Effective Classroom Learning
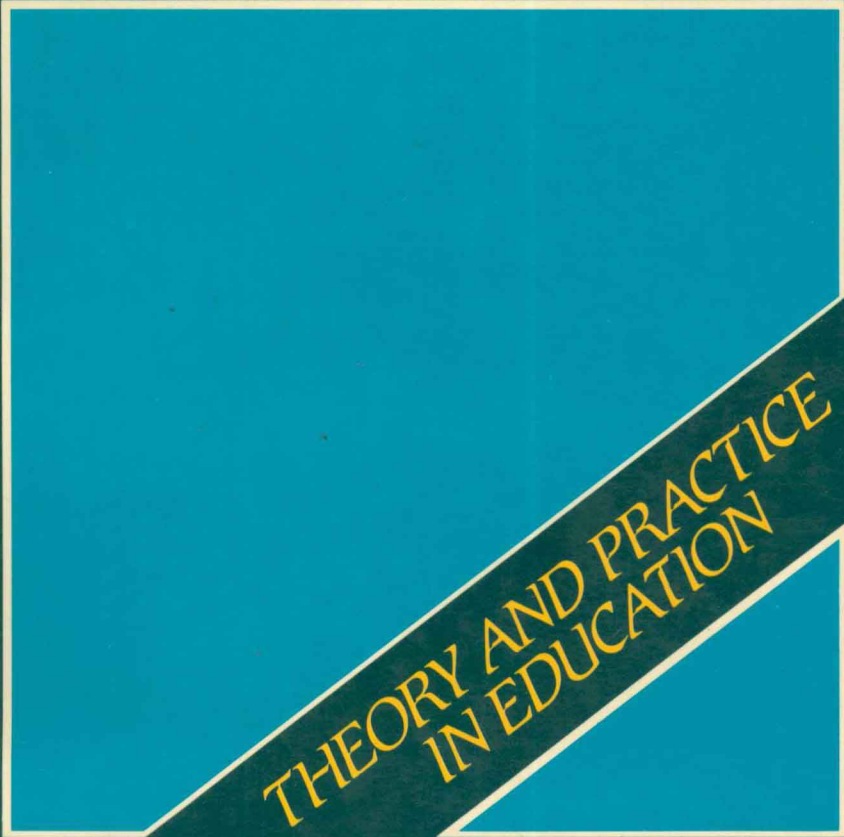
Kevin Wheldall & Ted Glynn

Effective Classroom Learning

A Behavioural Interactionist Approach to Teaching

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THEORY AND PRACTICE IN EDUCATION
General Editor: Dennis Child

For Susan and Vin

Editor's Preface

Very few, if any, educational problems are straightforward enough to have simple answers. Therefore, in so complex a human activity as educating, it should be no surprise that yet another series can still have a vital and significant contribution to make to our understanding of educational problems. Theorists and practitioners in the many developing interests in education quite properly continue to want to share their views and findings with others.

Theory and Practice in Education attempts to present, in a readable form, a range of issues which need to be considered by serving and student teachers in their roles as practitioners. Wherever formal, organized learning exists in our schools and colleges, there will always be questions relating, for example, to the effectiveness of teaching and children's learning, the preparation and adequacy of what is taught, the processes of assessment and evaluation, the sensitive problems of accountability, the preparation of children for 'life' and the monitoring of innovations.

Behaviour modification, or applied behavioural analysis, as it is now called, has been and doubtless always will be one of the major techniques of classroom practice. Teachers, whether they realize it or not, employ the behavioural approach in most aspects of their work with pupils. Yet surprisingly when confronted with this suggestion, some teachers either refuse to accept it or on accepting it have no inclination to examine and apply the principles systematically. But most teachers are keen to learn more about the underlying effects of their actions and to channel these to good effect.

Kevin Wheldall and Ted Glynn have become international figures in this field and the series is lucky to bring them together in this book. Their concerns are essentially practical and classroom orientated. In *Effective Classroom Learning*, they present a case for a behavioural approach to teaching, covering both classroom management and instruction. Most recent thinking in behaviourism

has turned attention to 'behavioural interaction'. This aspect, which uses all the characteristic methods of applied behavioural analysis, is carefully defined in the text and it promises to herald a new and stimulating dimension to classroom learning and teaching.

Behavioural methods are most frequently associated with special education. It is important to emphasize that this book is much broader and will be found valuable by teachers anywhere in the system.

