



School Behaviour

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There are few comprehensive research studies on school behaviour: approaches and interventions are generally partial, so that the literature is somewhat fragmented. The broad framework for this paper is developed from earlier publications (Watkins and Wagner, 1987) and from action research and development work involving the author with 12 local education authorities, 120 teachers on extended courses, whole staffs of schools, and consultation in England and Hong Kong.

This paper aims to:

- review findings on school differences in approaches to behaviour
- discuss issues in school behaviour at three levels: organisation, classroom, individual
- examine processes for problem-solving and improvement in school behaviour.

Defining the problem

The behaviours most often dealt with by teachers are repetitious low-level forms such as 'talking out of turn', 'calculated idleness or work avoidance', 'hindering other pupils' and 'making unnecessary (non-verbal) noise' (DES, 1989). This picture contrasts markedly with the image of violence and disorder which sections of the news media have sometimes painted.

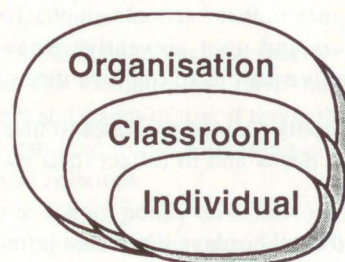
Repetitive patterns of poor behaviour lead to pupil under-achievement and to stress, for both teachers and pupils. They can be associated with cycles of responding which perpetuate difficulties. In such situations, pupils may be losing access to both the academic curriculum and the social curriculum. In these situations it is often also the case that the school is not learning: the repetitive patterns continue.

Addressing the problem

'The behaviour of pupils in a school is influenced by almost every aspect of the way it is run and how it relates

to the community it serves' (DES, 1989). This broad starting point has the positive effect of bringing the school back into the picture from which it so often leaves itself out.

Within any school, it is useful to identify three levels: (a) the organisation level, (b) the classroom level, (c) the individual level.



Different patterns of behaviour occur and can be identified at each level. Each level needs different ideas for understanding and intervening. Interventions need to be matched to the appropriate level, so that for example whole organisation change is not proposed for addressing a single individual. These three levels have been reflected in development materials for schools and in research on effective interventions (Gottfredson et al., 1993): they promote a comprehensive and balanced approach.

Behaviour should be addressed proactively not reactively. There is a strong tendency to rush discussion of difficult behaviour into 'what shall we do about it?', instead of 'how do we understand it?' or 'how may we ensure it does not arise?' But at all levels, a solely reactive approach is ineffective. By contrast a broader problem-solving approach aims to address behaviour through the development of schools and classrooms which engage pupils.

LEARNING FROM SCHOOL DIFFERENCES

Schools differ in key characteristics, disciplinary climate, sense of community, and ways of explaining difficult behaviour.

A study in the USA identified 13 characteristics of well-disciplined schools:

Characteristics of well-disciplined schools

1. These schools did many things that have been done by good schools and good educators for a long time (no new tricks, no quick fixes).
2. These schools create a whole-school environment that is conducive to good discipline rather than adopting isolated practices to deal with discipline problems.
3. Most teachers viewed the school as a place where staff and students come to work and to experience the success of doing something well.
4. These schools are student-oriented.
5. These schools focused on causes of discipline problems rather than symptoms.
6. Programmes in these schools emphasized positive behaviours and used preventive measures rather than punitive actions to improve discipline.
7. These schools adapted practices to meet their own identified needs and to reflect their own styles of operation.
8. The head teacher plays a key role in making these schools what they are.
9. The programmes in these schools often result, either through happy coincidence or through deliberate design, from the teamwork of a capable head and some other staff member who has the personal leadership qualities that complement those of the head.
10. The staff of these schools believe in their school and in what its students can do; and they expend unusual amounts of energy to make that belief come true.
11. Teachers in these schools handle all or most of the routine discipline problems themselves.
12. The majority of these schools have developed stronger-than-average ties with parents and with community agencies.
13. These schools are open to critical review and evaluation from a wide variety of schools and community sources.

(Wayson et al., 1982)

The picture is of a healthy proactive organisation which does not adopt piecemeal or reactive stances, and of an open organisation which pays attention to its social processes. There are implications for the style of leadership needed to achieve this at all levels. This list can be used for school self-evaluation: I regularly find that teachers identify items 11 and 6 as most in need of development.

