An Investigation into Libyan Teachers' Views of Children's Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties

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Abstract—A great number of children in mainstream schools across Libya is currently living with emotional, behavioural difficulties. This study aims to explore teachers' perceptions of children's emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD) and their attributions of the causes of EBD. The relevance of this area of study to current educational practice is illustrated in the fact that primary school teachers in Libya find classroom behaviour problems one of the major difficulties they face. The information presented in this study was gathered from 182 teachers that responded back to the survey, of whom, 27 teachers were later interviewed. In general, teachers' perceptions of EBD reflect personal experience, training, and attitudes. Teachers appear from this study to use words such as indifferent, frightened, withdrawn, aggressive, disobedient, hyperactive, less ambitious, lacking concentration, and academically weak to describe pupils with EBD. The implications of this study are envisaged as being extremely important to support teachers addressing children's EBD and shed light on the contributing factors to EBD for a successful teaching-learning process in Libyan primary schools.

Keywords—Teachers, children, learning, emotional and behaviour difficulties.

I. INTRODUCTION

THERE has been a growing concern with children's behaviour in mainstream schools in Libya and with the number of children excluded from quality education due to their EBD [1]-[4]. In fact, teachers over the world seem to use interchangeably similar words to describe the same phenomenon of EBD, despite differences in educational context, philosophy, belief and practices. Similarly, teachers often feel challenged by their pupils' behaviour and puzzled to find proper ways to address pupils' EBD (e.g., Libya [5], [6]; England [7]-[10]; America [11]; Canada [12], [13]; Jordan [14]). It is widely acceptable in Libyan society's common-sense view of schools that teachers are currently spending more time managing difficult behaviour than actually teaching [6], [15]. Similar concerns have been expressed by educators in the United Kingdom [16].

II. THE TERM EBD

It is fair to begin by saying that the notion 'emotional and behavioural difficulties' (EBD) is not straightforward; rather it ranges across a continuum. EBD are manifested in a variety of different forms and severities. In fact, the complexity to define the notion of EBD is well highlighted in the literature,

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reflecting a range of characteristics which may appear less obvious e.g., a phobia of school or deteriorating emotional well-being or behaviour can also signal emotional behavioural difficulties. Children with these problems exhibit unusual problems of adaptation to a range of physical, social and personal situations. They may set up barriers between themselves and their learning environment through inappropriate, aggressive, bizarre or withdrawn behaviour [17].

All through this study the term "EBD" is used to cover all children for whom behaviour in the widest sense is a source of concern. This, however, is not constrained to aggressive and disruptive children alone; disturbed children, e.g., anxious or withdrawn children are also included in this term. There are many children who may have experienced, to a large degree, emotional difficulties without showing any sign of behavioural difficulties. Therefore, the focus should be on both extrovert and introvert behaviour. In recent years, children's EBD has been front-page news reflecting an increasing public concern toward antisocial behaviour, street fighting, the spread of weapons and war between communities, besides the lack of educational provision to fix the problem. Drawing upon this crisis in Libyan schools, it is often argued by the Libyan Teachers' Union that the needs of classroom teachers have not been addressed in government policies. More recently we echoed the teachers' union concerns (e.g. [1], [18]) unless the demands of teachers are considered, children's behaviour and literacy standards would decline. In line with this, [6] perceived the removal of personal and social education from the national curriculum as a major factor in the growing antisocial behaviour at schools. Additionally, there is statistical evidence in the National Report for Development of Education (2008) [2] suggesting significant proportion of EBD children have failed academic promotion over the years.

