

Behaviour in Schools: is it as bad as they say – or is it worse?

Abstract

This chapter will explore a range of sources that inform the government, the public and schools; what constitutes inappropriate behaviour in schools and the range, and scale of, the perceived problem around poor behaviour in schools. The chapter charts 35 years of insights into the nature of behaviour in schools from the Elton Report (1989) to the Ofsted Report (2014), and considers whether the problem of inappropriate behaviour has changed for the better or worse – or indeed not changed at all. The chapter considers why the issue is deemed important, again by drawing on a range of government and academic reports. Finally, Haydn (2014) adds the learner voice to the discussion.

Introduction

Behaviour management is a key issue in schools and has been high on government agendas since 1988 when the Elton Report *Discipline in Schools* was commissioned by the then Department of Education and Science. Managing behaviour is important in schools for many reasons. There is a clearly established link between behaviour and learning (Powell and Tod 2004) and one of the main aims of schools is for children to have the opportunity to learn. A good standard of behaviour in a classroom allows the children to have the opportunity to learn without distraction whilst children who are actively engaged in learning have less inclination or opportunity to behave inappropriately and this allows teachers to teach. Schools are the training ground for work and for playing a full role in society. Developing appropriate behaviour allows children to learn both practical and social skills and qualities that will be required when they enter the workforce, where inappropriate behaviour will not be tolerated, and enable them to enjoy both their time at work and in their leisure. Appropriate behaviour in schools promotes a safe environment for both children and teachers, thus contributing to their wellbeing and enjoyment of the school experience which can have a positive effect on the quality of teaching and learning.

Impact of inappropriate behaviour on the teaching profession

The Importance of Teaching (2010), a government White Paper which led to the Education Act (2011), claimed

We know that among undergraduates considering teaching, fear of bad behaviour and violence is the most common reason for choosing an alternative career

(DfE 2010 p3)

DfE (2010) also claimed that a very common reason experienced teachers have for leaving teaching is inappropriate behaviour by pupils. Against statistics produced by the Department for Education (2014) that rising birth rates since 2002 will require an additional 400,000 state funded places for primary children by 2023 with a similar increase expected for state funded secondary school places, this raises a real concern that if prospective teachers are deterred from applying for teaching posts and current teachers are leaving the profession, there will be a shortage of teachers in the next decade. This also raises another concern that the decline in behaviour in schools with an increasing fear of violence is affecting pupils' opportunities to learn in a conducive, safe environment.

A further claim by DfE (2010) is that two thirds of teachers say their colleagues are being driven out of the profession because of poor pupil behaviour, generally identified as a lack of respect shown by pupils to teachers but, of course, this does not mean that two thirds of teachers are leaving or want to leave the profession, just that two thirds thought it was a reason why some teachers were leaving or wanted to leave.

Undergraduates and postgraduates considering teaching as a career will be aware of some of the claims made about poor behaviour in schools, often from the media which generally report on the most serious incidents in schools involving violence, even death. These prospective teachers need to ensure that they are fully aware of the facts regarding behaviour in schools to decide for themselves whether behaviour in schools is as bad as

suggested, or whether it might be even worse. They need also to consider whether there are other reasons why teachers might be leaving or considering leaving the profession.

Recent reports (Brown and Winterton 2010, Haydn 2014 and Ofsted 2014) suggest the situation remains a major concern with DfE (2013) confirming that it is poor pupil behaviour that continues to be the greatest concern of new teachers and why experienced teachers leave the profession.

There seems to be a difference in perceptions of prospective teachers and practising teachers. DfE (2011) agrees that poor pupil behaviour has caused teachers to either leave the profession or consider leaving the profession but points out that it is actually only in fourth place of reasons for leaving the profession, the top three being workload, initiative overload and target driven cultures in schools. Ratcliffe (2014) supports this view by citing workload and Ofsted inspections as the principal reasons why a third of all teachers consider leaving the profession. However, to put this into context Saunders (2013) reported that three quarters of all workers in both professional and non-professional occupations regret their career choices for one reason or another. A poll of undergraduates by the Department of Education in 2008 was highlighted by DfE (2011) claiming that prospective teachers were most likely to be deterred from teaching because of feeling unsafe in the classroom. However, if these prospective teachers are forming their opinions from what they have seen in the media, they perhaps need to weigh up the evidence taking into account their own first hand experiences in the classroom on placement as all prospective teachers will have had placement experience.

