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'They think that swearing is okay': first lessons in behaviour management

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Despite a considerable body of literature devoted to the 'behaviour management' of pupils, there is little that actually considers the experience of beginning teachers in learning to cope with that behaviour. Here we consider the experience of student teachers and illustrate their attempts to form deeper understanding, connections between theory and practice and the contribution made by other teachers. It is argued that students at this first stage of classroom teaching experiences are, despite the inevitable anxieties in their new encounters, starting to make deeper sense of them than can be provided by tips on discipline. There is a need for caution against over-emphasis of behaviour management as misleading, premature categorisation that could inhibit new teachers' capacity to build the relationships with pupils on which good teaching depends.

Behaviour management is generally acknowledged to be one of the major tasks facing new teachers. It was argued recently in the *Times Educational Supplement* of January 2004 that pupils in the United Kingdom are 'probably the worst behaved in the world' and that many teachers are not able to exert authority in the classroom. Media interest, for example, the recent '5 live' phone-in (BBC, 2004) on new teachers and classroom indiscipline, is part of an ongoing if intermittent trend in highlighting this particular facet of life in our schools. Although much of this interest may well be based on headlines and hype, the behaviour of pupils in school and how teachers should deal with it constitute a legitimate area of concern. In Scotland, the management of pupil behaviour is considered a major policy priority, among claims of links with escalating anti-social behaviour by young people and a national policy of unqualified social inclusion (TES, 2004a). The Scottish Executive (the devolved governing body of Scotland) has funded the appointment of 'behaviour coordinators' in schools as well as a national 'tsar' (TES, 2004b), and the Chief Executive and Registrar of the General Teaching Council for Scotland has acknowledged as top priority the importance of preparing new teachers for this aspect of their role (Scottish Executive, 2004).

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Contact with schools in our roles as teacher educators often touches on the question of pupil behaviour and there is no shortage of anecdotal evidence from students on or returning from school placements: 'welcome to the wild west' and 'you are now entering the war zone' are examples of the early greetings voiced to students often, it has to be said, with some humour. While we recognise the picture of the teacher beleaguered with difficult classroom behaviour, it is in our experience of schools and teachers a picture that does not represent the norm. It is still, however, a challenging feature of life as a beginning teacher, even though the apprehensive feelings about handling pupil behaviour tend to diminish greatly in the first few years of teaching for most teachers. For teacher education institutions (TEIs) the question is how best to prepare students for what is widely acknowledged as the inevitable challenge presented by pupil behaviour. It is clearly not enough to have 'subject knowledge', 'lesson plans', 'sensible 'strategies' and so on. Like many programmes of initial teacher education (ITE), we introduce students to a range of perspectives on behaviour management, typically emphasising the merits of 'positive teaching' (e.g. Wheldall & Merrett, 1989). Our seminars at the university also formally involve practising teachers in preparing students for the realities of classroom life. While our programme is broadly successful (we would claim) in taking our students to the required level of competence at the point of entry to the teaching profession (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2000), our own review discussions stimulated by the new policy priority led us to the view that we should re-examine the student experience at an earlier stage, at their first acquaintance with having to actually manage classrooms in the secondary school.

Models of development of professional expertise and practice, such as Dreyfuss and Dreyfuss (1986) and Schon (1983, 1987), seminal though they are for tutors' understandings, are too abstract and remote to be of any immediate use to novices. They need more contextualised interpretation and illustration by teacher educators. Textual sources such as *Getting the buggers to behave* (Cowley, 2003) and *Behaviour management: a whole school approach* (Rogers, 1995) do offer a more direct and seemingly down-to-earth pragmatic kind of guidance and are popular with students, as are other forms of preparatory support such as videotaped illustration, role playing and interactive discussion with tutors. Nevertheless, our impression was that for many students, their first teaching experience (a five week placement) was a mini-crisis, induced mainly by pupil behaviour. We perceived a need to offer more convincing explanations for the immediate situations and dilemmas facing students on this first practice. We, therefore, decided to conduct a more systematic study of their experience of this particular placement in order to research and develop our own understanding of it in greater detail. We were aware of stage-based descriptions of student development (e.g. Calderhead, 1987) but had the impression that, while 'fitting in' and 'exploring', for example, were part of the teaching experience of students, their development was in no way simplistically sequential. Our interest was, therefore, in students' first teaching experiences and what they learned about pupil behaviour and its 'management', if this did indeed turned out to be a feature of the experience. Interestingly enough, there appears to be an absence of studies that

can offer specific findings to build on or relate to. Notwithstanding general policy guidance for teachers that behaviour is an integrated component of classroom life rather than an attribute of the child (e.g. the Elton Report, 1989), there is little focus on how the beginner might develop along these lines, other than exhortation. Indeed, the key finding in the systematic review by Powell and Tod (2004, pp. 77–86) was that there were no relevant studies on behaviour management that sought directly to inform ITE, suggesting the possibility of crucial gaps in this area of research.

