

Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties in Irish Schools: We Need to Talk About Gender

Findings from the *Growing Up in Ireland* research (Banks, Shevlin and Mc Coy, 2012) report an over-identification of males with special educational needs, particularly social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD). This highlights gender as a previously well-known but largely ignored variable in understanding and supporting students who present with SEBD. With over one third of post-primary schools being single gender schools (Department of Education and Skills, 2018), Ireland is unique in Europe in stratifying schools according to gender. This paper makes the case for further research into gender and SEBD in the Irish context. Identifying a lacuna in the literature and referencing previous research by this author (McKeon, 2015), four issues are highlighted in which further investigation is needed in order to respond more effectively to the needs of students in Irish schools.

Keywords: Gender, Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (SEBD), Post-Primary, Primary

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INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the issue of gender as being a significant variable in the understanding of Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (SEBD) in the Irish education context and, in particular, in the post-primary sector. It commences with a rationale for this assertion by outlining the particular significance of gender in the Irish education system. This is followed by a review of the literature which explores how SEBD and gender are conceptualized and where attention is focused. This is supported by gender-specific references from a small scale research study previously reported in this journal but in a broader context. Finally, the paper discusses the impact of the issues raised about gender on how the Irish education system understands and responds to SEBD and offers some suggestions for deepening that understanding.

SEBD: THE DILEMMA OF DEFINITION

Definitions of SEBD vary widely and for a considerable length of time relied heavily on medical, therapeutic and psychological perspectives (Cullinan, 2004; Hunter-Carsch, Tiknaz, Cooper and Sage, 2006). A much broader approach is evident nowadays and, for example, in the Irish context there are visible parameters evident in the literature within which a view has emerged over time of a more overarching definition when discussing the concept of SEBD. The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), in its publication *Behavioural, Emotional and Social Difficulties: A Continuum of Support, Guidelines for Teachers*, (2010) described SEBD (or rather BESD) thus:

As NEPS uses it, the term refers to difficulties which a pupil or young person is experiencing which act as a barrier to their personal, social, cognitive and emotional development. These difficulties may be communicated through internalising and/or externalising behaviours. Relationships with self, others and community may be affected and the difficulties may interfere with the pupil's own personal and educational development or that of others. The contexts within which difficulties occur must always be considered, and may include the classroom, school, family, community and cultural settings. (p. 4)

This relies heavily on Cooper's definition (1999), which is more forthright in its declaration of a biopsychosocial approach, stating emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD) are

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)

How SEBD is defined and understood is central to the level of success achieved in supporting students in schools. It remains a nebulous concept at best and its inherent complexities affect greatly its understanding amongst practitioners and, subsequently, the range of responses put in place in schools to support students and their effectiveness.

WHAT IS PARTICULAR ABOUT GENDER IN THE IRISH CONTEXT?

Drudy (2008) reports that the gender profile of the teaching profession in Ireland is predominantly female and this reflects what is found in school systems across Europe. This remains the case today. In 2017-2018 85% of primary school teachers were female (Department of Education and Skills, 2018), with 67% of primary principals being female. In the same year, at post-primary level (figures only available that exclude the Education and Training Board (ETB) sector), females outnumbered males in the teaching profession at 69%, yet were under-represented in managerial roles in these schools, with only 47% of principals being female. As elsewhere, gender, therefore, represents a significant variable in the profile of the teaching profession and management personnel in our schools, with very different profiles across the primary and post-primary sectors.

From the perspective of the student population in our schools, Ireland differs somewhat from other countries. Whilst only 18% of students at primary level were educated in single gender classes in 2017-2018 (DES, 2018), the corresponding figure at post-primary level was 37% (DES, 2018). The *Sé Si - Gender in Irish Education* report (Department of Education and Science, 2007) indicated that Ireland had the highest proportion of students in single gender post-primary schools in Europe. In 2017-2018, 233 of 715 (32.5%) post-primary schools were still single gender (DES, 2018). The large number of single gender post-primary schools in Ireland is therefore unique in the European context. Gender has been identified as influencing educational engagement and outcomes (Smyth, 1999; Williams, 2018). How these issues impact on the culture, values and expectations of post-primary schools is a pertinent issue at societal level and, it can be argued, may influence understandings of and responses to SEBD.

