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Using role-play to develop the confidence of primary-phase trainee teachers to manage low-level disruptive behaviour in the classroom

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ABSTRACT

This research evaluated the potential of using role-play activities to improve the confidence of primary-phase trainee teachers to manage common low-level disruptive behaviours exhibited by pupils in the classroom during initial teacher training (ITT).

The research concluded that role-play activities improved the confidence levels of trainees to manage common low-level disruptive behaviours and that trainees who participated in these activities were more confident at the end of training than those who did not. The primary benefit of the role-play activities was the opportunity for trainees to rehearse strategies and responses to low-level disruptive behaviours in a low-stakes context.

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the impact of role-play within initial teacher education programmes, with a focus on how it can develop the confidence of trainee teachers to manage low-level disruption in the classroom. From the outset, it is acknowledged that the focus of this research was on the confidence of trainees and not their competence in this area. Whilst this study does not set out to present evidence of any link between the confidence and competence of trainee teachers in behaviour management, previous research indicates that confidence is a factor in determining how effectively teachers manage pupil behaviour (Giallo & Little, 2003).

The development of behaviour management skills during initial teacher education and training has been a concern for a number of years. Indeed, a lack of training in this area, both in the UK (where this research

was conducted) and internationally, has been cited as a potential reason for the difficulties often faced by new teachers in terms of managing pupils' behaviour in the classroom (McNally *et al.*, 2005). Trainee teachers themselves report being inadequately trained in this area (Atici, 2007; Giallo & Little, 2003; Johansen *et al.*, 2011; Reupert & Woodcock, 2010; Woodcock & Reupert, 2012), that discipline concerns are their most significant worry during training (Mastrilli & Sardo-Brown, 2002; Chaplain, 2008) and this can prevent them joining the profession even after completing training successfully (Priyadharshini & Robinson-Pant, 2003).

'Real-life' classroom experience is generally recognised as an important element for developing the confidence of teachers with regard to behaviour management (Hamilton, 2015). However, engagement in out-of-classroom activities also appears to have had a positive impact on the confidence levels of trainees in this area. O'Neill & Stephenson (2012) identify the significant positive impact that the direct teaching of models of behaviour management, and the strategies associated with these, can have on the confidence of trainee teachers. The view is also supported by Martin (2004), whose longitudinal study of trainee teachers moving into the profession as newly qualified teachers concludes that explicit teaching in behaviour management should be an integral part of teacher education programmes.

Other research promotes the benefits that more participatory methods can bring to the development of trainees' behaviour management skills. Reupert & Dalgarno (2011) identified the use of online blogs with a focus on behaviour management to be useful for many trainees, although the benefits were more in terms of knowledge of strategies rather than increased confidence. However, these blogs did provide a source from which trainees could reflect on their classroom experiences. This

process of out-of-classroom reflection on in-classroom experiences is identified as a beneficial activity that can develop trainee confidence in managing behaviour (Stoughton, 2007) particularly when focused on critical incidents during classroom-based practice (McNally *et al.*, 2005).

In addition to reflecting on first-hand classroom experience, the use of 'real-life' case studies and scenarios surrounding behaviour management also appears to be beneficial in terms of increasing trainees' confidence in behaviour management (Hamilton, 2015). This strategy provides the opportunity for trainees to consider their responses to certain behaviours prior to encountering these in a 'real-life' classroom (Atici, 2007) and also allows trainees to make clearer links between theory and practice (McNally *et al.*, 2005). However, the diversity of incidents that trainees will encounter when in the classroom means it is not possible to consider their response to all situations that they may experience (Hamilton, 2015).

Pertinently for this research, two studies consider the use of role-play as part of trainee teachers' development in behaviour management. Rudolph (2008) explores the impact of role-play on the attitudes of trainees to behaviour management, comparing the attitudes of trainees who experienced role-play with the attitudes of trainees who did not. Her results found no significant difference between the two groups. However, Rudolph's research focused on the attitudes of trainees towards how pupil behaviour should be managed. No consideration was given to the confidence levels of the trainees who engaged in role-play activities, which is the primary focus of this research. Niemeyer, Johnson & Monroe (2014) explore the use of role-play for developing the behaviour management skills of trainee teachers on alternate-route pathways into the profession. In a survey immediately following training, 40% of trainees stated

that the role-play activities were the most helpful part of training in behaviour management. In a follow-up survey completed by the same participants (who by this time had six months of classroom experience as a teacher), this figure rose to 80%. This suggests that the usefulness of role-play is not always immediately apparent to trainees and the value of role-play is only recognised when the situations that have been part of the role-play activities occur in the reality of the classroom.