Impact of inappropriate behaviour on pupils

There is a wide ranging debate on inequality in the classroom based on gender, race, social background and other factors but it is interesting that Haydn (2014) considers that one of the biggest inequalities of opportunity in our classrooms arises from those pupils who are in classes that are well managed and controlled by their teachers and those who are not. He

considers that there is not just a difference in standards of behaviour between schools but also within schools. Anyone interested in education can reflect on their own experience at school to consider those classes where behaviour was good and those where it was less than good and think about any reasons that might have led to that behaviour.

The effect of inappropriate behaviour on pupils is very important. Inappropriate behaviour prevents the perpetrator from learning as well as impacting on the learning of others in a negative way and indeed Haydn (2014) considers that it has been clearly established that attainment is negatively impacted upon by inappropriate behaviour. Poor levels of behaviour can create an environment which feels unsafe for many pupils and this could lead to disengagement from learning and even truancy (Ferguson et al 2005). However, Brown and Winterton (2010) found in their study that although poor behaviour is present in schools, its impact is not so great as may be thought, particularly when the teacher is present.

Government intervention

In November 1987, the Professional Association of Teachers had written to the then Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, requesting that a Committee of Enquiry be set up to look at behaviour in schools based on their own survey findings that most teachers considered that behaviour in schools was declining and a third of its members had been physically attacked by pupils. This reported poor behaviour caused considerable unease in Parliament and in the public's eye, and led to the government's first intervention into behaviour in schools in England and Wales when they commissioned the Elton Report (1989) chaired by the Rt Hon Kenneth Baker, the then Secretary of State for the Department of Education and Science. The Elton Committee carried out the largest structured survey on teacher perceptions of behaviour in schools ever undertaken in Britain.

The conclusions of the Elton Report (1989) were that behaviour in schools cannot be measured with quantitative data and therefore they could not draw a conclusion that behaviour was actually getting worse, but recognised teacher perceptions that behaviour

was getting worse year on year in their careers. One of the important findings of the Elton Report (1989) was that inappropriate behaviour was not recorded by schools in terms of types of inappropriate behaviour or the number of incidents although exclusions were recorded by some LEAs, but not all. This was restated by DfE (2011) that data collected by the Department for Education did not evidence the state of behaviour in schools or the commonality of its occurrence. If the evidence then of declining behaviour is based on teachers' perceptions rather than statistical data, perhaps behaviour has not actually declined but teachers just feel it has - maybe because of now having to manage classrooms against a background of higher workloads, initiative overload and target driven cultures.

Ofsted's views

A general overview of behaviour in schools is provided by Ofsted in their Annual Reports and in 2010, behaviour was deemed to be good or better than good in 89% of primary schools and 70% of secondary schools (Ofsted 2010), continuing a trend of Ofsted Reports claiming that behaviour was not a serious issue. DfE (2011), however, found that teachers considered Ofsted Reports did not reflect their own experiences and that head teachers were not always honest with Ofsted Inspectors. Head teachers were reported to employ two strategies to avoid inspectors observing inappropriate behaviour – firstly, suspending badly behaved pupils during inspections and secondly, appointing supply teachers whom Ofsted would not observe. DfE (2011) also criticised Steer (2005 and 2009) for relying too heavily on Ofsted Reports for his own findings on the state of behaviour in schools, and concluding that such behaviour was improving without considering sufficiently other available evidence. However, the latest Ofsted Report (2014 p4) raises concerns that behaviour in schools is “deeply worrying” because pupils' learning and their life chances are being negatively impacted on and, again, concern that very good teachers are being driven away from the profession.

