PGCE Secondary Trainee Teachers & Effective Behaviour Management: an evaluation and commentary

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This article addresses the important issue of initial teacher preparation in relation to classroom management. It is based on a study of Post Graduate Certificate of Education (Secondary) students in one university department. The study sought to ascertain the ongoing concerns of trainees during the course of their year's training, and to identify key issues for training providers as a result of this process. Data were gathered both by interview and by questionnaire. Carolyn Bromfield uses the findings to broker a discussion about the nature of behaviour training; her key message is that there is a need to move trainee thinking from a traditional behaviourist approach to one which highlights the relationship between behaviour and learning.

Key words: **initial teacher training; positive behaviour; trainee teachers; school placement.**

Introduction

Practising teachers have long been concerned about their lack of training and their lack of skills in dealing with challenging behaviour in the classroom (Swinson *et al.*, 2003). In terms of Initial Teacher Training (ITT) by 2006 it could be expected that this view had significantly changed, as ITT programmes currently now give appreciably more attention to trainee teachers' classroom management skills with an emphasis on establishing and maintaining an environment in which learning can occur.

However there are still a significant number of teachers entering the profession claiming not to have had sufficient grounding in behaviour management (TTA NQT Survey, 2005) and the effective management of students' undesirable behaviour in the classroom still represents a major challenge for trainee teachers (Kokkinos *et al.*, 2004).

The advent of a 'New Labour' government in May 1997, with its promises of 'education, education, education', raised hopes that educational policy might start to reflect issues relating to young people with behaviour problems and reinforced in the wider context of inclusion. A Green Paper *Excellence for all Children: Meeting Special Educational Needs* (DfEE, 1997) declared the government's vision:

> … of excellence for all. This inclusive vision emphasises children with special educational needs (SEN)… The great majority of children with SEN will, as adults, contribute as members of society. Schools have to prepare all children for this role.
>
> (DfEE, 1997, p.4)

However this vision is for some becoming an impossible dream:

> As in all the previous policy and legislation this document disappointingly reproduces all the rhetoric, assumptions, fundamental misunderstandings and confusion about the issues and fails totally to address in any way the central issue, genuine access to an equal educational opportunity.
>
> (Lloyd, 2000, p.135)

This is particularly true of pupils with emotional, behavioural, and social difficulties (EBSD) as witnessed by a general concern about a perceived rising tide of disruption and the resulting exclusions from schools of significant numbers of pupils. This is hardly surprising, given an apparent contradiction in policy in which schools are being exhorted to drive up standards and raise attainment whilst at the same time delivering greater inclusivity (Dyson & Millward, 2000). In an effort to find a solution to the dilemma some schools have resorted to increasing exclusions (Vulliamy & Webb, 2000). However, given the negative publicity that rising exclusion figures have on the government's inclusion agenda, it is equally unsurprising that more recent policy has had to re-visit matters of discipline and disruption (Didaskalou & Millward, 2002) to locate solutions within, rather than outside of, schools.

Partly in consequence of the high media profile that pupil behaviour has always been exposed to, the Government's solution has tended to train teachers in approaches which are more conceptually aligned to behaviour modification, with recommendations based on behaviourist approaches. The emphasis is on control, despite the fact that punitive approaches are likely to exacerbate, rather than eliminate, problems in schools (Cooper, 1998). Policy makers focusing on the raising of standards inevitably create pressures on schools to perform which in turn leads teachers to seek advice and guidance on the 'management' of those pupils who are seen as an impediment to the desired outcome of increased academic achievement. As a result, some schools have turned to behaviourally-based management programmes particularly as these were advocated by Government in their White Paper (1998), which endorsed such buy-in schemes as Canter and Canter's 'Assertive Discipline 'package'(1992).

These programmes appear, on the face of it, to offer a panacea for all behaviour problems with their 'quick-fix' solutions but their underlying philosophies have exerted something that could be regarded as a 'hegemonic influence' (Didaskalou & Millward, 2002: 113) over the professional training and development of teachers. In turn, this hegemonic influence that the behaviourally-based discourse has over current practices has resulted in what Skidmore (1996) refers to as 'reductionism', both in the field of theory and practice. The problem with behaviourist approaches is that they can over-simplify the nature of behaviour difficulties and stress the importance of discipline and control (Hanko, 1995; Slee, 1995).

