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Applying psychology to enhance teachers' self-efficacy beliefs, classroom management and resilience

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Abstract

The retention and resilience of teachers are subject to many influences. Children's behaviour is often cited as a major source of stress for teachers and a challenge to their resilience.

We outline findings from research that has examined teachers' attributions for the causes of children’s misbehaviour, teachers' beliefs in their efficacy as classroom managers of children’s behaviour and how such beliefs may be supported and enhanced. We relate these findings to those associated with educational and developmental outcomes for children. We suggest that an understanding of teachers' attributions and efficacy beliefs may provide the foundations for cost-effective interventions to support teachers and children.

In conclusion we suggest that the application of psychology in support of the work of teachers can support teachers' well-being and resilience and yield cost-effective beneficial outcomes for staff and children.

Introduction

From a purely economic perspective the training and employment of teachers represents a large financial investment. In England, for instance, central government allocated over £700m in 2010 for initial teacher training (TDA, 2011). The well-being, engagement, motivation and resilience of teachers are, therefore, all important issues if this investment is to be recouped with interest. Teachers’ resilience in the face of professional difficulties cannot be taken for granted and the consequences for children of poor teaching cannot be ignored.

There is a range of reasons why people wish to become teachers (Chevalier, Dolton, & McIntosh, 2007; Hayes, 2004; Hoy, 2008; Scheopner, 2010) and significant variations in their career trajectories (Day, 2008). However, despite the initial motivation to become teachers, there is significant attrition during training and the first years as qualified teachers. Evidence from both the UK and USA suggests that about half of all those who train and qualify as teachers either do not take up a post or leave the profession within 5 years (Dolton & Klaauw, 1999; Hayes, 2004; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). Further, recent data (DfE, 2010) has
indicated that in England over half of the teaching workforce (308,800; 56%) took some sickness leave in 2009, with an average 4.9 days absence per teacher per year. Moreover, it might be reasonable to suppose that, as in business, ‘passive’ attendance by workers who are not wholly committed to what they do is a further cause of loss of effectiveness (Lockett, 2007). Cumulatively, this suggests that alongside other factors, teachers’ resilience and well-being cannot be taken for granted (see also Griffiths, this issue). There is, therefore, a need to consider how to enhance teachers’ resilience in order to both capitalise on the financial investment in their initial training as well as ensuring well-motivated, consistent and effective teaching for children. Whilst clearly not a simple relationship, there is good evidence that resilient teachers are more likely to be effective teachers (Gu & Day, 2007; Stuart et al., 2012). Developing our understanding of factors that may sustain (or erode) the resilience, motivation, engagement and effectiveness of teachers is, therefore, important so that attention may then be given to enhancing support for teachers’ resilience and well-being. In this paper we will not attempt to address all of the many factors that may challenge teachers’ confidence, motivation or resilience. We focus on certain factors that arise from the interaction between children and their behaviour, and the presumption that teachers should be able to manage the behaviour of children in class.

We start with some consideration of issues that arise from children’s misbehaviour.

Behaviour in schools

Children’s misbehaviour in schools has been a persistent source of concern for teachers and administrators (Grieve, 2009; Klassen & Anderson, 2009; Martin, Linfoot, & Stephenson, 1999; Steer, 2009). Teachers’ concerns about children’s misbehaviour have been found to be associated with increased stress and burnout, to undermine teachers’ resilience and be a significant precipitating factor for those who decide to leave teaching (Hastings & Bham, 2003; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Klassen, 2010; Klassen & Anderson, 2009; Martin et al., 1999; Miller, 2003). The data provided by Ingersoll and Smith (2003), for instance, suggested that of those who left teaching after just one year, nearly 29% cited dissatisfaction with the job and of these, nearly 35% gave discipline problems as the main reason for leaving the profession.

Children’s misbehaviour is frequently attributed by teachers to either the characteristics of children or to factors external to the teacher and the school (Miller, 1995, 2003). With that externalising attribution it is perhaps understandable that a response by school staff to more extreme forms of misbehaviour is the formal exclusion of children from school. Although the characteristics of schools, the nature of the community and children may be associated with
varying rates of exclusion (Achilles, McLaughlin, & Croninger, 2007; Noltemeyer & Mcloughlin, 2010; Theriot, Craun, & Dupper, 2010), an alternative explanatory factor has been suggested in the relationship between teachers' beliefs, practices and the organisational ethos of schools (Gibbs & Powell, 2012; Osler, Watling, & Busher, 2001).

With the forgoing as the context we now turn to a more detailed consideration of the nature of teachers' efficacy beliefs and their relationship to teachers' practice and resilience in relation to children's behaviour.

