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Beyond Disruption: identifying effective behaviour support in schools

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Introduction and overview

Behaviour in schools is a continuing policy concern internationally (Hue, 2010; Ball *et al.*, 2012). Many countries develop policies to promote inclusion of all pupils, including those whose behaviour is considered as 'challenging', in mainstream schools (Wearmouth and Glynn, 2004). Much of the literature suggests that the most common form of pupil misbehaviour is low-level disruptive behaviour which includes talking out of turn, work avoidance, hindering other pupils and making distracting noises intentionally (Sullivan *et al.*, 2014; Scottish Government, 2016).

In Scottish schools, there is an increase in low-level disruptive behaviours, and class exclusion and internal exclusion are some of the different practices adopted by schools in terms of exclusion (Scottish Government, 2016). However, rates of disciplinary exclusion/expulsion have reduced (Scottish Government, 2015), representing schools' and councils' efforts to adopt a range of approaches to engage pupils in their education.

Research shows the different approaches that are used in schools to achieve greater inclusion including restorative and nurturing approaches, but also illustrates the challenges that schools experience (Black *et al.*, 2012; Mouroutsou, 2017). Those approaches employ different strategies and practices. For example, a restorative approach employs practices such as emotional and social literacy skills, circle time, solution focused interventions, relational pedagogy training for teachers, restorative ethos building, use of restorative language informal restorative conversations, and restorative group work with students and/or families (McCluskey, 2018).

Taking the Scottish Attainment Challenge into consideration, the emphasis on positive relationships and behaviour (Scottish Government, 2013) as well as the link between learning and behaviour (Head, 2005) (such as for example the association of school-level behaviour approaches with improvements in attainment), it is important to explore the practices that schools have adopted and are considered to be effective and the adaptations that make a difference in practice. Therefore, the aim of this study was to identify practices that are considered to be effective and the characteristics that make an approach effective. This project was funded by the British Academy. This short report presents a summary of the key findings.

The study sought to answer three key research questions:

1. What approaches and practices are considered by teachers to be effective in terms of behaviour support?
2. What are the differences in the adaptations of similar approaches adopted by different secondary mainstream schools?
3. What are the important characteristics that can make an approach effective?

Research Methods

This report is the product of two sources of data:

- Initially, a questionnaire developed by the author was distributed to secondary mainstream schools in Scotland in order to identify the approaches that schools have adopted and the effective practices on behaviour support. The results of the questionnaires also facilitated the identification of the sample of teachers who would be interviewed. Thirty-four mainstream

schools from different local authorities replied to the questionnaire, completed mainly by Headteachers, Depute Headteachers and Principal Teachers Pupil Support.

- Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with six teachers in total from six schools from across Scotland. The interviews offered information about the effective practices that the schools have adopted and the characteristics of these approaches that make them effective. Schools of different sizes and from both urban and rural areas of Scotland participated.

For this research, the necessary procedures for ethical compliance were followed. The review process and approval were conducted by the General University Ethics Panel (GUEP) of the University of Stirling. Pseudonyms are used to ensure the anonymity of the participants.

Main research findings

The research explored the approaches and practices adopted by schools during school year 2017-2018.

- Seven schools replied through the questionnaire that they have adopted restorative approaches while 23 schools utilised multiple approaches (nurturing approach, nurture group, solution focused approaches, 1-to-1 approach, person-centred) and reinforcement of positive behaviours. Four schools replied that their policy is based on positive relationships.
- Three out of the six schools that participated in the interviews were going through the process of updating their policies. Also, two of them had just moved to restorative approaches.
- The interviewees offered examples of different practices that their schools have adopted (Table 1). Learning and/or behaviour bases, classroom support and communication with parents were strategies that were discussed with all the teachers.
- Three interviewees explained that their schools try to move away from a punitive approach, however, practices such as punishment exercises and detentions which can be seen as examples of that approach are still employed.

	School A	School B	School C	School D	School E	School F
Base (Learning and/or behaviour)	X	X	X	X	X	X
Behaviour card/ behaviour support sheets/ target sheet	X	X			X	X
Celebrating success assemblies				X	X	
Classroom support (pupil support assistant)	X	X	X	X	X	X
Class teacher strategies (verbal warning, change seats etc)		X		X		
Communication with parents	X	X	X	X	X	X
Detention and/or punishment exercises	X		X	X		
Education (social education)	X				X	X
Internal exclusion	X	X		X		X
Interventions		X		X	X	
External exclusion	X	X				
Guidance	X	X	X	X	X	X
Nurture group	X	X				X
Restorative conversation/discussion/exercise	X	X	X	X	X	
Referral System	X		X		X	X
Merits-Demerits		X		X	X	X
Specialist support	X				X	X
Transfer system/supervision	X		X			

[TABLE 1: examples of practices adopted by schools]

Effective approaches and practices

A list of the approaches and practices that the interviewee teachers consider to be effective follows.

