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Teachers' Perceptions and Management of Disruptive Classroom Behaviour During the Middle Years (years five to nine).

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ABSTRACT

A survey of 96 Australian primary and secondary school teachers was carried out based on a stratified random sample. The study aimed to determine Middle Years teachers' perceptions and management of disruptive classroom behaviour. Variables such as gender, teacher confidence and experience, supports, specific disruptive student behaviours, and behaviour management strategies were examined. The results showed that teachers' main concerns were related to distractibility, student on-task behaviour, and adherence to classroom rules. In relation to classroom management, no significant differences were identified between the management strategies employed by primary and secondary school teachers. However, differences were identified in the management strategies teachers used to manage the behaviour of male and female students. In relation to disruptive student behaviour, an increase in reports of aggressive male behaviour was observed from primary to secondary school.

INTRODUCTION

The issues of classroom management and disruptive student behaviour are of continuing interest to individuals within the fields of psychology and education. Students' classroom behaviour has been examined from perspectives such as the most frequent disruptive behaviour, the most troublesome disruptive behaviour and the behaviours of most concern to teachers (Haroun & O'Hanlon, 1997a; Houghton, Wheldall and Merrett, 1988; Martin, Linfoot, & Stephenson, 1999; Stephenson, Martin, & Linfoot 2000; Wheldall, 1991). In turn, this has lead researchers to investigate teachers' management strategies and perceived control in the classroom (Lewis, 1999; Malone, Bonitz, & Rickett, 1998; Martin et al., 1999; Stephenson et al., 2000). Until recently the majority of this research has been conducted outside Australia. Furthermore, research into disruptive classroom behaviour has either focused on the early years of school (prep to year four) or on secondary school. Little research has focused on the middle years of schooling (years five to nine) and the transition period from year six to year seven.

The Middle Years and Student Transitions

The middle years of schooling is a period involving social and emotional changes and for the majority of students it also involves school transition. Subsequently, as students conclude primary school and commence secondary school, friendship groups often change and peer group pressure becomes evident; furthermore, an increase in teasing and bullying is often observable throughout

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the middle years (Nansel et al., 2001). Often, the transition period is a time of high anxiety for students. Generally there is a move from the familiarity of primary school surroundings, to a secondary school involving unfamiliar teachers, unfamiliar buildings and markedly older students. Any problems in adjusting to these changes can result in the emergence of school refusal, anxiety and adjustment problems (Galloway, Rogers, Armstrong, & Leo, 1998; Sainbury, Whetton, Mason, & Schagen, 1998). The importance of these areas to both students and teachers highlights the need for investigation into the changes in student classroom behaviour throughout the middle years, and particularly throughout the transition period. Research into this area will aid in informing programs designed to ease the transition from primary to secondary school.

Teachers' Perceptions of Disruptive Student Behaviour

In reviewing the disruptive behaviour literature it becomes apparent that teachers commonly report talking out of turn (TOOT), disturbing or hindering other students, and non-attending as the most problematic and most frequent disruptive behaviours (Houghton et al., 1988; Haroun & O'Hanlon, 1997a; Stephenson et al., 2000; Wheldall, 1991). It appears that the behaviour problems that are most concerning to teachers are not major infringements or violent behaviour, but rather they are minor infractions and repeated disruptions that are most problematic. However, it is important to consider the definition of disruptive behaviour relevant to each study, as there is no uniform definition.

For the purpose of the current study, disruptive behaviour has been defined as an activity that causes distress for teachers, interrupts the learning process and that leads teachers to make continual comments to the student (Haroun & O'Hanlon, 1997a; Houghton et al., 1988). Teachers frequently report high levels of concern for student behaviour (Haroun & O'Hanlon, 1997a; Houghton et al., 1988; Merrett & Wheldall, 1984; Stephenson et al., 2000), although there is often high variability between research findings. Thirty-three to 62 percent of teachers across primary and secondary schools have reported TOOT as the most frequent or the most troublesome disruptive behaviour, and 13 to 25 percent of teachers have reported hindering others as the most frequent and most troublesome behaviour (Houghton et al., 1988; Wheldall & Merrett, 1988).

