Maintaining an interactionist perspective of undesirable behaviour: What is the role of the educational psychologist?

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Abstract

Special Educational Needs (SEN) legislation has recently undergone the largest reform in over a decade. Whilst several key changes have been widely discussed, the shift in terminology to describe children's behavioural difficulties has received less attention. A greater emphasis has been placed on encouraging school staff and professionals to see beyond the observable behaviour and to give consideration to possible underpinning factors. However, the explicit focus on identifying undiagnosed learning difficulties, speech and language difficulties or mental health issues may serve to encourage a paradigm shift towards a more 'within-child' rather than interactionist perspective of undesirable behaviour. This paper will discuss this possibility, and with specific reference to speech and language difficulties, it will consider how through their five core functions educational psychologists can seek to maintain an interactionist perspective of undesirable behaviour.

Introduction: The legislative background

Concurrent with the Children and Families Act 2014, Special Educational Needs (SEN) legislation has recently undergone the largest reform in over a decade (Norwich & Eaton, 2015). Under the reforms several changes have been made to the Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice (Department for Education, 2015b). School Action and School Action Plus have been replaced with a single category known as SEN Support, a greater emphasis has been placed on involving children, young people and their families in decision-making, and there is a local authority requirement for the joint planning

and commissioning of services (Norwich & Eaton, 2015). However, a further significant but arguably more subtle change is the shift in terminology from behavioural emotional and social difficulties (BESD) to social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) as a category of need; a change which has been underpinned by the premise that 'persistent, disruptive or withdrawn behaviours do not necessarily mean that a child or young person has SEN' (DfE, 2015b, p. 13).

The conceptualisation of behavioural difficulties has been widely debated by academics, practitioners and policy-makers alike. Within the literature exist several distinct constructs, each informed by competing discourses in the social sciences; the language used not only shaping beliefs about what may underpin the difficulties but also perceptions about appropriate responses (Jones, 2003; Parsons, 2005). Prior to the 1981 Education Act, which reconstructed special education, the term 'maladjusted' was used to describe children who showed evidence of psychological disturbance or emotional instability (Jones, 2003). Understanding disruptive behaviour as a function of psychopathology rather than disaffection and delinquency led to the 're-adjustment' of children through placement in special schools; the emphasis on 'diagnosis' and 'treatment' a clear reflection of the dominant medical discourse (Jones, 2003). However, during the mid-1970s social-scientific discourses began to reconstruct behavioural difficulties as context-dependent and transient; their severity the matter of subjective judgement (Jones, 2003). This perspective was supported by the growing interest in ecological thinking within developmental psychology (e.g. Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and by research that drew attention to the influence of schools on children's behaviour (e.g. Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore & Ouston, 1979).

Concurrently, whilst the Warnock Committee endorsed the term 'maladjusted', they also acknowledged the role of environmental factors, arguing that 'behaviour can

sometimes be meaningfully considered only in relation to the circumstances in which it occurs' (Department for Education and Sciences, 1978, p. 58). This marked a significant shift towards understanding 'emotional and behavioural difficulties' (EBD), the term that supplanted 'maladjusted', as arising from the interaction between a child and their environment, rather than existing within a 'deficit model' (Norwich & Eaton, 2015). Through reconstructing children's behavioural difficulties as a learning difficulty, practical responses were conceptualised in terms of providing special provision within mainstream schools; the objective being satisfactory educational achievement (Jones, 2003).

Whilst this shift in understanding supported the establishment of 'integration' as a concept, the Warnock Committee recognised it was necessary to protect children with the most severe difficulties (Frederickson & Cline, 2009). This was achieved through the introduction of statements of SEN that identified children's primary area of need and the provision they required (Runswick-Cole and Hodge, 2009). Reflecting the Labour government's commitment to inclusive education, a revised Code of Practice was published in 2001 and EBD became known as BESD, an all-encompassing label describing children who may "be withdrawn or isolated; disruptive and disturbing; hyperactive and lacking concentration; have immature social skills; or present challenging behaviours arising from other complex special needs' (Department for Education and Skills, 2001, p. 87).

Subsequently, the use of such an ambiguous term has resulted in a lack of impetus to focus on potential factors underlying children's behavioural difficulties with an undue emphasis placed on their behaviour rather than social and emotional needs (Cole & Knowles, 2011). More recently, the Coalition's Green Paper *Support and Aspiration: A New Approach to Special Educational Needs* clearly indicated the need for any assessments of children to "'identify the root cause of the behaviours rather than focus on the symptoms' (DfE, 2011, p. 70). Consequently, non-statutory guidance advised that 'there should be an assessment to determine whether there are any causal factors such as undiagnosed learning difficulties, difficulties with speech and language or mental health issues' (DfE, 2015a, p. 13).