**Teachers’ attributions for the causes of misbehaviour**

A range of beliefs about teachers' responsibility for 'problematic' children has been found (Jordan & Stanovich, 2003; Miller, 1999; Stanovich & Jordan, 1998). So, for example, when things go wrong

>'Teachers can feel they have little chance if their efforts are not supported at home. Parents will complain that they are unable to exert control over how their child behaves during a particular lesson at school. And young people themselves lack the power and psychological sophistication to act as mediators between clashing home and school perspectives.' (Miller, 1999) (p79)

Thus, teachers can become part of a cycle of causal attributions and blame. There is evidence that teachers may attribute the causes of children’s misbehaviour to sources outside their control, particularly when they feel unable to manage the behaviour of the children in their classes (Gibbs & Gardiner, 2008; Miller, 2003; O'Brien & Miller, 2005). However, when teachers are able to intervene successfully and improve children’s behaviour they are more likely to attribute their success to their own efforts (Miller, 1995). In line with Bandura's theory, such experiences could contribute to expectations of future efficacy (Bandura, 1977, 1989, 1993). Since it appears that teachers’ beliefs can be determinants of both their professional commitment and outcomes for children's learning and achievement (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Steca, & Malone, 2006; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001), enhanced efficacy beliefs should have positive effects for teachers themselves and, in turn, for children in their classes.

**Teachers’ efficacy beliefs**

There is converging evidence that perceived self-efficacy and personal goals enhance motivation and performance attainments (Bandura & Locke, 2003).
‘Efficacy beliefs influence whether people think erratically or strategically, optimistically or pessimistically; what courses of action they choose to pursue; the goals they set for themselves and their commitment to them; how much effort they put forth in given endeavors; the outcomes they expect their efforts to produce; how long they persevere in the face of obstacles; their resilience to adversity; how much stress and depression they experience in coping with taxing environmental demands; and the accomplishments they realize.’ (Bandura, 2000, p. 75, emphasis added)

Teachers’ belief in their efficacy, confidence and determination to succeed can be seen as primary requirements for successful classroom practice and skilful management of the learning environment (Martin et al., 1999; Muijs & Reynolds, 2002; Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Woolfolk Hoy & Weinstein, 2006).

Consistent with this, the existence of significant positive correlations have been found between individual teachers’ self rating of their efficacy beliefs and their responses to the actual behaviours shown in the classroom (Almog & Shechtman, 2007). Further, when teachers believe they can manage children’s behaviour it appears that children’s own self-efficacy may be enhanced (Bandura, Caprara, Barbaranelli, Gerbino, & Pastorelli, 2003; Bandura, Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, & Regalia, 2001; Skinner & Belmont, 1993).

Three important questions then follow: what are the main sources of efficacy beliefs for teachers; how may these be sustained; how may these be used to enhance teachers’ resilience and professional success? It has been suggested that greater understanding of the conditions that enhance teachers’ efficacy beliefs would facilitate teacher well-being and educational reform, enhance the development of inclusive education and reduce educational exclusion (Gibbs, 2007; Labone, 2004). However, unless managed carefully such notions risk adding to the burden of initiatives and policy directives that can bedevil education and teachers’ workload (Bartlett, 2004).

**Sources of efficacy belief**

Whilst studies such as those cited above demonstrate the important association of efficacy beliefs with outcomes, there is a relative lack of information about sources of efficacy beliefs (Klassen, Tze, Betts, & Gordon, 2011). Such information is almost certainly critical to endeavours to support teachers seeking to develop their professional efficacy and further work in this area is essential.
It is, however, currently thought that a primary source of efficacy beliefs is successful ('mastery') experience of producing a desired effect (Bandura, 1997; Knoblauch & Woolfolk Hoy, 2008; Mulholland & Wallace, 2001). Mastery experience has been found to be the most salient contributor to efficacy beliefs amongst both novice and experienced teachers (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2007). Thus, teachers who have been helped to demonstrate they can produce the outcomes they need may have a greater expectation that such effects can be reproduced in the future.

Other sources of influence on individual efficacy beliefs include vicarious experience, social persuasion and affective states (Bandura, 1997). Although studies such as that by Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2007) indicated that such experiences may be less powerful than achieving mastery, professional development and training activities involving vicarious experience and/or social persuasion have been shown to have effects on teachers’ beliefs in their professional role, responsibility and efficacy (Jordan, Schwartz, & McGhie-Richmond, 2009; Tschannen-Moran & McMaster, 2009).