It would seem that experienced teachers are not alone in seeking instant answers. Newly qualified teachers (NQTs) also stated that what they wanted from training was 'better teaching of step-by-step strategies to deal with bad behaviour and a discussion of options for different situations' (TTA NQT Survey, 2005). In attempting to fulfil these needs there could be a tendency to introduce behaviourist approaches that seemingly provide neatly packaged solutions without an understanding of important conceptual underpinnings. The behaviourist approach fails to take account of complex classroom dynamics and the personalities and circumstances of individual pupils:

> Reliance on a mechanistic manipulation of the environment may prevent pupils from developing an intrinsic motivation and control of their actions and this encourages teachers to underestimate the complexity of the management of behaviour.
>
> (Didaskalou & Millward, 2002, p.113)

Here, then, is the dilemma for ITT tutors who seek to 'adequately prepare' trainees for teaching within a limited time frame of just twelve weeks in a higher education institute espousing humanistic values whilst attempting to meet the needs of anxious trainees demanding instant solutions.

The study

The aim of this research was to examine trainee teachers' concerns about behaviour issues throughout their PGCE course of training. In doing so the study sought to identify and discuss how best tutors within a Higher Education Institution (HEI) might support trainees, not just by supplying a plethora of strategies for behaviour management but by using theoretical models to enable trainees to make sense of and evaluate proposed ideas and strategies.

In June, 2004 an Initial Teacher Training Professional Resource Network (IPRN) called Behaviour for Learning (www.behaviour4learning.ac.uk) was launched, funded by the Teacher Training Agency. It has become an established web-based resource for tutors and trainees engaged in Initial Teacher Training, facilitating discussion and debate about the nature of behaviour difficulties and ways in which these might be managed. The IPRN is underpinned by a humanistic philosophy based on the belief that there is an interdependent relationship between learning and behaviour and that this is the foundation for effective behaviour management.

Such a humanistic viewpoint initially tends to fit with trainees' value systems and beliefs as they often begin their course espousing humanistic views and pupil-centred relationships (Wilson & Cameron, 1996) before moving to more managerial behaviourist approaches which emphasise instructional outcomes and academic performance. This move, from people-centred to managerial perspectives of teaching, is not surprising when trainees constantly find themselves being observed and judged and where their primary concerns are 'getting a favourable evaluation of my teaching'and 'doing well when a supervisor is present' (Capel, 2001). The concern here is that once trainees succeed in their quest to become efficient managers 'they may not return to value the personalised, student centred perspectives they once held' (Wilson & Cameron,1996:194).

A study by Calderhead and Robson (1991) echoes this theme, illustrating how trainee teachers often enter the profession with idealised notions of what being a teacher is and that this is changed by the realities of teaching practice. Humanistic ideals about teaching methods and the sort of relationship trainees envisaged having with students were found not to be sustainable when faced with the realities of classroom life (Kyriacou & Cheng, 1993). Furlong and Maynard (1995) also found this shifting notion of ideals that trainees held on entry to their training course and how they changed to take account of real-life at the chalk face.

Sample selection

This study aimed to examine the development of trainees from the start of their training to their qualification as NQTs. Trainees on a one year PGCE Secondary course in an HEI in the west of England provided an opportunity sample. This cohort was selected because the trainees involved not only have to come to terms with the teaching

of a specialist subject but also have to become competent in classroom management and organisation, as well as coping with students with a variety of Special Educational Needs such as learning difficulties and behaviour problems at different key stages of education. Barry and King (1993) have suggested that teaching comprises three fundamental areas: instruction, management, and relationships and other research has also placed the issue of relationships as a central theme of being an effective teacher (Abbott-Chapman *et al.*, 1990; Hughes, 1994). Secondary teachers have fewer opportunities to build relationships with their students, unlike their Primary counterparts who have the same class of pupils each day. Trainees whose main subject specialism is maths and english were selected as these are two of the core subjects in schools/colleges and business studies was also chosen as a subject outside the compulsory academic core to provide a contrast.

