

Managing troublesome behaviour in Primary and Secondary classrooms

Kevin Wheldall and Frank Merrett of the Centre for Child Study, University of Birmingham have been researching together for ten years on the application of the behavioural approach to teaching in the classroom. 'BATPACK' is the result of that research and is the subject of this article



Dr. Wheldall (left) and Dr. Merrett

The phasing out of corporal punishment in our schools has been accompanied by renewed interest in seeking out alternative, more positive methods of working with children in classrooms. More and more teachers have been turning to the behavioural approach to classroom management, a consistent and positive approach which has been carefully researched and scientifically evaluated. In our research on what we call 'positive teaching' we have concentrated on how teachers should *behave* in classrooms in order to bring about suitable conditions for effective and efficient learning to take place. We have concerned ourselves almost solely with problems of classroom social behaviour; with methods of encouraging children to behave socially in ways which will maximise their opportunities for learning appropriate academic skills and knowledge. Our first concern was to determine the extent of the problem – ie the types of classroom misbehaviour which teachers find most troublesome.

Troublesome classroom behaviours

Children with behaviour problems are a common type of referral to educational psychologists and teachers frequently cite classroom behaviour problems as one of their major difficulties. We have recently carried out a survey enquiring

into the frequency and kinds of troublesome behaviour experienced by primary school teachers in their classrooms. The survey constituted a 25 per cent random sample (32 schools) of the infant, junior and junior/infant schools in a West Midlands LEA. Sufficient survey forms were sent to each of these schools for each full-time class teacher (excluding nursery classes) to complete the questionnaire. Replies were received from all 32 schools resulting in a very high return of 93%, 198 teachers responding.

Half of the sample (51%) responded affirmatively to our first question, "Do you think that you spend more time on problems of order and control than you ought?" with the same percentage of men and women responding in this way. The average class size was 27 of whom 4.3 children, on average, were regarded as troublesome and three of these were boys. Asked to pick out the two most troublesome individual children in the classes, boys were picked as the 'most troublesome' by 76% and as the 'next most troublesome' by 77%. This supports the anecdotal view that boys do tend to be more troublesome than girls.

What was it that these children did that was troublesome? As we said earlier it was the type and frequency of troublesome behaviours in which we were particularly interested. We offered ten alternative behaviour categories based on our pilot inquiries. When asked to pick out the most troublesome behaviours 46% cited 'talking out of turn' (TOOT) followed by 25% giving 'hindering other children' (HOC). None of the other categories reached over 10%. This was confirmed by the results for the 'next most troublesome' behaviour in which 31% opted for HOC and 17% for TOOT. The findings for the most *frequent* troublesome behaviours gave a very similar picture and when we went on to ask about the behaviours of individual children cited as being troublesome, again we got the same response, TOOT followed by HOC.

Our more recent research carried out with Steve Houghton (a secondary teacher and member of NAS/UWT) has shown that a very similar picture emerges at the secondary level. Our secondary survey consisted of a stratified random sample (approximately 30%) of the secondary schools in the same West Midlands LEA. Replies were received from all six schools approached, yielding a return of 62.28%, 251 teachers responding. For the question, "Do you think that you spend more time on problems of order and control than you ought?" 55% responded affirmatively. Asked to pick out the two most troublesome individual children in the classes,

boys were picked as the 'most troublesome' by 71% and as the 'next most troublesome' by 65%. The results for the 'most troublesome behaviour' showed that 50% cited 'talking out of turn' (TOOT) followed by 'hindering other children' (HOC) (17%).

These findings were confirmed by the results for the next most troublesome behaviour and those for the most frequent troublesome behaviours of individual children: TOOT followed by HOC. (The category 'physical aggression' was cited by fewer than one per cent as being most troublesome and this placed the category tenth (last) in rank order.)