With regard to students presenting with special educational needs (SEN) overall, the *Sé Si* Report (2007) recorded that males presenting with SEN outnumbered females by a ratio of almost 2:1 in enrolments to ordinary primary schools and special schools, with this figure having increased from 59% to 64% between the early 1980s and 2002/2003 (DES, 2007). Again, this is consistent with European statistics reporting similar ratios of males to females across several education systems (Riddell, 2014; European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2017). In the Irish context, Banks, Shevlin and Mc Coy (2012) report findings from the longitudinal research study *Growing Up in Ireland* (see Williams, 2018) that are similar to other international studies showing males are much more likely to be diagnosed with SEN than females but, more importantly, that this is particularly the case in relation to SEBD.

The gender profile of our schools can be investigated from two important perspectives, i.e. the gender of teachers and management personnel and the gender of the student populations in different types of schools particularly at post-primary level. Gender represents an important variable that impacts significantly on our understanding of and support for students presenting with SEN and especially those with SEBD.

HOW ARE GENDER AND SEBD INVESTIGATED IN THE LITERATURE?

In Ireland gender does not really feature significantly as a variable in SEN-related research. A review of Irish-based SEN literature for the period 2000-2009 (Rose, Shevlin, Winter and O'Raw, 2010) does not mention it. In the international context research in relation to gender and SEBD concentrates largely on quantitative comparisons across gender (Maras and Cooper, 1999; Oswald, Best, Coutinho and Nagle, 2003; Young, Sabah, Young, Reiser and Richardson, 2010; Banks et al., 2012), focusing on the ratio of males to females presenting with a variety of sub-categories of SEBD. The focus on a traditional elucidation of SEBD as manifesting in 'externalising' behaviours in males and 'internalising' behaviours in females receives considerable attention (see, for example, Maras and Cooper, 1999; Hess Rice, Merves and Srsic, 2008; Soles, Bloom, Heath and Karagiannakis, 2008; Place and Elliott, 2014). In this context, for example, the male-female ratio of diagnoses of Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (Cooper, 2006) is reported. The relationship between gender, SEBD and academic achievement is also investigated with Hess Rice and Yen (2010), for example, reporting no statistical differences across genders.

Some female-specific studies are also in evidence. Kann and Hanna (2000), for example, investigate Disruptive Behaviour Disorders among females, whilst Cullinan, Osbourne and Epstein (2004) investigate the characteristics of females presenting with emotional disturbance. Interestingly the latter discuss the ramifications of applying identification criteria to the female population that have been established in studies on males. This implies a pre-existing tradition of focusing predominantly on the male population when investigating some categories of SEBD. Cullinan et al. (2004) suggest that if gender differences exist, such assumptions may result in under-identification of females with emotional disturbance, as they may exhibit characteristics that are different to those traditionally attributed to males but ignored in the research.

Research has also focused on how schools respond to male and female students presenting with behavioural difficulties. Several studies report different approaches and procedures (Buswell, 1984; Hurrell, 1995; Jull, 2008; Kourtrouba, 2013), suggesting that this is linked to different assumptions regarding the underlying causes of behaviours presented by male and female students. Hess-Rice et al. (2008) report differences in the language being used to describe male and female students and their behaviours and this issue is taken up again later in the current paper. Also, they note a perception amongst professionals that females present with more challenging difficulties. Davies and Ryan (2014), however, refer to difficulties in ascertaining the significance of gender, highlighting the overall complexities of researching in this area.

As stated, some issues relating to the gender of teachers are investigated. Avramidis and Norwich (2002), for example, in their review of teachers' attitudes towards integration and inclusion, refer to several studies examining gender differences between teachers that present inconclusive results. They cite, for example, Egelund and Foss Hansen (2000) who suggest that other factors impact more significantly than gender in the management of behavioural difficulties, such as teachers' experience. Maras and Cooper (1999) report a correlation between gender and teachers' expectations around behaviour, particularly aggressive behaviours. These studies, however, do not appear to address the specifics of how male and female teachers interact with or respond to male and female students presenting with SEBD. This phenomenon, however, is explored by Green, Shriberg and Farber (2008), for example, where they report on gender differences amongst teachers in responding to different, specific behaviours finding female teachers rating them as being more severe than their male counterparts.

