Teachers' Perspectives on Classroom Management: Confidence, Strategies and Professional Development

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ABSTRACT

The issue of behaviour management is one that is consistently reported as a concern facing teachers in today's classrooms. This study, which surveyed 110 teachers of Year 1 to Year 4 students, examined the behaviour management training teacher respondents had received both pre-service and inservice, as well as the behaviour management strategies they perceived as useful.

The results of this survey indicate a requirement for a comprehensive classroom behaviour management programme to be utilised (particularly for teacher trainees). This type of training can assist in ensuring that positive reinforcing skills and strategies are enabled to provide the best-possible learning environment for students and teachers alike.

Practice paper

Keywords:
behaviour management, behaviour strategies

INTRODUCTION

Classroom behaviour management (CBM) issues are a recurrent theme of concern for beginning teachers and more experienced teachers alike (Reupert & Woodcock, 2011; Oral, 2012). Teachers are more likely to request professional development (PD) in this area than any other (Townsend, 2011). Likewise, research conducted by Webster-Stratton, Reinke, Herman and Newcomer (2011) revealed training and support in managing difficult behaviour as teachers' number one requirement. Correspondingly, Webster-Stratton (2000) estimates that as many as a quarter of all classroom children demonstrate behavioural problems.

Research shows that teachers are more likely to negatively perceive children who demonstrate behavioural problems (Webster-Stratton, Reid & Stoolmiller, 2008). This negativity makes it difficult for teachers to appreciate or recognise achievements made by these students. Consequently, these individuals are likely to receive less academic and social instruction, support and behaviour-specific praise (Webster-

Stratton, Reid & Stoolmiller, 2008). Without this input, behaviour problems can escalate to more serious behaviour disorders (McLean & Dixon, 2010).

The success rate of behavioural interventions deteriorates as the age of the child increases. It is reported that, prior to school entry, behavioural problems as severe as Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) can be eradicated in 75 to 80 percent of occurrences (Church, 2003), whereas the most effective interventions introduced between the ages of 8–12 years have a significantly decreased success rate of 45–50 percent. Furthermore, abundant evidence indicates persistent and early-emerging antisocial behaviours during early primary school as predictive of young adult criminal behaviours (Duncan & Mumane, 2011; McLean & Dixon, 2010; Sturrock & Gray, 2013; Walker, Ramsey & Gresham, 2004).

Additionally, a lower level of academic achievement is linked with behaviour problems (Johansen, Little & Akin-Little, 2011). Children experiencing behavioural difficulties have more problems sitting still, focusing on the task, and answering or asking questions as necessary in the learning process. Subsequently, those experiencing these difficulties are less likely to complete high school or attend university (Duncan & Mumane, 2011).

According to Webster-Stratton et al., (2008), teachers lacking effectual classroom behaviour management (CBM) techniques experience higher levels of social, emotional and behavioural problems amongst the students in their classes. Conversely, they claim that teachers, who are trained in using a proactive teaching style, can play an important role in the prevention of behavioural difficulties, and can nurture the development of social and emotional skills by developing supportive and encouraging relationships with the students (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Lewis & Sugai, 1999; Myers, Simonsen & Sugai, 2011; Walker et al., 2004). These teachers maintain clearly-defined classroom rules, give explicit instruction in social skills and conflict management, offer high levels of praise, demonstrate a move away from punitive responses, and are supportive to each student. "Having

a supportive relationship with at least one teacher has been shown to be one of the most important protective factors influencing high-risk children's later school success" (Webster-Stratton et al., 2008, p. 472). This relationship-building is reported to enhance job satisfaction for the teacher (Dinham & Scott, 2000). Teachers who enjoy high quality relationships with their students reported 31 percent less behavioural problems over a school year than their colleagues (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Teachers who feel overwhelmed by the behavioural difficulties in their classroom can become emotionally exhausted (Pisacreta, Tincani, Connell & Axelrod, 2011; Stoughton, 2007). These teachers may find it difficult to be positive with students and may be overtly punitive in an attempt to cope with the challenges they face (Skiba & Peterson, 2000). A lack of suitable skills can lead to self-doubt, feelings of helplessness and, subsequently, a desire to leave the profession. Teachers who experience emotional exhaustion risk emotional impairment to themselves and their students (Dinham & Scott, 2000; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Johansen et al., 2011; Westling, 2010).

