PREVENTING CLASSROOM DISRUPTION

Policy, Practice and Evaluation
in Urban Schools

David Coulby and Tim Harper

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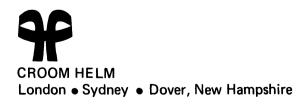points out that some imperfections in the original copies may be apparent.

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PREFACE

The Authors.

David Coulby taught for nine years mostly in
East London. He established and took charge of the
ILEA Division 5 Schools Support Unit for its first
two years. Following this he lectured in urban edu-
cation at the University of London Institute of
Education. He is now head of the department of
teaching studies at North London Polytechnic.

Tim Harper trained as an educational psycholo-
gist at University College, London. He worked in
the London Borough of Haringey for five years and
has been attached to the Division 5 Schools Support
Unit in the ILEA as its psychologist for the last
six years since its inception.

Although both authors are working, or have
worked, for the ILEA, the views expressed in this
book are entirely their own and do not necessarily
represent the authority's ideas or policies.

INTRODUCTION

    This book attempts to show that children who are
perceived to be disruptive in their primary or secon-
dary schools need not be excluded into a form of
special provision. Neither special schools, nor the
variously named disruptive units, have shown that
they can make a significant improvement to the beha-
viour of such children once they are returned to
mainstream school. However, we suggest that outbreaks
of classroom disruption in primary and secondary
schools can be reduced without excluding particular
children. This assertion is based largely on our work
in, and evaluation of, an urban support team. The
team is called the ILEA Division 5 Schools Support
Unit, and its method of working is described in Chap-
ter 2. Both authors played a significant part in the
development of this team. They also set up a long-
term evaluation of its work. This evaluation is re-
ported in Chapter 3.
    Chapters 4 and 5 concentrate on the ways in
which classrooms and schools can change to prevent
incidents of disruption. Chapter 6 looks at how sup-
port teams can facilitate the integration of child-
ren perceived to have special needs. The book aims
to deal in some detail with practical methods where-
by exclusion to segregated provision can be avoided.
To this end we present, in the course of the chap-
ters, sections of illustrative material. These illu-
strations may be of work in specific contexts and
with particular children; they may present case ma-
terial within formats used by the unit or they may
concentrate on the difficulties encountered by a
team member in a certain situation. The content of
this material is by no means a statistically repre-
sentative sample of the Support Unit's work, but it
will vividly exemplify what we mean by disruptive
behaviour. To preserve the confidentiality of the

participants, this illustrative material has been
partly fictionalised.

Chapters 1 and 7 attempt to frame the descrip-
tive, evaluative and practical components of the
book within the wider educational debate. The way in
which some children are categorised as disruptive in
schools is examined. The growth of segregated provi-
sion is seen alongside the apparently opposite
trends towards comprehensivisation and the integra-
tion of pupils perceived to have special needs.

We would like to acknowledge the help of past
and present members of the Schools Support Unit with
whom we discussed the ideas and practices presented
in this book. In particular we would like to thank
those who allowed aspects of their work to be pre-
sented as illustrative material. We would also wish
to acknowledge the help of the schools and educa-
tional services of ILEA Division 5 who cooperated
in the establishment of the team, and all those
teachers who patiently filled in the apparently end-
less sequence of questionnaires which were essential
to our evaluation. We owe special thanks to David
Lane and his colleagues at the Islington Educational
Guidance Centre for discussions with them. Dr. Peter
Mortimore of ILEA Research and Statistics encouraged
and guided our evaluation; our thanks are due to him
and to his staff for help with running our data
through the computer. Our typist, Mrs. Sibylle Muirden,
transformed our manuscript into a neat typescript
with speed and precision. Additional thanks to her.

Finally, in recognition of the importance of the
work of the past, present and future members of the
support team, we would like to dedicate this book to
the memory of Nigel Pryor.

