A comparison of student teachers' and mentors' perceptions of problem behaviours in secondary schools

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Abstract

Behaviours are social constructs, which become 'troublesome' when they are problematic to someone. This paper compares student teachers' and mentors' perceptions of problem behaviours in secondary schools in Singapore. The study is particularly relevant, given the increased use of mentoring in initial teacher education in Singapore and other countries throughout the world.

The research focused upon behaviours which teachers (students and mentors) regard as troublesome within the classroom. An analysis of the perceptions of a total of 80 teachers is presented in order to reveal the types of problem behaviours which are cited as the 'most frequently occurring' and the 'most disruptive'. The results of the two groups of teachers are compared.

The research also examines perceptions of problem behaviours which occur 'around the school' (e.g. along the corridors, the playground). The inclusion of this section was influenced by Lawrence and Steed's (1986) research which named the playground as the site of most problems.

Key words

Teachers' perceptions, problem behaviours, mentoring, disruptive behaviours, secondary schools, troublesome pupils.

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Introduction

'Problem' behaviours are essentially social constructs. As Wheldall and Merrett (1988, p.15) point out, 'what is disturbing to one teacher may be quite acceptable to another'. This paper compares student teachers' and mentors' perceptions of 'troublesome' and 'common' misbehaviours. The first part of the enquiry examines their perceptions and behaviours in the classroom and is based upon Wheldall and Merrett's (1984, 1988) research. The second part of the study examines types of misbehaviour which occur frequently 'around the school'.

Mentoring and behaviour management in initial teacher education

Low, et al. (1955) discuss the origins of 'mentoring':

The concept and process of mentoring is not new. It dates back to the days of the ancient Greeks. In Greek mythology, Mentor, a servant of Ulysses, was entrusted with the care and tutelage of his master's son, Telemachus, who became his mentee and protege. Today, a mentor is often defined as an experienced adult who befriends and guides a less experienced adult (Fagan and Walter, 1982). To Levine (1985) a mentor is a wise adviser or monitor who manages, nurtures, encourages and teaches organisational responsibility.

(p. 19)

The process of 'managing', 'nurturing', 'encouraging' and 'teaching' can be carried out in many different ways, each of which vary in quality. Some mentors might assume that teaching competencies can best be enhanced if they help 'trainees' to adopt behaviour management strategies which work for them (the mentor). However, that particular approach reduces the complexities of classroom teaching (see also Elliott, 1993), which is founded upon relationships between human beings.

Hyde and Pink (1992, p.8) are also critical of such simplistic approaches and claim that by employing an ecological (Schulman, 1986) or interpretive (Erickson, 1986) paradigm, a very different and improved view of teaching and staff development emerges. Rather than attempting to train teachers to imitate certain classroom behaviours, this approach encourages them to take part in an extended examination of their assumptions, beliefs and conceptualisations about learning, behaviour, students' and interpersonal relations, as well as the cultural context of the school, that guide their practice. This calls for the establishment of a type of mentoring which is quite different

from the 'passing on of skills' model, which was referred to above. The foundations of a more enriched mentoring process must be built upon a good understanding of ways in which trainee teachers make sense of certain aspects of classroom life, for these may differ from the perceptions of 'proteges'. Enz and Cook (1992) suggest that mentors ought to be selected because they demonstrate good qualities of caring, listening and sensitivity to the views of others. They should be willing to articulate the intricacies of their craft and the subtleties of the school culture.

The majority of previous studies of teachers' perceptions of problem behaviours indicate that a large number of teachers (often over 50%) consider that they spend too much time on matters of order and control. The Elton Committee (DES and Welsh Office, 1989) found that although incidents of physical violence against teachers (in the U.K.) were few, continuous disruption caused by pupils bickering, talking out of turn, shouting out and jostling each other, was a problem in many schools. There has been little previous research which has compared trainee teachers' and mentors' perceptions of problem behaviour.

Student teachers' and mentors' perceptions of problem behaviours in secondary schools in Singapore.

The research described in this paper was conducted in secondary schools in Singapore. Questionnaires were distributed to 43 student teachers, who were attending a Post Graduate Diploma in Education - Secondary

(PGDE-S) programme at the National Institute of Education, and their mentors. A total of 39 students and 41 mentors returned completed questionnaires, resulting in a response rate of 93%.

The first part of the questionnaire asked teachers to list those behaviours which occur most frequently and are the most troublesome, within their own classrooms. Information was also requested about the number of 'withdrawn' pupils in their classrooms. The second part of the questionnaire asked for information about the perceived frequency of occurrence of certain types of behaviours 'around the school'. Teachers were asked to conceptualise 'problem behaviours' as those which:

-interfere significantly with the children's own learning
-interfere with other children's learning, or
-interfere with the teacher's ability to operate effectively

The findings which are presented in this paper are based upon respondent's first choices to the items in the questionnaire.