Lugrin *et al.* (2016) and Muir *et al.* (2013) both highlight how advances in technology can now allow for virtual reality to provide a fully immersive vehicle for role-play to occur, allowing an opportunity for a more 'authentic' experience than traditional role-play. Through the creation of a virtual classroom, complete with virtual pupils who present challenges in terms of behaviour, trainees are provided with the opportunity to rehearse their responses to these specific pupil behaviours. Given the reluctance of some to participate in traditional role-play (Lugrin *et al.*, 2016), virtual reality provides the trainee with an even 'safer' space in which to develop these skills. However, as yet there is little evidence that the use of virtual reality develops the confidence of trainees to manage pupil behaviour more effectively than traditional role-play, although this may become more apparent should this approach become more widespread.

METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

This study broadly adopted an evaluative case study methodology. Data regarding the impact of role-play activities on the confidence of pre-service teachers to deal with low-level disruption was collected using a group of trainee teachers (n=145) undertaking a postgraduate route into teaching at one higher education institution (HEI) in England.

Participants were all undertaking a one-year postgraduate course that involved taught sessions at the HEI and three

school placements. Most participants in the study engaged in two role-play sessions. These were held in January (after the completion of the trainees' first school placement) and in April (following the completion of the trainees' second school placement). Before and following each role-play session, these participants completed an identical questionnaire that sought to measure their confidence in dealing with low-level disruption in three contexts:

1. Confidence to deal with low-level disruption when pupils are entering the classroom

2. Confidence to deal with low-level disruption when delivering to the whole class (whole-class teaching time)

3. Confidence to deal with low-level disruption during on-task learning time.

Within each context, participants were asked to indicate their confidence level in dealing with specific issues, such as 'play fighting, pushing and/or shoving' within context 1, 'calling out' within context 2 and 'not getting on with work' in context 3.

Three questions within the questionnaire were used to indicate confidence in dealing with low-level disruption on entry to the classroom. Seven questions were used to indicate confidence in dealing with low-level disruption during whole-class teaching time. Ten questions were used to indicate confidence in dealing with low-level disruption during on-task learning time.

In terms of analysis, the average (mean) confidence level of the group was calculated for each of the three contexts outlined above and for each specific area within each context. These average confidence levels were calculated four times:

1. Immediately before the first role-play session

2. Immediately after the first role-play session

3. Immediately before the second role-play session

4. Immediately after the second role-play session.

As both role-play sessions occurred prior to the participants' final teaching placement, the questionnaire was completed once more by the trainees at the end of training. The final questionnaire was also completed by a smaller group of 52 trainees who had not undertaken the role-play sessions, providing a control group and allowing a comparison of the confidence of those who had and had not undertaken this activity as part of their training.

Additionally, two focus group interviews, each with four participants who had completed the role-play sessions, were conducted at the end of training. These provided qualitative data and allowed exploration of the impact that the role-play sessions had on the participants' confidence in dealing with low-level disruption during their final teaching placement and as they prepared to move into the profession as a qualified teacher. It was felt that this was particularly relevant as Niemeyer, Johnson & Monroe (2014) had identified that the benefits of role-play are often not recognised by participants until they have encountered similar situations in 'real life'.

In order to widen the generalisability of the study, semi-structured interviews were also conducted with two prominent individuals involved in the development of trainee teachers' behaviour management skills and how this can be achieved successfully. Both interviewees agreed to waive their right to anonymity for this paper. They were:

Dr Bill Rogers

Dr Bill Rogers has a worldwide standing both in the field of behaviour management and initial teacher education. He is widely published in these areas in many countries and has worked alongside teacher training providers across Europe, Australia and New Zealand.

Tom Bennett

Tom Bennett is the current UK government advisor on behaviour in schools, leading government reviews into behaviour in schools and initial teacher training in England. Pertinently for the focus of this project, Tom Bennett chaired the Initial Teacher Training Behaviour Management Committee and authored Developing Behaviour Management Content for Initial Teacher Training (DfES, 2016), which outlined the UK government's position on how trainee teachers should be prepared to manage pupils' behaviour during their initial training.