Internationally, a trend for high attrition rate amongst teachers is evident, with almost 40 percent of teachers leaving the profession within their first five years (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011; Webster-Stratton et al., 2011). Oral (2012) attributes the high attrition rate for beginning teachers to difficulties in CBM. Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2011) report a correlation between teacher emotional exhaustion, a decrease in job satisfaction and an increase of teachers leaving the profession.

To prevent emotional exhaustion and a high attrition rate, importance should be placed on providing suitable CBM training for teacher trainees. While the aetiology of various forms of persistent behavioural problems are becoming better understood, any insights from the developmental sciences are not integrated well into teacher preparations (Pianta, Hitz & West, 2010). New Zealand research conducted by Johansen et al., (2011) revealed that only 16.2 per cent of respondents believed they had satisfactory training in managing behavioural issues. Teacher trainees reported their training to be too theoretical, with concepts being too far removed from the classroom (Atici, 2007; Reupert & Woodcock, 2010). Jennings and Greenberg (2009) reiterate this belief, stating that teachers are insufficiently prepared to provide the social and emotional development to successfully maintain effective CBM. Furthermore, Dinham and Scott's (2000) survey undertaken in Australia, England and New Zealand revealed that, overall, teachers felt their training insufficiently prepared them for the workplace. Teachers understand the importance of

possessing effective CBM skills; however, without training and support, most feel poorly prepared for the classroom (Atici, 2007).

This study examined teachers' perceptions of: teacher training preparation in management of classroom behavioural problems, their utilised behavioural management strategies, and the usefulness of these techniques.

METHOD

Procedure

This research was undertaken utilising an online digital survey created using Survey Monkey (www.surveymonkey.com). A list of school contacts was obtained from the Education Counts website (New Zealand Government, 2013). Seeking a sample size of 100 teachers, a total of 1,347 emails were sent to principals throughout New Zealand. Principals were invited, if they consented, to forward the survey link to teachers of Year 1 to 4 students within their school. The sample was not a direct representation of New Zealand teachers, as participants were selected in an on-response sample rather than stratified sampling. A descriptive statistics approach was used in the analysis.

The Survey

Questions for the survey were mostly selected and adapted from two existing surveys: the Teacher Classroom Management Strategies Questionnaire (The Incredible Years, 2012) and a questionnaire used by Johansen et al., (2011). The Incredible Years Teacher Classroom Management (IYTCM) Strategies Questionnaire is administered to all participants of the IYTCM training at the commencement and the completion of the programme. The second questionnaire was provided by Dr Steven Little in response to a request for further information regarding the survey used for an article in the Kairaranga journal (Johansen et al., 2011).

Participants were informed of the purpose of the study and it was made clear that no identifying data would be collected. Participants then chose either to consent or to exit the survey. The survey consisted of 24 questions in total, 12 of which were optional comment boxes. The remaining were check boxes and Likert scales.

When constructing the survey, a conscious decision was made to not include questions asking teachers for perceptions of the racial or ethnic characteristics of children; these were deemed outside the scope of this study. This decision was made despite research indicating higher rates of conduct problems occurring with Māori children. It is teacher- perception of their personal confidence in managing these behaviours,

rather than the source of the behaviour, that is relevant to this study. Additionally, evidence suggests effective CBM strategies provide similar outcomes regardless of ethnicity (Sturrock & Gray, 2013).

Participants

Participants were 110 teachers of Year 1 to Year 4 students. The 'average' profile of responding teachers: teaches Year 1, has a Bachelor degree, and has been teaching for more than 15 years in a decile 6 school.

The majority (35.5%; n=39) of responding teachers have been teaching for more than 15 years, with 13.6% (n=15) having taught for 3 years or less. Correspondingly, 60% (n=66) of the respondents are aged 40 or above, of whom 7.3% (n=8) are aged 60 or older. The mode age band of the teachers is 40-49 years. The number of years teaching range is 40 years and the mean is 13 years teaching. All teachers in this survey teach students of Year 1 to Year 4. The majority teach Year 1 (30.9%, n= 34) and the least Year 3 (16.4%, n=18).

