

# The Challenges of Comparative Educational Research into Social Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties

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## Abstract

*European research demonstrates substantial differences in child well-being between countries and suggests that levels of child well-being are not inevitable but “policy-susceptible”. There would seem to be a need for studies that look in more detail at the differences in educational and social provision between developed nations, particularly for those children and young people who are most at risk and who represent the greatest challenges, such as those presenting with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, (SEBD). The United Kingdom provides an example of how even within national boundaries terms such as SEBD are difficult to define and inconsistently applied. The complexities of descriptive terms such as SEBD impact both on the research task and on educational practice. Comparative social research presents a complex task, particularly where there are linguistic and conceptual differences to overcome, but offers advantages to the research task through examining alternatives to provision ‘at home’, and questioning the ‘taken for granted’ assumptions under which educational systems operate. Vignettes could provide one methodological solution to the difficulties of comparative research.*

*Keywords:* Social emotional and behavioural difficulties, labelling, comparative research

## Introduction

Terry (14) is late for class as always, he shouts a greeting to his friend Ben as he enters the room. He doesn't have his homework and he needs to borrow a pen before he gets started. He interrupts the teaching on several occasions by shouting across the room, and is constantly swinging on his chair to talk to the girls in the seats behind. When the teacher finally approaches him and asks him if he needs some help starting he gets out of his seat and says loudly to the teacher ‘you're always picking on me’ and gets up and leaves the classroom. He spends the next five minutes making faces from outside the door of the classroom while the teacher waits for the deputy head teacher to arrive. The deputy head teacher arrives, looks at Terry and sighs, “this is the fourth time this week already Terry he says and it's only Tuesday, what are we going to do with you!”

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In the United Kingdom, Terry would probably be described as having ‘social, emotional and behavioural difficulties’ (SEBD). International colleagues would use different terminology, but Terry would probably in most educational locations be a cause for concern. This paper will argue that comparative research in this area is timely and necessary, present some of the challenges both of defining SEBD in a national setting and of comparative educational research into SEBD and conclude by suggesting some methodological approaches to the difficulties of the task.

The recent UNICEF report, ‘Child Poverty in Perspective: An overview of child well-being in rich countries’ raised some important questions for professionals in developed countries. The study looked at 40 indicators of child ‘well-being’ in six categories across 21 industrialised countries. The statistics need to be read with a degree of caution, and commentators have drawn attention to the difficulties of finding comparable data, choosing appropriate indicators of well-being and aggregating and interpreting the results, (Ansell, Barker and Smith, 2007). Nevertheless the data suggests that levels of child well-being are not inevitable but “policy-susceptible”, (2007, p. 3), and the differences suggest the potential for improvement in some areas in all European countries. These findings might logically lead to studies that look in more detail at the differences in educational and social provision between developed nations, particularly for those children and young people who are most at risk and who represent the greatest challenges, such as those presenting with SEBD.

Many European countries contributed to a study carried out in 2003 by the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education into Inclusive Education and Effective Classroom Practices. The study combined an international literature review, case studies in fifteen European countries and expert visits in seven countries as well as various discussion forums across national boundaries. The study concluded; firstly that inclusive classrooms do exist throughout European countries, (and that evidence suggests that what is good for pupils with special educational needs is often good for all pupils) and secondly that behaviour, social and/or emotional problems present the greatest challenge to inclusion, (Meijer, 2003).

Although there has not to date been any comparative research that explicitly compares European provision in this field, academics in the field are beginning to start a ‘comparative conversation’; the second European conference on Promoting Social-Emotional Education: Practitioners and Researchers Exploring Evidence Based Practice hosted by the University of Bogazici in Turkey in 2009 brought together academics and practitioners in the field to share theory and practice in the area of social and emotional competence.

