

Maltese youngsters with very challenging behaviour speak about school.

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Abstract:

Fourteen young persons between 10 and 18 years of age, who were in a service designed for youngsters with challenging behaviour, chose to speak about their experience at school when interviewed about significant moments in their lives. All of them had experienced a wide range of heavy losses throughout their lives and felt labelled and in some cases bullied by their school peers. Some of the youngsters who were in a special school enjoyed the positive relationship with their teachers and peers while others did not like the low level of instruction and the fact that it was not like a normal school. A number of children felt that their misbehaviour in mainstream education precipitated their placement in a specialist setting although one boy was sent to a special school simply because he was feeling unhappy. Particular teachers or heads were criticised for being too harsh or for picking on the children or not maintaining confidentiality. Therapeutic interventions are explored.

Introduction

In spite of the amount of literature on challenging behaviour (Ball et al., 2004; Feldman et al 2004; McKenzie et al 2006; Keen & Knox 2004) little knowledge exists about the children's own experiences. In fact, except for a small number of studies, the experiences and perspectives of individuals who have challenging behaviour have been generally ignored (Emerson et al., 1997).

In a recent study, Gonzi et al. (2006) highlighted the youngsters' understanding, views and suggestions with regards to several areas in their lives. Given the very interesting views that most of these youngsters provided regarding their school experiences, this paper presents their feelings, explanations and understanding of how they got on at school, looks at what school meant to them and puts forward their suggestions.

Literature Review

Although there are gaps in what we know about very challenging behaviour, also referred to in literature as 'social emotional and behavioural difficulties' (SEBDs), children and young people with these difficulties, deserve careful educational input, designed to promote their positive adjustment and development (Cooper, 2001). Whilst a large amount of information about challenging behaviour and different types of interventions already exists very little is known about the perceptions of students who have been placed in special schools for pupils with very challenging behaviour (Polat & Farrell, 2002). The experiences of children with challenging behaviour in mainstream education are equally scant.

The major finding of the few existing studies regarding separate special education placement is not as bad as strict full inclusionists have thought (Padeliadu, 1995; Vaughn and Klingner, 1998, in Jahnukainen, 2001).

One such study, carried out by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted, 1999), interviewed youngsters from a number of different special schools. It presented various helpful factors mentioned by the students themselves, including: the importance of a clear distinction between minor and major offences; and that staff try to separate the misbehaviour from the person. Students would also like to see that sanctions offer a way to make amends, and that exclusion is used only in extreme cases (such as drug taking, arson, carrying an offensive weapon and attacking another person). Finally they wish that staff show justifiable anger rather than "nagging" about trivial matters.

Another study carried out with students from one special school, found that those interviewed were satisfied with the quality of education, care and support that they had received (Polat & Farrell, 2002). The interviewees gave great value to: being in small classes; the ongoing support after school hours; being in a relaxed environment that gave them space to ask questions; and the variety of recreational activities that

were offered to them. Such factors helped them to feel a sense of achievement and success and also helped to enhance their self-esteem, self-respect and self-confidence.

Jahnukainen (2001) interviewed a number of students who had been in special classes for the emotionally and behaviourally disordered (EBD). The findings were that most of the interviewees began their stories with positive memories. The overall picture of their feelings about being educated in special classes seems very positive. The most positive elements were the special teacher and the small teaching group. Other influencing factors were the teacher's competence and personality that in turn had a positive effect on school achievement, the motivation to learn and the disciplinary style perceived.

Whilst the Ofsted report found that nearly all the pupils interviewed hoped to go back into mainstream schools, Jahnukainen's study found that the positive memories contrasted strongly with the former regular class experiences, where the students generally failed behaviourally as well as academically.

The Ofsted (1999) report also found that with regards to the students' perception of why they are in a special school, almost all the students admitted that the problems they had with learning and concentrating on school work, together with confrontational and sometimes aggressive behaviour against teachers and other pupils, were the main reasons for their placement in an EBD school. Few, however, acknowledged that it might be their poor attitudes or lack of self-control which could be the main cause of their troubles. They tended to regard themselves as the victims of individual teachers or of the system and blame circumstances outside their own control.

Whilst in most studies the students spoke positively of the special school they were in, a number of them also spoke of negative factors. Two major concerns expressed by some were the effect of the placement on forming relationships with the opposite sex (Polat & Farrell, 2002), the negative impact of being labelled as having attended a special school (Polat & Farrell, 2002; Jahnukainen, 2001) and low-level instruction (Jahnukainen, 2001).

Students reported that, in general, privileges such as the use of IT school equipment or music rooms were particularly appreciated. Forms of validation including mention at assembly, certificates of merit, being given more responsibility, having their work displayed – particularly art and good stories, and parents being informed of their children's good deeds, enhanced the children's self esteem. Finally being allowed out to the shops, an outing at the end of term and joining members of staff for a meal in a restaurant were among the rewards they rated as important and worth striving for. (Ofsted, 1999).

