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## **Bad Boys Talking: Using the Views of 'Disruptive' Children to Improve the Way We Teach**

**A research project carried out in the north-west of England examined the views of pupils, judged by teachers as disruptive, on a range of issues including teacher characteristics, curriculum relevance, inappropriate behaviour and the ethos and organisation of the school. Much of what children say about their lives in school can be used to promote more effective teaching, to inform professional development sessions at whole school meetings and to empower pupils in their own learning.**

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### **PUPIL BEHAVIOUR AND THE SCHOOL CURRICULUM**

Much has been written recently about the need to develop alternative approaches in teaching and learning for those children whose disenchantment with school life frequently results in poor behaviour, and their consequent categorisation as 'disruptive' (Ford, Mongon & Whelan, 1982). There has been a long-standing debate on this matter (Hargreaves, Hester & Mellor, 1975). In England, the Elton Report (DES, 1989) examined discipline in schools and recommended that

All parties involved in the planning, delivery and evaluation of the curriculum should recognise that the quality of its content and the teaching and learning methods through which it is delivered are important influences on a pupil's behaviour (p.104).

In this paper the term 'curriculum' is used to describe both the formal curriculum and the hidden curriculum, relating to general aspects of a child's life in school.



## **INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AND THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM**

As a result of the Education Act of 1988 in England, schools began to compete for new pupils (Cooper, 1993). Open competition has meant that measures of school effectiveness are becoming increasingly important influences in a parent's choice of school. One indicator of the quality of a school's provision is the level of discipline that is maintained within it (Cooper, op. cit.). Simultaneously, the Department for Education (DFE) inspection schedule (OFSTED, 1993) identifies the personal development and behaviour of all children as a key quality indicator (p. 64). Moreover, it recognises that schools should 'encourage all pupils to contribute to school life and exercise responsibilities' (p. 64). Schools have, therefore, a vested interest in providing the 'consumer' with what he/she needs to make the process of learning a more meaningful and rewarding activity.

This is easier said than done, however. Schools, especially secondary schools, have been regarded by many as illiberal places, where practices are based upon control and dominance (Adams, 1991). Moreover, the lack of flexibility within the National Curriculum in England is seen as inhibiting the development of cooperative approaches between children and teachers on many aspects of teaching and learning (Ingram & Worrall, 1993). It is also true that teachers in England have come under increased scrutiny and criticism (Hewton, 1988). This has engendered a siege mentality in which teachers try to provide a reasonable education for pupils whilst being publicly criticised for a perceived decline in behavioural standards in schools (*The Times*, 17.6.88). However, there are ways in which children who are seen as disruptive can be incorporated into the decision-making processes that concern them most. The dilemmas facing schools using such an inclusive approach forms the focus of this paper.

## **VIEWS OF CHILDREN: ASSISTING EFFECTIVE EDUCATION**

There has been increasing interest shown in using the views of children on various aspects of life in school. This is due in part to a growing awareness that children are active agents in their education and not passive recipients of teacher directed knowledge (Krappman & Oswald, 1987). This awareness has been heightened by the use of classroom based action research using qualitative approaches (Armstrong, Galloway and Tomlinson, 1993). In special schools, for example, this has become a recent but influential form of inquiry (Scarlett, 1989). Another important influence is a growing realisation that the way teachers behave and the way schools are organised can be powerful influences on individual and group behaviour (Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore and Oustan, 1979).



The views of disruptive children, however, have generally received far less attention (Schostak, 1983). Whilst this is understandable, given that a small percentage of children display behaviour which is so unacceptable to make it dangerous, nevertheless, this lack of inclusion in a range of aspects of school life is an important cause of alienation in the first place (Cooper, 1993). However it has also been suggested that positive use can be made of listening to children, so that teachers can do a more effective job in the classroom and in the wider school environment (Davie, 1993).

### **INFLUENCES ON INCLUDING PUPILS' VIEWS ON SCHOOLING**

Recent legislation in England offers encouragement for this approach. An early hint that children should play a more active part in educational decision-making was contained in the 1981 Education Act. The Act included, as part of a general response to students identified as having special educational needs (SENs), consideration of the child's feelings about schooling. The Act stated, for instance, that 'The feelings and perceptions of the child should be taken into account and the concept of partnership should, wherever possible, be extended' (para 17). Later, the 1989 Children Act stated unequivocally that the young person, as a central character in a drama characterised by social, economic and educational disadvantage, had a right to be heard.