Most teachers would agree that TOOT and HOC are not particularly serious misbehaviours, in the sense that they are hardly crimes: but they are irritating, time-wasting, exhausting and stressful. The good news is that these sorts of classroom problem behaviour have been shown to be particularly amenable to resolution by behavioural methods.

The behavioural approach to classroom management

The effectiveness of the behavioural approach to teaching in the normal classroom has been demonstrated in a wide variety of experimental studies. Our own studies carried out in local schools have demonstrated how to bring about changes in the problem behaviour of single children, small groups and even whole classes of children from a wide range of educational populations. More importantly, we have shown teachers how to encourage and increase the kinds of behaviour they want to see children in their classes engaged in and which are of educational benefit to them.

The main assumption underlying the behavioural approach to teaching is that children's behaviour is primarily learned and maintained as a result of their interactions with their environment which includes other children and teachers. Consequently, children's behaviour can be changed by altering certain features of that environment. The key environmental features are events which immediately precede or follow behaviour. Simply stated, this means that behaviours followed by consequences which the individual finds rewarding will tend to increase in frequency whilst behaviours followed by punishing consequences will tend to decline. Similarly, certain changes in behaviour may be brought about by changing the classroom setting (e.g. seating arrangements or classroom rules).

A typical and widely used general behaviour procedure, which has often been used in schools and which clearly illustrates the basic operating principles of the behavioural approach, is the 'rules, praise and ignore' technique. In this system, attention is focused on *desired* behaviour which is clearly defined by three or four explicit, positively phrased rules such as, 'We put up our hands if we wish to speak', 'We stay in our seats', etc. The teacher or other care-giver then rewards children who are keeping the rules by praising their behaviour, whilst making clear what the praise is for, eg "That's good Jerry. You put your hand up to ask me a question". He or she will typically attempt to ignore infractions of the rules (inappropriate behaviour) where possible, since the attention a reprimand brings can serve to increase such behaviour in some children.

The methods we advocate are all firmly based on behavioural principles and have all been carefully and rigorously tried and tested in our work with teachers. We have been able to show how simple and straightforward interventions by teachers can bring about dramatic results in terms of improved classroom atmosphere and the quantity and quality of work produced. Moreover, these methods, illustrated in the case studies below, have been shown to

yield a more satisfying and rewarding classroom experience for both teachers and children.

Case studies

● One study involved two eight year-old children, a boy and a girl in the same class, who seemed unable to remain in their seats during group work. The boy was continually interfering with the work of others whilst the girl rarely produced the work she was capable of doing. The teacher's initial observations revealed that on one day Mark was out of his seat 16 times and Rebecca 14 times. They were subsequently asked by their teacher if they knew why she was sometimes cross with them. Reasons such as 'for chewing my ruler' and 'for losing my book' were given but neither child mentioned being out of their seat. When the teacher showed them her record sheets they were amazed at how often they were out of their seats. She then told them that she would continue to watch them and that if their 'out of seat' scores dropped they would gain a team point. This system continued from day to day with occasional reminders from the teacher. She also showed them charts of their progress and praised and encouraged them whenever their scores fell. The charts showed clearly that being out of seat declined rapidly for both children in the first week and continued at a very low rate (3-4 occasions per day) in subsequent weeks. This intervention was very easy to set up, cost nothing and was very effective.

● Another study was carried out by a young teacher working with a group of 11 year-olds. She had just completed her probationary year quite successfully but was not at all happy about her ability to get the best out of her class of rather below-average children. She decided to play a behavioural game with them. A cassette tape was prepared which emitted an audible signal every minute on average but at intervals varying between 15 and 95 seconds. The children were given three rules to keep whilst the 'game' was in progress: (a) we stay in our seats whilst working, (b) we get on quietly with our work and (c) we try not to interrupt. Whilst the 'game' was being played the tape recorder would be switched on and every time the signal was heard the teacher would look at one of the tables. If every child at that table was keeping the rules then each would score a house point. (The children were assured that all tables would get equal turns but that the order would be random.) Each time team points were given it was announced publicly and the children were praised.