Disruptive Student Behaviour Across Primary and Secondary School

Considerable primary and secondary school research reports male students as more disruptive than female students across the majority of disruptive behaviours (Borg & Falzon, 1989; Houghton et al., 1988; Kaplan, Gheen & Midgley, 2002; Merrett & Wheldall, 1984; Stephenson et al., 2000; Wheldall & Merrett, 1988). Research from the Early Years (Years Prep to Year 4) suggests that additional management strategies are needed for 5% of male students and 2% of female students in an average class (Stephenson et al., 2000). Whether these trends continue into the middle years is unknown, as little research has considered the perceptions of teachers involved in the middle years.

Central to investigating the behavioural differences throughout the transition period is the usage of a single study sample involving primary and secondary school students, an element often neglected in research samples. One study that has investigated the behaviour problems across primary and secondary school is that conducted by Haroun and O'Hanlon (1997a). These researchers investigated the disruptive behaviours of concern to Jordanian schoolteachers. However, the sample only reflects the behaviour patterns of male students, due the structure of the Jordanian education system. It was demonstrated that there were distinct changes in the behaviours considered as disruptive to the classroom environment across primary and secondary levels (Haroun & O'Hanlon 1997a). TOOT was identified as the most frequent disruptive behaviour exhibited by both primary and secondary school students. However there was large discrepancy between the percentages of primary and secondary school teachers finding this behaviour problematic (57% and 35% respectively). Seventeen percent of secondary teachers found bullying to be of concern while in contrast, primary school teachers failed to note the behaviour as a concern. How the behavioural changes progress from primary school to secondary school is not clear, as this study that considered primary and secondary school samples combined all primary school levels and contrasted these with a combined sample of all secondary school

levels. The implications of the transition period on student behaviour and comparisons involving discrete year levels have not been investigated.

Moreover, it is evident that many research studies have employed questionnaires using a ranked scale (Houghton, et al., 1988; Haroun & O'Hanlon, 1997a; Wheldall & Merrett, 1988). Thus, results are often ordinal and not a clear reflection of how closely teachers perceive behaviours to be ranked. Martin et al., (1999) derived a questionnaire using likert scales to assess the behaviours teachers perceived as most disruptive, the supports utilised by teachers and the management strategies employed by teachers in the early years. Such a scale has not been used in the middle years environment.

Disruptive Behaviour Management Strategies and Supports

As indicated the most frequent and troublesome behaviours are also relatively minor, yet frequent problem behaviours (Houghton et al., 1988; Merrett & Wheldall, 1984). Behaviours such as TOOT, hindering other students and distractibility are readily amenable to redemption by behavioural methods and appropriate management strategies (Houghton et al., 1988; Merrett & Wheldall, 1984). Identification of teacher supports and behaviour management strategies currently used becomes significant to determining effective strategies and to identify the most efficient ways of communicating this information to teachers.

Given the findings regarding behaviour problems that concern teachers the most, it is imperative that teachers have appropriate strategies to manage these behaviours. Classroom management skills constitute an important aspect of the classroom environment. Furthermore, management skills can influence student behaviour and achievement, such as student on task behaviour (Houghton, Wheldall, Jukes & Shapre, 1990; Malone et al., 1998; Poulou & Norwich, 2000; Traynor, 2003). Low incidences of praise and high rates of disapproval have been observed in the classroom (Martin et al., 1999). However, student on-task behaviour is shown to increase through the use of positive management strategies rather than the use of disapproval (Houghton et al., 1990).

Teachers' views of behaviour management have also highlighted the importance of consistent positive strategies and the importance of student involvement in the discipline process (Clement, 2002; Haroun & O'Hanlon, 1997b). Involving students in classroom decision-making is considered to be an effective classroom management technique (Lewis, 1999; Malone et al., 1998).

It is feasible that teachers' perceptions of student maturity may play an important factor in teachers' choice of management strategy. Lewis (1999) identified lower involvement in classroom management for older students when comparing the upper primary school and lower secondary school years (for example years 4-6 and years 7-9). Specific differences between the strategies employed by teachers directly involved in the transition period are yet to be investigated. Similarly, differences in management strategies relative to student gender are also yet to be examined. It is paramount to consider the affects of disruptive student behaviour on teachers, as student behaviour is often identified as a key variable that impacts on teacher stress, well-being and confidence (Chan, 1998, as cited in Lewis, Romi, Qui & Katz, 2003; McGee, Silva & Williams, 1983; Miller, Ferguson & Byrne, 2000; Poulou & Norwich, 2000).

