

Challenging behaviour: the perceptions of teachers of children and young people with severe learning disabilities

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This paper reports the findings of a study which aimed to elicit teachers' perceptions of pupils' challenging behaviour. Teachers were asked to indicate: which aspects of challenging behaviour concerned them; their responses to it; which strategies they found effective; what they believed to be the causes of it; how stressed they felt; and how effective they felt when dealing with it. They were also asked to identify sources of information, advice and help and to rate different types of challenging behaviour in terms of severity of challenge. Results indicate that teachers are concerned about challenging behaviour and find it stressful. Whilst considering themselves to be effective in dealing with it, a proportion report feeling frustrated by it, angry, upset and/or at a loss. The most frequently cited challenging behaviour was aggression, although self-injury was found to be the most challenging. Whilst recognising the communicative basis of many forms of challenging behaviour teachers nevertheless tended to select strategies which were concerned with diffusion rather than prevention. The most likely source of information, advice and help was other teachers. Some differences in responses were noted according to experience and whether or not additional qualifications were held.

Introduction

Challenging behaviour has been defined as:

Culturally abnormal behaviour(s) of such intensity, frequency or duration that the physical safety of the person or others is likely to be placed in serious jeopardy or behaviour which is likely to seriously limit or deny access to and use of ordinary community facilities.
(Emerson, 1995, pp. 4–5)

The main forms of challenging behaviour have been identified as aggressive/destructive behaviour, self-injurious

behaviour, stereotypy, and other socially or sexually unacceptable behaviours (Hastings & Remington, 1994; Qureshi & Alborz, 1992). Challenging behaviour is likely to have onset in childhood and may be highly persistent over time (Emerson, 1995). The consequences of it can include significant impairment of the health and/or quality of life of the persons themselves, those who care for them and those who educate, live or work in close proximity. Social responses to it may include abuse, inappropriate treatment, deprivation and systematic neglect (Emerson, 1995). Within the care sector staff working with people with severe or profound disabilities who show challenging behaviour have reported feelings of anger, annoyance, anxiety and being upset (Hastings, 1993). In an educational setting challenging behaviour may cause severely restricted access to the curriculum or exclusion of the pupil from school (Male, 1996). Pupils displaying challenging behaviour are also a major source of intense stress in the lives of teachers (Male & May, 1997a; Male & May, 1997b).

Incidence and prevalence of challenging behaviour

Studies into the incidence and prevalence of challenging behaviour within the severe learning disabilities (SLD) population have indicated varying rates, but it is clear that a significant minority of people with learning disabilities engage in challenging behaviour (Jones & Eayrs, 1993). Hogg et al. (1987) returned rates of problem behaviours ranging from 6% ('engages in inappropriate sexual activity') to 43% ('makes disruptive sounds or noises'); Kiernan and Kiernan (1994) returned rates of 2% for 'extremely difficult or very difficult' behaviours and 14% for 'moderately or least difficult' behaviours; Qureshi and Alborz (1992) returned rates of 10%; Harris, Cook and Upton (1996) and Porter and Lacey (1999) returned rates of around 25%. Male (1996), in a national survey of maintained schools for children and young people with severe learning disabilities (SLD schools) in England (representing in the region of 4100 pupils), found that 80% of SLD schools estimated that up to a quarter of their pupil population displayed challenging behaviour, whilst just over 15% of schools estimated that up to a half of their

pupils displayed challenging behaviour. Sixty per cent of head teachers considered that the number of pupils in their schools displaying challenging behaviour had increased 'somewhat' or 'significantly' in recent years. This latter point appears to be supported by Harris et al. (1996) who note that 'there is plenty of informal and anecdotal evidence to suggest that teachers and classroom support workers are more aware of pupils who present challenging behaviour than they were in the past' (p. 7). In the care sector (where clients are generally older) rates of around 50% are commonly reported (e.g. Hill & Bruininks, 1984).

Pupils who are more likely to engage in challenging behaviour include those who, in addition to their severe learning disabilities: have visual or hearing impairments; are reported to experience sleep disturbance; are non-verbal or who have difficulty in communicating (Kiernan & Kiernan, 1994). Self-injury is more prevalent in pupils with severe learning disabilities who also have significant impairments of mobility (Kiernan & Kiernan, 1994).

Teachers' perceptions of challenging behaviour

Whilst there exists a body of research relating to the perceptions and behaviour of care staff in relation to client challenging behaviour (e.g. Hastings, 1996; Hastings & Remington, 1995), with few exceptions (e.g. Harris et al., 1996; Kiernan & Kiernan, 1994; Porter & Lacey, 1999) relatively little is known about teachers' perceptions of challenging behaviour.

