

# Improving School Behaviour

**Chris Watkins**      **Chair NAPCE London**  
**Head of Group, Institute of Education University of London**

## *What do we know about improving school behaviour?*<sup>1</sup>

There are three major impediments which can stand in the way of improving behaviour in a particular school:

1. the way in which difficulty is explained and described
2. the attempt to employ "one-size-fits-all" solutions
3. the focus and style of intervention

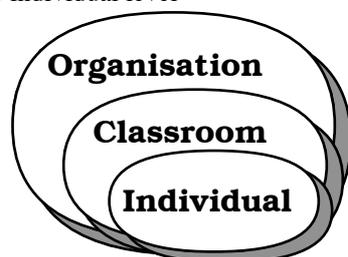
Studies of sustained improvement suggest that

1. we need to paint ourselves back into the picture when explaining difficulty
2. we need diagnostic thinking about the patterns in school
3. we need to develop proactive improvement which relates to the classroom and the school as a social and learning community.

"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"<sup>2</sup>. This broad starting point has the positive effect of bringing the school back into the picture from which it so often leaves itself out.

To put the school into the picture, it is useful to identify three levels, at each of which behaviour is patterned in a range of ways:

- a. the organisation level
- b. the classroom level
- c. the individual level



Each level needs different ideas for understanding and intervening. The distinction is useful, for example on occasions when someone suggests that the whole organisation needs to change for an individual pattern that is not widespread - the proposed solution is not well matched to the problem! These three levels are reflected in research on effective interventions<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> 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<sup>4</sup>

## *What needs improving?*

The patterns of difficulty are unique to each school and classroom. However, a couple of broad trends are worth reflecting on. In a range of studies, teachers in secondary, middle, primary and nursery schools in the West Midlands, England and Wales generally, and as far afield as St. Helena Singapore and South Australia identify the most frequently occurring troublesome behaviour, the most difficult to deal with, and the behaviour of the most difficult classes as 'talking out of turn'. This is not the picture of violence and assault beloved by the more sensationalist sections of the media. It is useful to consider what purpose is served by amplifying a problem. Sometimes those who do it cry "something has to be done!", and their cries may promote a distorted picture. Action based on such a picture can bring about a deteriorating rather than improving situation. In many staff-rooms there are voices which seem to amplify difficulties, and it is sometimes difficult to know how to respond. One approach is to seek clear evidence to place alongside their view, so that whatever action follows is based on fact, not just feeling.

## *Improving the explanations*

Schools vary in the styles of 'explanation' they use for 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<sup>5</sup> 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, and that there is a strong suggestion of a trend towards higher rates of suspension amongst those who tend to have less confidence in their own power to tackle the problem.

Improvement is difficult to achieve in a climate of blame. The language used to discuss the contribution of teachers

and school will be crucial - it needs to be highly professional in order not to appear to simply blame. Blaming teachers is just as unproductive as blaming pupils. Managing the improvement process may include managing the language used. Most teachers can see the disadvantages of the external and internal 'explanations' above. An explicit agreement can be made to avoid their over-use. Teachers do accept school-based strategies as the responses 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<sup>4</sup>.

### ***Patterns of Behaviour at the School Level***

Learning from school differences and their relations to patterns of behaviour, it becomes possible to ask:

#### ***How does your school behave?***

The whole school picture creates an important context for interventions at the classroom level. Improvement process needs to reflect the particular school's starting point: it is not a case of "one size fits all"

One starting point is that of school self-evaluation on dimensions which have some research backing. This leads to useful discuss between colleagues and the identification of areas for improvement

#### ***1. Proactive schools have better behaviour.***

There is little relationship between a school's discipline policy and the perceived level of student misbehaviour<sup>6</sup>. Reactive schools can experience things going down hill, especially with the "tariff" version of "school policy". Ofsted have noted: "In some cases an increase in numbers of exclusions can be attributed to the application of new stratified codes of conduct in which exclusion is a 'fixed penalty' on a sliding scale: whereas in the past, for example, incidents of fighting were dealt with by pastoral staff as arbitrators and conciliators, many recently adopted behaviour codes stipulate temporary exclusion as the punishment for fighting"<sup>7</sup>

How proactive is your school?  
low  high

#### ***2. Schools with a strong sense of community have better behaviour***

Schools that form tight communities "attend to the needs of students for affiliation and ... provide a rich spectrum of adult roles. Adults engage students personally and challenge them to engage in the life of the school"<sup>8</sup>.