It seems, therefore, that the official reports from Ofsted until 2014 and government commissioned reports by Elton (1989) and Steer (2005, 2009 and 2010) paint a picture that behaviour in schools is improving and looking good; whereas the media, politicians and teachers suggest otherwise, and this latter view is finally echoed by Ofsted in their 2014 Report. It is the disparity between these two sets of sources that need to be explored by prospective teachers for them to make up their own minds on the current scale of the problem, or if the problem exists at all. The current state of behaviour in schools is not known because it is based on the subjective views of teachers based on their anecdotes and experiences (DfE 2011).

Teachers' views

Poor behaviour in schools ranges from low level disruption to more serious incidents including violence although there is no clear guideline as to what constitutes low level disruption, what constitutes serious incidents and how often they are occurring.

The biggest dataset on behaviour in schools is produced by Ofsted inspectors in their reports when inspecting schools. However, they can only report on what they see and what they are told. With the pressures head teachers are under from performance tables to the marketization of schools, it is not surprising that they try to present as positive a picture as they can to inspectors and the parents of prospective pupils. Teachers too may not wish to admit they have problems controlling their pupils as this challenges their own professional skills and qualities. On the other hand, teachers may exaggerate the seriousness of behaviour in order to gain school and public support outside the Ofsted arena for not achieving higher attainment levels.

Steer (2010) purports that behaviour standards in primary and secondary schools are high for most children with only a few of the 7 million children in schools behaving poorly. He considers that standards have risen since the Elton Report (1989) and negative views are promoted by media reports of rare major incidents. The Guardian (2014) reports that

Michael Gove (the then Education Secretary) similarly believed that there has been considerable improvement in the standards of behaviour in schools, but also echoed Steer (2010) that there is still more to be done.

Recent views

The Association of Teachers and Lecturers undertook a survey of its members in 2011 and concluded that there was no clear research that behaviour in schools was worse, the same or better but that its members felt that behaviour was deteriorating. It is difficult to quantify inappropriate behaviour without a clear definition of what constitutes inappropriate behaviour or possible boundaries to what it might be. Children talking in class whilst they are working on set tasks might be seen by one teacher as inappropriate behaviour whilst another teacher might consider that talking helps the learning process.

Haydn (2014) considers that the true extent of disruptive behaviour is underestimated in terms of the scale of the problem, the nature of the problem and the complexity of the problem. By including the complexity, he develops the discussion by adding the issue of children who might lack social skills and those who do not want to learn, or both. This develops the teacher's role from trying to manage behaviour to trying to understand the causes of it and echoes the conceptual framework developed by Powell and Tod (2004) who consider that identifying the underlying causes of inappropriate behaviour is necessary to support a change in that behaviour through a range of behaviour management strategies.

Ofsted produce annual reports on schools and the consistent message being given over the last few years up to 2014 is that behaviour is improving. In 2012, behaviour was satisfactory or above in 99.7% of schools. If behaviour is satisfactory or better in 99.7% of schools, this means behaviour is unsatisfactory (or inadequate in Ofsted terms) in only 0.3% of schools. This is looking good and cause for celebration but might have a different meaning. Ofsted grades are outstanding, good, requires improvement (formerly satisfactory) and inadequate. So today Ofsted would say that behaviour is requiring improvement or better in 99.7% of

schools which paints quite a different picture. Ofsted (2010) declared that behaviour was good or better in 89% of primary schools and 70% of secondary schools. The percentages have increased but the criterion has changed from good or better to requiring improvement (satisfactory) or better. And so it is argued that behaviour has declined and Ofsted was masking the problem. Of course, Ofsted (2014 p4) has now changed their position and declared behaviour in schools to be “deeply worrying”.

