Beyond Behavioural Management Strategies: an alternative viewpoint from the pupil perspective

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ABSTRACT The article begins by discussing the literature as it relates to the perceived effectiveness of behavioural management approaches, as well as the author's experiences of implementing a behavioural approach. The second part highlights an alternative viewpoint, as derived from an empirical study, as it relates to the pupil perspective of effective teaching and learning environments.

Introduction

The first part of the article discusses the literature as it relates to the perceived effectiveness of behavioural management approaches, as well as the author's experiences of implementing a behavioural approach. The second part highlights an alternative viewpoint, as derived from an empirical study, as it relates to the pupil perspective of effective teaching and learning environments.

In relation to classroom behaviour, the perceived causal attributions as derived from a range of academic disciplines are seen to be multi-various, where no single attribution can be regarded as significantly more important than any other. Indeed, it would appear that there is no single cause for difficult classroom behaviour; moreover it is likely that many of these potential causal attributions will be interrelated and interdependent.

Methodology

The study was conducted over a 12-month period using participatory paradigm and young people as co-researchers (pupil voice). In essence, there were three major cycles, with the first two consisting of six phases incorporating reflection and reflexivity. The third cycle was essentially a *final reflection* session for all co-researchers.

Co-researchers' data-gathering techniques included classroom observations, the completing of event-contingent diaries and individual focused discussions.

Behaviour Management Approaches

It would seem that in the perceived absence of clear causes of difficult classroom behaviour, many teachers have tended to follow a number of understandable, but 'ad hoc' behavioural approaches; they either revert to well-tried methods, which worked in the past, or leap onto whatever curricular, organisational or pedagogic initiative happens to be prevailing at the time.

Behaviour management approaches are regarded as strategies to help classroom teachers manage routines, as well as establish positive relationships with their students. In other words, behaviour strategies are designed to help teachers teach, as well as being of assistance to teachers in 'coping' with classroom behaviour.

Moss (1998), although aligning with techniques for establishing good order in the classroom, considers that there is a need to think of behaviour management as an element of learning itself; indeed, that it should be considered to be an integral part of the teaching and learning process, in order that pupils are able to interact effectively with the curriculum and with each other. In other words, instead of thinking about this as 'behaviour management', the topic should be approached from an integrated perspective, or what Moss refers to as 'behaviour education'.

Porter (2000) describes individual behaviour management theories as being on a continuum. Authoritarian theories subscribe to the notion of teachers having a great deal of control over their students, while the permissive approach, often termed *laissez-faire*, gives students a great deal of freedom, with very few imposed restrictions.

All theories claim that they work, but there is no consensus on how to define effectiveness. However, it should be noted that there are few empirical findings, making it difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of the many available behavioural approaches (Ogilvy, 1994). The usual assumption is that effective behaviour management equates with teacher dominance over the class, yet the constructivist approach to teaching upholds that teacher dominance detracts from the quality of students' learning. When considering whether the theories are effective, then, the question needs to be asked: effective at what?

The literature describing and analysing the various behaviour management approaches is vast, and so it has been necessary to restrict the discussion to the following approaches:

- assertive discipline;
- behaviour motivation;
- behaviour modification.

It can be shown that there are noticeable disparities between the approaches. For instance, whereas Canter & Canter (1992) consider that it is necessary to reward good behaviour, Dreikurs (1960) considers that we should avoid rewarding good behaviour; doing so, it seems, will only condition children to expect rewards.

Unlike assertive discipline, where punishment is considered to be an integral part of the approach, behaviour motivation, or neo-Adlerian theory, effects a change in behaviour through establishing the motivation for the misbehaviour, rather than by using punishment. Furthermore, where assertive discipline and behaviour modification approaches are both seen to focus on the individual pupil to effect behaviour change, behaviour motivation emphasises the need to use the whole class as a potential effecting mechanism, on the basis that all behaviour is socially embedded, and this is also considered to meet the basic need of young people to belong.

All theories, it has been noted, claim to be effective yet it would seem that no single approach is completely effective, with few designed to prevent unproductive classroom behaviour. The literature on this subject, extensive though it may be, demonstrates an inconclusiveness regarding the effectiveness of behaviour management strategies in helping to address the problem of difficult classroom behaviour.