Perceptions of Disruptive Behaviour and Teachers' Confidence

Variables such as teacher training, length of teaching experience and teacher confidence are significant moderator variables on teachers' perceptions of disruptive behaviour, although little research has examined relationships between these variables (Borg & Falzon, 1990). Teachers who perceive classroom management problems as more severe, are more likely to leave the education system (Taylor & Dale, 1971; as cited in Sokal, Smith, & Mowat, 2003). Out of a sample of 400 teachers (from the United States of America) choosing to leave the education system, 30% of teachers did so due to classroom management and discipline concerns (Ingersoll, 2001).

It has also been established that teacher confidence affects various elements of the classroom, ranging from student behaviour and achievement to teacher psychological well-being (Lewis, 1999; Merrett & Wheldall, 1984). The finding that almost 20% of teachers did not feel confident

in their ability to manage disruptive classroom behaviour (Martin et al., 1999) is highly disturbing. This is reinforced by findings that 72% of a group of 60 experienced teachers indicated that they were under prepared or not prepared at all to manage behaviour problems following their initial teacher training (Little, 1999).

Teacher supports for managing classroom behaviour involve strategies such as personal development sessions, reading appropriate literature, and the use of staff meetings. The supports employed by teachers to assist with disruptive student behaviours constitute a relatively new area of investigation. Research that has considered the supports used by teachers has classified teacher supports into the categories of professional and school based supports (Martin et al., 1999; Stephenson et al., 2000). It is imperative to examine relationships between teacher confidence and supports throughout the middle years and across the transitional period. Variables such as student gender and years of teaching experience need to be considered. Once possible relationships are identified, interventions can be introduced.

Summary

Gender differences in the disruptive behaviour of male and female students in the early years and secondary school students have been established (Houghton et al., 1988; Wheldall & Merrett, 1988; Stephenson et al., 2000). Furthermore, behavioural differences between male primary and secondary school students have been recognised (Haroun & O'Hanlon, 1997a). However, research is yet to investigate these relationships across the middle years, and specifically across the transition period. Similarly, relationships concerning teachers' confidence and supports are also yet to be established in the middle years sector. Little research has considered teachers' management responses to the disruptive behaviours of male and female students, thus it is unclear if teachers are employing the same management strategies for male students as for female students. Whether teachers employ consistent management strategies over the middle years or whether teachers modify their strategy in accordance to students' year level is also unknown. This area of research is in clear need of further investigation as such teachers have consistently reported a need for information and supports (Martin et al., 1999; Stephenson et al., 2000).

The current study aims to explore the relationship between the variables of student behaviours perceived as disruptive, behaviour management strategies and supports, along with teaching experience and confidence. It is hypothesised that teachers will have more concern over male students engaging in disruptive behaviour than female students, with differences in disruptive behaviour observable over the transition period. Additionally the relationship between teacher confidence and classroom management strategies will be examined. Exploratory hypotheses concern the variables of student gender and management strategy, along with investigation into teachers' information requests and use of supports.

METHOD

Participants

In total, 350 teachers were recruited from five primary schools and eight secondary schools across Victoria, Australia, using stratified random sampling techniques. A representative number of schools from each region in Victoria were initially selected for recruitment. Of the 350 questionnaires distributed, 96 teachers (38 male and 58 female) participated in the study, providing a return rate of 27.4%. The average years of teaching was identified at 16.69 years, (SD = .93), while average teacher age was 42.16 years, (SD = 9.96). Average class size was 23.71 children, (SD = 3.08) whilst average number of students in each school was 975.56, (SD = 506.62). Teachers from the upper primary school years comprised 26.1% of the study sample. Lower secondary teachers and upper secondary teachers accounted for 45.8% and 15.6% respectively. The remaining 12.5% involved secondary school teachers who teach across a variety of secondary levels.

Materials

Teachers completed the Child Behaviour Survey designed by Martin et al. (1999). The questionnaire consisted of four sections containing dimensions related to teachers' perception and management of children's behaviour in the classroom. Slight modifications were made to the questionnaire in order to improve the relevance of the items for middle years teachers, and to obtain gender specific information for disruptive behaviour and management strategies used. The first section of the questionnaire requested teachers' demographic information (gender, age, teaching qualifications, years of teaching, participation in behavioural/classroom management courses), along with information based upon their school (number of students in the school, number of students in a class, average number of males and females in a class and a disability profile). Teachers also completed items examining their level of confidence in managing classroom behaviour by indicating their level of agreement on a 5-point likert scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree).

