Causal attributions for challenging behaviour in schools: Uniting teacher and parent contributions for effective intervention.

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Overview

The causes of child anti-social behaviour within the classroom are diverse and inter-dependent and so accordingly, the causal attributions made by parents and teachers often vary and conflict. This essay will discuss literature on common attributions made by both parties and consider the wider spectrum of influential factors identified within the process of causal attributions. With reference to empirical material and psychological theory, the efficacy of current intervention strategies will be examined. From this, preventative methods for the long term management of challenging behaviour within the classroom are proposed, with adequate teacher training and support alongside educational parenting programmes, identified as key factors to consider.

What is challenging behaviour?

Challenging behaviour is difficult to define due to the subjective nature of perceived “misbehaviour”; behaviours considered difficult or unmanageable by one professional, parent or pupil may not be classified as challenging by others. Broadly speaking, Educational Psychology considers ‘Challenging Behaviour’ as an umbrella term representative of any behaviour that exposes an individual and those around them to risk. These behaviours can range from physical or verbal aggression to self-injurious acts or obsessional conduct, and are commonly found in individuals with intellectual disability (Emerson & Enfield, 2011).

Challenging behaviour in the form of aggressive and anti-social behaviours is consistently reported as a persistent and widespread challenge within the school environment, presenting daily problems for both parents and teachers. These behaviours are of particular interest within education policy and practice due to their robust and explicit association with long term adverse problems. For instance, persistent aggressive behaviour within the early years has been identified as a primary, contributory risk factor for substance abuse, delinquency and truancy, gang membership and an increased risk of mental health problems throughout adulthood (Foxcroft & Tsertsvadze, 2013). Furthermore, longitudinal studies have identified that increased aggression and anti-social behaviour throughout childhood establishes sequences of aggressive behaviour into adulthood, (Romano et al., 2005).

Within the school environment, expression of challenging behaviour is problematic due to the direct interference with the learning, development and eventual success of the child (Klass, Guskin & Thomas, 1995; Ritchie & Pohl, 1995). Without sensitive and effective implementation of interventions, challenging school behaviour becomes a barrier to learning, not only yielding the afore mentioned social problems but also putting the child at
an academic disadvantage. The short term consequence of this is leaving compulsory education without adequate qualifications, significantly increasing the risk of spending time 'not in education, employment or training' (NEET). The long term consequences of disrupted education as a result of anti-social behaviour are far more wide reaching, encompassing later unemployment and lower income alongside poorer health and life expectancy (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2008; Department for Education and Skills, 2007). The longer a child engages with anti-social behaviour as a means of expression, the greater the consequences become and the more difficult it is to modify the aggressive behavioural response; it is therefore essential to intervene and prevent a child from entering the inevitable cycle of poor life quality at the earliest opportunity (Slaby et al., 1995).

Schools and educational institutes alike therefore harbour the responsibility of helping children overcome their difficulties with challenging behaviour in a manner that allows each child to succeed in school and develop into a participative citizen. Emotional and behavioural difficulties are often caused, or worsened by the school environment, dependent on the schools' and teachers' responses and adaptability to the presented behaviour. The present discussion will therefore focus on the causal attributions of challenging behaviour made by parents and teachers in attempting to provide an empirical and theoretical framework for effective intervention strategy.

**How are attribution processes involved?**

Attributional processes arise from the inherent need to assign order and sense to our environment across physical, emotional and social contexts (Jones & Davies, 1965; Försterling & Rudolf, 1988). Within an educational context, Weiner's (1986; 2000) Attribution Theory provides a theoretical framework for understanding causal attribution, identifying three dimensions along which attributions for behaviour are commonly found. The first, 'Locus of Control', allows an individual to determine whether a behaviour is attributable to internal or external factors, followed by 'Stability' which recognises whether a behaviour is transferable. The final dimension is 'Controllability' in which an individual will distinguish between causes that a person can control, such as skill, against those that are uncontrollable such as luck. This theoretical framework, alongside Weiner's' classic studies (Reyna & Weiner, 2001) suggests that understanding the different causal attributions made by parents and teachers for challenging behaviour, may be vital to the development of effective interventions.

**Parents.**

The extent to which parents might make genuine contributions within parent -
teacher partnerships for successful behaviour interventions will depend on the nature of the attributions parents implicitly make for the causes of classroom misbehaviour. Hence the need to explore parental attributions for challenging behaviour.

