Applying the 'least dangerous assumption' in regards to behaviour policies and children with special needs

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Abstract

Children with special needs and disabilities (SEND) in mainstream schools have a wide range of complex conditions rendering it impossible for teachers to fully understand all the complexities of their needs. Difficulties with understanding and self-control lead to much of the behaviour that is considered unacceptable within schools and that can ultimately lead to the large numbers of children with SEND who are excluded. Schools often wish to provide a behaviour policy where everyone is treated equally despite people's needs and abilities being different. Government guidance in relation to behaviour policies is that they should comprise a mixture of sanctions and rewards, but this behaviourist view leads to a lack of equity of response to behaviour, again feeding into disproportionate numbers of children with SEND being excluded. The move from sanctions and rewards to the operation of a relationships policy where students' actions yield consequences, within a humanist ethos of understanding, would far more effectively support all children to learn to moderate and control their behaviour and would allow staff to apply the 'least dangerous assumption' when dealing with challenging students.

Key Words

Special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), relationships, behaviour policies, least dangerous assumption

Introduction

With the increased inclusion of students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in mainstream schools, teachers have the task of trying to develop a full understanding of every child and their behaviour. The range of difficulties a child may present with, and the complexity of conditions of many students with SEND, make it virtually impossible for teachers in mainstream school to understand and anticipate the behaviour management needs of every pupil. Many children with SEND present challenges to teachers through their difficulty in following school rules and lack of recognition of authority, and may behave in ways that are generally considered unacceptable. This challenging behaviour may occur as a secondary issue stemming from a primary difficulty such as a communication disorder, or be viewed as a primary problem in itself, with children being given labels such as 'social and emotional and behavioural difficulties' (SEBD). In the interest of equality, the reactions and sanctions incurred by students with SEND are generally the same as for all students, however, as I shall argue below, this is unlikely to promote equity. UK Government statistics (Department for Education, 2015a) indicate that students with SEND are 9 times more likely to be permanently excluded from school than their more typical classmates, making up 70% of all exclusions. In addition, as highlighted by England's Commissioner for Children (Atkinson, 2013), and again in a Guardian newspaper report in 2015, children with SEND are also subject to illegal exclusions which will not be included in the government statistics. We can conclude from this that students with SEND who also have challenging behaviour are posing the greatest challenges to school behaviour policies and teacher understanding.

It is possible that children with SEND may sometimes know that what they are doing is wrong and could possibly inhibit their poor behaviour and yet choose to behave in an unacceptable way. However, it is my belief that many children with SEND have less control over their behaviour, and

possibly more sensitivities to provocation, than their classmates. It is not possible to know when a child would be capable of exerting self-control, therefore students with SEND are probably punished for behaviour that was beyond their control at the relevant time leading to them feeling misunderstood and poorly treated. At best being misunderstood can undermine the student and impact on their self-esteem, at worst it can lead to further challenging behaviour that can, and as statistics indicate often does, ultimately end in exclusion. Unjust punishments potentially provide an alternative explanation for the numbers of students with SEND who are excluded. I would go further to say that teachers, through their desire to be 'fair', to treat all students the same, and to apply school rules, can inadvertently cause or exacerbate poor student behaviour. The solution to this appears to me to quite straightforward, as I outline below.

Policy and advice

UK Government guidance to all schools in developing their behaviour management policies focuses on the consistent applications of rewards and sanctions (Department for Education, 2016). They highlight that 'Good schools encourage good behaviour through a mixture of high expectations, clear policy and an ethos which fosters discipline and mutual respect between pupils, and between staff and pupils' (Department for Education, 2016, p.8). Having identified the value of the positive the remainder of the guidance focuses on sanctions. Within this there is concentrated advice about the management of detentions, seclusion, confiscation of items and 'Power to use reasonable force' (p.12). Overall then the government appears to give credence to the effectiveness of sanctions, the only caveat being that they must be employed within guidelines and consistently. The use of rewards and sanctions is straightforward behaviourism (McAllistaire, 2014). Good behaviour will be encouraged because it will be noticed and reinforced, while poor behaviour, which is punished, will decrease since the punishments act as deterrents for future behaviour. However, even within behaviourists there is the recognition that giving poor behaviour attention, through punishment, can act as a reward rendering the sanctions ineffective.

