

Classroom Behaviour and Social Adjustment among School Students: A Theoretical Perspective

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Abstract: *Children's behaviour and social adjustment within the classroom are important considerations. Behaviour can refer to how a pupil engages with learning tasks, follows instructions, works with others and interacts within the classroom. Social adjustment can relate to how children feel they fit in, build friendships, communicate effectively and feel included. Although behaviour and social adjustment are two distinct areas, they will be influenced by each other. This conceptual article will discuss the relationship between behaviour and social adjustment for upper primary school students. Using theories such as ecological systems, social learning and sociocultural. School engagement, friendships and school belonging will also be discussed. It is important to consider how behaviour should be seen as more than just an individual trait. Family factors, teaching style, peer relationships, individual differences and school factors can influence how a pupil behaves. A strength based approach to children's behaviour and social adjustment will be advocated. The article will conclude with key implications for classroom settings and recommendations for future research. Future research should be culturally aware, developmentally appropriate and ethical. This article is theoretical and will not give any findings.*

Keywords: Behaviour; Social adjustment; Upper Primary students; School belonging; Social learning

1. Introduction

School is not just a place for children to gain academic knowledge but is also a social environment for them to learn how to communicate, work with others, negotiate, manage their emotions and build relationships with adults and peers. Within the classroom children are required to listen to instructions, participate in learning, share resources, and respond to feedback. Children will also need to fit in with their peers, build friendships, ask for support and manage conflict.

Although behaviour and social adjustment are separate they should be considered. Behaviour usually refers to how a child acts within a learning situation, whereas social adjustment relates to how pupils feel about their relationships and participation. A child may follow classroom rules but still feel like they do not fit in with their peers. Likewise, a child may have good relationships with peers but struggle with some aspects of learning.

Within upper primary school, the learning of children can be very meaningful. As children progress through Classes V, VI and VII there may be more demands within the classroom, peer relationships and expectations of working independently. However, children will have individual differences. They may have different temperaments, language, backgrounds, learning requirements and preferred ways to participate. Just because a child is quiet does not mean they are not engaged. Likewise, if a child questions an instruction it does not mean they are being inappropriate. We need to consider the context of their behaviour.

This article will provide a theoretical overview of behaviour and social adjustment. It will discuss the relevant psychological perspectives. How schools can help children to participate, feel they belong and have positive relationships.

This article is conceptual and will not give any findings from a sample.

2. Understanding Behaviour

2.1 What is behaviour?

Behaviour within the classroom refers to how a pupil acts within the classroom. This could include listening to explanations, following instructions, contributing to discussions, attempting tasks, working with others, and respecting shared resources. Whilst this helps teachers to understand how children are engaging with the classroom, they cannot be seen as a complete indicator of how a child is learning.

2.2 Contextual

The meaning behind the behaviour will depend on the situation. Being quiet may be because they are concentrating, unsure, uncomfortable, struggling with the language or prefer to watch. Moving around may be due to restlessness, however they may be doing so because they need to be actively involved in the task. A child may struggle with long written tasks but be very engaged with practical or group tasks. Overall behaviour should be observed over time.

2.3 Following rules

Following rules can help create an organised learning environment. However, this should not be seen as engagement. A child may be quiet but feel they are not engaged with the lesson. Likewise, a child may ask lots of questions as they are genuinely curious. A balanced view of behaviour should be taken into consideration. Children should be seen as engaging, attentive, active, safe and willing to learn. They should not be seen as just following reasonable

expectations. This aligns with the multi-dimensional view of school engagement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004).

3. Understanding Social Adjustment

3.1 What is social adjustment?

Social adjustment relates to how children interact with others. This can include building friendships, communicating their needs, sharing resources, working with others, respectfully disagreeing, asking for support and feeling they fit in. This can impact on how children feel school is a supportive community.

3.2 Feeling they belong

Feeling they belong is an important factor within social adjustment. Children need to feel they are valued and can participate without feeling embarrassed or excluded. Goodenow has looked at psychological membership within school (Goodenow, 2002). It is important to consider how children actually feel. A child may appear to fit in but actually feel left out. It is important to listen respectfully to children.

3.3 Individual differences

Not all children will have positive social adjustment. Some children prefer to have a few close friends whilst others enjoy being involved with a larger group. Cultural expectations, language, disabilities, temperaments and previous social experiences may impact how children engage. Schools should not expect children to be extrovert to have positive social adjustment. The main thing to consider is whether children have fair opportunities to participate safely and respectfully.

4. Theoretical Perspectives

4.1 Ecological Systems Perspective

Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective looks at how development occurs within interacting systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Children's experiences within school will be impacted by their individual characteristics, however their relationships with their family, within the classroom, school and community will also play a role. Factors such as teacher expectations, family routines, peer expectations, resources within the school and conditions within the community may impact behaviour.

It is important to understand that behaviour within the classroom may not be entirely the child's fault. For example, they may not be participating due to unclear instructions, a threatening peer environment, language barriers or lack of opportunity to contribute. Likewise, they may be positively adjusting due to having clear routines, supportive adults and a welcoming classroom culture. This perspective encourages educators to think about what is going on around the child.

4.2 Social Learning Theory

Bandura's social learning theory focuses on how behaviour is learnt through observation, modelling and reinforcement (Bandura, 1977). Children will observe how their teachers

and peers act when making mistakes, disagreeing, working with others and asking for support. When adults model respectful communication and positive conflict resolution it is modelling behaviour. Peers can also model behaviour.

