BEHAVIOUR SUPPORT: A CONSTRUCTIVE MODEL

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SYNOPSIS

The model outlined in this article was one of the outcomes of research commissioned as a small part of a much wider review of behaviour support within a Scottish local authority. The main concern of the authority at the time was to establish an overall behaviour support strategy, and the case studies, carried out in 1997, helped by providing a snapshot of issues contributing to a much wider picture that provided the starting point from which the new policy was developed. Although findings from case studies are not generalisable, what is useful is that they provide others with the opportunity to examine practice in their own area and to consider what applicability, if any, findings may have for them. Of particular interest in this example, and the focus of this article, is the model which developed from the cases examined. It is suggested here that schools should evaluate the behaviour support system within their schools by examining the strategies employed and the feedback loops adopted in the model, as a starting point for in-school discussion and development.

INTRODUCTION

Discipline and the management of behaviour is recognised as a difficult area in many schools. Freiburg, Stein and Huang (1995) succinctly summarise the problems associated with disruptive behaviour in schools which include: loss of learning time to the individual involved; loss of learning time from other students while the teacher deals with disruption; loss of non-instructional administrative time; greater risk to the individual of dropping out of school; substance abuse; and other delinquent behaviours.

The Government White Paper *Excellence in Schools* (1997) recognises that discipline and the provision of adequate behaviour support is often problematic. It encourages examination and development of home-school partnerships and a greater involvement of parents and the wider family in supporting pupils learning. In Scotland, the Children (Scotland) Act 1995, implemented on 1 April 1997, defined the rights and responsibilities of parents and children and conferred a wide range of mandatory duties and discretionary powers on local authorities. The emphasis of the Act on partnership between parents and local authorities required authorities to review, produce and publicise detailed plans for the provision of relevant services for children in their area. This extensive exercise involved a number of services including Social Work, Housing and Education.

It was against this background of legislative change, a growing awareness for the need for new approaches to behaviour support, and the development of effective behaviour support strategies within schools, that the research described here was undertaken. It should be emphasised that this study and the model elaborated upon in this article, was just a small part of a much wider, multi-faceted review of behaviour support on the part of the local authority concerned. As a result of the overall review, the authority has implemented a number of initiatives which are currently being evaluated.

Although carried out in one authority, and a small number of schools therein, discussion with, and anectodal evidence from, staff in other authorities, as well as the studies conducted by Munn, Johnstone and Sharp (1998) and Munn, Johnstone and Chalmers (1992), suggests that much of what is reported is not uncommon in

many, if not all, authorities in Scotland.

The study was primarily concerned with behaviour support with a particular focus on strategies used to cope with more disruptive children, who are less likely to respond to the 'normal' classroom discipline strategies. To do this it was necessary to examine behaviour support within the context of whole school policy, management strategies and individual classroom practice with reference to discipline procedures and behaviour management. Five schools from within the authority area were selected in a random way and considered as being reasonably typical of the schools under the authority's control. These schools all had rolls of around 1000 pupils and each had undergone some staffing reorganisation as a result of a loss of priority status given to schools in areas of deprivation. All the schools had been given an allocation of staffing to be used for behaviour support, although no more than 1.0 full time equivalent (FTE) members of staff in any case.

In total 45 people were interviewed:

- 26 had some responsibility or direct involvement with behaviour support or the Joint Assessment Teams (J.A.T.);

- 6 were classroom teachers (3 Principal Teachers (PTs), 1 Assistant Principal Teacher (APT) and 2 unpromoted teachers) with no other involvement in behaviour support or the J.A.T.; and

- 13 pupils in third or fourth year of secondary school.

The teachers were selected at random. They were either members of the Mathematics or English department and had been in their current school for a minimum of five years. All the pupils had been through the school discipline system and had been, at some stage, either excluded or involved with a behaviour support group at some time. Some, or all, of these children may have been before the Joint Assessment Teams but this information was not available for reasons of confidentiality.

