pupil misbehaviour and indiscipline, emotional and/or behavioural difficulties and their exclusion from school, amongst other 'problems'. These terms will be used interchangeably, reflecting the non-clinical, and frequently heavily subjective, nature of the field.

A BRIEF CONTEXT FOR ENGLAND AND WALES

Both the Warnock Report (DES, 1978) and the 1981 Education Act reinforced a view, and an operational reality, that little was then being done to integrate those pupils who were regarded as having emotional and/or behavioural difficulties (EBD). The period following the Act showed that, whilst considerable progress had been made towards mainstreaming pupils with moderate, or even severe, learning difficulties, little headway was made concerning the segregated position of those children whose learning difficulty was deemed to be associated with emotional and/or behavioural difficulties (EBD) (Swann, 1992). An indication that the education service as a whole was increasingly feeling either unwilling or incapable of meeting the complex needs of the EBD population during the period 1981-1988 is to be found in the continued high levels of exclusion of such children during that time (Blyth & Milner, 1996).

The political climate of the 1980's and particularly the impact of the 1988 Education Act made the Elton Report inevitable. The impact of the Report, however, was subsequently compromised by the so-called educational reforms pursuant to the Act. The one element of the 1988 Act which seriously impaired the chances of schools responding effectively to the Report was central government's preoccupation with the establishment of a National Curriculum, and the circus of assessment which accompanied it. This deflected much teacher attention away from 'social behaviour' as a central issue in learning and focussed mainly upon the 'delivery' of subject knowledge. Little status or attention was given to aspects of personal and social education, these being relegated to non-core activity and consequently seen by many to be of secondary importance. For the 'pupil with problems' however, attention to a range of social skills is an essential part of an effective intervention programme.

TAKING CONTROL OF ONESELF

The importance of the role of pupils in managing their own behaviour and learning and in shaping and reviewing school policy on behaviour is made explicit

in Recommendations 75 and 76 of the Elton Report (p.36). In so doing it recalled the earlier work of Rutter et al. (1979) and Mortimore et al. (1988), which evidenced the benefits of pupil involvement. In spite of a prevailing tendency to characterise many pupils with problems as disaffected, and even oppositional to school, the early 1990's coincided with an increase in awareness of the need for including pupils in their own learning. This is witnessed by the body of literature on the topic which has been forthcoming in the ensuing period (see, for example, Davie & Galloway, 1995; Garmen & Sandow, 1995).

PROBLEMS OF PROVIDING PASTORAL CARE

As a result of the introduction of a National Curriculum, schools have been faced with a reduction of time available for pastoral care and social skills programmes. The importance of these aspects of learning for 'pupils with problems' in particular, was emphasised in the Elton Report, which stated that as "a pupil's sense of being known and valued by the school is an important factor in ensuring good behaviour, the pastoral system has a vital role to play" (p. 111). Currently, however, there remains a gap between social and academic learning (Smith, 1996), in spite of the National Curriculum's promotion of a series of 'cross-curricular themes'. There may also be a tendency for some schools to focus almost exclusively upon the academic curriculum, a fear expressed by Copeland (1991), thus marginalising an aspect of education which, for pupils with problems, is seen as enabling: "someone to respond quickly and appropriately to pupils' problems or, indeed, to anticipate problems which may arise" (DES, 1979). In the prevailing conditions it would appear pious to expect schools to implement Elton's recommendation that "Schools should also provide personal and social education programmes outside the National Curriculum" (R. 36.2).

CONVERSATIONS WITH PUPILS

In testing this theory I have talked with a range of 'pupils with problems', and the remainder of this article is devoted to what one of them had to say about the situation he experienced in school. Asking children to recount their experiences is a starting point for including their views in determining both policy and provision. The Code of Practice (DfE, 1994e) has recognised the value of incorporating the pupil's view. Section 2.37 recommended that schools consider how they involve children in decision-making in respect of assessment and identification, individual education plans and in the process of monitoring and review. The subsequent Circular 8/94, relating to 'Pupil Behaviour and Discipline' (DfE, 1994a) confirmed the desirability of involving children in behaviour management by

suggesting that pupils can play a positive role. Moreover, the accompanying Circular relating to EBD (DfE, 1994b) recognised that “There is a positive association between pupils’ involvement and greater motivation and feelings of self worth on their part” and that, consequently, they “should be encouraged and guided in setting and organising learning goals according to their age and understanding.”