An additional psycho-social source for individual teacher efficacy beliefs may be found in the espoused collective beliefs that are shared amongst staff in a school. In his study of teachers’ attributions for behaviour, Miller (2003) commented on the potential power of the staffroom culture. Subsequent work illustrated how teachers’ discourses may influence their responses to behaviour (O’Brien & Miller, 2005). From such discourse amongst colleagues (in the milieu of the staff room, for instance) may arise shared beliefs in the collective efficacy of the school staff (Goddard, 2001; Goddard & Goddard, 2001; Goddard, Hoy, & Hoy, 2000; Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2004; Goddard & Skrla, 2006; Kurz & Knight, 2004; Parker, Hannah, & Topping, 2006; Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004).

The attitudes that school staff hold about roles and responsibilities regarding certain groups of children have been shown to influence the beliefs and practices of individual teachers (Dyson, Farrell, Polat, Hutcheson, & Gallannaugh, 2004; Jordan, Glenn, & McGhie-Richmond, 2010; Jordan & Stanovich, 2003). Not only may specific collective efficacy beliefs represent a significant influence on the way children’s behaviour is managed corporately, but also, within a nested relationship foster positive individual efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 2000; Gibbs & Powell, 2012). However, while a critical factor in developing and sustaining the nature of the psycho-social environment seems to lie in the quality and vision of the leadership (Chen & Lee, 2007; Hulpia, Devos, & Rosseel, 2009; Powell & Gibbs, 2012; Ross & Gray, 2006; Stanovich & Jordan, 1998; van den Berg, 2002), the effects may be easily negated by a number of possible factors identified by Dyson et al. (2004).
In order to illustrate ways that the above ideas about how teachers’ efficacy beliefs – and, therefore, their resilience – may be sustained and enhanced, we now give examples of how psychologically informed interventions have provided support for both individual teachers and staff groups.

*The application of psychological interventions*

It is evident that the experience and beliefs of teachers can be powerful determinants of both their professional commitment and the outcomes for children's learning and achievement (Caprara et al., 2006; Miller, 2003; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001).

When teachers’ beliefs in their confidence and skill in managing children’s behaviour have been challenged it is, therefore, important to consider how current and past beliefs can be treated with respect while simultaneously offering appropriate help to address the concerns that are expressed. Psychologists can represent a resource that teachers may turn to at such times for support (Hanko, 1985, 2002; Jordan & Stanovich, 2003; Soodak & Podell, 1993).

In the UK much of the application of psychology to educational issues is undertaken by Educational Psychologists; in the USA their counterparts are the School Psychologists. Historically, applied psychologists have often been deployed to determine which children would benefit most from specific, and clearly segregated, forms of education (see for instance Carroll, 1997; Rodger, 1949; Stinnett, Havey, & Oehler-Stinnett, 1994; Woods & Farrell, 2006). More recently, and in particular in light of moves toward increasing educational inclusion, psychologists have taken an increasing account of context and an interest in the interaction between teachers and children (Farrell, 2004; Forlin, 2010; Havey, 1998; Thomas & Loxley, 2007). Here we provide examples of two ways of intervening to support teachers’ well-being and resilience. First by means of providing in-service training; second through psychological consultations with individuals and groups of teachers.

*In-service training*

One way to effect change in a school is to provide training and professional development activities. A number of studies have shown this to be an effective intervention in schools and with groups of teachers (Hanko, 2002; Jordan & Stanovich, 2004a, 2004b; Tschannen-Moran & McMaster, 2009; Tucker et al., 2005). These studies demonstrate that by working with staff groups and by attending to teachers’ affect (Hanko, 1985, 2002) and teachers’ beliefs in their professional responsibility and capability (Jordan & Stanovich, 2003, 2004a, 2004b), the overall competence of teachers and schools may be enhanced.
Other examples of work in this field have drawn on the theory and findings of work in the field of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). One study reported the effects of work-related demands on teachers – including those implicated in attempting to regulate disruptive behaviour (Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2006). This showed that in the presence of factors such as supervisory support and a positive social climate in the school, teachers would themselves be more likely to be positive, resilient and engaged in their work. As might be expected on the basis of Bandura’s work, the effects of such factors have been found to impinge on teachers’ affect as well as their efficacy beliefs (Brackett, Palomera, Mojsa-Kaja, Reyes, & Salovey, 2010).