The results were immediate and remarkable. On-task behaviour rose from 44% to 77% whilst the 'game' was being played. General movement about the room, loud talking and general disorderliness almost disappeared whilst the amount of written work achieved increased greatly. For example samples of written work taken from the class before the 'game' began showed a mean output of five written words per minute. During one of the first 'game' sessions this rose to a mean of approximately 13 written words and despite this big increase in output the number of spelling and other errors hardly changed. The teacher found the strategy she has employed very effective and quite easy to operate and the reactions of the children were very positive, several commenting on the fact that the generally improved working atmosphere enabled them to get on with their work without interruption.

● Yet another case study was carried out in a remedial class of sixteen twelve year-olds whose average reading age was around nine years. The staff teaching this class felt that the were too noisy, that they were too slow in settling down to work and that when they finally did so, their work output was

unacceptably low. It was decided to employ a self-recording strategy and a cassette exactly like the one described above was used. During the daily half-hour English lesson the tape would be played and the children were instructed to place a stroke, on specially prepared sheets, if they were getting on with their work when the signal sounded. Marks were totalled at the end of the lesson and at the end of the week. (Note that since the children could not anticipate when the signal would sound, the only way to be sure of scoring a point was to be working all the time.)

On the basis of the first week's results the teacher selected a weekly target score of 80 points. She promised as a reward for all children who met the target, a half hour free-time session at the end of the week in which they could choose what they wanted to do. The weekly target scores was raised gradually to 120 points. In spite of the increasing target, only one child ever failed to reach it over the five weeks and cheating occurred only very rarely. The staff reported great improvement in both noise levels and the amount and quality of work completed. Word counts of the amount written showed an increase from around 130 words per session, on average, to around 190 words. This study showed clearly that self-recording proved to be an effective technique to use with these older children.

All the studies reported here were simple to set up, used inexpensive materials already to hand and could be carried through without any extra help. The behavioural approach to teaching is more fun for all concerned, and is also cheap!

Teacher's classroom behaviour

A common reaction to our suggestion that teachers should, for example, increase their use of praise is, "Ah, but we do that already". Consequently, we observed a large sample of British Primary school teachers to see if this was, in fact, the case. Data have been obtained on over 100 Primary school teachers using trained observers with specially prepared observation schedules. Each teacher and class were observed on at least three separate occasions for half an hour. Our schedule looked at the teachers' use of praise and disapproval and also at the behaviour of their classes.

Briefly, we found from our sample that British primary school teachers in general *approve* slightly more than they *disapprove*. In fact, approval for academic behaviour ("Well done John, what neat handwriting") is much higher than disapproval ("Only two sums right, not very good, eh Susan?"). But for social behaviour the reverse is the case. Teachers are very quick to notice social behaviour of which they disapprove and continually nag children about it. ("Sharon, how many more times do I have to tell you to stay in your seat?"). But they hardly ever approve of desirable social behaviour ("That's how I like it class; I could hear a pin drop in here.") In other words, children are expected to behave well and are continually reprimanded if they do not. Again, these findings are substantially confirmed by our subsequent research in the secondary sector. Preliminary results from 21 teachers teaching third year classes in Secondary schools showed that, in fact, Secondary school teachers used far fewer positives than primary teachers. They used far more negative responses than their Primary colleagues and these were directed almost exclusively to social behaviour.

To sum up so far:

- The majority of Primary and Secondary school teachers experience troublesome classroom behaviour especially 'talking out of turn' and 'hindering other children'.

- Positive behavioural methods have been shown to be very effective in dealing with these behaviour problems at Primary and Secondary level.
- Neither Primary nor Secondary teachers use positive behavioural methods 'naturally' but instead are prone to 'nag' their pupils for inappropriate social behaviour.

