Learning Needs not Learning Difficulties: Intervention and Challenging Behaviour

Promoting the positive behaviour of children and staff is not a matter of superficial quick-fix strategies. It requires analytical investigation into what pupils and teachers experience and understand when challenging behaviour occurs in the classroom and the contingent implications for respectful intervention.

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DIFFICULTIES OR NEEDS?

Many terms are used to describe the children who attend special schools. In advancing beyond terms such as 'retarded,' 'backward' and 'maladjusted' we have recreated new descriptors that can have a similar restrictive effect upon expectations of a child's learning potential. The current emphasis is placed on a child's difficulties. These difficulties might appear on a continuum which ranges from profound and multiple through to moderate, or indicate a particular area in which the child experiences a categoric difficulty, such as an 'emotional and behavioural' difficulty. The difficulty perspective and its negative connotations can result in low expectation. It can also be presented as a fixed and absolute state. A fixed view of difficulty can produce special school environments where the children are seen as difficult and the process of teaching them is seen in a similarly negative vein - particularly when their learning difficulty presents as challenging behaviour.

In order to begin to intervene when challenging behaviour occurs we must have a clear conceptual framework of why it is actually taking place. The initial premise of this framework has to be an assertion that there is a seamless connection between behaviour and learning. My contention is that challenging behaviour is a learning difficulty and that our framework must also ensure that 'the difficulty factor' is over-ridden by a focus on a child's needs. We often talk about needs and difficulties as if they are the same - but they are not, they are conceptually different. If we focus upon learning needs we are immediately given a positive route into the teaching and learning process. If we focus on difficulty we take the first step down a road that can be paved with confrontation, stress and learned hopelessness.

UNDERSTANDING LEARNING NEEDS

At times, the difficulties which children in special schools experience can seem both insurmountable and overwhelming. These difficulties are compounded by the lack of a whole-school approach to, and understanding of, challenging behaviour. The nature of severe learning difficulties emerging in special schools is becoming increasingly more complex (Carpenter, 1996). However, an analytical approach to understanding a child's needs enables us to look at what they have in common with all other children first. I propose that we should develop an institutional and individual model that enables us to see children's needs as 'common', 'distinct' and 'individual' (O'Brien, 1998). Every child has needs that relate to their personhood, their development within groups and their individual characteristics. Common needs include needs such as the need for a sense of belonging, the need to be seen as an interactive communicator, and the need to receive respect and dignity. This must be our starting point for teaching and for any intervention that takes place during an episode or incident of challenging behaviour. Distinct needs refer to the needs of children in relation to the groups to which they belong. These include gender, family, race, culture and disability. Individual needs are needs that are particular to a particular child at a particular time in a particular context. A focus on 'need' demands that we look at the critical factors that affect learning - the complex interaction between the child, the teacher, and the total learning environment (which includes the home). It asserts that learning needs are relative and situational. The focus on 'difficulty' implies that the pupils have specific problems that will remain the same no matter where the child is being taught and no matter who is teaching them.

FOCUS ON NEED

When a teacher continually focuses on need they can bridge the difficulty gap. For example, a teacher may teach a child who, at certain times, kicks bites and punches out at adults and children. That is an indication of learning difficulty. The positive teacher accepts this but will focus on need analysis. Perhaps there is a common need that is unmet - the need to belong and be respected? This might involve the child in learning that there is an adult out there somewhere who likes to be with them. The need is cited in the development of a positive and responsive mutual relationship. The teacher makes a decision to be that adult - providing a fresh start for the child every day and consistently being respectful - even when there are stressful and distressing difficulties, as there will surely be. Mutual learning takes place and the teacher becomes the active mediator of change.

The 'common, distinct, individual' pathway also enables us to understand that all children are the same, groups of children are similar, and every child is unique. This removes the fuzziness that results from the 'they-are-all-children-to-me' approach. This approach, although compassionate and well intended, sees no further than common need. It will never provide the progressive focussing that is necessary in order to analyse and understand individual need. The term 'special,' attracting sympathy and charity or discrimination and stigmatisation, can cloud conceptual clarity too - is the whole of the human race special or is it particular individuals or groups (such as those who attend 'special' schools)? The assumptions that are inherent in the terms that we use have to remain under constant scrutiny and conceptual analysis since they drive the interventions we design and implement. They also effect the degree to which we are willing to share power and involve children in changing their behaviour.

