

Research commentary: managing behaviour

Good behaviour is a necessary condition for learning

Everyone stands to benefit from good behaviour in schools. Effective behaviour management means that low-level disruption is not tolerated and pupils' behaviour does not disrupt lessons or the day-to-day life of the school. Pupils can learn; teachers can teach; staff can do their job; and parents have confidence that their child is safe and supported to do the best that they can.

If we do not get managing behaviour right, we will not be able to provide children with the quality of education they deserve. It should therefore surprise no one that we are concerned with ensuring that we know and inspect behaviour well. This is why we now have a separate 'behaviour and attitudes' judgement in the new [education inspection framework \(EIF\)](#), but also why we are running a programme of research to study how schools are managing challenging behaviour. In this commentary, we report on the first phase of this programme.

Our 2014 research

In 2014, we published a report on low-level disruption, '[Below the radar](#)', the findings of which were disturbing. We found great concern among teachers and pupils about a large amount of low-level disruption, which in many cases was not recognised or adequately addressed by school leaders.

We found that, in many schools, leaders failed to identify and tackle disruptive behaviour at an early stage or provide enough support for their teachers. Too many headteachers underestimated the amount of disruption that was occurring. Too many teachers simply accepted low-level disruption as a part of everyday life in the classroom. Worryingly, only a third of teachers said that the school's behaviour policies were applied consistently. Teachers felt that this inconsistency, and a lack of support from senior leaders, undermined their efforts to manage behaviour well.

Of course, we found good practice as well. In the best schools, there was an emphasis on creating a positive climate for learning. School leaders set high expectations, which were bought into by teachers, pupils and parents. Leaders in these schools did not accept low standards of behaviour and made sure teachers were supported in managing behaviour. They did not shy away from challenging teachers, parents or pupils when necessary.

Bringing our research up to date

Five years on, we felt it was time to update what we know about managing challenging behaviour in schools, looking not just at low-level disruption but at more challenging forms of misbehaviour as well.

We know that behaviour remains a major concern for teachers. The [NASUWT big question survey](#), the [OECD TALIS study](#) and our own study on [teacher well-being at work](#) show that teachers feel misbehaviour is common, and is a major source of teacher stress. In our teacher well-being study, we again found that many teachers felt that senior leaders provided insufficient support.

In our research, we look at what has changed since 'Below the radar' and what issues persist. We also look at what school leaders, teachers and pupils tell us about how they are managing behaviour today.

The study to date has used a range of mainly qualitative methods to develop an understanding of how teachers, leaders and pupils think about managing behaviour. We wanted to identify the strategies that schools use to pre-empt and manage challenging behaviour and promote good behaviour.

The research had 3 distinct phases

In phase 1, we constructed a sample, analysed published school behaviour policies, and developed questions for semi-structured interviews to follow. We piloted the questions in a small number of schools and used this feedback to refine the questions.

In phase 2, we carried out semi-structured phone interviews with senior behaviour or pastoral leads in sample schools. This was often the headteacher, particularly in smaller schools.

We spoke to leads in:

- 23 primary schools
- 22 secondary schools
- 4 pupil referral units (PRUs)
- 4 special schools

In phase 3, we carried out follow-up visits to selected schools to meet with pupils, teachers (including newly qualified teachers (NQTs) where possible) and support staff in focus groups. Additional questions were asked of leaders on these visits.

We visited:

- 4 primary schools
- 14 secondary schools
- 2 PRUs
- 2 special schools

We visited more secondary than primary schools because the official figures

on exclusion suggest that behaviour issues become more common in secondary schools, although recognising that rates of exclusion can vary even between schools with similar challenges.

In the academic year 2016 to 2017, the fixed-period exclusion rate was 4.8% in secondary schools and 1.4% in primary schools.

Positive developments: the importance of consistency and explicit teaching

Compared with 'Below the radar', we can report some positive developments in the current study. We found that teachers and leaders understand the importance of consistency in the implementation of behaviour policies. Most schools in our study favoured whole-school behaviour management approaches in which a set of consistent routines are put into practice and rigorously and consistently applied.

Staff, particularly in secondary schools, emphasised the value of teaching desired behaviours and making them routine. This is especially the case for those behaviours that are repeated regularly throughout the school day and that ensure:

- the safe movement of pupils around the school
- the smooth running of lessons
- the minimum loss of learning time to low-level disruption

When pupils and staff have a shared understanding of the expectations for these common behaviours, and both staff and pupils follow established routines, overall consistency is easier to achieve.