Schools differ in their 'disciplinary climates'. Research on 52 secondary schools in Australia (Cohen and Thomas, 1984) suggested four types:

- controlled: low misbehaviour, severe punishment
- conflictual: high misbehaviour, severe punishment
- libertarian: high misbehaviour, light punishment
- autonomous: low misbehaviour, light punishment.

In England, inspectors suggested that just over 5 per cent of secondary schools were 'over-authoritarian' and just under 5 per cent 'over-permissive' (HMI, 1986).

Schools differ on the degree of community that is developed. Those which rate highly on this 'attend to the needs of students for affiliation ... provide a rich spectrum of adult roles [and] engage students personally and challenge them to engage in the life of the school'. Collegial relations among adults are core to this, coupled with a 'diffuse' teacher role which brings them into frequent contact with other staff and with students in settings other than the classroom. Schools that scored high on communal organization showed more orderly behaviour on the part of the students (Bryk and Driscoll, 1988).

Schools vary in their styles of 'explaining' difficult behaviour. They may emphasise various versions of:

- 'they're that sort of person'
- 'they're not very bright'
- 'it's just a tiny minority'
- 'it's their age'
- 'this is a difficult neighbourhood'.

When such explanations are over-used, the school inadvertently contributes to its own disempowerment. A study of six Scottish secondary schools (Maxwell, 1987) suggested that schools vary in the extent to which key respondents believe the problem of disruptive behaviour to be within the power of schools to resolve. A trend was strongly suggested of higher rates of suspension amongst those with lower confidence in their own power to tackle the problem.

IMPROVING SCHOOL BEHAVIOUR

Improvement may be possible in any school: 'you don't have to be ill to get better'. However the process needs to reflect the particular school's starting point: it is not a case of 'one size fits all'.

For the disciplinary climates mentioned above:

- the controlled school might need to develop positive student self-control in the learning process,
- the conflictual school may need to increase reward and shared purpose,
- the libertarian school may need to develop greater direction and concern for others, while
- the school with autonomous climate may benefit from maintaining its concern for pupil development and active involvement in the learning process.

Managing the improvement process may involve managing the style of language used. Most teachers see the disadvantages of the 'explanations' above, and can explicitly agree to avoid their over-use. They accept that school-based strategies are most likely to succeed in reducing disruptive behaviour, particularly in-service training in class management skills, greater pastoral care input and better liaison with outside agencies (Maxwell, 1987).

The kind of language used to discuss 'incidents' is important. Many teachers follow the helpful advice 'focus on the behaviour not the person'. A further step in this direction opens up greater possibilities: by talking about the *patterns* of behaviour, diagnostic thinking can be improved and a better range of interventions considered.

Improvement is difficult to achieve in a climate of blame. The language used to discuss the contribution of teachers and school must be highly professional in order not to appear simply to blame. Blaming teachers is just as unproductive as blaming pupils.

For coherence of approach, it is now common to talk of 'whole-school approaches' and policies, although it is less common to analyse such terms well. At best they emphasise the need for agreed and connected strategies, but at worst they can mean an empty rhetoric which may not affect daily practice (or worse, a covert attempt by one section of staff to impose their approach on others).

An effective whole-school approach is one in which:

1. All staff (and indeed all members of the school community) recognise they have a contribution to

make to the patterns of behaviour, to their understanding and analysis, and to intervention. This contrasts with 'discipline' being the 'responsibility' of just some staff.

2. Different teacher teams contribute differently to the overall coherence. For example, a whole-school team looks at aspects of the organisation, a teaching team examines how their teaching affects pupil behaviour, a mid-day team considers ways of improving the organisation, facilities and activities for that time of day, and a tutor team reviews the behaviour of pupils in the year. The whole is facilitated by senior managers, who allocate time, promote team reviews, and arrange communication. This contrasts with the idea of uniformity, or everyone doing the same thing in the same way.
3. The perspectives of the whole school are engaged – teachers, pupils, other staff, and so on. This can be sustained through an active whole-school policy.

Ineffective policies can become reactive and counter-productive. For example the 'tariff model' of listing punishments and stages of use: if this is the predominant element it can lead to the worsening of behaviour and interpersonal relations.