The Ofsted (1999) report also gathered a number of common characteristics of pupils with challenging behaviour described in this report by the pupils themselves and by their teachers. Restlessness and boredom; short concentration spans; anxiety;

frustration; manipulation of the teacher and other pupils; challenging the need to know; distractibility; an obsession with sexual matters; continued attention to concerns outside the classroom or the school community; inability to express thoughts and feelings; and poor basic skills were mentioned.

Another more recent study carried out by Ofsted (2005) includes the views of children and young people, who are coming from various settings including early years provision, mainstream and special schools, pupil referral units (PRUs), secure training centres and colleges. Some of the findings in this report are also based on a wider range of Ofsted's evidence. Findings showed that in schools which manage challenging behaviour well, students feel safer and are confident that issues such as bullying are dealt with swiftly and fairly. Also in settings where students could receive more individual attention, teachers would know them better and good relationships could be established.

In a number of the secondary schools, some of the special schools and the PRUs, pupils mentioned the support they receive from outside agencies and in-school counsellors as particularly helpful in improving their behaviour and ability to learn. Meetings between parents, behaviour support workers and school staff are seen as important. Most pupils in the secondary, special schools and PRUs know their individual targets and like the system for recognising and rewarding their achievement. In the PRUs and special schools they tend to enjoy receiving certificates to celebrate their successes (Ofsted, 2005).

Pupils in the PRUs appreciate the time staff gives to explain things and support them. Some spoke of their difficult experiences in the past and their pride in the progress they have made where they are treated more like adults. Their relationships with others are good, whereas they had difficulties in previous placements. They feel that these units have given them a second chance (Ofsted 2005).

These studies are consistent with a number of current approaches that are using what have been termed 'therapeutic' approaches. These approaches are based on contemporary theories that highlight the idea that the social environment and the emotional climate of the educational setting have an enormous influence on learning processes. Students learn better when they feel safe and secure and the risk of failure is not experienced as a threat (Cooper, 2001).

Clearly a number of the few existing studies that give voice to the children themselves, concur in most findings related to the factors which students themselves mark out as helpful to them although there are also contradictory and paradoxical findings (Guterman, 1995 as cited in Jahnukainen, 2001).

Recently, the Commissioner for Children in Malta wished to find out more about the situation in Malta with regards to 'challenging behaviour'. To do this, a group of researchers and volunteers were brought together to look at the various aspects of this issue (Office of the Commissioner for Children, 2006).

The last chapter of this project “See me, listen to me: Children’s perspectives” (Gonzi, M. , Abela, A., Azzopardi, A., Camilleri, A., Caruana, B., Borg, C., et al. 2006), is a qualitative research carried out by the authors of this paper together with a team of interviewers and a few other professionals who offered their feedback about the research project .

This study adopted an emancipatory stance (Oliver, 1997) and listened to the children’s experiences and perspectives about several issues related to their challenging behaviour. Involvement, empowerment, voicing experiences and accountability were given priority. The research findings were also presented in the form of a child-friendly book, published purposely for children to be able to read and understand. Moreover, 3 children with challenging behaviour had their narratives published as part of the book, and these short biographies were read out to the public in a conference in Malta, organised to present the research findings and implications.

Throughout this study a high number of students spoke about their experiences at school both in mainstream education and in special schools. Given the importance these children gave to this area in their lives, we were interested to look further at this particular aspect of the data collected, and chose to present it in the present paper, further carrying the children’s messages to the public.

Methodology

Influenced by a post-modern perspective, the qualitative study by Gonzi et al., 2006, interviewed a total of 19 children aged between ten and eighteen years. Out of these nineteen children, 14 young people, who at the time of the study were using a service designed for youngsters with challenging behaviour, chose to speak about their experience at school.

The majority of the 14 spoke about their experience in mainstream education. Five of the 14 were in a special school at the time of the interview and 3 of these five chose to speak about their experience in a special school.

Participants.

During the time of the study the participants were placed in one of the six existing services in Malta that are meant to address the needs of children with challenging behaviour. These services included a residential mental health unit for youngsters, two residential homes, two special schools and a rehabilitation service for young offenders.

Of the 14 participants, 8 were males and 6 females. All of the respondents were Maltese. Ten of the participants were still at school, 2 finished school but were not working, 1 was following a course to become a tile layer, and 1 wished to begin a course at the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST). Before entering the current service, only 5 of the 14 participants were living with both parents. Four of the participants were living in a residential home, 1 with their

mother only, 2 with their father only, 1 with the mother and partner, and 1 with the mother, her partner, and the grandmother.

The parents' occupations were all from working class background.

Interview questions

The interview questions were piloted by carrying out three pilot-interviews. These were discussed with the participants following each pilot interview and the original structure of the interview questions, the sequence, and some of the content was changed accordingly. The final interview questions (see appendix 1) were divided into two sections. The first section sought to elicit the demographic information of the participants. In the second part of the interview, the youngsters were invited to answer five qualitative and open-ended questions.