In the study by Harris et al. (1996), teachers of children with severe learning disabilities most frequently mentioned physical aggression, non-compliance, disruption and hyperactivity as being 'challenging' behaviours. Physical aggression, self-injurious behaviour, shouting, swearing and destruction of property were most frequently mentioned as 'severely challenging' behaviours. Feelings towards pupils who presented challenging behaviour included frustration, anger, stress and determination. Teachers in the Kiernan and Kiernan (1994) study cited aggression, social disruption, temper tantrums and physical disruption as being 'more difficult' behaviours displayed by independently mobile pupils. Self-injury, social disruption, temper tantrums and aggression were cited as being 'more difficult' behaviours displayed by non-independently mobile pupils.

In terms of explanations given for challenging behaviour, teachers in the Kiernan and Kiernan (1994) study cited, in rank order: attention seeking, demand avoidance, communication problems, stress, interference with routines and provocation. For just over a third of the 'more difficult' group some problem behaviour was considered by teachers to be unpredictable.

Some of the perceived social and educational consequences of challenging behaviours mentioned by teachers in the Harris et al. (1996) study included: isolation from peers; reduced access to the curriculum; reduced opportunities for participation in extracurricular activities; and risk of injury

to self or others. Teachers in the Porter and Lacey (1999) study mentioned pupils missing out on leisure and social activities and reduced contact with their peers and the wider community.

The preferred method of dealing with challenging behaviour described by teachers in the Harris et al. (1996) study was behaviour modification. Other relatively 'popular' approaches included child-focused/individual approaches, Gentle Teaching (McGee et al., 1987) and interactive approaches. Time out/detention/seclusion was also a highly ranked approach in terms of frequency of mentions. In response to a particular pupil showing challenging behaviour, teachers in the Harris et al. (1996) study described ignoring/avoiding the problem, diverting/distracting the pupil and removing the pupil from the situation. In the Kiernan and Kiernan (1994) study, teachers described responses which included: the employment of physical resources (e.g. strengthened fittings, time-out rooms); the employment of staff resources (e.g. redeployment of staff, one-to-one provision); and the use of drugs to control behaviour.

In the study by Porter and Lacey (1999) more staffing, smaller classes and more space and equipment were mentioned by teachers as means of improving provision for pupils with challenging behaviour; training and increasing staff skills were also considered important.

Rationale for the study

Research has shown the significance of the role of care staff behaviour and beliefs in the development and maintenance of challenging behaviours (e.g. Carr, Taylor & Robinson, 1991); related to this, beliefs of care staff about the causation of challenging behaviour and their emotional responses to it have been found to influence the way in which they deal with it (e.g. Hastings, 1993). As noted, however, there is a relative dearth of research into teachers' behaviour and beliefs. In addition, very little is known about teachers' emotional responses to challenging behaviour. The study reported here aims to contribute to, and extend, the small body of existing research knowledge.

Identifying and describing challenging behaviour is not unproblematic. According to Emerson (1998), challenging behaviour is to some extent socially constructed. Oliver et al. (2003) note that:

The social construction of challenging behaviour implies that the identification of challenging behaviour will vary across settings, with some settings able to manage more severe behaviours such that the behaviours are not perceived to be challenging.
(Oliver et al., 2003, p. 53)

The social construction of challenging behaviour will therefore have implications for the interpretation of research findings arising from the present study and, indeed, from any study that attempts to explore perceptions of challenging behaviour.

Data collection

A questionnaire was designed which aimed to elicit special (SLD) school teachers' perceptions of challenging behaviour. Whilst acknowledging some of the limitations of questionnaires (e.g. see Robson, 2002) recommendations by Robson to maximise 'meaningfulness' of responses were adopted. Nevertheless, limitations associated with questionnaires should be borne in mind when considering the results.

The questionnaire included the following sections:

1. Biographical data

Sex, age, qualifications, teaching history and nature of present school and post.

2. Perceptions of challenging behaviour in general

i) With reference to challenging behaviour in general teachers were asked:

- how concerned they were about challenging behaviour
- how stressful they found challenging behaviour
- how effective they felt in terms of improving and/or managing challenging behaviour
- to indicate whether there were any particular aspects of challenging behaviour which were of special concern
- to indicate whether there were any people or other sources of information/advice/help that they found useful.