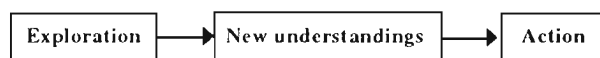
A whole-school policy on behaviour is much more than a written statement or a 'school code'. It is guidelines for action not reaction: this includes action identified for improvement. The written statement might incorporate:

- how this policy supports the school goals, and relates to other policies
- the core principles on which the policy is founded
- particular areas for action to improve behaviour:
 - improving school facilities
 - developing statements of expectations at organisational and classroom levels
 - how the curriculum promotes learning about behaviour
 - classrooms and their management
 - staff systems for learning/development
 - engaging pupils' views
 - countering bullying and harassment
- sources of support: recording, monitoring and reviewing their use.

Improving school behaviour requires development work at all three of the levels: organisation, classroom, individual. Popular discipline programs which focus on one aspect (usually teacher behaviour) show almost no

positive evidence of effect on student behaviour, but work at all levels can produce moderate effects (Gottfredson et al., 1993). Indeed, outcomes from such interventions are shown to be far more closely related to factors such as the staff culture, organisational boundaries and interpersonal dynamics than is normally recognised in the literature on behavioural interventions (Miller, 1994).

The remainder of this paper will examine the three levels with the following phases of problem-solving process:



PATTERNS OF BEHAVIOUR AT THE ORGANISATIONAL LEVEL

A Home Office research study concluded:

'the principal explicit response to the problem of disruptive behaviour has tended to be to focus upon the individual pupil and segregate him/her from other pupils. There is a marked lack of records of formal attempts to influence the context in which the disruptive behaviour arises, or to prevent such behaviour from occurring in the first place. On the contrary, school counselling, school social work, and support units all reflect attempts to deal with the problem once it has arisen. Unless the social and organisational contexts in which disruption emerges are also addressed, these responses to the problem can hardly succeed, since pupils merely continue to be educated within a context that continues to be susceptible to its emergence' (Graham, 1988).

A significant feature at the organisational level is the working relations between teachers, especially the degree of collaboration or isolation. In schools with a collaborative culture, teachers share information about a particular student to find ways to help the student learn more effectively: in isolated settings, sharing information about students usually takes the form of swapping stories about a child's errant behaviour or sympathising with one another. When they have a particular problem with a student, teachers in collaborative schools seek help more widely, seek to identify causes and then to solve problems; in schools where teachers are more isolated, problems invariably means behaviour problems, and punishment is seen as the solution (Rosenholtz, 1991).

Roles and responsibilities may warrant review (Watkins and Wagner, 1995) especially if some roles are over-used for 'referral'. This can become self-perpetuating, as in some pastoral care systems. Secondary schools with low levels of disruptive behaviour have pastoral care systems with the following characteristics (Galloway, 1983):

- principal aim of pastoral care is to enhance educational progress
- class teachers are not encouraged to pass problems to senior staff
- pastoral care is based on tutors, from whom advice about pupils was sought
- pastoral care for teachers is in evidence
- the climate promotes discussion of disruptive behaviour without recrimination.

Exploration

Many aspects of school organisation can have an impact on patterns of behaviour: each school's combination is unique. Ways of reviewing the patterns which occur within each school are needed, leading to identify those aspects which need attention.

The collection of information on the patterns at the organisational level can be stimulated through existing means:

- informal surveys on an occasional basis
- structured reviews on a whole-staff occasion
- using a meeting to collect perspectives on the locations and situations where difficult behaviour occurs and where it does not
- examining 'referral' data, or other existing data which reflects the patterns of behaviour (Badger, 1992).

All teams need to be led to discuss behaviour patterns in a collaborative and problem-solving way.

New understandings

An appropriate forum for discussing and understanding organisational patterns is needed. This may mean composing a whole-school review team to meet occasionally – they may also monitor the whole-school policy and offer findings when it is reviewed. Here, it is most important to use organisational explanations for the patterns of behaviour, rather than fall into individual explanations. Matters of the school climate, rule culture, pupils' engagement in the organisation, overall curriculum, overall teaching methods, school

environment and organisation, management model, staff support systems, communication, links to home, may all be candidates for review and development (although it would be worrying if **all** of them were causing concern!)

Action

Areas for improving behaviour at the organisational level could include:

- improved monitoring and analysis of results
- action to support problem-solving in key groups
- improving the reward climate of the school
- developing occasions for reviewing classrooms and their management
- enhancing systems for all staff learning (including mid-day supervision team).

The impact of intervention may be enhanced by a development plan.

