

The Odd One Out: A Support System For Emotionally Disturbed Pupils

Are support systems in danger of creating special needs? Can visiting support teachers contribute to a possible stigmatising effect on pupils? These were some questions posed in a qualitative evaluation of an outreach support system for students with learning and adjustment difficulties operated by the Ulster Hospital Special School.

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INTRODUCTION

The Ulster Hospital has seven hundred beds, of which one hundred are paediatric. It was built in 1962 on the outskirts of Dundonald village, which is situated about six miles east of Belfast. Most patients in the general wards come from east Belfast and surrounding rural towns and villages, but in the field of plastic surgery, for which the hospital has a high reputation, patients are admitted from all over N. Ireland. The school was founded at the same time as the hospital, having therefore a twenty-eight year history. Two distinct groups of children are catered for in the hospital school: internal pupils (3-16 years) who are suffering from a variety of medical and surgical complaints, and external pupils (11-16 years) with learning and adjustment difficulties. One teacher deals mainly with internal pupils (usually around twenty in number) and another member of staff deals mainly with external pupils by operating an outreach support system in the various schools which have requested help. The third member of staff (the principal) is responsible for the smooth functioning of each area and works with both groups of pupils.

OUTREACH SUPPORT SYSTEM

The outreach support system presently operates thus: when a pupil in a mainstream secondary school is giving grave cause for concern, the school principal contacts an educational psychologist. If the psychologist feels that the pupil is in need of a sustained period of specialist support which cannot be provided by the school, he then

refers the matter to the Special Education section of the Education and Library Board. A Board officer reviews the situation and if appropriate refers the pupil to the U.H.S.S. A support teacher then travels out to the school in question, offers support and counselling to the pupil who has been referred and, when requested, advice to staff. Usually, when the support teacher visits the school, the pupil is removed from the classroom for counselling.

A QUALITATIVE EVALUATION

The immediate concerns which prompted this evaluation can be briefly stated: to find out whether the support system offered is of any benefit to the schools and the children they refer i.e. does the support system meet the needs of emotionally disturbed pupils or are special needs being created?

There are many topics in special education which are best explored by means of qualitative enquiry and others which benefit from a quantitative approach. Exploring the perceptions of individual pupils and teachers, probably, lends itself to qualitative investigation and it is therefore the main method which was used.

Data collection was carried out using the following methods:

- a) focused interviews with pupils (Cohen and Manion 1980);
- b) focused interviews with teachers;
- c) collection of quantitative data from school records.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

"Experiences affect people in different ways". This truism suggests that the individual outcomes and changes that result from participation in a particular programme are rarely predictable with any degree of certainty. While reactions are likely to be specific I feel that it is important to stand back and endeavour to find out if there are any patterns or themes. One of the purposes of the evaluation was to do just that: to document the experiences of individuals and then look for patterns which help to provide an overview of the support system and its impact. Fourteen children were referred during the year. Of that number, three received Training School Orders and were unable to be interviewed, one truanted so much that I was unable to "catch" him and four pupils were still on the waiting list at the end of June. The interviews with the remaining six children focus on the central issue - withdrawal from class to see the support teacher.

There was an intensity to the responses of those pupils at either end of the spectrum, which makes it clear just how significant an event it was in their daily lives even though some found it difficult to articulate clearly just how they felt.

PUPILS' RESPONSES

Interviewer: - How do you feel about coming out of class to see the support teacher?

Raymond: - It's O.K. It's better than going to room three (where pupils without behaviour problems are sent). When I get sent to room three I usually go on the mitch and go home or something and then I get into worse trouble.

Richard: - I hate it! I miss my lunch every day. Well I don't miss my lunch because I eat it in here, but I don't get out into the playground. I really hate this! Why do I have to sit in here every day? I really hate this. I want out!

George: - Well, coming out of class used to annoy me but not any more.

Interviewer: - Oh, it doesn't annoy you now.

George: - No, I don't mind, but I would like to be back. You know just ordinary, in my proper class.

Interviewer: - What is your proper class?

George: - I mean just back with the rest of them. I feel the odd one out.

David: - It's good. It's sort of - well I can tell her things that I couldn't tell the teachers. Teachers never listen to ya.

Miriam: - I really like the other teacher coming to see me. I get away from all the hassle.