RESULTS

Professional Development

Teachers were asked to identify professional development (PD) they had undertaken and to categorise areas of PD they would like to undertake in the future. The majority of respondents have received PD in curriculum-based writing (91.8%, n=101) and numeracy (86.4%, n=95). Interestingly, 64.6% (n=71) of respondents indicated having trained in a CBM programme: IYTCM (26.4%, n=29) or other CBM programmes (38.2%, n=42). Of the 26.4 per cent of participants who attended IYTCM programme,

34.48% (n=10) reported also attending another CBM programme. That considered, a total of 55.45% (n=61) of respondents have attended either one or more CBM programmes.

Even though 55.45 per cent of respondents indicated receiving PD in CBM, this PD focus was the most sought after by respondents (32.7%, n=36). Of the 32.7 per cent who indicated an interest in attending PD in CBM, 61.1% (n=22) have not attended PD in this field previously. Almost 20 per cent (19.7%, n=14) of those who have received training in CBM indicated an interest in additional training in this area (4.2 per cent of whom attended IYTCM training, 14.1 per cent other CBM programmes and 1.4 per cent who have attended both IYTCM and another CBM programme). In all, 75.4% (n=83) of respondents have either attended or expressed an interest in attending PD in CBM.

The teachers responding to this survey indicated high teacher confidence ratings in managing difficult classroom behaviour. Notably, this confidence increased by 14.7 per cent upon completing a CBM programme other than IYTCM, and by 17.25 per cent in those who completed an IYTCM programme. The data indicate no significant difference in teacher experience or decile rating in relation to these confidence ratings.

Classroom Behaviour Management

Teachers were asked how confident they felt managing general behaviour and difficult behaviour in their classroom. Additionally, they were asked how confident they felt in promoting students emotional, social and problem-solving skills. The responses to these questions are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Confidence in Managing Behaviour in the Classroom

	General Behaviour		Difficult Behaviour		Promote Skills	
	Frequency	Per cent	Frequency	Per cent	Frequency	Per cent
Very Unconfident	2	1.8	2	1.8	2	1.8
Unconfident	0	0	0	0	0	0
Somewhat Unconfident	0	0	2	1.8	1	0.9
Neutral	0	0	4	3.6	3	2.7
Somewhat Confident	6	5.5	24	21.8	19	17.3
Confident	53	48.3	58	52.7	65	59.1
Very Confident	49	44.5	20	18.2	20	18.1

The majority, 92.8% (n=102) of the teachers, indicated a confident or very confident rating in managing general behaviour and 70.9% (n=78) in managing difficult classroom behaviour. In differentiating general and difficult behaviour the very confident range drops from 44.5 per cent for general behaviour to 18.2 per cent for difficult behaviour.

However, 33.6% (n=37) indicated a lower-than 'confident' rating in the three questions relating to confidence in managing classroom behaviour. Of those 33.6 per cent, 16.2% (n=6) have attended an IYTCM programme and 29.7% (n=11) attended an alternative CBM programme. The median decile rating of this group of respondents is 6 and the mode is 4. Twenty one (56.8%) respondents indicated they would select PD in CBM.

The 37 respondents in the less-than confident category have a mean of 9.6 years of teaching experience, median=6, range=26, and a mode of first year teachers (13.5%, n=5). The total respondents (n=110) consisted of 15.8% (n=6) first year teachers, and 83.3% (n=5) of these first year teachers indicated a less-than confident rating in one of the three 'confidence in managing behaviour' areas.
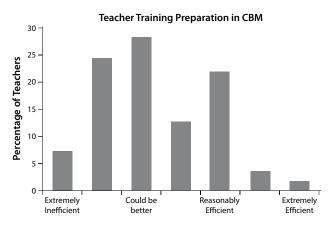
Of those in the less-than confident group, 13.5% (n=5) felt confident in managing difficult behaviour, but did not feel confident in promoting emotional, social and problem-solving skills with their students. A total of 16.4% (n=18) of all respondents did not feel confident in this area, and 48.6 per cent of those who indicated another area of less-than confident also indicated a less-than confident in this area. Just 7.3% (n=8) responded to feeling less-than confident in managing general classroom behaviour.