The breakdown of the staff designated as having more direct responsibility for behaviour support provision or management in the study was:

- 11 senior management (including some with responsibility for guidance),

- 4 Guidance staff (PTs or APTs),

- 4 Learning Support staff,

- 1 Behaviour Support specialist,

- 2 teachers on a school development discipline committee,

- 2 Educational Psychologists,

- 1 Community education Partnership worker,

- 1 teacher on the school Joint Assessment Team.

Each of these persons may have played more than one role, a number being involved in the Joint Assessment Teams. Not all the interviews were carried out on a one to one basis. Five of the interviews with the staff involved in, or having responsibility for, behaviour support, and the five interviews with pupils, were conducted as small focus groups of two or three. In all there were 28 separate interview sessions conducted. In addition copies of relevant school policy documents and behaviour support materials were obtained and examined. Discussions also took place, and notes were made, during a behaviour support conference organised by the authority.

Although only 6 of the 45 interviewees were with individual classroom teachers who had no additional involvement in behaviour support provision, many of

the other interviewees also had teaching commitments and so could adequately comment on classroom strategies even although they were interviewed because of their management or behaviour support responsibilities. However, although it would have been desirable to carry out more interviews with teachers having no other involvement in behaviour support beyond the classroom, the timescale of the research did not allow for this.

One additional problem encountered in the interview sessions, particularly with the teachers, was the difficulty in avoiding leading terms. Although the research was in part concerned with school responses to behavioural difficulties, guidelines for behaviour support strategies and guidance were invariably incorporated into the school discipline policy and was seen to start in the classroom itself. However, the terms 'discipline' and 'support' are emotionally charged terms which tend to lead towards particular types of responses. The term 'discipline' tends to be associated with more 'traditional' types of punishment based approaches , whereas 'support' is a much more empathic term suggesting different approaches. It was important when interviewing the teachers to elicit some idea of how they approached classroom behavioural problems, as well as how they perceived the strategies employed within the school for dealing with behavioural difficulties.

The model illustrated in figure 1 is the result of analysis of the interviews, documents and notes.