In the first part of this paper I am going to use the United Kingdom as a case study to look at the complexities of describing and labelling behaviour experienced as difficult in an educational setting, and at the implications of the use of those labels for practice. In the United Kingdom the terminology has undergone several incarnations, from what was described as ‘maladaptation’ in the first half of the twentieth century to ‘emotional and behavioural difficulties’ and then to social, emotional and behavioural difficulties’ late on in the century. It has been suggested that the elongation of labels, as a result of professional collaboration, serves to reinforce both the complexity of the syndrome and the authority of the professionals required to pronounce upon it! (Watling, 2004). SEBD is used interchangeably with BESD (behavioural, emotional and

social difficulties) and EBSD (emotional behavioural and social difficulties) in policy documents and theoretical writing.

In the United Kingdom SEBD is almost exclusively used as a term of reference in educational settings, and a label of SEBD is usually acquired through a process of ‘statementing’ and represents primarily an administrative category used often used to access extra services. The process involves collating reports from parents or carers, teachers, the Educational Psychology service and where appropriate representatives from Health and Social Services, in response to which the Local Education Authority decides whether to issue a ‘statement’; a document that summarises a child’s special educational needs and suggests where those needs could best be met.

In the United Kingdom current educational policy sets out four broad areas of special educational need cognition and learning, communication and interaction, sensory and/or physical needs, and behavioural, emotional and social development. This last category is described as a learning difficulty which encompasses a range of difficulties such as being withdrawn or isolated, disruptive or disturbing, being hyperactive and lacking concentration, having immature social skills, or presenting challenging behaviours arising from other complex special needs. Learning difficulties can arise for children and young people with BESD because their difficulties can affect their ability to cope with school routines and relationships. (DfES, 2001)

Although SEBD is often used as a quasi-clinical category, (Thomas and Glenny, 2000), it is important to emphasize that SEBD is not a medical diagnosis. Gower (2000) makes the distinction between what he sees as educationalists using ‘emotional and behavioural difficulties’ when describing a group of children who pose a challenge in the classroom and what child and adolescent psychiatrists refer to as ‘behavioural and emotional disorders with onset usually occurring in childhood and adolescence; psychiatric diagnoses classified by the World Health Organization in ICD—10 or the American Psychiatric Association in DSM-IV-TR.

“It is readily apparent that these concepts do not describe the same children. The terms are not synonymous, and although there is likely to be overlap between the two categories, the implications of the two expressions are rather different. The majority of children identified as having EBDs will be unknown to child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS), while a number of those who are being treated by CAMHS with internalising disorders would not be identified by the education system” (Gower 2000, p. 285).

Studies (eg. Malek, 1993) have found that similar behaviours have led to young people being variously described as being ‘SEBD’, ‘beyond parental control’, as having ‘conduct disorder’ or as being ‘a young offender’, depending on which service they encountered first, (education, social care, health or youth justice). It has even been suggested that a young person’s placement in one of these services could depend on where the vacancies were when the child was perceived by particular professionals to have reached crisis point, (Visser, 2003).

The wide remit for behaviours that fall into the category of SEBD and the blurred boundaries between SEBD and definitions of difficult behaviours used by other services has led to a number of writers commenting on what Visser and Stokes (2003, p. 67) refer to as the “fluctuating working definition and differing practical application of the term”. They highlight the local variables that determine what are deemed to be

SEBD; differing professional and personal attitudes and values, parental and institutional pressures, and local government policy and resources. These inconsistencies in turn lead to the problems of providing a consistent picture of the scale of the problem and how it is being addressed given the “vagueness and incompleteness of available national and local data” (Cole, Daniel and Visser, 2003, p. 188).

The data that is available suggests that between 10 and 20 per cent of all school-aged children experience such difficulties to a significant degree at any time. Interestingly SEBD is reported to affect three times as many boys than girls; a disparity that hasn't been sufficiently theorised, although is often argued that girls are statistically unrepresented because of their tendency to internalize rather than externalize difficulties (Cooper, 2006). Most SEBD literature tends to talk about (ungendered) ‘pupils’ when in reality they are talking about boys. Lloyd (2005) argues that perhaps girls are also less likely to be excluded or diagnosed with SEBD because they are not boys, that this disparity tends to be seen as ‘normal’ or unproblematic and that explanations where given are characterised by an implicit biological reductionism.