Subjects

Student teachers were attending a one year Post Graduate Diploma in
Education (PGDE-S) programme. Table 1 indicates the teaching experience
(number of years) of the mentors. The majority of respondents had been
teaching for over 16 years (44%), whilst the next largest group had
been teaching for 6 - 15 years.

Table 1: Teaching experience of mentors

Teaching experience (number of years)
% of mentors surveyed with this amount of experience

0 - 5 years
24%

6 - 15 years
32%

16 years plus
44%

Results

At the beginning of the questionnaire, teachers were asked: "Do you
think you spend more time on problems of order and control than you
ought ?" Overall responses were remarkably similar for student teachers
and mentors. 38% of student teachers and 39% of mentors responded
affirmatively, compared with 51% in other studies (e.g. Wheldall and
Merrett's, 1988 study in the West Midlands area of the U.K.).

When asked to pick out the most disruptive behaviour,   38% of student
teachers and   34% of mentors cited E ('talking out of turn), as shown
in Table 2. There was also agreement over the second choice for which
20 % of mentors listed 'distracting others' as a particularly
disruptive behaviour.

Table 2: Most disruptive behaviours (1st choice)

Behaviour	% studt teachers who select	% mentors who select
A: Facing away from work	3%	3%
B: Inapprop motor behav(seated)	3%	0%
C: Inapprop motor behav(out of seat)	8%	3%
D: Distracting others	21%	20%
E: Talking	38%	34%
F: Making a noise	3%	5%
G: Non-attending and disobeying	10%	6%

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H: Work avoidance                      4%            0%
I: Verbal abuse towards teachers       5%            5%
J: Physical aggrn towards the teacher 0%           12%
K: Not punctual                        0%            2%
L: Other                               0%            0%
Z: No behavr selected under this item 5%           10%
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'Talking out of turn' (E) was also selected as the 'most common'
behaviour, by 53% of student teachers and 34% of mentors respectively
(see Table 3). For student teachers, the second most common behaviour
was item (B) 'inappropriate motor behaviour whilst seated', such as
"rocking in chair", "moving chair in place", "sitting out of position"
(selected by 21% of respondents). That particular item was only
selected by 2% of mentors, for whom item (A) "facing away from work"
was the second most common behaviour.

Table 3: Most common behaviours (1st choice)

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Behaviour % studt teachers who selected % mentors who selected
A: Facing away from work            3%           19%
B: Inapprop motor behav(seated)    21%            3%
C: Inapprop motor behav(out of
        seat)                       0%            0%
D: Distracting others               3%            5%
E: Talking                         53%           34%
F: Making a noise                   0%            5%
G: Non-attending and disobeying     5%           12%
H: Work avoidance                   5%           12%
I: Verbal abuse towards teachers    0%            0%
J: Physical aggrn towards teacher   0%            0%
K: Not punctual                     3%            7%
L: Other                            0%            0%
Z: No behav selected under this item7%            3%
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Question 3 asked teachers to list the misbehaviours of particularly
troublesome children. Whilst item (E) "talking out of turn" is still
prominent in the selections of both students and mentors (approximately
25%), the range of behaviours listed for these particular pupils was
more extensive (see Table 4). In particular item (G) "non-attending and
disobeying" and item (H) "work avoidance" are more prominent. The
analysis of results indicate a high degree of consensus between the
perceptions of student and mentor groups, when the data is analysed as
a whole. The only notable difference is that mentors also select item
(A) "facing away from work", as one of the most common misbehaviours of

this particular group of pupils, a fact that was also noted in Table 3 (above).

Table 4: The most disruptive and most common behaviours of particularly troublesome pupils

Percentage of students and mentors who selected each item. The table only shows items selected by over 10% of respondents.

Part 1 of the questionnaire also asked teachers how many children in their classrooms could be described as 'withdrawn' (i.e. seldom responding to general questions, non-participation, over shy, with few friends). Overall results were similar for student teachers and mentors. Student teachers identified an average of 1.5 boys and 1.6 girls per class, whilst mentors identified 1.3 boys and 2.0 girls.

Part 2 of the survey analysed the frequency with which student teachers and mentors perceived different types of behaviour to occur 'around the school'. The analysis of results shows a high degree of similarity in the perceptions of student teachers and mentors. The only items upon which they have different views are the frequency of occurrence of 'running in corridors' and 'general rowdiness'. On both items student teachers considered that these behaviours occurred more frequently than mentors (see Table 5).

