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Behaviour in Scottish Schools

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Behaviour in Scottish Schools

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Introduction

Pupil behaviour in schools has been an issue of concern for many years and the subject of extensive research. The report produced by the Discipline Task Group, *Better Behaviour – Better Learning* (Scottish Executive, 2001), recognised the challenges that teachers and other professionals face, and acknowledged the wide-ranging causes of indiscipline. In light of this, funding was made available across Scotland for the implementation of the report's recommendations.

The 36 recommendations to the Scottish Executive, local authorities and schools aimed to promote positive behaviour through the provision of a range of strategies to support the needs of young people, and by effectively targeting support and resources to help teachers in delivering education. As a result of the recommendations, the Scottish Executive supported the piloting and subsequent development of a range of behaviour schemes or approaches in Scottish schools, for example, restorative practices and the Staged Intervention/Framework for Intervention (FFI) scheme.

The Scottish Executive has committed to instituting 'regular major surveys of teachers' and pupils' experiences and perceptions of behaviour and discipline in schools' (Scottish Executive, 2004a). This study represents the first of these surveys.

About the study

The main aims of the current study were to:

- provide clear and robust information on the nature and extent of behaviour (including positive behaviour) in publicly funded schools in Scotland
- examine what is effective in preventing and responding to indiscipline
- examine what is effective in promoting positive behaviour.

The study was designed to build on previous work conducted by Edinburgh University (Munn, Johnstone and Sharp, 2004), but to expand its scope. Thus, in addition to the views of headteachers and teachers, this study now also sought those of education authority representatives, additional support staff and pupils. It had 3 strands: telephone interviews with a representative of each of the 32 local authorities in Scotland; questionnaire surveys to 384 headteachers (which represents a 66 per cent response rate), 1080 teachers (a 53 per cent response rate) and 501 additional support staff (a 60 per cent response rate) in primary and secondary schools; a questionnaire survey to 1,461 pupils in 4 primary and 3 secondary schools (a 70 per cent response rate), as well as pupil focus groups and a contextual staff interview in those 7 schools; and 8 regional focus groups with school staff.

Overview

Overwhelmingly, the headteachers surveyed considered pupils to be generally well behaved in the classroom, as did the majority of teachers, additional support staff and pupils, albeit less emphatically than headteachers. Positive behaviour was reported much more frequently in primary schools than at secondary level.

How serious a problem is indiscipline in 2006?

Headteachers thought that indiscipline was less serious a problem than did teachers and additional support staff (see Table 1). Secondary school staff were consistently more likely than their primary counterparts to identify indiscipline as a serious problem. Comparing the percentages of staff rating the problem as 'very serious' with the findings from the Edinburgh University study in 2004, the present figures emerge as broadly similar.

Table 1: Headteacher, teacher and additional support staff ratings of how serious a problem indiscipline is in their own school

| Rating of how serious a problem indiscipline is in school | Headteachers | | Teachers | | Additional support staff | |
|---|--------------|-----|----------|------|--------------------------|-----|
| | % | (N) | % | (N) | % | (N) |
| Very serious 1 | 1 | 3 | 8 | 89 | 5 | 26 |
| 2 | 5 | 18 | 19 | 202 | 17 | 87 |
| 3 | 24 | 92 | 28 | 297 | 33 | 166 |
| 4 | 42 | 161 | 28 | 299 | 23 | 117 |
| Not serious at all 5 | 28 | 108 | 17 | 180 | 18 | 89 |
| No response | 1 | 2 | 1 | 13 | 3 | 16 |
| TOTAL | 100 | 384 | 100 | 1080 | 100 | 501 |

Source: NFER survey of school staff, 2006

Indiscipline was thought to occur predominantly in the 'school playground or yard', 'outside school precincts' or on 'corridors and stairs'. Secondary headteachers were more likely than primary headteachers to identify the 'classroom' as an arena for poor behaviour. P6 and P7 in primary schools and S2-S4 in secondary schools were identified by staff and pupils as the most challenging and/or difficult year groups. Individuals usually causing the indiscipline were reported to be: boys; pupils from dysfunctional homes; and those with behavioural/developmental difficulties.

Better Behaviour – Better Learning appears to have affected practice at a local authority level and, to a lesser extent, at school and classroom level. School staff felt generally aware of *Better Behaviour – Better Learning*, and showed support for a number of the recommendations being implemented in schools and classrooms.