Response modes for the first three questions were four-point Likert-type scales. Whilst meanings of the scale varied according to the item, for these and subsequent questions in the section 1 was always the least 'strong' (e.g. 'unconcerned'; 'not stressful') and 4 the most 'strong' (e.g. 'very concerned'; 'very stressful') or 1 was always the most positive (e.g. 'very effective') and 4 the least positive (e.g. 'very ineffective'). Response modes for the remaining two questions were qualitative. For both of these questions teachers could provide as many or as few examples as they wished.

ii) In relation to the use of physical restraint teachers were asked to indicate:

- whether or not they used it
- if not, why not
- whether or not they had received training
- how effective they felt in their use of physical restraint
- how comfortable they felt about using it.

A definition of physical restraint was given. This was: 'the positive application of minimum force with the intention of protecting the child or young person from harming him or herself, or others, or seriously damaging property' (adapted from *Permissible Forms of Control in Children's Residential Care*, Department of Health, 1993).

Response modes for the final two questions were Likert-type scales, the penultimate question being a

four-point scale and the last question being a five-point scale. The rationale for a five-point scale was to provide a neutral option.

iii) In relation to specific approaches to managing and/or improving challenging behaviour teachers were asked to indicate which strategies:

- they knew about, had tried and had found effective (coded A)
- they knew about, had tried but had not found effective (coded B)
- they knew about, had not tried but may try in the future (coded C)
- they knew about, had not tried, did not intend to try (coded D)
- they did not know about (coded E).

The different approaches specified were: behavioural; counselling (Lovett, 1985); Gentle Teaching; Intensive Interaction (Nind & Hewett, 1994); replacing challenging behaviours with appropriate communicative behaviours (e.g. Repp, Felce & Barton, 1988).

Awareness, use and perceived effectiveness were indicated by reference to the range of codes shown above – for example a teacher who knew about, had tried and found behavioural methods to be effective would select code A.

iv) With reference to particular types of challenging behaviour, teachers were asked to indicate how challenging they found them:

Teachers were presented with five vignettes of pupils, each describing a different type of challenging behaviour, and asked how challenging they found the behaviour. The five types of behaviour described were: aggressive, destructive, self-injurious, disruptive, stereotypic/self-stimulatory. Response modes for all five vignettes were 1 = not at all challenging; 2 = moderately challenging; 3 = challenging; 4 = very challenging.

3. Perceptions of challenging behaviour with reference to a specific pupil

With reference to a particular pupil known to them who was considered to be displaying challenging behaviour teachers were asked to:

- describe the behaviour of the pupil
- indicate what they considered to be the possible cause(s) of the behaviour
- indicate which strategies they used as a first and/or main response to managing and/or improving the behaviour
- describe how the behaviour made them feel.

Responses to this part of the questionnaire were qualitative.

The targeted sample

The study aimed to elicit the views of teachers from 12 local education authority (LEA) maintained special schools

for children and young people with severe learning disabilities (SLD schools) in England. It was hoped that this number would yield in the region of 75 responses which would allow for appropriate statistical analysis and which would (potentially) provide a reasonably representative sample of teachers of children with severe learning disabilities more generally. Head teachers of 12 all-age (i.e. 2–19 years) SLD schools from 12 LEAs were contacted for prior permission to approach staff. The LEAs were selected to include: a) predominantly inner city catchment areas (six schools); b) predominantly urban/suburban catchment areas (four schools); c) mixed inner city/urban/semi-rural catchment areas (two schools). Geographical regions represented included the North, Midlands, Southeast of England and London. Only all-age SLD schools were chosen in order to provide for the opportunity for any aged pupil to be cited. School sizes ranged from 49 pupils to 121 pupils, with the mean number of pupils on roll being 81. Reference to related research (e.g. Male, 1996; Male & May, 1997a) indicated that schools were generally representative in terms of sizes/mean number of pupils on roll.

All 12 head teachers gave permission for their staff to be approached. Questionnaires were then sent to potential respondents via head teachers who distributed them to all staff; they were returned on a confidential basis by respondents by means of prepaid envelopes. Both full- and part-time teachers were included in the parent sample. This yielded a respondent sample of 70 teachers and a response rate in the region of 53%. A small-scale pilot study was conducted prior to the main study. Only minor amendments to wording were required.

Respondents were predominantly female (59 female, 11 male) with a mean age of 40 years (range 28–52 years). The mean length of time teaching was 15 years (range 3–24 years), mean length of time in SLD teaching 10.48 years (range 6 months–24 years) and mean length of time in present post 5.2 years (range 6 months–14 years). Thirty-four teachers (i.e. 48.6%) held additional qualifications relevant to severe learning disabilities. Reference to related research (e.g. Male, 1996; Male & May, 1997a) indicated that the respondents were generally representative of other teachers working with pupils with severe learning disabilities in terms of more female than male staff, mean ages, length of time teaching and length of time in SLD schools. A somewhat larger proportion held additional qualifications in comparison with other research (e.g. Julian & Ware, 1998).

