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## **Title :**

*Can Changing Perceptions within the Classroom remove Barriers to Learning?*

## **Abstract :**

*There seems to be little time for the needs of the individuals as more and more we are being asked to judge the success of our teaching and the way we organise our schools by the results the pupils achieve in examinations. I witnessed at first hand how teachers can enter situations with pre-conceived ideas and beliefs of pupils and then allow these unsubstantiated assessments to formulate their teaching strategies.*

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**Can Changing Perceptions within the Classroom remove Barriers to Learning?**

The school I teach at is a large, mixed comprehensive situated in the suburbs of Liverpool. With over 1500 pupils and 90+ staff the school has a diverse cultural and socio-economic pupil population and prides itself on the success of its students especially in public examination results.

I am sure it has much in common with many other similar schools in other parts of the country, and that in those schools also, life seems very hectic and speeds along at a frantic pace. There seems to be little time for the needs of the individuals as more and more we are being asked to judge the success of our teaching and the way we organise our schools by the results the pupils achieve in examinations. The pressure on teachers to 'deliver the goods' is continually gaining momentum, especially now that it seems to be linked with pay through the Performance Related Pay Scheme, and Performance Management coming into effect soon.

It appears that although academic progress of the pupils is at the heart of these new initiatives, we may be in danger of rendering the pupils themselves as anonymous.

I already hear staff refer to groups as 'my 'A' grade class' and individuals as 'a 'C' grade candidate'.

Categorising and labelling pupils in such ways may be a shorthand used by teachers to pinpoint pupil progress and attainment, but it does not really tell us much about the children themselves.

My concerns within the confines of this action research project lie with those pupils who we already identify as a particular group, removing their individual identities and replacing them with 'brand names' such as, 'Special Needs children' and the 'Remedial Group'.

Some may argue that by separating, sifting, identifying and labelling we can better cater for the individual needs of children, witness how many schools organise teaching groups based mostly on academic attainment.

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Many in the teaching profession are still looking for the quick answer; identify what the individual needs of the child are and then prescribe the correct 'treatment' and get on with the business of education, or so the theory goes! But using this medical model as an example of how we seek to label children does not sit easily with the drive for inclusion in education which we are now witnessing, and are part of. For many teachers this conflict of priorities is difficult to come to terms with. On the one hand we have the pressure to 'produce the goods' in relation to academic progress and on the other to accept into mainstream schools children who may otherwise have received their education in perhaps a Special School, where a different set of priorities may have been in place. However, I believe that having given a child or group of children a particular label our expectations of them may also change to suit our understanding of what we perceive them capable of. Rather than teach the individual we may, I fear, be guilty of responding to the label.

Where pupils are identified, especially as a result of behavioural patterns, there seems to be a different view away from the medical model. Here it seems that there must be a change precipitated by the child in order for academic improvement to be made. The barrier to progress being firmly pointed at the pupil themselves. Assistance is provided often in the form of behavioural management schemes and the appointing of Learning Support Assistants, but often the end result can be removal of the child from the classroom, and with it denied access to the curriculum. This, I feel is clearly a concern for any school, and we should question ourselves on how we arrived at this situation and what can be done to provide a positive learning environment for all our students.

Having previously worked with a pupil described as having Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD), I witnessed at first hand how teachers can enter situations with pre-conceived ideas and beliefs of pupils and then allow these unsubstantiated assessments to formulate their teaching strategies. Also in my work I had, through reviewing old school reports and interviews with the pupil, formed a strong opinion that academic progress was more in evidence when a positive and harmonious relationship existed between teacher and pupil.

My feelings led me to believe that here was a pupil who was becoming increasingly removed from the teaching situations due to the interaction between himself and the teacher. Behavioural patterns were being established and accepted as normal. This, I also felt, was

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creating a domino effect, the Learning Support Assistant (LSA) working with the pupil did not seem to be enjoying a positive relationship, and certainly the child himself was often found trying to live up to his image in front of his peers.

Expecting a child to change their behaviour, especially when they seem to be attracting all the attention, seems a little unfair, even more so when one considers the negative aspect of many of the strategies in place; loss of free time, removal from the classroom.

The approach I decided to adopt was to concentrate on finding a way of changing perceptions and opinions, breaking down the negative barriers and bringing positive aspects to the fore.

