

TARGETED INTERVENTION EFFECTS ON ANTISOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

By Dr Boaz Shulruf¹

Abstract

The current study reports on an evaluation of a school-based intervention aimed at altering at-risk primary students' self-perception and social awareness as an avenue to mainstream citizenship rather than delinquency and criminal activity.

Fourteen students participated in a pilot intervention programme operated once weekly over four months. Programme activities were focused on raising awareness of antisocial behaviours and awareness of personal life quality. The evaluation applied a mixed-methods approach using both quantitative and qualitative data.

Evidence for improvement in children's self-perception was identified as well as effective methods facilitating such changes. Implications of the findings for further intervention programmes and evaluations are discussed.

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The effects of a targeted school-based intervention programme on children's self-perception and antisocial behaviour

Although New Zealand is known as one of the most peaceful countries in the world, it is not free from severe antisocial behaviours which can be observed in children as early as in the first year of schooling (Curtis et al., 2002, Carruthers et al., 2002, Wylie, 1999). The Ministries of Social Development, Education and Justice introduced strategies to schools to address antisocial behaviours (Ministry of Justice, 2001) aimed at reducing bullying, graffiti and tagging, violence, and youth delinquency, particularly in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The current study reports on the evaluation of a school-based pilot intervention aimed at altering at-risk primary students' self-perception and social awareness as an avenue to mainstream citizenship rather than delinquency and criminal activity.

Theoretical background

Crime or delinquency are at the extreme negative end of social deviation (Sherman et al., 1997). Nonetheless, antisocial behaviours can be identified in the early stages of children's social development (Wilson et al., 2003, Sherman et al., 1997, Loeber and Farrington, 2000). For example, Loeber and Farrington (2000) suggested that young offenders who appeared before a juvenile court before the age of 15 years were likely to have experienced minor behaviour problems at age seven, leading to moderately serious behaviour problems by age 10, and serious delinquency before the age of 12. Furthermore, it has been suggested that "life-course persistent" offenders could be identified even as early as age three (Moffitt and Caspi, 2001, Wright et al., 2001, Stevenson and Goodman, 2001, Bor et al., 2004).

Loeber and Farrington (2000) suggested a range of risk factors at early and middle childhood for child delinquency, and later for serious and violent juvenile offending. These include: child characteristics, temperament, and behaviour; family factors, particularly parent-child relationships; school factors, predominantly children's social and academic performance in school; and peer and neighbourhood factors. Although Loeber and Farrington's (2000) work, echoed by McLaren's (2000) review, it is more of a list of indicators than causal factors (Abramson, 1995). The predictability of antisocial and delinquency by these factors is, nonetheless, indisputable.

To reduce youth delinquency and further adult criminal behaviour different societies implement a range of child crime prevention programmes and initiatives (Sherman et al., 1997) which, since most of the children in the OECD countries attend school (at least at primary level), are commonly operated within the school setting (Wilson et al., 2003, Sherman et al., 1997). One of the most comprehensive reviews on crime prevention was Sherman's et al report to the United States Congress (Sherman et al., 1997). It identified four major successful within-school initiatives [a] Building school capacity to initiate and sustain innovation through the use of school teams or other organizational development strategies; [b] Clarifying and communicating norms about behaviour through rules, reinforcement of positive behaviour, and school-wide initiatives; [c] Applying a long-term social competency skills curriculum, such as life skills training, to teach skills such as stress management, problem solving, self-control, and emotional intelligence; and [d] Training or coaching in thinking skills for high-risk youth, using behaviour modification techniques such as rewards and punishments (Gottfredson, 1986, Kenney and Watson, 1996, Mayer et al., 1983, Greenberg et al., 1995, Lipsey, 1992). In a more recent meta-

analysis it was suggested that effect sizes were greater when the intervention targeted the at-risk (ES=.41) rather than the general population (ES=.09) (Wilson et al., 2003). Furthermore, the majority of the effect sizes reported from interventions at primary school level were small (ES.17), Wilson et al (2003) indicated that the greatest effect size was achieved by programmes targeting either preschoolers or adolescents.

Reports from New Zealand indicate that adolescent antisocial behaviour rose by 63-89% between 1990 and 2000 (Curtis et al., 2002, Gabrielle Maxwell and Elisabeth Poppelwell, 2003). It also appeared that the offending rate was greater among youth of Maori and Pacific descent (Te Puni Kōkiri, 2000, Paul Delfabbro and Andrew Day, 2003). Furthermore, a recent report (Ministry of Social Development, 2006) shows that problems of youth delinquency and gang membership have worsened significantly over the past two decades, particularly in South Auckland, and calls for intervention have become more frequent. A significant example is the Report of the Ministerial Taskforce on Youth Offending (Carruthers et al., 2002), which called predominantly for better collaboration between government and non-government agencies in providing early interventions, and emphasised the need for more medium to long-term initiatives to help prevent youth offending from an early age. McLaren (2000), for example, suggested that for interventions targeted at the high-risk groups, a decline in youth delinquency of 5-50% could be observed. A range of interventions have been implemented in New Zealand (Delfabbro and Day, 2003, Curtis et al., 2002, McLaren, 2000) but the availability of school-based interventions and well-designed evaluations is very limited (Curtis et al., 2002).