Chapter 1

THE CONCEPT OF CLASSROOM DISRUPTION

1.1 Ploughman's Lunch.

In the 1970's the education system in England and
Wales created a new category of pupil, "the disrup-
tive child". It was rather like the creation of the
ploughman's lunch made famous in the film of that
name. What now seems like a traditional and appeti-
zingly earthy part of our gastronomic culture,
stretching back into the mists of medieval folklore,
was actually a concept put together by an advertising
agency less than fifteen years ago. Similarly, the
word disruptive is now applied by educators to pupils
as if it signified a well-known type of child. The
category now has the authority of the familiar, of
the educationally accepted. It is this acceptance
that we wish to challenge. At the outset it might be
best to assert boldly that there is no such thing as
a disruptive pupil. Certain pupils behave disruptive-
ly in some lessons, with some teachers, in some en-
vironments at certain times of the day or week. Some
pupils behave disruptively in corridors, playgrounds
and staircases. Do any pupils behave disruptively
with all teachers? in all lessons? in all contexts?
And if they did, would disruptive any longer be the
best way of describing them? Disruptive is a word
better applied to forms of behaviour or to situations
than to pupils. Most labels simplify life for the
person doing the categorising. For the person who is
categorised, however, they may have pernicious and
long-term consequences.
     There is more here than semantics. If we per-
ceive a situation to be disruptive, then this is a
temporary state of affairs, and one which involves
several participants. If we perceive behaviour to be
disruptive, then this is something which can change
into other more appropriate behaviours. But if we
perceive a pupil to be disruptive, this is somehow
something to do with his/her personality or nature.

This means that we are more likely to regard it as
permanent and difficult to change. We will probably
then see any incident in which a "disruptive pupil"
is involved as caused by him/her rather than as a
clash between various participants within a specific
context. In other words, now that the category of
disruptive exists, it is easy for particular pupils
to be stigmatised, but it is actually more difficult
to conceptualise ways of developing change in beha-
viour, or of diminishing the frequency of disruptive
incidents. Why should anyone waste time trying to
develop plans for change and improvement when it is
clear that it is the child who is disruptive? The
existence of the category "disruptive pupil" both in
the provision of a local education authority and in
the mental set of educators, may then actually serve
to inhibit methods of cutting down disruption in
mainstream primary and secondary schools.
     It is possible to ask how "the disruptive pu-
pil" was created. This question may be answered in
two ways: by reference to the way in which the cate-
gory of disruptive pupils came into existence in the
education system of England and Wales; or by refe-
rence to the way in which specific children acquire
the label whilst in mainstream primary and secondary
schools. These two aspects of the question will each
be considered in some detail.

1.2 The Creation of the Category.

Children have always indulged in disruptive beha-
viour in schools. We say this blandly in order not
to give the impression that there is no such thing
as disruptive behaviour, or that particular child-
ren do not have a predilection for it. Nor do we
wish to assert that bullying, racism, rudeness,
theft and vandalism are really quite acceptable.
They are no more acceptable in a school than in any
other institution. Indeed, many writers, following
Durkheim, have seen the socialisation of children
into generally accepted patterns of behaviour to be
one of the main tasks of the school. Particularly in
infant schools, the encouragement of co-operation,
good working habits, friendliness and mutual tole-
rance and respect are significant aspects of the
work of the teacher. This is sometimes regarded as a
rather sinister form of social control. It is neces-
sary at this stage, then, to make a working distinc-
tion between socialisation and social control.