Table 5: The perceived occurrence of 'around the school' behaviours

Behaviour	Studt teacher				Mentor			
	Daily	Weekly	Rarely	Never	Daily	Weekly	Rarely	Never
Lack of concern for others	28%	23%	46%	3%	29%	27%	39%	5%
Unruliness while waiting	36%	28%	28%	8%	39%	27%	32%	2%
Running in corridors	31%	28%	26%	15%	27%	24%	46%	3%
General rowdiness	31%	28%	31%	10%	32%	27%	41%	0%
Persistently infringing rules	16%	28%	46%	10%	32%	29%	34%	5%
Verbal abuse towards pupils	10%	36%	36%	18%	22%	19%	49%	10%
Loitering in prohibited areas	13%	23%	36%	28%	20%	14%	46%	20%

Cheeky or impertinent
                18%   38%   34%   10%   20%   27%   48%   5%
Physical aggression towards other pupils
                 5%   25%   44%   26%   10%   24%   56%   10%
Leaving school premises
                 0%   15%   52%   33%   2%   27%   48%   23%
Physical destructiveness
                 0%   12%   44%   44%   2%   15%   56%   27%
Verbal abuse towards teachers
                 0%   5%   31%   64%   0%   2%   44%   54%
Physical aggression towards teachers
                 0%   0%   8%   92%   0%   2%   10%   88%

(Frequency of occurrence selected by highest % of respondents are
highlighted for comparative purposes)

Discussion

This study reveals that, when the responses are analysed for the
sample as a whole, student teachers and mentors appear to share
remarkably similar perceptions about the behaviour of pupils within the
classroom and around the school. 38% of student teachers and 39% of
mentors consider that they spend more time dealing with matters of
order and control than they ought. This figure is somewhat lower that
commonly found in U.K. studies, which often cite figures in excess of
50%. There is also considerable overall agreement that "talking out of
turn" is the most disruptive behaviour (selected by 38% of student
teachers and 34% of mentors respectively). Similarly "talking out of
turn" was also identified as the most commonly occurring misbehaviour,
although there is a notable difference in the percentages selecting
that item (53% of student teachers and 34% of mentors).

There was also considerable agreement in the selection of the most
frequently occurring and most troublesome behaviours of particularly
disruptive children. Item (E) "talking out of turn" was still the most
prominent (selected by approximately 25% of all respondents). Similar
numbers of student teachers and mentors also chose items (G)
"non-attending and disobeying" and (H) "work avoidance". The only
noticeable difference was that 21% of mentors selected item (A) "facing
away from work" as one of the most common misbehaviours of this
particular group of pupils. That particular item was not significantly
high in the student teachers' selections.

There were some differences in the second most popular choice of 'most
commonly occurring' behaviours. For student teachers, the second most
common choice was item (B) "inappropriate motor behaviour whilst

seated", such as 'rocking in chair', 'moving chair in place', 'sitting
out of position' (selected by 21% of respondents). That particular item
was only selected by 3% of mentors, for whom item (A) "facing away from
work" was the second most common behaviour.

Part 2 of the survey focused upon the frequency of occurrence of
certain problem behaviours around the school. The results show a high
degree of concurrence between those identified by student teachers and
mentors. The only items upon which they disagree were the occurrence of
"running in corridors" and "general rowdiness". On both items, student
teachers considered that these behaviours occurred more frequently than
mentors.

The above analysis suggests a considerable amount of overlap between
the perceptions of student teachers and mentors. However, when the
responses of particular student teachers and their mentors were
analysed, considerable disagreements were revealed.

Analysis of findings - comparison of responses of student-mentor pairs

An analysis of responses of student teachers and their mentors revealed
a considerable difference in perceptions of problem behaviours within
particular schools. Most agreement was about item (E) "talking out of
turn". Whilst approximately 50% of student teachers and mentors had at
least one common 'behaviour' in their respective selections, there was
considerable disagreement about other behaviours which student teachers
and their mentors selected.

In the case of 'most disruptive' behaviours, 87% of student
teacher-mentor pairings listed at least one item which wasn't recorded
by the other. 79% listed at least 2 different behaviours and 42% listed

at least 3 different behaviours. In the case of the 'most commonly
occurring misbehaviours', 90% of student teacher-mentoring pairings
listed at least one item which was not recognised by the other, 82%
listed at least 2 and 50% at least three. Similar disagreements
occurred regarding the perceived 'misbehaviours' of particular
troublesome pupils within classrooms.

When student teachers' and their mentors' perceptions about the
frequency of misbehaviours around schools was analysed, the results
showed a high degree of similarity. Most respondents (approximately
90%) either indicated exactly the same frequency of occurrence of
particular behaviours, or were only one section away from each other
(e.g. a student might have selected 'daily' whilst their mentor
selected 'weekly'). The only items which showed recognisable
differences concerned "unruly" behaviour and "running in corridors".

This analysis draws attention to the different perceptions of problem behaviours held by student teachers and their mentors. The results further reinforce the need for the establishment of an interpretive model of professional development, as discussed at the beginning of this paper.

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