Ethical Considerations

Before carrying out the interview a few minutes were spent with the participant, in which confidentiality was clarified and secured, and in which it was made clear that he or she had the right not to participate, the right to choose not to answer any of the questions and the right to stop the interview at any time. Prior permission was given to all participants to take part in the study by their parents or legal guardians. The aim and goals of the study and how this research is part of a general project was also explained to all persons involved.

Throughout the study the identity of all the participants was separated from the information given so as to guarantee anonymity. Furthermore error inoculation was also minimally used in the report and a fictitious name was given to each participant in the written report. The names were eliminated in the theme '*Suggestions by the youngsters*' so as to avoid any possibility of the reader recognising the participant's identity by the comments made and connecting this with the fictitious name.

Another measure, aimed to protect the participants identity was that findings and discussions speak of the heterogeneous sample across-board in relation to challenging behaviour, rather than analysing the specific settings one by one. One of the reasons for this approach was in order to avoid putting specific settings under the spotlight. Rather, insights gained from the research would provide food for thought for all the services under study.

Method of Analysis

The process used for analysis was thematic, where firstly *vertical hermeneutics* was used in which the single cases were analysed, thus allowing the unfolding of manifest and latent views. Following this, the process of *horizontal hermeneutics* was carried out where the sum of all interviews was analysed (Leithaeuser and Volmerg, 1998, as cited in Schorn, 2000). Moreover the process of blind reviewing

was used, where the analyses was carried out by the authors of this paper who were working independently. The themes that emerged were then compared. This process was chosen to increase the internal validity and reliability of the study. (Silverman, 2001). For the purposes of this paper, we selected from the themes that emerged, those themes that were related to the children's experience at school.

Results and Discussion

Children's experience of being in a special school.

Five participants were attending a special school at the time of the interview. The experience of being in a special school for challenging behaviour varied according to the person interviewed. One participant was happy and claimed that he enjoyed being in the service:

Il-‘crafts’, għax ngħaddieh il-hin. Ara din il-mejda, irrangajtha jien. Kienet bis-saqajn jiċċaqalqu, invitajtha u issa ara kemm hi soda. Għamilna dak l-almanakk. Dak jibqa’ għal dejjem. Issa fil-‘crafts’ ħa nibdew xi xogħol bl-injam. Nieħu gost anke nbajjad u nirrangaw il-kmamar. Għamilna l-air conditioner u bajjadna barra. [Andrew]

The crafts because like that, time passes for me. Look at this table, I arranged it. The legs were shaky, I screwed it together and now, look how steady it is. We did that almanac. That will remain forever. During the crafts lesson, we will soon start working with wood. I also enjoy painting and refurbishing the rooms. We installed the air-conditioning and painted outside. [Andrew]

Andrew claimed that whereas originally he would loose his temper and behave aggressively at the special school, he eventually calmed down:

Għall-ewwel li ġejt kont niġġieled ma wiehed għax qabziti u tajtu daqtejn ta’ ponn, imma issa ikkalmajt. [Andrew].

At first when I came here, I used to fight with someone because I lost my temper and I punched him twice, but now I calmed down. [Andrew]

Jason on the other hand expressed mixed feelings and started by criticising the system “the school isn’t such a good school” (“L-iskola m’hix xi skola tajba”). He seemed to feel stigmatised by the fact that the school does not give importance to academic learning. Jahnukainen (2001) also reports that children do not like schools with a low level of instruction. The boy then spoke positively of the relationships he has within the school “I have friends, the teachers love me too...it’s like being at home” (“ħbieb għandi, teachers iħobbuni l-istess... qisni qieghed id-dar”). When he was asked why he thinks he is in a special school he said: “Jien naf! Biex jibduki aktar dixxiplina suppost” “I don’t know! To discipline me supposedly”.

Following this he said that he did not learn enough in the school

Li ma tantx titgħallem
(silence) nagħmlu siegħa kitba
fil-klassi, siegħa, siegħa u
kwart, il-bqija nilagħbu fil-
ground... ‘Break’ il-ġurnata
kollha mbagħad sat-3 ta’ wara
nofs in-nhar... dik li
iddejjaqni. [Jason]

That you don’t learn much
(silence)...we spend an hour
writing in class...the rest of the
time we spend playing in the
ground.... ‘break’ is all day
then till 3 in the
afternoon...that is what
bothers me” [Jason]

On the other hand he claimed that he would promote the school to a friend.

Ejja ħu gost – jġififieri, ma’
tiddejjaqx hemm hekk...
tghaddi ż-żmien hemm hekk,
jġififieri filgħodu nidhol...dik
is-siegħa naraha ġurnata u l-
bqija lanqas narah għaddej il-
ħin. [Jason].

Come and enjoy it – that is,
you won’t get bored
there...time will pass for you
over there, that is, I mean, in
the morning I go in...that hour
is like a day to me, otherwise I
don’t even see the time pass
by. [Jason]

In the course of the interview with another youngster, we could gather that he was attending a special school simply because he was fed up in the area secondary school where he was attending and not because he was exhibiting very challenging behaviour. He is not happy in the special school either:

Fil-verità niddejjaq hawn – ma
tantx inħobb niġi hawn... ma
jkollix aptit niġi [Albert]

In reality I am unhappy here –
I don’t really like coming
here...I don’t feel like coming
[Albert].