The more confident teachers were and the more supported teachers felt by their schools, the more likely they were to register encountering positive behaviour in the classroom and around the school, and the less likely to report incidents of negative behaviour.

Behaviour in the classroom

Who is most likely to report positive behaviour?

There were acute differences in perceptions of the prevalence of positive behaviour in the classroom, depending on the 'world view' of the respondent type. Pupils themselves were least positive, then additional support staff, followed by teachers and finally the headteachers.

The specific types of positive behaviours that were reported to occur most frequently in lessons included 'pupils arriving promptly for classes', 'pupils contributing to class discussions' and 'pupils listening to the teacher respectfully'. Analysis by school sector, however, revealed that positive behaviours occurred much more frequently at primary level than they did in secondary schools.

There were also some differences in the perceptions of negative behaviour depending on the respondent type, with headteachers being the most positive, followed by teachers, additional support staff and then pupils. In addition, differences were seen between respondents at primary and secondary levels. Specific findings included:

- additional support staff were consistently more likely than teachers to identify low-level behaviours as happening in lessons several times a day. This could well be because pupils can be less inclined to do as they are asked by support staff. At the same time, close to half (44 per cent) of the sample of additional support staff was assigned to a particular pupil/pupils or class, which may have been on the grounds of the additional needs (one of which could be behaviour) exhibited by the pupil(s) or class.
- secondary headteachers were more likely than their primary counterparts to report that 'a few', or 'some' pupils were badly behaved in the classroom teachers. However, the tiny number of headteachers (2 per cent) who reported that 'most', or 'all/almost all' pupils were badly behaved in the classroom were primary headteachers. Factors affecting this might include: the small size of the school; higher levels of deprivation; or higher levels of special educational needs.

The classroom behaviours encountered by school staff (headteachers, teachers and additional support staff) most frequently within a typical week of teaching were low level, in particular 'talking out of turn', 'making unnecessary (non-verbal) noise', 'hindering or distracting others' and 'pupils leaving their seat without permission'. Pupils also identified these types of low-level indiscipline as the behaviours they observed in most of their lessons. More serious indiscipline, such as physical violence or aggression, was far less likely to occur on a daily basis, and was hardly ever directed at school staff. The very few incidents of racist or sexist abuse towards staff, and physical aggression or violence towards staff that were reported in the survey, occurred more frequently in primary schools than in secondary. Increasing numbers of 3- and 4-year olds were reported to be entering mainstream education with often complex difficulties, or a lack of basic social skills, which quite often resulted in behavioural problems.

As identified in the previous Edinburgh University study and reported by staff in the focus groups in the current study, it is the constant "drip, drip effect" (Munn *et al.*, 2004) of low-level bad behaviour that 'grinds' school staff down and contributes to a lowering of morale.

Most teachers in the survey, especially those in primary schools, did not find any of the behaviours they had reported particularly difficult to deal with. Headteachers and teachers reported that it was the low-level behaviours identified most frequently by school staff (in particular, talking out of turn), that had the greatest negative impact on teaching. Staff focus group participants noted that dealing with such behaviour "wasted" teachers' time and hindered teaching and learning. It was also said to be unfair to other pupils and could have a detrimental effect on their behaviour because they saw poor behaviour being "rewarded" through increased teacher attention. Pupil comments from their focus groups echoed those of school staff. They reported that negative behaviour in the classroom disrupted lessons and slowed down the learning process. Such behaviour was said to be "annoying" and unfair when "bad" pupils received all the teacher's attention. Some pupils noted that negative behaviour could escalate, especially if not contained by the teacher.

What sort of negative classroom behaviours do school staff encounter most frequently?

What effect does poor behaviour have on school staff and pupils?

How well behaved are pupils around the school?

Behaviour around the school

The vast majority of the school staff surveyed indicated that 'all/almost all' or 'most' of the pupils they encountered around the school were generally well behaved, although primary school staff reported seeing the positive behaviours more often than their secondary colleagues. Headteachers were the most positive, followed by teachers and then support staff. Again, pupils were the least positive in their assessment of their peers' behaviour around the school.

Teachers were more than twice as likely as headteachers to report that 'some' or 'most' pupils were badly behaved around school. However, as with negative behaviour in the classroom, the tiny number of headteachers who reported that 'all/almost all' pupils were badly behaved around school, were primary headteachers.