The Behavioural Approach to Teaching Package (BATPACK)

So how do we go about the business of teaching teachers to use the behavioural approach? In the early days we tried to lecture formally about behavioural methods. We gave lots of references, mentioned lots of experiments but without much success. As the old saying has it, "Teaching isn't telling" and as Herbert Spencer put it, "The great aim of education is not knowledge but action". We found that telling teachers about behavioural methods increased their knowledge but did little to change their behaviour, i.e. what they did in the classroom. Consequently, we learned the hard way. The emphasis has to be on skills training: training teachers *how* to apply the behavioural approach in real teaching situations rather than just teaching them *about* behavioural principles.

The Behavioural Approach to Teaching Package or BATPACK was developed by our project team based in the Centre for Child Study at the University of Birmingham. This team comprised Dr Kevin Wheldall (project director and also Director of the Centre for Child Study), Dr Frank Merrett (research fellow and a former college of education lecturer with many years' experience of primary and secondary school teaching) and, in the early stages, Alan Russell (an LEA educational psychologist). Our aim was to develop a package which would train practising Primary and Middle School teachers in a number of key behavioural skills. BATPACK was informed by the programme of experimental research into the behavioural approach to teaching carried out by Wheldall and Merrett and associated students in the Centre for Child Study. The package has six distinguishing characteristics.

1. **BATPACK is skills based.** In BATPACK our primary aim is to change teacher behaviour by teaching new skills and techniques which can be implemented directly in the teacher's own classroom. By such skills we are referring, for example, to pin-pointing and observing specific child behaviours, positive rule-setting, effective praising and so on.
2. **BATPACK is school based.** BATPACK training is typically carried out in groups of about eight or ten which would often include the whole of an Infant, Junior or Middle school staff. It is essential that the idea is seen by the head teacher and his/her staff as something for the whole school which will be *their* system. This school-based training system provides support by instilling a team spirit whereby all members of the staff are working together and gives them a common language for talking about children's behaviour problems.
3. **BATPACK is contract based.** We specify precisely, in advance and in practical terms, what is expected of the teachers and what the course tutor will provide. These points are then embodied in a contract which is agreed and signed by each course student and the tutor. The contract requires the tutor to start and finish all sessions on time and to provide all necessary materials. Course members contract to attend all sessions on time, to complete the work assignments between sessions, to try out the suggested techniques in class and to complete the evaluation sheets at the end of the course.
4. **BATPACK is limitation based.** The limitations of BATPACK are deliberate and are made explicit. We are not attempting to provide training in behaviour therapy. Our sole

aim is to train teachers in a limited number of key behavioural teaching skills and techniques for use in classroom teaching.

5. **BATPACK is research based.** The content of BATPACK units refers specifically to relevant research completed by its authors. This includes reference to our surveys of the prevalence of troublesome classroom behaviours, our behavioural observations of teachers' 'natural' rates of approval and disapproval and our demonstration studies of successful behavioural interventions. This means that all of the material presented is backed by research evidence rather than mere assertion or opinion. Moreover, the content and techniques employed are also the result of continuing experimental evaluation (see below).

6. **BATPACK is evaluation based.** From the outset, teachers who have attended BATPACK courses have been required, as part of the contract, to contribute to the evaluation of the package. As a result of constructive criticism from teachers and BATPACK tutors, many changes were made to the content and structure of BATPACK. Moreover, the effects of BATPACK training are expected to be demonstrable in terms of changes in teacher behaviour and pupil behaviour. Earlier versions were continually revised until BATPACK could meet these criteria. Experiments, involving independent classroom observers, have clearly demonstrated that BATPACK training achieves its objectives of changing teachers' classroom behaviour and that this leads to improvements in children's behaviour. Typically, teachers on the course increase their use of approval and decrease their rates of disapproval and these changes, in turn, lead to the children in their classes spending far more of their time actually getting on with their work. More generally, our research emphasises that skills-based, in-service training is an effective means of passing on the benefits of the behavioural approach to practising classroom teachers.