Interventions for reducing antisocial behaviour are usually classified into four categories: individual based approaches; family based approaches; school based interventions; and community approaches (Curtis et al., 2002). With the shortage of school-based interventions in New Zealand it is apparent that there is a need for better understanding of this category of intervention. This case study attempts to address some of this need.

Programme description

The intervention described in this paper was undertaken by a family service centre located in a low socioeconomic, urban neighbourhood in the Greater Auckland Region, New Zealand. The intervention was funded by the Ministry of Justice and aimed to reduce antisocial behaviour in primary school children.

The programme, "Look at me now", was developed by a team of in-house social workers and provided support to children in the local school. The range of staff skills and the close relationship between the local community social workers and staff at the local primary school facilitated the implementation of the programme. Students were selected and invited to join the programme by the school staff. To enhance positive attitudes and ensure negative labelling was not attached to the group of participants, a few students who were not deemed to be at-risk were also recruited onto the programme, which was described as an enrichment course.

The programme operated once weekly over four months and consisted of an introduction module followed by four main modules, each centred on different theme. The objective of the introduction module was to establish good rapport within the group and for the facilitators to meet with the students and their parents or caregivers. The first module, "Who am I?", aimed to enhance the child's self-esteem, allow them to achieve a sense of belonging, and develop an awareness of the importance of family, friends and the wider community. Activities were conducted over two sessions and included family trees and the significance of family; cultural

affiliations whereby each child had to identify their ancestry by undertaking tasks at school and at home with parents or family members; and a timeline, on which each child identified their achievements since birth and their goals or aspirations to age 18 years.

The second module, “Graffiti and Vandalism”, aimed to develop the children’s awareness of graffiti and vandalism in their local community and its effect on individuals, the school and the community. Parents were invited to participate in the first session of this module to keep them informed and let them know what would be covered during the next four sessions. A range of activities were used to achieve this module’s objectives. These included identifying the differences between graffiti and vandalism, and identifying these within their neighbourhood; encouraging the children to “interview” their school caretaker about his or her role in the school and about his or her experience of graffiti and vandalism, particularly in relation to the extra work and cost needed; and, to enhance the children’s understanding of the impact of graffiti and vandalism on the environment, the students took a train trip from their neighbourhood through to Auckland City centre. The train travelled through a variety of neighbourhoods ranging from the well-kept to the neglected, the affluent and the poor. The aim of this activity was for the students to identify the issues they had discussed and see them in and beyond their own environment. In addition, they met with a Police Officer who explained the consequences of being caught tagging. The final part of this module involved encouraging the students to take on leadership roles to prevent or reduce graffiti and vandalism in the school. Each student took responsibility for a small section of the school and promoted a no vandalism or graffiti attitude; they were also given personalised “Graffiti Monitor Badges” to raise their status among their peers.

The third module, “Recreation”, comprised a series of recreational activities aimed at developing the children’s awareness of local free or low-cost recreational opportunities with an emphasis on family activities, to encourage the children to encounter new experiences. The range of activities explored included sports facilitated a local role model; involvement with local agencies providing recreational opportunities; two trips to nearby recreational centres where activities were offered to the families at low or no cost; and a day on a farm looking after domestic animals. Along with participating in these activities discussions were held regarding how the students might use these facilities with or without their families, in the hope that the students would find these activities more attractive than the antisocial behaviour they were used to participate in.

The last module, “Self-care”, focused on different aspects of self-awareness. This module was aimed at developing the children’s sense of pride and respect in one’s self as well as developing their self-esteem, self-image and own personal safety. Further emphasis was put on the differences between “I need” and “I want. The sessions, which included discussions on personal care, focused on encouraging students to assume leadership and be responsible for self-caring behaviour within their families and among their peers. The programme concluded with a “Graduation” ceremony in front of their families and the entire school. At the ceremony the students presented their views of their experiences on the course and shared with the audience some of their most exciting moments.