Ofsted (2013) focused on teaching and learning in good schools and made the link with good behaviour at several points but made very little mention of schools where inappropriate behaviour occurred – this suggests that Ofsted was avoiding discussing inappropriate behaviour in schools which bucked the trend from earlier reports where they positively portrayed behaviour in schools. To the reader, it suggested that inappropriate behaviour in schools may no longer have been an issue. However, Ofsted (2014) has clearly articulated that the problem still exists and is worse than previously portrayed.

Elton (1989) drew on press comments that physical attacks on teachers were commonplace but their findings were that teachers did not consider such attacks were a major problem and certainly not the most difficult behaviour that they had to deal with (Elton 1989). Elton (1989 p11) further recognised that major incidents were not the problem but that the most difficult behaviour, according to the teachers consulted, was the high level of “trivial but persistent” behaviour including talking out of turn, hindering the learning of other pupils and deliberate task-avoidance whilst physical violence was ranked only 10th in order of concern. This state of behaviour was found in both primary and secondary schools and the list can go on – children tapping their pens on the desk, walking round the room, talking to each other, passing notes to each other, using their phones, poking each other, pulling silly faces at each other – all arguably minor infringements of behaviour that could perhaps be ignored in small doses. However, as Elton (1989) points out, there is a high level of this behaviour and this starts to impact on learning in the classroom as children cannot concentrate amid this type of disruption, teachers spend too much time dealing with inappropriate behaviour and of

course the miscreants themselves cannot be learning whilst they are focusing on their 'off task' behaviour.

Defining inappropriate behaviour

Low level disruption was identified as the most persistent form of inappropriate behaviour in the Elton Report (1989) and Ofsted (2006), and echoed more recently by DfE (2011) and Ofsted (2014) to include name calling, swearing, not listening, interrupting and fighting, although it is questionable whether fighting can be considered low level disruption. Low level disruption is increasing and is the biggest challenge to teachers (Brown and Winterton 2010) and cyber bullying particularly among teenage girls is also increasing. Verbal aggression is commonplace between pupils and physical attacks are more likely to be against boys. It is interesting that whilst Winterton and Brown (2010) were writing about violence in schools, they too found that it was the low level disruption that was the biggest challenge facing teachers.

Steer (2005) recognises that persistent low level disruption affects both pupils and teachers – pupils' learning is interrupted, staff are stressed and importantly, low level disruption can be the breeding ground for more serious issues to occur. A letter from Tony Blair, the then Prime Minister, to Steer in 2005 added his voice to the definition of inappropriate behaviour including "backchat and disrespect" (Steer 2005 p86). In 2009, Steer revisited behaviour in schools and repeated that inappropriate behaviour in schools could not be tolerated but that there is

strong evidence from a range of sources that the overall standards of behaviour achieved by schools is good and has improved in recent years

Steer (2009 p4)

Again, this must now be considered in light of the 2014 Ofsted Report.

Earlier reports generally focused on the views of teachers and the observations of Ofsted inspections but Haydn (2014) collated pupils' views on behaviour in schools that diverts

them from their learning and found recurring themes – children being disruptive of their own and others' learning, throwing things around in class and being off task – all issues of low level disruption but on a scale that makes it a high level problem. Here, the pupil voice is telling us that there is a problem and that they are feeling its effects.

Elton (1989) also considered physical aggression in schools and found that contrary to media and government concerns that there was violence in the classroom and teachers fear this violence, there is in fact little violence in schools and what there is generally involves children fighting with each other, and any physical harm occurring to teachers is incidentally caused by intervening in children fighting, and not by pupils attacking teachers. However, whilst this might be reassuring for prospective teachers, perhaps it is not so for pupils and their parents.

Ofsted (2005) provided examples of challenging behaviour which go beyond low level disruption to include physical attacks such as pinching other children and throwing furniture.

Brown and Winterton (2010 p 12) report that definitions of violence vary widely but drew on the work of Benbenishty and Astor (2005) who defined school violence as

behaviour intended to harm, physically or emotionally, persons in school as well as their property and school property

(Benbenishty and Astor (2005) cited in Brown and Winterton (2010 p 12)

This would include physical attacks on pupils and teachers, fighting, damaging property, bullying, cyber bullying and verbal aggression.