Having reviewed the western literature, it is obvious that much work on the problem of children's EBD and its origins has been undertaken [7]-[10], [19]; however, very few studies have focused on the effect that school organisation may have on its pupils, particularly in relation to the school climate, system of rewards and punishment, assessment, attitudes and actions of teachers and other professionals towards pupils' academic, personal and social needs [20], [21]. There is also a need to scrutinise professionals' conflicting accounts of children's EBD in the assessment process. Similarly, there is a considerable need to listen to children's and parents' accounts in regard to issues which pertain directly to them [6], [18], [22], [23]. Yet, despite the current plethora of literature on EBD, and despite the recognition in the literature of the effect

of the wider context on children's EBD, the focus of remedial procedures remains on the individual pupil or the teacher's reaction to the behaviour of the individual pupil (see for instance, [7]). Furthermore, research in the Arab literature concerning special education in mainstream schools (e.g. [1], [6], [14]) has highlighted the need to clarify the area of special education in the Arab world in order to effectively address children's learning, EBD within mainstream settings. There is also a general consensus among these researchers that the current atmosphere of primary classrooms is chaotic, and hence classroom discipline becomes challenging and an unbearable experience for many teachers. In a similar way, these researchers found the role of the school and national curriculum in originating children's special educational needs to be significant factors.

Evidence from the above body of research suggests that teachers' perceptions of children's behaviour can have great impact on their attitudes toward education. Children perceived to have EBD are often treated differently from children perceived to not have such a 'problem'. Likewise, children with EBD are at higher risk for developing adjustment problems. In Libya, for instance, it is known that school professionals' perceptions of children's behaviour are important, not least because they play a major role in shaping the child's life, yet we know very little, if anything, about how teachers view children's EBD and how these views influence the level of support given to such children [15]. Thus, it is essential to explore how far and how successfully theory has been translated into practice by teachers in their work with children displaying EBD in mainstream schools.

Drawing on previous research findings e.g., [15] and work experience with children encountered with enormous behaviour difficulties both in Libya and the United Kingdom, there is an increased interest in how the term 'EBD' is construed by school teachers. In a previous research (e.g. [15]), it is found that troublesome pupils in mainstream schools in Libya, particularly boys, are very often excluded from schools or alternatively left to their own devices until they eventually give up and leave school. The dilemma perceived by teachers that pupils' behaviour more often than not let them down with regard to the schools' rules and regulations, though there was evidence which held the school system responsible for pupils' failing to accommodate to the discipline procedures, e.g., corporal punishments which provoke pupils to challenge them (see for instance, [1], [15]). In relation to this, the United Nations Office in 1998 [23] (see also, [2]-[4]) underlined the growing concern with the number of pupils excluded from mainstream schools because of their behaviour. Following the publication of the United Nations Report in 1998 [23], the National Educational Report (2008) [2] has also confirmed the dramatic increase in the number of those who left education before the school leaving age between 1990-2000, though this does not necessarily reflect pupils' behaviour problems. However, the report indicates a significant association with low academic achievement reflecting the pressure imposed by the national curriculum upon pupils to score high marks for promotion, and large class sizes that make individualised attention very difficult, leading teachers to look for consistency of pupils rather than diversity. Away from the family and within child explanations of children's EBD, [24] states that:

"most workers now see the child's difficulties as a function of inappropriate curriculum content and this view has been strengthened by the Elton Report."

Similarly, teachers in Libya appeared to work under extreme pressure because of a rigid national curriculum in which they are instructed to pass on a great deal of academic knowledge in a very short period [2]-[4], [6], [18]. This required teachers to tackle pupils' academic problems more readily compared with pupils' EBD. Drawing upon the current intervention procedures used in schools to handle pupils' antisocial behaviour in Libya, the United Nations Office in Geneva (1998) [23] expressed concerns with the increasing use of corporal punishment in schools. The report also suggested that despite the civil law (in Libya) which prohibits adults, e.g., teachers from using any physical punishment with children, this does not guarantee children are not violated [23]. In this respect, nothing has been done by the present Libyan government to address the educational needs of children and provide them with appropriate support. Unfortunately, there are as yet a great number of children who are segregated because they fail to conform to school standards, e.g., failing the academic requirements (school's exams) or their behaviour is found intolerable by teachers [18]. As a result, many of those children end up going to vocational training sectors or military services against their wishes; this is often because they are perceived as not academically bright. In contrast to the views of the school professionals in the assessment process, children's opinions, like parents, are given much less weight [1], [25].