UK legislation states that punishments must be proportionate and 'reasonable in all the circumstances and that account must be taken of the pupil's age, any special educational needs or disability they may have' (Department for Education, 2016, p. 7). This relates to the issue of equality of behaviour management i.e. giving the same rewards and sanctions to everyone, as opposed to equity, which makes provision for different reactions to students on the grounds in inherent differences. It is left up to school leaders to interpret and apply government guidance. In order to take account of a pupil's SEND teachers need to understand the full implications of their primary and secondary difficulties, before deciding upon a 'reasonable' sanction. In my experience this can be a contentious issue in schools where there is frequently a view that rules must be applied in the same way to everyone, and allowing someone a lesser or no sanction on the grounds of their SEND would undermine discipline in general. Teachers can be very vocal in suggesting that it would not be fair to 'let him off just because he has SEND'. All of this is underpinned by a view of discipline as stemming from rules and teacher control rather than the building of positive relationships. It allows little space for the development of self-determination or agency or, indeed, the adoption of positive attitudes towards behaviour and learning for their own sake. This stance cannot be seen as beneficial for any student, but even less so for those, with SEND, who are already struggling with self-control and for whom success at school and beyond is at risk.

The UK Government's behaviour advisor has provided a checklist for school and classroom management (Taylor, 2011). His focus is on whole school management and he has little to suggest specifically for students with SEND. He indicates schools should 'Have clear plans for pupils likely to misbehave and ensure staff are aware of them. Put in place suitable support for pupils with

behavioural difficulties' (p. 4) but does not elaborate on these. He also acknowledges that in his consultations schools are frequently concerned with 'making sure all adults in the room know how to respond to sensitive pupils with special needs' (p.2) but does not go on to suggest ways in which this might be done. So, the dilemma for school leaders and teachers, as I see it, is whether to have a set of rules which lead to a set of sanctions that are applied in blanket fashion to everyone, or to adapt and adjust sanctions according to judgement of a specific individual's needs in a specific situation. Neither of these would appear to be ideal, and there can be an alternative.

Teachers increasingly say they are 'child-centred' and humanistic, yet many schools adopt a behaviourist system of rewards and punishments to drive, rather than motivate, children to acceptable behaviour. The UK Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice (Department for Education, 2015b) instructs schools to adopt a child-centred approach to students with SEND. The focus for effective teaching and behaviour management is to take an individualistic approach which puts the child at the centre, includes them in decision making, along with their parents, and stresses frequent review of teaching and approach. This appears to move away from a pure behaviourist theoretical underpinning to more of a humanistic one and would seem to be a positive step forward in terms of how teachers think about pupils with SEND, looking to understand their behaviour and learning. If this is applied only to students with SEND it seems to me that all other pupils could claim a lack of equity.

The least dangerous assumption and positive approaches

The criterion of the 'least dangerous assumption' (Donnellan, 1984) has long guided me in my work with children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). This principle, together with a humanistic and child-centred stance, means that when we do not know why a child behaves in a certain way (which is most of the time) we must presume that they are doing the best that they can do in that moment. For me it also acknowledges that students may appear to be in control and making conscious decisions when they are not e.g. a student with autism who leaves the room without permission may appear to have just wanted a break, when in fact they may have been struggling with sensory overload from noise within the classroom. Many children with a range of conditions struggle with sensory input and self-regulation but the symptoms of too much or too little input may look the same to the observer although they require very different remedies. Taken to the extreme if a child is aggressive towards an adult the least dangerous assumption is that the child was trying hard not to hurt anyone but felt so frightened or angry that they could not control themselves in a situation where they perceived the adult to be threatening them. Let me say at this point that I am not advocating that we condone aggressive or other poor behaviour, or that we do nothing about it. Rather I want to call for blanket adoption of positive approaches to relationship building, with students incurring consequences appropriate to their actions rather than sanctions, and with rewards being primarily intrinsic, so that the least dangerous assumption will always be adhered to. The framework for this will be a relationships policy that encourages control of behaviour, to enhance the student's learning as a goal itself to enhance the development of the child. My basic premise is that teachers cannot know, in depth and detail, all of the implications of the disorders which students frequently have, and therefore cannot reliably moderate their own behaviour within the deterministic paradigm and 'do the right thing' for every young person.