Through the qualitative data collected during these interviews, it was possible to outline the perspectives of two individuals who have national and international expertise in this area.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

CONFIDENCE LEVELS OF TRAINEES IMMEDIATELY BEFORE AND AFTER ROLE-PLAY SESSIONS

Table 1 (opposite) shows the average confidence-levels of trainees to deal with specific examples of low-level disruption immediately before and after the two role-play sessions they participated in.

As can be seen from table 1, the confidence of trainees to deal with all forms of low-level disruption increases between the beginning and end of the individual role-play sessions, although the increase in confidence is not always to the same extent. Following the first role-play session in January, the most significant gains reported by trainees related to whole-class teaching, citing increased confidence in dealing with 'fidgeting and fiddling with equipment' (an increase of 1.5) 'calling out' and 'making inappropriate noises' (both increases of 1.3). Following the second role-play session in April, the most significant increases in confidence

Table 1: Reported confidence levels of pre-service teachers to manage specific examples of low-level disruptive behaviour before and after each role-play session.

Example of behaviour	Pre-session 1 (January)	Post-session 1 (January)	Pre-session 2 (April)	Post-session 2 (April)
Theme 1: Entry to the Classroom During entry to the classroom, how confident do you feel dealing with:				
Noise level and restlessness	6.3	7.2	6.6	7.8
Play-fighting, pushing and/or shoving?	5.8	6.2	5.9	6.8
Theme 2: Whole-Class Teaching During whole-class teaching, how confident do you feel dealing with:				
Talking and chatting	6.6	7.5	7.1	8.2
Calling out	5.4	6.7	6.2	6.9
Fidgeting and fiddling with equipment	6.3	7.8	7.0	7.9
Making inappropriate noises	6.1	7.4	7.0	7.9
Swinging on chairs	7.0	7.9	7.3	8.1
Disturbing other children	6.7	7.5	7.0	7.7
Theme 3: On-task learning time During on-task learning time, how confident do you feel dealing with:				
Talking and chatting	6.6	7.3	6.9	7.5
Calling out	5.5	6.6	6.0	6.9
Not getting on with work	6.7	7.7	7.3	8.0
Fidgeting or fiddling with equipment	6.3	7.5	7.1	7.9
Making inappropriate noises	6.3	7.2	7.0	7.9
Swinging on chairs	7.1	8.0	7.4	8.2
Unacceptable noise-levels and restlessness	5.5	6.0	5.6	6.2
Wandering around for no good reason	6.8	7.3	7.2	7.7
Disturbing other children	6.4	7.4	7.1	7.8

related to dealing with 'noise levels and restlessness' (an increase of 1.2) on entry to the classroom and dealing with 'talking and chatting' (an increase of 1.1) during whole-class teaching. Overall, confidence levels increased more after the first role-play session in January (0.93) than they did after the second role-play session in April (0.81), though it should be noted

that confidence levels were higher before the second session than they were before the first.

Trainees identified specific areas of low confidence in the very first questionnaire, such as calling out and unacceptable noise levels during on-task learning time, pushing and/or shoving on entry to the

classroom and calling out during whole-class teaching time. Whilst trainees indicated that their confidence to deal with these behaviours increased during the role-play sessions, they were the areas that showed the smallest increase in confidence and also remained the areas of lowest confidence at the end of training.

It can also be seen from table 1 that trainees' confidence levels dropped between the end of the first role-play session in January and the beginning of the second role-play session in April. During this time, trainees had undertaken an assessed school placement and likely experienced dealing with many of the behaviours in a 'real-life' classroom context. This experience, and their perceived self-effectiveness of dealing with low-level disruption, may well have impacted on the confidence levels of the trainees involved in the project. However, it is important to note that confidence levels of trainees did not fall lower than they were before the first role-play session in any area, and by the end of the second role-play session in April, confidence levels in all areas were higher than they were at the end of the first role-play session in January.

CONFIDENCE LEVELS OF TRAINEES IMMEDIATELY AFTER THE FINAL ROLE-PLAY SESSION AND AT THE END OF TRAINING

The first two columns of table 2 below show the confidence levels of trainees in all areas at the end of the second role-play session (April) and then at the end of training (July). Column three shows the confidence levels of trainees who were not involved in the role-play sessions at the end of training in July, with column 4 highlighting the differential in confidence levels between the trainees who did participate in role-play sessions during training and those who did not.

As can be seen, the confidence of trainees to manage all areas of low-level disruption increased between the final role-play session and the end of training. Whilst

Table 2: Reported confidence levels of trainees after the final role-play session and the end of training, also compared with the reported confidence levels of trainees who did not participate in the role-play sessions at the end of training.