Methods

During the academic year the PGCE students follow a 36 week course. Twenty four weeks are spent in school and twelve weeks in the higher education institute with HEI involvement being 'front-loaded' in the programme. The trainees start their course with a three week induction at the university and then have their first school experience (Placement A). An initial concerns questionnaire was given to 30 English specialist trainees, 31 business education studies trainees, and 27 mathematics specialist trainees in week three of their ITT programme prior to a two-week school visit to prepare for Placement A. The questionnaire invited the trainees to consider what behaviours they thought were going to the most difficult to deal with and what they thought the tutors should do to prepare them for dealing with these issues. The end of the questionnaire invited trainees to provide a contact address if they consented to be interviewed as part of the research. In this study the selection of participants was therefore purposive in nature (Patton, 2002) with the participants initially self-selecting and then being chosen because they have particular characteristics which enabled detailed exploration and understanding of the particular phenomena being researched. Twelve trainees (4 from each subject area) were chosen as case studies to ensure inclusion of all relevant age groups, backgrounds etc. and were interviewed prior to their first teaching placement. Questionnaires were subsequently given to the 3 groups half way through the year following placement A and prior to placement B with supportive rich data from the second set of interviews. Data collection and analysis from the third and final phase of this research, taken as the trainees concluded their ITT programme, would form the basis of a subsequent paper, to be reported at a later stage.

The Major Concerns

The major concerns highlighted by the trainees at the beginning of their PGCE course, and prior to Placement A, were a fear of being 'out of control'and having to deal with abusive violent or threatening behaviour:

> *I am worried that being unable to control a class will make me look incompetent in front of the class teacher. I mean once they are lost how do you get them back?*
>
> *I am concerned that it will be difficult to deal with violent and aggressive behaviour and keeping the whole class involved. There is quite a lot of bad press about children's behaviour problems and I have heard scary stories!*

These anxieties were linked to their lack of confidence on embarking on a totally new experience:

> *I am concerned that as a trainee teacher the class will not have as much respect for my authority as they would for their normal teachers and they might say things like 'You can't make me you're not my real teacher!'*

The second questionnaire was administered half way through the PGCE programme following Placement A and prior to going out into schools and colleges on Placement B. The major concerns of the trainees had now changed significantly with 'refusal to work'being referred to as the most difficult behaviour to deal with.

> *It's when a pupil does nothing when you ask them to do something and just refuses to work. I had children getting out of seats or leaving the room, and talking to them made no difference and you cannot physically make them sit down. It's the 'don't care', 'how are you going to make me' attitude.*

Whilst refusal to work and reluctance to work were now cited as the most difficult behaviours to deal with, a significant number of the trainees expressed concern about low level disruptive behaviours such as talking when the teacher was talking and inappropriate noise levels.

> *The constant chattering was probably the hardest part. I sometimes found it very difficult to actually get them quiet for long enough to tell them what they needed to do.*
>
> *I found it very hard to regain attention after an activity and tried a range of techniques to deal with this. Getting a class quiet is often more difficult than dealing with an individual who is behaving badly.*

The highest level of concern with regard to low level disruption was that of excess noise in the form of background chatter, students talking about their own agendas, and talking over the teacher. Other trainees mentioned the effect of collaborative excess noise, with one talking about her last placement where there were two or three boys who would take it in turn to hum, '*so that it was barely audible and difficult to locate the perpetrator*'. Another trainee teacher said she found it difficult to manage groups of students all chatting at the same time and '*when you get one group to shut up then another group, or groups, start talking*'. Many said they were not prepared for the amount of time they would spend dealing with low level behaviours:

When you're at the university there's an emphasis on subject teaching and when you're doing that you could almost forget that there is a behaviour management aspect to it as well. However when I got into school I found that the majority of the lesson was taken up with behaviour management, be it low level behaviour, and I would come out of the lesson and think all I did was say 'Can we please have quiet over there', 'Can you get on with your work'. I spent the whole lesson trying to stop people talking.

Excess noise in the form of calling out or shouting across the classroom was also a concern with students calling out '*inane, irrelevant remarks*' or students '*who try to disrupt whole class with outbursts*'.

Handling defiance in students was problematic with trainees saying they found it difficult to cope with students who openly defied their instructions or just ignored them. One trainee talked about being frustrated when:

A pupil is doing something disruptive that they know is wrong and actually knows better but they have decided that they will take the calculated risk and they judge that they have more nerve than you!

Other trainees mentioned concerns about students refusing to work, and how one disruptive individual can quickly lead to whole groups being off-task.