When considering the confidence ratings for general and problem classroom behaviour, 71% (n=78) of teachers felt confident or very confident in managing behaviour (mean of 15 years teaching, median=12, and range= 40). However, 9% (n=7) of this group and 100 per cent of first year teachers reported feeling less-than confident or only somewhat confident in promoting emotional, social and problem-solving skills. Of the 71 per cent who felt confident or very confident in managing problem behaviour, 30.8% (n=24) have attended an IYTCM programme and 42.3% (n=33) attended another CBM programme. Interestingly, 23.1% (n=18) of these respondents indicated that they would like to receive PD in CBM. Half of the teachers who would like further instruction in CBM have previously had PD in this area.

Teacher Training Preparation

A significant percentage (60%, n=66) of respondents believed their training was less- than satisfactory in preparing them for managing behavioural challenges in the classroom (see Figure 1). Conversely, 5.4% (n=4 and 2 respectively) believed they received 'efficient' or 'extremely efficient' preparation for CBM. Thirty eight (34.5%) respondents gave additional comments for this question. Reference was made to: learning from personal experience in the classroom; erudition from personal failures and successes, and very little training in CBM. It should be noted, however, that these findings need to be interpreted with some caution as the average profile of responding teachers had more than 15 years experience.

Figure 1. Teacher Perception of Teacher Training Preparation for CBM

Classroom Behaviour Management Strategies

The purpose of this section was to gain an understanding of what CBM strategies teachers use, how often they use them, and how useful they perceive them to be. Each participant was able to select one of seven levels of use for each strategy, from 'never', through to 'two or more times a day'.

Thirty-nine (35.5%) of the participants added additional comments in this section. Comments made here remark on the need to adapt your strategies to meet the individual needs of the child with the behavioural problem and not all strategies work with all children.

Three most used strategies

The respondents selected 'encourage positive social behaviours' (e.g., helping, sharing, waiting) as the most frequently used strategy; 76.4% (n=84) indicated that they used this strategy two or more times a day and 22.7% (n=25) used this strategy daily. This was also selected as the most useful strategy, with 83.6% (n=92) choosing the highest category of 'very useful' and 11.8% (n=13) selecting 'quite useful'.

'Give clear positive directions' was selected as being

used more than twice a day by 75.5% (n=83) of respondents and daily by 22.7% (n=25); this was the second highest response rate. It is also rated second highest (equal with 'praise positive behaviour') in the usefulness category with 79.1% (n=87) rating this strategy as 'very useful' and 12.7% (n=14) rating it as 'quite useful'. The third most frequently used strategy was 'praise positive behaviour' (including naming the positive behaviour receiving praise). This was selected as being used two or more times a day by 74.5% (n=82) of the respondents, with 23.6% (n=26) using this strategy daily.

DISCUSSION

Pre-service Teacher Training

As could be expected, first year teachers were more likely than other teachers to report a level of less-than confident in CBM. Five of the six first year teachers reported feeling less-than confident when dealing with problem behaviour in their classrooms. While this sample size of first year teachers is small, it reflects the findings of research undertaken by Dinham and Scott (2000) and Johansen et al., (2011).

Respondents commented that the absence of sufficient, effective training means there is a requirement for new teachers to learn CBM from personal experience, erudition from personal failures and successes, and from other teachers or mentors within the school. While is it well-accepted that a teacher's preparation does not end when they complete their initial teacher education programme (i.e. learning to be a teacher is a life-long practice), unfortunately, if a new teacher does not find the support necessary to build the required skills and strategies, they may experience difficulties and develop ineffective coping strategies. This could result in an ineffective learning environment for the students and unhealthy stress levels for the teacher (Oral, 2012; Reupert & Woodcock, 2010; Stoughton, 2007; Webster-Stratton et al., 2008). To ensure effective strategies are utilised, training in CBM is required. Training can assist in creating positive reinforcing skills and strategies to provide the best possible learning environment for the students and teacher alike (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Walker et al., 2004).

