

Using support groups to improve behaviour

An evaluation of an intervention to support pupils perceived as having social and emotional behavioural difficulties (SEBD)

How can we support children who have been identified as having social and emotional behavioural difficulties? **Joan Mowat** reports on the success of an intervention using support groups for pupils in Scotland.

Concerns about pupil behaviour have come increasingly to the fore in media coverage and in a raft of UK and Scottish Government policies and initiatives such as the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning Programme (DfES, 2005) and Better Behaviour – Better Learning (Scotland) (SEED, 2001). They are also reflected, within the Scottish context, in the longitudinal surveys of discipline within Scottish Schools (Munn *et al.*, 2004 and Wilkin *et al.*, 2006) and the study commis-

class teacher accounts were more ambivalent and highlight the context-related nature of pupil behaviour

sioned by the GTCS (Adams, 2005).

This article focuses upon the evaluation of an intervention, designed by the

author (Depute (Scottish context) Headteacher and Project Leader), to provide support to pupils who had been identified by their pastoral care teachers as either having SEBD or being at risk of developing it. The context of the study is a secondary school in the West of Scotland, situated in an area of multiple deprivation (SENSP, 2003). The approach was developed over a seven year period, involving 150 pupils and

16 members of staff. In that time, only one pupil failed to complete the intervention for reasons other than leaving the catchment area of the school and one further pupil was permanently excluded.

Nature of the intervention

Support groups of three to six pupils met weekly with a Support Group Leader (SGL) for one hour per week over (around) 20 weeks. SGLs were all volunteers drawn from pastoral care, behaviour support staff and members of staff who ‘wanted to make a difference’. The author led the initiative within the school. She liaised with senior management, communicated with all relevant stakeholders, organised materials and staff development activities, acted as mentor for staff new to the approach and undertook the necessary administration to ensure the smooth-running of the groups. She also led groups in order to gain insight and to lead by example. Pupils were initially consulted about their involvement before parents were formally approached to seek permission for their child’s participation. Parents were invited to an information session at which they had the

opportunity to meet SGLs, ask questions and raise issues of concern.

Within groups, pupils were involved in collaborative activities designed to foster reflection and encourage discussion. They also selected weekly individual targets, with the assistance of the SGL, which were then monitored daily by class teachers, the SGL and parents. In addition, pupils completed a support group diary, which was designed to enable them to learn from their experiences,

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promoting the transfer of learning.

The approach aims to help pupils to gain an understand-

ing of themselves and others (Gardner's personal intelligences (Gardner, 2006)) such that it impacts upon their interpersonal relationships, self-control, capacity for empathy, the development of self-esteem and confidence and more positive dispositions towards learning and school, helping them to re-engage with education.

The principal influence underlying the approach is 'Teaching for Understanding', a framework to foster deeper learning developed by the team at Project Zero, the Harvard Graduate School of Education, led by David Perkins, Howard Gardner and Zeto Perrone.

According to Perkins (Perkins, 1998), understanding is the capacity to work flexibly with one's knowledge such that it leads to new insights – a transformative process. The approach also draws on theories of transfer, motivation (Dweck, 2000, McLean, 2003), multiple intelligence theory (Gardner, 2006), emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1996) and thinking skills using the 'Activating Children's Thinking Skills' framework (McGuinness, 2006), which is derived from the work of Swartz and Parks (1994).

Nature of the study

Study design

Over a five-year period, the study followed the progress of four cohorts of secondary 2 (S2) pupils aged 12–14 years (69 in total) who participated in support groups over the period of the study, and their related stakeholders – SGLs, class teachers, headteacher, depute (S3, year 10) and parents. The progress of each of these cohorts was followed from the commencement of S1 (retrospectively on a range of measures), through the period of intervention in S2 until the end of S3 or S4. As well as evaluating the implementation of the intervention, the study also tested established theory and sought new understanding (Bassey, 1999).

The study is framed around four research questions (Table 1).

Research questions 1 and 2 ask 'Is teaching for understanding happening?' and 'Does it make a difference?' These questions test established theory – can constructivist theories of learning (the 'Teaching for Understanding Framework') be applied to the affective field (which is concerned with the social and emotional development of pupils) such that they impact on the range of desired outcomes expressed within the aims of the approach?

The study also set out to reach a deeper understanding of the complex set of circumstances surrounding SEBD, to establish the strengths and weaknesses of the intervention and the variables that impact upon pupil outcome (the focus of research question 3) and to establish what the implications of the study are for current imperatives within Scottish education and for knowledge transformation, adding to the bodies of knowledge within the respective fields (research question 4).

An extensive literature review supported the study, drawing from a wide range of fields

Table 1 Research questions

Research questions

1	<p>Is teaching for understanding happening?</p> <p>To what extent have pupils succeeded or failed in developing further:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • understanding of self (intrapersonal intelligence) • understanding of others (interpersonal intelligence) • insight into their interpersonal relationships?
2	<p>Does it make a difference?</p> <p>To what extent, if any, have pupils been able to demonstrate the capacities to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • regulate their behaviour with good judgement in a range of contexts? • develop further, empathy and interpersonal skills? <p>as reflected in the:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • development of confidence and self-esteem • development of more positive dispositions towards learning and towards school.
3	<p>What are the strengths and weaknesses of the approach?</p> <p>What are the variables which impact upon pupil outcome?</p>
4	<p>What are the implications of the study?</p> <p>What can be learned from the study to inform practice and policy?</p>

(reflecting the influences upon the approach), but focused principally upon social constructivist theory, the affective field (theories of intelligence, theory of mind, the development of moral values and theories of motivation), social inclusion and the management of change.