Later on he admits that he enjoyed school much more when he was in a mainstream school.

Le – bħal skejjel oħra nippreferihom iktar, allavolja ma kontx inħobb nitgħallem u hekk, imma kont nieħu gost l-iskola. [Albert]

No – as with other schools I prefer them more, even though I didn't like to learn and all that, but I used to enjoy it at school [Albert]

Their perception of the professional staff

There was mention of members of staff several times throughout the interviews. A number of respondents spoke positively of their relationship with members of the professional staff. However some had significantly negative experiences with particular members of staff, which at times influenced their perception of school. The participants' comments indicate the great need that several children with challenging behaviour have for significant and meaningful relationships.

One participant first described how helpful and supportive the professional staff within the residential home were:

Il-carers kollha x'hin tridhom ser ikunu hdejk fhimt? Ikollok problema ser issibhom hemm. Dejjem għandek spallejn fuq xiex tistriħ – dik importanti... Jien insib l-għajnuna meta jien nitkellem miegħek, niftaħ qalbi, dik għajnuna kbira għalija. [Anna]

All of the carers – when you want them – will be near you, do you understand? If you have a problem you will find them there. You always have someone's shoulders to rest on – that's what is important... I find help when I speak with you, open up my heart, that is a lot of help for me. [Anna]

She then moved on to describe the negative experience at school where members of staff did not maintain confidentiality, There is a strong contrast between the two contexts:

Imma imbagħad huma jkabbru...Għalfejn tikxifli mal-klassi kollha dik il- problema li gejnt ngħidlek?... allura, worth it li ngħid din mal-klassi kollha – l-problema tiegħi – mhux miegħek biss, għax xorta ser isiru jafu... [Anna]

But then they amplify (things)...why disclose with all the class that problem which i came to tell you?...if so, then it's worth telling the whole class myself, because they will get to know anyway... [Anna]

Anna then explains angrily that as a result personal information was spread around the school.

...tfajla mill-klassi tiegħi tkun taf; xi 10 tfajliet oħra minn klassijiet oħra, ser tmur tgħidilhom, u dawk imorru jgħidu 10 tfajliet oħra u l-kelma tinxtered ma' l-iskola kollha. Anna ġejja u Anna sejra u kulhadd jgħid fuqi. Qegħda kerha wisq il-biċċa. [Anna]

...a girl from my class would know; some 10 other girls from other classes, she'd go and tell them, and those will go and tell another 10 girls and then the word is spread around the whole school. Anna here and Anna there and everyone gossiping about me. This is really ugly this thing. [Anna]

Jason explains that there was one teacher, who he feels, influenced how he got on at school:

Sal-year 3 għamilt allright u imbghad giet teacher... kienet ħarxa...u minn hemm bqajt sejjer lura... sal-year 3 kont naf nikteb u naqra u nagħmel imbghad bdejt sejjer lura. [Jason]

Up to year 3 I got on allright and then a teacher came... she was harsh,, and since then I began falling behind... up to year 3 I knew how to write and read and do things, but then I started falling behind. [Jason]

On the other hand, Andrew speaks positively about the school staff at the special school and confirms the wish to be respected and understood by them:

Kuntent ħafna għax jgħallmuni u jisimghuni... Qed nitghallem naqra ftit ftit u – li jifhmuni mhux ikeċċuni u jagħjtu miegħi. [Andrew]

Very happy because they teach me and listen to me...I am learning to write bit by bit and – they understand me and not send me away and shout at me. [Andrew]

Even Albert who is not happy in the special school acknowledges that one finds staff, who can help children in the school. Similar to the Ofsted report (1999) students appreciate motivated teachers. Jahnukainen,2001 also reports how much children appreciate motivated teachers with personality who influence them to learn. The small group setting also helps.

School experience prior to placement

The children's experience at school varies. Two children describe their experience in a very positive way. Lara says "At school I used to enjoy it with my friends and that." ("L-iskola kont niehu gost mal-ħbieb u hekk."). [Lara]; whereas Peter is very positive about his behaviour "Kont nikteb pulit u nogħqod bil-għaqal – kienu jħobbuni t-teachers." [Peter] "I used to write neatly and behave well – the teachers used to love me" [Peter].

But other children describe it as a difficult time. The following participant (P) speaks to the interviewer (I) about what was difficult for him:

P: Kont immur tajjeb, imma qisni sfrattajt fl-aħħar Miss. Għax kont iddejjaqt ...

P: I'd get on well, but then I sort of lost track at the end Miss. Because I got fed up ...

I: X'dejjek?

I: What annoyed you?

P: Il-homework...Kien ikolli naghmlu d-dar."

P: The homework...I used to have to do it at home".

