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Identifying and Engaging 'Disengaged' and 'Disruptive' Students

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This paper outlines concerns in the UK about students who are disruptive in class and/or disengaged from the normal educational process. After discussing who these students are and estimating their numbers, the paper looks at recent research on how best to meet their needs. This research indicates the appropriateness of the British government's recent softening of its position on 'inclusion'. The studies cited indicate that far more can be done in 'normal' school settings to promote engagement but that special provision can sometimes be more appropriate. If social inclusion as adults is the overarching aim, what matters more than the physical location of the education offered are the qualities, skills, commitment and energies of the professionals involved. The values of staff, the quality of their relationships with the students and their imaginative, flexible delivery of appropriate curricula are crucial, as is the need to support these professionals in their demanding task.

Keywords: disengaged, disruptive, engagement, inclusion, UK

Introduction

Improving services for students said to be 'disengaged' and/or 'disruptive' has proved to be of enduring concern to the governments of Scotland (SEED 2001,2006, 2007), Wales (NBAR 2007), the Republic of Ireland (DES 2005) and - the focus of this paper - England. The English government has invested much political and indeed financial capital in this area. It has a 'Behaviour and Attendance Strand' as part of its national strategy for secondary schools (DfES 2003). It commissioned first a detailed look at challenging behaviour from its schools inspectorate (Ofsted 2005), and then an overlapping investigation by practitioners led by the headteacher, Alan Steer (DfES 2005). In 2007 it issued detailed new guidance (DfES 2007a) to schools on behaviour issues.

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In the pages below will be discussed who the 'disengaged and/or disruptive' students are, the range of educational provision they attend, and a summary of findings on 'good practice'. The latter findings are largely derived from a range of research projects conducted by the writer with colleagues at the University of Birmingham EBD¹ Research Team between 1995 and 2003 (e.g. Cole, Visser and Upton 1998; Daniels et al. 1998; Daniels et al. 2003) but are echoed in a wider range of literature reported by Cole and Visser (2005) and Cole (2007). The paper ends with some wider thoughts springing from the writer's research, observations and involvement in the English school behaviour scene over the last decade.

It is argued below that more can be done to engage the interests and to boost the achievements of more of these often teacher-resistant, even 'adult-aversive', children and young people in 'mainstream' schools as well as those placed in special units or special schools. The research evidence indicates that it is not so much the physical location of where these students are educated that matters: rather the qualities, commitment and energies of the professionals working with them. Indeed, the English government has gradually adopted a much broader and realistic definition of what 'inclusion' should be about (e.g. DfES 2004), recognising that it is more than merely maintaining children and young persons in or on 'mainstream' school sites. Inspectors' reports in 2005 and 2006 (Ofsted 2005, 2006) on some special schools and off-site units have indicated that they can make very good provision for some students with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, appreciated by parents and the students - although many specialist sites continue to find 'success' elusive. In the past three decades there have been concerns about the standards of education and behaviour achieved in many 'BESD' schools and PRUs (eg. Ofsted 2007). This is unsurprising however, given their intake of students and the difficulties of recruiting and maintaining highly skilled and motivated staff in some establishments. The national government now accepts that special schools and other alternative provision (numbers in off-site units have quadrupled over the last 15 years) have a long-term future and that 'social inclusion' as adults, can be better promoted - albeit for a small minority - in such settings than in mainstream schools.

Who are the 'disengaged and/or disruptive'?

A deliberately loose term has been employed given the well-chronicled difficulties of providing exact definitions (see for example, Cole and Visser 2005). The term is used to encompass all students reported by schools, in their annual census returns, to the English Department for Education and Skills as having 'statements' of special educational needs or identified as needing additional help to address

their Behaviour, Emotional and Social Difficulties (BESD). At the start of 2006, there were about 135,000 such students, with the great majority attending mainstream schools, and nearly 13,000 in special schools and Pupil Referral Units (DfES 2007a). The percentage of students in BESD schools and PRUs is about 0.4% of the total number of children of compulsory school age in England, a figure which has remained fairly consistent over the last two decades. A small and declining percentage of this group will be residential, usually boarding for Monday to Thursday nights, at special schools with care facilities.