A common investigative method employed within research examining the causal attributions for challenging behaviour is that of written vignettes; parents are given short abstracts depicting a particular child or situation involving challenging behaviour and are asked to give a judgement or rating of causal attribution for the behaviour. Under this experimental paradigm, a body of research highlights that differences in attributions made by parents, for children’s behaviour, vary according to the age of the child. Responsibility of misbehaviour within social contexts are consistently only assigned by parents to internal, child personality factors for older children (Dix et al., 1989; Johnston, Patenaude & Inman, 1992). Accordingly, the misbehaviour of young children is often attributed to wider dispositional factors, such as the role of teacher competency in behaviour management (Phares, 1996). However, caution must be taken in assuming that attributions made of behaviour presented in a vignette reflect true causal attribution processes. As a consequence of the hypothetical nature of the behaviour, lower levels of motivational engagement in accurately assigning a cause to the behaviour may result in lower ecological validity. Though, this research can be taken as instructive in understanding the mechanisms involved in the process of assigning cause to behaviours.

Interestingly, parents’ causal attributions for challenging behaviour also differ dependent on the child in question. In comparison to the attributions made for other children’s behaviour, causes assigned to their own child’s misbehaviour are consistently less global and less stable, regardless of the similarities in the actual behaviour displayed (Cornah, 2000). This highlights the important consideration for bias within the attribution process of parents, particularly that of self-serving bias (Snyder, Stephan & Rosenfield, 1978); the notion that attributions are distorted in an attempt to protect or enhance self-esteem (Hogg & Vaughan, 2011). In this way, parents may be assigning lesser internal, stable causes of behaviour to their own child in an attempt to reduce their perceived responsibility to modify the behaviour as the parent. The invested motivation required of parents to adapt challenging behaviour may therefore be reduced as a result of assuming the behaviour is caused by external, unstable factors out of their immediate responsibility and control.

This suggestion is further substantiated by recent findings which demonstrate that parents often implicate the role of external factors, such as a challenging social environment within school, in the process of assigning a cause to their child’s problematic behaviour (Jacobs, Woolfson and Hunter, 2015). This indicates that parents make comprehensive judgements
when assigning causal attributions to problem behaviour, considering the contribution of social and environmental attributions. However, when making causal attributions for the misbehaviour of children with additional educational needs, such as intellectual disabilities, parents often assign internal causes (Merrell & Holland, 1997). This again could reflect the protective nature of self-serving attribution biases, and importantly underlines the key issue in differences between parent/teacher attributions. Assigning an internal cause to problem behaviours limits parental optimism for the treatment of misbehaviour, resulting in significantly reduced parental engagement in interventions implemented by teachers, (Mah & Johnson, 2008; Keenan et al., 2007; McDougall et al., 2005).

**Teachers.**

Outside of a child's immediate circle of influence, teachers form an integral part of every child's social ecology. An abundance of studies indicate that a greater understanding of teachers' responses to problematic behaviour can be gained from the analysis of teachers' attributional process (Arbeau & Coplan, 2007; Soodak & Podell 1994). Taken together with research reporting negative relations between aggressive children and their teachers (Kaiser & Raminsky, 2007; Coie & Dodge, 1988), and conflicting opinions of causality with parents, (Brophy, 1988) this growing body of research indicates that the attributions for aggressive behaviour made by teachers could be a barrier to progressive intervention strategies.

In a study employing vignettes, Arbeau and Coplan (2007) demonstrated teachers' ability to make fine-grained discriminations in their beliefs and responses towards prosocial, unsociable and aggressive behaviours of hypothetical children. Teachers consistently assigned more severe punishments and placed greater emphasis on external factors out of their control as causes for the challenging behaviour. Interestingly, the teachers' also recognised that, unlike the prosocial behaviour, the aggressive behaviour was less intentional and less durable over time, indicating an optimistic stance with regards to the development of the child beyond the challenging behaviour. Similar studies employing vignette methodology suggest that primary school teachers more often suggest non-teacher-based strategies than teacher-based regarding the management of difficult-to-teach students, with attributions for the cause of student behaviour always assigned to situational factors within the home environment (Soodak & Podell 1994). In the same way that parents externally attribute responsibility for the persistent expression of challenging behaviour, teachers consistently report misbehaviour to be the consequence of factors beyond their control.