The broader impetus for this study is the need to have a research-informed approach to ITE. The recent official focus upon behaviour management in schools, coupled with extensive coverage in both the popular and professional press, can generate a sense of crisis that occludes both critical analysis and imaginative response. Rather than simply reacting to the imposition of policy, TEIs need to articulate their approaches as a contribution to research-informed policy whilst also resisting the uncritical appropriation of pre-given priorities and packages. In this paper, the intention is to develop a pragmatic, but critically informed appreciation of, as it were, behaviour management for absolute beginners. This would of course feed into our own ITE programme which is a concurrent four year course for secondary teaching across a range of subjects, with placements mainly in schools in central Scotland. Prior to their 'first' actual secondary teaching placement of five weeks, students have spent three weeks in a primary school observing and assisting teachers and pupils, followed by a microteaching course in which they practise teaching small groups of between six and 10 pupils, aged 11–13, for some 20 minutes once a week over two eight week stretches.

Method

On return from their first secondary teaching placement (five weeks in school), students were asked to describe a critical incident and to explore the nature of this and their responses to it. This method was not too different from what is normally done in subject seminars with students. The difference is that their observations were recorded on tape and then used as data. Permission was obtained from each student to use the transcript. They were also informed that their views would be treated as strictly confidential and that pseudonyms would be used in any subsequent publications. Students were asked to interview each other in pairs, in a form of micro-story telling (Tripp, 1993). Each student had to think of a key incident whilst on practice and tell this as a story to their partner. The second person's role was as a facilitator: to try and enable their colleagues to say all they wished without passing any judgement and to encourage them to explore different aspects of their story. They were asked to limit the time spent to around 15 minutes. When this was complete, the students swapped roles and repeated the process. Tapes were transcribed, read by individuals and then submitted to joint analysis from which the following themes emerged. In our scrutiny of the data we also made connections with some previous and current work in the field of early professional

learning, as well as other literature. This is reflected in the presentation of themes and in the concluding discussion.

Content of the stories

We anticipated that many of the 'critical events' that students would choose to report would feature pupil behaviour. Not all of them did and analysis and discussion of the other issues of placement experience will be the subject of a separate paper. The fact that a large minority did not choose behaviour as their main incident event suggests that we cannot make the assumption that difficulties with behaviour in class will be the dominant experience for each and every beginner. Nonetheless, of the 30 stories, some 22 were concerned with behaviour to some degree, so the first thing to report is that this was indeed the main feature of the experience for most students.

Scrutiny and discussion of the stories about behaviour indicate that there was no obvious pattern to the experiences recounted, other than that some pupils in the class were simply not interested in working. Some of the reported behaviour was fairly extreme:

> Right, it's to do with a third year all boys class and the behaviour by them. You would have maybe Monday or Tuesday, Thursday or Friday you would have a class that would be half full so you would have about 10 children in that class, boys and the class worked well, everyone seemed to get on really well and felt motivated. But on your days like a Wednesday you had the boys come back into classroom from maybe their college days and they're just not interested in doing work at all.

> Now this is about a particular class … the subject that had been taught to them the topic was Empty Lands in the Brazilian Rainforest and half of the class most of them seemed interested and paid attention whereas the other half sat near the window and looked out the window and carried on, didn't pay attention, always behavioural problems putting them out the class and shouting at them.

> In one of my first lessons that I taught it was a third year class, a girl got brought back into her class, it was a couple of days into school and she had been out of school for I don't know a few months and she got brought back. She should been in fourth year but she got put back into a third year class because she had been having problems in school where she didn't want to work in the class and she would swear at teachers and when they asked her to do work she would walk out of class sometimes just because she didn't want to do the work. She also would just get up in the middle of the class and go and sit under the desk for like the whole of the period.

The behaviour in the student accounts was above the low level of incidental distractions. Clearly, such behaviour—not doing any work, not paying attention, swearing at teachers and so on—is not typical behaviour in most teachers' classes (in our local knowledge) but it is perhaps unsurprising that students would select from their experience in this way. What we may have are incidents which may be seen by them as extreme, but which in fact tend to happen in their classes simply because they are beginners. What is not clear in the stories is whether they themselves are aware of this—that these experiences are much less likely to happen after the early

months—or whether they think they are dealing with normal behaviour in the school in general—in that this 'extreme' behaviour is what they have to get used to and learn to manage.