The model represents the typical structure to be found within all of the schools, but in each of the schools the strategies employed at each of the links may have differed. There was, however, some degree of similarity in the overall pattern. The discipline, or behaviour support, pathway, which we might label this model, tended to follow a similar pattern across the schools. It contained the separate links, such as policy, classroom, and referrals etc., and the interviews built up a picture of what was thought of as being effective practice at each of these stages. Views of what constituted effective practice were developed from respondents' comments and not from research evidence in this particular case. Although there were differing opinions among the staff interviewed, there was a large degree of consensus, particularly among staff more directly involved in behaviour support, about what constituted effective practice. It may have been that in any of the schools concerned, what was thought to be effective practice was not always in place but, overall, there was a broad consensus of opinion about what was required.
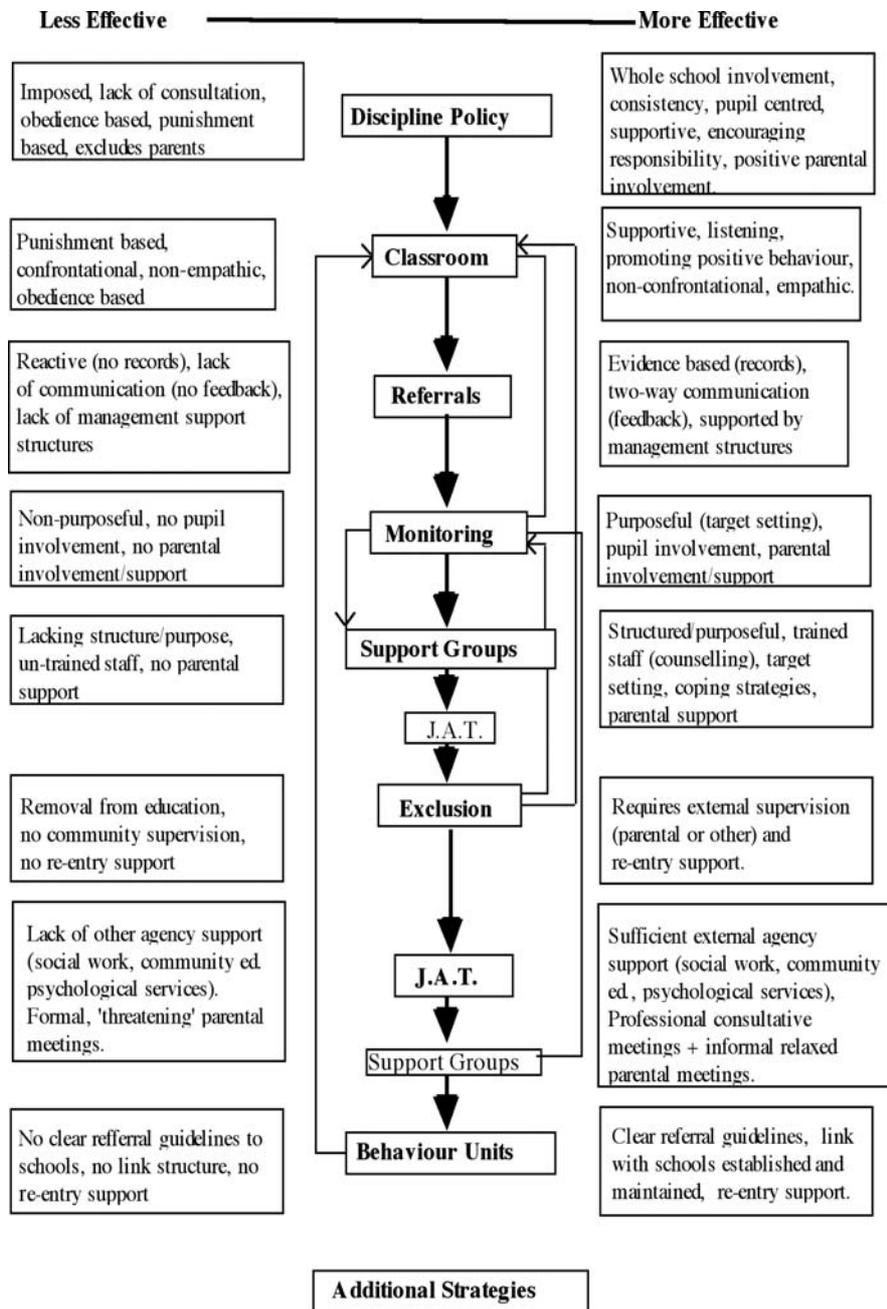
Each of the links in the chain will be considered briefly below with a general overview and implications considered in the discussion.

POLICY

From the outset of the study there was no declared preconception, nor discussion, of what was considered to constitute good, or effective, practice. However, it became clear that, during the course of interviews with many of the staff within many of the schools, the principles of promoting positive behaviour were at the forefront of developments in behaviour support and discipline policy. The policy documents obtained from the five schools probably fell into three broad categories. In the first a policy in which the philosophy of promoting positive behaviour (PPB) was explicitly stated and recommended as that underpinning the strategies to be adopted in the school; secondly, there were policies in which there was no explicit statement that PPB was the philosophy adopted by the school, although there may have been some reference to the principle of promoting positive behaviour; and, in the third category the policy document contained little or no statement of underpinning philosophy nor on the discipline strategies to be adopted.

The policy documents on the whole, therefore, tended towards a more proactive, positive discipline based on the philosophy of PPB, rather than a more negative,