Example of behaviour	Confidence levels of trainees			
	Involved in role play sessions		Not involved in role-play	Difference at the end of training
	after session 2 (April)	at the end of training (July)	at the end of training (July)	
Theme 1: Entry to the Classroom During entry to the classroom, how confident do you feel dealing with:				
Noise level and restlessness	7.8	8.2	6.7	+1.5
Play-fighting, pushing and/or shoving?	6.8	7.3	6.3	+1.0
Theme 2: Whole-Class Teaching During whole-class teaching, how confident do you feel dealing with:				
Talking and chatting	8.2	8.5	7.0	+1.5
Calling out	6.9	7.0	6.1	+0.9
Fidgeting and fiddling with equipment	7.9	8.3	6.6	+1.7
Making inappropriate noises	7.9	8.2	7.1	+1.1
Swinging on chairs	8.1	8.5	7.2	+1.3
Disturbing other children	7.7	8.0	6.8	+1.2
Theme 3: On-task learning time During on-task learning time, how confident do you feel dealing with:				
Talking and chatting	7.5	7.9	6.7	+1.2
Calling out	6.9	6.9	6.3	+0.6
Not getting on with work	8.0	8.2	7.1	+1.1
Fidgeting or fiddling with equipment	7.9	8.4	6.9	+1.5
Making inappropriate noises	7.9	8.3	6.8	+1.5
Swinging on chairs	8.2	8.4	7.3	+1.1
Unacceptable noise-levels and restlessness	6.2	6.2	5.7	+0.5
Wandering around for no good reason	7.7	8.2	7.0	+1.2
Disturbing other children	7.8	8.3	7.0	+1.3

no role-play sessions occurred during this time, trainees were still developing behaviour management skills during in-school placements and therefore a further rise in confidence is perhaps unsurprising. However, this contrasts with the decrease in confidence experienced between the two role-play sessions in January and April when trainees were also undertaking school placements. Niemeyer, Johnson & Monroe (2014) also found that trainee teachers who had undertaken role-play activities rated the usefulness of these more highly once they had more teaching experience. Hamilton (2015) highlights the exposure to 'real-life' classroom experience as an important element for developing the confidence of teachers with regard to behaviour management (Hamilton, 2015). The questionnaire findings of this study support both of these claims.

It is also evident that trainees who participated in the two role-play sessions during training were more confident dealing with low-level disruption than trainees who had not undertaken these sessions at the end of their training. Whilst the difference in confidence levels was variable, trainees who had been involved in the role-play sessions reported a higher level of confidence to deal with all the types of low-level disruptive behaviours than trainees who had not participated in these sessions. This supports the findings of Hamilton (2015) who concluded that the use of 'real-life' scenarios in out-of-school training was beneficial in terms of increasing trainees' confidence in behaviour management.

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS WITH TRAINEES

At the end of training, two focus group interviews were conducted, each with four trainees who had all attended both of the role-play sessions during their training.

In both focus groups, there was a general consensus that undertaking role-play made trainees feel uncomfortable, especially prior to the first role-play session. Trainees reported that they anticipated that they might need to 'act' and this was not an activity that many were confident undertaking. However, there was general agreement between trainees that they felt more comfortable before and during the second role-play session, as they were more knowledgeable about what they would be expected to do. Some trainees commented that they felt too shy to undertake the role-play activities.

Other trainees stated that there were trainees in all groups who did not perceive the activities to be serious and therefore either did not engage or engaged in a way that was detrimental to the group.

Most trainees stated that they felt the second role-play session was more beneficial, as they had more experience of 'real-life' classrooms to draw upon when taking the role of the teacher. There was a strong view in both focus groups that the purpose of the role-play was clearer and 'made more sense' later in training when trainees had experienced responding to low-level disruption more often during their time in schools. This contradicts the work of Atici (2007) who suggested that trainees should undertake role-play activities prior to encountering these in a 'real life'. Trainees commented that they had used specific strategies that had been rehearsed in the role-play sessions towards the end of their training, supporting the finding made by Niemeyer, Johnson & Monroe (2014) that the usefulness of role-play is not always immediately apparent to trainees and the value of role-play is only recognised when the situations that have been part of the role-play activities occur in the reality of the classroom.