In partial confirmation of such work, a small scale intervention based on the work of Seligman and colleagues was developed by Critchley and Gibbs (2012). Staff in one school was encouraged to record and reflect on three positive events that had taken place each day and their causal role in each event. During the course of the following week participants were asked to keep a written record of their reflections in a specifically designed booklet to ensure they would engage fully with the process. Although a seemingly simple intervention, it was based on the premise that ‘happiness is causal’ (Seligman et al., 2005, p. 413). The evidence of the work of Seligman and others is that the encouragement for each participant to record and take credit for their part in each ‘good thing’, facilitates reflection and appreciation of how each ‘good thing’ can lead to another. Thus teachers who participated in the intervention reported by Critchley and Gibbs (2012) were able to attribute their responsibility for the ‘good things’ and, thereby, gain enhanced beliefs in their collective efficacy.

In that study it was also possible to examine subsidiary themes related to the teacher’s efficacy beliefs. Of relevance to the present discussion of ‘resilience’ was a recurrent theme that related to the teachers’ views about ‘Managing Change’ and the effects on them of organisational change. Critchley and Gibbs (2012) data indicated that the staff who received the positive psychology intervention reported significantly increased efficacy in dealing with change. Embracing this one teacher said:

‘[Change is] a good thing for us, certainly for your experience, your career or whatever. If you had a change that you weren’t expecting, maybe later in life it could be quite beneficial for you…’

Consultation

The capacity to view change as a positive opportunity that can promote the development of creativity and professional strengths has been noted elsewhere (Luthans, 2002; Seligman, 2002). To facilitate problem solving and the development of strategies for teachers (including
managing change), psychologically informed consultation has been found to be highly effective for both groups (Bozic & Carter, 2002; Hanko, 1985; Shaalan, 2004; Stringer, Stow, Hibbert, Powell, & Louw, 1992) and individual teachers (Akin-Little, Little, & Delligatti, 2004; Bergan & Tombari, 1976; Terjesen, Jacofsky, Froh, & DiGiuseppe, 2004).

Evaluations of a range of models of consultation have found positive effects for teachers’ overall competence and enhanced beliefs and emphasised the need for such interventions to be delivered by appropriately trained, qualified and supervised professionals (Bramlett & Murphy, 1998; Gutkin, Singer, & Brown, 1980; Shaalan, 2004; Wagner, 2000). Although there are variations in the models of consultation used, the interactions implicit within the essential dialogue provide the psychological processes within which alternative possibilities can be considered and developed (Hymer, Michel, & Todd, 2002; Leadbetter, 2006; Volosinov, 1986; Wegerif, 2011; White & Epston, 1990).

There is good evidence that the application of psychology in this way can have far-reaching consequences. It has been found, for instance, that appropriately trained consultants can positively affect teachers self-efficacy and their competence in specific areas related to children’s socio-emotional development (Weldon & Weingart, 1993). Cumulatively findings demonstrate that appropriate consultation helps teachers identify, implement, adapt, and sustain effective practice with positive effects for teachers, schools and children (Cauce, Comer, & Schwartz, 2010; Goldman, Botkin, Tokunaga, & Kuklinski, 1997; Truscott et al., 2012).

In working with a group of teachers Hanko (1985), for example, demonstrated that by considering the choices of behaviours that the teachers could exhibit in response to children’s behaviours

‘We considered… that we might deal with those by trying to recall how our own powerful aggressions in childhood had been brought under control… it may [then] be possible to deal with these remnants and prevent them from interfering with our professional skills, thus becoming more effective…’ Hanko (1985, p. 38)

Hanko also described how

‘… the rationale [was] to build on the teachers’ experience and on their knowledge of the learning process … to enable [them] to redirect their perceptions and to answer for themselves the questions raised in the exploration rather than having them answered for them… and how to make better use of their skills… They may then see
how much more they can do as teachers faced with the special needs of the whole range of children.’ (Hanko, 1985, p. 69)

An illustration of how consultation enabled a hitherto demoralised and isolated teacher to reframe her position is provided by Miller (2003). In that study a teacher, is recorded as saying:

‘I was very aware that the rest of the staff... would blame Darren [a child in that teacher’s class] for anything because they have always have done... I was having a lot – no a fair amount of opposition from the head... any kind of misdemeanour on Darren’s part was just jumped on... you can feel quite isolated in a school.’ (p72)

However, after discussion with an educational psychologist, this teacher later indicated how:

‘...she [the psychologist] made me feel that I was worthy and she made me feel that I was doing the right thing. She made me feel that all was not lost and she gave me more confidence to go on and to persevere... she was really sort of heartening and she sort of spurred you on to do more.’ (p81)

This, it seems to us, suggests that the intervention enabled the teacher to regain her sense of professional purpose, resilience and belief in her efficacy as a teacher. Miller (2003) suggested that the dialogue and process of consultation created a new and temporary system that included at least one member of staff, one parent, the pupil and the psychologist, within which new rules and norms were created. This new system enabled participants to act toward and construe each other in new and more positive ways providing a basis upon which the pupil and, sometimes, the parent could assume new ‘identities’. In passing we would also like to suggest that that this form of intervention with individual teachers is a form of peer supervision that, while regarded as essential for the maintenance of staff well-being in the ‘helping professions’ (Hawkins & Shohet, 2006; McIntosh & Phelps, 2000; Townend, Iannetta, & Freeston, 2002) is generally not otherwise available for teachers in schools.