I realised the difficulties I was going to face, asking colleagues to adopt a different approach, may seem as if their past actions were being put under scrutiny, and how many teachers would be willing to make this change without seeing some form of condition being attached.

My conviction was that the end result would prove worthwhile for all concerned, and that a new framework would evolve in which staff and student would value the contribution each was making towards an improved working relationship.

#### **Aims.**

In my previous work with the child (Child A), I had become increasingly aware of the importance he placed on his relationship with his teachers. He recalled in detail events that at various times had left a marked impression on his perception of school life, and there are clear links with his academic profile that illustrate how his work in school was subsequently affected. (Dyson, 2000).

Having transferred from Primary to Secondary school and coming up to the completion of his first year, it was now becoming evident through conversations with staff who taught him and others closely involved, such as the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) and his LSA, that they were finding it increasingly difficult to cope with what they would often describe as, 'Child A's behavioural problems'.

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By the very nature of ADHD, supported by the fact that Child A was taking Ritalin, there would be some aspects of his persona that he himself would find extremely difficult to come to terms with. Even so, I was convinced that I needed to influence a change in teacher perception of Child A rather than let it continue as it was, which I felt was presently creating the framework within the classroom which appeared to be producing a less than conducive setting for learning. A better understanding and increased awareness would hopefully change opinions and enable teachers to see his different behaviour was not meant as 'challenging' and that through a different approach progress within the classroom could be made.

Therefore my original intention for this piece of curriculum development was to act as a 'go-between' (Child A was not in any of my teaching groups), attempting to bring all concerned to a different level of understanding of each individual's perspective.

Several questions helped me to formulate my method:

- Can teacher perception of Child A be changed?
- Will this affect relationships within the classroom?
- What will be expected of Child A in order to alter perceptions of himself?
- From my removed position how can I influence proceedings?
- How can I measure progress?

### **Method**

I consulted with the SENCO at school to explain my intentions and to see what his response might be. Other than Maths, Child A was taught in mainstream classes of mixed attainment, the SENCO was not directly involved in the child's teaching, but I needed to gain approval for my work and ensure that I was not going to disrupt any initiatives that were already in place.

I was able to gather much in the way of factual information from school reports, assessments, examination results, samples of work and notes from meetings. What I did not have access to however, was an insight into how the relationship between teacher and pupil was functioning within the classroom. For this I consulted both the staff and Child A.

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I decided not to involve all the staff who taught him, this was for a number of reasons:

- I wanted to preserve some degree of ‘normality’ so that comparisons could be made
- With what could have been a delicate proposal, I wanted to approach staff who were known to me and I could rely on for their cooperation
- Keeping the project within manageable proportions

Seven of Child A’s teachers agreed to be involved, and I attempted to cover as many variances as possible such as gender, subject taught, time of day.

I outlined my proposals and then asked each to complete a behaviour checklist for Child A.

The LSA was also included in my initial research, as of course was Child A who, as well as an informal interview was asked to fill in a questionnaire regarding his feelings on teachers and the lessons.

### **Findings from preliminary analysis**

Asking the staff involved to fill in a behaviour checklist was intended to serve two purposes, firstly to focus directly on Child A and then consider the impact that some of the his behaviour was having. Secondly to provide information for my discussion with Child A so that we would have areas that the child might like to focus on.

This may seem that I was about to turn the project around and look at Child A’s behaviour, and ways in which he should attempt to address the problems that it presented. My real intentions at this point were to involve the staff and to commit themselves to working positively with the pupil. The behaviour checklist was only to be used to identify two target areas that Child A was involved in selecting, and would then be used in a positive reinforcement programme. The aim being that he would succeed in achieving targets set, thereby providing a valuable boost to his self esteem and a reinforcement to the staff that their change in approach towards Child A was succeeding.

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A sample of the checklist and a summary of the results can be found in the Appendix.

The questionnaire that I asked Child A to complete provided baseline information on how he felt the lessons were going and what he felt about the relationship with the teacher. I intended to repeat both of these exercises on completion of the curriculum development I was about to put into practice.

As was to be expected, my opportunities to talk to staff and explain their involvement were limited. But the overall feeling was that they were all ready to embrace any initiative that would improve behaviour and relationships. Two of the staff were rather indignant that they should have to perhaps make 'allowances' for his behaviour. One commenting that they were "...already bending over backwards."