The second section of the questionnaire investigated the types of behaviours of concern to teachers. For each item teachers were required to rate their level of concern and amount of support needed for male and female students, on a 4-point likert scale with anchors ranging from 1 (not at all) to 4 (a lot). Behaviours were categorised into four subscales pertaining to hyperactivity, aggression, disobedient, and delinquent behaviours. The subsequent section examined teachers' use of supports to manage behaviour problems; employing a 3-point likert scale (never used, sometimes used, frequently used). Teacher's supports were categorised into the subscales of professional based supports and school based supports. The specific strategies teachers used to deal with disruptive classroom behaviour for male and female students were examined in the final section of the questionnaire. Strategies used by teachers were divided into the subscales of punishment, outside help (such as liaison with non-school professionals), positive programs and referral. Teachers were then able to indicate their needs for information and support related to disruptive classroom behaviour using a 3-point likert scale with anchors ranging from never used, sometimes used to frequently used.

The subscales for each section of the questionnaire were identified by Martin et al. (1999) to hold adequate internal consistency with Chronbach's alpha ranging from $r = .79, p < .05$, to $r = .92, p < .001$.

Procedure

Once the schools had been identified and ethical approval had been acquired, the principals of each school were contacted and provided with a copy of the instrument to be used and a letter of approval from the Victorian Department of Education and Training. Once a principal agreed to have his/her school participate in the study a subsequent package containing questionnaires to be distributed to teachers was sent.

Data Analysis

The study was of a quasi-experimental nature and used a pre-existing questionnaire. Data was screened for violations of normality and variability; testing revealed no need for transformations. Repeated measures multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA), correlations and *t*-tests were conducted using an SPSS analysis package.

RESULTS

The results related to behaviours that teachers perceived as disruptive will be discussed followed by the results for teachers' confidence and supports. Finally results related to teachers' management strategies will be reported.

Disruptive Classroom Behaviour: Descriptive Statistics

The percentage of students reported to have disruptive behaviour severe enough to warrant additional management was calculated at 18.20% for males ($SD = 24.31$) and 7.25% for females

($SD = 14.94$). Differences were identified between male and female students' behaviours considered problematic in later primary school and early secondary school. In regards to male students, a mean increase of 15.25 is observed between upper primary ($M = 9.69$, $SD = 11.50$) and lower secondary school ($M = 24.94$, $SD = 29.63$), while a mean increase of 6.20 is observed for female students (upper primary, $M = 4.58$, $SD = 6.15$ and lower secondary school, $M = 10.78$, $SD = 22.80$).

Table 1 depicts descriptive statistics for teachers' level of concern for disruptive behaviours of male and female students along with the support needed. The highest levels of concern for male students pertained to disruption, distractibility, arguing when reprimanded and not remaining on task. The highest level of concerns for female students regarded disruption, distractibility and ignoring the feelings of others. Teachers reported a high mean need for support for behaviours related to disruption, not remaining on task, expressing inappropriate anger and not following class rules.

Mean levels of teacher concern for the four subscales of disobedience, aggression, delinquency and hyperactivity are shown in Table 2. The subscale of aggression and hyperactivity held highest teacher concerns for both male and female students.

Table 1: Teacher Mean Level of Concern and Support for Specific Disruptive Behaviours

Behaviour	Level of concern male		Level of concern female		Support needed	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Demands must be met immediately/cannot wait for attention	2.26	.94	1.95	1.01	1.86	1.04
Disrupts the activities of others	2.71	.83	2.14	.88	2.11	1.06
Doesn't remain on-task for a reasonable time	2.56	.78	1.97	.80	1.96	1.06
Excessive demands for teacher's attention/doesn't work independently	2.25	.94	1.98	.90	1.81	1.11
Distractibility or attention span a problem/does not listen	2.62	.86	2.32	2.89	1.89	1.01
Argues when reprimanded or corrected	2.50	1.12	1.98	1.12	1.92	1.16
Runs away from school or classroom	1.38	.99	1.28	.97	1.21	1.11
Ignores the feelings of others	2.38	.99	2.01	.99	1.67	1.00
Does not get along well with other children	2.11	.87	1.83	.88	1.69	.93
Does not follow established class rules	2.33	1.07	1.92	1.05	1.90	1.13
Expresses anger inappropriately	2.51	1.45	1.84	1.09	1.98	1.15
Is physically aggressive with others/bullies	2.18	1.23	1.34	.92	1.67	1.67
Damages others' property	1.46	1.09	1.00	.77	1.09	1.00
Engages in inappropriate sexual behaviour	.73	.64	.67	.56	.54	.66
Uses obscene language or gestures	1.57	.66	1.21	.85	1.15	.99
Steals	1.17	1.04	.95	.82	.96	.90
Refuses to obey teacher-imposed rules	1.76	1.08	1.46	.95	1.35	1.06
Is verbally aggressive with others	1.84	1.10	1.33	.91	1.32	.96
Lies	1.93	1.07	1.59	.92	1.42	.86
Breaks things/damages others property	1.39	1.07	1.07	.99	1.02	.95