What sort of negative behaviour around school do teachers encounter most frequently?

The types of behaviour around the school encountered most frequently by headteachers and teachers were: 'running in the corridor'; 'unruliness while waiting'; 'persistently infringing school rules'; 'cheeky or impertinent remarks or responses'; 'showing a lack of concern for others'; 'loitering in 'prohibited' areas'; 'general pupil rowdiness or mucking about'; and, to a lesser extent, 'general verbal abuse towards other pupils'. Teachers were more likely than headteachers to identify these behaviours as ones they encountered on a daily basis. Secondary school staff in the focus groups particularly referred to corridors and stairs as locations for negative behaviour outside the classroom and also identified off-site locations at breaktimes and lunchtimes as particularly problematic in terms of behaviour.

Incidents of negative behaviour around school were reported more frequently (i.e. at least daily) in secondary schools than primary schools, possibly because of the greater opportunities for such behaviour afforded by moving from lesson to lesson. That said, the very rare incidents of physical aggression or violence towards staff that were reported around school occurred more frequently in primary schools than in secondary.

Overall, most teachers did not find the negative behaviour they had reported particularly difficult to deal with, although secondary teachers were more likely than their primary counterparts to identify some degree of difficulty in dealing with negative behaviour around school.

Complaints were not frequently received by headteachers, particularly at the primary level, from the general public, local community or the media about the conduct of their pupils outside the school premises. The most common basis for a complaint was, for primary headteachers, 'verbal abuse' and 'cheeky or impertinent remarks to members of the public', while for secondary headteachers, it was 'general rowdiness/horseplay' and 'anti-social behaviour'.

How serious a problem is pupil violence?

Headteachers, teachers and additional support staff did not perceive pupil violence to be a particular problem in their school. Teachers were the least positive of the three groups, with just over a third reporting that they thought it was a problem. Staff reporting pupil violence as a problem in their school were most likely to cite 'pupil-to-pupil verbal abuse/aggression'.

Pupil violence was considered to be more serious by secondary school staff, particularly secondary teachers.

Physical violence towards teachers was reported to be rare. A higher percentage of teachers and additional support staff identified verbal abuse/aggression towards teachers than did headteachers. Analysis showed a significant relationship between experience of

violence and the length of time headteachers had been in that role, but not for either of the other two staff groups (teachers and additional support staff). That said, however, far fewer teachers who had been in role for 3 years or less had experienced a violent incident compared with the proportion who had been teaching for 4 years or more.

The majority of school staff who had experienced violence against them had reported it. Headteachers were most likely to report violent incidents to the local authority, and teachers and primary additional support staff to the headteacher. Secondary support staff were more likely to refer incidents to their line manager in school and Senior Management Team (SMT) before the headteacher. Secondary headteachers also reported referring incidents to the police when appropriate.

Finally, local authority interviewees confirmed that most authorities operated a centralised system for schools to report incidents of violence by pupils to them. Incidents were typically recorded on a form within the school and logged onto a database by the local authority for termly or annual review. Follow-up after a serious or violent incident had been recorded included: identifying schools in need of additional support; offering direct support and counselling to staff; and (for very serious incidents) instigating risk assessments to look at what can be put in place to minimise the risks to staff and other pupils (e.g. de-escalation/physical intervention training).

Approaches to managing behaviour

Local authorities were rolling out, and piloting, a range of initiatives/strategies (e.g. Staged Intervention/FFI; Solution Oriented School; and Restorative Practices). In addition, the majority of schools operated a school-wide behaviour/discipline policy; used a range of rules and reward systems; had a school uniform; and were involving parents and pupils in school-wide issues. Pupil support bases; home-link workers; integrated support teams; pupil councils and buddying/mentoring schemes were used to a lesser extent.

What types of approaches to managing behaviour are being used in

Referral to a key member of staff was a much reported strategy for managing behaviour, with over three-quarters of headteachers and teachers 'frequently' or 'sometimes' employing it in their school. A third of both headteachers and teachers stated that they 'frequently' or 'sometimes' made a referral for an exclusion. Despite this, pupils in the focus groups highlighted that they thought schools could do more by: rewarding well behaved pupils; punishing (more severely) badly behaved pupils; a fairer treatment by teachers; removing badly behaved pupils; and making lessons more enjoyable.