[Karl]

[Karl]

A recent HBSC WHO study (Samda, Dur & Freeman 2001/2002) found that 44% of 11 year olds, and 65-80% of Maltese children between 13 and 15 years of age, report feeling some or a lot of pressure because of school work. Maltese children (together with those from Lithuania) rank at the top regarding pressure because of schoolwork. For a student who has challenging behaviour, such as Karl, homework may be a hard task that may possibly lead to low motivation and even giving up on school. In fact, the aforementioned study found that the higher the perceived pressure the lower the academic achievement.

For most respondents the relationship with students and school staff has a strong effect on how they experienced school.

Tajjeb u ħazin. Tajjeb fis-suggetti, mhux ħazin, fis-sens li l-eżamijiet ngħaddi minnhom u hekk. U ma tantx kelli ħbieb u hekk. Kont waħdi. [Faye].

Good and bad. Very good in the subjects, not bad, in the sense that I would pass exams. But I didn't have many friends and so on. I was alone. [Faye]

Mark explains how he was strongly influenced by his friends at school and by the environment at school. He explains that one leaves school with what one has 'learnt' or 'been exposed to' at school:

L-iskola ma ddejjaqtx hekk, imma ma kontx inħobbha ħafna, ħafna l-iskola. Mill-iskola qisek tibda. Issa l-iskola tkun liema tkun fhimt? Jiġifieri mill-iskola ssib ħbieb...Issa, jekk trid toħroġ mill-iskola ta' nġorant toħroġ. Skond inti. Imma m'għaziltx dik it-triq, għazilt mat-tip tal-level...[Mark]

At school I wasn't unhappy, but I didn't really like the school very much. It's like, you start at school. Now when I speak about school, I mean any school, do you understand? That is, at school you find friends...Now if you want to leave school as ignorant you will. It depends on you. But I didn't choose that road, I chose that type of level...[Mark]

The rest of the interview with this young person indicates that when he speaks of leaving school as someone 'ignorant' he seems to mean that a person can choose to leave school as someone who is not exposed to the criminal world. He considers himself to be at a different level because at school he chose friends that exposed him to the criminal world.

Jason, another boy, explained that because a member of staff picked on him continuously his experience was:

Ħazin ħafna... Kollox – teachers, tfal kollox...kont niddejjaq ħafna hemm... iqqabbizomli s-sir u ingaralu l-mejda. [Jason]

Very bad... Everything – teachers, children, everything ...I was very unhappy there... the sir would make me loose my nerves and then I'd throw a table at him. [Jason]

As the children themselves imply, building a good relationship with the pupils is vital for them to profit from their time at school.

Negative experiences with school staff precipitate the placement.

Several explanations given by the youngsters regarding their placement in a special service for children with very challenging behaviour were in one way or another linked to negative experiences they had at school. These experiences were perceived to be the episode/s that led to a sequence of events, resulting in them having ended up in the service that they were currently in.

Andrew explained that in primary school: “I was really good – first class, I used to do everything properly” (“kont bully – first class, kollox kont naghmel sew”). However when he moved into secondary school, he claims to have been picked upon by the headmaster and things started going really badly.

Is-surmast ma ħax grazzja
miegħi u dejjem kien ikeċċini
'l barra mill-klasi...min kien
jgħidli xi ħaġa kont intihielu.
Insejt kif naqra u nikteb għax
is-surmast ħarbatni u dejjem
jaqbad miegħi. Fl-aħħar kont
gieli naghmel għalih..
[Andrew]

The headmaster didn't like me
and he'd always send me out
of class...whoever would
threaten me, I would hit him. I
forgot how to read and write
because the headmaster made
me loose track and always
used to pick on me. At the end
sometimes I would retaliate
back at him. [Andrew]

He went on to explain that he was never understood in that school: “Għax qatt ma fehmuni, qabdu miegħi u għamilt minn kollox biex nitlaq. Ma ridtx nibqa' l- (school's name).” “Because they never understood me, they picked on me and I tried my best to leave. I didn't want to remain at (school's name). It is clear that this participant connected the lack of understanding and his misbehaviour to how he was treated by the headmaster. There is even an underlying sense of rejection in the participant's words. This is emphasised further when he explains that the fact that he has a good relationship with the present headmaster has helped him to move on:

Is-surmast li għandi bħalissa
jhobbni ħafna u qalli li kif
naghlaq is-sittax-il sena jsibli
xogħol *hu*. Issa digà qed
nispelli għax qabel l-anqas
kont naf ittra waħda. [Andrew]

The headmaster that I have
now really loves me and he
told me that as soon as I will
be sixteen *he* will find me a
job. Now I already know how
to spell because before I didn't
even know one letter.
[Andrew]

Another participant explained that he has very negative memories of school. He didn't get on well with the teachers or the other pupils and he felt particularly offended by being treated differently:

Minni, minni ukoll, minni kien jiġi ħazin...Kont niddejjaq ħafna hemm...per eżempju lil l-oħrajn kien itihom kitba hekk, u lili itini kitba għaliha...lili u lill-ieħor fil-bank miegħi. Kont niddejjaq hu...Sal-'year three' għamilt 'allright' u imbghad giet teacher... kienet ħarxa...u min hemm bqajt sejjer lura...Sal-year three..kont naf niktib u naqra u nagħmel, imbagħad bdejt sejjer lura...l-mummy kienet titla' xi tliet darbiet fil-gimgha l-iskola... kienet tkun iktar l-iskola milli d-dar. [Jason]

It was also coming from me, the bad things ...I was very unhappy there ...for example he would give written work of one kind to the other students, but then would give me written work just for me...to me and to someone else sitting in my bench . I was unhappy ...Till year three I got on alright but then a teacher came...she was harsh...and from then on I continued doing badly...Until year three I knew how to write and read and do things, but then I started doing badly...my mother used to come up to school about three times a week...she'd be more at school than at home. [Jason].