From a personal perspective, and from personal experience as a classroom practitioner and in relation to the above, specifically with regard to the approach referred to as assertive discipline, I have the following observations to make:

- Unlike others (refer to Edwards, 2000), who describe the programme as being simple to use, I would argue that such a notion is too simplistic. In this regard, I would highlight time-management issues as being problematic, in particular, associated paperwork.
- An inconsistent or non-collegiate approach from teaching staff raises questions about the effectiveness of this approach.
- The approach is seen to have limited effectiveness with regard to a significant minority of pupils who are seen to be continually disrupting the learning of others.
- In terms of its perceived effect, is there a danger that schools can become too reliant upon the programme; in other words, have they been seduced by its potential appeal? As such, is it regarded as being an ever-present part of school structure, but at the same time not necessarily an integral part of an effective teaching and learning environment?
- As a consequence, does this mean that there has been little consideration for longer term measures with regard to there being life after behavioural management approaches. With this question in mind I turn to the second part of the article, which offers a potential alternative.

An Alternative Perspective

This article argues that traditionally, discussions about classroom behaviour have placed far too much emphasis on managing unproductive student behaviour and too little on creating environments that encourage productive student behaviour and, thus, learning (Jones & Jones, 1981). In other words, teachers have necessarily focused on the manifest meaning associated with the symptoms and signs prevailing in their everyday classroom practice. In this regard, too little attention has been given to helping teachers understand why behaviour problems occur. As a result, the question still remains, what are the prevailing circumstances and conditions that are considered necessary to create an effective teaching and learning environment?

In this regard, Sayer (2000) suggests that it is appropriate to try to get beyond the recognition that something can produce change, to an understanding of what it is about it that enables it to effect this change. Moreover, to effect a strategy there is a need to look at the actual relationships entered into by key players in the classroom, in order to highlight the interdependence of activities and characteristics. Instead of relying upon the ambiguous evidence of aggregated formal relationships between different groups, causality can be analysed by examining actual connections through 'unpacking' the antecedents of the phenomenon (Sayer, 2000).

At the same time, he considers that it is important to understand that actions can be influenced by pertinent and prevailing circumstances, which might include other actions, reasons and beliefs – what Sayer calls the 'causes of enabling conditions'. Thus, in order to understand the meaning of an action, it is rarely sufficient to explain how, why, when and where it is done. More generally, social science is often concerned with explaining actions that in themselves may be relatively well understood in everyday discourse, but whose conditions of possibility are largely unacknowledged, and in particular, social structures (Sayer, 2000) – in other words, making the familiar unfamiliar and vice versa.

Like other classroom practitioners before me, I have been troubled by the phenomenon of difficult classroom behaviour – physical behaviour, I would argue, has no intrinsic meaning; it is a manifestation of a problem. The ultimate question with which I have been continuously wrestling is: What is the problem?

A Notion of Holism

Although others, such as Miller *et al.* (2000), have drawn attention to potential multiple causal attributions, what is not apparent is any notion of interrelatedness and interdependence between these attributions. So, in terms of the contingent nature of the conditions, circumstances and antecedents necessary to create an effective teaching and learning environment, with a commensurate level of classroom behaviour, this article argues that the ultimate problem lies in a possible lack of recognition of the concept of holism in this

context. The findings of the study demonstrated an alternative to the traditional discourses of causal attribution and behaviour management; in particular, that the effectiveness of the 'whole' in the form of a holistic teaching and learning environment, is dependent upon the effectiveness of the parts – more specifically, the nature of identified key concepts (discussed later) and associated sub-concepts being regarded as causal powers or causal liabilities (Sayer, 2000).

In this regard, the study moved beyond the idea of simple cause and effect, to an understanding of what it is about the nature of the prevailing condition, circumstances and antecedents that brings about change. In other words, the study has gone beyond the limited horizons of common sense (Sayer, 2000), to a new understanding of *holism*. Moreover, it is my belief that it is within the concept of holism that, perhaps, one of the keys to the ultimate question lies.

The study demonstrated a link between the degree of effective teaching and learning, and a commensurate level of classroom behaviour, and as such, these two issues can be considered to be mutually dependent and interrelated. In other words, there is a need to view them as a *holism*. In so doing, the concept of holism would seem to reflect the notion that humans function as a whole; their needs and the fulfilment of these needs interact with each other in transactions with the environment (Marshall, 1972).

