

Alternative Approaches to Behaviour Management in Schools: An Exploration of Senior School Leaders' Experiences, Beliefs and Perceptions of Interventionist Behaviour Management Systems

Laura Oxley
Department of Education, University of York
lo590@york.ac.uk

Received: November 2015

Accepted: March 2016

Published: September 2016

Keywords: behaviour management, alternative, school leaders, experience, phenomenology

Research Note

The subject of challenging behaviour in schools is rarely out of the media spotlight. Examples of challenging behaviour range from disrupting the learning of others to shouting and swearing and even to physical assaults (Richardson, 2016). Many schools in England typically respond to this type of behaviour with an interventionist approach, enforcing punishment as a consequence of failing to observe the school rules. Yet, despite the popular media opinion that disruptive students need to be punished more often and more severely (Sellgren, 2013), research suggests that this punitive approach does not work for a core minority of students (Greene, 2008; Martinez, 2009; Searle, 2001). These students instead become caught in a cycle of sanctions gradually increasing in severity and potentially leading to exclusion from school (Greene, 2008). If punishment were an effective way of dealing with challenging behaviour, there would be no need for this cycle to continue.

Alternative approaches have already been adopted in some English schools (Abdelnoor, 2014). These approaches recognise the value of building relationships between students and teachers and encourage a collaborative approach to resolving issues. Examples of these approaches include strategies based on Glasser's choice theory (Hewitson, 2012; Glasser, 1985), Greene's Collaborative and Proactive Solutions (Greene, 2008), restorative practice (Thorsborne & Blood, 2013), and suggestions drawn from attachment theory (Bombèr, 2007; Geddes, 2006). At the core of all these alternative approaches to

interventionist behaviour management is the philosophy that students should be treated with respect and encouraged to have an active voice in problem solving.

The importance of building relationships with students has long been understood by teachers, as is illustrated by this quote from Demia in 1716 who, almost 300 years ago, stated in the *Règlement pour les ecoles de la ville de Lyon* (Regulations for schools of the city of Lyon) that “It will be very beneficial when the teacher is obliged to use punishment, to win the heart of the child if he can before doing so” (Demia, 1716, cited in Foucault, 1991, p. 180). Whilst it is now being recognised in some schools that building relationships with pupils is a more beneficial practice than the use of punishment, many English schools still base their approach to behaviour management on a system of extrinsic motivation, with rewards promised for conforming to school expectations and sanctions being enforced for failure to do so.

My PhD research aims to discover what lies behind the continued use of interventionist behaviour management strategies in English schools. It will explore this by answering three questions:

- 1) What are senior school leaders’ experiences, beliefs and perceptions of interventionist behaviour management systems in both mainstream schools and Pupil Referral Units?
- 2) What are senior school leaders’ attitudes towards, and knowledge of, alternative approaches?
- 3) What are the perceived barriers that are preventing schools from implementing alternative approaches to behaviour management?

Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with an “expert group” of twenty participants. Each participant will be selected based on the criteria that they are a key decision maker within school, employed in a role where they have significant or sole influence on how challenging behaviour is responded to. Participants are anticipated to encompass a range of different job roles, including head teachers, assistant principals, and inclusion managers, among others. This is because different schools allocate the responsibility for decision making in behaviour management to different employees. Participants will be drawn from a range of schools in England, comprising of six secondary schools, six primary schools, four independent schools, and four Pupil Referral Units. Data collection will take place throughout the academic year 2015/16 and, to date (March 2016),

sixteen participants (80%) have already been recruited and eleven interviews (55%) have been conducted. On occasion, two participants have been drawn from the same school. This decision was taken because in some schools the responsibility for behaviour management policy and response is shared. As an example, the head teacher will retain an oversight of the behaviour policy but the day to day management of situations will be carried out by a deputy head. The study has received ethical approval from the University of York, in line with the British Psychological Society's (BPS) Code of Ethics and Conduct.

The interviews will be analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). This methodology was chosen as it enables a focus on the idiosyncratic experience of each individual participant. It was felt that this would most appropriately answer my research question in relation to the experiences, beliefs and perceptions of senior school leaders. My research questions are well suited to qualitative research as experiences and perceptions cannot be neatly categorised or assigned to numerical codes. IPA is particularly well suited to my research design due to its focus on how people make sense of phenomenon, in this case how senior school leaders make sense of their experiences of behaviour management systems in schools. Overarching themes will be identified within each education sector (primary, secondary, independent, and Pupil Referral Units), as well as within the participant group as a whole.

In addition to the interview data, a large scale survey will be conducted online. All head teachers at Pupil Referral Units in England (approximately 330 in total), as well as a sample of head teachers from mainstream primary and secondary schools across England (approximately 350), will be invited to take part. The data gathered from this survey, incorporating almost 700 participant views, will enable a wide range of views and experiences to be shared on the subject of behaviour management and the attitudes towards different approaches. Even if there is only a 25% response rate, this will still give a potential data set of about 170 participants. The survey will be sent out in the autumn term of the 2016/17 academic year.

The combination of thematic analysis of the large scale survey data alongside the in depth IPA analysis of the semi-structured interviews will give the study breadth as well as depth. Whilst using a survey as a data collection tool will elicit more restricted responses than using a more in depth qualitative data collection method such as interviewing, the number of responses that it will be possible to gather using an online survey will create a large data set

which will enable analysis of a range of views from many participants. It would not be possible to gain this number of views through recruiting participants for interviews due to the amount of time this would take.

In summary, the study aims to identify the perceived barriers that are currently holding schools back from introducing alternative approaches to behaviour management, despite the evidence which suggests that the current interventionist approach is not working (Martinez, 2009; Greene, 2008; Parsons and Castle, 1998). The hope is that this will shed light on innovative solutions as to how these barriers can be overcome and empower schools to pave the way to a more effective response to challenging behaviour, ultimately resulting in less stress for school staff and better outcomes for students.

References

- Abdelnoor, A. (2014). "Good relationships and behaviour policy". *Inaura: the inclusion charity*. Retrieved September 15, 2015, from <http://www.inaura.net>
- Bombèr, L. M. (2007). *Inside I'm hurting: Practical strategies for supporting children with attachment difficulties in school*. London: Worth Publishing.
- Foucault, M. (1991). *Discipline and punish*. London: Penguin Books.
- Geddes, H. (2006). *Attachment in the classroom: The links between children's early experiences, emotional well-being and performance in school*. London: Worth Publishing.
- Glasser, W. (1985). *Choice theory in the classroom*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Greene, R. W. (2008). *Lost at school: Why our kids with behavioural challenges are falling through the cracks and how we can help them*. New York: Scribner.
- Hewitson, K. (2012). *Understanding learning needs*. Northampton: Advocating Creativity.
- Martinez, S. (2009). A system gone berserk: How are zero tolerance policies really affecting schools? *Preventing School Failure: alternative education for children and youth*, 53(3), 153-158.
- Parsons, C. and Castle, F. (1998). The cost of school exclusion in England. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 2(4), 277-294.
- Richardson, H. (2016). Four in 10 teachers "attacked by pupils". *BBC News*. Retrieved March, 2016, from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-35431782>
- Searle, C. (2001). *An exclusive education: Race, class, and exclusion in British schools*. London: Lawrence and Wishart Limited.
- Sellgren, K. (2013, March 23). Disruptive behaviour rising, teachers say. *BBC News*. Retrieved September 15, 2015, from <http://www.bbc.com/news/education-21895705>
- Smith, J. A., Flowers, P. and Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, methods, and research*. London: Sage.
- Thorsborne, M. and Blood, P. (2013). *Implementing restorative practices in schools*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.