Analysis

It might be anticipated that differences in responses would be observed according to experience and/or additional qualifications held: for example, research by Hastings and Remington (1995) found that experienced care workers rated challenging behaviour as less disturbing than inexperienced workers. Similarly, Hastings, Remington and Hopper (1995) found that experienced and inexperienced nursing staff working with people with learning disabilities

and challenging behaviours differed in their views on probable causes of challenging behaviour, with experienced staff being more likely to interpret challenging behaviours as expressions of needs than inexperienced staff. Where appropriate, responses were therefore analysed with reference to experience and/or additional qualifications (e.g. specialist advanced diplomas or Master's degrees). Experienced respondents were considered to be those who had taught for five years or more in SLD schools. The experienced/ additionally qualified (EQ) and experienced/ non- additionally qualified (E) groups each comprised 27 teachers; the inexperienced/ non- additionally qualified group (I) comprised nine teachers; and the inexperienced/ additionally qualified group (IQ) comprised seven teachers. Small numbers in groups I and IQ require that interpretation of some results be treated with caution.

Differences might also be seen in terms of strategy selection according to *type* of challenging behaviour shown: for example, research by Hastings (1996) showed that nursing staff were likely to use restraint for self-injurious behaviour, make the environment safe for aggressive behaviour, and distract the person for stereotyped behaviour. In the present study causal attributions and subsequent strategy selection were therefore considered with reference to specific types of challenging behaviours.

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS for Windows. Statistical tests used were: Kruskal-Wallis one-way analysis of variance by ranks, Friedman two-way analysis of variance by ranks, Mann-Whitney *U* test (see Siegel, 1956) and Crammer's *V* (see Crammer, 1994).

Responses to open-ended questions were subjected to a content analysis procedure (see Dey, 1993). Emergent categories were used by independent raters to obtain measures of inter-rater reliability. Agreement ranged between 83% and 94% (mean = 88%). Disagreements were resolved by discussion.

Results

Results are presented to correspond with the relevant sections of the questionnaire.

With reference to challenging behaviour in general

Concern about challenging behaviour. The mean level of concern expressed by all teachers was 3.11 (sd .79), indicating that teachers were concerned about challenging behaviour (3 = concerned; 4 = very concerned). No significant differences were found between groups EQ, E, IQ or I in terms of level of concern. However, Mann-Whitney test comparing additionally qualified teachers with non- additionally qualified teachers indicated significant differences ($z = -.259$ [.01]), with additionally qualified teachers expressing significantly more concern about challenging behaviour than non- additionally qualified teachers. Comparison of experienced teachers with inexperienced teachers showed no significant differences ($z = -1.371$ [.170]).

Levels of stress. The mean level of stress expressed by all teachers was 2.85 (sd .60), indicating that teachers found challenging behaviour to be somewhat stressful/stressful (2 = somewhat stressful; 3 = stressful). No significant differences were found between groups in terms of levels of stress expressed.

Feelings of effectiveness. The mean level of effectiveness expressed by all teachers was 2.04 (sd .59), indicating that they felt effective when dealing with challenging behaviour (1 = very effective; 2 = effective; 3 = ineffective). No significant differences were found between groups in terms of feelings of effectiveness expressed.

Particular aspects of challenging behaviour which were of special concern. In response to the open-ended question asking teachers if there were particular aspects of challenging behaviour which were of special concern, 74.3% cited physical harm to self or others (e.g. 'self-injury, attacking other pupils and staff') whilst 20% cited prevention of learning/limiting of opportunities (e.g. 'behaviour which hinders access to the curriculum or limits future options'). Remaining responses were of an individual or idiosyncratic nature.

People and/or other sources of information, advice or help. Over a third (35.7%) of the sample said they had not found any person or persons to be a particular source of information, advice or help. Of those teachers who cited a particular person or people as being useful sources of information, advice or help, 80% mentioned other teachers. All the inexperienced teachers (whether additionally qualified or not) who had found a person or people to be a useful source of information, advice or help mentioned other teachers (and no other people). In addition to mentioning other teachers as being useful sources of information, advice or help experienced teachers (additionally qualified and unqualified) also mentioned classroom assistants (31.4% of mentions), in-service training providers (3.7% of mentions), speech and language therapists (3.7% of mentions), educational psychologists (3.7% of mentions) and clinical psychologists (3.7% of mentions).

Use of physical restraint
Almost three-quarters (71.4%) of the sample used physical restraint but only 60% of these had received training. Thus, over a third of teachers who used physical restraint had received no training. Of those who had received training three-quarters found the training useful or very useful.