There are also clearly many thousands of disengaged, often disruptive students, who have not been put forward for identification as having the special educational need now called 'BESD'. They have been identified as having 'behaviour' problems, to be dealt with by pastoral or 'behaviour' staff, rather than by mainstream schools' special educational or learning support staff. It is not possible to put a figure on this large group, given statistics are not kept nationally, and that practice can vary substantially from school to school in identifying such students. The merely 'naughty but normal' in one school can be seen as having severe disruptive behaviour in another. However, it is likely that in England, as has been estimated in the United States (Kauffman, 2001), this group will amount to somewhere between 3% and 6% of the school population (see also Cole and Visser 2005).

Another group of students within this category are those manifesting emotional problems. These 'acting in' children with internalised, perhaps mental health difficulties, similarly find great difficulty in engaging with the school curriculum. Disruptive and/or disengaged students also include those who are 'permanently excluded' from school. Following the careers of nearly 200 young people excluded from schools, Daniels et al. (2003) suggested that many of these students could also be grouped as follows:

- In a relatively few cases:
 - Extreme 'family background' cases (e.g. parent or sister jailed for murder);
 - Chronic offenders (some were steeped in usually minor crime);
 - Lives dominated by drugs/ solvent abuse
- Far more commonly:
 - young people bored with school
 - Aggressive/ 'acting out' young people;
 - 'Dripping tap' children (many of the Daniels et al., 2003 sample, had been involved in 'minor' but repeated disruptive behaviour from an early age, sometimes before the start of formal schooling. Some years later another fairly minor action would be the 'last straw')

for a school, bringing about the child's exclusion);

Some students clearly fall into more than one category. There are also some students whose disruption is primarily associated with biological or neurological conditions, most notably ADHD, which were perhaps a major cause of their behaviour difficulties in school.

Greater 'engagement' in mainstream schools is possible

Daniels et al. (1998) reviewed relevant research literature before investigating the practice in relation to students with social, emotional and behaviour difficulties in a range of contrasting English schools. They found that schools noted for their good practice with such students did not use highly specialised approaches nor had access to additional support services. They had head teachers or other senior staff who were sympathetic to and understanding of the needs of these students and helped to create an inclusive environment and ethos, where every child was valued. They could be said to be 'talking', 'learning and listening' and 'caring' settings: collaborative, communicating schools where teachers, teaching assistants and school leaders felt free to share difficulties with each other in the staff room and to help each other develop appropriate approaches to children presenting challenging behaviour.

The Daniels et al. (1998) research team observed teachers in classrooms and witnessed the extraordinary care and commitment often shown. Staff valued the students, did their utmost to make them feel a sense of belonging to the class, and was willing to go that extra distance to help the students. They were also good transmitters of knowledge, using a wide range of classroom strategies to help the students achieve high but realistic objectives. These schools had achieved a good balance between academic expectations and pastoral support. They were careful to identify learning difficulties, which might be exacerbating the students' behaviour in some classrooms, particularly where less sympathetic or less skilled teachers were encountered. The schools appreciated that some students clearly responded better to practical and experiential learning than to demanding abstract thought and approaches that frequently highlighted their difficulties in academic writing. They knew that a practical approach, linked closer to the student's present and likely future world of employment and leisure, was likely to be seen as more relevant and engaging by the students. They also knew that despite these concerted efforts,, there would remain a small percentage of children and young people, whose engagement could not be retained and who might be better placed in settings other than the normal comprehensive schools

(Daniels et al. 2003).