After speaking with Child A I got the feeling that he was much more prepared than some of the staff to apply to the principal of the project. Discussing his likes and dislikes concerning teacher attitudes towards him, he highlighted several areas; he did not like it when teachers shouted and he felt that at times he was being unjustly picked on for disturbances that were going on around him. He also felt that it was unfair that he was not always allowed to sit next to his friends - in a number of lessons Child A was closely supervised by the LSA who occasionally sat next to him and seemed to have the power to remove him from the classroom or detain him after the completion of the lesson.

These comments I felt further demonstrated and supported the rationale for my work, they seemed to be identifying Child A as a child who must be different in some way and needs the close supervision of an extra adult in the classroom, and singling out one pupil as the cause of disturbances maybe because of his past record. It was these attitudes and images of the child that I wanted to challenge.

### **Curriculum Development**

I wanted teachers to focus on the positive aspects when working with Child A, and I intended the project to run for the next two school weeks. Unfortunately the half term holiday came in

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the middle and I was conscious of the effect that this might have when determining the outcome of the programme.

I made a booklet that he would take and give to the teacher at the beginning of each lesson. An introductory statement explained the emphasis on positively reinforcing the efforts he was making and asked them to award a mark out of five for his success rate of the task. With a maximum of forty points obtainable, we set a target of twenty-five for the week.

Child A and I agreed on the two targets he was going to work towards, areas that staff had highlighted but, more importantly, areas in which he felt he would be successful.

1. avoiding tapping with his pencil or ruler
2. not calling out to the teacher

In our previous discussion we had talked about rewards, he mentioned things like being allowed to sit next to who he wanted, this was something I felt was inappropriate as it was teacher attitudes and not classroom organisation that I wanted to concentrate on. Being allowed a play area for just himself and his small circle of friends was also something he asked for but was, I felt, a very contentious topic. Having teachers quietly compliment him on his efforts and ask, in passing if everything was OK seemed simple enough requests and I spoke with his teachers who agreed. Perhaps the biggest and most unusual demand I made of the staff was to provide compliments and praise by way of a code. Child A is deeply into the world of American wrestling which is full of characters with their own catchphrases. At home Child A and his mum use the catchphrase of one wrestler, 'Cactus Jack' as a private way of saying 'well done'. He was now asking if staff would also use this as a more personal way of complimenting him. I felt that this offered a valuable opportunity for very positive reinforcement and so staff were asked to add the words 'Bang-Bang' to some of their comments. Finally, if he achieved the agreed target of twenty-five points for each of the focus areas I said that I would buy him the latest issue of his favourite wrestling magazine.

During the two weeks I intended to keep in touch as much as possible with the staff and Child A, a record of conversations and events being kept in a diary. At the end of the two weeks I would again circulate the questionnaire and behaviour checklists for completion and a final interview with Child A.

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The LSA was involved in the project but only in so far as providing positive reinforcement verbally or with gestures and signs, smiling or thumbs-up, for example.

### **Findings from Curriculum Development**

The first week; the booklet was given to Child A prior to the start of his first ‘target’ lesson and a quick word with the teacher, it was now up to the two parties concerned.

During the week I saw Child A a couple of times in passing, checking if he still had the booklet and was remembering to get it filled in. I made more of an effort to see the staff and get their views. This was maybe not the best thing to do if I wanted the project to run independently, but I felt a certain degree of responsibility towards my colleagues, was I asking them to radically change their approach and if so how much confidence did they have in me? Quite clearly in my conversation prior to the commencement of the scheme the majority had welcomed the idea of some form of assistance, almost as if they had been looking for help.

This had set me thinking at the time about the role played by the LSA and the SENCO, especially as a number of staff had expressed similar concerns, in particular the relationship between Child A and his LSA. I examined his Statement and the latest Individual Education Programmes (IEP) and observed that there was only one objective, very general in nature;

*“To settle into secondary school life in such a way that he can move towards independent learning”.*

With no clear plan as to how this was going to be achieved and no guidance for the LSA. I traced all of his Annual Statement Reviews and found that the original statement had not been changed in all this time, a period of seven years.