Use of physical restraint: feelings of effectiveness. The mean level of effectiveness expressed by all teachers in the use of physical restraint was 2.30 (sd .46), indicating feelings of effectiveness. No significant differences were found in feelings of effectiveness between the trained and untrained groups.

Use of physical restraint: comfort with. The mean level of feelings of comfort with the use of physical restraint

expressed by all teachers was 3.95 (sd .69), indicating that they felt uncomfortable (3 = neutral; 4 = uncomfortable). No significant differences were found in feelings of comfort between the trained and untrained groups.

Of the 20 teachers who did not use physical restraint (28.6% of the sample), six did not do so because of school policy, 12 because of personal choice (e.g. citing 'respect for the child'), and one each citing 'no need' and 'not appropriate with young adults'.

In relation to specific approaches to managing and/or improving behaviour

Table 1 indicates the percentage of teachers indicating knowledge of strategies and their perceptions of the efficacy of these strategies.

It can be seen that, in comparison with the other strategies, the approach which was most known about and which was considered to be the most effective was replacing inappropriate behaviours with functionally equivalent and appropriate communicative behaviours. Almost equally well known and as well regarded in terms of perceived efficacy were behavioural approaches. Least well known about was Gentle Teaching. Counselling approaches received the most varied set of responses, with a number of teachers commenting that, whilst they felt these approaches might be appropriate and effective with pupils with moderate learning disabilities, they were less appropriate and effective with pupils with more severe learning disabilities. Neither experience/inexperience nor the presence/absence of additional qualifications appeared to affect awareness or perceived efficacy of strategies insofar as the four groups were represented reasonably proportionally for each response mode for each approach.

With reference to particular types of challenging behaviour

Table 2 indicates how challenging teachers found particular types of behaviour described in the different vignettes.

As indicated, teachers generally found aggressive behaviour, destructive behaviour, disruptive behaviour and stereotypic behaviour moderately challenging to challenging. Statistical analysis (Kruskal-Wallis) indicated

Table 1: Teachers' knowledge of strategies/perceived efficacy of strategies (% citing)

Approach	A	B	C	D	E
Behavioural	78.6%	17.1%	0%	4.3%	0%
Counselling	25.7%	21.4%	22.9%	22.9%	7.1%
Gentle Teaching	32.9%	10%	24.2%	0%	32.9%
Intensive interaction	50%	12.9%	28.6%	0%	8.6%
Communication	84.3%	7.1%	8.6%	0%	0%

- A = know about, tried, found effective
- B = know about, tried, not found effective
- C = know about, had not tried, may try in the future
- D = know about, had not tried, do not intend to try
- E = do not know about

Table 2: Teacher ratings of ‘how challenging’

Type of behaviour	How challenging
Aggressive	3.07 (<i>sd</i> .72)
Destructive	2.62 (<i>sd</i> .70)
Self-injurious	3.42 (<i>sd</i> .69)
Disruptive	2.44 (<i>sd</i> .97)
Stereotypic	2.61 (<i>sd</i> .96)

1 = *not at all challenging*

2 = *moderately challenging*

3 = *challenging*

4 = *very challenging*

no significant differences between groups EQ, E, IQ or I in terms of how challenging they found aggressive behaviour (1.724 [.632]), destructive behaviour (4.044 [.257]) and disruptive behaviour (2.363 [.500]). However, significant differences were observed between the groups for how challenging they found stereotypic behaviour (8.122 [.044]). Mann-Whitney test comparing experienced teachers with inexperienced teachers and additionally qualified teachers with non-additionally qualified teachers indicated significant differences between additionally qualified and non-additionally qualified teachers ($z = -2.411$ [.016]) but no significant differences between experienced and inexperienced teachers ($z = -1.643$ [.100]). The results therefore suggest that additionally qualified teachers found stereotypic behaviour significantly less challenging than non-additionally qualified teachers.

In terms of self-injurious behaviour, teachers generally found this behaviour to be challenging to very challenging. Statistical analysis (Kruskal-Wallis) indicated significant differences between groups EQ, E, IQ, I in terms of how challenging they found the behaviour (9.392 [.025]). Mann-Whitney test indicated no significant differences between additionally qualified and non-additionally qualified teachers ($z = -1.644$ [.100]) or between experienced and inexperienced teachers ($z = -1.597$ [.110]). This latter finding may be related to small group sizes.

Perceptions of challenging behaviour with reference to a particular pupil

Pupil age and sex

With reference to a particular pupil known to them who showed challenging behaviour, the mean age of pupil cited by teachers was 11.5 years (range 5–16 years) with the modal age of citation being 12 years; 52 of the pupils cited (i.e. 74.3%) were boys.