I have noticed how key individuals can influence others in the class and when they go off-task they drag others with them both intentionally and unintentionally and I've had to work really hard to find ways of managing that.

A further incident was cited where a Year 7 boy sat down, crossed his arms and refused to work. When the trainee tackled him he said he could not do the work which was particularly exasperating for her as '*I knew full well that he understood the task and the subject matter*'. Another said she was also concerned about off-task behaviour particularly with students '*not bothering to work when I know that it is within their capability*'.

Other types of low level disruption included students who '*continually fidget and distract other pupils during whole class teaching sessions*' as well as out-of-seat behaviours such as finding equipment which students should have brought with them for the start of the lesson. There was a general feeling that many students appear to have PhDs in delaying tactics!

During my last placement, there were about five boys who never had a pencil at the start of each lesson. Then when they found one it took another few minutes to locate the sharpener, followed by a repeat with a search for a rubber.

This resonates with other studies of secondary PGCE students (Kyriacou and Stephens, 1999) where surface behaviours were described as causing the most stress and also relates to similar findings of practising experienced teachers (Elton, 1989). In 2006 low level disruptive behaviour 'which tends to wear you down' (Kyriacou & Stephens, 1999) is still being cited as a major cause for concern with Ofsted reporting that many schools were being held back by low level disruption and Tony Blair (Prime Minister) pinpointing low-level disruption as a problem in schools (June 2005).

Commentary

Findings from this study support previously identified anxieties (Fuller and Bown, 1975; Hart, 1987) and that behaviour still remains *the* major concern for trainee teachers. Data analysis from the first set of questionnaires and interviews emphasised the importance that trainee teachers place on being 'in control'of the class. This is in line with other research (Capel, 2001) that found the item causing trainees the most concern was 'maintaining the appropriate degree of class control'. Research by Wilson and Cameron (1996) also found that trainee teachers early in their course showed a universal concern with being able to control pupils and saw this as the main marker of effective management. This is not surprising when trainees receive the message from other teachers, and via the media, that behaviour management is solely concerned with establishing control over disruptive students (Powell *et al.*, 2004).

This highlights a need for trainees to be made aware of the difference between being in authority and authoritarian management and an emphasis on humanistic approaches as opposed to behaviourist techniques. A failure to do so can lead to trainees becoming harsh disciplinarians in an effort to manage situations (Kyriacou & Stephens, 1999). There is clearly a need to make the link between theory and practice explicit for trainees to enable them to put these humanistic ideals into practice (Calderhead & Shorrock, 1997; Tomlinson, 1995). The trainees appeared to be willing to intellectually engage with theoretical models when reflecting on issues and concerns regarding students with learning difficulties, but there was little evidence that they were employing theory to make decisions about the use of behaviour management strategies and their subsequent evaluation (Clandini & Connelly, 1995). Their thirst for acquiring a bank of strategies was leading to a trial and error approach with little understanding of the reasons why a certain approach might work in a particular context. There are no neat answers that can be packaged or prescribed. Behaviour is complex and any situation involving human interactions creates a separate occurrence that is coloured by individual circumstances and differences.

One aspect that has been highlighted by this study is the need for trainees to be able to recognise their concerns as the pre-requisite of finding solutions to their problems. Tutors could elicit generic and individual concerns prior to Placement A and plan delivery of lectures, seminars etc. to focus on specific subjects related to identified needs.

Whilst the identification of concerns and anxieties could be seen as highlighting negative attributes there can be positive outcomes and accomplishments as trainees find solutions to their difficulties, understand the underlying theory, leading to increased confidence (Guillaume & Rudney, 1993; Kyriacou, 1993; Stephens & Crawley, 1994; Kyriacou & Stephens,1999).