Methods

The major goal of the evaluation was to determine the effectiveness of the programme with regard to the children’s behaviour and self-perception, and to evaluate the participants’ satisfaction with the programme. To address the evaluation goal, both qualitative and quantitative data were collected. To measure self-perception within the participants, the children

were asked to fill out the Self-Perception Profile for Children questionnaire (SPPC) (Muris et al., 2003, Shevlin et al., 2003) questionnaires at the beginning and at the end of the programme. In addition, programme staff kept observation records on the children's behaviour during the course and developed a self-administered questionnaire to be filled out by each child at the end of each module recording their satisfaction and knowledge of the module. Information on children's behaviour was collected at the completion of each module (Table 1). Different types of questions were asked. Four questions were yes/no type and one question was narrative.

For assessing programme structure and operation, staff maintained records of all operational details and after each completed module a thorough discussion was held to identify the strengths and weaknesses and any need for action. Minutes of these discussions, which had been used by the staff to make operational recommendations, were made available to the author by the programme leader.

Results

A total of 14 students, with the average age of 9.4 years, participated in the programme. In New Zealand terms, the children came from relatively large families with an average of 3.7 siblings per child. In order to identify trends in behaviour the first four questions on the behavioural questionnaire were analyzed (Table 1). No change in a child's behaviour was indicated as NC; positive change during the modules was indicated as P; and negative change during the modules was indicated as N (see Table 1). The results of children's behaviour within the programme indicate that throughout the programme more children expressed less interest in participating and less interest in working cooperatively. However, interest in creativity increased with an overall 79% (n=11) of the children reporting an interest in making things. Facilitators' reports on the children's strengths indicated that most of the children were identified as having the ability to complete their tasks and have leadership skills. Strength in communication was only identified in a small number of the children (see Table 2). It is noteworthy that about a third (n=5) of the children were identified as bright or intelligent.

At the end of each module the children were asked five questions about what had they learnt; what they found interesting; what they liked most; what they liked least; and what ideas they had to make the programme better. Answers were given as narrative so data was aggregated (Table 3). The results indicate that most children had learnt that graffiti is wrong and half of them had learned the importance of being clean. Five children had discovered that recreation is enjoyable. Further analysis revealed that trips, graffiti and its punishment, and hygiene were identified by the children as interesting topics; whereas leadership, communication with others, and knowledge of one's own family did not appear to be interesting (Table 4). These biases are also reflected in the children's answers regarding what they would like to see increased in the course (Table 5): most of the children indicated they would like to have more trips. It appears that the question asking children to indicate what they would like reduced in the course was not clearly understood, since most indicated that they would like to have less tagging, an answer that relates more to the programme's objectives than its content; only a few reported that they would like to have less of a particular component of the programme. The last measure taken for this evaluation is The Self-Perception Profile for Children questionnaire (Muris et al., 2003). Children were asked to compare themselves to other children. Items related to five domains: Athletic competence; behaviour conduct; physical appearance; social acceptance; and scholastic competence. Children answered the questionnaire at the beginning and at the end of the programme (Figure 1). The scores are the average score (range 1-4) for a cluster of items relating

to each dimension. The results indicate that the children's perception of their physical appearance had largely improved, along with their perception of their scholastic competence and their athletic competence. The children's perception of their social acceptance (by their peers) did not change, yet the scores of their perception of their behavioural conduct decreased.

Discussion

The main objective of the evaluation was to identify the extent to which the programme was effective. Since data were available only on the participants' behaviour and their feedback within the context of the programme, the most appropriate approach for the evaluation was to measure the change in children's behaviour and attitudes before and after participation (Abramson, 1995).

With only fourteen schoolchildren participating in the programme quantitative analysis was relatively limited and mainly descriptive. Nevertheless, the combination of the quantitative and qualitative analyses does provide worthwhile information. The results suggest that the programme positively affected children's knowledge and self-perception, which is an essential step for behaviour change (Bloom, 1956, Prochaska and Di Clemente, 1986). There are several indications that children's self-perceptions became more positive as they progressed through the programme. The children's body image (athletic competence and physical appearance) improved and as a result they became more creative and felt more confident in expressing their creativity (indicated by the staff) which was also reflected in the improvement in their scholastic self-perception. The change in their body image was consistent with their reports of their learning and interest in hygiene topics and healthy eating habits. These issues emphasise the importance of self-care knowledge to children's self-image, and later to their behaviour. These are important findings particularly because of the evidence for the strong association between poor self-image in childhood and youth delinquency (Belcher and Shinitzky, 1998, Loeber and Farrington, 2000, Sherman et al., 1997).