Connections with theory

Some of the accounts did refer to their university preparation (though they were not primed to do so), broadly construed as theory. Occasionally this was seen to be helpful as in, for example, the use of praise and encouragement through the experience of microteaching and even in bringing theory to bear on the practice of teaching:

> Through link practice and microteaching I've realised the importance of praising and encouragement because it might not seem a lot for the teacher but it takes a lot of courage to stand up in front of all your classmates and potentially make a fool of yourself. Definitely praise is the one of the most important things I think you can give to kids.

> I felt I was exactly the right stage to be doing the placement. Although at first I was scared of the placement once I was out there I had planned these lessons I thought yeah I've just got the right amount of knowledge now to be on this placement and it felt to me that the course had totally got me to that stage … the theory that I had learned mostly in the Tuesday night class I had brought it to bear on the teaching and I realised I had done it myself and I thought yeah everything is totally linked. I would say if I was to go back to microteaching and things like that I was ill prepared for that I didn't get fitted to that bit of the course so much but the time I got to the five week placement I thought this is exactly the stage we should be at and we are at … it helps me with standing up in front of them and it actually it helped me to be a stronger teacher if you like because in the microteaching you are kind of laid back and you think this is just half an hour so what.

The more common reflection, however, was that the preparation was of limited help and even, in a few cases, felt to be an inadequate basis for the real world of teaching:

> … I tried again thinking about back to Bill Rodgers about what can I do now. So I politely told her again so fortunately she did go back to her seat. So once I had got her sat back down then somebody decided to start making animal noises from the back of the classroom. … so again I just tried to make light of it and not pay too much attention to it because I thought if I do this then everybody is going to get started. So anyway this four started and then someone on the left hand side of the room decided that they would join in as well and then I thought I am not coping well here

> … they just don't want to be at school so they are like swearing, eating, throwing things about and the classroom is full so … you feel threatened almost … its trying to get a good grip on keeping the class together when you have people coming in and out, situations like I feel we have not had a good basis on to be honest with you. We've been told all these different protocols to say or put your hand up or don't shout out but their life's not like that. They live in a different world, they think that swearing is okay

It is not only that these students have met difficult behaviour—animal noises, throwing things, swearing. It is the impact of this on them. They can recognise in a

rational way that there is no ready-made response that they can draw on, but there is a deeper sense of self-doubt, of 'not coping well', of feeling 'threatened'. In the latter story, the doubt stems from coming up against a different world—a life in which 'swearing is okay'. Students of course know that some people swear but they may well presume that it is happens in some social situations e.g. the football stadium, rather than others, e.g. the classroom. It may be that this potential clash of cultures explains the shock to some students. Coming to terms with this is not at this stage just a matter of 'behaviour management', in the sense that there are techniques which can be successfully applied. If the experience for some students is genuinely that their pupils 'live in a different world' then, for them at least, a successful transition into the world of teacherhood looks like a longer and more profound project, in which they first have to ask whether they can manage themselves.

Given the serious impact on some students' sense of their ability to cope, it is understandable that they may attribute this to inadequate preparation by tutors and courses. Though our programme includes both theoretical principles and practical protocols for dealing with behavioural issues, we appreciate the broad view that that no preparation can quite create a smooth transition into 'what teaching is like'. Understanding through 'first hand' experience is a position which some of them at least understand. Some indeed are able to begin to make connections with what 'lecturers talk about':

> The university prepared me for incidents such as this by warning me but no matter how many lectures you go to and how many papers you write really practice makes perfect. It's only through practice, through experience, that you really get a flavour of what teaching is like. You only get the passion for teaching that your lecturers talk about in the lecture hall, you can't really appreciate how rewarding it is from other people's experiences, it's when you experience it first hand that it all gets put together.

This very idea, that 'it all gets put together' when you experience it first hand, is an admirably succinct expression of our intentions but of course the realisation of this is in practice appears to be a much less utopian blend of reason and passion for many students.

One student did suggest that the course should take children's backgrounds into consideration, with 'some kind of classes towards preparing you for going into a classroom setting like that'. In fact, children's backgrounds are covered in some detail in the period following this school experience but there may be a case for some earlier coverage. Other reflections did make positive, if non-specific, reference to their 'theory'—'the theory connections gave the right amount of knowledge', 'totally linked', 'helped me to be stronger'. The limited use made of prior 'theory' by students on practice is well known, though previous research (McNally *et al.*, 1997; Drever & Cope, 1999) also found nuances of theory in student accounts of their placement experience. Such allusions do provide a degree of defence for a university-based element in ITE where the relative absence of reference to theory by beginners—understandable as it is from their perspective, as we have argued earlier—makes it an easy target for critics, who tend to underestimate the complexity of teaching and of learning to teach.