Table 2: Teacher Mean Level of Concern Specific Disruptive Behaviours Subscales

Behaviour subscale	<i>M (SD) Male</i>	<i>M (SD) Female</i>
Hyperactive	11.70 (3.86)	8.79 (3.52)
Aggressive	10.30 (4.92)	7.30 (3.80)
Disobedient	6.02 (2.75)	4.63 (2.67)
Delinquent Male	4.49 (2.30)	3.68 (1.60)

Disruptive Classroom Behaviour: MANOVA Statistics for Teachers' Level of Concern for Male and Female Students and Support Needed

In order to test for any gender differences among the four disruptive behaviour subscales a repeated-measures multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted. A significant multivariate effect was found, Wilks' $\Lambda = .39$, $F(4, 43) = 16.96$, $p < .001$. Follow up univariate analysis of each dependent variable found a significant difference among all subscales, $F(1, 46) = 42.17$, $p < .001$ for hyperactivity, $F(1, 46) = 53.46$, $p < .01$ for aggressive behaviour, $F(1, 46) = 32.03$, $p < .001$ for disobedient behaviour and, $F(1, 46) = 18.77$, $p < .001$ for delinquent behaviour. Male students were found to be significantly higher on all subscales when compared with female students. In regards to year level comparisons, while not statistically significant, higher levels of aggressive behaviour in male students was found in secondary school, $M = 11.76$, ($SD = 4.43$) compared with primary school, $M = 8.07$, ($SD = 5.44$).

Confidence In Management

Teachers were asked to identify their level of confidence in classroom management and their confidence in the strategies they employed to manage their classrooms. Both questions were unanswered by 40.6% of teachers. Of those who did respond, 52.1% were confident, 6.3% were neutral and 1% were not confident in overall classroom management. Concerning confidence with the classroom management strategies used, 48% of teachers were confident, 9.4% were neutral, whilst 2% were not confident.

Significant negative correlations were identified between teachers' confidence in classroom management strategies and use of referral strategies for male students, $r = -.28$, $p = .05$; between disobedient male behaviour and teachers' confidence in classroom management strategies, $r = -.27$, $p = .05$; and between hyperactive male behaviour and teachers' confidence in classroom management strategies, $r = -.37$, $p = .05$.

Supports

Teachers were asked about the supports used for concerns related to classroom management. Frequencies revealed that 77% of teachers sometimes or frequently used staff meetings as supports, 71% sometimes or frequently attended in-services or professional development sessions and 56% of teachers used journal articles or books as sources of support. A significant negative correlation of $r = -.24$, $p = .05$, was identified between years of teaching and use of professional supports.

Behaviour Management Strategies

Significant correlations for male students were identified between hyperactivity and referral strategies, $r = .36$, $p = .01$, punishment strategies and disobedience, $r = .35$, $p = .01$, and subsequently for delinquency and referral, $r = .49$, $p = .01$. A significant negative correlation was identified between years of teaching and the use of positive management strategies for male students, $r = -.24$, $p = .05$.

Table 3 provides the mean scores for the management strategies for male and female students. A paired sample *t*-test was conducted to evaluate whether teachers employed different management strategies for male and female students. Means for the use of punishment strategies were significantly higher for male students, $M = 4.68$, ($SD = 1.64$), compared to female students, $M =$

4.03, ($SD = 1.75$), $t(52) = 3.43$, $p < .01$. The use of positive strategies was also significantly higher for male students, $M = 12.95$, ($SD = 3.56$), compared to female students, $M = 12.22$, ($SD = 3.62$), $t(21) = 2.96$, $p < .01$. The use of referral strategies were significantly higher for male students, $M = 3.12$, ($SD = 1.20$), compared to female students, $M = 2.27$, ($SD = 1.46$), $t(53) = 4.27$, $p < .01$. No significant differences were observed between the use of outside help and non-school professional liaison for male and female students.

