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Are we doing enough? Assessing the needs of teachers in isolated schools with students with oppositional defiant disorder in mainstream classes

Fiona McLean
Univesity of WOLLONGONG, fmclean@uow.edu.au

Roselyn Dixon
University of Wollongong, roselyn@uow.edu.au

ARE WE DOING ENOUGH? ASSESSING THE NEEDS OF TEACHERS IN ISOLATED SCHOOLS WITH STUDENTS WITH OPPOSITIONAL DEFIANT DISORDER IN MAINSTREAM CLASSROOMS

Fiona McLean and Roselyn Dixon

University of Wollongong

ABSTRACT

The Vinson report (2001) into public education highlighted the growing incidence of behavioural problems within the NSW public school system. One disorder that is currently causing particular concern is Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) as the outcomes for students with ODD who do not receive intervention are dire. Barcalow (2006) claims that without intervention these behaviours may progress, sometimes rapidly, towards delinquency and incarceration.

ODD has such a negative impact on classroom life and the working conditions of teachers and students that it needs urgent early intervention. The disorder does not only impact on the individual student, it impacts negatively on the other students, school staff and the learning environment. However, the area is not well-researched particularly from the viewpoint of the teachers who are in rural and isolated school in New South Wales.

This qualitative research study examined the experiences of four teachers in two isolated rural schools in NSW who are currently teaching students with ODD. It examines the degree to which behaviours, of students with ODD impact on their own learning and socialisation skills and how this, in turn affects the teachers' ability to teach. Participant teachers indicated experiencing higher levels of stress when teaching students with ODD in isolated communities.

INTRODUCTION

Specific challenging behaviours have become more prevalent within mainstream schools. This has been highlighted by the Vinson Report (2001), which investigated the increase of behavioural problems within the NSW public school system. Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) is one such disorder (Kaiser & Hester, 1997; Barcalow, 2006). These students, without the appropriate intervention and support to help them regulate their behaviours, persist with behaviours that may then escalate, resulting in delinquency and incarceration (Barcalow, 2006: Greene, Beszterczey, Katzenstein, Park & Goring, 2002; Forness, Walker & Kavale, 2003)

As ODD is a serious psychiatric disorder, and a precursor to the more serious Conduct Disorder (CD) (aggressive law-breaking and violent behaviours), it needs to be identified as soon as possible. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV) (APA. 1994) defines ODD as "a recurrent pattern of negativistic, defiant, disobedient, and hostile behaviour towards authority figures that persists for at least 6 months" (p. 100). Furthermore "in a significant proportion of cases, ODD is a developmental antecedent to Conduct Disorder' (APA, 1994, p. 100).

Gresham, Lane and Lambros (2000) describe students with CD, particularly those with co-morbid Attention Deficit and Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD), as being 'Fledgling Psychopaths' (Lynam, 1998) and suggests that by the time they have moved from ODD to CD that they are "highly resistant to interventions" (p. 84). It is these students who pose a serious threat to teachers, staff and students (Gresham et al., 2000). Conduct Disorder is an outcome that is not in the best interest of any student, teacher or school.

Early intervention is required to support students with ODD (Kaiser & Hester, 1997; Gresham et al. 2000) due to the negative impact of their behaviours on overall classroom life. Their behaviours affect staff and students alike and can erode well-established positive classroom environments (Gresham et al., 2000). Infantino and Little (2005) assert that disruptive behaviours have a direct effect on the student's academic performance and future outcomes. This can lead to students acting out, exerting further stress on the teacher.

There are indications that heightened stress for teachers who work with these students, is a key factor that impacts directly on the teacher's mental health (Greene, Beszterczey, Katzenstein, Park, & Goring, 2002). Teachers working in remote and rural communities in NSW have minimal access to resources, professional development and experienced support in dealing with these students. The McRae Report (1996, p. 5) calls for 'equitable distribution of available resources regardless of location or setting'. There are a number of teachers in isolated schools throughout NSW that are beginning teachers with little experience or management skills to deal with extreme behaviours.

Research shows that teacher stress levels are continually being increased (Westling, Herzog, Cooper-Duff, Prohn, & Ray, 2006), partially by an ever increasing unrealistic workload and expanding curriculum (Morin, 2001). These stresses are exacerbated in rural and remote communities by additional factors. These factors include isolation and inexperience, as there is a higher percentage of beginning teachers who lack relevant skills in dealing with students with additional needs such as those with ODD.