What is quite clear in these more focussed interviews is evidence of students' own insights. Some of them are beginning to make their own sense of situations and theorise for themselves. Occasionally an observation implies that a more general lesson has been learned, as in 'limit exposure to field trips with difficult class and teachers with poor control', 'not taking it personally' and 'expect the unexpected'. One saw part of the solution to behaviour management in terms of controlling one's body language, broadly speaking, as in 'try to make light of it', 'remain as calm as possible and try and continue with the lesson' and 'if you 'get quite flustered then pupils will know'.

Students seeking deeper understandings

In the earlier quotes, even in the first sentences, student awareness of an underlying complexity to behavioural incidents is apparent. Many of their stories convey their sense of this in the ways their accounts describe their uncovering of the backgrounds of different pupils and the subtleties of the classroom situations in which these arise. The choice of title is intended to convey the first exposure to behaviour management through the students' sense of entering another world. Yet swearing is on the mild side of life as represented in their narrative exploration of this new experience. Extracts of some length are needed to do fuller justice to the unfolding classroom situations in which the students find themselves. Perhaps two will suffice to make this point. In the first, some 'niggly comments' escalate into 'ugly' threats and possible racism, involving two boys, one of whose father is dying of cancer, only for the intrusion of the class teacher who 'undermines' the student's attempt to handle the incident:

> … we were in this class of 26, there was about five or six personalities. One of them was a black Nigerian boy and the other one was ginger … and they didn't get on at all well … I had never had problems with them before but throughout the course of this lesson they started niggling … I shifted the ginger one to the front of the class … they started making niggling comments to each other just for a joke—I will meet you outside at lunch and I will give you a panning and all this stuff, you know. I got really annoyed with them so I said 'right you two get on with your work' … I just went up to them and said to them quietly shut up and get on with your work type thing. But they didn't, the student had progressed from niggling comments to throat slitting actions … Right now this is when it starts to get complicated, I knew the black boy—his father was dying of cancer, terminal cancer, so he was having a really bad time anyway … and there had also been a couple of incidents where he had made comments about other people being racist to him and there had been investigations in the school … and so I was quite worried that this was going turn into some kind of war between black and white in the classroom … so it got to the stage about quarter of an hour before the end of the lesson where they were doing it constantly and it was starting to get ugly. So I threatened them both, I said if I catch you doing that again I'm going to give you both a punishment exercise and will refer you to the deputy rector … However the ultimatum and my authority were immediately undermined because the teacher had spotted me talking to them and he asked me what the problem was so I told him and he went over and gave them a stern talking to and told them to stay behind after the class. So basically I could no longer enforce any punishment that I was going to do because he has taken over the

> punishment part of it … So to summarise by the end of the lesson I had failed to avert a near racial war in the class and … I had also failed to impose ultimatums and disciplines on the class because my authority had been undermined by the teacher …

In another case involving self-harm, the student was aware that the boy had a serious bowel condition. The narrative account of this—the bowel condition, stabbing of the pen into his own arm, cutting his wrist with scissors—reads like the unfolding of a minor comic tragedy. Our knowledge of school life allows us to suggest one obvious reading of this: the naïve student as the perennial victim of the class hoax. Even so, this story is not just about learning the ropes of behaviour management; this is also a lesson on life for the aspiring teacher, a sharp awakening that the tragic stories of life affect young people too and are not left at the school gate:

> The first thing that was strange was that there was a boy in my second year class and he had … a bowel condition … When we were doing group work and things you had to help him more than others because he wasn't very good at mixing with them but this particular day there had been an incident the week before … they were just working individually through their sheets and he started banging his head off the desk so I went over and spoke to him and the teacher automatically took him out the class and he started banging his head off the wall … when there are any problems like that he had to be referred to guidance. So in my final week they were doing 'life on board the Titanic' and they were working on different groups … he was in the group … making up their big posters they had to cut pictures and stick them on and when I was helping one of the other groups I heard his group laughing. So I went over and he was standing with a pen stabbing the pen into his arm so following instructions I had from the teacher I took the pen off him and said right get on with the work and I had been told not to draw attention to what he was doing and just to tell him to stop it and leave it at that. But after he stopped doing that with the pen he was sitting with a pair of scissors cutting away at his wrist so I took the scissors off him and I said what are you doing and he said he was trying kill himself. So I sent one of the other pupils along to get a teacher because obviously I had no idea how to handle that. I didn't know what to do but she just said just stop it and put him back in the classroom … But then he started, he took his jumper off and started trying to tie his jumper round his neck so in the end the teacher took him out of the class … and his parents got contacted about it but it was quite strange because it was something that I hadn't expected.