Professional Development

This study indicates that teachers receive PD in writing and numeracy more than in any other academic area. Conversely, Townsend (2011) stated that teachers sought PD in CBM more than in any other field. This statement is reinforced by the current study results, with the largest percentage of respondents indicating a choice to obtain PD in CBM. This is irrespective of the fact that more than half of the responding teachers have previously received PD in CBM. Interestingly, almost 20 per cent of those who have previously completed a CBM programme indicated preference to complete another course.

Confidence in Managing Classroom Behaviour

Respondents' confidence in CBM strategies is high. Interestingly, this percentage is higher again for those teachers who have completed one or more CBM programmes. The highest confidence rating came from those teachers who had completed an IYTCM programme. Data indicate no significant difference in teacher experience. Additionally, data collected show decile rating is not a mitigating factor associated with these confidence ratings either. Considering these factors, the researcher concludes that the CBM programmes are likely to contribute to teachers' confidence in addressing challenging behaviours in the classroom.

Strategies: Frequency and Usefulness

Teacher management of personal stress is important in avoiding the futility and frustration of implementing insufficient, ineffective CBM skills and strategies (Webster-Stratton, 1999). Complications can occur when teachers become emotionally overwhelmed and do not possess the correct skills, strategies and attitude to positively face challenging situations. As the majority of the respondents indicated feeling confident in managing general and difficult behaviour in their classrooms, it is likely that many of these teachers have developed effective CBM strategies through their experience in teaching and PD attended.

The Most Utilised CBM Strategies

Three strategies were considered both very useful and are utilised more frequently than any other. They are: 1) Encourage positive social behaviours; 2) Give clear positive directions, and 3) Praise positive behaviour. These three strategies are affirmative and the consistent, frequent use of them is likely to be a strong contributor to the high level of perceived confidence in managing CBM (Webster-Stratton, 2012). Each of these strategies guides, teaches and encourages students to demonstrate and maintain positive behaviour in the classroom. There are another seven strategies (making ten in total) that were recorded as being frequently utilised by highly-confident responding teachers: 4) Use a transition routine; 5) Verbally redirect a child who is distracted; 6) Use non-verbal signals to redirect a non-engaged child; 7) Reward a certain individual for positive behaviours with incentives; 8) Use class-wide individual incentive programmes; 9) Use persistence or emotion-coaching, and 10) Have clear classroom rules and refer to them.

Misrepresented Strategies

Interestingly, the strategies 'send notes home about positive behaviour' and 'call parent to report good behaviour' are used infrequently. However, comments made signal that the results may be deceptive. Many teachers, especially teachers of Year 1 students, reported face-to-face contact with parents on an almost daily basis, which negates the need for written notes or phone calls home. The respondents rated the usefulness of these two strategies identically, with both receiving 84 per cent in the 'useful' to 'very useful' category. Respondents therefore may consider using this strategy if face-to-face contact was minimal.

Additionally, the strategy 'teach students anger management strategies (e.g. turtle technique, calm down thermometer), while predominantly being classed as useful to very useful, is also seldom used. Comments suggest some strategies are not applicable for all students. Techniques that are utilised need to reflect the current social needs of the students in the class. If anger issues are not a behavioural challenge experienced in that particular classroom, then it is not appropriate for the teacher to consistently use this strategy. In the same tenet, 'use time out' and 'teaching rest of class to ignore student in time out/calm down' are seen as useful strategies, but are not regularly implemented. The data indicate that the majority of respondents use these strategies, when required, congruently – as anticipated by Webster-Stratton (1999).

Limitations of the Study

As with any study of this kind, there are limitations which need to be considered when interpreting the findings. These include the composition of sample (predominantly respondents with 15+ years teaching experience) and the relatively small sample size. This sample is not a direct representation of New Zealand teachers, as participants were selected in an on-response sample, rather than by stratified sampling.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study has highlighted the need for additional training for trainee and beginning teachers in CBM. This type of training is important for establishing safe, effective and successful learning environments for students and their teachers. Teachers and students alike require strategies for dealing with behaviours encountered on a regular basis in the school environment. While teachers require strategies for effectual CBM, students require the security and boundaries those strategies establish. Additionally, both teachers and students require the strategies in regulating their own behaviour and their reactions to others within their environment.

Likewise, relationships between teacher and student benefit from co-operation and consistency in establishing regulating strategies and supporting relationships.

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