When all these factors are combined, it is a potent mix and can have possible ramifications for the retention of beginning teachers. Teachers have a duty of care for all students but they also have a right to be safe in their workplace.
There is little research addressing these issues from the perspective of teachers in isolated schools in NSW. This study aims to fill the gap in the literature by investigating the explicit support needs of these teachers. Therefore, the purpose of the study was to investigate the needs of teachers in remote and rural schools linked to the difficulties arising from managing students with Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD). This research highlights the many issues associated with working in isolated communities. It describes the current support provided to teachers in isolated schools in NSW and identifies some of the issues concerned with the mental health of these teachers.

This research examined the experiences of four primary school teachers in two isolated Department of Education and Training (DET) primary schools in NSW. Of these participant teachers, two were new graduates, one was a temporary teacher with three years experience and the fourth had 20 years experience in the isolated

school. The participants were identified by the school principals, as having students with ODD within their mainstream classes. This research met ethical standards of the DET and the University of Wollongong Human Research Ethics committees.

METHOD

This research was part of a larger qualitative study of isolated schools in NSW. The methodology used was multiple case studies (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). The participant schools for this study were initially identified with the assistance of a District Guidance Officer servicing one of the most isolated regions in NSW Department of Education and Training (DET). Both participant schools were classified as isolated as they were located between one and two hours drive from the nearest regional centre, both serviced a population of 2800-4000 and had enrolments of 217-226 students.

The investigation was conducted to identify whether teachers in isolated schools need further support, particularly those teaching students with ODD. It used data obtained in four semi-structured interviews and daily reflective journals and memos to identify the support needs of teachers with students with ODD in isolated schools in New South Wales. The multiple case studies allowed the researcher to discover the current support supplied to the participant teacher, and what they identified as their support needs.

Semi-structured interviews and reflective journals identifying the impact of the students with ODD were used as the main data collection instruments. Further strengthening the validity of this research is the triangulation of data using interviews, follow-up questions and the daily reflective journals, completed by the teacher participants during the study. The triangulation of data was further strengthened by the use of follow-up questions during the study.

The reflective journals were the primary source of documentary evidence and are used to 'support the strength of interpretations and conclusions in qualitative research' (Mertens, 2005, p. 426). These journals were examined for themes that strengthen the interview data analysed and provide evidence for triangulation.
Once the deeper coding had been completed, the data was interpreted. Mertens (2005, p. 422) describes the resultant analysis as being "some type of higher-order synthesis in the form of a descriptive picture, patterns or themes, or emerging or substantive theory". The data were interwoven into thick descriptions to contextualise the interpreted data and answer the research questions.

In order to maintain the anonymity, the participant schools in this study were identified by code (C & G), as have the participant teachers (A, B, E, & R). The following table is an overview of the participant's level of experience, class and school.

<div align="center">**Table 1. Participant Overview**</div>

School	Teacher	Student identification	Level of experience	Class	Number of Students
C	Teacher A	A	0 years	IM	17
C	Teacher B	B	20 years	Stage 3	20
C	Teacher E	E	0 years	Multi-categorical	5
G	Teacher R	R	3 years	Stage 3	22

KEY THEMES

The major theme that emerged throughout the data analysis process was:

The influence of disruptive behaviours, particularly ODD on the teachers' mental health and well-being.

Finding 1: Teachers in isolated schools of students with ODD had limited access to in-school and out- of school support.

Whilst all schools and their senior staff were reported as being very supportive, it was not sufficient to make them feel they could adequately manage the students with ODD on their own. They indicated that new graduate teachers, particularly, need additional specialist support when dealing with students with ODD.

The four teachers indicated they had limited access to support personnel available to similar teachers in city or larger rural schools. Only one of the four participant teachers had contact with an Itinerant Support Teacher Behaviour (ISTB), Teacher R reported having sporadic support from the Itinerant Support Behavioural specialist at the time of interview (term 1, week 9). These ISTBs provide vital specialist assistance in assessing students and developing detailed individual behavioural plans (IBP).

The participant teachers in this study were supported from within the school by mentors, supervisors and some support staff. Teacher B, by far the most experienced of the participant teachers, has had some experience dealing with the stress created by students with ODD in isolated schools. Of the day-to-day stresses she comments *'some days it is harder than others. I think we have very supportive staff here so that makes a big difference'.*

There was a DET beginning teacher support program in the Region, but participation in this one-day workshop was not compulsory and it did not cover behavioural difficulties. This was the only form of induction available for teachers. Furthermore, teachers in isolated schools had to travel considerable distances to attend these professional development courses at centralised locations. This took them away from the class, which exacerbated the difficulties of teaching students

with ODD. An appropriate model of teacher professional learning for teachers of students such as those in the study must consider the effects of disruption to routine. The two new graduate teachers both had the in-class support of a teacher's aide, which they found invaluable in the day-to-day running of the class. However, their inexperience in dealing with paraprofessionals in the classroom environment left them feeling, at times, intimidated. One teacher reported her directions to the student being occasionally undermined by the aide, which led to power struggles with the student.