Description of behaviour and causal attributions for behaviour

Based on the research literature (e.g. Harris et al., 1996; Hastings, 1996) teachers’ descriptions of challenging behaviour were categorised as: aggression (e.g. ‘attacking members of staff, hair pulling, kicking, biting’); self-injury (e.g. ‘hits own head repeatedly’); destructiveness (e.g. ‘rips up work, throws equipment’); non-compliance/resistance/avoidance (e.g. ‘drops to the floor and refuses to move’);

attention-seeking (e.g. ‘constant requests for praise/rewards’); other ‘inappropriate’ behaviour (e.g. ‘masturbating in public’). Only one teacher cited stereotypy (e.g. ‘twiddles continuously’); for the purposes of future statistical analysis this behaviour was categorised as ‘inappropriate behaviour’. When more than one type of behaviour was cited (four occasions) the first mentioned or most frequent and/or intense behaviour was accepted, e.g. ‘self-biting ... sometimes “nips” other pupils’ would be categorised as self-injury.

Teacher causal attributions for challenging behaviour were categorised on the basis of causal hypotheses found in the research literature (e.g. Hastings, Reed & Watts, 1997). Categories were: communicate needs (e.g. ‘if she wants something’); stimulation (e.g. ‘she enjoys the feeling’); social (e.g. ‘lack of contact with other children – doesn’t know how to behave with them’); biological (e.g. ‘predisposition because of syndrome’); environmental (e.g. ‘when he is in a crowded place’).

Table 3 indicates the different challenging behaviours described by teachers and their causal attributions for these behaviours. Thus, for example, 51.4% of teachers described aggression, with 28.6% of these citing ‘communicate needs’, 8.6% citing ‘biological’ and 14.3% citing ‘environmental’ as causal attributions.

As can be seen from the table, the most frequently mentioned type of challenging behaviour was aggression and the most frequently mentioned causal attribution was ‘communicate needs’ (receiving 51.5% of all mentions). In terms of causal attributions according to specific types of behaviour, it can be seen that for aggression, attention-seeking, destructive and other inappropriate behaviours teachers felt the most likely cause was ‘communicate needs’. For non-compliance it was ‘biological’ and for self-injury it was ‘stimulation’.

Analysis according to experience and additional qualifications indicated a significant association in the case of experienced/ additionally qualified teachers (Cramer’s $V = .672$ [.000]) but not in the case of experienced/non-additionally qualified teachers (Cramer’s $V = .434$ [.117]), inexperienced/ additionally qualified teachers (Cramer’s $V = .436$ [.489]) or inexperienced/non-additionally qualified teachers (Cramer’s $V = .645$ [.233]). Thus, it appears that it was only the experienced/ additionally qualified teachers, as a group, who were *consistent* in the causal attributions they gave for different types of challenging behaviour.

Strategies used and found to be effective in improving and/or managing the behaviour

Strategies which teachers reported as using to improve and/or manage the specific behaviour described were categorised on the basis of work done by McDonnell and Sturme (1993), who identified the following procedures:

- *prevention* (e.g. high levels of engagement, individual programme plans)

Table 3: Teachers' causal attributions for challenging behaviour (% of total citing)

	Communicate needs	Stimulation	Social	Biological	Environmental	% of total
Aggression	28.6%	–	–	8.6%	14.3%	51.4%
Non-compliance	4.3%	–	2.9%	7.1%	1.4%	15.7%
Self-injury	–	4.3%	–	–	–	4.3%
Attention-seeking	2.9%	–	–	–	1.4%	4.3%
Destructive	5.7%	–	–	–	–	5.7%
Other inappropriate	10.0%	–	4.3%	–	4.3%	18.6%
% of total	51.5%	4.3%	7.2%	15.7%	21.4%	100%

Table 4: Teachers' citing of strategies used according to type of challenging behaviour (% of total citing)

	Prevention	Diffusion	Avoidance	Intermittent restraint	Restrictive practices	% of total
Aggression	18.6%	28.6%	1.4%	2.9%	–	51.4%
Non-compliance	4.3%	10.0%	–	–	1.4%	15.7%
Self-injury	1.4%	–	–	2.9%	–	4.3%
Attention-seeking	1.4%	2.9%	–	–	–	4.3%
Destructive	–	5.7%	–	–	–	5.7%
Other inappropriate	5.7%	12.9%	–	–	–	18.6%
% of total	31.4%	60.0%	1.4%	5.7%	1.4%	100%

- *diffusion of potential or actual incidents* (e.g. interpersonal skills, management of antecedents, differential reinforcement of other behaviour)
- *avoidance* (e.g. non-violent self-protection, stepping away, removing other pupils)
- *intermittent restraint* (i.e. personal/mechanical restraint)
- *restrictive practices* (e.g. seclusion, continual restraint).