Such findings were hardly startling and were to be echoed in Ofsted (2005) and the Steer Report (DfES 2005). Further work by the Birmingham EBD Research Team (Cole, Visser and Daniels 2000), underlined the findings of Daniels et al. (1998). Cole, Visser and Daniels (2000) looked at the City of Birmingham's 'Framework for Intervention' and how the skills of teachers in mainstream schools could be enhanced and behaviour improved through the recruitment of 'Behaviour Co-ordinators' (BCos), supported by a team of local authority advisory teachers and educational psychologists. BCos helped colleagues develop skills effectively through observation, auditing and coaching, thereby impacting on more students who might have become seriously disengaged and disruptive. They encouraged teachers and assistants first to examine systems, including whole-school behaviour policies but in particular the ingredients of the more immediate behaviour environment, such as how the students entered the classroom, seating and furniture arrangements, ease of availability of equipment, playground arrangements, and the impact of teaching style, such as use of voice and pace of lessons. A requisite for effectiveness is that BCos have the time to pursue this role, the teachers they help are given time to review and to practice improvements in their practice - and that the Framework for Intervention is whole-heartedly endorsed by senior staff. Slight variations of the Birmingham scheme have been adapted by most local authorities in Scotland under the name 'Staged Intervention', and some of its characteristics have been incorporated into the English government's National Behaviour Strategy (DfES 2003).

The value of 'on-site' behaviour units', now 'Learning Support Units' in England and 'Pupil Support Bases' in Scotland, has also been re-emphasised in the last decade. A small study supervised by the present writer (Sutton 2002) has found that LSUs have a role to play in promoting re-engagement and improving challenging behaviour (cf. DfES 2002) when they operate according to the following conditions:

- LSUs are not seen as a separate, sometimes 'special needs', entity;
- staff other than the LSU manager contribute to their running/ curriculum delivery
- the units have clear entry and exit criteria so that they do not become 'clogged up' with long-stay pupils;
- they are not seen as a threat to school standards of behaviour;
- they are staffed by skilled teachers and support staff;

- they are supported by a local authority's specialist support services.

The essence of good practice (whatever the setting)

More disengaged and disruptive students can be retained, and have their needs addressed, in mainstream settings but it seems that no country or area of the UK, has managed to keep all children in mainstream schools. Throughout the UK, there remain special schools, special units, special classes in 'further education colleges' (for adolescents over 14 years of age and for adults) and other forms of alternative provision for students whose behaviour has proved too challenging for mainstream schools. Findings from Daniels et al. (2003) added to this writer's argument (Cole et al. 1998; Cole 1999) that whether the location is 'mainstream', 'alternative', 'unit' or 'special school', the essence of good practice is essentially the same. It consists of key factors in four areas:

- Physical environment
- Students and parents
- Programmes (policies and practice)
- Professionals

The physical environment

In relation to residential care for children with complex difficulties, the American pioneers Redl and Wineman (1952), talked evocatively of the need for 'a home that smiles, space which allows, props which invite'. The same principles should be applied in educational settings. Engaging challenging students is clearly easier in a pleasant, well-equipped and appropriately sized physical environment - in classroom, workshop, playground, and other areas of educational contexts. Size (often better small and domestic-like), comfort ('bodily comfort speaketh the loudest') and sufficient space to allow running around, as well as more formal areas for physical education and sport, are key aspects of an engaging physical environment (Cole et al. 1998). Yet, too often students with complex behavioural needs are accommodated in sub-standard, cramped or otherwise inappropriate physical environments (Cole 2002). When an old building is declared unfit for some other purpose, it is sometimes used for students with severe behaviour difficulties, such as for PRUs. LSUs are too often sited in redundant and decrepit 'pre-fabs' at the extremities of the school grounds. It has been encouraging however, to see that over the last few years some local authorities in England have invested heavily in creating purpose-built new special

schools for students with SEBD.

Students and parents

Crucial to the engagement of all students, including many at risk of exclusion, are headteachers and governors who are reluctant to exclude students but yet have some control over admissions to and transfers from their schools, either through 'managed moves' or occasionally through exclusion. Cole et al. (1998) reported various headteachers complaining about their schools being viewed by the local authority as receptacles for too wide a range of highly disruptive young people, placed into or maintained at their schools against the judgement of these heads, with serious negative consequences for the well-being of others. The English government accepts that heads do need to have an important say in these matters, and that there are times when the greater good of the community and particularly other children and young people at risk has to be put ahead of the interests of the individual child or young person. This is a difficult area to which there is never likely to be an easy straightforward answer.