University of Leeds   *Dennis Child*

Foreword

This book attempts to provide a contemporary 'behavioural interactionist' perspective on teaching. It is based on the programmes of behavioural research in schools we have both been engaged in, sharing the aim of trying to make classroom learning more effective and more rewarding for both teachers and pupils. Although our two research centres are separated by some 13,000 miles, for 10 years we have enjoyed a fruitful and collaborative research relationship. Reciprocal visits, a reasonably efficient postal service and the wonders of modern information technology have permitted us to share ideas readily and to organize complementary research in a number of important areas.

For some time we had daydreamed about the possibility of integrating our research findings into a book. This has now been made possible by the generous support of the British Council who, recognizing the value of the work produced in our two research centres, have provided funding for an academic-exchange scheme. This has allowed reciprocal visits by the authors (resulting in this book) and has also permitted exchange visits by our doctoral students working with us in the area of behavioural research in schools. This book would not have been possible without support from the British Council and we would like to take this opportunity of recording our grateful thanks.

Although our names are on the cover, the research and ideas reported in this book are by no means all our own. We have both been fortunate in having research colleagues and doctoral students who have made creative and original contributions to the programmes of research we have been privileged to lead. The following have all made major contributions to the research and theory reported in this book: Keith Ballard, Susan Colmar, Diane Dolley, Vin Glynn, Wilson Henderson, Steve Houghton, Stuart McNaughton, Frank Merrett, Mariane Quinn and Viviane Robinson. We would like to thank them

all for their inspiration and friendship over the years. There have also been many other undergraduate and graduate students, too numerous to mention, who have researched with us and whose work has helped to build up the profile of research reported here. Finally, we would like to thank Frank Merrett (again) for producing the very professional index.

Kevin Wheldall and Ted Glynn

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Why Can't Schools be More Positive?

Imagine how you might feel if you found yourself sentenced to a term of periodic custodial care for over ten years. Forced to spend up to six or seven hours a day locked up with 20 or 30 others, you are subjected to a regime of petty discipline, of performing mindless, repetitive tasks which have no meaning, and of continual criticism of your appearance, your behaviour and your attitude. In the struggle for survival among so many others, and at the mercy of fickle custodians whose moods and motives are hard to fathom, you find your sensitivities becoming brutalized. Any respect you had for those above you diminishes daily as you encounter apparently arbitrary timetabling, changes of task and changes of staff. Told that this is for your own good, to equip you for later life outside in 'the real world', you laugh hollowly and long for the day of your release . . . . when you can leave school.

This might sound like a wicked travesty of schooling to many teachers, but too many children in our schools feel this way. They are put off education by the trappings of schooling. Even with the phasing out of corporal punishment, days spent in school can be demoralizing, demeaning and soul-destroying. In recent years, some educationists have begun to doubt the value of much of what currently passes for schooling. John Holt (1969), for example, has written movingly of the fear that schools can hold for many children. Many educationists are beginning to ask if schooling and education have very much in common or are even compatible.

The strange thing is that we take schools for granted. We tend to see schools as being an obvious, necessary and permanent part of our own lives when we are children and of our children's lives when we grow up. Schools are places where we are expected to send children for over ten years so that they can be taught the academic and social skills necessary for survival in adult life. After all, how else would they learn? But only a moment's reflection reminds us

that it was not always so. Schooling for all children as a matter of course is a relatively recent innovation. In some developing countries, even today, there is not such a heavy reliance on formal schooling. But we take it as given that schooling is essential for effective education. Furthermore, we give tacit acceptance to the view that schools have to be like they are. In this book, we will argue not that schools are unnecessary, but that they are not always as truly educative as we would like them to be. Schools can be alienating, aversive and unresponsive. We would like to see schools become more positive, more liberating and more effective.

Courses of training for teaching universally lay great stress on knowledge of curriculum design and content, on the philosophical, historical, sociological and psychological perspectives on education, and on the in-depth study of one's main academic subject. Relatively little time, however, is spent on preparing the teacher-to-be in the interactive skills essential for successful classroom teaching. Very little instruction is provided in what the teacher actually ought to do in the classroom, how she or he should behave. This is particularly noticeable in the context of handling troublesome or disruptive classroom behaviour. Many student teachers are still reassured with the pious platitude that provided you have spent enough time preparing your lessons properly, you will never have discipline problems. The poverty of this advice is exposed by the countless number of both student and practising teachers who have had lessons which were impeccably prepared destroyed beyond redemption. Many have been reduced to tears by classes of children whose behaviour in the classroom was beyond the influence of any amount of prior lesson-preparation.