Bullying at school triggers challenging behaviour

Two participants describe how the bullying they experienced at school affected their own behaviour. This participant explains how he would keep all the anger he felt inside him and then displace it by letting it out when at home.

P: Ġieli jkolli nervi mill-iskola u mmur id-dar bihom.

I: Kif kien ikollok in-nervi mill-iskola?

P: Šhabi jagħmluli n-nervi.

I: Kif?

P: Jigġieldu miegħi u jagħjruni.

I: U int x'kont tagħmel?

P: Ma nagħmlilhom xejn imbagħad immur id-dar u noqgħod niġġieled għax ikolli n-nervi.

[Peter]

P: At times I'd be edgy from school and then would go home uptight.

I: How would you become edgy at school?

P: My friends would make me edgy.

I: How?

P: They'd fight with me and call me names.

I: And what did you do?

P: I'd do nothing to them but then I'd go home and fight because I'd be edgy.

[Peter]

Another participant explained that when she used to be bullied, she would do whatever she was told. This consequently led her to be placed at the residential mental health unit:

...Ibbuljaw lili biex nagħmel hekk, u jiena, qisni tiġieġa - heqq nagħmel kollox li tgħidli...smoking, serq, xorb... ħabba šhabi għax dejjem ngħid 'iva' 'u iva', 'iva'... U l-iva li għidt jien u għal kemm il-darba għidt 'iva' spicċajt hawn. [Louisa]

...They bullied me to do that, and me, just like a chicken, I'd do everything they'd tell me, smoking, stealing and drinking... because of my friends because I'd always say 'yes' 'and yes', 'yes'...And with the 'yes' that I said, and the many times I said 'yes', I ended up here. [Louisa]

Josef described his experience at school as negative possibly due to the bullying that he went through whilst at school:

- | | |
|--|---|
| I: Kif kont tmur l-skola? | I: How did you get on at school? |
| P: Ħazin... | P: Badly... |
| I: U ma sħabek? | I: And with your friends? |
| P: <i>Bullying</i> | P: <i>Bullying</i> |
| I: <i>Bullying</i> fuqek? | I: <i>Bullying</i> on you? |
| P: Ehe | P: Yes |
| I: Ġieli kont inti li tagħmel <i>bullying</i> ? | I: Did you at times be the one to bully others? |
| P: Le, jien dejjem kwiet kont. Diżastru hux! Jien dejjem kwiet kont. | P: No, I was always quiet. It's a disaster don't you think! I was always quiet. |

Children who feel uncomfortable at school, either because the school does not succeed in protecting them from being bullied or because they do not fit in are likely to have feelings of shame and inadequacy. Such children blame the school for the way they feel (Ahmed & Braithwaite, 2004).

Later on he points out that he too became aggressive at school.

- | | |
|--|---|
| I: X'wasslek biex mort fis-servizz? | I: What lead you to end up in the service? |
| P: Aggressiv. Kont aggressiv l-iskola. Għadni sal-llum jġififieri... | P: Aggressive. I was aggressive at school. I still am till today... |

Peer Pressure

One participant acknowledged the fact that he was influenced by his friends to have taken the direction he is in now. He explained that:

Imbagħad bdejt nagħmilha ma' ċertu ħbieb, bdejt min haġa żgħira, imbagħad tibda kbira u tibqa' sejjer biha. Imbagħad kelli hafna ħbieb, illum l-aħjar il-ħbieb sa l-għatba tal-bieb. [Mark].

And then I started mixing with certain friends, and started from something small, and then it gets bigger, and then you continue with it. Before I had a lot of friends, now I prefer to keep the boundary with friends. [Mark]

Changing schools.

Interestingly two respondents explained that they had to change from one school to another several times. Research findings show that children who frequently change schools are more likely than those who do not to have behavioral health problems (Mansour et al, 2003; Alspaugh, 1999; Crocket et al, 1989).

One of them, who was still in primary school, has already been to four different schools. Another participant, who was at the end of secondary school, had also been to four different schools. This participant explained that she managed to cope with the situation by getting to know the other students: “Ghall-ewwel hekk, ma tkunx tafhom hekk lil shabek. Sakemm jidrawk, u sakemm tidra lilhom. Imbagħad orrajt.” [Maria] “At first you wouldn’t really know your friends. Until they get used to you and until you get used to them. And then it’s alright”. [Maria] This possibly helped her to learn how to adjust and be more flexible, and consequently to adapt to life in the various services she was in.