The positive effects of such work on the confidence and resilience of individuals and groups of teachers are significant. There is evidence that changes in teachers’ beliefs in their classroom efficacy have consequences for children’s behaviour (Gutkin & Hickman, 1988; Luiselli, Putnam, Handler, & Feinberg, 2005; Sheridan, Eagle, Cowan, & Mickelson, 2001). This form of intervention, therefore, provides not only very cost-effective support for teachers’ well-being, resilience and consequent effectiveness (Gu & Day, 2007; Stuart et al., 2012), but also supports the continuing well-being and progress of children in mainstream provision at approximately a quarter of the cost of placement in segregated special schools (DfE, 2011, 2012).
Conclusions

Teachers are subject to considerable demands from a range of sources. The demands include the expectation they will manage classrooms successfully and help children learn. In this paper we have not tried to address all possible sources for such demands and expectations. Here we recognise that teachers’ specific concerns about children’s behaviour can be sources of stress and challenge to their resilience in the face of occupational stress. Without the support of peers, managers and leaders, morale and motivation may be adversely affected. As a result teachers may feel increasingly isolated and ineffective. Such feelings may be significant in precipitating moves out of the teaching profession. There are, then, at least three potentially serious consequences of this loss of resilience. For the teacher ill-health and time absent from work; for the children a less well-managed learning environment; for the employer a loss in the investment in the training and intrinsic value of good teachers. These represent substantial cumulative economic and social waste.

We have suggested in this paper that a key to understanding and ameliorating such deleterious effects may be found in the psychological underpinnings of teachers’ beliefs in their efficacy in managing children’s behaviour. Therein also lies the key to appropriate intervention. The extent to which these beliefs may be enhanced so that teachers continue to feel resilient and professionally creative is an important consideration. We have suggested that part of the context that maintains teachers’ beliefs in their efficacy is provided by the leadership and management of schools, and, we would add, those who set the national agenda for education. That context may itself be enhanced by appropriate intervention with the whole staff (such as illustrated here by the use of ‘positive psychology’). However, there may be occasions when (for a range of reasons) a teacher’s belief in her own efficacy can be temporarily eroded. At such times skilful and discrete individual work with that teacher may help her to re-experience herself as effective and, thereby, regain her belief in her own efficacy as a successful classroom manager.

It has been suggested that consultation as an intervention can help teachers ‘develop their perceptions of a situation and deepen understanding of possible solutions’ (Hymer et al., 2002 p50). We suggest that psychological interventions of this nature are within the remit of and role for applied educational psychologists. The interventions we have described can help generate solutions that restore teachers’ beliefs in their own self-efficacy and the goals they believe they can achieve. These effects are likely to be achieved through explicit recognition and validation of teachers’ emotional states, and subsequent support toward the achievement of ‘mastery’ experiences. The process thus enables teachers to reflect on and
learn from their experience and to formulate achievable, appropriate and realistic outcomes. The dialogue within the consultative relationship provides the opportunity to consider what the teacher has already successfully achieved (in ways analogous to the recording of successful events in the intervention described by Critchley and Gibbs (2012)), before planning what are the next possible and desirable achievements. Interventions such as those described here have been extensively used and evaluated by applied psychologists (Bergan & Tombari, 1976; Bozic & Carter, 2002; Bramlett & Murphy, 1998; Critchley & Gibbs, 2012; Gutkin et al., 1980; Hanko, 2002; Larney, 2003; Seligman et al., 2005; Shaalan, 2004; Stringer et al., 1992; Wagner, 2000) and, we believe, are valued by teachers in schools.

These approaches 'seemingly simple and straightforward at one level can also be seen as a subtle and delicate undertaking, steering a course between thoughts and feelings, the professional and the personal' (Miller, 2003, p. 86). We suggest that such approaches support and challenge teachers to generate new knowledge, new skills, and attribute greater belief in their own self-efficacy as managers of children’s behaviour (Conoley & Conoley, 1990; Gutkin & Hickman, 1988; Luiselli et al., 2005; Sheridan et al., 2001). As a result teachers gain in resilience and belief in their competence as classroom managers. This in turn provides better outcomes for children and a better return for the investment in teachers' training.

References


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