BATPACK is designed to be taught by a tutor who has attended a special training course. Prospective tutors must have a good working knowledge of behavioural psychology and are usually educational psychologists, advisers or senior teachers. On the tutor training courses, tutors receive a copy of the BATPACK manual which contains all the instructions for running courses.

The BATPACK course consists of six one-hour sessions called units, taught at weekly intervals. For each unit there

are five objectives. Every unit is divided into five elements so that each corresponds to an objective. The first objective is always a review item, giving the opportunity for students to ask questions and for the tutor to review aspects of the earlier units. The last objective of each unit is concerned with the practical assignments for the following week. These always include some reading and time for the student to observe and record his/her own behaviour in responding to the class. The three other elements are used to explore practical problems (identifying problem behaviours), to develop skills (pin-pointing, praising, observing) and to explain techniques (setting rules, defining work demands). Every unit has an accompanying 'Takehome' in which an attempt is made to supply some of the theoretical material which will inform the practical skills learned in the unit and which provides the reading assignment for the week. In the last unit an attempt is made to review all the skills and techniques which have been covered and to present some successful classroom strategies tried out by other practising teachers.

The final (Mark IV) version of BATPACK for use in primary schools is now widely available. It is a dynamic, user-friendly, in-service training package which has been shown to be effective in training Primary school teachers in key behavioural classroom management techniques. We are now extending our research and development and are working on two new projects. The first is to devise a version of BATPACK suitable for use in Secondary schools and this will involve major changes. The second is to produce a follow-on package to BATPACK which will deal with more severe behaviour problems of particularly troublesome individual children.

Editor's Note:

If you would like to know more about the behavioural approach to teaching or BATPACK in particular, please write to Dr. Kevin Wheldall and Dr. Frank Merrett, Centre for Child Study, Department of Educational Psychology, University of Birmingham, P.O. Box 363, Birmingham, B15 2TT mentioning where you read about them. They are thinking about organising a one-day Course/Conference on managing troublesome behaviour in the classroom for NAS/UWT members. Please let them know if you would be interested in attending.

Suggestions for further reading

MERRETT, F. (1985). *Encouragement Works Better Than Punishment*. (Birmingham: Positive Products)
 WHELDALL, K and MERRETT, F. (1984). *Positive Teaching: the behavioural approach*. (London: George Allen and Unwin.)

WHELDALL, K., MERRETT, F. and BORG, M. (1985). The Behavioural Approach to Teaching Package (BATPACK): an experimental evaluation. (*British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 55, 65-75.)

BATPACK

THE FIVE PRINCIPLES OF THE BEHAVIOURAL APPROACH TO TEACHING

The behavioural approach to teaching is based on five general assumptions, which may be summarised as follows:

1. We are to be concerned with the observable.

This means that teachers who adopt the behavioural approach (behavioural teachers) concern themselves with what a child actually does, i.e. his behaviour, rather than speculating about unconscious motives or the processes underlying his behaviour. The behavioural approach is objective and is concerned with the observable facts of life. For example, a teacher might report that "Sally worked well for the first half of the lesson but then her concentration lapsed." In behavioural terms what happened was that Sally completed ten sums correctly in the first twenty minutes of the lesson, but only two in the last twenty minutes. The teacher's reference to her concentration lapse is an attempt at explanation based purely on speculation.

2. For practical purposes we assume that behaviour is learned.

In other words behaviour, what people do, is assumed to have been learned as a result of the individual interacting with his environment, rather than being inherited at birth. This does not mean that behavioural teachers do not believe in genetic inheritance or that they do believe that anybody can be taught to do anything given time. Rather they believe that genetics or biological endowment may set the limits for what an individual can learn, but that behaviour is still the result of learning. In other words they take the practical view that there is very little you can do about a child's genetic inheritance or the biological state of his nervous system, but that you can make it easier for him to learn new sequences of behaviour by exercising control over his environment.

