

Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties in Primary and Post-Primary Schools: Different Systems, Different Understandings?

Emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD) attract considerable attention and resources in the Irish education system. The complexities of EBD can lead to misunderstandings and misconceptions. This article reports on some of the findings of a research project which examined the understandings of EBD and the attitudes and responses to be found in mainstream schools in Ireland, focusing particularly on similarities and differences between the primary and post-primary sectors.

DAVID Mc KEON is a senior lecturer in learning support and special educational needs in the Church of Ireland College of Education, Rathmines, Dublin.

INTRODUCTION

Comparative research studies of emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD) across primary and post-primary settings are not readily apparent in the international literature. This is also the case in the Irish context. This article focuses specifically on a comparative analysis of the findings of a small scale research project conducted in mainstream primary and post-primary schools in relation to the understandings of and responses to EBD among practitioners in those sectors.

CONTEXT AND LITERATURE REVIEW

There exists a general consensus in the literature that it is difficult to define EBD (Kavale, Forness and Mostert, 2005; Mowat, 2009). Attempts to provide a definition have tended to offer wide-ranging descriptions of a variety of factors, often encompassing contributions from medical, therapeutic and psychological perspectives (Cooper, 1999; Cullinan, 2004; Hunter-Carsch, Tiknaz, Cooper and Sage, 2006). There is also a ‘legalistic’ or ‘administrative’ perspective to defining

EBD (Cullinan, 2004). Indeed, the existence of such an eclectic mix of disciplines contributing to the issue of definition may be seen as one reason for the lack of consensus. There is also some evidence of a trend towards generalisation, for example Cooper (1999) suggests that EBD:

is perhaps best seen as a loose collection of characteristics, some of which are located within students; others of which are disorders of the environment in which the student operates (such as the school or the family). The third, and probably most common, category involves the interaction between personal characteristics of students and environmental factors (pp. 9-10).

A review of the literature pertaining to EBD reflects a tendency to consider broader topics, such as students' psychological difficulties (Erdur-Baker, 2009), perceptions of problem classroom behaviours (Little, 2005) and indeed of special educational needs (SEN) and inclusion (see, for example, Avramidis, Bayless and Burden, 2000). In the Irish context, the work of Kelly and Devitt (2010) is a rare example, which looked at reasons for student transfer from mainstream to special schools among post-twelve year olds. Gibbs and Gardiner (2008) investigated how primary and post-primary teachers in Ireland and England attribute students' misbehaviour.

A considerable number of reports and guidelines emanated from the Department of Education and Skills (DES) in relation to behavioural issues in the decades following the abolition of corporal punishment in 1982 (Department of Education, 1982a and 1982b), e.g. the *Report of the Committee on Discipline in Schools* (Ireland, 1985), the *Report to the Minister for Education and Science on Discipline in Schools*, (Martin, 1997), *School Matters: The Report of the Task Force on Student Behaviour in Second Level Schools* (DES, 2006), *Developing a Code of Behaviour: Guidelines for Schools* (NEWB, 2008). The teachers' unions also considered behaviour matters; the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) published *Discipline in the Primary School* (1993 and 2002), *Managing Challenging Behaviour, Guidelines for Teachers* (2004) and *Towards Positive Behaviour in Primary Schools* (2006). The Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI) published *An Approach to Discipline in Schools: Draft Policy Paper* in 2004, while the Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland (ASTI) encouraged its members to review discipline policies in its *Guidelines for Review of School Discipline Policy* in 2004, when it also issued *Responding to Serious Indiscipline in Schools*.

The chronology of publication evidenced in these documents suggests that behavioural issues were addressed and considered separately and following somewhat different timelines in the primary and post-primary sectors. DES publications from the period also suggest consideration of the issue in the context of the primary sector first of all (*Report of the Committee on Discipline in Schools*, (1985); *Circular Letters 7/88* (1988a) and *20/90* (1990)), followed by the post-primary sector (*Circular Letters M34/88* (1988b), *M33/91* (1991); *Report to the Minister for Education and Science on Discipline in Schools*, (Martin, 1997), which focused mainly on the post-primary sector; *School Matters: The Report of the Task Force on Student Behaviour in Second Level Schools*, (DES, 2006) and *Circular Letters 10/12* (2012) and *07/14* (2014). This traditional approach reflects a long-established notion of two education systems, primary and post-primary, as being separate entities with little in common, a view that does not serve the needs of students well.