Whilst it is acknowledged that the intention behind the current legislative changes is to encourage school staff and professionals to see beyond the observable behaviour, one could argue that by explicitly leading schools to focus on learning difficulties, speech and

language difficulties or mental health issues, there may be an unintended shift towards a more 'within-child' rather than interactionist perspective of behavioural difficulties. With specific reference to speech and language difficulties, this paper will address the role of educational psychologists (EPs) in challenging this paradigm; illustrating how through their core functions they can seek to maintain an interactionist perspective.

Coupled with the varying definitions of behavioural difficulties, Billington (2000) notes it is a concept almost impossible to define due to issues of power and control associated with giving children such a label. Accordingly, and in acknowledgement of the subjectivity surrounding the identification of behavioural difficulties, the term 'undesirable behaviour' is used to describe behaviours that are perceived as difficult and in need of attention by those with power within a specific social context. For the purposes of this paper the term speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) will be used to refer to children who may have difficulties with expressive, receptive or pragmatic language, as defined in the Code of Practice (DfE, 2015b). This broad definition reflects the fact that children may have difficulties with one, some or all aspects of language and that this may change over time. For brevity the term 'children' will be used in reference to both 'children and young people'.

Perspectives on undesirable behaviour

Broadly speaking, there are three perspectives on the nature of undesirable behaviour. These are best described on a continuum with a 'within-child' perspective at one end and a situation-centred perspective at the other (Frederickson and Cline 2009). A 'within-child' perspective holds that undesirable behaviour arises from an internal deficiency that presents as a barrier to children's development (Cole & Knowles, 2011). The focus of causation is on individual differences, which may be considered at the biological, behavioural or cognitive level (Frederickson & Cline, 2009). In contrast, a situation-centred perspective holds that undesirable behaviour arises from environmental demands not adequately matching children's needs, with the focus of causation on external factors and the context in which children are functioning (Frederickson & Cline, 2009). Central to these two positions is an interactionist perspective, which considers the complex relationship between children's abilities and their environment. Thus, undesirable behaviour results from the interaction between the

environmental demands placed upon children and their influence on the environment through their own actions (Frederickson & Cline, 2009).

An interactive causal model of undesirable behaviour has been advocated in education for many years (Norwich & Eaton, 2015). However, the alignment of undesirable behaviour with diagnosable conditions is implicitly suggested in the new legislation through the use of language such as 'root cause', 'assessment' and 'undiagnosed'; terms commonly found within medical discourses (Norwich & Eaton, 2015). Coupled with the emphasis placed on identifying undiagnosed learning difficulties, SLCN or mental health issues, this may unintentionally lead to an over-diagnosis and labelling of children's undesirable behaviour, endorsing a more 'within-child' rather than interactionist perspective.

It is widely established that systems have demands on their resources, and resource allocation favours the categorisation and labelling of children according to individual differences (Reindal, 2008). Whilst labelling enables us to make sense of our world, Mowat (2015) argues that within education its primary function relates to providing an explanation for a problem in order to facilitate understanding and action. Lauchlan and Boyle (2007) make a number of suggestions about the negative consequences of diagnostic labels, including a tendency to focus on the label rather than the child's needs. In this way, children take on characteristics ascribed to the label, which in turn frames discussions around understanding the child's 'problems' rather than possible environmental influences (Mowat, 2015).

Moreover, diagnostic labels can 'medicalise' both the problem and the child, suggesting 'treatment' is required to remediate their difficulties (Bishop, 2014). Consequently, this may lead to an increased number of referrals by schools to external agencies; the very nature of which localises the problem within the child and diffuses responsibility from both teachers and parents (Heath et al., 2006; Ho, 2004; Souter, 2001). In addition, Allan and Harwood (2014) argue that a consequence of 'medicalisation' is that it can obscure alternative interpretations of children's behaviour. In contrast to the medical model approach, ecological theory emphasises the dynamic relationship between an individual and their environment in influencing behaviour (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). According to Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006), environmental factors range from proximal influences of the family to distal influences, which include schools and communities. Thus, viewing undesirable behaviour from an interactionist perspective broadens the focus from solely being on children's difficulties and gives consideration to the influence of their homes, families and schools, alongside the cultural and socio-political context.