Finding 2: Participant teachers in isolated communities experienced high levels of stress when teaching students with ODD

All participants expressed the feeling of frustration, due to interruptions by erratic behaviours reduced teaching and learning time for both the teacher and other students. This led to increasing stress levels for the teachers. Furthermore, the tiring nature of dealing with oppositional students, who are often compulsive attention seekers or continually in power struggles with adults, compounded all four teachers' state of well-being. Teacher A commented that *'It is tiring. At the end of each day you kind of sit down and go wow. I think teaching in general can be tiring, but when you are constantly in a power struggle with a student just to do something simple such as writing their spelling list a lot of other students were to sit there and have to write it when you are constantly trying to explain why they need to do it and it is tiring. You end some days just needing a break.'* Teacher E, a beginning teacher in her first year comments *'it is obviously more difficult for me to have him there but that is teaching, having kids with different need, ... he does have some days when he is very good. I sometimes take it personally and think it is my fault that it has happened* [an incident].'

Teacher B claimed the stress of continually dealing with students with ODD resulted in her going on stress leave the previous year. She reported that there was an ongoing expectation of availability by other staff members for her to attend to all issues involving that student. Therefore, the teacher's off-class time was consumed by requests from others to deal with the student with ODD and this added to the stressors.

All schools had a school behaviour management program that was supported by senior staff members, however, it appeared to be an ineffective deterrent to the students with ODD. The ineffectiveness of the standard behaviour management practices is evidenced by fact that all of the identified students had been suspended by the middle of Term 1. This was reported in the teacher daily reflective journals. One student was suspended for 30 of the first 39 days of school. Although none of the aggressive behaviours were directed at teachers, this study found that the teachers were concerned about the escalation in student behaviour and were conscious of the additional anxiety that teaching these students caused them.

Finding 3: The beginning teachers felt underprepared for teaching students with ODD.

The third finding of this part of the study is the under preparedness of beginning teachers to teach students with ODD in isolated schools. This became evident during the initial interview when two teachers revealed that they were new graduates and a third revealed that he was an inexperienced temporary teacher. The two new graduate teachers felt that they were unprepared for dealing with students with ODD within the mainstream classroom despite their university education. Teacher A remarked when discussing whether the preparation she received at university was sufficient, *'Being straight from uni you never really learnt about that* [effective strategies for students with ODD] *so I think just to be able to have people who have experienced this and maybe just having a chat with those people just to see what strategies they have in place.'* When asked about whether she felt a need for additional training Teacher A replied *'Yes, definitely'*.

Teacher E had come to the school with experience teaching students with special needs, but has had no experience with students with ODD *'I have never had anybody with ODD before apart from the defiance which comes with Down Syndrome'*. When asked if she considered she required further training, Teacher E commented *'Yes. Because….. I have never worked with kids with mental health behaviour….. So it is on myself to also find out how I can implement something that will work for him'*.

All three inexperienced teachers felt that further training and professional development, particularly in the area of classroom management and social skills training, was an important tool in coping with these demands. One complicating factor that they highlighted was that this was not always practical in an isolated school. Alternative means of providing support, such as a website were seen as a positive initiative by the teachers. This was demonstrated when one of the teachers went to a two-day course and came back and found over half the class had been suspended due to behavioural incidents.

DISCUSSION

The results of the study revealed a number of areas in which teachers in isolated schools might be better supported to manage and assist students with ODD. Recommendations for supporting teachers and delivering resources to isolated teachers and teaching communities can be made.

Support for teachers in isolated schools

Individual Education Plans and Individual Behaviour Plans were identified by the participant teachers as being an important strategy in planning for, and assisting, the ODD students to achieve their learning goals. However, with one exception, teachers did not mention having any in place. Specialist assistance is required when assessing and constructing well-designed individualised plans for each student. This assistance needs to be provided to allow the teachers to access flexibly resources as they require them, without having to leave the school environment. In isolated schools, and in large country regions these personnel cover a huge geographic area and as such, are not often in the office or available via phone.

This exacerbates the feeling of isolation for teachers in isolated schools as they must 'wait their turn' for access to specialist services.

The data demonstrated a distinct need for social skills training for the students with ODD. However, staff indicated they did not have the skills and knowledge and would require a specialist program and specialist support to implement the program. Areas of concern included developing positive reciprocal peer interaction skills and individual anger management skills.