School communities have three core features:

- a shared value system,
- a common agenda of activities, and
- collegial relations among adults coupled with a 'diffuse' teacher role (which brings them into frequent contact with other staff and with students in settings other than the classroom).

How would you rate your school?  
low  high

#### ***3. Schools with teacher collaboration have better behaviour***

In collaborative settings:

- when teachers shared information about a particular student, it was usually for the purpose of finding ways to help the student learn more effectively [in isolated settings sharing information about students usually took the form of swapping stories about a child's errant behaviour or sympathising with one another]
- when they have a particular difficult problem with a student, teachers in collaborative schools seek help more widely, seek to identify causes and then to solve problems; teachers in isolated schools problems invariably meant behaviour problems, and punishment was seen as the solution<sup>9</sup>

How would you rate your school?  
low  high

#### ***4. Schools which promote pupil autonomy have better behaviour***

Research on 52 secondary schools in Australia<sup>10</sup> suggested four "disciplinary climates" of schools:

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

The last-mentioned focus on engendering self-discipline, and active involvement in the learning process

How would you rate your school?  
low  high

#### ***Policy?***

When a school makes a policy, it makes an image of itself and its vision of the future. A great many school policies of the tariff type are not helpful.

A proactive policy is a set of principles which guide action and provides a stimulus to learn. It sets out to appreciate what is currently helpful and anticipates future difficulty. It outlines how to improve: school facilities, learning about behaviour, classrooms and their management, and engaging pupils' views. It promotes the handling of difficulties close to where they occur, e.g. in the classroom, and uses teamwork to address difficulty

It is common to talk of "whole school approaches", although such terms are often poorly analysed. At best they emphasise the need for connected strategies, but at worst they confuse "consistency" with uniformity. We must not regard the school as a machine!

#### ***Referral?***

Roles and responsibilities may warrant review<sup>11</sup> 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:<sup>12</sup>

- 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

The amount which teachers used internal referral relates to their beliefs about difficult behaviour in classrooms<sup>13</sup>. The staff who most used internal referral for others to take action were those who believed that they had little role in reducing difficulties, and that the causes lie solely outside the school. Some staff make zero referrals: they are an important resource for improvement in any school.

### *Data and improvement?*

Reviewing patterns of behaviour in a school is important 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.

## ***Patterns of Behaviour at the Classroom Level***

The style of language for describing teachers’ contribution in the complex situation of a classroom is crucial.

“Classrooms are crowded and busy places in which groups of students who vary in interests and abilities must be organised 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”.<sup>14</sup> From this perspective, attention properly turns to teachers’ extensive skills in managing classrooms. This fits with long-standing findings that a reactive approach to classroom difficulties is ineffective: “The action teachers take in response to a ‘discipline problem’ has no consistent relationship with their managerial success in the classroom. Indeed some responses can lead to further disaffection<sup>15</sup>. However, what teachers do before misbehaviour occurs is shown to be crucial in achieving success”<sup>16</sup>. 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”<sup>14</sup>. The management of the classroom environment links to how the goals, tasks, social structure, timing and pacing, and resources of activities are handled.

A situational approach also handles carefully the issue of responsibility in classrooms. If teachers are pressured to take increased responsibility for standards of attainment, the impact is that teachers become much more controlling and the development of learner autonomy is reduced, with potentially negative effects on both behaviour and achievement<sup>17</sup>

### *Diagnosing Classroom Difficulty*<sup>18</sup>

Many “solutions” which are proposed for difficult behaviour in classrooms are not based on a diagnosis of the situation. They are favourite solutions which may work but may not. Interventions which, for example, focus on “teacher encouragement” shows that frequency of difficult behaviour

returns to near-baseline levels after the intervention ends<sup>19</sup>. The following questions start to attempt a diagnosis through a consideration of the *extent* of difficulty and the range of foci for intervention.