First encounters such as these with real classroom issues are about more than managing groups of children. They are not just about pupils shouting out or swearing in class—even though students have to find their way of handling that with the help of others—but about coming to a deeper and wider understanding of why these kinds of things happen. In the midst of this melee, cognitive-behavioural approaches, whether theoretical or practical, do not quite offer the explanation sought by most students. They seem to be looking out to, if not actually searching within, the wider social and cultural contexts of pupils' relationships, beyond the classroom and school, an outlook which is closer in a natural sense to an eco-systemic view (Bronfenbrenner, 1992), while still realising that they cannot excuse disruptive behaviour and need to work out their own ways of handling it.

For many of the students the encounters also raise the question of whether they feel they will be able to teach in a way that accommodates and transcends such initial obstacles. Experience of 'incidents' could be seen as part of the rite of passage. The

question is how to provide optimal preparation for the experience, given that the very experience will in most cases induce a degree of trauma. Part of the answer may be that students' own stories and experiential theorising may offer a better anticipation of reality in the preparation of following cohorts.

'Can I go to the toilet?'

The nature of the data was leading us to a conclusion: it may actually be erroneous to pre-empt students' first school placement by supposing that there may be simple routines or ideas with answers to seemingly straightforward questions about pupil behaviour. We therefore took the opportunity to discuss one common situation with a group of six respected practitioners, involved as teacher–researchers in a current research project on early professional learning (McNally *et al.*, 2004), in which we tried to elicit their position(s) and tacit knowledge. The question is how to respond when a pupil asks, 'can I go to the toilet?' For students this is a dilemma between a basic right and ensuing classroom anarchy as pupils successively demand the same right granted to the first pupil to ask. One position, based on experience as a supply teacher, was that the instinctive response is to casually refuse the request. The rationale is that the beginner or even the supply teacher is simply being tested and so has to establish credibility with pupils in a new situation, to somehow show that they know the game being played. Past experiences build up an episodic memory which becomes tacit knowledge of what to do. Further discussion led to the probability that being seen to 'take it in your stride' also involved the tone of voice, the way in which 'no' is conveyed, in effect the use of 'body language', an insight in one of the earlier student narratives. Another more sophisticated position is that you say 'yes but …' and proceed to state that acceding to the request on this occasion will not be repeated. Another teacher's response was that it does not often happen in her class but when it does the request is accepted as genuine. Yet another explained that, while she herself might say yes to the request, she would probably advise a beginner to say no. Another position was 'no to boys but probably yes to girls' by a male teacher.

The extent of the discussion and attempts to verbalise tacit knowledge such as this could reasonably leave a novice or 'non-teacher' at a loss to explain the apparent over-complication of a simple, legitimate request by a minor. One can also well understand the difficulty school managers and policy makers have in providing clear procedural guidance for toilet requests and the like. Yet classroom anarchy, revolt and indeed wet floors have happened as a result of making the wrong call. This dialogue also highlights, in a way that the student narratives do not or cannot yet, the place of pre-emption of disruptive behaviour based on prior knowledge and likely outcomes: good behaviour management is about the prevention of incidents. Until newcomers emerge from being overwhelmed by the complexity of the new situation they do not have the experience or developed instinct for reading a situation. For a while, it seems that beginners need an early period in which there is a tolerance of judgement calls and mistakes, in relation to behaviour management at least. They

need time to begin to develop a sense of the latent complexity of classroom situations and the potential repercussions of different decisions and courses of action.

Other teachers

About half of the narratives made no explicit reference to any other teacher; in others there was assistance from one or more teachers. In the story below the observation is that 'if I had problems with pupils as well they would back me up brilliantly sometimes'. We may assume that this was generally well intentioned but, on the whole, 'assistance' was not experienced as helpful. Students tended to want the opportunity to deal with or handle the everyday difficulties themselves; or they felt, as in an earlier example, that their 'authority had been undermined by the teacher':

> I think I had to tell a teacher about them having run off and that I had caught them smoking but when it came to them swearing at me it was something that I could have probably have dealt with myself … fair enough they were cheeky with me but it's part of the course, I have to be able to put up with it … there was no need for it to be mentioned then and there … if I had problems with pupils as well they would back me up brilliantly … on the whole if I had any problems there was always someone there that I could either turn to get into the class or send the pupils to … I often thought that discipline wasn't really that harsh in the school that I was in. … a second or first year pupil … went into a geography class banged his head off of the door and said good morning to a filing cabinet and then proceeded to throw chairs about the classroom before he was removed and even then nothing was done about him …

> A problem I often found was that if a pupil was misbehaving rather than let me handle it myself the teacher would just take them out of the class and that didn't help because it wasn't giving you the chance … to discipline him and the other pupils are seeing this pupil is acting up and it's making me look like I don't have the authority to do anything.