Figure 1: Typical Behaviour Support (Discipline) Pathway

Less Effective ———————————— More Effective

Less Effective		More Effective
Imposed, lack of consultation, obedience based, punishment based, excludes parents	**Discipline Policy**	Whole school involvement, consistency, pupil centred, supportive, encouraging responsibility, positive parental involvement.
Punishment based, confrontational, non-empathic, obedience based	**Classroom**	Supportive, listening, promoting positive behaviour, non-confrontational, empathic.
Reactive (no records), lack of communication (no feedback), lack of management support structures	**Referrals**	Evidence based (records), two-way communication (feedback), supported by management structures
Non-purposeful, no pupil involvement, no parental involvement/support	**Monitoring**	Purposeful (target setting), pupil involvement, parental involvement/support
Lacking structure/purpose, un-trained staff, no parental support	**Support Groups** / J.A.T.	Structured/purposeful, trained staff (counselling), target setting, coping strategies, parental support
Removal from education, no community supervision, no re-entry support	**Exclusion**	Requires external supervision (parental or other) and re-entry support.
Lack of other agency support (social work, community ed. psychological services). Formal, 'threatening' parental meetings.	**J.A.T.** / Support Groups	Sufficient external agency support (social work, community ed., psychological services), Professional consultative meetings + informal relaxed parental meetings.
No clear refferral guidelines to schools, no link structure, no re-entry support	**Behaviour Units**	Clear referral guidelines, link with schools established and maintained, re-entry support.

Additional Strategies

This model illustrates a typical behaviour support 'pathway' through a school, starting with the school discipline policy and, potentially, ending in out of school behaviour units. Some schools may also have further additional strategies which can appear at any point in the pathway.

punishment-based discipline strategy. It was clear, also, that the development of an effective policy was more likely to be achieved if there was widespread consultation with, and possible involvement of, the whole school staff. This is in line with principles described by Rudduck (1991).

CLASSROOM

If the view is taken, as it was in a number of statements from behaviour support staff, that classroom strategies should be aimed at promoting positive behaviour, and the assumption that, according to one school's discipline policy, 'all teachers are interested, and prepared to accept a role, in encouraging good behaviour, and that dealing with pupil behaviour is an intrinsic part of any teacher's job', we should see a move towards the language of positive behaviour strategies and less confrontational strategies employed by teachers. This, however, was not apparent in speaking to the teachers.

In the interviews, teachers were asked to describe the way in which they approached the problem of disruptive behaviour in the classroom and the strategies they adopted. In all but one instance they immediately described the types of punishments employed, and the systems of referrals used should these punishments not be successful. However, as Munn et al. (1998) points out, responses are shaped by the questions asked and, although their research used questionnaire responses, a similar difficulty existed in an interview situation in trying to ask non-leading questions. Inevitably talk, or questions related to disruptive behaviour tended, on the whole, to elicit responses couched in terms of punishment or sanctions.

The respondents, however, were not totally negative and there was certainly a degree of support, particularly from one respondent, for a more positive approach to discipline. This reflects findings from the study by Munn et al (1992), again carried out in a Scottish local authority (prior to reorganisation). Munn states:

> "In all of our schools, teachers and pupils seemed less conscious of rules for good behaviour than of penalties for bad behaviour." (p57)

In all the schools, with all the interviewees including the pupils, there appeared to be a general recognition that some form of sanctions were necessary. However, it was also reported by guidance teachers, senior management and pupils themselves that there was inconsistency and considerable variation throughout the school in the way in which punishments and referrals were used. Behaviour support staff and management stated that in the vast majority of cases, staff were sympathetic and non-confrontational and that it appeared, in many cases, that discipline problems arose from a few particular individuals or departments. It may be, therefore, that some teachers require more training in these methods. This echoes the statement of Munn et al. (1998):

> ...it has been recognised that teachers themselves have a wealth of experience and expertise in promoting good discipline but that more needs to be done to share experience. (p158)

One of the difficulties it would appear, is in moving particular individuals from a 'mindset' which is heavily fixed in a set of procedures based on obedience and aversion behaviour modification, to another which is based on positive encouragement. Although most of the documents indicated positive moves away from punishment-based discipline to more positive behaviour approaches, the necessity of sanctions was still recognised. It appeared as if, for some staff, there was still a heavy reliance on punishment, at the expense of more positive approaches.

It was suggested, on more than one occasion, that the development of a positive behaviour support system needs an awareness amongst the staff that behaviour

support is required, and that discipline strategies involve more than just reprimands, punishments and referrals. There was a need for teachers to take time to talk with pupils and to try to come to some sort of mutual understanding of what was expected, and why that was expected.