Despite this body of research, some studies do demonstrate that teachers acknowledge the value of teacher factors, such as behaviour management within the classroom, as
contributory to the expression of persistent challenging behaviour (Maugham, Mortimore, Outston & Smith 1979). This highlights the crucial differences in optimistic expectations for strategic interventions between parents and teachers. As previously discussed, parents assign internal causes out of their control to misbehaviour if it is coupled with additional educational needs. This resignation and acceptance of problem behaviour as part of the child's typical behaviour is not replicated within the attributions made by teachers under the same circumstances. Therefore, although the overarching finding is that teachers view parents and home factors as the major cause of classroom misbehaviour, their increased optimism for medicating the problem behaviour presents the ideal platform from which to establish more agreeable parent-teacher interaction.

External influences upon causal attribution process

Overcoming the differences in attribution is the initial progressive step to initiate successful home-school strategies for the treatment of challenging behaviour. Research exploring the generalisability of attribution patterns across educators and primary carers has revealed distinct influences of culture and self-efficacy beliefs of teachers within the attribution process. Such situational factors are often underestimated in their impact on the process of attribution (Chakoff & Young, 2015) and so are vital to consider to gain a broader understanding of the mechanisms involved in the assessment of others' behaviour.

Cultural differences can impose variations in the approach taken towards social explanation of behaviour (Heine, 2010; Chiu & Hong, 2007). For instance, Gibbs and Gardiner (2008) revealed differences in attributional focus between Irish and English primary school teachers'. While English teachers judged their behaviour management strategies and adult behaviours in general as more important contributory factors, Irish teachers placed marginally greater importance on recognising the salience of children's personality and social pressure. This reported difference in attribution arguably reflects the explicit 'child-centred' focus within Irish educational policy in comparison to the value placed on curriculum demands within English policy and educational practice.

Cross-cultural differences in teacher attribution was further studied by Ho (2004) in a comparative model with Chinese and Australian teachers. Both groups of teachers were found to attribute challenging behaviours most to student effort and least to teacher factors though, as previously observed, significant variation in attribution patterns for different problems were reported. Chinese teachers emphasised family factors in their causal attributions for challenging behaviour whereas Australian teachers placed greater importance on the innate ability of the child. Since causal attributions are not only influenced by the nature of the information available, but also by wider belief and value
systems, it is arguable that the differences here are a reflection of the distinctive individualist and collectivist values of Australian and Chinese cultures. This is supported by the notion that western cultures typically attribute dispositional factors for others' behaviour in comparison to non-western cultures (Gilbert & Malone, 1995) and perhaps highlights the greater influence of social roles within collectivist cultures (Jahoda 1982). Further cultural differences are cited in studies undertaken with Greek (Poulou & Norwich, 2000; Avradmidis, Bayliss & Burden, 2000) and Canadian (Amend, 2005) primary school teachers.

Similarly, cross-cultural literature within the domain of child-rearing beliefs and practices identifies the importance of accepted cultural norms and value systems in guiding parental interpretation and response to child behaviour (Chen et al., 1998). The primary disadvantage of this research is the self report basis of data collection. While instructive regarding personal opinion, the subjective nature of such methods provides little external validity or empirical merit. Self report methods also present the issue of measurement and social desirability bias, because all variables are measured by the same respondent (King & Bruner, 2000). That said, the evidence is informative in highlighting the role of cultural influence and attitude formation in the process of attribution for challenging behaviour within parents.

In addition to wider cultural influences, internal factors such as teachers' self efficacy beliefs regarding behaviour management, have been implicated in the process of assigning causal attributions to aggressive and anti-social behaviour within the classroom. A compilation of studies suggest that teachers with higher judgements of their personal efficacy demonstrate greater motivation to manage learning environments successfully (Carara, Baranelli, Steca & Malone, 2006; Mujiks & Reynolds, 2002; Woolfolk-Hoy & Weinstein, 2006). Teacher efficacy also affects the perseverance of teachers when managing problematic behaviour; in one of the few empirical reports of children's actual behaviour, Almog and Schechtman (2007) observed a significant, positive correlation between individual teachers' judgements of their self efficacy and their observed responses to misbehaviour shown in the classroom. These findings support those examining the self efficacy ratings of pre-service teachers in association with their perceived behavioural control and intention to engage in inclusive practices when working with challenging behaviour (MacFarlane & Woolfson, 2013; Flores, 2015; Oh et al., 2010). Teachers' belief in their confidence, competence and motivation to succeed therefore contributes to the external nature of the causal attributions made for challenging behaviour.

Creating the conditions under which it is possible to devise effective home-school
interventions is therefore a complex task; consideration for cultural values and teacher competency within the attribution process, and the fundamental differences in the attributions themselves is required.