In contrast to the above issue, it is not difficult to see that staff in all provision must do their utmost to win over often resistant parents. If a child or young person is to continue to live with his or her parents, very little progress will be made, without pro-active policy and practice, time and resources to help parents get to know and to trust the key personnel working with their child (Daniels et al. 1998, 2003; Cole et al. 1998).

In relation to the optimum number of students at a special school or unit, there should be a sufficient number to permit the employment of a number of teachers to offer a broad curriculum and to allow for the formation of same- or similar-age peer groups. Having said that, however, there may occasionally be good reasons for very small units or schools, particularly for students with severe mental health difficulties.

Programmes (policies and practice)

The research of the Birmingham University EBD Team supported the stance taken by the Elton Report (DES 1989) and recent documents such as Ofsted (2005) and DfES (2007a). Better engagement of the disruptive student is undoubtedly helped by educational establishments having a clear view of what they are about and how they should be organised. This clarity of vision and practice should be expressed through comprehensive 'whole-school' policies on education, care and behaviour management. These policies should be planned and regularly reviewed by all staff, and also reflect the

views of the students themselves. This process would ensure both staff and students would own the policies. Imposed policies are likely to be ignored or resisted by those meant to carry them out. A collegiate approach, albeit under strong, respected leadership, has long been recognised as best in relation to children who present challenging behaviour (e.g. Cooper, Smith and Upton 1994).

There must also be individualised, 'personalised' plans for the education, behaviour and where necessary, care, of students who are disengaged and disruptive. Again, the child or young person, and most often his or her parents, should be part of this planning and review. These plans should

- be implemented in a flexible, responsive manner;
- encompass 'small steps' target setting;
- build on the student's existing strengths, rather than repeatedly emphasising areas of failure.

The implementation of the plans has to be in such a way that the student feels valued, accepted, involved, and thus has a sense of belonging in class and in the wider school community. The implementation has to involve key professionals, who know the student and family well and who can thus empathise with their likely complex social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. It is very difficult, sometimes impossible, for teachers to 'get through' to challenging students with merely a mechanical, even if skilled, technocratic approach. The student must see and experience the professional's 'real self', namely a caring, committed and skilled adult who respects them.

In recent years there has been a welcome move in the UK away from an over-burdened, prescriptive and excessively 'academic' national curriculum, particularly in secondary schools. A recent government review '2020 Vision' (DfES 2006) sketched a future where schools address students' social and emotional needs and make learning 'personalised'. Teaching should be matched to the individual student's learning needs by:

- Projects which cut across national curriculum subject boundaries;
- Flexible timetabling;
- Developing 'learning how to learn' skills e.g. oral communication, teamwork, evaluating data, creativity, reliability skills;
- Formative assessment /less 'testing'– 'stage not age'
- All-age schools/ mixed aged groups;

- 'Learning spaces' as well as 'classrooms';
- Flexibility of curriculum building on the student's present level of learning and understanding, interests and what s/he sees as relevant (DfES 2006).

The messages of '2020 Vision' and the government's recent attention to the 'Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning' (DfES 2007b) are encouraging. They provide for time- and evidence-based good practice with students who are disengaged or disruptive in all educational settings. They encourage working through positive *relationships* and paying close attention to '*re-signification*'. The way to get many students to re-engage or to be less disruptive, is to help them to see themselves in a different, more positive light (to 'resignify' themselves), through experience of success and achievement, which boosts their self-esteem (see for example, Cooper 1993).

This is not, of course, a new viewpoint. In 1938, R. A. Dewhurst, the headteacher of the second state-run special school for students with behaviour problems in England, had this to say about his school in Oxford:

There is something that every child can do well...and we try to find what that something is...When proficiency is found the child acquires a feeling of achievement and projects this feeling towards work of which he was previously afraid. Confidence in his work dispels the child's need of gaining compensation through obtrusive and difficult behaviour, so his energy is now directed into right channels and the behaviour problem clears up (cited in Cole et al. 1998).