GARY’S TALE

Gary took Mr. Stevenson’s car for a ride - across to Reading on the M4. He was apprehended by the blue lights when trying to overtake (at 96mph) a patrol car. Gary was for it. So was I, come to that, and the telephone duly rang just as I had settled in to watch United put five past some nondescript Italian team. I wasn’t pleased. Driving (more slowly) back to London with Gary we talked about what could be done. In two short years this 15 year old had been thrown out of one school, received a period of home-tuition, and had subsequently been placed in another mainstream school, where the ill-fated Mr. Stevenson, amongst others, had attempted to bridge the culture gap. For me it was a research opportunity, and with Gary’s permission I worked through an interview schedule (one that I’d prepared earlier....). Extracts of the conversation are instructive:

“Alls we do is mess about. The stuff they tell us about is shit and is no good to us”

“Sometimes I’d be bursting with anger about stuff. I’d want to say what I was thinking about all of the shit and stuff. Nobody...apart from Sambrook (teacher) wanted to know about anything about me”

“They never talked to me about what I was feeling at the time...they just tell you you’re bad...that’s it...end of the story”

“We get tests on this and that. They know we can’t do it. They don’t ask us about the things we can do good”

“It’s my temper that gets me into trouble”

“I just want revenge on the teachers. They’re worse than anyone. They tell us what’s this and what’s that. But it means nothing to me. Who needs all this book learning?”

“There’s not one teacher I can trust. I can’t talk to no-one about stuff I’m into or the shit I’m going through”

“You stand on your own...don’t take crap from anyone...otherwise you’re nothing”

CURRICULUM PRESSURES - ANY ROOM FOR UNDERSTANDING?

One inference to be drawn from Gary's comments is that teachers in mainstream settings, under pressure to conform to sets of rigid expectations and performances, are unlikely to favour an emphasis on emotional well-being and on awareness of 'self' - such things are viewed by the New Right (and indeed the new Government), as indicative of a liberal, mollycoddling attitude to 'pupils with problems'. As Peagam (1995) has remarked "...recent legislation (especially the 1988 Education Act) and official reports which influence the professional and contractual expectations laid on teachers have emphasised that the primary responsibility of teachers and schools to all children is the development of skills, knowledge and understanding" (p. 13). Schools, in consequence, are judged primarily on the levels of attainment in the academic curriculum. There is no place for Gary, who is bright and capable but whose learning difficulties relate to his anti-social behaviour. Subsequently, examining his Individual Education Plan, I found few references to strategies designed to ameliorate his behaviour and develop his social skills. Mostly it's about English and Maths.

Pressures on time, and a perceptible diminution of pastoral staff in many schools in recent years, has resulted in the ascendancy of quick-fix solutions, aimed at controlling behaviour rather than understanding it. The rule-governed ethos of many schools, as Gary's comments infer, are unlikely to result in a shared approach to managing behaviour. This is an important issue; as Royer (1995) remarks "...the school must teach social competence to students who are at risk of disciplinary actions such as suspension or expulsion. In order to be validated and reinforced, and achieve the necessary social reciprocity, these skills must be chosen by the adolescent in collaboration with his peers, teachers and parents" (p. 35).

AN ANGRY POSTSCRIPT

In much the same way that Konig (1959) believed that "Modern psychology has the greatest difficulty in discovering the reality of the living soul," so too can it be said that curriculum planners and legislators have displayed a level of intransigence and humbug in the way that they have consistently denied the importance of what Konig himself would perhaps have regarded as the soul of the curriculum. A tour of the recent history of curriculum developments for pupils whose behaviour in schools is deemed unsatisfactory is illustrative of this bankrupt belief system.

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