Effective routines

We know that these routines do not happen by accident. They need to be explicitly taught to pupils and modelled by all staff in the school. It's not enough just to 'expect the standard'.

Consistency and clarity in understanding and implementing a behaviour policy have been linked to effective behaviour management and lower levels of exclusions. High levels of exclusions can result from staff and pupils not having a clear understanding of the behaviour policy or behaviour being inconsistently managed [1](#).

Headteachers and teachers told us that establishing clear routines is not just about expecting consistent standards of behaviour (though this is of great importance). It is also about the use of routines daily and in classes to create an environment in which learning can take place. Consistency should be the aim, with leaders supporting teachers to achieve this. This will not only lead to better behaviour overall, allowing all pupils an education free of disruption, but it promotes fairness and avoids discriminatory practices.

Having systems in place for specific cases

Of course, there may be a small group of pupils with particular needs, such as a disability or mental health issues, that mean they will always struggle with behavioural norms. There may also be some pupils who are going through particularly difficult life circumstances at a given moment in time, which affects their behaviour in school.

In these cases, policies need to be applied flexibly, as was recognised by the teachers and leaders we spoke to. Some schools had systems in place to communicate when a child arrived at school having experienced something the previous evening that might influence their behaviour. Staff felt that this made the long-term management and support of these pupils easier.

However, the vast majority of pupils in a school are capable of behaving well, and most can and should do so for most of the time. The vast majority of those who do not behave can be taught to do so through explicit teaching and effective behaviour management. This group should therefore not be confused with the minority of pupils with particular needs or life circumstances. In some cases, we found evidence of teachers and leaders defining this latter group too broadly and thus potentially undermining the consistency of their approach.

Values and ethos

A whole-school behaviour approach is much more than a set of policies or documents. It is about what everyone in the school does, how they behave, and what expectations are set and taught. It is also about the values and ethos of the school. Strong values underpin good behaviour.

In some, but by no means all, schools we visited, the values underpinning the behaviour management policy were clear and explicit. Staff and pupils across the school knew what the values were. In one school, pupils described good behaviour as that which prepares them well for their future lives. As one pupil told us, the aim of her school was to: 'try to shape us to be a better person and prepare us for the outside world'.

In the schools where teachers, leaders, pupils and parents shared common values and high expectations, the school was less likely to need detailed lists of behaviours because responses were determined by the ethos or values of the school. Indeed, we found that long behaviour policy documents (and some were 40 pages or more) were not necessarily any clearer than those that were much more succinct.

Most schools mentioned the need to build and maintain positive relationships with all pupils to ensure ongoing good behaviour management. This could be more difficult to achieve in secondaries and larger primary schools. Nevertheless, most staff we spoke to made a point of establishing good relationships with their pupils. Through these good relationships, staff felt they were more able to spot behaviour that was out of character and so apply flexibility in the behaviour policy when necessary.

Types of behaviour strategies

Behaviour management is a subject that causes a lot of heat, and sometimes rather less light. Strong views are held regarding the effectiveness of particular approaches, such as restorative justice or zero tolerance.

However, we found that teachers and headteachers typically did not talk about their approaches in those terms, and rarely made reference to any of the standard approaches so frequently discussed in the media. We also found that terms used in school behaviour policies can cover a wide range of approaches. Policies that are called 'zero-tolerance', for example, can mean different things in different contexts.

The teachers and leaders we spoke with identified different types of behaviours they wanted to see in their pupils. Foundational behaviours, such as punctuality and not calling out, are the baseline pupils need to meet to allow effective teaching and learning to happen. As well as these foundations, pupils also need to show positive attitudes to learning, such as making a strong effort, a positive contribution in class, engaging in their learning and completing homework to a high standard. Social behaviours, the ways in which pupils interact with each other and with adults, formed the third component. Special schools and PRUs had definitions that reflected the individual needs, challenges and backgrounds that their pupils face, and often determined behaviour on a case-by-case basis.

How these link to the education inspection framework

These 3 types of behaviours are reflected in the behaviour and attitudes judgement in the EIF. In judging behaviour and attitudes, the main question we aim to answer for parents is: 'can my child learn here?'

In the framework, we state that to be judged good the following standards need to be reached:

Pupils' attitudes to their education are positive. They are committed to their learning, know how to study effectively and do so, are resilient to setbacks and take pride in their achievements.

Pupils have high attendance, come to school on time and are punctual to lessons. When this is not the case, the school takes appropriate, swift and effective action.