In the Irish literature, the issue of responses to emotional and behavioural difficulties tends to differ somewhat between the primary and post-primary sectors. Social and emotional issues tend to be the focus of the literature pertaining to the primary sector. Regarding the post-primary sector the literature appears to take more of a behavioural perspective focusing on developing school-wide structures to address discipline and behaviour. To illustrate this, Egan (2007) promotes developing emotional intelligence as a proactive approach to working with students in the primary sector, particularly those presenting with EBD, and cites a definition of this concept from Salovey and Mayer (1990), cited in Egan (2007):

...a type of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and others' emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions (p. 189).

Egan describes an intervention to develop emotional literacy, i.e. the skills of being emotionally intelligent, delivered through the SPHE programme. Evidence is also present of efforts to adapt aspects of the *Stay Safe, Best Practice in Child Protection* programme to focus on students presenting with SEN (Cullen, 2009). This programme, initially introduced in 1996, supported the introduction of child protection guidelines as part of the SPHE programme at primary level. More particularly, Cullen (2009) included guidance specifically focused on students with EBD among other categories of SEN.

The Incredible Years Programme (Webster-Stratton, 2001) has been implemented in a variety of situations in Ireland. In one incidence the *Basic Parenting*

Programme instigated by the Clondalkin Partnership was part of a local community response to reinforce positive behaviours and address identified emotional and behavioural problems (Fleming and Gallagher, 2002). The *Teacher Classroom Management Programme* has also been implemented in various settings. Evaluations of both (Clondalkin Partnership, 2006; Mc Gilloway, Hyland, Ní Mhaille, Lodge, O'Neill, Kelly, Leckey, Bywater, Comiskey and Donnelly, 2010) suggest improvements in students' behaviour. These interventions acknowledge the need for a holistic and multi-faceted approach to the difficulties identified as being problematic.

At post-primary level the focus on addressing behavioural issues can be traced to Foy (1978) and Blanche and Hyland (1983), for example, both of whom espoused classroom management strategies for teachers in a wider context of school-based discipline codes. This approach continues to the present day. Interestingly, Foy (1978) identified several behavioural characteristics common in the current literature, e.g. attention-seeking, opting out and destructive behaviour, and made the following observation, presaging somewhat a contemporary biopsychosocial viewpoint, as outlined by Cooper (1999) and others:

It is a mistake to look on indiscipline/aggression/disruption in the classroom as if these were global homogeneous entities. They are complex phenomena involving the problems, needs, tensions and values of the aggressor interacting with the dynamics of the class group (p. 8).

Indeed, Blanche and Hyland (1983) went further, to promote a pastoral care system, emphasising “emotional, social, physical and intellectual areas” (p. 4) and a team approach on a school-based level. This has subsequently become the norm in the post-primary sector and facilitates the provision of SPHE on the post-primary timetable. Referring to students presenting with SEN in a broader sense, Scanlon and Mc Gilloway (2006) reported on the importance of this programme in facilitating empathy with and understanding of students among their peers.

In subsequent years a variety of initiatives promoted the idea of positive behaviour or positive discipline (O'Hara, Byrne and Mc Namara, 2000; Dwyer, 2003) focusing primarily, for example, on rethinking how the school approaches the issue of the management of behaviour in the context of contemporary ideas about teaching and learning and the increasing diversity of the student population, as is highlighted in the *Report to the Minister for Education and Science on Discipline in Schools* (Martin, 1997). However these did not specifically address the issue of EBD.

