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Praise, Power and Pupil-teacher Relationships

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Abstract

This research paper explores the views of class teachers and support staff regarding the various behaviour management (BM) strategies deployed within the Early Years Foundation Stage within a school setting. Participants were asked to identify which BM strategies they considered to be the most effective in providing a positive learning environment. The collated data was then analysed resulting in the emergence of three themes; teacher-child relationships, positive reinforcement, rules and routines. Further analysis of the data revealed another, more prominent yet less obvious theme of 'power'. A final review of the emergent and underlying themes resulted in the conclusion of 'teacher-child relationships' and 'power' as forming the foundations of all the other emergent themes and the suggested behaviour management strategies. A proposed intervention action plan would serve to raise awareness of the two prominent themes allowing for teachers to establish effective and positive behaviour management.

Please note that within this research project the use of 'teacher' is used to express qualified teaching staff as well as teaching assistants who undertake similar roles and have equal influence in terms of behaviour management (BM) within the classroom.

Introduction

Charlie Taylor argues that teachers in training require "better" knowledge and skills in behaviour management (BM) (Department for Education, 2012). The government has high expectations of trainees, whom they hold responsible for ensuring the highest standards of BM (Teaching Agency, 2012). My research focuses on exploring the various BM strategies employed by EYFS teachers. The main aim of the project being to identify which BM strategies are considered the most effective in providing a positive learning environment.

The rationale for this research emanates from my interest in BM strategies within the EYFS. For many young children this may be their first formal experience of schooling, and possibly an introduction to behaviours which will need to be taught to enable them to adapt to formalised learning, forming foundations on which they will build as they progress through the school (Rogers and McPherson, 2008). Children will learn what rules and routines they will need to follow and what behaviour is acceptable, all of which will be established by their class teacher. This may be a difficult concept as what is acceptable within their family setting may not be appropriate within a classroom setting (Mah, 2007). Children within the EYFS, especially early on in the academic year when they are still familiarising themselves with school and classroom requirements, may be lacking in understanding, still acting upon impulse and forgetting rules. However, the importance of behaviour and the effect it has on learning is constantly presented through government documents such as those published by the House of Commons, The importance of teaching: the schools white paper 2010, and Ofsted's ongoing concern in regards to the behaviour they observe within schools (Ofsted, 2007, cited in Bullock and Brownhill, 2011).

Citation

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This research was undertaken in a large five form entry primary school. The school is graded as 'Outstanding' with the effectiveness of the foundation stage being rated as 'good' and the overall behaviour judged as 'outstanding'. (CPS Ofsted Report, 2008). Situated within the London Borough of Redbridge; a large, multi-cultural borough, the school embraces the various ethnicities of the high proportion of children from ethnic minority backgrounds. Could this be a factor which needs to be considered when analysing BM strategies?

Literature Review

Why is good behaviour within the classroom important? Bullock and Brownhill (2011) argue that improvement of behaviour provides "maximized" learning to take place within a classroom setting. They support this statement using Ofsted's 2006 report in which the same view is portrayed with the added key term "effective" (Ofsted, 2006 as cited in Bullock and Brownhill, 2011). The 'Behaviour and Discipline in Schools' report as published by the House of Commons Education Committee takes the idea even further by outlining that unacceptable behaviour can have "damaging consequences [that] is not a problem to be ignored" (Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons, 2011, p.X). With such strong views expressing the need for, and importance of good behaviour, why does misbehaviour exist? Bullock and Brownhill, (2011, p.3), with a focus on early years, outline reasons including; influence of peers, exposure to violence, lack of positivity within the home setting, "feminization" of the teaching profession and a "lack" of male teachers offering good role modelling. These suggestions though plausible, seem to lack validity. With no evidence of background research, these reasons could simply be the authors' own point of view.

Little and Akin-Little (2008, p.227) on the other hand refer to "disorders" such as "attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder" (ADHD) and "oppositional defiant disorder" to validate the need for effective BM. However, this is a USA study based on 'Psychology's contributions to classroom management' which may explain their heavy emphasis on disorders. Furthermore, no clarification is made as to which age group the researchers have chosen to focus on for this study; no early years context is referred to. Worryingly, one assumption Little and Akin- Little (2008, p.228) put forward is the cause of misbehaviour being "unstructured" time and supporting the need for engaging and exciting "academic activities". The researchers of this study create unambiguity in their claims. They seem not to take into consideration the foundation of play within the UK EYFS. Free flow play could be the "unstructured" time Little and Akin-Little were referring to in their study.