According to McDonnell and Sturmey (1993) this continuum may be viewed as an inverted pyramid, where most effort and resources are placed in prevention. When these strategies fail, management procedures move onto the next restrictive level of management.

Table 4 indicates teachers' citing of strategies used according to type of behaviour displayed.

As can be seen from the table, the most frequently mentioned strategy overall was diffusion (receiving 60% of all mentions). In terms of strategies used according to specific types of behaviour, it can be seen that for aggression, non-compliance, attention-seeking, destructive and other inappropriate behaviour the most likely strategy to be employed was diffusion. For self-injury, the most likely strategy to be employed was intermittent restraint.

Analysis according to experience and additional qualifications indicated a significant association in the case of experienced/ additionally qualified teachers (Cramer's $V = .618$ [.000]) but not in the case of experienced/ non-additionally qualified teachers (Cramer's $V = .263$ [.394]); inexperienced/ additionally qualified teachers (Cramer's $V = .737$ [.135]); or inexperienced/ non-additionally

qualified teachers (Cramer's $V = .565$ [.327]). Thus, it appears that, as for causal attributions and behaviour, it was only the experienced/ additionally qualified teachers, as a group, who were *consistent* in their selection of a strategy.

Teacher emotions

Categories which emerged in response to the question, *How does the behaviour make you feel?* were described as: 'understanding'; 'frustrated'; 'exhausted'; 'wary'; 'upset'; 'angry'; 'at a loss'; and 'problem-solving'. For individual teachers these categories were not necessarily mutually exclusive: for example, '*unsure as to what to do next but determined to try*' would be categorised as 'at a loss' and 'problem-solving'. Table 5 indicates the percentage of teachers citing particular emotions.

It can be seen from table 5 that almost half of the sample described feelings of frustration and around one in three

Table 5: Teacher citations of emotions

Emotion	% of sample citing
Frustrated	45.7%
At a loss	32.9%
Upset	24.3%
Exhausted	21.4%
Angry	21.4%
Understanding	20%
Wary	11.4%
Problem-solving	7.1%

reported feeling at a loss. Around a quarter were upset, exhausted, and/or angry whilst only 7.1% (five teachers) reported being problem-solving; of these five teachers, one also reported feeling angry ('suppressed anger when tired. Keen to find a way through the problem when full of energy'). All five teachers who reported being problem-solving were both additionally qualified *and* experienced.

Summary, discussion and conclusions

The present paper has reported on a research study which aimed to elicit teachers' perceptions of pupils' challenging behaviour. In general, the findings are broadly consistent with findings from the small body of similar existing research (e.g. Harris et al., 1996; Kiernan & Kiernan, 1994). In some areas (e.g. the possible influence of additional qualifications and experience on teachers' beliefs and actions) the study provides data not available elsewhere.

In summary, the data indicate that teachers of children and young people with severe learning disabilities are concerned about challenging behaviour and find it stressful. A proportion of teachers reported feeling frustrated, exhausted, angry, upset and/or at a loss; nevertheless, they considered themselves to be effective in dealing with it. The type of behaviour most frequently cited as challenging was aggressive behaviour, although self-injury was found to be the most challenging. Teachers were most likely to select strategies which were concerned with diffusion rather than prevention, thus tending to deal with the behaviour *after* it had occurred, rather than focusing on preventing it occurring in the first place. In some instances, anomalies were noted in terms of teachers 'matching' strategy selection to causal attribution: for example, whilst considering the cause of self-injury to be the need for stimulation, teachers cited using intermittent restraint as a main and/or only strategy. The most likely age for a pupil to be identified as showing challenging behaviour was 12 years, although the range included pupils as young as five years.

Other findings are discussed below with particular reference to the possible influence on teachers' perceptions (and behaviour) of additional qualifications, training and/or experience; the emotional impact of challenging behaviour on teachers; the use of other sources of information, advice and help; and the use of physical restraint.

Influence of additional qualifications, training and/or experience

It is increasingly recognised that working with pupils with complex needs requires specialist knowledge, skills and understanding (e.g. DfEE, 1997). In the present study some differences were observed in terms of whether or not teachers held additional specialist qualifications, with additionally qualified teachers generally being more concerned about challenging behaviour than teachers who did not hold additional qualifications. This finding may be interpreted to suggest that additional training at least raises awareness. There was also some evidence that additionally

qualified teachers found some behaviours less challenging (e.g. additionally qualified teachers rated stereotypic behaviour to be less challenging than other teachers).