Overall the literature cited above suggests there is a lacuna in the research regarding gender and SEBD. An over-representation of males identified with SEBD, coupled with a traditional focus on investigating males over females along with a consequent presumption of similarities across gender, result in a situation where understanding of the integral issues concerning SEBD may depend more on assumption rather than robust interrogation and investigation. The interaction between teachers of each gender and students of each gender is under-researched and this suggests a significant deficit for Irish post-primary schools where a sizeable number are still single gender schools.

METHODOLOGY

Research by this author was reported in this journal (McKeon, 2015). It focused on differences between the primary and post-primary sectors in the context of a broader interrogation of understandings of SEBD among principals and special education teachers from primary and post-primary schools, and guidance counsellors (post-primary only). The following sections report on some of the findings from that broader study in relation to gender as an illustration of the types of issues that need to be investigated in order to broaden and deepen how we understand and engage with students who present with SEBD.

The research cited was framed in a social constructivist paradigm and employed a qualitative approach to data collection. Through the use of postal questionnaires (n=47: 47% Male: 53% Female) and semi-structured interviews (n=13: 54% Male: 46% Female) with a representative sample of the practitioners outlined above, respondents' understandings of the variables that influenced how they conceptualized SEBD were gathered, alongside data relating to how they considered their schools responded to and supported students with SEBD through their behaviour policies and school structures. Gender was one of the variables employed to interrogate the data. A process of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2013; Guest, Mac Queen and Namey, 2012), identifying semantic and latent themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Maguire and Delahunt, 2017) was implemented in order to identify a set of themes within the data set established by the questionnaire and interview responses. The inclusion of three cohorts of practitioners (principals, special education teachers and guidance counsellors) contributed to the comprehensive nature of these themes.

Findings in relation to gender are extracted from the data for the purpose of this current paper and provide an informative illustration of how gender represents a pertinent variable to consider in order to broaden understanding of SEBD. The rationale for this approach is explained next.

ILLUSTRATIVE FINDINGS

The purpose here is to put forward a view that gender issues in relation to SEBD are significant and worthy of further research in their own right. In this context, illustrative findings from the data are presented to support this view. This paper does not purport to present definitive findings to 'prove' or 'disprove' a hypothesis. Rather, the intention is to initiate debate of a hitherto under-researched variable

in the Irish context in relation to SEBD. The first set of examples and extracts illustrate the kind of language male and female practitioners use when discussing SEBD. This is followed by a comparison from respondents in single gender and co-educational schools.

How do Male and Female Respondents Talk about SEBD?

There are clear differences between male and female respondents regarding the issue of defining the concept of SEBD. Female respondents are more likely to mention assessed conditions when explaining what they understand by this term. In contrast to their male counterparts they focus more on emotional issues than on behavioural issues. Female respondents can be described as more empathetic and more caring in the language they employ when talking about their students. When speculating on the causes of SEBD, issues or factors associated with the home background of students are frequently cited as relevant by female respondents. A female primary principal, for example, describes students who may be:

under stress from home problems which can lead to their being unable to cope in school, poor self-esteem, failure in class, poor relationships...

The language employed by male respondents when discussing SEBD often displays a more negative tone, suggested by an emphasis on extreme conditions and/or a feeling of resignation that such conditions are fixed and the situation cannot change. When male respondents do mention emotional issues they tend to dwell on extreme emotions such as anger. Male respondents focus on very different causal factors to their female colleagues. They place high importance on characteristics such as an inability to express oneself, the need for anger management, lack of social skills, etc. A male primary principal describes:

persistent long-term problems generated due to previous trauma. Unlike typical students, this behaviour manifests itself in everyday or common situations, i.e. antisocial reaction to authority, peers, etc.

Finally, a female teacher acknowledges a slightly different emphasis in how her male and female colleagues speak about these issues:

...I might be saying this wrong but I think a lot of our – the female teachers are maybe softer about things. In their approach – I think just in their approach – that it isn't just cut and dried. They see the grey area.

I think I am thinking some of the male staff. This is the way it is, this is the way you would have it. And that is it.

How do Respondents from Single Gender and Co-Educational Schools Describe their Students?