III. STUDY METHOD

This study began by sending questionnaires out to primary school teachers at different Local Education Authorities in Libya with the aim of identifying pupils with EBD. A total of 225 questionnaires were distributed to school teachers according to the number of teaching staff provided by the heads of the schools involved. Of the total number of teachers, 182 responded, of whom, only 27 agreed to be interviewed. Following the return of the questionnaires, semi-structured interviews were prepared for further investigation. The formulation of the interview questions was based on the findings of the teachers' questionnaires and observation notes; this was with the aim to respond to the following major area of inquiry:

The characteristics of pupils identified as having EBD. Therefore a triangular method was applied in this study to construct a rich picture of the children's EBD and get comprehensive perspective of the factors which contribute to their difficulties in primary classrooms. Denzin [26] described this type of method as fruitful and reliable to generate more sound accounts. Hence, teachers were asked in the questionnaire for information on actual and more recent cases in their classrooms rather than hypothetical examples as it was

felt that this would present a more accurate picture of children's EBD. General data were also requested concerning the resources available to teachers to support children with special educational needs. In short, the questionnaire was the focal point in which this study was based. Following the return of the questionnaires, preliminary analysis was made to identify the number of teachers who gave their consent to be interviewed about the information they provided. Further analysis of the responses of those who agreed to take part in the interview was also made to identify children with EBD and later observe them within their classrooms where the problem occurred naturally. Meanwhile teachers were also observed and interviewed. Thus, the broad and overruling aim of this study was to investigate the primary school teachers' views of children experiencing EBD and in doing so, it looked at teachers' attributions of the causes of children's EBD.

IV. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study suggest that there is a need for more personal and social education in schools, reflecting that of [6], to support children with learning, EBD. It appears from this study that teachers are working under extreme pressure to pass on academic knowledge rather than actually enhancing children's self-belief and confidence so that they can use their education more effectively. In line with the National Report for Development of Education (2008) [2], this study showed that there is a strong link between pupils' behaviour and learning difficulties, implying that the focus should be on both rather than training teachers merely to reduce pupils' academic failure. In a similar way, the National Report for Development of Education [2] showed that pupils were held back not only because of their learning difficulties but also due to behaviour problems (see also [5]). In a manner the report described the number of children who gave up school as unprecedented and alarming, reflecting children's accumulated frustrations to comply with the schools' expectations. Equally, although the report showed a tendency to portray children's behaviour as indifferent, it stressed children's disruption behaviour to classroom routine [5]. In actual fact, the association between low attainments and emotional and behavioural problems is evident from this study. The results suggest that there is a steadily increasing number of children with EBD whose failure to comply with the school's rules and regulations reflects a considerable amount of learning pressures imposed by a restricted national curriculum. Thus, this suggests that the programme implemented is too formal and that there is a need for a more flexible educational programme to be implemented in primary schools in order to boost children's confidence.

In general, teachers' perceptions of children's EBD reflect multiple factors of school professionals and children, including children's behaviour and backgrounds, and professionals' personalities, backgrounds, attitudes and levels of experience. Various terms and definitions have been used by teachers in this study to describe the same phenomena (EBD), though discrepancies exist among teachers reflecting the complexity of the term EBD. In fact, the lack of consensus among teachers to reach one common definition of EBD in this study verifies the dominant view in the literature that this term is unavoidably subjective (see, for example, [8], [10], [19], [27]-[31]). While this can be explained in part by different theoretical views of how such behaviour develops and is interpreted by different individuals, it should be noted that children (in Libya) are taught from an early age to behave and react in various ways with different individuals e.g., parents, relatives, teachers and other people. Indeed, the motives of a child to behave appropriately towards parents and other relatives may differ from those towards school professionals and other children (see [15]). Strictly speaking, children are required to be more polite and respectful in the presence of parents, relatives and older people, reflecting the traditional belief and duty towards these people [32]. Taking this into consideration, children may have to play different roles merely to satisfy their parents' feelings or those of relatives, disguising their own emotions toward certain incidents or difficulties that face them in life. To exemplify this, children in Libya are brought up to accept teachers' decisions, particularly those who come from the same family background (relationship), though they may disagree with them strongly. Thus, in Libya behaviour is quite often interpreted in cultural terms. In a similar way, teachers' assessments of children's behaviour are often guided by the level of relationship they have with children, attitudes and the academic performance of children in the classroom – factors such as family ties and tribe-hood are significant (within the Libyan community) in influencing teachers' views and opinions with regard to children's overall development. In fact, teachers know that parents' expectations of them as professionals vary from one parent to another. While traditional parents (older parents) are more keen to see teachers discipline children (i.e., they value personal and social education), modern parents appear preoccupied with children's promotion to the next year (concern with academic achievement). However, it should be stressed that the stronger the relationship with teachers, the greater the expectation of parents for the teachers to respond to their children's special educational needs. In a similar way, children know that their behaviour is under more scrutiny when they are taught by teacher relatives compared with non-relative teachers. While the same can be said of teachers' performance and attitudes toward pupils, it is often the other way around. Although this remains an unexplored area, particularly in traditional societies like Libya where children's behaviour tends to be very much influenced by the level of relationship they have with the school's staff, it is one which should be taken into account when interpreting pupils' learning, EBD. This should not imply that teachers in this study reacted unprofessionally towards pupils' behavioural problems, but rather draw attention to the expectations of the culture concerned. What appears significant, however, from this study, is that teachers in general seem to explain pupils' EBD according to their level of experience and training. Within the teacher groups in this study (e.g., less experienced teachers and experienced teachers), EBD children are perceived differently, reflecting