More recently, a recommendation of *School Matters: The Report of the Task Force on Student Behaviour in Second Level Schools* (DES, 2006) led to the establishment of the National Behaviour Support Service (NBSS), whose brief is to “provide support and expertise to partner secondary schools on issues related to disruptive behaviour” (NBSS, 2009, p. 5). For its underlying philosophy, this support service draws on international initiatives such as the *Behaviour in Schools: Framework for Intervention* (Birmingham City Council (BCC), 1998) and the *School-Wide Positive Behaviour Support* (Walker, Horner, Sugai, Bullis, Sprague, Bricker and Kaufman, 1996, cited in Cooper and Jacobs, 2011) programmes. The NBSS initiative, therefore, promotes a whole school approach:

...in most schools 80-90% of students will be sufficiently supported with whole initiatives related to positive behaviour. This implies an on-going programme, within schools, of addressing the social, emotional, academic and behavioural needs of all students (p. 4).

However, it also acknowledges the existence of the ten per cent of students who will require more targeted or individualised interventions, and this accommodates the three-tiered continuum of behaviour support model outlined by Sugai (2007) and espoused by the NBSS, thereby providing support for individualised behaviour planning and behaviour support classrooms .

THE RESEARCH PROJECT

This research project investigated understandings of EBD in Irish mainstream primary and post-primary schools and how these understandings contribute to the behaviour policies and support systems that are constructed in schools as responses to students presenting with EBD. A purposive sample (n=92) was chosen who could reasonably be expected to have experience of engaging with students with special educational needs and, hence, students presenting with emotional and behavioural difficulties (Gay, Mills and Airasian, 2006). This comprised of principals (n=34), special education teachers (n=34) and guidance counsellors (n=24) from mainstream primary and post-primary schools, representing the following variables: single gender and co-educational schools; urban and rural schools; large and small schools.

From this sample, eighteen principals, twenty teachers and nine guidance counsellors responded to a postal questionnaire (n=47, approximately fifty-two per cent response rate). Drawing from this cohort, thirteen semi-structured, cross-sectoral interviews were conducted representing these three groups. A variety of

themes was identified and these were also investigated through a thematic analysis of a sample of SEN and behaviour policies from the interview cohort. The findings of the research were reported in the context of these themes and those relevant to the primary and post-primary sectors are outlined in the following section.

FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH: PRIMARY AND POST-PRIMARY CONTEXTS

Understanding of EBD

Overall, the responses reflected somewhat different perspectives being taken on EBD in the two sectors. The respondents from the primary sector suggested quite a homogeneous understanding of EBD, with few exceptions, recognising a variety of influencing issues or factors, including an awareness of the link between social development and learning. Among post-primary respondents, there appeared to be a variety of different perspectives in evidence, at times between different practitioners but also between different types of post-primary setting. Among the post-primary respondents, principals and teachers focused on students' emotional state when asked to define EBD, and home background was also mentioned often. Indeed issues or factors relating to the home figured significantly across all sectors as being important in defining emotional and behavioural difficulties. While post-primary guidance counsellors referred to students' emotional state as a factor, they also mentioned students' level of maturity in the skills required to deal sufficiently with the kinds of difficulties experienced. They rarely referred to assessed conditions, unlike their colleagues in other positions in the post-primary sector. Several responses from the ETB (Education and Training Boards) and voluntary secondary school sectors tended to focus on describing quite extreme behaviours.

Behaviour Policies

Responses suggested that primary and post-primary schools share a similar profile regarding the existence, availability and age of the behaviour policies in their schools. Most policies were produced between three to five years before the time of the research and several of the respondents remarked that the policy had been updated recently; indeed some suggested this occurred annually. The majority reported that most stakeholders were involved in writing the policy, however special needs assistants (SNAs) were identified as those most likely not to have been included in this. Post-primary school respondents also reported that students and parents were not likely to be consulted in the formulation of the behaviour policy.

All respondents tended to indicate that a high level of importance was attached to the behaviour policy. However, a more diverse picture emerged when they were asked to comment on the level of awareness of the policy across the range of stakeholders. Two primary school respondents suggested that the level of awareness may be lower among parents, students and SNAs than among other stakeholders. The post-primary respondents displayed a more varied picture. Parents figured substantially in the medium categories of awareness, as did the Board of Management. SNAs were also reported with a medium level of awareness, but only by a few respondents.