A WHOLE SCHOOL APPROACH TO CHALLENGING BEHAVIOUR

I have chosen to use the term challenging behaviour in this article due to its social constructivist context. The term has been defined in various ways: behaviour that contravenes cultural norms (Emerson, 1995), behaviour that limits community placement (Zarkowska and Clements, 1994) and behaviour that has implications for the family (Russell, 1997) are selective examples of definition. For the purposes of this article, I would like to define challenging behaviour as any behaviour that prevents new learning, reinforces a child's low self-esteem and presents threats to individual staff or staff teams. Consequently, I am arguing that an individual member of staff should not be expected to unravel the constellation of complexities of challenging behaviour on their own - nor should a child. It is also unacceptable for a pupil or a teacher to be abandoned in isolation amongst the emotional and physical bruising that challenging behaviour can create.

Working with children who present challenging behaviour places demands upon any adult who wants a child to participate in the curriculum. One of the aims of education is to provide the incremental development of personal autonomy. This can feel impossible, for the teacher and the pupil, in situations where challenging behaviour is a regular occurrence. In these situations, the mutual loss of autonomy and self-esteem is a reality and this makes even the most committed and conscientious teacher feel de-skilled. School managers have a professional responsibility to support staff and pupils who are involved in these scenarios.

To avoid this we have to employ strategies which influence, and are influenced by, school ethos, philosophy and ideology. Interventions have to be monitored to

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ensure that agreed non-aversive modes of good practice are in place and that nobody undermines them, behind the closed door of their classroom, without accountability to the child, the parents and their own colleagues. There has to be an agreed understanding of what constitutes acceptable forms of 'restraint'- both physical (Farrell, 1995) and chemical (O'Brien, 1996). A focus on teaching functionally equivalent behaviours may also constitute part of the whole school approach. This would involve understanding that challenging behaviour may be a vehicle for gaining attention, sensory stimulation, tactile rewards or disengagement from an activity that is unwanted. In these cases, the teacher teaches the child new positive behaviours that gain the same outcome and crowd out the negative and challenging behaviours.

PROMOTING COLLECTIVE SCHOOL CONSCIOUSNESS

The whole school approach provides an insight into the collective consciousness of the school and the role that the whole curriculum plays. When pedagogical attitude is based on sensitive, flexible and needs-driven strategies and enhanced by positive, respectful and responsive relationships any intervention - be it based on prevention or resolution - will be more likely to succeed. The teacher has to be challenged to develop an understanding of how pupils learn and how teachers teach (Visser, 1997). In this respect, the principles of differentiation have to apply to intervention. A whole school approach should aim to provide a supportive environment for teachers, so that the acknowledgement of a difficulty in the classroom is not institutionally manipulated into, and interpreted as, the acceptance of a failure. Every teacher will need support at sometime in their career and a coherent framework for promoting positive behaviour ensures that they receive it - teachers have common, distinct and individual needs too!

BATTLE ZONE OR LEARNING ZONE?

The term 'challenging behaviour' can be used against a child to blame them for their difficulties. This is most unhelpful when it is accompanied by a quasi-medical context such as 'that pupil has got challenging behaviour' - where pupils catch it from is still a puzzle to me. It indicates that the teacher sees the problem located within the child. This removes any responsibility for the child's behaviour away from the teacher. Yet, adult intervention can reduce or exacerbate challenging behaviour and in some situations it is the adult who actually presents the challenging behaviour. It is important that all teachers reflect critically upon their own practice and ask themselves - does the way I understand, analyse, prevent and intervene during challenging behaviour place me in the 'battle zone'

or the 'learning zone'? To do this we have to be aware of the characteristics of each zone.

In the battle zone there are barriers between the teacher and the child, in the learning zone bridges replace those barriers. The battle zone provides a curriculum that controls the child, in the learning zone the curriculum is responsive. So, how are the elements of each zone evident during intervention? The first stages of intervention take place inside a teacher's head - decisions will be based upon how they understand learning and behaviour, construct their concept of self and their ability to deal with stress. A teacher in the battle zone may be committed to 'behaviour modification' or 'behaviour management'. I have concerns about such approaches because they can provide an ideological framework in which the teacher is always the locus of control and takes the decision to 'manage' or 'modify' a child's behaviour for them. A colleague of mine would often say, "He's a problem that boy - but I will sort him out." In the battle zone, the child is the problem but in the learning zone it is the behaviour that is the problem. This is why teachers in the learning zone will use strategies that respect the person but reject the behaviour. The within-child approach not only increases the likelihood of conflict between a teacher and a pupil, it also creates a 'win or lose' intervention path. In such a situation in a classroom, the teacher has to be the winner.

THE CHILD MAKES THE CHANGE

The teacher in the learning zone mediates change and knows that it is the child who actually makes the change. They are analytical about the functional and communicative messages inherent in challenging behaviour and see challenging behaviour as an indication of learning need. The emphasis on learning need allows a teacher to assert that being fair actually means treating everyone differently. At the point of intervention, the signpost on their intervention path says 'resolution.'

