

Behavioural difficulties in school: Is the problem in the eye of the beholder?

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Introduction

Current educational policies advocate for school inclusion. However, the implementation of this process is complex, especially with regard to pupils with behavioural difficulties. Indeed, the placement of these pupils is controversial due to their characteristics. As a result, they are constantly being excluded from the regular class, which may worsen their scholar and social difficulties (Bradley, Doolittle & Bartolotta, 2008).

Even though many factors determine these pupils' placement, teachers have a great influence in the decisional process. Indeed, teachers individual characteristics as well as their conception regarding their pupils' difficulties are likely to influence their tolerance threshold, as well as the kind of strategies they will adopt (Poulou & Norwich, 2002). Furthermore, these characteristics are likely to evolve during teacher education and teaching practice.

Literature review

Several studies address the influence of different teachers' social-cognitive characteristics on their practice towards pupils with behavioural problems:

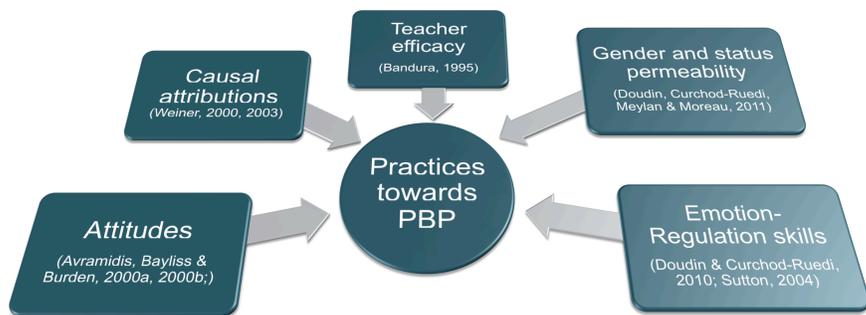


Figure 1: Main teachers' social-cognitive characteristics linked to problem behaviours.

However, none of them focuses on teacher's tendencies to include or to exclude these pupils from their class. Furthermore, no study has tackled the evolution of these characteristics through student-teachers education and after teaching experience.

Therefore, our study aims at:

1. Understanding the influence of teachers and student-teachers characteristics in their tendency to include or to exclude pupils with behavioural problems;
2. Comparing the different trends between novice students, advanced students and in-service teachers.

Research question and hypotheses

What is the influence of teachers and student-teachers social-cognitive characteristics in their tendencies to include or to exclude pupils with behavioural problems?

Hypotheses

1. **Internal attributions** (child-related factors) are associated to **low self-efficacy**, **negative attitudes** and **high tendencies to exclusion**. On the other hand, **external attributions** (family, cultural, educational) are associated to **high self-efficacy**, **positive attitudes** and tendencies to **include** these students.
2. **The ability to regulate** their own **emotions** is associated to **tendencies to include** these students. In contrast, a **low emotion regulation ability** is associated to **exclusionary tendencies**.
3. **Pupils gender** and **cultural background** have a significant impact on teachers because:
 1. These factors influence their **causal attributions**.
 2. **Boys** are more likely to elicit exclusionary tendencies.
 3. Pupils from a **favourable home environment** are more likely to elicit exclusionary tendencies.
4. **Student-teachers** have greater **inclusionary tendencies**. Their tendencies might become more exclusionary as they are confronted with teaching practice.

Methods

This research is structured in two parts:

1. Pre-study : (Qualitative data)

Objective

To explore teacher conceptions of behavioural problems, their causal attributions and the most-deranging behaviours in order to define a fictitious case based on genuine difficulties encountered by Swiss teachers.

Subjects

N= 5 in-service primary and secondary Swiss schools teachers.

Instruments

Semi-structured interviews.

2. Study: (Quantitative data)

Objective

To explore the link between teacher characteristics and their tendencies to include or to exclude a student, based on the above-mentioned fictional situation.

Subjects

N= 600 (200 in-service primary Swiss teachers; 200 first-year and 200 third-year student teachers).

Instruments

- Teacher Efficacy in Class Management and Discipline Scale (Emmer & Hickman, 1991)
- Multidimensional Attitudes Toward Inclusive Education Scale (Mac Farlane & Woolfson, 2013)
- Emotional Ability Questionnaire (Doudin & Curchod-Ruedi, 2010)
- Causal attributions and inclusion/exclusion tendencies questionnaire (to be developed)

Pre-Study Results

| | Problem Behaviour definition | Most disturbing behaviours | Causes |
|---|--|---|---|
| 1 | Inadequate behaviours according to classroom specific norms. Subjective, depends on each teacher. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Attention seeking• Violence,• Difficulties to follow orders | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Family factors• Teacher |
| 2 | Difficulties in classroom management, agitation, standing up without permission, etc. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Disruption• Talking without permission• The end of recess | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Teacher• School• Family |
| 3 | Very subjective, linked to the established classroom norms. Alarm that shows the malaise of a certain pupil. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Physical violence• Verbal violence• Noise | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Student (assertiveness seeking)• Family (big family, working parents)• School |
| 4 | Two kinds: incivilities (language, aggressiveness, disrespect) and others linked to medical troubles (hyperactivity). | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Insults (between pupils and especially towards teachers) | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Society (T.V., Movies, social networks) |
| 5 | Two kinds: minimal things (chattering, wandering, etc.) that we tend to trivialise, or "blow-up" students who may run a tantrum. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Noise• "Blow-up" students | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Family• Pupil who doesn't understand class content. |

Main results:

1. Three out of five teachers stated that problem behaviours' definition was very subjective and that it depended on teachers' tolerance threshold.
2. Except for one teacher that was confronted to extreme violence, the most disturbing behaviours were everyday incivilities.
3. The main causal attributions draw attention to family, school and societal factors. Internal factors were the least mentioned as a possible cause of problem behaviours.

Conclusion

Teachers' problem behaviour conceptions are **subjective** and may **differ** from psychopathological views. These different conceptions may give rise to a **bias in educational research**, broadening the gap between research and practice.

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