The results from the self-perceptions test provided some deeper insight into the effects of the programme. The children's perception of their behavioural conduct decreased during the programme but not their actual behaviour. This is a very important outcome: since no deterioration of children's behaviour was reported by the facilitators it is suggested that the children had become more aware of their behaviour and understood better what was expected from them. Although the results do not provide any information on their actual behaviour, acknowledgement that something is wrong and that it should be changed is the first step towards future behavioural change, particularly within youngsters at risk (Abrams and Aguilar, 2005). It is important to note, however, that the children's perception of their own social acceptance did not change during the programme and this may indicate that their behaviour did not actually change, since they did not perceive any change in the way their peers related to them.

The second major issue to arise from this evaluation was the children's attitudes towards graffiti and vandalism. The results indicate that the children learned that graffiti is illegal, not aesthetic, wrong and costly. The children's self reports indicate that their attitudes towards graffiti have altered, probably because of their significant learning experience in relation to this topic and the interest they reported in learning new things about graffiti. Furthermore, there is clear evidence that the children preferred a learning style that included trips, outdoor activities and games and asked to have more of these. This approach is supported by a range of learning theories (Swing and Peterson, 1982, Hawkins and Weis, 1985) in favour of the inclusion of more

active learning techniques, rather than 'classroom style' learning. This is an important finding since it suggests that attitudes towards graffiti - a predictor for youth delinquency (Sherman et al., 1997) - can be altered through active learning.

The children's attitude towards money, and the cost of activities and recreation, is noteworthy. The children's reports indicate that they were largely unaware of the existence of low-cost or free recreational activities and many had not experienced recreational activities due to their families' limited financial resources. Since family cohesion and positive functioning is a preventive factor for delinquency (Yoshikawa, 1994, Farrington and Brandon, 1999, Sullivan, 2006), it is suggested that preventive programmes should offer low-cost or free family (parent and child) activities to strengthen family coherence, an important factor in children's behavioural and academic outcomes.

It is important to note that the multi-method approach taken in this study proved to be appropriate. The quantitative and the qualitative data appeared to support each other and the integration of both datasets provided much richer information than could be yielded from a uni-method design. Nonetheless, it is acknowledged that the evaluation only used data on and from the participants of the programme (recorded by children and staff) thus there was no control group. This decision, however, was made by the school. It is therefore suggested that further evaluations should receive data from participants and non-participants to allow a more robust methodology.

In conclusion, this targeted programme appeared to have positive effects on children's self-perception, basic knowledge of self-care and their own behavioural awareness. Generally, the children found the programme interesting and they preferred the more active learning approach than the 'classroom like' approach to learning. Although this is only a small case study evaluation its findings are important. It is the first evaluation study of a crime-prevention programme, within a primary school setting in New Zealand that targets children at risk *before* unlawful behaviour has occurred. The findings are particularly important for policy makers by providing a small but useful, knowledge base of the extent of what works within the New Zealand context. Nonetheless, there is a need for further research, particularly on the long term effects of such programmes.

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Table 1*Feedback from facilitators*

Feedback	P	NC	N	Total
Was the child willing to participate?	1	6	7	14
Was the child interested in working cooperatively?	3	6	5	14
Was the child willing to give it a go?	2	8	4	14
Was the child interested in creating things?	7	4	3	14

Table 2*Children's Strengths*

Attribute	No.	Attribute	No.
Completes work	8	Responds well to facilitator	2
Leadership	7	Has improved	2
Friendly	4	Keen to learn	2
Creative/artistic	4	Eager to please	1
Good manner/polite	3	Wants to be involved	1
Cooperative	3	Able to work alone	1
Bright/intelligent/competent/answers well	5		

Table 3*Self reports on what children learnt*

Things learnt	No.	Things learnt	No.
Graffiti is wrong	8	Have to behave better	2
Keep clean	7	Have changed since born	1
Graffiti is illegal	5	Don't run away from people	1
Recreation is enjoyable	5	Feel good about myself	1
Healthy eating	4	Keep my room clean	1
Things can be done without money	4	Doing silhouettes with body parts	1
Cost of graffiti	3		

Table 4*Aspects the children found interesting*

Things children found interesting	No.
Trips	7
Graffiti is bad and has a risk of punishment	7
Cost of graffiti	4
Self care and hygiene	4
New things (general knowledge)	4
Police people	3
Recreation and sports	2
Giving things	1
Fun doesn't cost money	1
Knowledge on own family	1
Leadership	1
Communication with others	1

Table 5*Aspects the children wanted to increase or decrease*

Children would like more	No.	Children would like less	No.
Trips & outdoor activities	12	Tagging	10
Games	6	Homework	5
General statements (unrelated to programme)	4	Mucking around	2
More learning	1	Talking graffiti	1
Take photos	1	Detention	1
Gifts	1	Staying inside	1
		Games	1

Figure Captions

Figure 1. Children’s self-perception changes over the period of the programme (group means)

