Understanding the context-dependence of challenging behaviours in the classroom environment to maximize learning opportunities

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Introduction: statement of research interest

In the course of class teaching, I often ask children to pay attention to the learning instructions.   Hattie and Yates (2014) point out that individuals are highly selective with regards to what they pay attention to. This tendency to selectivity creates problems when expectations are projected onto another person's learning or thinking.

This means that teaching is not a simple process of transmitting knowledge from teacher to pupil. It is rather an interactive process in the classroom, viewed as a 'mini society', where a teacher has to manage complex situations so as to enhance student's learning. Learning, however, requires a high level of cognitive, physical and emotional energy, and not all pupils in the classroom are in accord with the teacher's intention. Therefore, although clear educational purpose is established in the classroom, it sometimes turns into a 'battlefield' between teachers and pupils when they do not agree on shared goals.

From personal experience of working with children in varied roles for almost ten years, I have witnessed their struggles in adjusting to the pace of learning in their environment. In my current role as a teaching assistant in a primary school, I am mainly engaged with children who need 'extra' support in their class 'tasks', especially those experiencing difficulty in grasping concepts as well as those who have trouble in focusing on the task itself. Among these children, whenever attention wanders from the lesson, undesirable behaviour results.

Year 3 class at work requires more attention to support a range of behaviour issues. Teaching staff recall this class in Reception as 'lots of interesting characters in a pot'. However, with each passing year, behaviour issues have become an increasing cause for concern. In this Year 3 class, and others, I have observed how the amount of time and energy invested in managing 'problematic' behaviours in the classroom has taken learning opportunities from both teaching staff and children. According to Hattie (2009), reducing disruptive behaviour is one of the most critical factors in improving learning in school.

As an educator, my main interest is in finding ways to enhance children's varied potentials and to enable them to become life-long learners. In this paper, I have narrowed my area of interest to children's behaviour, especially where it obstructs their engagement in learning.

Therefore, to find out what constitutes behaviours which could hinder learning, I first questioned how certain behaviour could be understood in the classroom. In order to answer

to this, and to maximize learning opportunities, it is essential to experience the classroom culture first-hand. Therefore, in my position as a participant observer, the focus will be on understanding 'what is going on' in a classroom setting.

However, this research does not necessarily seek a solution or an answer to particular issues of behaviour in the classroom. Rather, its purpose is to understand the culture of a classroom, including teacher-student as well as student-student relationships. The research further provides an opportunity to explore varied aspects of learning environments that have previously been taken for granted.

Literature review

My interest in this topic stems from a study which argues that constructing an integrated model of the nature of challenging behaviour is the starting point for intervention (Lyons and O'Connor, 2007).

The paper raised the need of redefining 'challenging behaviour' to foster a deeper understanding of the issue. Focusing on this clarity would enable the construction of 'appropriate responses' to 'problematic' behaviour. To do so, the authors conducted research that could illustrate how teachers and students make sense of the commonly used term 'challenging behaviour' in their educational settings. Hence, this paper could be a good starting point for my own research, offering a view of 'challenging behaviour' from the perspectives of children and teachers.

Overall, the paper is well structured and applies relevant methodologies. However, there are some issues with the way the research was conducted, which could detract from the findings.

Firstly, the researchers identify and explain clearly how and why the sample group was selected, and specify the number of participants. They also clearly detail how the research was carried out. This clarity, according to Mertens (1989), could reduce bias in the study. However, the reason that the researchers accepted teachers' opinions and made the choice of the sample classes for questionnaires and children for interviews could reduce credibility (Mertens, 1989). This is because the way the researchers identified the sample group was biased by teachers' prejudgements about the classes and the behaviours of the children.

Secondly, the wording of the questions in the questionnaires might not bring out children's authentic views of school. For example, closed-ended questions such as 'Do you like school?' would lead the interviewee to only 'yes or no' answers. Such closed questions according to Mertens (1989) are limited and thus raise concerns about the validity of the

study. Also, the word 'like' includes the participant's feeling, and "emotional reactions are frequently too complex to report in a single phrase" (Selltiz et al., 1964, p.248). Therefore, as Selltiz et al. advised, the researchers should have used open-ended questions so participants could respond with their own choice of words (Silverman, 1985).

In addition, the researchers failed to articulate interpretations by using pre-coded responses. For instance, 'get along with' and 'how often' could introduce ambiguity in interpretation between the researcher and the participants. Questions regarding behaviours in the present or past should be more "specific, related to actual rather than hypothetical situations" (Silverman, 1985, p.159).