- **Positive relationships:** Two interviewees commented that their policy is based on positive relationships and highlighted the importance of positive communications and relationships. As Anna (School A) emphasised, teachers' relationships with the young people and '*a more nurturing, caring approach rather than a punitive one*' makes a difference.
- **One to one conversation:** Three interviewees replied that one to one conversation with the pupils is the most effective practice as pupils have the opportunity to talk and reflect on a situation, moving away from a punitive system. As Sean (School B) stressed, pupils, parents and members of staff believe that instead of a punishment exercise or detention, having the opportunity to talk is more effective.
- **Restorative conversations**
Anna (School A) explained that restorative conversations help young people understand their behaviours because they can reflect on how they have acted and who is going to be impacted. As Julie (School C) explained, young people are asked to focus and reflect on what happened; what they could have done better and what they will do next time when they face similar situation.
- **Nurturing approach and nurture group:** Two interviewees discussed the importance of a nurturing approach focusing on the classroom being a safe base. Anna (School A) explained that it is important to be caring and see the person rather than the behaviour. Three interviewees also discussed about their school's nurture groups and their purpose.
- **Quality of teaching and learning:** Three interviewees discussed the link between learning and behaviour. They emphasised the importance of ensuring that young people can access learning, engage and improve in different ways. Approaches that tend to focus on learning and engagement are significant and young people can see the value in the lesson.
- **Social stories:** Kate (School E) explained that the use of social stories, where the pupils have to identify the behaviour, the reason and consequences of that behaviour, have a conversation with the teacher and write the story, is particularly effective at their school.
- **Behaviour card:** Kate (School E) explained that the use of a behaviour card (usually forms that are completed and signed by teachers at the end of the class commenting on a pupil's behaviour) was particularly effective for a specific pupil in her school.

This boy has been on a behaviour card on and off. He was on a behaviour card about this time last year, actually, and he came to me and said, look, I am getting into too much trouble again, can I go on a behaviour card. (Kate, School E)

Most schools had similar approaches and practices, however, their implementation differed. Differences were observed mainly in three practices:

- Bases: School B has both a learning and a behaviour base while the other four schools have a base for both, learning and behaviour.

- Restorative conversations: Five teachers discussed the use of restorative conversations. The way they understand and conduct the conversation with pupils differed. For example, in some schools a long discussion takes place between the teacher/s and the young people. Sometimes parents are also present and young people have to reflect on how they have acted, while an interviewee teacher replied that in their school a restorative discussion is short.
- Behaviour cards: Four interviewees discussed the use of behaviour cards. The way the cards are developed and used differs from school to school. For example, Kate (School E) explained that the young person creates his/ her card with the teacher after having discussed and agreed on specific targets, while in the other schools the targets are given to the young people.

Characteristics of effective approaches and practices

A list of the important characteristics that can make an approach effective according to the interviewee teachers follows.

- Clarity
- Clear communication
- Consistent adult behaviour
- Flexibility
- Focus on the relationships
- Increased quality of teaching and learning
- More proactive than reactive
- Positive language
- Pupils in the centre
- Pupils having a voice and being able to evaluate support
- Reflecting rather than punitive system
- Staff relationships- work collectively as a team.
- Teachers' beliefs
- Teachers to have training and confidence
- Whole-school approach

Training and challenges

Schools and teachers were also asked about any training opportunities. A variety of public and private sector training including nurture approaches, solution focused approaches, family network conferencing and restorative approaches has been offered to most schools who completed the questionnaire. A few schools replied that there has been no official training.

Five main challenges emerged from the teachers' interviews:

- Staff shortage
- Teachers' beliefs
- Resources/ Funding
- Consistency
- Parents and social media

Conclusions

- The findings give us a better idea about the different approaches and practices with regards to behaviour support that have been adopted by different secondary mainstream schools in Scotland. Restorative, nurture and solution focused approaches are the approaches mostly employed by schools according to the findings from the questionnaires and interviews. Five of the interviewed teachers discussed the use of restorative approach and two of them mentioned that their school had just moved to restorative approaches. Some of the schools involved in this project still embrace a punitive approach, although we know that 'little evidence supports punitive and exclusionary approaches' (Osher et al. 2010, p. 48). However, the effort of schools to move away from a punitive approach was clear through the interviews.
- The teachers offered several examples of approaches and practices that have been adopted by their school. Some of the practices are short term, reactive and punitive such as detention, punishment exercises and internal/external exclusion. However, the approaches and practices that are considered by the interviewees to be the most effective are proactive rather than reactive. For example, a nurture provision is a proactive approach that is longer term and prevention focused.
- Teachers' views about their schools' effective practices indicate that some practices are more effective in some schools than others and that even when schools adopt the same practice they implement it in different ways based on their context. This suggests that what 'works' in a school might not 'work' in another school.
- A list of elements of effective approaches and practices emerged from the teachers' interviews.

The examples of good practice included in this report illustrate some of the strategies that schools use to support pupils. These are best viewed through a critical lens as the way a practice is implemented might differ depending on the context of the school, teachers' beliefs and the pupils.

The findings from this study invite reflection on the different practices, the culture of schools, the existing belief systems, teachers' teaching philosophies and teachers' professional education. Also, the findings can be used to further develop the provision of support in schools in Scotland and beyond.

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