The concept of classroom disruption

Socialisation of young children takes place in the
family and the school. It serves to allow young peo-
ple to accommodate to society. This need not mean
that they accept unquestioningly all its values,
practices and institutions. Rather, they should
learn to work co-operatively, tolerantly and with
determination to change and develop those elements
which they consider to be incommensurate with human
needs. Preventing bullying and exploitation in
schools, for instance, and persuading children that
this is an unpleasant type of activity may be seen
as a valid form of socialisation. However, what may
be excused as socialisation in many schools, is per-
haps more correctly seen as systematic social con-
trol. Unquestioning obedience, uniformity of appea-
rance, regimentation, and unflinching patience are
examples of social control exerted over pupils in
many schools. We discuss some of the consequences of,
and alternatives to, rigid social control in this
and succeeding chapters.
     Disruptive behaviour has been perceived and
treated differently by teachers at different stages
of educational history. In the late nineteenth cen-
tury, after the introduction of universal compulsory
schooling, it was likely to be seen as morally re-
prehensible, bad, even evil. Corporal punishment was
a method frequently employed to attempt to control
such behaviour and punish the sinners. In the twen-
tieth century, medical and psychodynamic explanations
became more socially acceptable, indeed, fashionable.
Children behaved inappropriately because there was
something wrong with them; either they were "men-
tally defective", or they were sick in some way. Ma-
ladjustment, as a category, developed out of this
paradigm. Children who did not conform were per-
ceived as maladjusted, because their home life was
stressful, they had not received sufficient maternal
affection at an early age, they were acting out oedi-
pal anxieties, or whatever. Treatment was to sepa-
rate them from their less deviant peers, and to edu-
cate them together in an ethos of "stern love". This
philosophy can still be found in some schools for
maladjusted pupils in England and Wales today. How-
ever, there has been a trend to refer to these
schools fewer children remarkable for their interest-
ing middle-class problems, and many more of those
whose violent, unruly behaviour is more popularly
associated with working class and black groups
(Bowman, I., 1981). This has meant that the philo-
sophy of these schools has been increasingly diffi-
cult to put into practice.

As the category of maladjusted was increasingly
stretched to allow the incorporation of boisterous
working-class youth within the segregated educatio-
nal provision, a new growth area was being esta-
blished. These same children were also being re-
ferred to ESN (M) schools in large numbers. These
referrals were more likely to be on the basis of
perceived behaviour than of their academic perform-
ance (Tomlinson, S., 1981). Between 1950 and 1977,
according to the DES, the number of children in ESN
(M) schools in England and Wales rose from 15,173 to
55,698. Over the same period the number in schools
for the maladjusted exploded from 467 to 10,452.
      Towards the end of this period a new explana-
tion of disruptive behaviour, based on social learn-
ing theory, began to emerge. Children were seen as
having learnt patterns of behaviour according to the
contingent reinforcements of their specific social
contexts. Some of the segregated special schools be-
gan to develop methods of education and treatment
based on these theories. This involved positive re-
inforcement and rewards for appropriate behaviour,
sometimes organised around token economies. At the
same time the term disruptive came to be used, some-
times alongside and sometimes in place of previous
labels such as maladjusted or disturbed. Despite the
rapidly rising numbers of places available in spe-
cial schools, there was pressure to segregate even
more children, and to exclude them quickly without
the lengthy embarrassment of special education pro-
cedures. Tutorial centres, guidance units, support
units, sanctuaries, alternative classes, opportunity
groups, and a host of other euphemistically named
provisions sprang up both on and off the sites of
mainstream schools. What had happened to the schools
of England and Wales since the 1944 Education Act
that had necessitated the exclusion of so many
children first into special school provision and
then, additionally, into the various units?
      One noticeable change which had taken place in
many local education authorities was the progress
towards comprehensive schooling. There is no obvious
reason why this move towards greater educational
equality should lead to disruptive behaviour in
classrooms. Yet Hargreaves has pointed to some of
the difficulties that beset the implementation of
the policy which, significantly, was seen as provi-
ding "grammar schools for all" (Hargreaves, D.,1982).
The skills and flexibilities of secondary modern
schools and their teachers tended to be undervalued
and neglected in the new (often amalgamated) compre-

hensive schools. In the attempt to stamp the grammar
school ethos and the grammar school curriculum on
all children, it is possible that the potentialities
for friction and boredom were increased. This is not
to imply that children from secondary modern schools
were less "intelligent" than those from grammar
schools, or less capable of performing well at a ri-
gorous curriculum. Rather, there was a mismatch bet-
ween the needs and interests of the children and the
expectations of those teachers who came to control
the new institutions. Institutions which practise
streaming and which value elitist knowledge and ex-
amination success may alienate those pupils whom
they label as less successful.