Trainees in both focus groups commented that the role-play sessions provided a 'safe' environment for them to rehearse classroom strategies in a context where there was no consequence for 'getting it wrong'. Analogies were made in both focus groups; one group compared the role-play to pilots learning to fly in a simulator before a real aeroplane, whilst the other group compared role-play to surgeons operating on dummies before doing so on real people. However, both groups commented that whilst the role-play sessions gave them more confidence, it did not fully prepare them for a 'real-life' classroom. This was mostly because during the role-play sessions other trainees were co-operative and responded positively to the strategies that were used

when taking the role of pupils, whereas this was not always the case when it came to 'real pupils in real classrooms'.

Generally, both focus groups of trainees were positive about the role-play sessions that they participated in. Trainees in both groups commented that practising explicit strategies through role-play increased their confidence to deal with low-level disruption in the classroom, especially towards the end of training.

Expert interviews with Tom Bennett and Dr Bill Rogers

Individual interviews were conducted with Bill Rogers and Tom Bennett, both of whom have significant experience and expertise in behaviour management and teacher development, including initial teacher training (ITT).

During interviews, the phrase 'low stakes' was cited repeatedly by both experts when discussing the use of role-play to support the development of trainee teachers' behaviour management skills. Tom Bennett stated that the opportunity to rehearse responses to common types of disruptive behaviour in a low-stakes context provides trainees with a 'safe space where mistakes can be made without real-life consequences', echoing the view of trainees who participated in the focus group interviews. Bill Rogers emphasised that a 'safe space to rehearse different responses' was important for trainee teachers to develop a range of strategies to support their development of behaviour management skills.

Both experts, as with the focus groups of trainees, used comparisons and analogies to illustrate the potential benefits of role-play. Bill Rogers cited other professions that use role-play during training, such as policing and counselling, where those training to enter the profession routinely take part in role-play activities to rehearse and develop their skills and confidence. Tom Bennett likened learning the skill of behaviour management to learning how to swim. He described role-play

as allowing trainees to metaphorically 'learn in the shallow end rather than getting thrown in at the deep end', giving new teachers the opportunity to learn behaviour management skills 'with their feet still touching the floor'.

During interviews, Tom Bennett and Bill Rogers made links between role-play and 'scripting' responses to disruptive behaviour in the classroom. Tom Bennett stated that role-play provides trainees with the opportunity to develop scripted responses of 'what to say and what to do when dealing with disruptive behaviour', allowing trainees to develop 'confidence and consistency' and supporting them towards making effective behaviour management part of 'day-to-day habitual practice'. Similarly, Bill Rogers cited Burch's Stages of Competence model of learning a new skill, highlighting that role-play activities support trainees to become 'consciously competent' and can also develop 'consistent responses that become second nature' and allow trainees to move towards 'unconscious competence' (Burch, 1970).

Whilst both experts were generally supportive of role-play, each expressed the opinion that there can be potential barriers to this being effective. Firstly, Tom Bennett and Bill Rogers stated that role-play can make some trainees 'uncomfortable' and that this can lead to non-engagement and avoidance of training, as also cited by Lugrin *et al*. (2016) and by trainees in the focus group interviews. Tom Bennett suggested that the term 'role-play' could be replaced by 'classroom rehearsal' to mitigate potential negative preconceptions of the activity, whilst Bill Rogers suggested the term 'scenario training'. Both Bill Rogers and Tom Bennett highlighted that role-play activities do not require trainees to be in-role as pupils, but that trainees can rehearse how they would respond to a given situation or scenario that is presented in writing or verbally rather than 'acted out' by others.

Using role-play to develop the confidence of primary-phase trainee teachers to manage low-level disruptive behaviour in the classroom

CONCLUSIONS

The study concludes that undertaking role-play activities focused on behaviour management increases the confidence of trainee teachers to manage low-level disruption in the classroom.

Quantitative data demonstrated that the confidence of trainees to manage low-level disruption increased following participation in role-play activities and this was supported by the findings from focus group interviews with trainees and individual interviews with two experts in the field. Role-play provides a safe space for trainees to rehearse strategies and responses to common disruptive behaviours in a low-stakes context that can then be used in real-life classroom environments with increased confidence.

Whilst it is acknowledged that the increased confidence of the trainees who participated in the role-play sessions cannot be wholly attributed to this activity, as many factors influence this during training, it is notable that these trainees were more confident to manage low-level disruptive behaviour at the end of training than trainees who had not participated in role-play activities. ∎

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