**Current Intervention strategy**

Current interventions draw on the discrepancies between parent-teacher attributions, acknowledging that positive communication between the parties needs to be established to enable success. The early 20\textsuperscript{th} century was dominated by the Behaviourist movement in psychology; this was heavily reflected in the intervention strategies produced to combat challenging behaviour. Applied Behavioural Analysis (ABA) flourished, operating on basic behaviourist principles of associative learning. By implementing frequent and repeated assessments of observable and measurable behaviour, socially important or desirable behaviours are modified through positive reinforcement (Kauffman & Landrum 2006).

In the management of problematic behaviour, marginal success is reported with the implementation of interventions that build upon the principles of ABA, working collaboratively across the school and home environments of the child. Home Based – Reinforcement (HB-R) is one such intervention which essentially extends the structure of ABA; teachers outline classroom rules and violations of the rules and communicate this to parents, who are then responsible for assigning the agreed rewards/sanctions for the child's behaviour (Friederickson, Miller & Cline, 2008). HB-R is crucially dependent on the fidelity of parents in reinforcing the behaviours outlined at school, further highlighting the required need for communication between parents and teachers. Some practical success can be found in American studies. In a literature review of 29 experiments and individual case studies implementing HB-R techniques to modify the conduct and academic attainment of pupils across the statutory school range, Atekeson and Forehand (1979) identified HB-R as consistently effective. This success was reported within both areas of disruptive problematic classroom behaviour and improvement in academic attainment and was observed across the entire spectrum of school ages in both mainstream and specialised learning environments. Similarly, Barth (1979) reviewed the effectiveness of HB-R strategy, again demonstrating the broad application of the intervention in combating repetitive challenging behaviour when teacher and parent parties collaborate together with the same motive for changing pupil behaviour.

Despite the reported success within the American school system, HB-R approaches are not robustly supported within British literature as a direct intervention strategy, though, adaptations of ABA principles have been applied in reactive techniques employed by teachers. For instance, classroom ejections and reprimands are commonly deployed
techniques to manage misbehaviour in the classroom. Furthermore, the use of behaviour report cards provide a means of monitoring daily behaviour for teachers and also crucially allow the pupil themselves to review their behaviour over a specified time period, thereby offering a means of self reflection and promotion of positive behaviour (Chafouleas, Riley - Tillman & McDougal, 2002). This is especially important considering the tangible impact of receiving positive feedback regarding expressed behaviour for pupils and parents alike (Infantino & Little, 2005), again implicating the role of adequate communication between school and home environments.

Due to the intrinsic dependence on behaviourist principles, interventions built on ABA strategies have received criticism on the basis of being over simplistic. HB-R interventions essentially attempt to remedy a particular behaviour by reinforcing counter, desired behaviour with little regard for the social validity of the targeted behaviour for the child (Horner et al., 2009). For instance, the expressed aggressive or anti-social behaviour may have become instrumental in function for the child; perhaps an important channel of communication or articulation of their needs. This is commonly found in cases of bullying where engaging in physical or verbal aggressive acts is developed as a reliable coping strategy or problem solving method for the child. Consequently, attempting to eradicate this behaviour with ABA associative learning could exacerbate the issue further in that such interventions aim to remove what could be the child's only means for comprehending and responding to their social environment. This is potentially why classic ABA classroom based studies (Madsen et al., 1968; Gurney, 1987) fail to produce treatment effects that reliably generalise to other contexts, time frames and behavioural responses.

The criticisms of HB-R are further verified by substantial, longitudinal research undertaken by Farrington and West, (1977) who identified a strong relationship between the continuity and versatility of expressed anti social behaviours over time. Sixty per cent of the males assessed at 18 years for anti-social behaviours, remained the most anti-social when reassessed at 32 years, despite the potentially vast environmental changes occurring between participants within this time; this suggests stability of the anti-social traits within the individuals. Taken in the context of educational intervention for anti-social behaviour, this evidence implies that the focus of ABA principles on modifying specific behaviours rather than the underlying cognitive motivation for behaviour, is indeed simplistic. Wider dispositional and situational factors should be considered in order to substantially medicate the problematic behaviour, further highlighting the importance of parent-teacher agreement to provide consistency in intervention delivery between school and home environment.