On the whole, however, the indications from the present study are that additional qualifications and/or training *alone* have relatively little effect in terms of influencing teachers' perceptions of challenging behaviour: it will be recalled, for example, that holding additional qualifications did not help teachers to feel more effective or less stressed, neither did it appear to give them greater knowledge and awareness of a range of strategies. Similarly, it was only those teachers who were both experienced *and* qualified who were more likely to be consistent when ascribing reasons for challenging behaviour and in their selection of a strategy for improving and/or managing the behaviour; neither additional qualifications alone nor experience alone appeared to evoke this consistency. In addition, specific training (as in the use of physical restraint) did not appear to help teachers to feel more effective in, or comfortable with, its use. These findings may suggest that a level of experience is required in order for teachers to be able to benefit from additional training. If generalised, this would have implications for the nature, timing and targeting of advanced specialist courses.

Emotional impact of challenging behaviour

As noted above, teachers in the present study found challenging behaviour stressful; a relatively high proportion reported feelings of frustration, anger, exhaustion, being upset and/or being at a loss. Previous research by the present author into burnout and workload among teachers of children with severe learning disabilities found evidence of high work overload and long hours of work (Male & May, 1997a; Male & May 1997b). Like the teachers in the present study, teachers in these earlier studies found challenging behaviour to be stressful, expressed feelings of frustration, exhaustion and anger and – again consistent with teachers in the present study – a relatively high proportion of them reported a lack or absence of problem-focused strategies. A conclusion reached from the earlier studies was that, in relation to the emotional impact of challenging behaviour on teachers, there were grounds for concern, with a proportion of teachers indicating a texture and severity of stress which should not be minimised and which could be judged to be unacceptable in any professional setting. Similar concern may be justified in relation to findings from the present study, at least for a significant proportion of respondents, and thus similar conclusions may reasonably be reached.

The use of other sources of information, advice and help

A further finding of some concern was that very few teachers in the present study turned to other professionals for information, advice and/or help; instead, they were most likely to find information, advice and/or help from other teachers or from classroom assistants. This may reflect the fact that special schools in general are relatively poorly served in terms of available support from 'outside'

agencies. Harris et al. (1996), for example, noted 'remarkably little support or professional advice available from sources outside the school' (p. 80), with most schools reporting only termly contact with LEA support services (e.g. educational psychologists) and contact less than once a term with other professionals (e.g. social services). Findings from the present study may indicate that, in the absence of available support from other professionals, teachers turn to their own colleagues. This practice has a number of possible outcomes: these include (optimistically) the dissemination of existing good practice but (pessimistically) the validation of existing poor practice. Given the potential vulnerability of the SLD population to abusive, aversive and/or restrictive practices (e.g. see Emerson, 1995; Male, 1996; White et al., 2003) – together with the emotional impact of challenging behaviour on teachers' wellbeing – it would seem essential that teachers of children and young people with severe learning disabilities have access to appropriate levels and quality of 'outside' support.

Physical restraint

The majority of teachers in the present study used physical restraint, most usually with pupils showing aggression and self-injury. Of some concern was the finding that over a third of the teachers who used physical restraint had received no training and, of those who had received training, a quarter did not find it useful. Also of some concern is the finding that a proportion of teachers reported being left to make their own decisions as to whether or not they used restraint. Whilst it is acknowledged that physical restraint may be carried out reluctantly by some teachers (it will be recalled that teachers in the present study felt neutral to uncomfortable about using it), restraint used as a *secondary short-term* strategy may nevertheless be necessary in order to protect the long-term interests of the pupil. Such a situation requires a planned 'whole-school' approach (i.e. one which is within a clear policy

framework) rather than an individual one (see Department of Health, 2002; Powell, 2002).

Remaining mindful of the vulnerability of pupils with severe learning disabilities to abusive, aversive or restrictive practices, it goes without saying that physical restraint should not be carried out by teachers who are highly stressed or who are expressing feelings of frustration, anger or of being at a loss.

Concluding comments

The above findings relate to teachers' *perceptions* of challenging behaviour, not to 'truths' about it; however, in line with existing related research, the findings do suggest the potential significance of perceptions in terms of influencing teacher actions. Future research, to include observational approaches, should be carried out with a view to establishing links between perceptions and actions – perhaps particularly in the light of the emotional impact of challenging behaviour as indicated by the present and previous research. Research should also seek to ascertain influences on perceptions and behaviour. In particular, the influence of additional qualifications, training and experience needs to be more thoroughly investigated, as does the effect of access to appropriate levels and quality of 'outside' information, advice and help. Such information would help more accurately to identify appropriate training, development and support needs of teachers who work with pupils who show challenging behaviour and thus would facilitate the provision of more effective services for these pupils.

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