O'Brien (2013) agrees that the model for understanding student behaviour that is adopted by a teacher determines the way that they respond to the behaviour. He describes a number of ways in which teachers may view a child's behaviour. If it is seen as originating from within the student the perception is likely to be that the behaviour will never change. If it is seen as occurring because of the context it can lead to blaming the system instead of taking responsibility. He recommends that

the view that is mostly likely to lead to positive changes in the child's behaviour is the acknowledgement that behaviour is affected by the context, the situation, factors connected to the child's condition and is always communicative. We need, therefore, to put our efforts into trying to understand and develop rather than to control.

Since our understanding of many of the conditions that children have is still incomplete or disputed there is frequently a need to interpret their behaviour in order to try to make sense of it. This is particularly so given that those that we might ask for explanations, the students themselves, are frequently unable to provide them due to communication difficulties possibly in conjunction with a lack of self-insight. Bercow (2008) uncovered widespread lack of understanding of communication disorders within schools and the Communication Trust report 'A Generation Adrift' (Lee, 2013) indicates a persisting problem. Rates of communication impairment have been found to range from 10% to 50% in primary schools in areas of deprivation. Long-term communication difficulties are found in 10% of students, and 7% have specific language impairment as their primary need although only 3% of students across the board are identified. In addition, many children whose primary diagnosis is autism, ADHD and/or learning difficulties will have associated communication difficulties and most children with SEND will have speech, language and communication needs. What is of particular concern, beyond the difficulties that these students will typically have in coping with classroom learning and socialising, is that in a majority of cases their difficulties will go unrecognised and unsupported. These students are likely to struggle to understand, or have to concentrate and work harder in order to do so, particularly in classrooms where it is estimated that 90% of the teaching is through verbal instruction (Meredith and Sellman, 2013). While a student is making sense of one instruction the teacher may have given a couple more which are missed. The experiences of children with receptive comprehension difficulties in primary schools can compound into a way of dealing with the world that seeks to cover up and avoid complex situations that they think they won't understand. Children need to be able to communicate effectively to learn, socialise, develop emotionally and organise and control their own behaviour. So just in respect of one crucial aspect of child development we have large numbers of students with complex needs who are not identified or understood by teachers, and whose needs have a direct impact on their behaviour.

Take, for example, a secondary student with a label of ADHD who has acted aggressively within a classroom and is sent out. When faced by a member of staff who wants to understand and asks for the student's version of events, the student can perceive this as a further difficulty or even provocation, which may well lead to an escalation of unacceptable behaviour. Most students, in a heightened state of arousal will be unable to take in and process what is said to them for a significant length of time. If a child with a label of ADHD or ASD brings a weapon into the classroom many school policies will understandably state that the student must be permanently excluded, in the interests of safeguarding the rest of the school population. However, if it is not clear that the student fully understood the risks and consequences of their own behaviour, is exclusion the most appropriate response and how do school leaders ensure that child's wellbeing too? These examples are at the extreme range of causes of exclusions. The Department of Education (2015a) statistics indicate that the biggest cause of exclusions, accounting for 32.7%, is 'persistent disruptive behaviour'. Many children with SEND will have considerable difficulties in maintaining focus and obeying rules in the classroom, even when they understand and remember them.

Conclusion

To avoid the need for teachers to attempt to grasp full understanding of the nuances of needs of all students with SEND, or the problem of providing different rules for different students, schools can adopt relationships policies that put prime focus on teaching, developing and supporting positive

behaviour between peers and to and from pupils and teachers. In order to fulfil government guidance regarding sanctions the possibility of excluding a student would probably still be available, however this would be unlikely to ever need to be used. Instead of having teachers and pupils spend time in detentions students would discuss their behaviour, to the best of their ability, with staff within a context of learning to moderate and exercise self-control. In line with the Code of Practice teachers would spend time with pupils and their parents getting to know and understand their specific needs in place of getting angry and frustrated about 'persistent disruptive behaviour'. Current behaviour policies are clearly not working for a large percentage of the school population, as witnessed by exclusion figures that still show bias towards disadvantaged groups, but this issue goes beyond management of what is acceptable or poor behaviour. It links to the issue of the purpose and underlying philosophy of education. If we are to have just and fair institutions that support all students to become self-fulfilled and positive citizens, we need to model this through the way that we respond to them at every aspect of their schooling. I argue that this should be through firm boundaries, kindness, support and application of the 'least dangerous assumption'.

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