> That was the problem I faced a lot … the senior teachers would often come in and it wasn't just me she done it to the probationers in the department as well they would come in at the beginning and just yell at the class and told us that if there was any problems just to present it to them. I just felt that it undermined me and more so that it undermined the probationer because it is her job and she is qualified and there is no need for really anybody to come in at the start.

Previous research suggests that the learning experience of student teachers in schools is crucially determined by 'relational conditions' governed by the colleagues they work with (McNally *et al.*, 1997). In the particular case of learning about behaviour management the condition of colleagues being 'always there' is apparent, as is the more general feature that these conditions exist between the extremes of 'abandonment' and 'stifling intrusion'. There does appear to be the potential for support that is better tuned to the students' needs at any given stage of development. This is a support that could come in the form of natural mentoring (McNally, 1994) from those around the student, an absence of support recently identified by Eraut (2004), and as part of a broader base of support through better understanding by colleagues of early teacher development during the later induction period (McNally, 2002). Burn *et al.* (2000) also argue that school-based colleagues who provide

feedback to student teachers need to appreciate the complex understandings that they may develop. As our own data stories suggest too, it can be very easy to jump in with critical advice or helpful suggestions that fail to acknowledge the insights that the student teachers may already have. Encouraging this to be expressed could indeed, as they claim, serve them well as a habit of critical evaluation beyond ITE and induction.

Discussion

There are of course lessons from these findings for our own ITE programme. Whether they merit more general applicability is in part dependent on similarity of programme and context; yet it strikes us that the stories we have here are broadly representative of life for many beginners in many schools whatever the degree of support. This discussion is therefore intended to contribute to not just the discussion of other teacher educators in relation to their own programmes, but to the broader question of national policies on behaviour management in relation to ITE in particular and early professional learning in general.

The first point is to confirm that pupil behaviour is indeed an issue for most students in their first teaching experience, with many of the incidents seen as 'extreme' from the student's perspective. The folk wisdom in schools would probably view this as simply part of the early learning experience, a rite of passage. However, the incidents selected by some students are not about behaviour and so the assumption of inevitability for all is, therefore, questionable. That atypical episodes of some kind tend to make up the beginner's learning is a credible claim, supported by the extensive study of informal learning by Eraut (2004). Student learning about behaviour is partly informal in the sense that the experience of meeting difficult pupil behaviour is not explicitly structured by schools—indeed some may take steps to protect students—though there is probably an expectation that it will happen sooner or later. The inherent unpredictability and contingency in this aspect of the experience has to be recognised. While we know that the feeling of being in an environment of informal support is hugely important to students, we also know that over-intrusive support is counter-productive to their sense of development (McNally *et al.*, 1994, 1997).

The diversity too of the actual incidents and experiences suggest that it is not possible to prepare beginners to the extent that they will handle whatever comes their way when they enter the school. Sets of practical tips, seductive concepts or the next big idea, whatever it is, are unlikely to remove or de-problematise the difficulties of the first encounters. The illustrative data direct us toward that conclusion (and, of course, to the perennial matter of course review), but Powell and Tod (2004) are also persuaded from their wider review that, while a range of strategies is a necessary part of the new teacher's 'survival toolkit', this is not in itself:

> *sufficient* to secure the confidence and competence sought by the trainee (p. 2) … (or) … to protect trainees from experiencing behaviour problems in their classrooms. (p. 83)

What may be feasible is to reduce the severity of the experience through input of the practical advice and theories that students report as useful (in studies such as this), backed up by support and empathy during these first exposures in new settings, including the early weeks of induction. The re-presenting of short stories such as those illustrated above, as case studies from those at the same stage in the programme, offers another level of engagement for complete beginners. They may provide an opportunity for bringing theoretical and practical advice together in a way that recognises the essentially problematic nature of teacher development, in which individuals begin to make their own sense of events and learn from their own decisions. Case studies from the present data could profitably be used in encouraging future student teachers to begin to explore their thinking in 'hypothetical' situations (that have of course arisen in practice). Some of our colleagues, and no doubt others, are aware of the apparent value of joint seminars on placement experience of students with those one stage ahead, though we are unaware of any published research demonstrating this.