Whole-school approaches to behaviour

The 'top-five' individuals included by headteachers in whole-school discussion were: teachers; pupils; learning support staff; parents; and educational psychologists. However, pupils involved in the survey and focus groups felt that they had not been included in deciding school rules or devising an anti-bullying policy. In addition, school staff identified the key factors in developing a whole-school approach to behaviour as:

- consistency
- involvement of parents and pupils
- SMT support
- school staff consultation
- flexibility.

The vast majority of teachers already felt confident in their ability to promote positive behaviour and deal with indiscipline in their classroom. Understanding individual pupils' learning styles and motivations, however, was the approach thought by teachers to be most likely to increase their confidence (personal safety training was deemed least likely).

Which approaches are thought to be most effective?

Local authority interviewees considered approaches such as Staged Intervention/FFI to be effective means of responding to indiscipline at a local authority level, as well as a comprehensive Continuing Professional Development (CPD) menu; integrated working amongst agencies; clear inclusion policy; and inclusion training. Effective approaches at a school and classroom level were: pupil support bases; alternative, flexible and appropriate curriculum; additional support/behaviour support staff; and Assertive Discipline.

Support available for staff

What support is available to school staff for managing behaviour?

A diverse range of CPD opportunities was on offer in local authorities, with nearly three-fifths of headteachers having received some CPD since being in their current post (predominantly provided by the local authority), and the majority of teachers having been involved in some kind of development activity related to behaviour in the last year. Despite this, many school staff requested more training in general that was of a practical and proactive nature. An absence of supply cover was highlighted as an issue.

In terms of local authority support, three-quarters of headteachers surveyed had received local authority support for trying new initiatives for promoting positive behaviour. Most primary headteachers received this support in the form of advice and consultancy, whereas most secondary headteachers received additional funding or support staff. In addition, headteachers, teachers and additional support staff all indicated that the education authority worked, to a moderately satisfactory level, with schools to promote positive behaviour. At a school level, all staff felt generally supported in their school (as measured by the level that staff could openly talk to colleagues; senior staff would help colleagues; and awareness of confidential support and counselling in the school). Headteachers were the most positive about both authority and school-level support, followed by additional support staff, then teachers. In addition, primary staff were consistently more positive and felt more supported than secondary staff. Finally, school staff who gave higher ratings of how the education authority worked in partnership with the school, also felt more supported by their school.

Teachers had access, to a reasonable degree, to a range of support to help them with a difficult class. Primary teachers had access to additional support staff, both in terms of whole-class and individual pupils, but had less access to support provided by senior management within their school than their secondary colleagues.

Conclusion

The majority of pupils were reported to be generally well behaved, both in the classroom and around school. Low-level negative behaviour continues to be the most prevalent form of indiscipline encountered in schools, yet focus group discussions would suggest that these are also the most wearing for staff. Headteachers continue to be more optimistic than their staff about indiscipline, whilst the overall picture remains more positive at primary level than at secondary. In the intervening period since the earlier research by Edinburgh University there has been no real decline in standards of behaviour nationally. However, it may be that addressing the common pattern of low-level indiscipline needs greater attention, particularly given its reported de-motivating effect on school staff.

**Does low-level
indiscipline need
greater attention?**

The very tiny number of schools where 'most' or 'all/almost all' children were said to exhibit negative behaviour were actually in the primary sector and the very few incidents of physical aggression and violence towards staff also occurred more frequently in primary school responses. These findings were corroborated by local authority staff and in staff focus group discussions, suggesting that cohorts of very young children are embarking on their school careers with often complex difficulties, or a lack of basic social skills, which can result in behavioural problems.

The report suggests that there are various 'world views' of indiscipline issues which co-exist within schools and which are dependent on an individual's status and role within the institution. Headteachers, teachers and additional support staff all have differing experiences of the degree and frequency of the positive behaviours and indiscipline they encounter. Recognising these differences and understanding the perspectives of others may be an important component of any training and professional development in this area.

Additional support staff consistently appeared to be more negative than other school staff. Their focus groups identified an increasing lack of confidence in their ability to deal with indiscipline, and this may well indicate the need for further support and training for such staff, especially where they rely on personal experience rather than a professional skill base to handle discipline issues. At the same time, additional support staff in the survey indicated that they were not regularly involved in whole-school discussions and training relating to behaviour. There may be value in schools giving greater consideration to fully integrating additional support staff into whole-school behavioural issues.

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