the backgrounds that underpin teachers' expertise and knowledge. There seem to be two main groups of teachers: newly experienced teachers and experienced teachers whose education and training represent two different educational systems. The former appears to represent the current educational system, which is frequently perceived by the public as being generally weak for neglecting personal and social education, while the latter represent the traditional educational system which is highly thought of by people in Libya for considering the overall education of pupils' personal, social and academic education. In line with this division, more pupils are reported by the newly experienced teachers to have special educational needs compared with the experienced teachers, who have identified far less pupils with learning, EBD. Although this echoes previous findings (e.g. [15]) in which the newly qualified teachers appear to lack the ability to handle children's' learning and behaviour problems, the Ministry of Education and Local Educational Authorities (LEAs) are also found responsible for failing to provide teachers with the relevant support and training required to cope with children's EBD, and hence manage day-to-day classroom difficulties.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, no major differences were found in defining EBD from the literature, apart from that this term was repeatedly explained by teachers' level of experience, training, characteristics and relationships with children. The complexity of defining EBD appears evidenced from this study too, reflecting the subjectivity of the term, though teachers, particularly newly qualified teachers, seem to portray children's EBD as often the intolerable and unacceptable behaviour which should not be allowed to continue within the classroom. However, even though children allegedly were often referred to school social services because of their EBD, their problems appeared to be learning based. In contrast, experienced teachers appear to accept children's behaviour as part and parcel of childhood and allow room for conciliations with children and parents.

Once again, the results of this study suggested that the factors responsible for children's special educational needs in general were not dissimilar from those already in the literature, though some can be attributed to traditional constraints and the social changes that took place over the last two decades within the culture concerned, reflecting an invasion of Western media to the Arab culture. Three major sources for the child's EBD were found: teachers and school, home and parents and within child factors; all of which appear from this study interrelated. Regardless of the origins of EBD, school remains the place where children frequently display behavioural problems.

The study also showed an increasing lack of school and government policies with regard to special educational needs in general. This, in many respects, appeared to expose teachers to overwhelming pressure from the public. In a similar way, the results confirm the old anecdote in which schools were more ready to address pupils' academic difficulties as opposed to their emotional and behavioural ones. In line with this, individual intervention with children's special educational needs appeared dominant from this study, though teachers claimed to move away from these practices toward a more consultative approach with school professionals. Traditional use of sanctions in the form of corporal punishment appeared widespread among teachers to discipline children as opposed to complement and praise. This is often attributed to children's failure to meet the school's standards and expectations - whether this is a result of exam failure on behalf of the children. There is growing concern that learning in primary schools in Libya is still led by assessment which may fall far short of children's and parents' expectations of how education should be. Therefore, there should be a move towards a more inclusive curriculum, responding to the wider needs of children in primary schools, reducing the pressure of traditional assessment, while making sure that education at this stage is an enjoyable experience for all children.

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