REFERRALS

Referrals were usually used in cases where there had been persistent incidents of disruptive behaviour which the class teacher felt he or she had not been able to deal with successfully. However, other types of referrals did exist which were both formal and informal means of passing on information about pupils of whom teachers felt concerned. These second types of referrals were concerned with noticeable changes of behaviour or low level patterns of disruption which did not warrant immediate action but which the teacher wished to be noted and monitored over a period of time, or which the guidance teacher may have wished to pursue. All the schools clearly felt that there was a need for a well documented referrals system.

This was seen as very important so that, when dealing with parents, behaviour support staff, guidance staff, and Joint Assessment Teams, a comprehensive record of all that had transpired, and all the actions which had been taken, could inform any further decisions and action:

> "I will not have a child normally dangled at me by a head of department who says "you've got to do something with this child", I need to know more, what has the department done up until now? what was the work in question? was it appropriate to the child? and so on …"

Schools were also aware of referrals as a means to alert the school to potential problems:

> "Its not all punitive, it is I want to support this child, the teacher is saying I want to support this child but I don't know how, I am worried about this child, this child is falling asleep in my class, this child never brings any books."

It was also suggested that an important part of any referral system was the building in of feedback, as soon as possible, to the person making the referral about what action had been taken. The opinion was expressed, by one teacher that insufficient feedback was given on action which had been taken. However, in other cases there was a clear acknowledgement that the referral system was effective in giving feedback but administrative workload sometimes meant this was not quite as effective as it might be. Munn et al. (1998) points out that many secondary teachers felt that more time was being spent on discipline and that this was perhaps:

> "...the drip, drip effect of paper based referral systems adding to the workload." (p166)

MONITORING

All the schools appeared to have some form of monitoring system, although some had a much more apparently highly developed system than others, with different monitoring cards for different purposes, most notably for either behaviour or attendance. However, although everyone felt that monitoring was a very important exercise and strategy, the more effective the monitoring system was to be, the more burden it placed on members of staff, such as guidance.

The message which seemed to emerge from discussion on monitoring systems was that a monitoring system appeared to be more effective when it was linked to specific targets for behaviour and was used as a vehicle to focus discussions with

the child about their difficulties. In addition a reward system, which encouraged parental involvement was felt to contribute to the effectiveness of modifying the pupil's behaviour.

Although these issues emerged from discussion, it is difficult to say that these are the most effective strategies. Much appears to depend on the skills of the staff with responsibility for administering and discussing the situation with the child.

SUPPORT GROUPS

All the schools visited seemed to have had established peer support groups at different times, with varying degrees of success.

One of the factors that appears to be important in the success of the support groups is the counselling skill of the staff involved. Different staff in at least three of the schools suggested that effective counselling skills were a necessary pre-requisite for the successful running of support groups:

> "the person who held it [support group] held a diploma in counselling skills, so we were in a unique position there in that after all the normal, systematic interventions had taken place then we were able to hand them on to…[the teacher involved]…"

Although in one school the respondents felt it was not so successful:

> "We have had support groups for different reasons, some have been behaviour support groups. They haven't worked particularly well. …they were actually feeding from each other, all they wanted to talk about was fighting and everything."

In other schools there was an overwhelming feeling that it was worthwhile in helping to resolve the behaviour difficulties of the children and to prevent situations progressing as far as exclusion. A senior member of staff specifically stated that they felt exclusions were a direct result of not being able to offer support groups on a particular occasion:

> "As soon as we no longer had the resources to operate the group we lost two children immediately from exclusion."

The very strong support for such groups was tempered by the realisation that they needed staffing, which was difficult to provide, and that the staff needed to be skilled in handling and steering these groups for successful outcomes.

Another aspect of the support groups which emerged in talking with the pupils, was the difficulty these pupils had when the support groups were removed and they were back in the normal class routine. Nearly every child expressed the feeling that, even although they had attended the support groups and it had helped improve their behaviour measurably, they still felt they were targeted or picked on by the teachers, particularly those teachers who were instrumental in the original referrals. This, perhaps, links back to the earlier observation that some teachers appear to be inadequately prepared to cope with particular types of pupil. This could mean that, even after a child has been through a support group, the teachers' attitude and approach to that particular child leads to confrontational strategies leading back into a regressive loop.