> This growing confidence was linked to such factors as: realising that bad behaviour was not necessarily personal (it was sometimes precipitated, for example, by problems at home).
>
> (Kyriacou & Stephens, 1999, p.26)

Trainee concerns and anxieties are also closely linked to individual perceptions and interpretations of student behaviour (Kokkinos *et al.,* 2004). Other research has also focussed on trainee teachers' interpretations of student behaviour problems (Prawat, 1992; Westerman, 1991) as these will affect the types of strategies that are selected to manage the behaviour. For instance, trainee teachers can sometimes view inappropriate behaviour as an expression of defiance or non-compliance whereas more experienced teachers are more likely to look beyond the immediate outward signs for other contributing factors (Hoover & Kinsvatter, 1997). Misunderstandings and misinterpretations can lead to inappropriate choices of intervention (Irwin and Nucci, 2004) and these in turn can lead to resentment or confusion for the student. The use of vignettes or case study material, where outwardly presenting behaviours are discussed with first impressions and interpretations explored, could be examined in more detail as layers of further information are offered to the trainees. This would help them see that 'What's on the Tin' is not always what you get and that outward behaviour can mask inward emotions of frustration and anxiety. Trainees need to be encouraged to be reflective practitioners and to justify their reasoning for a specific action particularly when identifying or dealing with student's behaviour. This requires the ability to stand back and take a more analytical and critical view of their practice.

Other research (Preece, 1979) has described the cyclical nature of behaviour in that discipline problems can lead to high levels of anxiety in trainee teachers but that this anxiety sometimes appears to be the cause of the discipline problems. Relationship building can also be affected by the cause and effect of trainee anxiety with undesirable student behaviours more likely to evoke unfavourable impressions leading to negative attitudes on the part of the trainee teacher (Kagan, 1992).

Trainees expressed concerns about their lack of skills to manage disruptive behaviour and a feeling that there was not sufficient coverage of the topic in their training:

> *We're on this course because we know our subject, more or less, although there has to be seminars about making us aware about how we can actually teach it and yes they're very good, but the extent to which behaviour management is a part of the job is not reflected in the course content.*

Most trainees felt secure with their subject knowledge and were therefore more concerned about issues such as behaviour management for which they felt unprepared. It was interesting to note that despite their acquired subject knowledge the main concern of these trainees appears to be centred on the management of behaviour rather than focussing on behaviour for learning and the lesson content itself in terms of making it interesting and motivating for the students to lessen the chance of them going off task. This sometimes led to trainees concentrating on providing tasks that kept students occupied with a perceived understanding that 'busy children do not have time to misbehave'(Kyriacou and Stephens, 1999: 26). Additional connections need to be made for trainees between well-paced, motivating lessons that meet the needs of individuals in terms of differentiation and attention to learning styles and how this will facilitate a more conducive learning environment. They also need to recognise that good subject knowledge cannot be equated with good pedagogic practice: teaching a subject is very different from learning it.

Another aspect that tutors need to focus on is the diversity of initial knowledge and experience that trainees bring to the programme. One aspect of pedagogical practice that will soon become part of the trainees' lexicon is that of differentiation. This needs to be modelled by tutors to acknowledge trainees differing skills and understanding, and use that as the starting point. Many of the trainees have not come through a direct route from their first degree and will have already experienced the world of work. Others will have experience of working with young people in youth clubs, play schemes etc. and some will have intimate first hand experiences of children and schools through their own parental roles. Using these personal starting points tutors could discuss theoretical explanations for learning behaviours as a way of trainees acquiring an increased understanding of student behaviour within a school context.

Concepts and theories provide ways of understanding experiences and our understanding is shaped by the interpretative use of such theoretical knowledge. In designing PGCE programmes there is a need to introduce trainee teachers to theoretical frameworks and to discuss using that theory in practice as well as deriving theory out of practice in order to develop trainees' capacity to theorise. Trainee teachers who are beginning their course are inevitably influenced by prior experiences of education. They will have constructed theories of learning based upon these experiences and 'already possess a considerable quantity of theory before they even begin their courses' (Eraut, 1994). The tutors' role is one of being able to help trainees examine, develop and reconstruct these theories through reflection on practice. The first task is therefore to enable trainees to make these personal theories explicit and open to challenge (Bines & Watson, 1992).

The dilemma for tutors at the beginning of the programme is that they understand the necessity of trainees grasping the theoretical basis for particular strategies or interventions whereas trainee teachers want practical knowledge that will

enable them to survive their first teaching placement. There is clearly a need to bridge this gap between lay and professional concerns and make the process more transparent. Tutors in ITT courses are well placed to inform trainees about the role of research and theory and to use this to illustrate the interdependent relationship between learning and behaviour and then use it to promote more effective behaviour management in schools. Resources such as the 'Behaviour for Learning' website have an important role to play in this process.

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