Is there a *general* disaffection in this classroom?

If Yes:

1. Does the *climate* need improvement on any of its underlying dimensions, such as affiliation (pupils’ sense of wanting to join in and be a part) or cohesiveness (pupils’ sense of wanting to work with each other)
2. Is the *curriculum* offer appropriate for this class? Do pupils feel they achieve something valuable, and that the work is not too easy or too difficult Does the curriculum include the personal-social, and learning about behaviour?
3. Are the *activities* and activity structures clear and engaging? Are pupils involved in the activities?
4. Are the *responsibilities* in this classroom developed and shared? Are pupils involved in planning?
5. Are classroom *rules* agreed, understood, accepted and used? Are pupils reviewing the success of this classroom?
6. Is the *teacher’s role* seen by pupils as a source of support to learning?

If No:

Is there a *particular* disaffection? If so, does it relate to:

1. a *subgroup* of pupils  
Analyse the role of this group within the class, and the roles of key members within the group  
Consider a group intervention strategy, which might focus on reducing negative dominance of some members in the group, increasing participation of the isolated members in the class, or more broadly learning about social skills such as working in groups
2. a particular *classroom* context  
Analyse the physical social and psychological features of this classroom
3. particular *activities*  
Analyse the design and message of these activities
4. particular sorts of *teacher-pupil interactions*  
Examine teacher skills in handling conflict, avoiding escalations

In any particular classroom difficulty, some of the above headings will “ring bells” more than others, and the next step emerges of analysing the real difficulty rather than over-laying an inappropriate “solution”.

### *Building classroom community*

This is the most long-lasting form of intervention. It goes beyond methods which seek compliance, and is built slowly but surely by attending to:

- how pupils affiliate to the class
- challenging pupils to become engaged in the class,
- encouraging a wide variety of roles and contacts between all members of the class

Some of the class practices include:

- class meetings, class reviews and problem-solving, to address what would improve matters

- teacher shift from “What will I do as a result of this incident?” to “How are we all going to solve this problem?”
- acts (not actors) are unacceptable when they break a community agreement
- regularly asking “What sort of classroom do we want?”

Teacher practices include emphasis on prosocial values, elicitation of student thinking and expression of ideas, encouragement of co-operation, warmth and supportiveness, and reduced use of extrinsic control. Teacher support of cooperative activities appears to be particularly important<sup>20</sup>

### *Classroom Improvement*

This has to be a collaborative process. Team work can be more effective than additional training<sup>3</sup>. Yet in many schools, teachers have few occasions for reviewing and discussing their approach to classrooms in a detailed way. Appropriate forums for discussing and understanding 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 understandings, especially when supported by frameworks for observation. As well as team work, systems of pairing teachers, and of widespread mentoring can develop contacts for learning and change. In such arrangement, teachers’ choice of credible peers is an important consideration

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<sup>21</sup>
  - understanding positive patterns
  - developing assertiveness<sup>22</sup>
- which have shown to have positive effects<sup>23</sup>

### *Individual patterns of behaviour*

When discussing and attempting to understand an individual’s behaviour we regularly forget that behaviour is a function of the person and the situation. This reminds to utilise the available variation - here is almost no young person who is disruptive in all situations, and the exceptions to the overall pattern often provide a key for improvement. The following “Ten Important questions” help focus on situations, exceptions and cycles.

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

IN WHAT SITUATIONS does the behaviour occur?  
in what settings/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?

A framework of questions of this type above can be used productively for:

1. an individual teacher reviewing a difficulty
2. pairs of colleagues consulting with each other
3. a conversation helping to empower an older student

It can also be used to inform the methods of information-gathering in a school. Many “round robins” in schools are poorly designed and have poor results. A diagnostic behaviour questionnaire (see examples in <sup>1</sup>) can provide a spreadsheet of views from the different colleagues who know the young person, and offer a way forward in improving the patterns.

To do this, it is often useful to identify the elements which make up a “virtuous cycle” (when behaviour goes well)



and contrast them with the elements which make up a “vicious cycle” (when behaviour does not go well).



Small, manageable, practical interventions emerge which can have considerable impact on the overall pattern.

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