Evidence of the fact that the LSA was still working to this document came on Thursday of week one. An incident in Physics led to Child A being removed from the lesson by the LSA who was following the teachers request. This intervention strategy was detailed in his Statement in 1993. The LSA was of the opinion that this was still the best course of action for Child A, and commented further on the programme, that it was “...not going too well”.

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This may have seemed the case earlier in the week when he was not only receiving scores of two and three, but teachers also saw fit to make written comments in his booklet.

Perhaps it was a way of establishing authority and having the last word, but it appeared that negative comments had to be written about Child A to support the low scores he had been given. I felt at this time that the staff had either not fully taken on board the principle behind the project or they have been unsure about how much 'control' of the situation they were prepared to allow Child A to have.

Proof of this uncertainty came with the comments that they wrote, instead of looking at the target behaviours and passing on a certain amount of trust, they simply removed the problem, in this case the ruler, so that 'tapping' ceased to be an issue. Obviously not the strategy that I had hoped for.

By the end of the week progress had been made, comments in the booklet were now positive and a number of staff having tried the 'Bang-Bang' code were most impressed at its effectiveness and the rush of enthusiasm that followed. Child A seemed to be responding to something, and by the end of the week he had achieved the points target we had agreed on.

In our meeting on the Friday, Child A spoke about the incident and being removed from the room during the Physics lesson. His view of the situation was that there were other pupils involved, but that he was removed to save him from getting into further trouble. By adding an observation that he felt that the teacher. '...didn't keep the agreement', it shows that he is fully aware of his and others' responsibilities and commitments.

He was pleased to have achieved his target, and during the following week which was half-term, he received the magazine I posted to him.

Monday of week two, a brief meeting with Child A, he was delighted with the magazine and was full of enthusiasm for the target scheme. We had previously set a new points target of twenty-seven points but now he wanted to aim even higher and go for thirty, with a promise to work and try really hard all week.

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There was a change in Child A's approach to his work but what evidence was there of a change in teacher perception? Two distinct points emerged from week two.

The first was the positive way in which staff were responding towards developing their relationship with Child A. He spoke of occasions when teachers not only used the 'Bang-Bang' code, even writing it into his booklet – a big change from the negative comments in week one, but also how he had been referred to as a 'sweetie pie'. Child A himself had noticed this change in teacher attitudes. Most lessons that week he said he had enjoyed, and in Music, "Miss was enthusiastic and positive".

Indications of how far trust and understanding had progressed came from the same conversation with his music teacher;

*"I always used to like making loud noises on instruments, but now I want to get on with my work but my partners won't let me, they want to keep making a noise, and they're holding me back. I get upset. Miss says she realises this".*

The sort of reassurance that he needs, the fact that he is not always being linked or identified with noise or problems, and the realisation that teachers understand his dilemma, and are responding positively towards him.

*"I did something I've never done in my life before – I understood every single word in History. I answered a hard question and Miss actually said 'Bang-Bang' in front of the class".*

The second point from week two concerned an issue that had become significantly more important as a barrier to the progress being made in establishing relationships and removing labels and stereotypes.

The role of the LSA does not seem to have been reviewed since the original Statement in 1993, when one of his main requirements was to remove Child A from disruptive situations. This is clearly creating an area of conflict between the LSA, Child A and staff. Removing one child from a situation because his Statement requires it is almost like an admission of

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guilt, and in the eyes of pupils and staff it may seem that they are being offered a tailor made scapegoat, which in some cases they may be only too willing to accept.

When asked about his relationship with the LSA, Child A went very quiet, puffed out his cheeks and then pulled a funny face. Teachers trying to build up a positive relationship may see the injustice of Child A's removal or being detained at the end of lessons and, although not entirely the fault of the parties concerned, it does not provide the kind of support required.

With the exception of one incident, the second week went exceptionally well. Child A achieving a maximum forty for one target and thirty eight points for the other. His reward for this week was provided by his Mum and Dad – an outing to an American wrestling show being held in Liverpool.

The second set of behavioural checklists shows an overall reduction in figures for excessive occurring behaviour, and in fact one of Child A's targets, 'calling out to the teacher', has fallen out of the 'top five behaviours' list. The other target, 'tapping pencil or ruler' is still in the list, however (see Appendix).

Although they were not designed to draw any major conclusions, the statistics do show a shift in a positive direction of teachers' assessment regarding Child A's behaviour, and this correlates to the improvements shown over the two weeks in his target books.