Myers and Pianta (2008, p.600) consider the view of some children not being "ready" for structured schooling and outline "impulsivity" as one area of concern raised with the approach that this could be the cause of the child's misbehaviour. This study is focused on young children and they further explore the importance of good behaviour as a means of setting the foundation of how children then progress in their school life. Elliot (2009, p.198) explores behaviour patterns of children around the world and points out that behaviour in the UK is "challenging" in comparison to other countries and cultures.

Fields (2012, p.25) reminds us of an important notion; that teachers are "long term and influential figures" in the lives of the children they teach. Considering the length of a school day and days within an academic year in which children and teachers spend together this is a very important point for consideration. Furthermore, Fields (2012, p.25) offers the perception of embracing and encouraging positive behaviour as opposed to having to sanction or punish misbehaviour. This seems an interesting approach, especially as Fields (2012, p.25) views this favourable as a 'school-wide system'. Worth mentioning is that this study focusses primarily on children who display both "oppositional" or "defiant behaviour" and therefore may not be generalisable to all classroom settings.

I will now consider the influence of historical theorists who have and continue to impact our understanding of child learning and behaviour. Vygotsky, who introduced the concept of “Zone of Proximal Development”, offers the interpretation that positive, desired behaviour can be achieved through the adult modelling the behaviour and through offering reward to those children who clearly exhibit the expected behaviour. (Van der Veer et al., 1991 as cited in Bullock and Brownhill, 2011, p.3). What the authors seem to exclude in their interpretation is the importance of guidance and support through a more knowledgeable other; a key feature of the “Zone of Proximal Development”. The more knowledgeable other could range from peers to teachers to parents. Not necessarily the teacher but within a classroom setting the teacher is viewed and consulted as this. This links well with the concept of modelling but also the teacher-child relationship.

Possibly the most influential theorist in terms of research devoted to the understanding of behaviour is Skinner. With the proposal of “positive reinforcement theory” Skinner’s contribution to BM is interpreted as the rewarding of good, positive behaviour in the belief that the behaviour will be reinforced and repeated. (Hardin, 2004 as cited in Bullock and Brownhill, 2011, p.3). ‘Rewards’ in a classroom context refers to the positive acknowledgement (stickers, praise) of a child’s required behaviour.

Hart (2010) explores different behavioural themes which include; adult-child relationships, reinforcement, response to undesired behaviour and rules. Hart (2010) presents findings with little critical analysis: The themes seem to be outlined in a manner that then suits the views of the educational psychologists. The findings of the study support the view that the outlined themes play an important role in the effective management of behaviour however; these are based on the views of 47 participants whose level of expertise, gender or understanding of classroom practice is unclear (Hart, 2010, pp.353-370).

Similar themes are presented and explored in the research by Hester et al., (2009) who reviewed longitudinal findings on the effectiveness of three themes; praise, rules and ignoring. Focussing on praise, I found that Hester et al. (2009) explore praise using the same understanding offered by Skinner’s ‘positive reinforcement theory’ in Bullock and Brownhill, 2011. Positively rewarding a child with praise will result in the child wanting to repeat the behaviour. (Alberto & Troutman, 2009; Kerr & Nelson, 2010 as cited in Hester et al., 2009). Praise as a “key” strategy in itself as well as the promotion of building “positive teacher – child relationships” (Hester et al., 2009 p.515).

Tzuo (2007) in her research within early years establishments views favourably the philosophy of Montessori, 1995 who suggests the role of the teacher is that of a “servant” and children are “masters” proposing a completely different theme of power. Supporting and exploring the theme of power as well as control and anger is Keat (2008). Also focusing on early years education, Keat (2008) conducted a meta-analysis of themes identified as “common”, though no reference to view of effectiveness only that these themes are acknowledged as being “important” by teachers. (Keat, 2008 p.155). The themes are explored in detail dating back to the influence they were researched to have in the 1970’s onwards. This meta-analysis considers the view that teachers may not be aware of “power implications” (Sigsgaard, 2005 as cited in Keat, 2008 p.157). This suggests that misbehaviour in classrooms may in some ways be related to power between teacher and child which the teacher may not be aware of. This study supports the notion that teachers are unaware of the “underlying currents of children’s bids for control and power” (Keat, 2008 p.159).

Analysis

I chose to use a questionnaire as my research method for this study as this offered me the opportunity to gather more detailed answers from my participants, use a variety of question styles,

and also to pilot and readjust my questionnaire (McGrath and Coles, 2013). I received questionnaires back from four teachers; referred to as T3, T4, T6 and T10 and from three teaching assistants; referred to as TA5, TA9 and TA11 throughout this paper. The teacher participants of this study (n=4) recorded a total of 33 responses. The teaching assistant participants (n=3) recorded a total of 27 responses.