It is perhaps in the period following the first school experience and prior to the final one that is the right stage for serious engagement with real questions of behaviour management. Over the years, probably the most popular lecture on our programme has been one by an experienced practitioner that is essentially an illustrative list of over 40 brief anecdotes of real situations from her experience: how she handled them, when she failed and the resultant piece of advice, all couched in good humour. It is convincing and reassuring and many students have reported on its resonance during their teaching practice. While acknowledging her expertise in delivery, it is significant that it is given just before the final placement, perhaps the optimum stage at which to try to bring it all together. You need some experience before theories and tips begin to mean anything, as you can then begin to make your own connections. Most popular with beginners tend to be practical things that will work in the short term, as one of their main objectives is, understandably, to get order in order to teach. Moreover, there are techniques and routines which do tend to work provided they are backed up by 'good teaching'; good order is not in itself good teaching and in some cases may not even be a prerequisite. The importance of a practical emphasis also appears to be confirmed in early data from a current research project (McNally *et al.*, 2004): formal induction talks that are well received by new teachers as a group emphasise practical steps for action, illustrated through specific situations and delivered by credible speakers.

An issue here is the balance of practical tips with theory and the need for teacher educators to recognise this in their preparatory work with beginners. Tips risk being a casualty of a programme which is too focussed on theory, however pertinent and insightful; but, if too dependent on tips from teachers for teachers, we risk the absence of any central concepts or principles. We need to have better critiques of both the 'theory is useless' camp and the one-theory zealots. For this first acquaintance with the craft of classroom management and class control, however, the practical advice of experts (e.g. Wheldall & Merrett, 1989; Marland, 1993; McPhillimy, 1996) and the protocols they offer to teachers may not quite work for

students. Concepts such as 'relaxed vigilance' and 'tactical ignoring' (Rogers, 1995), for example, are eminently sensible but may mean much more to experienced teachers than beginners with little experience of their own to relate to. They may be too advanced for students at this stage who perhaps need more of a situated interpretation and illustration. On the other hand, the persistence of bland truisms such as 'firm but fair', 'nip things in the in the bud' and so on suggests that practical tips deserve greater reflection then they often receive. There is often much sense within these professional epigrams of advice, but we rarely hear the developed thinking behind them. For example, 'firm' could be one teacher's 'hard' and another's lenient'; 'fair' could indeed be consistent in dealings with all pupils, but still be unjust. Too often the statements are the object of ridicule in academe because of their apparent shallow one-sidedness whereas, in the hands of wise mentors, they could contain the germ of an idea, tailored to fit their particular protégé.

Such contextualised advice at the level of school, classroom and individual pupil which also suits the individual new teacher's own style is the complementary interpersonal part of experiential learning. Introductory experience at university, however practically oriented, is not quite the same as meeting real pupils, classes and schools as a 'teacher' for the first time. It takes time to absorb the complexity of this, time for enough experiences (including failures) on which to have any depth of reflection and time to begin to mature as a professional. It may be that theoretical principles and distilled practical wisdom, however soundly based, should carry a caveat about longer-term relevance. In the longer term (and usually the short term too), teaching well will depend on the establishment of relationships with mutual respect and trust, and a kind of discipline which is implicit in the norms of pupil and teacher behaviour within the classroom, with the occasional backup of ephemeral sanctions.

Across the student narratives it is also clear that they are engaged in a process of learning about behaviour that is too complex to be captured by a concept concerned with the application of behaviour management techniques. Students are learning about the lives of young people through their behaviour in school and are beginning to work out how to relate to this as teachers. For some, the process of learning involves a crucial question of identity. They ask whether they can see themselves in the role: 'is this for me?' … 'can I do this?' Indeed we know that one student (not interviewed) withdrew from the programme during this first experience because teaching was not for her, thus resolving her personal identity crisis. It does appear that pupil behaviour in these first encounters is, for many students, a defining feature of teaching. Adapting themselves as persons in such a way that they can enter this different world is a matter of identity formation, an ineluctable part of becoming a teacher. This is entirely consistent with the idea that becoming a teacher is largely defined through relationships with pupils (McNally *et al.*, 1994; Evans, 1996). The pupil behaviour that students witness is a manifestation of a relationship with a history to which the student is a complete stranger and a professional novice. The behavioural issues in the classroom are an inevitable part of their struggle for

acceptance over however many weeks or months it takes. Their biography is moving into a new social situation in which they have to assume responsibility for children. In terms of cultural psychology, the experience is a dynamic tension between self and social context, between an ontogenesis and sociogenesis of the knowledge they need (Valsiner & DeVeer, 2000). Their initial sense of powerlessness can lead to some psychological disturbance: 'I beat myself up about it', said one student in her story, which contains much of the analytic themes of the paper, but also illustrates how a situation can escalate into something approaching existential pain.