PATTERNS OF BEHAVIOUR AT THE CLASSROOM LEVEL

The classroom is a complex situation which affects teacher and pupil behaviour. The teacher's contribution needs to be recognised in these terms. 'Classrooms are crowded and busy places in which groups of students who vary in interests and abilities must be organized and directed. Moreover these groups assemble regularly for long periods of time to accomplish a wide variety of tasks. Many events occur simultaneously, teachers must react often and immediately to circumstances, and the course of events is frequently unpredictable. Teaching in such settings requires a highly developed ability to manage events' (Doyle, 1990). From this perspective, attention turns to teachers' skills in managing classrooms and the evidence that a reactive approach to classroom difficulties is ineffective and can lead to further disaffection: 'The action teachers take *in response to* a "discipline problem" has no consistent relationship with their managerial success in the classroom. However, what teachers do *before* misbehaviour occurs is shown to be crucial in achieving success' (Kounin, 1977; O'Hagan and Edmunds, 1982). Teachers' key skills create and manage learning activities, through setting up the 'activity system' of the classroom. 'If an activity system is not established and running in a classroom, no amount of discipline will create order' (Doyle, 1990). Activities are made up of goals, tasks, social structure, timing and pacing, and resources: they need to be planned and managed.

Such an approach contrasts with programmes which focus on one element of improving classrooms. For example, increasing rule clarity and consistency of rule enforcement can have the unintended side effect of a decline in students' perceptions of teacher support (Gottfredson et al., 1993). Also such programmes may not reach the key elements of classrooms. Data on 'teacher encouragement' shows that frequency of such behaviour can return to near-baseline levels after the intervention ends (Bain et al., 1991).

This approach raises the issue of responsibility in classrooms. If teachers are pressured to take increased responsibility for standards of attainment, they become much more controlling and the development of learner autonomy is reduced, with potentially negative effects on both behaviour and achievement (Ryan et al., 1985).

Exploration

Methods for collecting information on patterns at the classroom level are generally successful if they are flexible, with some agreed structure of headings to avoid the merely anecdotal. 'Pupil pursuits' or pupil 'tracking' gives powerful insights into the pupil's experience and the classroom styles they may meet in a secondary school. In the primary school, classroom observation from the pupil's point of view can be illuminating. Reciprocal classroom observation and planned discussion between teachers as chosen peers can promote review, and lead to real change.

New understandings

Forums for discussing and understanding classroom patterns may include periodic reviews with all the teachers and the tutor of a class, or a 'cause for concern' meeting on a particular class in a secondary school. In such meetings it is important to focus on the various ways of orchestrating the classroom in question, and the various methods or 'activity systems' which teachers employ. Reciprocal classroom observations can help develop perspectives.

Teachers have few occasions for reviewing and discussing their approach to classrooms in a detailed way. Thus team work can be more effective than additional training in teacher skills (Gottfredson et al., 1993). Systems of pairing teachers, and of widespread mentoring can also develop contacts for learning and change. In such arrangement, teachers' choice of credible peers is important.

Action

Intervening at this level generally means improving the activity systems in classrooms; this does not always imply major change. Teachers may select manageable and minimum interventions from each other.

Within discussions of classroom management, general principles for responding to incidents of difficult behaviour can be discussed.

1. Refer to and review agreements which have been created: school community code, classroom codes, individual agreements. This is regularly effective notwithstanding the evidence of some teacher resistance (Houghton, 1989; Rogers, 1991).
2. Praise and reward: refer to non-troublesome events, in the present situation or on previous occasions.
3. Selectively ignore: judge whether an intervention is needed, or whether it would disrupt the flow of the class.

Action should also address what could be termed 'the behaviour curriculum', i.e. ways in which pupils are helped to learn in such areas as:

- making and using agreements
- enhancing communication skills (Swinson, 1990)
- promoting positive interpersonal behaviour
- developing assertiveness (DFE et al., 1994)

which are shown to have positive effects.

PATTERNS OF BEHAVIOUR AT THE INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

Individuals' patterns are not simple. One of the USA's most experienced educational researchers examined the understandings of teachers who were nominated as effective in working with pupils who might otherwise be disruptive. He concluded: 'this method yielded case studies that were richly descriptive but did not lend themselves to analysis. Each case seemed unique, and it was not possible to group them to collate information about how to respond to any particular problem-student type' (Brophy and McCaslin, 1992). This is a warning against 'typing' students or simple strategies. In the classroom, teachers respond to individuals with brief comments made on the spot. This may be appropriate to the situation and its demands. The more elaborated thinking may go on outside the classroom.