Whilst it is beyond the scope of this paper to consider learning difficulties, SLCN and mental health issues with regard to the role of EPs in maintaining an interactionist perspective, it is the author's view that the strength of the relationship documented between SLCN and undesirable behaviour may lead schools to firstly consider SLCN as an alternative category of need. SLCN will therefore be used as an illustrative example in exploring the role of EPs.

The relationship between SLCN and undesirable behaviour

Language is an essential communicative tool, playing a critical role not only in children's academic development but also in their social, emotional and behavioural development (Bretherton et al., 2014; Im-Bolter & Cohen, 2007). The successful development of language provides children with a symbolic means for managing their environments and meeting their individual needs (Bretherton et al., 2014). Children with SLCN may therefore be at risk of concurrent or later difficulties in engaging in successful social interactions and in regulating their behaviour and emotions, leading to the development of potentially maladaptive patterns of interaction to successfully negotiate their environment (Bretherton et al., 2014; Hartas, 2011).

Whilst causal mechanisms for the association between SLCN and undesirable behaviour remain unclear, the relationship has been discussed extensively within the literature and is generally well accepted (Hollo, Wehby & Oliver, 2014). Empirical evidence initially emanated from research examining the prevalence of undesirable behaviour in children with identified SLCN, with concomitant prevalence rates of 40–60 percent consistently reported (Baker & Cantwell, 1987; Benner, Nelson & Epstein, 2002; Botting and Conti-Ramsden, 2000; Brownlie et al., 2004; Hollo et al., 2014; Lindsay and Dockrell, 2000).

Conversely, research has also focused on the prevalence of SLCN in children with formally identified behaviour difficulties. Interest in the relationship between SLCN and undesirable behaviour has extended to young children with psychiatric disorders (Walsh, Scullion, Burns, MacEvilly & Brosnan, 2014); older children excluded or at risk of

permanent exclusion (Clegg, Stackhouse, Finch, Murphy & Nicholls, 2009; Ripley & Yuill, 2005); and to the population of young offenders (Bryan, 2004; Bryan, Freer & Furlong, 2007). Research has also evidenced a specific link between children's pragmatic language abilities and undesirable behaviour (Donno, Parker, Gilmour & Skuse, 2010; Gilmour, Hill, Place & Skuse, 2004; Mackie & Law, 2010). For example, Donno et al. (2010) reported that 42 percent of children obtained pragmatic language scores that were at least three standard deviations below that of population norms, consistent with clinically significant levels of impairment.

However, as much of this research has been conducted with small clinical samples of children, the generalisability of these findings is questionable. Future research is therefore needed with larger community samples of children to corroborate these findings (Hollo et al., 2014). Whilst a small number of studies (e.g. Clegg, Hollis, Mawhood & Rutter, 2005; Lindsay, Dockrell & Strand, 2007) have evidenced a continuation of the relationship into adolescence and adulthood, the robustness of this association would be improved through more longitudinal research to determine how the nature of the relationship changes over time. Future research is also needed to ascertain whether specific types of undesirable behaviour correspond with specific types of language difficulties (Mackie & Law, 2010). Moreover, as research has been conducted within a clinical paradigm, findings have often been interpreted as evidence of undiagnosed language difficulties. Gilmour et al. (2004), for example, concluded that some children had pragmatic language difficulties as severe as those with a clinical diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder. Thus, one could argue that the evidence base for the relationship between SLCN and undesirable behaviour largely exists within a deficit model.

The role of the educational psychologist

In recent years the role of educational psychologists (EPs) within the United Kingdom has been widely discussed; especially with regard to their unique contribution (Ashton & Roberts, 2006; Cameron, 2006; Fallon, Woods & Rooney, 2010). Hill (2013) documents how their role has developed from assisting in school placement decisions to conducting assessments and interventions when a child may have SEN, a role promoted following the 1981 and 1993 Education Acts and a clear indication of how the socio-political context has also shaped the role of the EP.

More recently, there has been an explicit conceptualisation of their role as scientist-practitioners, applying scientific principles such as hypothesis testing in their work (Lane & Corrie, 2006). In their review of educational psychology services, the Scottish Executive Education Department (SEED, 2002) succinctly identified five core functions of EPs: consultation; assessment; intervention; research and training; working at the levels of the individual, group and organisation. Given the author's view that the language used in the new Code of Practice may lead schools to adopt a more 'within-child' perspective of undesirable behaviour, it would seem pertinent to consider EPs can maintain an interactionist perspective through the different aspects of their work.