The possible exclusion of the opinion of SNAs from the development of a behaviour policy may be explained by the relatively recent appearance of this position in schools in the Irish education system (Logan, 2006), particularly in post-primary schools, and the lack of clarity regarding their function and deployment in schools. However, this scenario does not apply as much to the primary sector, with SNAs having been present in primary schools for longer than in the post-primary sector. However, there are questions to be addressed in relation to their almost universal exclusion in the development of behaviour policies.

Consideration of the Student as an Individual

The consideration afforded to the individual student appeared to differ between sectors. This was expounded in a positive sense in the concept of 'child centredness' coming from some respondents in the primary sector, where the student was seen as the central point around which every aspect of provision was viewed. Other respondents, in the post-primary sector, appeared to infuse a sense of individualism into their interpretation and application of policy. Their responses suggested an egalitarian awareness of the individuality of the student, in that they were conscious of being flexible in how they interpreted and applied behaviour policy. This was linked to an emphasis on being aware of the emotional state of the individual.

Guidance Counsellors

Whilst counselling was reported as being employed in the primary sector, it is interesting that while this was mentioned in the post-primary sector, it did not stand out from other responses in a sector where guidance counsellors are present. Given that they are not present in the primary sector, it is not unreasonable to expect that their presence in the post-primary sector would be reflected in having a greater impact than this. DES guidelines (2005b) outline the role of a counselling service in schools in empowering students to address behavioural issues and develop coping strategies. The responses from the guidance counsellors

interviewed appear to suggest that they are in some way peripheral to the interventions and responses to students presenting with EBD in schools. Other interviewees from the post-primary sector referred to other counselling services, those provided by the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) for example, rather than the school's own guidance counsellor.

DISCUSSION

Variations in Understandings of the Concept of EBD

There appears to exist wide variations in an understanding of the concept of EBD across the entire sample. There are varying degrees of knowledge in evidence and this knowledge is coming from a variety of sources. Some practitioners appear to rely primarily on their knowledge of SEN in general, coupled with some knowledge or information about EBD which focuses specifically on behavioural issues. There also exists a certain knowledge of and reliance on DES documentation around the allocation of resources to various categories of SEN. Finally, when considering SEN, there exists a tendency to include any identifiable grouping in the school that differs from the mainstream. For example, interview responses suggested a tendency to feel comfortable with discussing SEN at a conceptual level, suggesting that they consider themselves to have an understanding of this, followed by transference of what they know about SEN in general to a subsequent discussion of EBD when asked specifically about this topic. Indeed there is evidence of a tendency among interviewees to refer to students presenting with SEN as a homogeneous group sharing a broad range of characteristics, suggesting that this is representative of similar thinking in their schools.

Levels of Sophistication

Whilst these wide variations of understanding of EBD manifest themselves across the whole sample, the research suggests that, within that reality, there also exist significant differences between respondents from the primary and post-primary sectors regarding how sophisticated these understandings of EBD are. Data appears to suggest that, although to a large extent the tendency to consider all students presenting with SEN as a homogeneous group sharing a broad range of similar characteristics exists in both primary and post-primary sectors, there appears to be evidence of a more sophisticated understanding among respondents from the primary sector.

The reasons for this may be twofold. Firstly, it is the case that, historically, specific provision for students presenting with SEN in general has been present in the primary sector for a longer period. Following the Special Education Review

Committee (SERC) Report (1993), the expansion of services for SEN impacted on the primary sector first and to a greater extent than on the post-primary sector. Added to this, the DES has tended to address issues of SEN provision at an official level in the primary sector before the post-primary sector. For example, continuing professional development (CPD) at post-graduate diploma level in special educational needs for teachers in the post-primary sector has only been provided by the DES since the early 2000s, whereas its origins in the primary and special schools' sectors date from the 1960s. Overall, therefore, the primary sector has had a longer timeframe to address and consider these issues, supported by an official framework within which to operate, than have their counterparts in the post-primary sector, leading to more complex understandings and responses.