More importantly the questionnaire shows an equal or higher rating in all the subjects included in the project, an indication that in his opinion the classroom is a more pleasing and productive place to be, with better relationships being developed.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

I wanted to show that by labelling or categorising children, and then using stereotypical values and judgements we begin to lose sight of the child and see only the label that now represents that person.

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From this viewpoint we begin to see only what we are told we should see, we adjust our expectations, and the child responds accordingly.

We may now feel justified, the original diagnosis must have been correct, we are comforted in the knowledge that there is a large and competent support network for 'these children', and that our responsibility towards them has diminished.

Without doubt, most schools identify pupil groupings with labels of some kind. In most schools it will be as a 'set', in others a 'band', but whatever the label we need to question the criteria applied and the effects it may have on the children themselves.

The child at the centre of this project will soon be entering year eight in September, and this means in many subjects pupils will be arranged in teaching groups according to academic attainment.

I have attempted to show how the achievements of an individual can be affected by the perceptions and expectations of their teachers. In the short space of time that I have been working with Child A, I feel that a significant change has occurred in both the more positive approach that child A now has for his school work and in the improved working relationship with the majority of his teachers.

I originally began working with Child A in late March, 2000, as part of a previous project, and samples of his work both from before and after that period show how considerable the progress has been in that time. This, I feel reflects the positive attitude that I have tried to foster both within Child A himself by raising his self-esteem, and in his relationships with me and his other teachers.

One interesting point concerning the sample of work found in the Appendix is that it came from a Geography lesson – Geography was not one of the focus subjects within this piece of curriculum development. I feel that this shows how far the influence of this work has permeated into other areas, and further supports my view concerning the value of a harmonious working relationship brought about by changing teacher perceptions of Child A.

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One of the major concerns that I have which has been highlighted through this project, is the extent and value of the support system which can be called upon to help with the education of pupils identified as having Special Needs.

Child A has been assigned a full-time classroom assistant as part of the requirements of the Statement.

The relationship with Child A was not, it seemed to me and many of the teachers I spoke with, of the highest quality and at times barriers to his education were in evidence as a result of this. Not only was Child A given the label ADHD, but he was also given a signpost to hang it on, for him and everyone else to notice, namely his LSA who was with him throughout the day. Rather than creating additional barriers to learning, the role of the LSA, I feel, should be in helping the child to overcome them. The support system in this case was clearly not functioning as was intended when the Statement had been written.

Two points emerge from this, firstly the importance of the Annual Review and the recommendations that are advised. In this instance I feel that for too long the existing Statement has been passed from year to year until it is no longer entirely appropriate for Child A.

Secondly the work of the LSA. Who is directly responsible? Should they not be encouraging good working relationships between Child A and all the staff who work with him, and also between all of the staff themselves, and for much the same reasons?

My final consideration would be towards the curriculum of the school and the messages, both visible and hidden, that are conveyed to pupils and staff.

The organisational elements of the curriculum inform us all of the importance of academic attainment, through the grouping of students, to how 'exam week' commands such importance in the school calendar, for example.

If we are to remove stigma and raise the aspirations and value of all the pupils in our schools then we must begin to assess the damage that is being caused by the over-riding pressure of exams and the quest for optimum grades.

## **Conclusion**

My work with Child A was rewarding both for me and hopefully for the staff and Child A himself.

I feel that I have made an impact on his life in school, his relationships within the classroom seem more harmonious and the staff still consult me over situations they encounter with him.

After two weeks the curriculum development did not end, however Child A insisted that I continued working with him and together we produced target booklets for the next two weeks containing different areas of focus. The second week I asked him to assess himself rather than use teacher assessment, in an attempt to help with his IEP objective of 'moving towards independent learning'.

I have also been in touch with the family, and they have requested that I may be present when Child A's Annual Review takes place in the next couple of weeks.

This I have found particularly rewarding as I came in to this area of education with little background and now find myself interested, involved and motivated to continue with this work.

I am also mindful of the role the 'support' staff play in Child A's education and feel that at the moment not enough is being done to help him overcome the barriers to his learning.

With the push in education for Social Inclusion it will become increasingly more important that the needs and requirements of all pupils are met within the school setting, and it is equally important that this is recognised as an essential ingredient for a happy and successful school.

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