In some authorities comprehensivisation was
followed by the introduction of restrictions on the
use of corporal punishment. Some teachers and heads
assumed that this would leave them with no coercive
threat with which to enforce discipline. As the ILEA,
for instance, moved towards completely banning cor-
poral punishment, there was pressure from many peo-
ple, especially in secondary schools, for some al-
ternative to be provided. The planning and implemen-
tation of ILEA's vast disruptive units programme may
well have been a response to this (Reece, M., 1983).
The unpalatable fact seems to be that some teachers,
when deprived of the right to beat their pupils, de-
termined that the only way to deal with them was to
exclude them from the mainstream school. Local edu-
cation authorities seem to have been surprisingly
willing to collaborate in this process.

It is perhaps appropriate to mention briefly
the wide context within which the category of dis-
ruption was created. In the early seventies popular
discourse, orchestrated by the media, adopted the
language of crisis. Two notable crises were "the
urban crisis" and "the youth crisis". The urban cri-
sis was a headline formula for the run down of many
of Britain's inner cities, associated with the exo-
dus of industry, commerce, and the prosperous sec-
tion of the population. The inner cities had become
areas of concentration for poverty, "social prob-
lems", and crime. Classroom disruption in inner city
schools would then be located within a specific icon-
ography of popular conceptions. The crisis of youth
concerned the moral panic about the highly visible,
and occasionally violent, activities of some youth
subcultures such as skinheads or punks. "The dis-
ruptive pupil" could easily be inserted into this
familiar media demonology. The creation of "the dis-
ruptive pupil" arose against a background of esca-

lating youth unemployment and urban decline, but
these factors were re-interpreted through a conser-
vative climate of concern, which perceived them as
issues of undisciplined young people, seaside riots,
mugging, glue-sniffing, and so on.

We are at pains to avoid giving the idea that
the amount or intensity of classroom disruption act-
ually increased during the 1970's. It is likely that
the change came in the relative tolerance of teach-
ers who, concerned with the academic progress of the
majority, were less able to deal flexibly with the
distracting, counterproductive activities of a mino-
rity. However, at one point in the early 1970's, the
teacher shortage in many urban areas was so severe
that schools were severely constrained in their edu-
cational activities. It may well be that during this
period there was a higher level of disruptive beha-
viour in some schools. This could then be reformula-
ted by some teachers, newspapers, and popular con-
cern as yet another aspect of the crisis of city
youth. Instead of more and better teachers, a press-
ure developed for the short, sharp shock model of
custodial care and for segregated disruptive units.

The growth of disruptive units in England and
Wales occurred at the initiative of local education
authorities. Probably responding to similar press-
ures, they copied expeditious forms of provision
which were seen to have developed in other areas.
There was no central instruction or guidelines from
the Department of Education and Science. A document
from Her Majesty's Inspectorate described and cata-
logued the developments, expressing neither approval
nor disapproval (HMI, 1978). Their dubious legality
under the 1944 Act remained unquestioned until the
Rampton Report (DES, 1981, p.50). It is surprising
that their legality has rarely been challenged in
that they provide a method of excluding children
from their mainstream classrooms, sometimes for se-
veral years, without the safeguards of a special
education referral. A child can be placed full-time
in a unit often simply at the request of the head-
teacher with or without the agreement of other tea-
chers. The risks of arbitrariness, or even victimi-
sation are apparently unchecked either by the
scrutiny of outside professionals, the possibility
of DES intervention, or by rights provided to pa-
rents and children in law.

This was the background against which the units
developed, and the category of "disruptive pupils"
became institutionalised. According to the DES the
number of units rose from 23 in 1970 to 239 in 1977.