Indeed, the findings are seen to support Moss (1998) and his notion of wholeness being conceptualised as interlocking building blocks forming the foundation for meaningful learning. Furthermore, it has been shown that compartmentalising teaching and learning, classroom behaviour, socio-cognition and intellectual competence, and neglecting a need to belong and for identity, is inappropriate – it is artificial and misleading. In other words, it goes against the philosophy that human beings function as a whole.

Unlike other studies (Galloway *et al.*, 1982; Moss, 1998; Haydn, 2002), which are seen to support the notion of holism, but are not seen to offer any specificity with regard to the contingent nature of the prevailing conditions, circumstances and antecedents that might occur to create a collegiate environment, the study has, I believe, provided such an analysis. In particular, it demonstrated that such an environment is due to high levels of interdependence and interrelatedness, or *interconnectedness* (Fowler, 2005), among the identified key concepts and associated sub-concepts, and furthermore, that the greater the degree of interconnectedness among identified key concepts and associated sub-concepts (identified as being causal powers), the greater the degree of collegiality.

In this regard, the evidence from co-researchers points to the following key concepts and associated sub-concepts (see Fowler, 2005) as being significant:

- teacher effectiveness;
- mutuality of respect;
- social awareness;
- a sense of belonging;

- appropriateness of the curriculum.

Turning now to non-collegiate classroom environments, the findings are indicative, in a generic sense, of the same key concepts being evident. However, when comparing and contrasting the two classifications there are some significant differences:

1. It can be argued that the description of the 'territory' that explains non-collegiality would appear to be more complex than that of collegiality.
2. The notion of *interconnectedness* is less apparent due to the potential of each key concept and associated sub-concepts to act independently or in combination. In other words, low levels of interconnectedness are seen to prevail.

The study finds that the two main classifications of collegiality and non-collegiality have not been shown to be mutually exclusive. As such, the two main classifications should not be regarded as being opposites, but concepts that encompass a range of effective teaching and learning environments and associated classroom behaviour. To put this another way, there would appear to be 'leakage' (Sayer), across and within the key concepts, which is seen to occur along a learning and behavioural spectrum. In other words, the nature of the identified key concepts and associated sub-concepts that configure at a given point on the learning and behavioural spectrum will determine the degree of effectiveness of the teaching and learning, together with a commensurate level of classroom behaviour.

Therefore, with regard to the creation of effective teaching and learning environments, and given the nature of *collegiality* and *non-collegiality*, it would seem appropriate to adopt a holistic approach when considering the issue of effecting strategies. So, implicit in the nature of the findings is a message to policy makers, to adopt joined-up thinking when approaching this issue, and in so doing to focus on the concurrence of prevailing conditions, circumstances and antecedents. In this regard there is a realisation that the issues associated with this matter are extensive and complex, and as such would require whole-school consideration and implementation.

Conclusion

The article argues that causality for classroom behaviour does not lie simply with pupils, teachers, or institutional structures of schooling. More importantly, the specific nature of causality is seen to inhere in the interrelatedness and interdependence among a series of identified key concepts and associated sub-concepts. In addition, understanding is derived, not so much from each of the identified key concepts and associated sub-concepts being considered on an individual basis, but more in the nature of their cohesiveness at any given point on the learning and behavioural spectrum. Moreover, interconnectedness is seen to be present in varying degrees of closeness (high or low levels) across the spectrum, which is as a consequence of the key concepts and associated sub-

concepts being regarded as causal powers or causal liabilities. Furthermore, interconnectedness, and hence holistic meaning, is established through a dialectical process in which the meaning of the whole is determined by the meaning of the parts.

This article does not subscribe to the notion of focusing on one aspect of life in the classroom at a time and thus it recognises the multiplicity and the complexity of the issues that are seen to influence young people in their being fulfilled in education, or rejecting it.

The overriding message that can be taken from this article is that, although the issues associated with the phenomenon of life in the classroom remain complex, the choices open to education appear to be straightforward. If it assumes that the circumstances, conditions and antecedents will remain substantially the way they are, it will need to continue simply managing disruptive behaviour, with all its inherent consequences. The alternative is to encourage the implementation of a set of effecting strategies that focus on the notion of holism, in an attempt to create collegiate teaching and learning environments. In other words it can have faith that the antecedent conditions can be changed appropriately over a period of time. Education cannot continue merely reacting to the symptoms of difficult classroom behaviour; it is too high a price to pay for all involved in life in the classroom.

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