Teaching practice can be a curious business. Student teachers are sometimes left alone for large periods of time to cope, as best they can, with whole classes of children, with little or no guidance as to how to proceed once they are actually in the classroom. The lucky ones may receive useful (or otherwise) tips from more experienced staff. The type of advice commonly offered is 'Give them hell for the first week, assert control, take charge, show them who's boss, and then you can relax.' Others rapidly acquire the skills of sarcasm and 'put down', learned from colleagues (who should really know better) or perhaps dimly remembered from their own school days. Many wish that an effective model of teaching was available which offered practical advice about how one should actually behave in the classroom. We believe that our *behavioural interactionist* approach to teaching, the unifying theme of this book, will go a long way

towards fulfilling that wish. In essence, this approach requires that teachers behave in a more positive and more responsive way towards children and that classrooms and schools are structured to become more meaningful and more effective learning contexts.

SCHOOLS CAN BE AVERSIVE

But many schools still seem to operate on the principle of punishing unwanted behaviours irrespective of whether those behaviours reflect failures to learn or anti-social acts. Even today school rules all too frequently consist of a list of 'Thou shalt not's. (We heard of one school rule which said baldly: 'No banging of anything on anything'!) Appropriate behaviour is demanded rather than encouraged or taught, and examples of appropriate behaviour are rarely specified. Children are hardly ever involved in the process of making the rules which describe behaviours appropriate and acceptable in different learning contexts.

About ten years ago one of our students analysed the results of a small, fairly informal survey he had conducted in a large urban comprehensive school in the UK. Nearly three-quarters of the fifth-year boys reported being both hurtfully hit by teachers and officially caned (of these over 65 per cent felt it was deserved). Only half of this proportion of second-year boys had been officially caned but just as large a proportion had been hurtfully hit. Figures were generally much lower for girls.

Holt (1969) writes of 'why intelligent children act unintelligently at school.' The simple answer, he claims, is 'because they're scared .... most children in school are scared most of the time, many of them very scared.' Children are scared, not only of physical punishment, which has at long last been abolished in British state schools, but also of being verbally abused, sarcastically scored off, shown up in front of peers and generally demeaned. Many children may also be frightened that behaviour appropriate to their cultural, ethnic or home settings will be judged out of place or inadequate in the classroom and school setting. This is conducive to learning neither academic skills, nor appropriate social behaviours, nor tolerance and acceptance of people who are different.

There is also an ethical dilemma in allowing children to remain in a context over which they have little control and where they have no alternative behaviours to those being punished. This can arise when children display embarrassed giggles or resort to funny remarks

in situations when they cannot answer the teacher's question, or find the teacher's question has little meaning to them, or find the task set too difficult. Punishing children in such circumstances is particularly reprehensible since they can neither comply nor escape. When teachers repeatedly punish children in these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that the teacher may rapidly become someone to be feared and avoided. There are even some teachers who deliberately seek this status for themselves as a means of establishing control. For such teachers almost all learning difficulties are seen as issues of control. They could not be more wrong.

As an illustration, take the following example. When writing this chapter in a crowded library, one of us was disturbed by two students talking in loud stage whispers. After a while, he glared across at them and their irritating behaviour ceased. However, within a few minutes the whispering had started up again. The author's power to 'control' the students' behaviour was brief and limited. Punished behaviour is merely temporarily suppressed and is likely to recur once the punishment or fear of punishment is removed. Consequently, one needs to continue punishing to suppress a behaviour over a period of time. To do this effectively one needs tighter and tighter control over the students and over their opportunities to escape. This has a number of implications. First, the mere fact of repeating the punishment is likely to lessen its effectiveness. Second, this may precipitate the escalation to more severe punishments. Third, children may become adapted to tolerating high levels of punishment. Fourth, and most important, nothing of educational worth has been achieved by such an interaction.

But why do teachers continue to resort to punishment since it is ineffective and has so many drawbacks? One possibility is that they continue to punish because occasionally this has led to the immediate (but temporary) stopping of an unwanted behaviour. In so far as teachers find this rewarding (they get a brief respite) they will continue to punish children. Teacher behaviour has come under the control of the reward obtained from the brief respite. The teacher and children are thus literally locked in a vicious circle. This is hardly a positive context for learning.