As Stainback and Stainback (1988) pointed out well-designed questions are an important factor in research; therefore, the answers from the questionnaire in this paper could lose its balance and authenticity to reflect children's views in school.

Thirdly, the way the questions were phrased limited a deep of exploration of the issue at hand. It is difficult to develop meaningful deductions from the data, since the individual questions and their results were open to interpretation that could endanger the validity and reliability of the methods used. To make a stronger argument, the researchers could have used the Likert scale to provide a detailed representation of the findings from their studied group (Dowling, 2014).

Lastly, it is possible that the semi-structured interview fosters deeper insights into a child's views. However, what children say may differ from what they *actually* do or see. "How they explain their actions to each other may not resemble their statements to an interviewer" (Charmaz and Mitchell, 2001, p.163). Therefore, the method the researchers employed may merely reflect or confirm what the researchers think 'challenging behaviour' is by providing a pre-determined choice of photographs which could detract from the credibility of the study (Mertens, 1998).

One of the strengths of the study is the evidence of ethical awareness of the researchers. It is made clear that children in the interview were granted permission to participate by their parents. Mertens (1998) asserts that, "Ethics in research should be an integral part of the research planning and implementation process" (p.23). Hence, it is important that the researchers follow appropriate procedures to protect children's rights.

However, there is no evidence that the researchers sought consent from both children and their parents when they conducted the questionnaires, and this oversight weakens the strength.

Although the researchers applied relevant investigation and appropriate research procedures, with their own methodological limitations, it is not strongly convinced that their findings were derived from the methodology they applied so that they achieved the research aim.

Applying the same methodological approach and exploring a similar theme, I have chosen the paper 'Managing emotions in research with challenging pupils' by Gillies and Robinson (2010).

Gillies and Robinson (2010) set out to identify the role of emotions as an asset in ethnographical research to build academic knowledge.

To begin with, due to the omission of a clear definition of 'emotion', it can be argued what exactly 'recognising emotion' means. However, from its usage it seems that the authors apply this term to varied expressions of feelings which are key sources in understanding other people (Gillies and Robinson, 2010).

The researchers originally engaged in a research project by working with pupils at risk of school exclusion. Their aim was to develop an 'innovative participatory method' so they could have a better understanding of this particular group. Throughout this research, they discovered the main source of their methodological difficulties, and it became a stepping stone to this paper: the salience of recognizing and managing emotion in research.

The empirical setting of the research was Behaviour Support Units (BSUs) in three secondary schools located in an inner-city. The researchers had the opportunity to meet 'specific BSU attendees': pupils who were sent to the units. Thus it appears the authors adopted opportunistic sampling. However, they did not specify the number of the participants or length of the time they spent with pupils. This leaves very little room to discuss their sampling strategies.

Also, the researchers failed to provide evidence that they obtained permission for the study from parents, which is one of the weaknesses of this study.

From the study, although the purpose of the original project was to develop an innovative participatory method, it is obvious that the researchers did not have sufficient experience to support pupils with behavioural difficulties and how to interact with them (Gillies and Robinson). According to Mertens (1998), the researchers should acquire adequate inside knowledge for the study. Although the schools have professionals who could contribute to the body of knowledge in the study, the researchers did not mention making use of them. This weakens the credibility of the study and makes it difficult to contextualise (Mertens, 1998).

Furthermore, the consequences of the researchers' entering the field ill-equipped with knowledge and without constructive relationships with participants became an obstacle to conducting research in the setting. According to Lincoln (1995) cited in Mertens (1998), methodology should enable the researcher to build 'trust and mutuality' with the participants. Hence, failing to do so, throughout the research conflicts escalated between researchers and pupils, researchers and staff, and pupils and staff. Methodological error could influence performance in research, hence the researchers could have lost validity in the study (Mertens, 1998).

However, after experiencing several failures, the researchers were 'breaching' one of the grounded rules which became a turning point for the project. They saw the possibility of obtaining more information from the same pupils by 'simply' sharing more time with them. At this stage, they began to realise that emotion was hidden behind all kinds of confrontational behaviours. In other words, the researchers recognized the emotions which were deeply embedded in participants' behaviour.

As Emerson et al. (2001) point out, emotional reactions can crucially influence data analysis. Despite some inadequate methodological approaches, the researchers were able to change their actions after recognising the importance of this element of the research, opening up different ways of interpreting the data.