There is a bidirectional relationship between behaviour and the environment. Children's behaviour may impact how their peers react. Likewise peer reactions could impact how willing they are to participate. Encouraging behaviour and fair recognition can help create positive engagement. However, mocking, inconsistent correction and embarrassment may impact negatively. Not all behaviour can be explained through modelling but it is one way social environments can impact on classroom experiences.

4.3 Sociocultural Perspective

Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective focuses on how learning occurs through social interaction and cultural mediation (Vygotsky, 1978). Children will often work with others within the classroom. This can include communication, problem solving together, explaining and scaffolding. Children will practise communication and working with others.

However, working with others does not always create an inclusive environment. If roles are unclear or some children take control then others may not get to contribute. Teachers can help create fair opportunities to participate by providing structure, rotating roles, providing clear expectations and providing support with conflicts. This perspective encourages looking at the quality of interactions.

4.4 Engagement and relationships

Engagement within school can be behavioural, emotional and cognitive (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004). Whilst behaviour can be observed it may not show how emotionally connected they are. They may not appear to be invested, see the relevance or be willing to put in effort. Relationships can also impact motivation. Wentzel has discussed the importance of relationships with parents, teachers and peers (Wentzel, 2002).

Overall, this suggests behaviour and social adjustment should be seen as separate but potentially linked. There are many theories to suggest why they may be linked, however this does not mean one will cause the other. The link may depend on the child, task, classroom environment and wider circumstances.

5. Conceptual Relationship Between Behaviour and Social Adjustment

There are many ways behaviour and social adjustment can be linked. Children may behave in a way that creates positive interactions with peers. Positive relationships may lead to children being more willing to ask questions and participate in group work. A positive classroom environment can encourage children to engage with learning and interact respectfully. However, if children are constantly excluded or there is conflict they may not want to contribute. They may also struggle to understand social cues.

This should not be seen as a direct link. Children's behaviour may impact how their peers react. Likewise peer reactions may impact their behaviour. This may also be impacted by other factors such as difficulty with the task, family stress, teaching style, classroom size, language requirements and developmental needs. A theoretical perspective should allow for multiple explanations. We cannot assume behaviour indicates how socially competent a child is.

It is important to consider how behaviour appears to be different to how they actually feel. Often teachers can observe children engaging with tasks, working with others and following rules. However, children will know if they feel they fit in, feel safe and can ask for support. This does not mean one perspective is incorrect but can show different aspects of school. To gain a full understanding multiple perspectives should be considered.

6. Implications for Educational/ Counselling Practice

6.1 Clear routines

Providing clear routines and instructions can help children understand what is expected of them. Teachers can explain the reason behind rules, be consistent with applying them and provide opportunities for children to ask questions. Expectations should be safe and allow children to learn together without unnecessary restrictions on their individuality or curiosity.

6.2 Model respectful behaviour

Teachers play an important role as a social model. By modelling behaviour such as listening without mocking, acknowledging mistakes, calmly managing conflict and providing constructive feedback children can see how members of the classroom can interact. If there is conflict providing constructive feedback can be beneficial.

6.3 Structured opportunities to work with others

Working with others can provide children with opportunities to take turns, communicate and problem solve together. This will be more accessible if teachers provide clear roles, monitor engagement and ensure everyone has a meaningful contribution. Providing alternative ways to participate can also help those who are less confident speaking in front of a large group.

6.4 Consider children's views

Children should be given appropriate opportunities to share how they feel they fit in, are understood and supported. Talking privately, providing age appropriate reflection activities and providing a supportive counselling service can help educators identify any concerns. Any assessment should be taken with caution. This should not be used to label children or make any disciplinary decisions.

6.5 Work with families

An ecological perspective should be adopted. This means working with teachers, families and relevant support professionals within the school. This should be done respectfully and with consideration to confidentiality and dignity. This can help to identify any barriers within the environment and work together to provide support. This should not be used to blame the child or family.

7. Considerations for Future Research

Future research should be clear on definitions and developmentally appropriate. Researchers should be aware that behaviour is observable whilst feelings such as belonging and fitting in with peers are internal. If a questionnaire is used questions should be clear, culturally and linguistically appropriate, reliable and valid. Tools developed by the researcher should not be seen as standardised.

Research involving children should have permission from the school, informed consent from parents/guardians, assent from children, voluntary participation and confidentiality. Children should not be penalised for not taking part. Individual responses should not be shared with peers, nor should they be used for marking or disciplinary purposes. Methods of data collection should be appropriate for the age group and reduce pressure to answer in a way that is socially desirable.

A wider evidence base can be created by undertaking research in a variety of schools and educational settings. Appropriate qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods can be used. Longitudinal research may help to look at how experiences and relationships change over time. Whatever the design, researchers should be aware of correlation vs causation and not generalise beyond what their methods support.

8. Conclusion

Behaviour and social adjustment are important factors within children's experiences at school. Behaviour relates to how children engage with instructions and tasks within the classroom. Social adjustment relates to relationships, feeling they fit in, inclusion and participation within the school community. Both cannot be fully understood without considering the child.

Using theories such as ecological systems, social learning and sociocultural can help to understand different aspects of the relationship. This highlights factors such as environmental factors, modelling, social interaction and quality of support. It also reminds us that being quiet does not mean they are not engaged, following rules does not mean they are well, and being confident with others does not mean they have positive social adjustment.

A strength based approach should be taken within education. Having clear routines, modelling respectful behaviour, carefully structured opportunities to work with others, considering children's voices and working with families can create an environment for children to learn. This article is theoretical and therefore no findings are claimed. The main point of this article is that behaviour and social adjustment

should be understood through a developmental, relational and inclusive lens.

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