These criticisms are in line with the rise of cognitive psychology which saw a greater emphasis placed on the mediating cognitive factors motivating behaviour in an attempt to
tackle distorted cognitions. A plethora of studies have since identified Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) as the most effective method of intervention for the treatment of problematic anti-social and aggressive behaviour within young adults, especially when implemented in conjunction with the parents of the child, (Lipsey et al., 2001; Lewinsohn et al., 1984). Though, the initial reports of improved social functioning are not consistently observed at later six and twelve month follow-ups suggesting no long term modification of behaviour with CBT interventions. Moreover, a number of studies report social skills training, such as the teaching of problem solving and reading skills, to significantly reduce delinquent behaviours over time, independent of CBT intervention strategies. This result is particularly robust for individuals displaying consistent aggressive behaviour (Rohde et al., 2004).

The literature surrounding current interventions indicates marginal success with the employment of ABA principles and the development of CBT techniques in the management of challenging behaviour. However, these methods fail to account for the wider influence of all domains within the child's social ecology and do not appear to offer preventative options rather than reactive management of behaviour.

The way forward

Effective interventions across the spectrum of problem behaviours are found under strategies which employ a holistic approach, involving the input of parents and teachers alongside a reinforced, inclusive school ethos (Ttofi & Farrington, 2009). Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory offers a framework that de-constructs the different social environments of a child to reveal the multiple influences on their expressed behaviour (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The lack of consideration for the range of influences across different social contexts, within HB-R and CBT interventions could be the reason for few long lasting, generalisable results. In contrast, Multi-Systemic Therapy (MST) interventions for challenging behaviour operate at a holistic level, recognising the importance of family-community relations in promoting prosocial behaviour. Unlike CBT, MST follow up studies repeatedly demonstrate continual and consistent effectiveness (Schaeffer & Borduin, 2005; Henggeler, Schoenwald, Borduin, Rowland, Cunningham, 2009), in comparison to individual therapies in improving key family correlates of anti-social behaviour (Borduin et al., 1995). This provides an example of successful treatment of problematic behaviour with parental involvement, further implicating the role of parent-teacher communication in delineating the influences between home and school environments.

Drawing on the literature of bullying interventions, Ttofi & Farrington (2009) present a meta-analysis reporting that the most effective interventions for aggressive behaviour are
those which value parental input, alongside behavioural management strategies implemented by teachers, early on. Studies exploring the value of informative 'Parenting Programmes', aiming to teach specific behavioural management skills to parents of preschool children at risk of developing conduct disorder, have found significant differences in parenting skill and observed problem behaviours (Hutchings et al., 2007). Perhaps then, value should be assigned to educating parents in an attempt to modify all social environments of the child equally, suggesting a method of prevention rather than reactive intervention when the child reaches compulsory school age.

If the most successful interventions cover the spectrum of social contexts of the child, it is valid to draw on the literature discussed regarding teacher efficacy and development to inform future preventative methods. Recent reviews identify consistency of implementation, availability of necessary support systems to deliver and sustain the intervention and the skill and comfort level of the teacher, as factors mediating the effect size of social behaviour interventions used by teachers (Stormont et al., 2014; Ducharme & Schecter, 2011; Gebbie, Ceglowski, Taylor & Miels, 2011).

The provision of adequate training and support within the learning environment is therefore critical in aiding intervention delivery and also to increase teachers' self efficacy belief in their ability to positively impact the management of a child's behaviour. Developing teachers' confidence in behaviour management through appropriate training may therefore be key to successful prevention of challenging behaviour (McLaren, 2007; Gilliam, 2005), and may further develop teachers' optimism for behaviour modification. Current research identifies continual support and coaching to be most valued by teachers' in increasing confidence with behaviour management (Stormont et al., 2014; Woolfolk-Hoy & Spero, 2005). More specifically, interacting with colleagues who report similar experiences, either directly or through the use of an online learning community, offers the opportunity to learn about different behaviour support strategies from other teachers who have actually used them (Gebbie et al., 2011). It appears that support for teachers in the management of challenging behaviour is a necessity for success. Though, psychological theory and research stipulates the importance of considering child development across the range of social contexts, inclusive of parent and teacher attitudes, motivation for change and engagement with implemented strategies.

**Conclusion**

It is evident that a myriad of factors influence the process of causal attribution. The evidence discussed regarding current intervention methods suggests that aligning parent-teacher attitudes towards challenging behaviour, enabling honest and therefore
effective communication between the two parties, is vital for holistically modifying the social ecology of the child and reinforcing established behavioural expectations from school to home. The progression towards prevention rather than reaction is viable, but requires the consideration of parental input and greater value to be placed on continual teacher training and support for better classroom management.
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