> I found that when I went into my first year class who were a really good class … one boy was on a behaviour sheet and he wasn't always there which was a bit of an issue as when he was there, there seemed to be an event … I was taking registration and he was provoking … another boy but I just happened to turn round as the nice child retaliated by pulling his chair from under him really severely causing him to fall and almost injure himself. … they were about to start a fight then and there … so I put the nice kid out of the class and made the behaviour sheet child sit in the seat and he sat with a face like thunder while the rest of the class were laughing and I got them all in order by which time the teacher came and wondered what was going on … she said that I should fill in a serious misbehaviour form so I then had to take the other child outside because I thought he was more in the wrong … I wasn't really happy that I had to do that because I felt that the other boy should have been disciplined in some way but there was nothing … that I could see or prove that he had done anything and so that as far as the paperwork goes I was restricted that I couldn't do anything about him. So and I beat myself up about it all weekend because it was a Friday and I really didn't think that that child deserved to have this referral put in but the class teacher said that that was the system, that was the sanction route and I had to follow it.

School experience takes place within the context of having to meet a certain regulatory standard and the concomitant competencies or benchmarks. Of interest here is benchmark statement 2.2.2 in the Standard for Initial Teacher Education (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2000), that students should be able to 'manage pupil behaviour fairly, sensitively and consistently by the use of appropriate rewards and sanctions and know when it is necessary to seek advice'. Our findings persuade us that it is important not to present the first school experience to students and placement schools as merely a 'benchmarked' exercise but more as a learning experience about teaching and its issues. Although there were classroom situations when they 'didn't know what to do' and when a behavioural issue remained unresolved, the evidence is that students do begin to think things through by themselves. If we accept the strong evidence that most learning is done alone, by teachers as with others (e.g. Lortie, 1975; Huberman, 1989), then this absence of answers is as it should be. Even at this stage of struggling for control, students may well see that there is a greater purpose beyond discipline (Kohn, 1996), which still promotes discipline itself, in managing pupils' learning experiences rather than their (mis)behaviour. For one student the solution lay in interesting as opposed to boring work for pupils:

> They were gelling and they were happening but the fact that I had a class of so many pupils with all behavioural problems it was hard but … most of the time, if they were doing something that they were interested in, they were working, and when they were

> bored they weren't, and I think with both of them experience would help, and the fact that this was the first time these things had been happening. I just generally didn't know what to do.

This further example of a student beginning to theorise from her own practice is consistent with models of genuine professional development (e.g. Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992). For this very early stage of professional learning it is perhaps of special importance that this is understood and that space is given to the beginner for such reflection. It is not that other teachers have no part in this learning process. The environment of support is clearly important to students, even if implicitly so, but it is not a learning experience in which they are passive apprentices in a community of practice. They are learning to 'fit in' but they are also 'exploring', thus supporting the notion of the student experience, even in a first five week stretch, as one in which they hold simultaneous concerns (Guillaume & Rudney, 1993), and even conflicting purposes. Burn *et al.* (2000) also found that from a very early stage students were not simply slotting in and could talk in sophisticated ways about the conflicting demands they faced in real classrooms.

The occasional conflict between a teacher's perception of a behavioural problem and the student's perhaps illustrates a lack of an appreciation of the embryonic artisanry of the student as beginning teacher (Huberman, 1993) and how support and advice might be better integrated into the individual's level of understanding or stage of development. Handling pupil behaviour is also a particular illustration of Maynard's (2001) conclusion that pain and conflict are inherent to the experience of becoming a teacher and that, despite the pressures, students are 'reluctant to relinquish their ideals and perspectives'. Given that children are more likely to develop positive behaviour themselves when they experience positive relationships with their teachers (Serow & Solomon, 1979), we would argue in favour of encouragement of beginning teachers by their more experienced colleagues during the confusing, vulnerable period of first contacts and experiences with pupils and classes. Building their self-confidence is surely an important contribution to their capacity to win the confidence of their young charges as they start to form and nurture relationships in their classrooms.

The term 'behaviour management' may, therefore, be only of temporary and limited use to students, a provisional conceptualisation that is at best a working title for the beginner. Powell and Tod's (2004, p. 18) synthesis of material leads them to suggest that learning and behaviour should be linked via the term 'learning behaviour' in order to reduce perceptions that 'promoting learning' and 'managing behaviour' are separate issues. Ultimately the good teacher's control is dependent on having enough moral authority within the classroom, wider school and community, an authority in which people perceive real understanding rather than abstract knowledge, holistic ability rather than technical skill and a personal commitment-in-action rather than espoused values. If the management of behaviour is given too much priority in policy then it is at worst a misleading, premature categorisation that occludes a superior focus on learning, trivialises the life problems of pupils and demeans the place of teacher–pupil interactions in relation to these problems.

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