Consultation

Consultation is a key means of service delivery in many educational psychology services and is based on the paradox that to effectively improve outcomes for children, the focus should first be on adults (Gutkin, 1988, as cited in Nolan and Moreland, 2014). During consultation, EPs can draw upon an ecological approach, helping to bring home and school systems together through the consideration and application of appropriate psychological theory and understanding; the aim being to jointly reach a better understanding of the child and their situation (Nolan & Moreland, 2014).

However, during consultations, parents and teachers often present a more 'within-child' view of the concern (Timmins, Bham, McFadyen & Ward, 2006), a perspective that may be further exacerbated by the governments explicit focus on identifying 'causal factors' of children's undesirable behaviour. Through consultation EPs can create a forum for developing a shared understanding and make suggestions which can facilitate a qualitative shift in the perspectives of consultees (Nolan and Moreland, 2014). Thus, EPs can support professionals and families to further understand the many factors that may contribute to undesirable behaviour, of which SLCN may be one.

Given that all behaviour is communication it is unsurprising that a child who is engaging in undesirable behaviour may have SLCN (Cross, 2011). However, through consultation EPs can help broaden this perspective by encouraging consultees to try to understand the communicative function of the behaviour (Nolan & Moreland, 2014). The 'Iceberg Model' (Goodman, 2002) is a systems-based thinking tool designed to support the discovery of patterns, motivations, supporting structures and mental models that underlie

human behaviour. This can apply equally to children's behaviour and also to adults' in terms of their perceptions and subsequent actions with regard to undesirable behaviour. Through asking questions that explore what may have influenced the patterns of behaviour and what values and beliefs exist about a particular child, EPs can extend the notion of identifying underpinning factors to include the child's environment, thus endorsing an interactionist perspective.

Assessment

A second core function of EPs is that of assessment. This can be described as a process by which an EP gathers information from a number of sources, including parents, professionals and children, in a variety of settings over a period of time (Cameron & Hardy, 2013). However, it is important to acknowledge that the lens through which children's undesirable behaviour is viewed may influence how it is assessed. Thus, if undesirable behaviour is viewed through a 'within-child' lens, an assessment may consist of an observation to ascertain a child's 'deficits' but would also likely include a standardised test, the nature of which is determined by the perceived underlying factor.

Utilising SLCN as an example, in maintaining an interactionist perspective it is important that EPs not only assess children's functional ability in the environment in which the undesirable behaviour occurs, but that they also assess the communicative demands of the environment through conducting an environmental audit, such as the Communication Supporting Classrooms Observation Tool (Dockrell, Bakopoulou, Law, Spencer & Lindsay, 2015). Whilst this may seem obvious, Frederickson and Cline (2009) note a distinct gap between EPs' theoretical understanding of the importance of context in children's development and the practice of assessing contexts thoroughly during assessment. Furthermore, in light of the statutory requirement for more collaborative working between health and education, there is an opportunity for EPs to support speech and language therapists (SLTs) in their assessment of children, ensuring they also give consideration to both the environment in which the child is functioning and the context in which they conduct their assessments (Pickstone, Goldbart, Marshall, Rees & Roulstone, 2009).

Whilst an assessment can take many forms, their main purpose is to develop and inform interventions or strategies that are designed to improve outcomes for children (SEED, 2002). As interventions may occur at an individual, school or local authority level, EPs are well placed to support interventions informed by an interactionist perspective. Given the strength of the association between SLCN and undesirable behaviour, it is the author's view that increased numbers of children may now be identified by schools as having difficulties with speech and language. It would therefore seem a useful endeavour to develop the presence and accessibility of SLTs within educational settings. However, careful attention should be given to how this provision is accessed; since if we 'refer' children, it may be assumed that the child has an impairment that needs fixing and thus the problem remains 'within-child'.

Intervention

At an individual level, SLTs typically assess children's abilities through a standardised test, such as the Clinical Evaluation of Language of Fundamentals (Wiig, Secord & Semel, 1992), and then use the results to develop a specific intervention programme; the goal being 'remediation' of their difficulties (McConnellogue, 2011). However, as SLTs often give less consideration to environmental factors in their assessment of children, interventions are rarely recommended at the environmental level (Pickstone et al., 2009). Therefore, in promoting an interactionist perspective there is a role for EPs to work jointly with SLTs in order to devise interventions that also take environmental factors into consideration.