My initial analysis of the data consisted of closely looking at the responses from all participants. I looked for similarities and differences in response before moving onto looking at responses in relation to job role (teacher or teaching assistant). To allow for a more in-depth analysis I used the coding method of analysis and looked for emerging themes using an inductive approach. I allowed for themes to develop by approaching the data with a critically reflective outlook, and no expectations of themes prior to coding. Using the coding method, I noted how similar responses were given by different participants but strongly outlining the same or similar views. My first attempt at coding resulted in three clearly identifiable themes emerging; 'Teacher-child relationship' (as evident in the responses of T3, T4 and TA11), 'positive reinforcement' (T3, T4, TA9, T10 and TA11) and 'rules and routines'. (T4, TA5, TA9 and TA11). Themes of 'power' and 'avoidance/distraction/' also emerged. (T4, TA5 and TA9).

When asked to offer their views on the 'most important factor for a well-behaved class with minimal misbehaviour' T3, T4 and TA11 all made suggestions relating to the teacher-child relationship which is clearly identifiable through their choice of wording; "...good understanding of each of your children..." (T4, Q3), "...developing a good bond..." (T3, Q3) and "...the relationship you build with you[r] students..." (TA11, Q3). What is interesting is how teaching assistants and teachers can have varying views on what they feel is effective in dealing with misbehaviour positively. T10 and TA11 work collaboratively within the same class but offer different insights as to what they believe is the most important factor in maintaining a well-behaved class. T10 suggests this is due to "lots of positive reinforcement..." (T10, Q3) whereas TA11 outlines the building of relationships as being the most important factor. However, the view offered by TA9 who also works with T10 offers a harmonious outlook. The most obvious reason for this being that within their class the use of positive reinforcement really is effective or that TA9 is just outlining strategies used by the teacher or mentioning what she thinks the teacher may have mentioned in her questionnaire.

The less obvious theme of 'power' was established as a result of deeper analysis and interpretations of my data. Responses such as "Asking children to take responsibility of their own actions..." (TA9, Q4), "... 'walking please' instead of 'stop running' ..." (Q7) "...give them a chance..." (Q8). Also, "I give the children...opportunity...sit beside someone who will help their learning" (T4, Q5). This analysis could be viewed as power given to the child to allow them to show they are able to behave as expected. However, this is also evidence of the teacher's power. She is giving children the opportunity to feel in power while anticipating the outcome of the situation. The alternative expression of 'power' is that which the teacher is in control of. This is represented in my data through the following selection of responses; "...encouraged to listen to all adults + grown-ups..." (TA11, Q9), "...children need to know that you are in charge." (T4, Q4) This teacher also outlines a "behaviour programme" she implements which she calls "class dojo". Initially thought to be simply a positive reinforcement tool, I discovered the foundations to be rooted in giving power to the teacher which in turn resulted in positive BM. This is because the awarding or deducting of points is within the control of the teacher.

All the participants of this study responded with the view that positive behaviour management is important. In terms of my final research question "Do support staff need to 'work' for respect while teachers earn it from the start?" All of the teaching assistant respondents stated that this was not applicable to them. Initially a surprise but on reflection I felt that this was because of my experiences

of joining placement classes and having to 'work for respect'. This is as opposed to teaching assistants who are present from the start of the year alongside the teacher and are viewed as important a figure as the class teacher. .

Considering the limitations of my research, all participants in this project were female. My research project is based on the responses of only 7 participants (later reduced to 6) with only the questionnaire method of data collection. Gathering more responses would have enabled me to make more confident judgements about teachers' perceptions of behaviour. Furthermore, my research project was conducted within one setting with no comparative data from another setting. The above mentioned factors would reflect upon how reliable, valid and generalisable my data is. I was not able to observe my participants teaching or interacting with any BM strategies so I cannot claim certainty that what they have stated in their response is what they implement as strategies. Also, the importance of considering biases. That of my participants (which could encompass anything relating back to their experiences) and that of me; they may feel they need to respond in a certain manner or withhold certain views. (McGrath and Coles, 2013, pp. 90-92). The analysis from this research cannot be generalisable to most other setting and would not reliably reflect the attitudes and practises of most teachers (not especially male teachers). Additionally, the findings of this research project are reflective of my interpretations, analysis and bias; what I feel is represented through the responses I received. This too could be considered a limitation of this project in terms of reliability, validity and generalisability.