Supported access to, and ongoing professional development in behaviour management of students with ODD was highlighted by the beginning teachers, as an immediate support need. All teachers expressed the need for access to specific resources such as social skills programs and behaviour modification programs to assist in dealing with students with ODD. Accessibility to DET provided support was an issue mentioned by all teachers.

Recommendations for Delivering Resources to Isolated Teachers

The researchers identified five key recommendations that have emerged from this study:

1. Teachers have access to specialist behavioural learning support officers (in-school aides) and ISTBs (external).
2. The formalising of induction and mentoring procedures for beginning teachers in isolated schools in a manner that they can access without disrupting the students
3. That the DET provide a support network for beginning teachers in isolated schools for students with ODD.
4. That the DET streamline the provision of specialist services to teachers in isolated schools, so that they do not have to wait excessive amounts of time.
5. That a website would be one effective means of delivering these services to isolated schools.

All participant teachers identified minimal experienced support, apart from other school staff. The provision of a fulltime Learning Support Officer (aide) with specialist behaviour training was indicated as an optimal support need. The teachers perceived the benefits as twofold: supporting all students in the class as well as support for the students with ODD. However, economically and practically, this may be viewed as unrealistic provision in the current political climate. An aide would allow teachers to focus on teaching with minimal interruption and assist in decreasing the sense of isolation both in the classroom and in a remote environment. Further, it would decrease teachers stress levels and add a protection factor in the form of adult support.

Geographical considerations impact on frequent face-to-face contact with DET support personnel, including ISTBs, and, therefore, restrict assistance in developing Individual Behaviours Support Plans and conducting Functional Behaviour Analyses (FBAs). Access to these support personnel between visits, could be increased by the availability of pre-arranged video conferencing.

Specific (school-based or DET) induction procedures were not indicated by participants prior to or early on at their new school. The researcher recommends a

formalisation of these procedures. Individual schools and regional networked schools should provide induction programs which include the identification of designated mentors who have experience with ODD students and other challenging behaviours, as well as, formal training on appropriate classroom management techniques. A toolbox of specific strategies would enhance new teachers' classroom management skills beyond mainstream methods and support their well-being.

All teachers in this study indicated varying degrees of stress, and feelings of frustration and isolation. These feelings can be much more prevalent with beginning teachers (DeWert, Babinski, & Jones, 2003) and may increase the possibility of an early exit from the profession. Professional, practical, emotional and social support in the beginning years has been shown to improve 'problem-solving skills' and reduce teacher stress (DeWert et al., 2003). This study found a clear need to further support teachers of students with ODD in isolated schools. However, how best to deliver these services to such a wide geographical area is an issue. On-line support communities had the ability to overcome barriers of time and distance, offering flexible delivery of collaborative consultation (DeWert et al., 2003).

The researchers recommend the implementation of a designated website, hosted on the NSW DET portal, to support teachers in isolated schools of students with ODD. This website should contain practical classroom strategies, resources to help teachers with students' social skill development and links that assist them in improving the academic performance of students with ODD and dealing with behavioural difficulties. Further, the researchers recommend that there be a 'chat-room' or online interaction component to provide "emotional support and encouragement while diminishing feelings of isolation" (DeWert et al., 2003 p. 313) with appointed mentors to be on this website as well. The website should also include specialist advice, with psychologist and behavioural specialists available for consultation. A weekly timetabled forum would be ideal; this would assist in bringing the isolated teacher in contact with specialist support in an effective use of their time.

The researchers suggest that learning support officers (aides) also be granted access to this website. This would assist their knowledge and understanding in assisting teachers to maintain positive learning environments. It could also provide professional learning opportunities specially tailored for learning support officers including an awareness of current behavioural policies and practices. To keep teachers in isolated classrooms in NSW the mandatory induction program could also be delivered in an on-line format that would allow teachers in isolated schools to complete the program at an appropriate time, without needing to leave their schools.

CONCLUSION

Working in isolated and remote schools with minimal support can be challenging particularly for new graduate teachers. This challenge, on a practical and personal basis, can be exacerbated by students with ODD who require additional support. Providing equitable support through physical and people-based resources, professional development and the suggested website to support teachers in isolated schools of students with ODD could assist in supporting and sharing these challenges in a professional and effective manner. This web based resource

can be used to provide a community of practice for the new graduate teachers to assist in reducing the feelings of stress and isolation. Further research needs to be conducted into the effectiveness of a web-based support structure for teachers in isolated schools, as a means to provide equitable distribution of specialist resources and targeted professional development.

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