On the other hand, other respondents spoke of the difficulties they found when they moved from primary to secondary school. The change in schools shows a clear shift in their experiences. Paul speaks positively about his childhood at school. However he describes a shift between the primary school and secondary school. In the first school he recalls being more at ease and close with his peers. In secondary school, however, he wasn’t as close with his new peers and this bothered him.

Meta kont żgħir kont close u hekk mal-ħbieb, u konna nidħqu u hekk – niċċajta... L-aħħar skola li kelli...ma konniex close daqshekk fil-klassi, qisna niġu bżonn meta jkollna l-eżamijiet u hekk, il-bqija - vaganzi u affarjiet hekk - ma tantx konna inkunu f’kuntatt... [Paul]

When I was young I was close with my friends, and we used to laugh and all that – we’d joke...In the last school I was at...we weren’t so close in class, it was as if we’d need each other when exams come, the rest – holidays and all that – we didn’t really remain in contact...[Paul]

Children felt labelled and stigmatized at School

All of the youngsters interviewed had experienced a wide range of heavy losses throughout their lives. Most of the children interviewed had been in residential care at some point in their life. The youngsters feel labelled by their school peers because of this. A few participants actually spoke of the stigma attached to living in a residential home (see Abela, Dimech, Farrugia and Role, 2001 for similar findings).

One youngster for example, explained that she is sent to school in a vehicle that reveals the place she is in:

... Ġieli nisthi mmur l-iskola għax ġieli jwassluni huma t'hawnhekk u fuq il-karozza jkun hemm miktub dipartiment xi ħaġa. U meta mmur l-iskola jgħiduli... Insomma, huma jafu. ħafna minnhom jafu li qiegħda l-istitut imma niddejjaq...
[Roberta]

...sometimes I'm shy to go to school because sometimes people from here take me to school and on the car 'Department of something' is written. And when I go to school they tell me... anyway, they know. Many of them know that I am in an institute but I don't like it...[Roberta].

Another respondent explained that due to her family background and situation, she had been labelled ever since she was young:

Li missieri jixrob... (l-istudenti l-ohrajn kienu jgħidu:) 'imsawwta, fejn hu x-xurban? Sakranazz!' ... Dejjem inżomm ġo fija. [Anna].

That my father was a heavy drinker...(the other students used to say): "You beaten one, where is the drunk? Drunkard!" ...I always went on keeping it all inside. [Anna]

Such shaming experiences leave an indelible scar on the identity of these youngsters. They feel treated like outcasts and the shaming is likely to provoke a defiant reaction from them (Braithwaite 1989, cited in Ahmed & Braithwaite, 2004).

As we have seen further up, Josef is aggressive at school. He admits that the main reason for him being aggressive has to do with the fact that he was brought up in a children's home

Jien, taf x'inhi l-problema tiegħi? – għax jien għajjejt nitkellem fuq dawn l-affarijiet. Jien, orrajt, minn mindu kont zgħir s'issa inhossni habs! Imbagħad kif trid il-bniedem ma jitlax aggressiv orrajt?! Bniedem aggressiv!! Qed niċċaħhad mi-libertà! Taf x'jigifieri?

In my case, do you know what my problem is? – because I am tired of speaking about these things. Since I was young to this day, I feel I am imprisoned! OK! And then how do you expect a human being not to become aggressive, alright?! An aggressive person!! I am denied of my liberty! Do you know what that means?

Suggestions by the youngsters

Several youngsters came up with a number of suggestions aimed at improving school.

One participant from a special school explained that there is a need for the government authorities to continue assisting and supporting schools in keeping up the environment of the school:

Hawhekk, f'din l-iskola kollox qed nirrangaw. L-affarijiet tbiddu u nkomplu ngħinuhom biex inkomplu nbiddu. Ġabulna l-computers u jkomplu jgibulna l-affarijiet u nkomplu nirrangaw l-iskola.

Here, in this school, we are arranging everything. Things have changed and we keep helping them so that things keep on changing. They got us computers and they continue getting us things and we continue arranging the school

Other participants thought that there is a need for a bigger variety of lessons on the school curriculum in special schools

Li l-ewwel iżidulna jew naghmlu xi lezzjonijiet differenti... Ikun hemm iktar hin għall-isports, jagħmlulna, hekk futbol.

That first they increase or do some different lessons... That there will be more time for sports, that they'd do something, like football.

and that the school should be made bigger “Ikabbarha ftit bħala skola ...il-klassijiet” “He should make it bigger as a school...the classes”. The idea behind this statement probably is to turn the special school into a normal school. The following youngster is quite explicit about this:

Ingib iżjed tfal u l-iskola
nagħmilha bħala skola normali
b'ħafna tfal u teachers għax
hawnhekk għandna żgħir
ħafna.

I'd get more children and I'd
make the school like a normal
school with a lot of children
and teachers, because here it is
very small.