Methodology

The study was principally qualitative but also draws from quantitative data. It used:

- open- and closed-questionnaires
- semi-structured interviews
- informal observation
- documentation and statistical data relating to pupil attendance, attainment in national tests in English and discipline.

Benchmark measures were established (retrospectively) for the support group (SG) population at the start of secondary schooling and pupil progress was followed through

until the end of S3 (year 10). The SG population was compared to the national, local authority and school populations on each of these measures. In addition, pupil attitudes, on a range of indicators (interpersonal relationships, self-esteem, dispositions towards learning and school), established by means of a semantic differential scale, were measured pre- and post-intervention and compared to those of a comparator group of pupils within the same cohort who had not been referred to senior management for indiscipline. All pupils were interviewed at the end of the intervention and a sample of pupils (representing a third of SG pupils within the study), selected by means of a stratified random sample, was interviewed one to two years after the end of intervention to establish whether any effects observed lasted over time.

Six in-depth studies (drawn from a single SG cohort) were conducted, drawing upon the accounts of the pupils, their parents, SGL and pastoral care teachers (if not the SGL)

and from the full range of data (as it pertains to all pupils within the study). A group interview was also held with SGLs, and the headteacher and depute (S3, year 10) were

interviewed.

parents felt the intervention had helped their children to focus upon their behaviour

These interviews were conducted by Stuart Hall (Scottish Council for Research in Education), utilising interview

schedules devised and analysed by the author. A stratified, multi-phase sampling method was used to select the case studies, meaning that different criteria were used at each stage of the selection process, for example, the group to which the pupil belonged and the gender of the pupil.

Qualitative data was analysed via content analysis and quantitative data via parametric and non-parametric (chi-squared) tests.

Findings

Is teaching for understanding happening?

From a constructivist perspective, understanding arises as a consequence of thinking. People actively seek to make connections between the incoming, new knowledge and their previous knowledge and understanding, which is unique to each individual, drawn from their life experiences. According to Piaget (Donaldson, 1987), people either attempt to assimilate the new knowledge into their current ways of thinking or to make changes to their current ways of thinking to accommodate the new knowledge. As such, understanding cannot be transmitted from one person to another – people have to arrive at their own understandings and, from the perspective of David Perkins, as exemplified within the ‘Teaching for Understanding Framework’ (Perkins, 1998), it is in working actively with one’s knowledge that understanding is both developed

and demonstrated. In consequence, when asking if teaching for understanding is happening, the answer lies not in observing what teachers do but in evaluating the consequences of that endeavour – pupils’ learning.

The majority of pupils are considered by their SGLs to have developed insight into their values, beliefs, emotions and motivations and those of others, at least to an extent.

Some of the exercises helped him to think much more deeply about his behaviour and he found the pupil diary helpful in reflecting upon his behaviour and learning from it.

SGL

This is corroborated by pupil accounts in which the majority of SG pupils consider that their involvement had led to heightened awareness of their behaviour and insight into the consequences of their behaviour for themselves and others. Parents also felt that the intervention had helped their children to focus upon their behaviour and cited target-setting as being particularly beneficial in this respect.

Does it make a difference?

SGLs considered that the majority of pupils had developed **the capacity to regulate their behaviour** with good judgement in a range of contexts, at least to an extent. This is corroborated by pupil and parent accounts and in a statistically significant reduction in referrals for indiscipline and in exclusion openings, which is in contrast to the statistically significant increase in these measures for other pupils within the year group, a trend which continues into S3 (year 10). Class teacher accounts were more ambivalent and highlight the context-related nature of pupil behaviour.

The development of empathy and more positive interpersonal relationships is reflected in pupils’ more positive perceptions of their relationships (particularly with

teachers) and heightened awareness of the effects of their behaviour upon others.

It's not just 'me, me, me' but them. Never used to think about it before.

Student

Class teachers note some improvements in their relationships with SG pupils but less so in relation to pupils' relationships with peers. Parents and pupils commented upon the warmth in relationships between SGLs and pupils.

Made you feel welcome and it was amazing. He wasn't strict. Dead calm. You had a laugh and got to know him.

Student talking about his SGL

Whilst **self-esteem and confidence** were not considered to be an issue for some SG pupils, around half reported improvements. These positive changes were related most to the quality of communication and positive relationships within the group, reflected in 91 per cent of SG pupils identifying with 'being listened to'. Around half of SG pupils identified with 'being cared about', feeling happier and being able to talk about problems. The development of self-control and self-responsibility together with motivation to want to improve were also cited by SGLs and pupils as contributing towards self-esteem and confidence. Parents valued the opportunity which SGs offered for pupils to 'open up' within a safe environment.