Discussion

Reflecting upon my findings, I found it interesting that the theme of 'power' emerged especially considering that Sigsgaard, 2005 (as cited in Keat, 2008 p.157) suggested that teachers may not have awareness of power implications. Teachers have a strong awareness of 'control' in terms of themselves however, when they reference control (they don't seem to recognise this as 'power'). I also found the theme of 'teacher-child relationship' interesting. Hester et al., (2009 p.515) referred to the collaborative understanding of previous research and outlined the "teacher-child relationship" as a product of praise but I feel the opposite may be more relevant. For praise, positive reinforcement, rules and routines to be effective firstly the child would need to know they are offered by or expected of a figure of power (teacher) the level of compliance from the child would then correlate strongly with the positivity of the relationship they have with the teacher. This is supported by Dix, 2010 (as cited in Bullock and Brownhill, 2011, p.4) who suggests that relationship building is "key" in relation to dealing with behaviour effectively. Similarly, Elliott, 2009 outlines teachers' attempt at building relationship with the pupils they teach as "long being recognised" as managing behaviour effectively.

On reviewing my analysis of the themes I noticed that 'teacher-child relationship' and 'power' were the two most under-stated in relation to my findings. Teachers may have provided relative responses but even when not mentioned these two themes formed the foundation and were present as underlying themes to all the other emergent themes.

Prior to conducting this study, I always made references to 'strategies' used to deal with behaviour effectively, examples being; personalised praise, stickers, 'teacher stare'. I was not inclined to think of possible umbrella themes under which these 'strategies' develop from. In conducting this study, I have advanced my continued professional development and understanding in terms of the deeper foundations of BM that may not always be evident unless researched or closely analysed. I think this is more important in the early years because how behaviour is managed and relationships built during these years' forms the solid foundations and understanding the children will then carry through their academic life. I strongly agree with Fields (2012, p.25) who pointed out that teachers are "long term and influential figures" in the lives of the children they teach. This reinforces the need for teacher-child relationships and teachers' awareness of power within a classroom. This piece of

educational research has allowed for me to establish this understanding and carry it forward into my practice.

My proposed intervention action plan is to make teachers aware of 2 prominent themes which emerged as a result of my findings to establish effective and positive BM. Teachers will need to consider getting to know and building relationships with each child they teach. This could include; background information, interests they are passionate about and how best they enjoy learning. Teachers can then build upon this knowledge and where possible spend time with children individually showing that they value their presence, efforts and contributions in the class. Positive relationship building with each child will ensure that praise is more meaningful, respect towards the teacher, school, each other and their learning is maintained. The theme of 'power' is one teachers would need to be aware of. This could include their own exertion of power and control over the class or something to consider when a child is consistently misbehaving. Once aware, teachers can then use this to adjust their use of instructions ("who is walking sensibly?" instead of "stop running!") rewards (class points, marbles, stickers) and to offer children the chance of having power over their own actions and behaviours. This intervention can be introduced at staff or inset meetings or presented as part of a training day talk or even adopted as a whole-school BM approach.

Conclusion

To conclude, this research project was conducted in order to establish which positive BM strategies teachers and teaching assistants perceived as being most effective. As discussed, good behaviour allows for maximised learning opportunities and is observed closely within schools by the government through Ofsted who state that unacceptable behaviour has damaging consequences and simply cannot be ignored.

Over the years, researchers have explored possible causes of misbehaviour and have offered suggestions ranging from possible medical reasons (psychological outlook) to children not being ready for formalised schooling to misbehaviour being the cause of unstructured time. Worryingly, according to such research behaviour is most challenging in the UK. Historical theorists have placed emphasis on the teacher modelling and positively praising good behaviour – this ties in strongly with the need for good teacher – child relationships. This was one of my emergent themes alongside 'positive reinforcement' and 'rules and routines'. Deeper analysis of my findings revealed a more powerful theme – 'power'. My research is not without its limitations; 7 female only participants, conducted within one setting using only the questionnaire method of data collection. However, implementing this action research approach has supported me in furthering my continued professional development through on-going self-evaluation and also given me the opportunity to extend this newly acquired knowledge to my future practice as a teacher. Through drawing together all my findings and research I was able to collate the emergent themes and foundations of positive behaviour management under two main themes; 'Teacher – child relationship' and 'power'.

In terms of implications for my future practice, I will be actively aware of power; my power and control over the class as a teacher and consider this closely in relation to a child misbehaving (trying to exert power) and less obvious means of a child trying to obtain power and control through their behaviour (Keat, 2008 p.159). I can then use this to my advantage to effectively and positively manage behaviour and establish a harmonious classroom setting in which all children are able to learn without disruptions caused by poor behaviour. Implementing this action research has supported me in furthering my continued professional development through on-going self-evaluation and also given me the opportunity to extend this newly acquired knowledge to my future practice as a teacher.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Analysis of raw data; emerging themes, evident in questionnaires and how they interlink with the 2 prominent themes identified