INTERVENTION OR INTERFERENCE?

As intervention begins the teacher should remain respectful, give positive descriptors and behave in a non-threatening way. A teacher would describe the behaviour that they want, not focus on the undesired behaviour. They will also model the desired behaviour. For example, a teacher in the learning zone would say "I want you to speak quietly please - listen to me (pause), I'm not shouting, please talk like I am." Shouting competitions do not eliminate shouting. In the battle zone, intervention style is different. It can often involve instruction clutter - a distressed and angry child is given a charter of twenty things to do in the next

twenty seconds, or else! Crucially, the teacher in the battle zone takes challenging behaviour personally and processes it as an affront to them as a person. They can not separate what is happening to them from its expressive communicative intent. This can result in a fixed and learned response. The response is further affected by the personal constructs of the teacher, particularly if their status and gender play a major role in determining their self-worth. The response could be as follows: "You might do that to the lunchtime supervisors (hidden message: low status and female) but you will not do that to me - I am the Headteacher (high status and male)." A flexible response is more preferable because it always has an intention to find a way out for the child. This also applies during self-injurious or violent behaviour, when a teacher in the learning zone makes judgements about the difference between intervention and interference and allows the child time to make a change. A common introduction for a request to behave differently in this type of situation would be "when you are ready."

AVOID BOUNCING

Challenging behaviour challenges a teacher to become aware of their 'bounce potential.' Having initiated an intervention, the teacher must avoid bouncing. Imagine a classroom in a school for children who have emotional and behavioural difficulties. This school has just introduced a school sweatshirt. A teacher asks a pupil to put on their sweatshirt. The pupil interprets this as a full-scale declaration of war and begins to protest "Why are you always having a go at me?" The teacher now has a choice - to remain focussed on the sweatshirt or to bounce. This teacher bounces away from the initial intervention and begins to claim that they do not pick on pupils. The pupil turns this into an argument and, in anger, slams a book on the table. The teacher, now controlled by the physiological messages from the spleen, argues about school property being disrespected and shouts at the pupil. In responding to the shouting the pupil swears. The teacher insists that the pupil has sworn at them, the pupil denies this but admits swearing. The teacher threatens a sanction and states that they will not allow swearing in their classroom. The pupil, enticing the teacher further into the battle zone stands up and offers to go outside of the classroom to swear. This bouncing scenario results in a teacher using physical intervention to prevent the pupil from leaving the room. The escalating performance of mutual loss of dignity is now many bounces away from the initial enquiry about a school sweatshirt. Interventions have to focus on problem-solving and must always be sensitive to the fact that, even when we feel that it is ethically and morally defensible, from the perspective of the child it may well be unwanted. The many outstanding teachers that exist in special school classrooms remain flexible but do not bounce.

CHOOSE YOUR SLOGAN

It is imperative that we reflect upon the skills that are being developed during and after intervention. The skills involved in a win or lose situation belong to the teacher and can be based on the hierarchical abuse of power, such as sarcasm. Sarcasm is the corrosive sediment of the battle zone and is the tool of a teacher who is a bully. At the core of this zone are those adults who bully pupils whose limited expressive communication skills instantly disarm them and make it impossible for them to inform anyone that it is happening. At the core of the learning zone, teachers and pupils demonstrate the skills involved in developing positive relationships. This will include the use of sanctions, but the 'three R's' of the battle zone - revenge, retribution and recrimination - will not determine them. It also involves the respectful assertion of authority rather than the application of oppressive control.

When a teacher offers alternatives to a child who is experiencing a learning and behaviour difficulty, it enables a child to learn how to change their behaviour. It shares the power of change and places a positive focus upon what the child is doing to make a change. The classroom in which this happens is one where increased autonomy, competence, confidence, success, self-esteem, dignity and trust are shared with generosity of spirit amongst pupils and adults. Pupils in special schools may experience a devalued identity (Norwich, 1997) and such a classroom changes self and school concept for the better.

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A framework for promoting the positive behaviour of pupils and adults is multi - dimensional and influenced by the cultural and political climate of the school and the country. There are also competing interactions between institutional and individual ideologies, values, assumptions and perspectives to consider. However, we can adopt strategies that remind us of our fundamental approach. In the day to day complexities of creating and restructuring responsive environments, it is often helpful to have a phrase or saying that encapsulates your approach - like a slogan that you would wear on a tee shirt. It is relevant to this journal and many of its readers that my 'challenging behaviour' tee shirt has an Irish phrase emblazoned across it. It says, "Níor bhris focal maith fiacal riamh" - " A kind word never broke anyone's teeth."

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