The Professionals

This final factor of good practice in the education of students who are disruptive and/or disengaged, is probably the most important. In the last two decades, there has been a welter of 'reforms' in the UK, such as new laws, guidance, initiatives, revised inspection standards and academic targets, which has shuffled around structures governing educational and care settings in an unsettling manner, arguably adding to the stresses of those working with challenging students. Largely absent from most of this activity has been a serious concern for the importance of staff well-being, despite ongoing and perhaps increasing recruitment and retention issues in child care services, PRUs, BESD schools, and probably in mainstream school behaviour support teams.

The staff must be helped consistently to live up to the factors identified in the national study of BESD schools (Cole et al. 1998), as being associated with the most effective practice. Professionals need ongoing good mental and physical health to plan efficiently, to be organised; consistent and fair; humorous; understanding; patient; give positive reinforcement; to be firm; to set clear but 'flexible' boundaries; to be confident, skilled at their subject; masters of classroom craft (see Kounin 1977). They need to have a wide range of behaviour management skills. The staff needs to ensure that their own behaviour is always a good model for their students to follow. They are more likely to be successful if they think beyond the classroom and of 'life-space' working. Being an expert purveyor of knowledge in a particular subject area in the confines of a set lesson-time is not likely to be enough. There needs to be an emotional engagement between teacher and students, one that maintains and develops that essential close relationship between them.

It is crucial to have in place skilled and highly committed professionals with the right values and the necessary skills, and then do everything possible to maintain these people's energy, enthusiasm and well-being through informal but effective supervision, other support and ongoing professional development. In England, there has probably been an over-attention to children's rights in the name of 'child protection', and neglect of staff rights and the need for adults' protection and personal well-being. This results in staff working under unnecessary stress and with only a fragile confidence, making it difficult for them to maintain the quality and depth of relationship with the students as they share the same daily 'life-space'.

The staff needs ongoing nurturing and support from colleagues and senior staff and local authority managers. They need to feel sure that if - occasionally - they show very human reactions and sometimes failings under extreme or repeated provocation from challenging students or parents, they will receive a sympathetic, helpful and slow-to-condemn response from managers at their school or in the local authority's offices - and, sometimes, in the media. The present climate seems to expect those working with the most difficult students to be paragons of patience, virtue and skill, with central and local government officers, agencies and media very quick to condemn and reluctant to support or recognise the frequent, steady successes of the professionals devoting their lives to students who are disengaged and disruptive.

Conclusion

A study by the present writer of research and practice in the United States and other countries suggests that the evidence from the UK reported in this paper is likely to be echoed in many parts of the world and in relation to many periods of history. Quotations from the nineteenth century could have been used to illustrate some key points, such as the importance of using collaborative approaches or listening to the voice of the child). Pioneers in the SEBD field before the Second World War, were well aware of enduring issues, particularly the interaction of learning difficulties and behavioural ones or the need to give young people curriculum experiences that play to their potential rather than emphasise their difficulties (Cole, 1989). The chronic nature of many of the key issues is both disappointing and yet hopeful. In a pessimistic vein, a small proportion of children and young people would seem to have been disengaged and disruptive no matter what the age - and many teachers and other professionals have struggled to help them. In a more optimistic mood, there is now substantial evidence over many generations, that if attention is given to the key points made in this paper, then the extent of disengagement and disruption in schools can be substantially reduced. It is fairly well established that the most significant area, saved for discussion to the last, is 'the people factor' - ensuring that the disengaged and disruptive are helped by skilled, motivated, cared-for and supported professionals, who are deeply imbued with appropriate values.

Notes

1 'EBD', 'BESD' and 'SEBD' are used to signify the same group of children. The writer far prefers SEBD but the English government used 'EBD' until 2001 when it changed to 'BESD' in its Special Educational Needs Code of Practice. Scotland continues to use 'SEBD'.

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