The majority of pupils were regarded by their SGLs as having developed more positive dispositions towards learning and school to at least some extent.

Says he's staying on. Before he said he was leaving.

Student's mum

Class teachers' responses are more variable in this respect. It is evident that some pupils had been encouraged to reflect upon the

purpose of school and its relevance to their lives.

School was just a place you were sent to – you realised that you were there to learn. It's for a reason.

Student

However, the wide gap in attainment in national tests between SG pupils and all comparator groups, which was established in the benchmark measures, was still in evidence beyond the period of intervention (23 per cent and 14 per cent of SG pupils attained at least level D in reading and writing, respectively in comparison to 65 per cent and 50 per cent of the national cohort at the end of year 7).

The positive effects of participation within the intervention had remained with the vast majority of pupils within the retrospective sample up to two years after intervention. Almost all were able to identify something which they had taken away from participation within SGs.

I'd talk to other people now before going into a fight – give them a chance to apologise.

Student

However, **outcomes were not positive for all pupils.**

A charming rogue previously, now simply unpleasant.

Class teacher talking about student

A range of variables was identified by stakeholders as influencing pupil outcome.

Bringing this discussion together, it is evident that, to varying degrees and taking account of context, pupils had developed intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligence and that this had impacted on a range of positive outcomes, which would imply that teaching for understanding was indeed happening and that, for at least some pupils, it had made a difference.

What are the variables which impacted upon pupil outcome?

In analysing and synthesising the variables that impacted upon pupil outcomes, several broad themes emerged which, taken together, illuminate the study for others and establish general principles that may inform future practice.

Factors related to the support group

The quality of the materials and efficacy of the approach in fostering reflection upon behaviour emerged as significant factors. In particular, the **crucial role which the SGL plays** in:

- establishing the ethos of the group, fostering mutually respectful and trusting relationships and creating a safe environment in which pupils are able to talk freely and be listened to
- scaffolding and mediating learning, fostering the transfer of learning to other contexts

- supporting and challenging pupils and having faith in their capacity to change
- challenging limiting aspirations, opening wider horizons, helping pupils to see the value in education.

Factors related to the child

A range of factors interact with each other to make the process of change possible. The group served as a **community of practice** (Wenger *et al.*, 2002) in which the values, beliefs and practices become part of 'the way of being' – the culture – which, if internalised by the pupil, have the potential to effect change. Underlying change is the child's recognition of the need for change, a desire to improve, faith in the capacity to change (a sense of self-efficacy), a willingness to take responsibility for behaviour and the development of a sense of agency such that he/she has the confidence to put into practice in a range of contexts what has been learned within the group.



some pupils had been encouraged to reflect upon the purpose of school

Factors related to the wider school context

It is evident that **pupil response is highly context related**, which highlights the important role which the classroom teacher plays in fostering or impeding pupil progress. Learning difficulties need to be identified at an early stage and addressed adequately. Awareness of the potentially damaging effects of stereotyping and

discipline cannot be separated from the context in which it emanates

labelling needs to be balanced with the need to take pre-emptive action before problems become intractable. It is

important to adopt a **whole-school approach**, to ensure effective communication between all stakeholders, to lead by example, to put in place a programme of effective staff development, to ensure that the initiative is effectively managed and to monitor, evaluate and refine practice as required.

Factors beyond the school context

The **need for effective partnership working between the home and school** and between the school and external agencies is crucial, particularly in supporting the most vulnerable pupils. Discipline cannot be separated from the context in which it emanates and it is therefore important to ensure effective monitoring and evaluation of all of the school's policies, systems and practice if an effective climate for learning is to be established. **To focus solely on discipline is counter-productive.**

However, even in schools in which a whole-school approach is adopted there is a need to develop an understanding of the complex factors which militate against effective learning, particularly in schools in areas of multiple-deprivation, focussing in particular upon teacher expectations of pupil achievement. MacBeath *et al.* (2007)

and Lupton (2005) highlight the specific nature of the difficulties experienced by such schools, paralleled within this specific study, highlighting the **need to target resources effectively, efficiently and economically to ensure that provision meets need.**

Implications of the study for theory, practice and policy makers

One of the most important findings of this specific study is that the **negative perceptions of learning, of school and of teachers which are often held by young people who have disengaged with schooling are open to change if the right conditions prevail.** Support Groups offer a tried-and-tested approach to address the difficulties faced by pupils experiencing SEBD, based upon a strong theoretical basis. This approach impacted successfully upon some of the most troubled youngsters and upon the ethos of the school, making it a more inclusive environment for all pupils and staff, whilst also developing staff expertise and capacity for growth within the school. The initiative clearly resonates with governmental drives for social inclusion, social justice, children's rights, citizenship and raising attainment, reflected in a wide range of policies in the UK – Every Child Matters (DfES, 2004), Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (DfES, 2005) and the National Curriculum – and, in Scotland – Better Behaviour – Better Learning (SEED, 2001), A Curriculum for Excellence (SEED, 2004) and Happy, safe and achieving their potential (SEED, 2005) amongst others.

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