In 1989, most European countries, signed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. After generations of being 'denied the status of participants in the social system, labelled as a problem population (and) reduced to being seen as property' (Freeman, 1987), this convention offered the hope that previously marginalised groups of schoolchildren might be empowered. The UN Convention's summary statement was that 'The child capable of forming his/her own views shall be assured the right to express those views freely, on all matters affecting him or her, and these will be given weight in accordance with the child's age' (Article 12). Some researchers have identified little difference between the views of 'problem children' and those of children who are not categorised as such (Raymond, 1987).

A further influence, on including the views of children, came from the United States, where an alternative set of political, social and educational values prevailed. Stevenson (1991), for example, argued that the use of a 'collective-resource perspective' allows the development of negotiated rules and procedures in teaching and learning encounters. All the participants, whether teachers,



classroom helpers or children, are involved in negotiating a shared set of classroom goals. Interestingly, Stevenson applied this approach particularly to those children regarded as deviant.

### **PROMOTING PUPIL/TEACHER PARTNERSHIP ON DISCIPLINE**

'Reaching Success through Involvement' (RSI) provides a concrete example of this philosophy: a school 'retreat' was used as the vehicle for discussion between teachers and children, so that problems relating to school discipline could be identified and solutions found. Furtwengler (1986) reported dramatic improvements in the behaviour of deviant school children as a result of RSI. Teachers, too, felt a greater sense of shared responsibility with children, and this in turn engendered a more effective corporate identity or ethos for the school.

Despite these initiatives, there remains a long way to go. Commenting on RSI, Furtwengler (1990) stated that a major obstacle to the success of such programmes was the time it took for some teachers to accept an apparent loss of control over certain school decisions. In England, too, there has remained a pervasive fear, not helped by the current political climate, of the dangers of allowing children to speak their mind on educational matters. Gribble (1993) summarised the basis of these fears:

Children are more honest. They have not learnt our hypocrisy. That is why it hurts so much when they tell us what we ought to do, and we know that they are right. (p. 8).

Consistent, long term efforts are needed to be made to raise the awareness of teachers and other educationists to the value of incorporating what children have to say. The remainder of this paper comprises a brief account of a study of the views of 'disruptive' children, and the implications for teachers.

### **GATHERING VIEWS OF 'DISRUPTIVE' CHILDREN: A CASE STUDY**

As part of a more extensive research study (Garner, 1993), forty-three teachers in one secondary school in the NW of England were asked to identify, in confidence twelve boys in Years 10 and 11 (aged 15+) who they regarded as 'disruptive'. No explanation of the term disruptive was given because such behaviours are generally subject to individual interpretation. Thirty-two teachers responded to this request, and the study focussed on the twelve boys most frequently named.



A semi-structured interview schedule was then used, in which the boys were asked a series of questions about their life in school. Comments were then assigned to one of four categories: the curriculum, the personal and professional characteristics of the teachers, the boys' views concerning inappropriate behaviour, and the organisation and ethos of the school. Within these groups each statement was categorised as either positive or negative on the basis of the shared perception of the researcher and a teacher from the school. A neutral category was retained for use where a difference of opinion existed (see Table 1).

<b>Student Comment</b>	<b>+</b>	<b>—</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Total</b>
Curriculum	29	60	8	37
Personal/Professional	40	76	3	119
Discipline	50	61	3	114
School Organisation	46	44	3	90

As an illustration of the value of this approach for teachers, a focus can be made on a selection of the boys' responses to some aspects of the curriculum category, where statements were organised into 5 sub-groups. Again, a positive-neutral-negative continuum was used to provide some indication of the balance between positive and negative views. The results of this are summarised in Table 2.

<b>Student Comment</b>	<b>+</b>	<b>—</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Total</b>
Subject Specific	6	22	3	31
Teacher Specific	10	16	2	28
Teacher/ Learning Style	2	10	2	14
Organisation of Curriculum	6	10	1	17
Expectations	5	2	0	7
Total	29	60	8	97

### **CHILDREN'S STATEMENTS CONCERNING TEACHER ATTRIBUTES**

The comments of the boys suggest that they like, or dislike, particular subjects according to the personality of the teacher. Their response to an individual



teacher is a key factor, even where they may dislike a given school subject. The boys acknowledge a range of preferred qualities in their teachers (which correlate with their responses in the category which examined their opinions concerning the personal and professional qualities of teachers). Five teacher attributes appear to be viewed by the boys as desirable: They talk of a 'good' teacher as (a) a source of help: 'In class, if the teacher is well organised, then I can work....like in Geography', (b) a charismatic personality: 'I would be happier if teachers were livelier and more fun with me', (c) patient "I want him to explain it (Mathematics) to me, and if I don't understand to explain it all again', (d) a motivator: 'He makes you feel as though he's really interested in you....so you do the work', and (e) a disciplinarian: 'Cullingford gets you working even in French, because you have to with him'.