Secondly, a more sophisticated understanding among respondents may be due to organisational differences between the two sectors. The primary curriculum is an integrated child-centred curriculum, in contrast to that in the post-primary sector. The nature of the primary school is one where teachers spend most of the day with one class, which provides opportunities for a greater level of knowledge regarding the learning needs of the students and possibilities for initiating appropriate responses. The allocation and organisation of resources has been present in the primary sector for longer and has subsequently been adapted in a more sophisticated way than in the post-primary sector. For example, *Circular Letter SP ED 02/05: Organisation of Teaching Resources for Pupils who need Additional Support in Mainstream Primary Schools* (DES, 2005a) provides for an integrated approach to providing additional teaching resources, based on a staged approach, allowing primary schools considerable autonomy in organising the deployment of their resources with the intention of promoting more inclusive practices such as in-class support. Similar initiatives at post-primary level did not emanate from the DES until 2012 and again in 2014 (*Circular Letters 10/12* and *07/14*).

Policy Development

Recent years have seen an impetus for schools to develop policies to cover all areas of school life in response to legislative requirements, e.g. Education Act (Ireland, 1998). Compliance with this imperative appears to have resulted in an emphasis on quantity over quality in the production of policy. Commenting on the level of discussion that preceded the development of the behaviour policy in their school, one teacher interviewed put this succinctly:

I think also I suppose it's basically because it was a set policy because we've had to bring in all these policies.

Related to this are the difficulties inherent in conceptualising and defining such a nebulous issue as EBD in the first instance. A tendency to focus more on presenting characteristics and responses is a position that lends itself to allowing the co-morbidity of presenting characteristics across a range of conditions to compromise clarity (Mowat, 2009). Hence, there is a tendency to consider students presenting with SEN as a homogeneous group sharing common characteristics.

Another suggestion, linked to this, relates to the level of meaningful systemic change in schools necessary for the development of a truly inclusive school. Here it can be argued that surface level change, such as a focus on policy writing, is being achieved but this has occurred to the detriment of deep level meaningful change in attitudes, structures and, indeed, policies (Shevlin, Kenny and Mc Neela, 2002; Kinsella and Senior, 2008). This may suggest that the production of policy statements is more imperative than meaningful understanding of the concepts and issues inherent in those policies.

Interventions in Schools

No particular set of interventions appears to be associated with specific sectors across the sample. However, some points can be made to illustrate what is happening in schools. In the primary sector, there is evidence of some interventions that are consistent with the aims of the Primary Curriculum and, in particular, the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) programme. This is supported in the literature (Egan, 2007; Cullen, 2009). This, in turn, suggests that a whole school focus may be more established in the primary sector. At post-primary level, interventions focus more on establishing structures to implement the behaviour policy. While this can also be seen as an example of a focus at whole school level, it is different in that it seems to focus more on the implementation of the structures rather than focusing on the individual circumstances of students.

The reliance on flexibility in the interpretation of the behaviour policy, whilst present in both primary and post-primary sectors, appears to be the dominant initiative to be found in the post-primary sector. On a practical level, some examples of such responses are linked to the geography of the urban-rural divide. For example, urban post-primary schools appear more likely than rural schools to collaborate with parents on a face to face basis but are also more likely to suspend and exclude students. The former may be due in part to the availability of parents to attend the school for consultation, whilst the latter may also be due to the proximity of students' homes if they are removed from lessons.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The findings of this small scale research project suggest that subtle differences exist in the understandings of EBD and in the responses to behavioural difficulties in the primary and post-primary sectors. The lack of research in this area is indicative of the historical separation of the two sectors which largely ignores the clientele, i.e. the students, that is shared by both sectors. Further comparative research is required so that each sector can not only begin to understand the other more but, more importantly, so that they can begin to work together in closer harmony in order to respond effectively to students' needs.

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