Additionally, if more children are identified as having SLCN, this may lead to greater numbers of children requiring the support of SLTs, placing greater demands on a system already limited in its resources (Pickstone et al., 2009). Whilst SLTs have tried to overcome this difficulty through the delivery of 'indirect' interventions, within the health profession this does not mean that interventions are at the environmental level; it simply means that they are delivered by individuals other than SLTs (Pickstone et al., 2009). EPs on the other hand are well placed to support the implementation of interventions at the systemic level through, for example, the creation of language-rich and communication-friendly classrooms (Dockrell et al., 2015). Alongside having important implications in reducing demands on the system's resources, the implementation of interventions at the environmental level may provide a better communicative environment for all children.

Research and training

The recent changes to SEN legislation and the accompanying Code of Practice (DfE, 2015b) actively support improved joint working between education and health services. However, as illustrated through their conceptualisation of assessment and intervention, there are qualitative differences in perspectives between services (Norwich & Eaton, 2015). As an interactionist perspective doesn't disregard 'within-child' factors but places a greater emphasis on the environmental demands made on children, it may be that EPs can work jointly with SLTs to deliver training to schools (McConnellogue, 2011). However, it is important to be mindful that training delivered by EPs has the potential to be situated quite 'within-child', especially if the focus is on developing staff understanding of a particular need. Recent research conducted by Marshall and Lewis (2014) demonstrates how training in creating language-rich classrooms was successfully delivered through theoretical sessions on language and cognitive development, but also by facilitating experiential training for practitioners. Thus, there may be future opportunities for EPs to adapt their training and to work with practitioners in self-evaluating videos of their own practice.

As a result of the extension of statutory provision until the age of 25 and given the body of evidence that suggests a high prevalence of language difficulties in populations of young offenders (e.g. Bryan, 2004; Bryan et al., 2007), it is likely that EPs will increasingly find themselves working with professionals involved in the youth justice system. This provides an opportunity for EPs to raise awareness of the relationship between SLCN and undesirable behaviour amongst these professionals. However, maintaining an interactionist perspective must be coupled with developing staff understanding of the need for their services to match the needs of the individuals they are working with.

Finally, whilst for many EPs active engagement in research may be rare, it has an important function in facilitating the evidence base from which we draw upon (SEED, 2002). However, specific evidence-based interventions are often 'shown' to work under experimentally controlled conditions; thus in practice they may not always 'deliver' (Cartwright, 2007). Therefore, EPs should continue to seek opportunities to contribute to the evidence base by appropriately evaluating interventions within the context in which they are delivered. Furthermore, whilst EPs may be fluent in making the link between theory and practice, it may be helpful to explicitly articulate this with school staff; thus encouraging greater fidelity to interventions.

Conclusions

Whilst it cannot be feasibly concluded that the recent legislative changes to SEN and the explicit emphasis for school staff and professionals to consider undiagnosed learning difficulties, speech and language difficulties or mental health issues as underpinning factors for children's undesirable behaviour has led to a paradigm shift, it is clear that there are some possible unintentional consequences that resonate highly with a 'within-child' perspective. These include an over-diagnosis and labelling of children's behaviour, which in turn may lead to an over-reliance on external agencies.

One of the fundamental difficulties in any discussion of undesirable behaviour is the lack of consensus on how to define it. Through consideration of how the conceptualisation of undesirable behaviour has developed within the context of differing socio-political agendas, it is clear that throughout history the way undesirable behaviour is viewed has influenced how it has been responded to. Language used within the new Code of Practice such as 'root cause', 'identify' and 'undiagnosed' may therefore serve to reconstruct undesirable behaviour within a medical discourse: a deficit requiring remediation by a clinical expert.

Using SLCN as an illustrative example, this paper has demonstrated that through their core functions EPs are well placed to challenge this paradigm and maintain an interactionist perspective in understanding children's undesirable behaviour. However, the current context in which EPs find themselves working may act as a potential barrier in achieving this as more services move towards a traded model of service delivery, whereby work is largely commissioned by schools. As a result, EPs may find themselves engaging in more statutory assessment work and in less work in children's homes, a key system in which children function. Thus, if EPs are to ultimately support schools, other professionals, children and their families to understand undesirable behaviour from an interactionist perspective, there is a need for EPs to develop the confidence to be explicit in their psychology and to be explicit in explaining the possible paradigm shift.

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