Difficult behaviour may be telling us about matters in the immediate context: the group, the classroom, the teacher and the organisation, as well as about matters of the individual pupil. Therefore some diagnostic thinking is required to identify which aspect(s) should be addressed.

Exploration

Effective problem solving is founded on effective problem definition. For this the range of enquiries listed below provides a useful start.

Individual patterns: some important questions

WHAT behaviour is causing concern?
specify clearly, do not merely re-label

IN WHAT SITUATIONS does the behaviour occur? in what settings or contexts, with which others?

IN WHAT SITUATIONS does the behaviour NOT occur? (this can often be the most illuminating question)

What happens BEFORE the behaviour?
a precipitating pattern? a build up? a trigger?

What FOLLOWS the behaviour causing concern?
something which maintains the behaviour?

What SKILLS does the person demonstrate?
social/communication skills? learning/classroom skills?

What skills does the person apparently NOT demonstrate? and how may these be developed?

What view does the person have of their behaviour? what does it mean to them?

What view does the person have of themselves?
and may their behaviour enhance that view?

What view do others have of the person?
how has this developed? is it self-fulfilling?
can it change?

Who is most concerned by this behaviour?

The final question often has the important effect of drawing attention to the way the concern is being handled by the various people involved.

Similar styles of enquiry may also improve the school's methods for gathering information from a number of teachers or situations. Many schools have forms for collecting such information, but many also report that they do not find them effective. This is often because there is no conceptual structure underlying the enquiry, and no clear purpose driving it.

New understandings

Understanding the patterns in an individual's behaviour demands that a range of possibilities is considered, not only a focus on the individual. The diagnostic questions above promote that range.

The important questions above can be used:

- by an individual teacher to help structure her own thinking
- by a number of teachers to help structure discussions with each other
- by a teacher exploring patterns of behaviour with a pupil.

In most instances individual behaviour is a function of the person and the immediate situation: systematic exploration of the patterns in the situation will help identify the most effective route for next action.

Often, difficult behaviour is occurring in some and not other situations: attention is therefore directed to the context and the management of the class. In secondary schools a group of teachers may be able to learn from each other's experience and approach with the same group. Here leadership and coordination are needed, especially in gathering perspectives and facilitating a meeting: the class teacher or tutor could be appropriate. All participants in such meetings can identify and analyse the vicious and virtuous cycles in the pattern of behaviour, so that the means of creating further virtuous cycles may be found. In a primary school, a teacher can initiate the process and use other colleagues to help in the diagnostic thinking.

If difficult behaviour is only occurring in one situation, attention is directed to a teacher and/or their classroom and/or conflict management skills. Here the choice of who may advise is less clear, and is likely to depend on which member of staff is credible in this area to the teacher concerned. Alternatively the individual teacher and pupil may be involved in a conflict which could be resolved with the help of an appropriate third party, for example another teacher. Or the pupil may be demonstrating through their behaviour in this one situation a personal difficulty, and particular individual attention may be appropriate.

The above changes are within the normal professional roles of the teachers involved. If these prove not to be effective then the school may develop an individual plan which is associated with more special or specialist provision, but still that which is normally available within the school: learning support, SenCo, pupil support team, plus more detailed conversation with the parent and the child on what their perspectives are

and what might help. It may for example include specific work to help an individual change a reputation that has developed.

If the data shows that difficult behaviour is occurring in all situations (a very rare event), this directs attention to aspects outside the school – family, welfare, medical. Such a pattern of behaviour demonstrates that in this instance it is appropriate to focus on the individual pupil.

Action

At the individual level, interventions are individually tailored. Broad guidelines for intervention include the background principles mentioned at the classroom level: agreements – rewards – ignore. In each case it is also important to address the possible function of the behaviour, i.e. what the pupil is achieving through the behaviour – for example avoiding failure, maintaining a reputation, gaining favour with key people. Interventions which continue to satisfy the function which the behaviour serves, but through something other than the difficult behaviour, are most likely to be successful.

ENDNOTE

Schools and teachers seldom celebrate their own successes. In the area of behaviour, successful interventions are often not proclaimed, even amongst colleagues: indeed teachers sometimes attribute the cause of the success to external features. This is an opportunity missed. Schools are crowded complex organisations achieving complex goals. Their capacity to learn and develop in this area deserves further recognition and research.

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