EXCLUSION

Although nearly all the non-pupil respondents mentioned exclusion, they were all also of one voice in stating that it really was the exception rather than the rule. Despite the schools having different strategies and different successes, they all appeared to

be of the same mind in saying that exclusion was, in most cases, not to the benefit of the pupil, socially or educationally, and every effort should be made to keep the child within the school.

There was recognition that exclusions disrupted education but none of the schools made any suggestions as to how this could be dealt with when the child was out of school. One school considered this problem and introduced a lunch time detention sanction to try to bridge the gap between normal school sanctions and exclusion. However, it was clear that in every school there were times that it was felt that exclusion was necessary and at least one teacher expressed a certain amount of frustration that disruptive pupils were not removed earlier, and appeared to suggest that if teachers wanted a child removed they should make an effort to refer the child as often as possible:

> "Staff complain that some children seem to be in the school for a long long time before they are excluded but the process is slow, you've got to build up the paper work and that's why it is very important that staff keep putting in referrals."

There appeared to be, therefore , the dilemma between making every effort to keep a child in the normal classroom routine, so that they would not lose out on their education, but at the same time trying to ensure that they did not disrupt the education for other pupils.

JOINT ASSESSMENT TEAMS

Joint Assessment Teams (J.A.T.s) are school focused teams of professionals from a number of disciplines e.g. the school, social work, community education and psychological services, which meet regularly to discuss particular cases and recommend courses of action.

Three main areas emerged out of discussion around the Joint Assessment Teams. The first was that everyone spoken to thought that the J.A.T. was very important and played a significant role in making decisions about a course of action for the young people referred to it. The second point concerned the input from external agencies. All the behaviour support personnel interviewed were very clear that the input to J.A.T. from external agencies, such as social work, community education and psychological services, was very important. They felt that, although operating from different perspectives, these different perspectives were very valuable in forming a picture of the situation, allowing for a more broadly reasoned way forward for the individuals concerned:

> "The joint agency team itself, I feel is a very good forum because it does address problems from a multifaceted point of view."

The third point which emerged was concerned with the structure and operation of the J.A.T. Interviewees from every school mentioned that they had had to re-examine the J.A.T. in light of the Children (Scotland) Act. The main problem appeared to be in interpreting the meaning of the act in relation to the involvement of parents. All the case study schools had not previously had direct involvement of parents in the J.A.T., and all for similar reasons. They felt that many of the issues to be discussed could only be appropriately addressed in the absence of the parents and the child:

> "...we didn't have direct parental involvement in the J.A.T. Mainly because we felt that the issues that were being put on the table were.. could be more openly discussed without the parent of the child there, particularly without the child... if you're talking about child abuse, or problems arising from a difficult divorce, I am convinced that the child should not be present."

There was no argument with the principle of the parents, and the child if appropriate, being involved in the consultation and discussion. However, every interviewee felt that direct involvement in the J.A.T. was inappropriate. All the schools involved the parents in a consultative process as it was, and there was a general feeling that the J.A.T. was a professional meeting.

BEHAVIOUR UNITS

The behaviour units in this particular area were ones which were being proposed by the local authority to deal with the most difficult cases from particular areas. Although the full details of the proposals had not been finalised, and so were not known to the schools at the time of the interviews, the preliminary proposals were that they would take those children in the first or second year of secondary school which the schools had not been able to deal effectively with. These children, it was proposed, would be referred to the behaviour units full-time for a period of around twelve weeks.

A number of concerns were expressed about the role of the behaviour units with the more apparent concerns being related to the relationship of the unit with the school, the type of children being referred and their particular problems, and the means by which some continuity with the school would be maintained. One respondent suggested that one way around this would be a link system. With this the child would be in the school for a few days a week, where the teachers could monitor any progress, and in the units for the remainder of the time.

One thing which was clearly stated was that the units should not be seen as a 'dumping ground' or a 'sin bin'. Thus it was necessary for the purposes of the units to be made explicit with clear guidelines given for referral procedures.