Alison: - I would go crazy if I had to stay in there all day. I get out for a break when she comes in to see me.

PROBLEMS OF LABELLING

The above issue arose from a concern about the process of being labelled "special" and being seen by other children as being somehow different. Some educators believe that children labelled as different from peers are permanently stigmatised. Woolfolk (1987) has found that teachers, friends and the students themselves, set expectations for achievement that are based on the labels and not on real abilities. Labels, however, are not the sole source of stigma for children with special needs. There is evidence (Gottlieb, 1974) that the behaviour of "special students" is one cause of difficulties in their interpersonal relationships. Pupils who repeatedly disrupt class or who repeatedly fail are liked less by their classmates, regardless of the presence or absence of formal labels. This unpopularity is painfully illustrated by Teacher C:

"The other kids really hate him. Last week when he ran out of my class the rest clapped and cheered".

EFFECTS OF WITHDRAWAL

A child's self-esteem is developed through relationships (Gurney, 1988) and it may be that the pupils who welcomed the support teacher were having their "special needs" met i.e the development of a warm caring relationship with an adult. Dawson (1981) reports that warm, caring relationships in adult to child relationships ranked number one in the treatment programme among a survey of 114 schools for maladjusted children. Among the pupils interviewed, therefore, removal from class would appear to have two effects; being made to feel the odd one out and also providing an opportunity for a good relationship to develop with an adult. Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1954) would suggest that the need to be accepted and belong, must at least be partially met before cognitive needs can become important sources of motivation i.e. opportunities provided in school for exploring and understanding. It would appear that the process of withdrawing the referred child from class is more successful with those pupils who desperately need a relationship with an adult. (Miriam, for whom the support system worked well, had no family ties and moved school once during the year and also moved to another children's home). Adolescents for whom peer acceptance is all important, find the withdrawal from class to be an uncomfortable process.

The issue of withdrawal is, understandably, viewed rather differently by teachers. The following are some of their reactions to the removal of the pupil from class:

TEACHER REACTIONS

- Teacher A: - Teachers breathe a sigh of relief when he goes. They are delighted when he walks out the door. He disrupts the whole class. I just can't teach when he is in the classroom.
- Teacher B: - Teachers don't mind at all. It means they can concentrate on teaching instead of sorting out discipline problems.

Sleeter (1989) claims that general teachers in mainstream schools tolerate only a limited amount of deviation from the behaviour norm and so pupils with disturbing behaviour may be a source of frustration which the teacher might be glad to refer elsewhere. Perhaps this is largely due to the demands placed upon teachers to teach a given amount of material in a given amount of time, leaving little time or energy for coping with discipline problems.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of this small study would seem to indicate that the support service met the needs of half of the pupils and created needs in the remaining half. It should be remembered however that the support service was working with a small percentage (1.5%) of the expected population of pupils with disturbing behaviour. It is obvious that special needs support teachers (even six teachers for the Board area) could not possibly meet the needs of such a population by dealing personally with one pupil after another. It could be suggested that the needs of these pupils with adjustment difficulties could be met just as well from within the school rather than from the support service. This would help to remove the stigma of being withdrawn from class to meet the support teacher and would also remove the disadvantage of missed lessons.

This solution has been advocated by Hanks (1985) who emphasises the fact that teachers need professional and emotional support in the handling of disturbed pupils and suggests that the role of the support teacher could be expanded to include support for teachers in mainstream schools in the form of school-based support groups. These groups would give teachers additional strategies for addressing the problem of disturbed pupils in the classroom but there may be a problem, however, in encouraging teachers to employ these strategies.

Teachers are expected to provide a rewarding and fulfilling education for *all* pupils and are also expected to prepare pupils for the demands of a highly complex technological society. Herein lies the root of the problem: the language of Government policy on pupils with special needs suggests fairness and rationality, while the structures which are imposed on schools limit the flexibility with which teachers can respond to the diversity in their classrooms. These contradictions between the exposition of Government policy and its outworking do not often find their way into discussions on special education and yet unless we change what teachers in mainstream schools are expected to do, children with disturbed behaviour may well continue to be rejected. The imminent introduction of the Common Curriculum (due to be implemented in N. Ireland in September 1990) will undoubtedly reduce the amount of tolerable deviation from the norm still further.

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