### **CHILDREN'S STATEMENTS ON TEACHING & LEARNING STYLES**

The comments in this category amplified the observations that the boys made about the personal and professional characteristics of their teachers. They tended to express negative views concerning the way in which they were taught. Typical comments received were that 'None of us take no notice and we can learn off each other', or that 'Our teachers teach the material too (expletive) fast'. They also provide an indication of the way in which they preferred a lesson content to be presented: 'We do worksheets and worksheets...' and 'it's a lot of writing and there's no equipment'. Other comments emphasise the routine, traditional approach adopted by many of their teachers in delivering lessons.

### **CHILDREN'S VIEWS ON THE SCHOOL AND THE CURRICULUM**

The boys held forthright views about the way in which the school organised the curriculum. They found many ways irritating; some alienated them further. Often, these responses were impressionistic, and unsupported by specific examples. For instance, one boy maintained that 'You're just left to get on with the stuff yourself and we get the worst teachers', while he observed that '...other classes do alright'.

Organisational factors, both within and without the school, were identified as being largely responsible for this state of affairs. These included timetabling matters: 'The lessons are too long', adequate (suitable) teacher supply: 'We get too many substitute teachers who give us word searches', and teachers' rates of pay: 'Some teachers, not the bosses, get paid peanuts'.



## **VIEWS OF 'DISRUPTIVE' CHILDREN AND THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF TEACHERS**

The use we make of the views of so-called disruptive children can be considered on two levels. At a pragmatic level, when school revenue depends on the numbers on roll, it is better for teachers to ensure adequate provision even for pupils who are hostile to schooling. At an altruistic level, however, it can be argued that it is the individual right of every child to be educated in a way which best meets his/her needs. These considerations are not mutually exclusive, and both have important implications not only for the professional development of teachers but also for the organisational health of the whole school.

It is important to note from this small sample that not all disruptive children hold wholly negative views about school. Teachers, should not slip into the syndrome of 'blaming the victim'. As their statements show these boys are very astute at recognising certain positive qualities in the way teachers teach. It is worth noting also that many characteristics identified by the boys form part of OFSTED's assessment of what constitutes a 'good' teacher.

The most crucial element is the process by which individual teachers can enable disruptive children to have a genuine stake in their own learning. One way is for teachers to encourage individual children to provide confidential details of their preferred learning styles within a given curriculum area. Ideally this is done by adopting an input-process-output model, which denotes the range of interventions at each stage of the classroom encounter. For the child, this is done by providing a checklist of activities and styles of pupil-teacher interaction, to which the child can add additional activities. The teacher writes a similar list. The two lists are discussed; an agreement is reached on an approach, and on the resources required. This plan is then used in a predetermined set of lessons.

## **PUPILS' VIEWS ON STRUCTURES AND WHOLE-SCHOOL POLICIES**

Evaluation of this process is also a cooperative venture. The focus is upon individual responses to content and the teaching and learning style adopted. This provides the basis for subsequent meetings, during which the process of negotiation is refined. Much depends on the ability of the teacher to allow space for the child to state a frank opinion about his/her needs.

Nor should the use of children's views be restricted to the specific aspects of curriculum practice, as exemplified above. Much of what children say about their



lives in school can be used in professional development sessions for the whole school staff. Indeed, individual teacher initiatives would need the support of a whole school staff to secure long-term benefits. Hence, the value of incorporating children's judgements of teachers in in-service training work. Many examples have been provided of ways in which disruptive children can contribute to school organisation and discipline procedures (Garner, 1992; Coulby & Coulby, 1990).

## RECOGNISING OPPORTUNITIES AND THREATS

It is perhaps best to end on a note of cautious optimism. There are both opportunities and threats to teachers in devising ways of incorporating disruptive children's opinions. The biggest threat to a successful child-centred philosophy which includes listening to and hearing what children say about their school experiences is the present educational ideology in England which claims a "classless society" but is far from it. The 1988 Education Act, makes no mention of obtaining the views of children. This serves to reinforce the status quo, in which so-called disruptive children remain disenfranchised. A more optimistic view is that, the few exemplars of negotiated curricula, discipline policies and school routines provided by certain schools, show evidence of a nucleus of teachers who are beginning the fight, on behalf of all children, against the prescription and control of the present Government.

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