Table 3: Teacher Mean Level of management strategies subscales

Strategy	M (SD) <i>Male</i>	M (SD) <i>Female</i>
Punishment	4.90 (1.38)	4.13 (1.67)
Non-school professionals Help	.50 (.51)	.45 (.51)
Positive	12.95 (3.57)	12.27 (3.62)
Referral Male	2.86 (.94)	2.27 (.98)

In order to test for any differences among the four strategies to manage disruptive behaviour subscales (positive strategies, punishment, outside assistance, referral) between year level and gender, a repeated measures MANOVA was conducted. A significant multivariate effect was not found, Wilks' $\Lambda = .67$, $F(4, 18) = 2.14$, $p > .05$. No significant differences were identified between the management strategies employed by primary and secondary school teachers.

Teachers' Information Requests

Despite not being a formal survey question, information related to the management of disruptive student behaviour was requested by 24% of teachers. Both primary and secondary school teachers, generalist and classroom teachers, and male and female teachers requested information from the researchers. Teachers requested information related to increasing student motivation and on task behaviour, maximising the learning benefits of disruptive students, bullying and practical solutions to disruptive classroom behaviour. Several teachers also commented on the strategies they personally employ in the classroom and the success of such strategies.

DISCUSSION

The current study reports on teacher's perceptions and management of disruptive classroom behaviour, comparing perceptions of primary and secondary school teachers across the middle years.

Behaviour Problems in Male and Female Students

The hypothesis that teachers would have higher levels of concern over male students engaging in disruptive behaviour than female students was supported. Concordant with considerable past research, male students were perceived as more disruptive than female students (Borg & Falzon, 1989; Houghton et al., 1988; Merrett & Wheldall, 1984; Wheldall & Merrett, 1988). In addition, 18.2% of male students and 7.25% of female students in an average class, were considered to possess behaviour severe enough that teachers needed additional support. Past research using the same measurement tools reported that early years teachers required additional support for 5% of male students and 2% of female students in an average class (Stephenson et al., 2000).

Behaviour Problems: Upper Primary Compared to Lower Secondary School

A difference in the levels of male aggressive behaviour was identified between primary and secondary school with higher levels seen in the secondary school setting supporting the second hypothesis. Interestingly the difference was not observed in female students. The current study also identified a difference in the number of male and female students considered disruptive between years six and years seven, thus the conclusion of primary school and the commencement of secondary school. Both males and females reportedly engage in more disruptive behaviours in early high school compared with late primary school. When comparing the percentages of early years and middle years teachers needing additional support for disruptive student behaviour, secondary school teachers reported higher levels of need for support.

Taken together, these results regarding gender and year level suggest that student behaviour continues to be a concern through transition, and may in fact worsen as students change environments. Factors involved in this period such as school transitions, social and emotional changes may have an affect on disruptive student behaviour, and these areas may require focused intervention. Given these differences in behaviour, it is of interest to look at teacher and classroom variables that may be related to these variations. Previous research has indicated that teacher confidence is often related to classroom behaviour problems.

Teacher Confidence

It is important to recognise that whilst over half of the respondents indicated they were confident in classroom management (52.1%), over one third of teachers refrained from answering this question (40.6%). The current study identified that only 1% of teachers did not feel confident with their skills in classroom management. In contrast, Stephenson et al. (2000) found that almost 20% of teachers did not feel confident with their skills in classroom management, despite the use of identical questionnaire items used in the research by Stephenson et al. (2000) and in the current study. It is possible that differences may exist in moderator variables related to the confidence of early years teachers compared to the confidence of middle years teachers. These may require further examination to determine whether it is the case that middle years teachers are more confident than early years teachers, or whether the lack of response to the item (in the current study) is indicative of a lack of confidence. Faced with a similar finding of lack of response to confidence questions, Haroun and O'Hanlon (1997a, p. 34) state that '.... teachers in this study presumably wished to appear as if they were effective managers who did not face serious problems of control'. In the current study it may be the case that teachers did not wish to appear as if they had low confidence in classroom management or in the strategies they used to deal with classroom management.

Confidence, Behaviour problems, and Classroom management strategies.