These inconsistencies don't only of course present issues for policy makers and researchers, it is equally important to recognize how special educational needs labels impact on practice; “today it is widely recognised that the language used to describe behaviour problems shapes not only beliefs about the manifest problems but also perceptions of what could be done about it and whose responsibility it is to do it” (Jones 2003 p.150).

It is argued often with good cause that a ‘diagnosis’ or a label can better enable parents and professionals to understand and meet a young person's ‘special needs’ and perhaps give the professional a clearer idea of which set of ‘tools’ and strategies might work in managing individual difficulties. However Daniels (2006, p.4) argues conversely that the process of labelling and categorisation can corrupt good practice in which teachers respond creatively and sensitively to individual learners; “that the socio-cultural processes of categorisation and pedagogic responses to categories once they are invoked can act to subvert this much needed responsive pedagogic practice”.

Equally there is a sense in which a label can, in locating the difficulty in the child, reduce the potential of remedial action by the teachers. Poulou and Norwich (2001a) suggest that there is a causal relationship between teacher's perceptions of the causes of behaviour and their responses to it; and that subsequently if teachers believe that ‘within-child’ factors are affecting behaviour and that therefore they cannot influence the child's behaviour they are less likely to devote time and energy to that child. Indeed Tobbell and Lawthorn (2005) point out that when we refer to children ‘with’ social, emotional and behavioural difficulties we are in some sense already attributing a level of responsibility to the child; instead they write about ‘children labeled or identified as having (S)EBD’.

It is emphasized in policy documents and academic texts that a label of SEBD should not be interpreted as individual pathology but rather understood as a situational description of an individual's relation at a particular time to the people and circumstances which make up his environment. It follows that therefore the difficulties

are amenable to school prevention or intervention, and sometimes arise from or are exacerbated by circumstances within the school environment (Ofsted, 1999).

However in spite of this developing focus on school processes rather than individuals there is a continued literature on EBD with an individual focus. A number of studies have demonstrated that despite the emphasis on process and environment espoused in policy documents and educational theory, that teachers still tend to employ within-child explanations for behaviour at school and respond accordingly (Poulou and Norwich, 2001a).

Feiler and Gibson (1999, p. 149) point out that an emphasis on labelling and categorisation carries with it important resources implications in that attention is focused on the few rather than the many; “The pressure on LEAs, schools and teachers to provide more for children who have certain labels is undoubtedly strong ... where resources are directed towards such children it invariably leads to less for others. Our concern is that labels for the few can diminish access to resources for the wider group of children with special needs”. Corbett and Norwich (1997, p.380) take this further and suggest that what they call the ‘re-emergence of medical labelling’ has more to do with the allocation of scarce resources, “the process has been used strategically and the notion of individual deficit has become more of a political rather than a psychological concept”.

The second part of this paper focuses on the challenges of comparative educational research into pupils with SEBD. Given the complexities of defining and understanding these issues in a national context, it is no wonder that the challenges of researching this area across national and linguistic boundaries are profound, particularly when the intention is comparative rather than international. Postlewaithe (1988, p. xvii) distinguishes between what he calls ‘truly comparative studies that seek to “examine two or more entities by putting them side by side and looking for similarities and differences between them” between and within systems of education and ‘international’ studies that describe or analyse a particular aspect of education in an ‘other’ classroom, or an ‘other’ culture.

Comparative research implies a comparative conversation between researchers and practitioners; an interchange of thoughts and information in relation to predefined constructs or situations that are being compared. If the conversation were about the relative merits of different approaches to preparing coffee for example, the conceptual equivalencies would be relatively simple, the linguistic and conceptual characteristics of coffee being easily understood. If however the research is social research and conversation is to be about the characteristics of and differences between social actors, the parameters of the research immediately become more complicated. It is accepted that one of the most immediate difficulties of comparative research is that of comparing ‘like with like’ across national and linguistic boundaries; “language is not simply a medium for conveying concepts, but part of the conceptual system, reflecting institutions, thought processes, values and ideologies” (Hantrais, 1995).