3. Learning involves change in behaviour.

The only way we know (that we can know) that learning has taken place is by observing a change in a child's behaviour. The behavioural teacher will not be satisfied with claims such as "I think she has a better attitude to school now". He will only be satisfied if the child now displays behaviour(s) which she was not showing before. For example, this might be reflected in her increased attendance and/or punctuality figures.

4. Changes in behaviour depend mainly upon its consequences.

The consequences of behaviour are critical to learning. In simple terms this means that children learn on the basis of tending to repeat behaviours which are followed by consequences which they find desirable or rewarding. Similarly they tend not to repeat behaviours, the consequences of which they find aversive or punishing.

5. Behaviour is also influenced and judged within its context.

In any situation some behaviours are more appropriate than others and we learn which situations are appropriate for which behaviour. If a child's behaviour is appropriate for the circumstances in which it occurs it is likely to be rewarded; if it occurs in inappropriate circumstances reward is less likely and the behaviour may even lead to punishing consequences. As a result of this we rapidly learn not only how to perform a certain behaviour, but when and where to perform it. For example, the new boy in the secondary school will soon learn to cheer on the school team from the touchline but merely to clap politely when the result is announced in assembly.

The five points set out above may be seen as the essential features of the behavioural approach to teaching. If we believe that teaching is concerned with helping children to learn new skills and gain new information, and if we believe also that learning implies a change in behaviour, then it follows logically that teaching is about changing children's behaviour, whether we are talking about the acquisition of appropriate social or academic skills. Moreover, if teaching is about changing behaviour then the role of the teacher is to bring about changes in the social and academic behaviour of the children in her class.

Basically, our concern in BATPACK is with the classroom management of children's social behaviour. The behavioural approach may also be applied in curriculum design and in the teaching of academic skills and subject matter but we will not be concerned with these directly. We must immediately stress, however, that improved social behaviour in the classroom has enormous implications for children's academic progress. Our aim is to present a positive approach to the perennial problem of classroom discipline and to demonstrate how the behavioural approach yields benefits for teachers and children. By employing effective, positive behavioural methods of establishing control in the classroom, the teacher is freed in large part from the often time-consuming chore of chiding children for disrupting lessons or for not getting on with their work. The teacher is then able to spend more of his time planning and directing effective lessons and advising and explaining with individual children. As a result of this we might also expect children, once they have become consistently more successful at their lessons, to begin to find their schoolwork rewarding in its own right. This is a change in behaviour of a different order and is the ultimate aim of all good teaching.

THE BEHAVIOURAL CHARTER

TEN TACTICS FOR TEACHERS

1. MAKE SURE THAT YOUR CLASSROOM IS ARRANGED APPROPRIATELY FOR THE TASK THAT YOU HAVE SET.
2. MAKE SURE THAT THE CHILDREN KNOW WHAT THEY ARE MEANT TO BE DOING.
3. HELP THEM TO MAKE AND KEEP A FEW SIMPLE, POSITIVE RULES.
4. LOOK OUT FOR GOOD BEHAVIOUR AND/OR WORK (CATCH THEM BEING GOOD).
5. AS FAR AS POSSIBLE IGNORE BAD BEHAVIOUR AND/OR WORK (TRY NOT TO NAG).
6. TRY TO PRAISE QUICKLY AND CONSISTENTLY.
7. USE A VARIETY OF SOCIAL REINFORCERS.
8. REMEMBER TO PRAISE THE BEHAVIOUR RATHER THAN THE CHILD.
9. MAKE SURE THE CHILD KNOWS EXACTLY WHAT HE IS BEING PRAISED FOR.
10. BUILD 'TREATS' INTO YOUR TEACHING AS REWARDS FOR ESPECIALLY GOOD CLASS BEHAVIOUR.