A moment's thought reveals the nonsense of attempting to teach by means of punishment. Consider a simple learning situation where a teacher, Mrs Sharpe, wants a young child, Mervyn, to get on with his work and not to chatter, not to look out of the window, not to get out of his seat, and not to disturb other children. So, she decides to punish Mervyn by reprimanding him whenever he does anything

other than get on with his work. Mervyn bumps his neighbour; she reproves him. He gets up; she reproves him again. He looks out of the window; she reproves him again, louder this time. He begins to wail and she smacks him. Mervyn wails louder than ever. The teacher feels exhausted and miserable. She has tried to solve this problem in terms of exerting total control over Mervyn's behaviour, ending with physical force. But her exhaustion and misery tell her that she does not have this control over Mervyn. All of her attention has been focused on only one child. She has ignored the other 29, who are now all watching her and Mervyn, and still she has not succeeded in teaching him to get on with his work. All of this points to the simple fact that it is far more constructive to focus on appropriate behaviour than it is to try to suppress the inappropriate behaviours.

Delivering punishment has another danger: it paves the way for teaching other undesirable and unhelpful behaviours. By definition, we do not like or 'go for' punishment; we attempt to avoid it. Consequently, we rapidly learn ways to do so. This may sometimes include doing what the teacher had in mind, but may more frequently include escape behaviours such as opting out of the teacher's area of control whenever possible, or trying to undermine that control. As Becker, Thomas and Carnine (1969) remark; 'Avoidance and escape behaviour often have names such as lying, hiding, truancy, cheating in exams, doing things behind one's back, etc. Accompanying such avoidance and escape behaviours are negative feelings for the persons who use punishment. . . . . the teacher is wise to find other means for influencing children.' Avoiding the teacher, running out of the class, 'skipping' class or staying away from school are behaviours which will be rapidly learned. These behaviours constitute an escape from punishment. It seems reasonable to suggest that truancy, school phobia or school refusal may often be simply the product of a school environment which the child finds either aversive or lacking in positive interactions compared with what is available outside. We would argue that in order to be successful, schools must be places where appropriate behaviour is negotiated and rewarded. The main emphasis should be on creating positive, responsive learning contexts which will not only make teaching more effective and efficient, but will also make school a more enjoyable and happy environment for both children and teachers.

It is only fair to emphasize that corporal punishment has finally been abolished in British state schools. The results from schools which abandoned these barbaric and inefficient methods are encouraging. The number of physical attacks on teachers by pupils dropped

dramatically following the decision to outlaw corporal punishment in inner-London schools. In Scotland it was shown that schools which had abolished corporal punishment did not suffer a decline in discipline and that none of these schools wanted to reintroduce corporal punishment. As this evidence accumulated it became increasingly hard to justify Britain's place as the only European country which continued to beat its children in school. It is to be hoped that countries like New Zealand will also formally abolish corporal punishment in the near future.

SCHOOLS CAN BE OFFENSIVE

Schools can also be alarmingly rude places. Pupils are continually reprimanded for bad manners or insolence, but the example set by some teachers is unlikely to lead to better behaviour. The man or woman in the street will often claim to be able to tell when a new acquaintance is a teacher. Is it something about the edge in their voices or do some aspects of their behaviour at school carry over to life outside?

Imagine going to a social event with, say, 20 or 30 other people only to find that you had a very strange host. . . .

'Oi! Bryant!', he shouts in an imperious voice and snaps his fingers as he says the one word 'Window!'

Chris Bryant, looking rather sheepish, reluctantly opens the window.

Jean Simpson, a timid soul, half raises her hand and asks tentatively, 'Do you think I might put my jacket back on?'

'No, weakling, do as you are told! You'll only go to sleep if you get too warm,' sneers our host and turns to catch a couple arriving late, trying to sneak in through the back door unnoticed.

'Ah, Swan and Peacock, not very early birds are we? Too busy, were we, to arrive at the same time as everyone else, ... liaising with the P.M. perhaps . . . .' His sarcasm falters in midflow as he spots another guest.

'Melrose, what are you wearing? You look like a hibernating hamster! We wear blue pullovers, don't we? Get outside and change it and do something about that stupid haircut while you're at it. I don't trust people with fringes. . . .'