ADDITIONAL STRATEGIES

As well as the more conventional strategies described above, a number of other strategies had been employed by some of the schools at various times. Early intervention/early assessment was mentioned by a number of respondents as being important. One aspect of this was communication between the primary and secondary school. Using information from the primary school guidance staff can help monitor the situation of children who may have potential problems.

Good home/school links were seen as valuable, with parents and members of staff considered as equal partners in behaviour support strategies. Associated with the home/school links was the idea of parental support groups. One school in particular mentioned that they felt that very often parents also needed support. Other supplementary strategies included negotiated timetables and befrienders and it was suggested that such strategies should be proactive, rather than reactive. There was a need to share ideas and to consider the ways in which potential problems might be dealt with, rather than waiting for a problem to arise and reacting to it.

DISCUSSION

One of the points which clearly emerges from the study, and is perhaps self-evident, is that behaviour support is a whole school issue. Not only is there no one single point when adequate behaviour support strategies are required, but there also requires to be a high level of co-ordination, communication and feedback between many of the links in the chain of strategies employed within the school. However, it also emerged that although a whole school strategy, involving a number of different staff is desirable, there are certainly some key points at which effective strategies, if employed, can if not entirely halt certainly help to curtail much disruptive behaviour and offer positive support to those youngsters who require it.

As Rudduck (1991) makes clear, for change to be successful those responsible

for carrying the change through must be involved in the process of developing that change. They must have a sense of ownership. Innovations which are imposed, tend not to be adopted as readily as changes in which people play an active part in developing the ideas behind that change. Thus strategies for developing effective behaviour support should emerge and evolve from whole school discussion and active involvement, and not be being seen as imposed from above.

A system of monitoring, and intervention at the earliest point necessary, can help to guide youngsters through a difficult period, develop self-esteem, self-control and a more positive attitude. This requires communication, often between sectors (primary/secondary), and sensitive early intervention if required. Care must be taken that youngsters do not merely become tagged with a label as 'troublemakers' which, they believe, stigmatises them for the duration of their school careers.

A picture that developed from analysis of the interviews was that there was a dichotomy between the philosophy which the schools, on the whole, purported to espouse and the actions and reactions which the teachers themselves described. Although the sample of teachers was very small, it was interesting that in every case, except one, a heavy emphasis was placed on confrontational aversion strategies as the principal means of classroom management. This contrasts with the principles of encouragement and praise promoted in the positive behaviour policies outlined, to varying degrees, in all but one of the schools.

The pupils themselves reported this, but at the same time made it clear that it tended to be the same classes, with the same teachers, in which they tended to be involved in trouble. Other teachers, they agreed, tended to be 'fair' and 'give them a chance' and in these classes they tended to be in less trouble. It is difficult to say from the interviews whether the pupils actually did behave better in these classes, or whether these particular teachers just had a higher threshold of tolerance. However, based on reports from the other members of staff interviewed, it seems more likely that the 'better' teachers have developed more effective strategies for defusing potentially explosive situations and do have a more positive approach to classroom discipline and management.

Thus it appears that one of the key links in developing effective whole school strategies is staff development and training in effective behaviour management skills. Although development of skills in classroom management could prevent the development of many disruptive behaviours, there will always be some pupils for whom these strategies are not effective. These youngsters will move on through the system of referrals and monitoring, some perhaps being excluded or referred to special units. For some of these youngsters more intensive strategies within the school, such as behaviour support groups, can help to re-integrate them back into the normal classroom routine. This must be undertaken by skilled trained staff and should include feedback, with support, for the teachers from whom the pupil was referred in the first place. Lack of suitable support structures and strategies can lead to a perpetual loop of misdemeanours and referrals.

As well as the within-school strategies employed by teachers and management staff for monitoring and dealing with behavioural problems, there also appeared to be an important role for peer support groups and close links with parents, even to the extent of offering parental support groups where practicable.

SUMMARY

In summary this small piece of case study research suggests that there is a developing awareness of the need for deploying a flexible and positive approach to behaviour support in schools. The development of such a whole school strategy should prefereably involve all the staff in the school and needs to address important areas such as personal development and training in effective classroom management

stratgeies and effective counselling skills for those staff more directly involved in behaviour support.

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