Leaders, staff and pupils create a positive environment in which bullying is not tolerated. If bullying, aggression, discrimination and derogatory language occur, they are dealt with quickly and effectively and are not allowed to spread.

These statements clearly relate to the 3 types of behaviour schools identified as important, which provides some reassurance that we are assessing the right things.

Parents

It is crucial for parents to work positively with the school to support its behaviour policy and ensure good behaviour of their child when they are at school. Parents reinforcing agreed school-based rewards and sanctions makes it easier for staff to apply the policy and for children to accept the consequences of their behaviour.

Parental engagement is an important element of effective whole-school behaviour management [2](#). It gives parents a sense of involvement, provides a consistent message and helps their understanding of procedures and rules [3](#). Families are most likely to support a school's behaviour policies and practices if they understand the reasons for a particular approach. To allow parents to do so, they need to be properly informed of the school's policies and practices.

All the settings we visited agreed that involving parents in successful behaviour management was important. This could be done in a number of ways. Some schools focused on improving attendance at parents' evenings. Others found positive ways to re-engage with parents when their child was sanctioned. Many teachers mentioned the power of regular positive communication.

Transitions between settings and schools

Positive behaviour needs to be taught as early on as possible and expectations raised as children get older. Moments of transition, from an early years setting to primary school, from primary to secondary, or from one school to another, are very important.

Leaders talked about the value of managing transition to make it as smooth as possible. For some pupils, going from a relatively small primary community, where you're known by everyone and where you have a close relationship with a small number of teachers, to a much larger secondary school with several teachers will be particularly challenging.

The schools in our sample felt that it was important to identify pupils who were particularly at risk well before they started secondary school so that they could provide appropriate support and prepare them for life in the 'big school'. Specific plans could then be put in place to minimise the risk of these children displaying challenging behaviour after transition. There was agreement that early identification should not result in secondary schools pulling up the drawbridge and discouraging entry under the guise that the child 'would not fit here'.

Strategies and training

The strategies to manage transition that schools said had been successful include individual support plans or an extended period of transition. Some secondary schools said they had had success when starting work with pupils in year 5 or had run summer schools or literacy and numeracy catch-up sessions in year 7 for pupils who were struggling at the end of primary school. Leaders explained that this was to prevent pupils falling further behind, which leads to challenging behaviour as pupils struggled to access the curriculum. However, we lack evidence of the effectiveness of these strategies and lack equivalent data on transition into primary.

Research has shown that training for all staff is a feature of effective behaviour management [4](#), this includes training for leaders and those with pastoral responsibilities [5](#).

Many leaders in our study confirmed that they achieved consistency through regular training, mentoring and induction of new teachers. Many teachers also valued informal discussions with school leaders alongside clear monitoring systems and policies. We also saw different approaches in schools, with training focused on a range of different aspects of behaviour, from implementation of strategies to a focus on causes. As yet, we do not have much evidence on the relative effectiveness of these approaches.

Conclusion

Behaviour matters. That is why the EIF contains a separate behaviour and attitudes judgement. We expect that this will bring a greater focus on behaviour on inspection, and allow us to probe more deeply into what schools do and how well this is working.

As we roll out the new framework, we'll be monitoring how well we're able to get under the skin of behaviour management, and to calibrate our inspection findings with what our research shows works best.

Behaviour management will also be a focus in our upcoming initial teacher education inspection framework. It's vital that the next generation of teachers know the important principles of behaviour management, how to teach pupils to behave and how to create an environment that allows them to focus on learning.

Future projects

This study provides some promising results, but also some continued concerns around the management of behaviour in some schools.

It also leaves us with a number of questions still to be resolved. That schools have differing views of what good behaviour is, and different emphases in training, begs the question of what approaches actually work best in developing good behaviour for all pupils.

The methodology we employed here, which was to look at a broad range of

schools, did not allow us to identify what the schools that are best at managing challenging behaviour do that differs from what happens in those that are less successful. While we know it is imperative that we actively teach pupils desired behaviours, we do not know enough about how the most effective schools do this. We need to know more about how the most effective secondary schools manage transitions from primary, and especially how the most effective primaries manage the transition from early years into the school setting. We need to find out more about how the best PRUs are able to work effectively with the most challenging pupils in the education system. We also need to know what training the most effective schools employ.

As an inspectorate we need to know what best practice is, so it can inform both our inspectors and the system. That is why we will be embarking on further projects as part of a programme of research on behaviour, looking specifically at what the schools that are most effective at managing behaviour do.

References

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