Finding exact linguistic and conceptual equivalency is difficult enough when ‘normative’ concepts of difference are being researched. Although there is a relatively high level of consensus over what constitutes normative differences such as visual impairments or physical disabilities as Daniels (2006) points out, an examination of comparative data reveals that even normative categories such as hearing impairment

vary substantially across international borders. Sociologists working in the field of special education have argued that in contrast categories such as SEBD and 'learning difficulties' are not and never will be normative categories; "There are no adequate measuring instruments or agreed criteria in the social world to decide upon these particular categories, whether descriptive or statutory. There can be and is legitimate argument between professionals, parents, other interested groups and the general public over what constitutes these categories" (Tomlinson, 1982, p.65).

In addressing the complexities of comparative research in this area there is a need for methodologies that can stimulate meaningful data across conceptual and linguistic boundaries. Vignettes have been effectively used in quantitative and qualitative research as a methodological tool often alongside other data collection methods. Vignettes can be defined as or "short stories about hypothetical characters in specified circumstances, to whose situation the interviewee is invited to respond" (Finch (1987, p.105). Barter and Renold (1999) describe vignettes as being used in three main ways in social research, to provide a less threatening way of exploring sensitive topics, to allow action to be explored in context, and to clarify people's judgements. Vignettes of pupils with SEBD were successfully used in a national study of teacher's attributions and behaviour in relation to young people with SEBD (Poulou and Norwich, 2001b).

The use of vignettes in comparative social research is relatively untested, but Soydan and Stal (1994) used vignettes in a cross-cultural study of the delivery of social services and concluded that the technique could go some way to addressing what they called the 'incommensurability' of concepts across cultures. An extension of this method was used very successfully in a landmark study called "Preschool in three cultures' in which international researchers compare preschools in three different cultures using 'filmic' visual vignettes to stimulate comparative data by showing concrete examples film to stakeholders in pre-school education in different national settings (Tobin, Wu and Davidson, 1989).

The vignette that introduces Terry, and other similar depictions of pupils could in a similar way provide concrete examples of pupils and their behaviour on which research partners can offer comment or opinion, (Hazel 1995), which would be particularly useful in a situation where descriptive labels are subjective and therefore particularly difficult to translate adequately. The ensuing comparative conversation could hopefully contextualize our practice in relation to young people with SEBD, and illuminate possibilities by examining alternatives to provision 'at home', and questioning the 'taken for granted' assumptions under which educational systems operate.

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### **Karşılaştırmalı eğitim arařtırmalarında sosyal duygusal ve davranıřsal güçlüklerin ele alınması**

#### **Özet**

*Avrupa kaynaklı çalışmalar çocukların iyi oluř hallerinde ülkeler arası önemli farklar olduđunu göstermekte ve çocuklarda iyi oluř hallerinin kaçınılmaz deđil uygulanan politikalara duyarlı bir özellik olduđunu öne sürmektedir. Geliřmiş ülkelerdeki eğitimsel ve sosyal kořulları karşılařtıran, özellikle risk altında bulunan ve sosyal, duygusal, davranıřsal sorunlar (SDDS) gösteren çocuk ve gençler gibi en zorlu durumları oluřturan gruplara yönelik çalışmaların gerekli olduđu görülmektedir. Birleřik Krallık örneđi SDDS ifadesinin ulusal sınırlar içinde dahi tanımlanması zor ve tutarsız uygulamalar içerdiđini göstermektedir. SDDS gibi betimsel ifadelerin karmařıklıđı gerek arařtırma süreçlerini gerek eğitim uygulamalarını etkilemektedir. Karşılařtırmalı sosyal arařtırmalar özellikle ařılması gereken dilbilimsel ve kavramsal farklılıklar olması durumunda karmařık bir süreç haline gelse de, bu durum yerel düzeyde farklı seçeneklerin incelenmesi ve eğitim sistemlerinde dođal karşılanarak sürdürülen varsayımların sorgulanmasını sađlayarak arařtırma sürecine olumlu katkılar yapmaktadır. Küçük oyun bölümleri (vignettes) karşılařtırmalı arařtırmalarda bu tür sorunlara yönetsel bir çözüm sađlamaktadır.*

*Anahtar sözcükler:* Sosyal, duygusal ve davranıřsal sorunlar, etiketleme, karşılařtırmalı arařtırma