There was, for example, a pupil whom the researchers initially found hard to like and relate to as a result of certain character traits and observed behaviours. However, the researchers 'managed' to resist forming 'harsh interpretations', especially after several interviews with his mother who described him in a different light. As the researchers pointed out, "personal feelings and an ability to relate emotionally to research participants plays a key role in the analysis of qualitative data" (Gillies and Robinson, 2010, p.106). Their own interpretation of the role of emotion allowed them to explore participants' perspectives. This facilitated a quality of communication that had previously eluded them.

Also, the researchers became 'insiders' by expressing their own sympathetic feelings for students' disadvantaged, unjustified or insecure situations that mirrored the students' emotions. This allowed them to establish emotional connections with participants. Therefore, the researchers were able to acknowledge and explore "the subjective aspects of lived experience and the deeply intimate aspects of human relations", which is receiving increased attention in the social sciences (Emerson et. al, 2001, p.361).

Additionally, the researchers claimed the ethnographical approach accords best with the participatory method. However, the way they analyse emotion in the study was rather phenomenological (Dowling, 2014). Adopting phenomenological analysis enabled the

researchers to "understand and describe an event from the point of view of the participant" (Mertens, 1998, p.169). Through this process, the researchers were able to interpret their own subjective experience in developing theoretical ideas.

Although the researchers omitted some important elements in qualitative research, they raised their own self-awareness critically by reflecting in detail on their own experiences to highlight the aspect of emotion in their study. Therefore, the argument, that the participatory method they adopted as an ethnographical research approach based on trial-and-error enables them to claim emotion as a critical factor in research, is justifiable.

Methodology

"Understanding a people's culture exposes their normalness without reducing their particularity […] it dissolves their opacity" (Geertz, 1973, p.14).

Inspired by an anthropology research approach, I am drawing on an ethnographic methodology, which is an effective way of learning about 'culture'. This methodology would enable me to explore unexpected phenomena, and hence allows me to illustrate classroom culture insightfully.

I am also going to borrow tools from a grounded theory approach, such as open coding, conceptualisation, constant comparison, and theoretical saturation and apply them within the ethnographic approach in order to mutually reinforce each methodology. This approach will empower an understanding of relationships and interactions in relation to behaviour patterns and usage of language in the classroom viewed as a 'mini society'.

Sampling and data collection

The empirical study will be conducted in a one-form entry primary school in London. The participants are children aged 7-8 in Year 3 class, and teaching staff comprised of the class teacher, dance teacher, Spanish teacher, teaching assistant and the inclusion manager.

   A. Sampling

I will adopt opportunistic sampling strategies, recruiting available participants at work. My interests are particularly in how behaviour construction is distributed in the classroom setting. Year 3 class, consisting of 17 boys and 10 girls with diverse cultural backgrounds, is the recommended study target and permission to observe has been granted.

To observe the whole class of 27 children at once is impracticable in my role of a participant observer. I will therefore focus on and follow specific events, and a small number of undecided participants will be used as the sample. Moreover, to add to the strength of the study, I will conduct theoretical sampling in the form of follow-up interviews with participants involved in events during the observations. According to Creswell, this method is to "help the researcher best form the theory" (Creswell, 2013, p.86).

B. Data collection

Data will be collected from varied sources using an ethnographic of approach, in accordance with Creswell's description of data collection "as a series of interrelated activities" (Creswell, 2013, p.146) in order to gather enriched information for research.

Data will be collected over two consecutive weeks from eight lessons in four different subjects: Literacy, Maths, Spanish and Physical Education. It will include classroom observations, fieldnotes, and semi-structured interviews with children and teachers.

Class observations: as a main apparatus for this methodology, I will record using "highly detailed observation" (Dowling and Brown, 2010, p.49). I enter this empirical setting without narrowing my focus to see 'what is going on', but not being completely open. This will sensitise me to all participants' interactions, such as use of language or certain patterns of behaviour, in a 'classroom' environment.

My position will be participant observer. I immerse myself as a 'new insider', which means that although I see the children 'in the same building', I will approach them as if I am an 'outsider' who enters their empirical setting to become an insider. It thus allows me to reduce my 'old habitual views' of children's behaviour and the culture of the classroom, and promotes engagement with the insider's view.

Interviews: to increase the productivity of the observation, children who catch my particular interests during the observation will be chosen for semi-structured interviews as well as participant teachers.

It is important that interviewees feel the interview process is as informal as possible, as if we are having a casual conversation. Since I am working as a TA, it is possible they will not feel completely free to tell me about their emotions or the cause of their actions.

