2 Understanding Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties

Teachers cannot hope to change the lives of severely troubled pupils who are thought of as ‘having’ emotional and behavioural difficulties. But they are able to help and support in a range of ways. Consider the case of Darren:

Case Study: Darren

Teachers became increasingly alarmed by Darren’s behaviour. He was on the fringes of all trouble in Year 9, and often central to situations that might have become serious had staff not intervened promptly. He was surly to teachers, and on one or two occasions had verged on the brink of violence. Using a proforma (eg Form 3, page 18) teachers undertook a description of his behaviour (now in Year 10) and found there were many gaps in their knowledge. They knew very little about Darren’s family, or how he related to the local community. Within the school he appeared to have some friends. The staff were ready to intervene and apply sanctions.

Darren’s parents had had little to do with his schooling, except that his mother had complained to his form teacher that Darren had struck her. She wanted something doing. A member of staff then met with his mother. During the meeting it emerged that Darren’s father was a bullying aggressive man who liked to bait Darren. His mother was unstable due to epilepsy and also aggressive, particularly to Darren. They have a daughter who was working and seemed to be able to escape her parents’ attention.

A teacher then talked to Darren about his parents, (unexpectedly) revealing that he (the teacher) would find it difficult to live with Darren’s mother. Darren behaved as if a great weight had been lifted from him. He talked about how anxious and frightened he was every morning before escaping to school, and how his mother had pinned him against the wall, strangling him, so he had had to hit her to break free. He had been keeping all these troubles a secret.

This changed significantly the perceptions of the staff, who rather than apply sanctions (punishments) determined to support Darren. Support – where a teacher was available before school for a few minutes for Darren to talk to – was put in place for a trial period and extended once it had been found to work well.

This case study illustrates some of the key features in this publication: ethical questions (consent), human rights (problems of making assumptions and inhumane treatment), resource worthiness (getting rid of trouble), welfare versus justice (support versus punishment).
3 Defining Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties

In the introduction we highlighted the presence of problematic definitions through multi-agency perspectives and historical labelling. There is more value in teachers examining their own explanations of the causes of emotional and behavioural difficulties in the classroom. It is the everyday or ‘lay’ explanations, as opposed to the rhetoric of jargon-ridden mystifying terms, which provide more useful information for intervention and of understanding emergent consequences (intended and unintended) of attributing responsibility and blame.

Activity

Exploring your own definitions – The following activity is based upon the work of Kelly and his Personal Construct Theory. The basis of his work was that everyone operates using scientific principles, trying to make sense of their world and applying categories to help them.

Kelly’s Personal Construct Theory

Kelly (1955) questioned the prevailing dominant psychological theory of the time (behaviourism) suggesting that humans acted like scientists in their everyday behaviour. The fundamental postulate of the theory being ‘a person’s processes are psychologically channelised by the ways in which he anticipates events’. Kelly proposed that we develop ‘theories’ about why things happen and engage in hypothesis testing to discover how accurate our predictions of the world are. We use the process to categorise our world. He argued that the only way to understand the individual is to discover how they construct their world, i.e categorise the people and things within it. It follows that those who categorise and predict accurately most of the time but also have the ability to change their personal constructs when they prove to be inaccurate are likely to be the most adaptive. He also proposed that we constantly engage in this process, are active beings (‘forms of motion’).

He developed a methodology for measuring individuals’ personal constructs which involves a technique called the ‘Repertory Grid Test’. The ‘Rep Grid’ helps an individual to discover the fundamental constructs they use to perceive and relate to other people and things. To do this the grid is used to identify a number of personal constructs – made up of contrasting descriptors (e.g. good-bad, clean-dirty and so on). The information is presented in the form of a grid – hence the name – with the people or things being measured along the top and the constructs down the side.
Coping with Difficult Children

- **Stage 1 - As a group** select 15 children who you consider to have a range of behaviour problems (from shy, withdrawn to boisterous and violent.) Each member of the group then enters their own name on **Form 5** (page 31).

- **Stage 2 - As an individual** and using **Form 5**, select three of the pupils at random. Consider how two of the pupils are similar and the other different. This is a difficult task and may take some time. This gives you polar dimensions (contrasts) (eg quiet - noisy, shy - outgoing). Enter the two polar dimensions in the appropriate boxes. Place a + sign against each pupil who has the first polar characteristic and a – sign against each pupil with the contrasting characteristic. When you feel you have exhausted the dimensions for one set of pupils select a second group of three pupils at random and continue to generate polar dimensions. Record your findings.

- **Stage 3 - As an individual** - once you have completed **Form 5** (note that the number of trios you evaluate is arbitrary), review the polar dimensions you have generated. It is likely that you have repeated some in which case only one is required. List the range of polar dimensions (ie categories). These dimensions are your way of trying to predict how pupils will behave based on your experience, ie how you construct your ‘world’.

- **Stage 4 - As a group** discuss the polar dimensions you have generated. You may find that you have used different words to describe similar concepts (eg shy – outgoing or introverted – extroverted) or you may have generated quite different polar dimensions. This is what Kelly would have expected. Do not try to artificially arrive at a group consensus.

- **Stage 5 - As an individual** consider selected pupils’ individual profiles (use one copy of **Form 6** (page 32) for each pupil you consider). On this form list your constructs and contrasts on the outer two columns and then rate the pupil against these polar dimensions. This form enables you to quantify more specifically where the pupil is placed along the construct (eg 1 = very quiet, 2 quiet, 3 = neither quiet nor noisy, 4 = noisy, 5 = very noisy). This provides you with more detail in your description and prediction of the pupil’s likely behaviour.

- **Stage 6 - As a group** discuss individual pupils’ profiles. How far is there a consensus about individuals? How can differences be explained? What does the analysis tell you about how you and others think and feel about pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties?
The analysis stage

1. Define the problem
   - Whose problem?
   - Who's involved?
   - Who's affected?
   - Where does it occur?

2. Decide on how to record it
   - List each occurrence
   - Time sample
   - Duration
   - Ratio recording
   - Indirect

3. Who will record the behaviour?
   - Learning support assistant
   - Class teacher

4. How much of a problem is it?
   - How often does it occur?
   - Is it a danger to anyone?
   - Does it occur in more than one place?
   - Is it restricted to one type of lesson or teacher?
   - Produce frequency chart/graph

5. What appears to set the behaviour off?
   - In particular:
     - Lessons/style of learning
     - Particular teachers, style of teaching, particular lessons
     - Particular settings
     - Particular peers
     - Time of day/days of the week

6. What appears to be keeping it going?
   - Peers' response
   - Teacher's response
   - Classroom environment, e.g., noise level
   - Teaching/learning styles

The modification stage

7. Decide what needs responding to
   - Select objectives from 5 and 6 to determine the behaviour to be targeted. If there are a number of behaviours causing concern list and prioritise. Determine what the pupil is motivated towards, i.e., what are his/her preferences?

8. How to respond
   - Prevent the behaviour before it starts, e.g., change what triggers the behaviour. Prevent the behaviour from carrying on, e.g., remove, change, or offer extra reinforcers.
   - Agree process with pupil and draw up contract

The review stage

9. Has the response worked?
   - Examine the frequency or intensity of the behaviour following intervention. Produce a new frequency chart

10a. If it has worked
   - Gradually reduce the amount of extra reinforcement or
   - Expect more from the pupil to receive the same reward

10b. If it hasn't worked
   - Re-evaluate your initial conclusions about what sets the behaviour off. What keeps it going and the power/appropriateness of the reinforcers introduced? Are you sure you haven't missed anything?
   - Re-run the modification stage with new targets

Behaviour modification - the process