The differences between respondents from single gender schools (n=22: 32% Male; 68% Female) and those from co-educational schools (n=38: 55% Male; 45% Female) are also quite marked. Respondents from single gender schools tend to display a wider range of responses regarding the factors that influence teachers when thinking about behavioural issues than their colleagues in co-educational schools. They also appear to dwell more on the emotional state when defining SEBD. They make a connection between students' behaviour acting as a means of communication regarding their emotional needs. They also talk about social interaction and being able to get on with people in school.

Amongst the co-educational schools' respondents, the focus in their responses is on the extreme end of the behavioural spectrum, e.g. psychiatric conditions, being out of control, an inability to control behaviour. One male respondent from this sector recounts:

... this year and last year we've had a lot of trouble with female students. We've had, by and large the majority of troublesome students were male then but this year we had a collection of very fiery and very difficult to handle female students. Which was a new, well not totally, a new experience but it was a new phenomenon to have so many of them as it were, such a group of them in a particular year.

It depends then as well what works better with male students and female students as well. That might differ in terms of sanctions or even approaching them and talking to them and giving out to them or whatever. There can be decided differences between the two.

DISCUSSION

The dilemma of definition outlined earlier is crucial to how schools and practitioners engage with students presenting with SEBD and, also, how successful their efforts might be. This engagement requires a consideration of a broad range of issues integral to the understanding of SEBD which will impact on responses to students in schools. On the one hand we are obliged to consider within-student characteristics, e.g. *"personal, social, cognitive and emotional development"*, factors which are influenced by gender amongst other things. On the other hand these definitions also promote an equal consideration of factors or characteristics external to the

individual student, as variables in their own right, as being integral to how SEBD is shaped and understood, e. g. “*disorders of the environment in which the student operates.*” Whilst the term ‘disorders’ appears extreme and implies dysfunction, it is helpful here for it to be understood in a more benign way and be taken to include the structures, cultures and organisation of the environment which are not necessarily considered as examples of dysfunction. Heretofore, external factors or characteristics have been considered really only in terms of those present in the lives of students and the environments and cultures in which they operate outside the school. Whilst it is often the interactions between factors or characteristics from different sources that tend to be the prime focus of discussion nowadays, following Cooper’s third category above, it is equally important to consider the impact of external factors or characteristics in their own right. In the context of the school environment, for example, this could include a single gender or co-educational population, a concomitant traditional ethos/culture, the attitudes of school personnel, etc.

The examples outlined in the previous section do not provide definitive evidence of differences in the ways in which teachers consider students presenting with SEBD based on the gender of those students, nor are they meant to do so. Gender is just one variable which influences teachers’ understanding and how they respond to their students’ needs. These issues do, however, support the literature in suggesting that gender is a significant factor in our conceptualization of SEBD and how this manifests itself is worthy of consideration and further research. These illustrative examples demonstrate an imperative to consider four external factors or characteristics within the overall context of gender, which may act both independently and interdependently:

- The **language** that is being used by teachers when talking about their students
- The **factors** that are associated by teachers with the causes and reasons for the presenting characteristics of their students
- The **attitudes** that teachers hold about those factors and the possibilities for effective support and responses for their students
- The **environmental and cultural climates** within which teachers operate in their schools and how these influence their attitudes and responses.

A desire to investigate how SEBD is conceptualized in a global sense is predicated on further examination of the extent to which these four issues impact on and are integral to the responses (both implicit and explicit) *in situ* in schools which

support students or, indeed, marginalize them. This is particularly pertinent in the Irish context given the large number of single gender schools (one third approximately) in the post-primary sector, a factor unique to this country.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This paper contends that the issue of gender is important in relation to SEBD in the Irish context and warrants further attention and investigation. The international literature reviewed demonstrates that a lacuna exists in how gender impacts on our understanding of and responses to SEBD. Stark findings (Banks et al., 2012) from the *Growing Up in Ireland* research highlighting significant gender differences in rates of identification represent just one aspect that requires investigation. Illustrative findings from this author's small scale research project justify a call for further investigation into how gender issues influence how male and female teachers consider and respond to their male and female students. In particular, research is required within and across single gender schools to deepen our understanding of the particular circumstances pertaining in the organisation, cultures and practice of those schools in relation to supporting students who present with SEBD.

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