For the teachers who did complete the confidence question, the hypothesis that teacher confidence would be associated with the classroom management strategies employed was supported. It is interesting however, that teacher confidence held no significant relationships with perceptions of disruptive behaviour or management strategies in regard to female students. However, the same relationships were found to be significant when concerning male students. Teachers' confidence appears to decrease as hyperactivity and disobedience in male students increase. It may be that less confident teachers have more difficulty in managing disruptive behaviour or that higher levels of stress are associated with managing such behaviours, leading to a decrease in teacher confidence. Stephenson et al. (2000) identified a relationship between teacher confidence and use of referral strategies, although gender differences were not examined. The current study found a significant relationship between teacher confidence and referral strategies for male students and not for female students. Given that it has been established that there are differences in behaviour problems across the transition period and for male students there was a relationship between behaviour and teacher confidence, the types of supports teachers use to manage these problems will now be considered.

Teachers' Use of Supports

The finding that over three quarters of teachers used staff meetings as a source of support and that 71% of teachers attended professional development sessions provides a direction for support professionals when attempting to communicate information with teachers. Staff meetings may be seen as an appropriate forum to provide teachers with information about effective management strategies.

The current study also identified relationships between years of teaching experience and the use of professional supports, and between years of teaching experience and the use of positive strategies for male student behaviour. Similar relationships were not identified in research involving perceptions of early years teachers (Martin et al., 1999; Stephenson et al., 2000). Teachers in the current study indicated the behaviours needing most support were those related to disrupting others, remaining on task, and not following class rules. These behaviours are amendable by the use of positive focused strategies, as demonstrated by Houghton et al. (1990). The support sources that teachers use are likely to involve a range of suggestions regarding management strategies for classroom behaviour problems. Whether these management strategies differ across year levels and gender will now be investigated.

Teachers' Use of Management Strategies

Significant differences were observed in the employment of referral, punishment and positive behaviour management strategies for male and female students. Furthermore, it was identified that behaviour management strategies employed by teachers did not significantly differ between primary and secondary school teachers. Therefore, in this sample, teachers are employing similar strategies for behaviour management across the transitional period. Despite this reported similarity, behaviour problems appear to be more prevalent in secondary school. Therefore there may be variables other than management strategies that are causing the change in behaviour. These may include the reduced time each teacher spends with a particular group in secondary school compared to primary school (possibility for less consistency in strategies); developmental changes; transitional stress; and other environmental variables (such as increased demands, family pressures etc). While teachers reported that they do have strategies they use for problem behaviour, an unexpected finding from the current study was that many teachers wrote requests directly to the researchers for information about classroom management.

Teachers' Requests for Additional Information

Twenty-four percent of teachers in the current study requested information related to the management of disruptive student behaviour. Teachers requested information regarding dealing with bullying, motivation of students, how to maximise the learning of non-disruptive students, and general practical solutions for classroom management. Teachers also provided examples of strategies they personally have found successful, such as rewarding good behaviour with vouchers for the school canteen, and the use of a cumulative chart to record good behaviour that is followed up with a good behaviour graph which allows children to visibly see their behavioural improvements over time.

Teachers commented on the success of agreeing on classroom and playground rules at the commencement of the academic year and the importance of following through with the agreed upon consequences. These strategies are consistent with research by Haroun and O'Hanlon (1997b) and Lewis (1999) who suggest these approaches are related to effective classroom management, and pertain to methods known as inclusive forms of classroom management. Implications of this finding are that even though teachers are reporting that they are confident in classroom management, they are still requesting further information related to practical classroom strategies.

Methodological Limitations

A limitation of the current study was that many teachers refrained from answering some items on the questionnaire, making interpretation of teacher confidence difficult. Research may benefit from the use of a questionnaire involving additional items related to teachers' confidence.

Subsequent research is needed in order to understand the implications of the transition period on both student and teacher. The questionnaire employed asked teachers to specifically respond to the disruptive classroom behaviours that concern them. Consequently, the results may reflect high levels of concern for relatively infrequent behaviours.

Conclusion

Whilst the current study revealed increases in student disruptive behaviour across the transition period, this relationship was only found to be significant in male students. Further investigation is needed in order to understand causal factors that are involved in this increase. Similarly, relationships between student behaviour and teacher confidence were observed in male students, a finding relevant to research into both the transition period and to teachers' confidence. Information on the supports used by teachers will provide researchers with direction when communicating effective disruptive behaviour strategies with teachers. This finding suggests that the optimum way of communicating information to teachers is through staff meetings and in-services. In regards to teacher perceptions and management of disruptive classroom behaviour, it is paramount to develop practical classroom management solutions and effectively communicate them to teachers.

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