Extreme violence including that leading to death is very rare in the UK and carrying weapons is also low (Brown and Winterton 2010). There are media reports about inappropriate conduct in schools carried out by both pupils and teachers but fortunately very serious cases of violence are rare, two prominent and extreme cases being the murders of Philip Lawrence in 1995 and Ann Maguire in 2014.

Inappropriate behaviour from outside the school

Serious issues do not just arise from pupils and teachers but also from parents. According to Brown and Winterton (2010) 40% of teachers reported that they had had to deal with aggressive parents and it is common now to see notices outside both primary and secondary schools warning parents that staff at the schools will not tolerate abuse or aggression from parents or other carers.

Haydn (2014) reports that in 2010, the Prime Minister David Cameron cited that there were 17,000 assaults on teachers each year and he highlights that 330,000 pupils were excluded from school in 2010/2011, 5,080 being permanent exclusions. With just under 7 million children in the school system, this equates to 1 in 20 children being excluded which seems a high number – at least one child per class is excluded each year? However, these are all exclusions and the majority of these are fixed term but it still suggests that behaviour in schools is such that exclusions are necessary, whether fixed term or permanent and therefore the government reports and Ofsted before 2014 were masking a real problem.

Inappropriate behaviour from teachers

Having considered inappropriate behaviour by pupils, there is another strand here – inappropriate behaviour by teachers. Haydn (2014) found that pupils reported that their learning was affected by teachers who could not control their classes and did not deal with inappropriate behaviour when it occurred. Haydn (2014) also concluded that whilst there were variations in the standards of behaviour between schools, there were also variations in standards of behaviour within schools. This reflects the pupils' views that individual teachers are responsible for whether their classes are well behaved or not (Haydn 2014). Haydn (2014) cites Gove (2010) who looked at the issue from a different perspective when he recognised that learning could be disrupted where discipline had broken down. This suggests that it is not the behaviour that is the problem but rather the lack of appropriate strategies being implemented by teachers and this could be viewed as inappropriate

behaviour by teachers. Powell and Tod (2004) explored the notion that two possible underlying causes of inappropriate behaviour can be relationship with others and relationship with the curriculum. How teachers behave and interact with pupils alongside their level of teaching skills can affect pupils' levels of engagement or disengagement with school or individual lessons, possibly leading to inappropriate behaviour as a means of avoiding the learning process.

This suggests that inappropriate behaviour is not the disease but is the symptom of other underlying causes. Whilst government and Ofsted reports are generally silent on inappropriate behaviour by teachers (with the exception of the link between good teaching and good behaviour), the media are not so silent and report on inappropriate behaviour by teachers including misuse of social network sites.

Solution still needed

Considering the diverse evidence available on the scale of the problem of inappropriate behaviour in schools and the lack of agreement on the definition of low level disruption and serious misbehaviour, it is difficult to be absolutely conclusive about whether behaviour has declined, stayed the same or improved over the last 25 years since the Elton Report (1989) was produced. The publication of the Ofsted Report (2014) suggests a U-turn as it now declares there is a serious problem in schools, contradicting previous reports based on different criteria. However, prospective teachers will have been in schools prior to seeking a teaching position, either as part of their B Ed placement or as part of voluntary placements in preparation for the PGCE interview and so should have an understanding of what behaviour is like in schools. Prospective teachers will also perhaps consider whether they can rise to the challenge of being an inspirational teacher who can win the hearts and minds of pupils so that they will want to engage in the learning process and thus have no time for inappropriate behaviour. From the government's point of view, there needs to be recognition that children are being adversely affected by inappropriate behaviour in class. Ofsted (2014)

recommend that the main issue is teachers being inconsistent with setting behaviour management rules and dealing with inappropriate behaviour. A whole school approach led by the headteacher and senior leadership team as recommended by Elton (1989), Steer (2005) and DfE (2010) should lead teachers in that aim of consistency and support them in managing inappropriate behaviour.

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