Children might think that they have to give me the 'right answer' or that I am 'telling them off' based on their actions, and teachers might feel that I am questioning their way of teaching. My position in the school may influence the process of obtaining authentic answers from children. However, although this 'possible effect on behaviour', known as the 'Hawthorne

effect' (Dowling and Brown, 2010, p.47), could be regarded as a drawback, it will be acknowledged as in the nature of the research.

Fieldnotes: "[…] [T]he structuring of the empirical setting can occur progressively […] as successive sets of notes are analysed and the researcher returns to the setting with more finely developed foci for their observation" (Dowling and Brown, 2010, p.61).

I will bear in mind the important function of the fieldnotes: this will be one of the essential resources which enables me to make meaning and find significance from it. In turn, it will sharpen my focus when I return to the empirical setting for further observation.

Data analysis

 "Nothing is more necessary to comprehending what anthropological interpretation is, and the degree to which it is interpretation, than an exact understanding of what it means and what it does not mean – to say that our formulations of other peoples' symbol systems must be actor oriented." (Geertz, 1973, p.14)

Inspired by Geertz's explanation, I am going to pursue my own intellectual interests to produce the 'thick description' described by Ryle (Ryle, 1968 cited in Geertz, 1973), which will enable me to conceptualize the data. In addition, I will adopt a grounded theory approach "to increase the analytic incisiveness" and to avoid a low level of descriptive observation of the classroom (Charmaz and Mitchell, 2001, p.160).

To take an example, I will employ open coding to analyse children's behaviour from the observations. Then I will compare the data with my fieldnotes and memos so that I can "create categories around […] core phenomenon" (Creswell, 2013, p.86). Continuing the comparison of the data with the categories I created, a theoretical idea will emerge through this industrious analysis: how and why the events happen in certain ways. Hence, with my own formulated categories I will be able to conceptualize what the behaviour means or does not mean from the child's point of view. Through this process, the segmented data can be integrated with categories and the quality of analysis will be increased (Charmaz, 2014).

In addition, I will bear in mind that the methodology I applied here is *only* a means for the research. Therefore, I will keep "[a] keen eye, receptive mind, discerning ear and steady hand" to stay close to my empirical setting (Charmaz and Mitchell, 2001, p.161) and to deliver accurate and authentic data interpretation. Hence, in my dissertation, I will explore the emerging theories which are closely linked to reality.

Ethical issues

I adhere to the BERA guidelines for ethical research in education (BERA 2011) and am aware of the concerns particular to the methodology I have chosen for the study.

First of all, participants are assured that they are the 'end' themselves in the research rather than a 'means' (Kelman, 1982 and Macklin, 1982 cited in Murphy and Dingwall, 2010, p.339). The researchers treat their participants with fairness, sensitivity and with dignity. Therefore, their rights should be protected in several ways: 1) voluntary informed consent should be given by all participants. If children and vulnerable young people are involved in the study, approval is needed from parents or guardians according to the appropriate procedure and policy of the institution. 2) All participants must be informed of their right to withdraw at any time during research period. 3) By "protecting setting and participants by removing identifying information at the earliest possible opportunity, routinely using pseudonyms, and altering non-relevant details" (Burgess, 1985, Tunnell, 1998 cited in Murphy and Dingwall, 2010, p.341).

There is the possibility to cause distress not by intention but by unpredictable responses, such as answers from the participant's interview questions. The researchers should take action to reduce the feeling of discomfort or intrusion.

In respect of school policies and procedures, lesson observations and follow up interviews will be discussed in advance to help ensure a smooth process.

Conclusion: Professional development

By the purposeful action of teachers and pupils, learning occurs in classrooms (Black and William, 1998). Indeed, learning does not automatically happen by entering the classroom. The classroom consists of complicated personal, emotional and social factors which influence pupils' learning. In other words, pupils have to exert their cognitive, emotional and physical energies to meet academic expectations. Simultaneously, they have to respond to pressure from varied sources, both inside and outside. As a result of mishandling the pressure, there may appear varied forms of behaviour among students, and consequently, they may lose some learning opportunities.

The main purpose of this research project is to understand the culture of the classroom. Through deeper analysis of the study, I would be able to overcome my own accustomed (old habitual) view of the classroom which could open up more opportunities to enhance learning. I believe this project enables me to develop insightful knowledge of the classroom, and thus

increase my strength to engage with children, especially when they find it difficult to motivate themselves to learn.

In addition, although I am not seeking an 'appropriate response' or developing strategies to manage certain behaviours in this study, in my dissertation I will explore the factors that inhibit learning and ways of learning more effectively. I will continue to study various approaches to promote learning to ensure that I can provide alternative ways to keep inspiring my children to learn, as well as to advance my own professional development.

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