Research abroad indicates that children feel that the fact that they have attended a special school leaves a negative impact on them (Polat and FaFarrell; Jahnhainen 2001). Further suggestions were to assist, help and support children who are experiencing some form of bullying,

Kieku lit-tfal nibgħathom skola
oħra u ngħidilhom biex meta
jiġġieldu magħhom ma jagħtux
kashom u jgħidu lit-teachers
biex jgħidu lil ommhom.
Kieku kont nikkmanda jien, t-
tfal li jbatu ma nħallihomx fi
skola fejn ibatu.

I would send the children
to a different school and
tell them that when they
fight with them, not to take
any notice, and to tell the
teachers and to tell their
mothers. If I were the one
in command, I wouldn't
leave those children who
are suffering in a school
where they can suffer.

Children also want more teachers who are understanding:

Ingib iżjed teachers li jifhmu
għax aħna hawnhekk qegħdin
ftit, tajbin imma ftit.

I'd get more teachers who
understand because here, we
are a few, good, but a few.

Finally when asked for suggestions, one boy expressed how depressed he was at school

Niddejjaq... B'kollox per
eżempju l-iskola nixtieq
inwaqqagħha. Niddejjaq.

I'm unhappy... with
everything, for example I
would like to leave school. I'm
unhappy.

This boy told us that he was put in a special school simply because he was not happy at the previous school and asked to be moved. However when asked to talk about his life as a young boy, all he could say was that his mother died when he was eight. The chances are that this boy is suffering from a depression which was undetected and not from very challenging behaviour.

Other points for discussion

It is worth noting that all of the children that were interviewed came from a working class background. It would be interesting to see what happens to children with very challenging behaviour who come from middle class backgrounds. It may well be that they are the ones for whom parents seek help in the community probably in private practice rather than in state run clinics. It could be that these parents refuse to admit their children in any of the services mentioned. We believe that it would be valuable to pursue research in this area. Is it in fact cheaper and more effective for the state to care for these children in the community? Do such children perceive it to be better than being sent to another school or residential set up?

Significant and positive relationships with teachers and heads of school emerged as major needs that the children have. As Cole et al (1998) pointed out, maintaining a positive relationship with these youngsters, can be very demanding for the teachers. Teachers and school staff need to be equipped with the necessary training including psycho educational strategies and interventions such as pedagogical know how and classroom management. Given the intense demands put on teachers, ongoing professional training is warranted. This should also include regular supervision so as to minimise any possibility of burn out of the school staff. Such training is very valuable as it enhances a much needed professional stance when working with these children. It helps school staff get in touch with the hardships that the children are going through and understand the children's feelings of frustration, rebellion, anger, loneliness, longing and sense of loss. The empathic relationship would certainly help in building up a positive relationship with the children.

Proper assessment prior to admitting children in a specialised service and adequate follow up is very important. In this paper we come across a boy who was put in a special service simply because he was fed up in the school he was in. He had lost his mother when he was eight. The chances are that this boy needed to be treated for depression rather than being placed in a special school. There is in fact a pressing need for multi-disciplinary teams to be set up in schools where teachers and head of schools can work hand in hand with psychologists, social workers, youth workers, family therapists, psychiatrists and other professionals.

Many children have told us how they first started experiencing problems at school when they were still very young. Several issues need to be addressed with the child both at school and with the family. Children need to be helped to consider short-term and long-term consequences and to cope with their situations including peer pressure and self-control. A number of children present various complex issues including family

instability, cognitive difficulties and even mental health problems that need to be addressed professionally.

Early intervention is crucial for such children. Teachers and parents need to be supported by other professionals in order to be able to provide care for these children. Psychologists, family therapists and social workers who work hand in hand with the school can provide valuable intervention at this stage. This therapeutic infrastructure is still lacking in our schools when in fact we know that early intervention at a multi-systemic level is the treatment of choice for children with challenging behaviour (Henegler, 2002)

There needs to be a concerted effort from different services for children on the island to work hand in hand (See KNF,2003 Building Bridges) strongly liaising with the family and the school given that these are the two places where the child is spending most of his/her time .

Suggestions for further research

Whilst the children's perspectives have been given utmost priority throughout the whole study, we would like to suggest that research regarding the views of professionals working with the children in schools and/or those of the parents of these youngsters would enrich our understanding of the youngsters themselves by providing us with a more systemic framework highlighting the links among the different contexts.

Only the views of children in the six services mentioned in the methodology were taken into account. Although these children did refer to their experience in school prior to being admitted to the service, the views of children with challenging behaviour who find themselves in mainstream education were not included in the study. Children below the age of ten were also not included given that this would have implied a totally different set of age appropriate interview questions. Views from all of these children would prove extremely valuable in helping us understand the experiences and perceptions these children have.

Conclusion

This paper has provided useful insight into what has been described by the Malta Union of Teachers as unacceptable pupil behaviour in their 2006 survey carried out among 992 teachers. One important message that the children are sending us is that the school is an important part of their lives and that we cannot aim at eliminating the challenging behaviour in the child without first addressing the individual child's needs.

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