Exploring school staff and expert views on approaches to managing behaviour in UK secondary schools:

Key findings from the Behaviour In Schools Study (BISS)

December 2024

Background

The National Institute for Health and Care Research Applied Research Collaboration West (NIHR ARC West) funded the 'Behaviour In Schools Study' (BISS). Young people from our Young People's Advisory Group (YPAG) had raised concerns about disciplinary behaviour management strategies (DBMS) during a consultation about school-related factors contributing to poor mental health and wellbeing.

As part of BISS, we undertook:

- A systematic review on the evidence of the impact of DBMS on pupil psychosocial outcomes
- An interview-based study on pupil views and experiences of DBMS and preferences for alternative approaches.

Findings indicated that DBMS negatively impact mental health and wellbeing and do not address poor behaviour. The pupils interviewed said they would like schools to adopt approaches that understand poor behaviour and build relationships with them.

What did we do next?

Then between January and July 2024 we interviewed 17 secondary school staff and experts in behaviour management to:

- Explore their views and experiences of behaviour and behaviour management approaches
- Identify barriers to using non-disciplinary methods.

This summary covers what we found during these school staff and expert interviews.

What did we learn?

Pupil behaviour

Poor pupil behaviour was viewed as a persistent problem, negatively impacting staff and pupils.

Four main problem behaviours

1. Low-level disruption (and willingness to challenge authority)
2. Passivity
3. Neurodivergence
4. Poor attendance (Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) and internal truancy)

Causes of poor behaviour

- **Societal problems:** the root cause was attributed to poverty and poor parenting. Contributing factors were a lack of parent support for school and the negative impact of the pandemic and social media use.
- **School and support system issues:**
  o Too much emphasis on academic outcomes, issues with the curriculum and exam system
  o Inadequate systems such as transition from primary school and pastoral care
  o Issues with the school environment such as large class sizes
  o Lack of pupil access to specialist services such as mental health and wellbeing support.
- **School staff challenges:**
  o Inadequate training, support and resources to meet pupil needs
  o Poor staff wellbeing and a lack of support
  o Low quality interactions and relationships with pupils
  o Staff recruitment and retention.

Facilitators of positive behaviour were effective:

1. Features, such as clarity, consistency, routines, boundaries
2. Strategies and ideas, such as refocus cards, pupil meet and greets, teach behaviour expectations
3. Communication and relationships, such as using pupil passports, building relationships with pupils outside of the classroom and pupil voice
4. Theories, interventions and specialist support, such as attachment theory, trauma-informed practice, mentoring, emotion coaching and school counsellors.

Behaviour management approaches

Views and experiences of behaviour management approaches varied.

- Experts opposed DBMS and supported needs-led approaches, trauma-informed and relational and restorative practices, but school staff views and experiences were mixed
- School staff reported that both disciplinary and relational and restorative approaches were often used together (for example use of restorative conversations after sanctioning pupils) and should not be viewed as a 'dichotomy'
- Most schools were reported to use a disciplinary approach with 'supportive layers' and have flexibility within their sanction system
- Most school staff reported that schools need a sanction system but felt more supportive layers would be beneficial
- School staff emphasised the importance of school culture and the delivery of any system (opposed to the system per se) and the need for it to delivered with respect and kindness

Benefits and drawbacks to using disciplinary approaches

such as 'Ready To Learn' (RTL) were highlighted by schools staff and experts.

Benefits included:

1. Efficient at controlling most pupils easily and cheaply
2. Effective at reducing classroom disruption, enabling teaching and learning
3. Provision of centralised support for staff
4. Clarity around expectations and consequences for staff and pupils
5. Order and calmness appreciated by pupils, parents and the community
6. Provision of data on pupils not responding to identify those in need of more support

Drawbacks included:

1. Overrepresentation of and disparities in use of sanctions for some pupils such as those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) or Social Emotional Mental Health (SEMH) needs
2. Lack of reasonable adjustment and inclusivity
3. Ineffective at addressing poor behaviour (often negatively impacting behaviour and escalating issues)
4. Isolation room use not providing a meaningful education and having a negative impact on mental health and wellbeing
5. Deskilling staff
6. Damaging relationships between staff and pupils
7. No mechanism to activate support and intervention (lack of data-driven support and intervention)

Barriers to using non-disciplinary approaches:

1. Lack of autonomy (policy and practice dictated by government and school trusts)
2. DBMS are embedded in schools and school culture change is hard (linked to fear)
3. Impracticalities of relational and restorative approaches (lack of time and space, burdensome for staff and costly)
4. Some staff lacked belief in their effectiveness (loss of staff control, pupils abusing the system and question over success at tackling complex, challenging behaviours)
5. Personal ideology of some staff (belief that their role as a teacher is to impart knowledge to achieve good academic outcomes and not pastoral care work)
6. Lack of training, confidence and expertise in non-disciplinary approaches such as relational and restorative practices (lack of clarity around a 'roadmap' (what to do and when and resources to use), viewed as abstract, and lacking research evidence for effectiveness)

Illustrative quotes

School systems contributing to poor behaviour

"A lot of our school's structures and systems have not changed an awful lot in many, many decades. And they are largely about disciplining and controlling large numbers of young people. And for most of the young people, they work. However, they don't work for a really important part of the school population and that's young people who are neurodiverse or who might have had really difficult experiences in childhood. And there's an inflexibility in systematic approaches in schools, that I suppose therefore creates a sense of behaviour being a problem because the institutional structures don't match what young people need."
- Participant 4

School staff did not view approaches to managing behaviour as a dichotomy

"I guess in my head I saw a whole school approach to behaviour as being on a continuum between ready to learn at this end and then the relation approach at that end but I actually think it's a false dichotomy. You can have Ready to Learn but still have staff that are really caring and invest in relationships."
- Participant 14

Lack of training, support and resources in non-disciplinary approaches

"The other problem that we've got is that we aren't trained. We don't have that expertise. So even if we had time for it, we can't necessarily implement it because we don't quite know what we're doing if I'm honest, beyond, somebody who's got an interest in it. That's not for the lack of wanting to know, it's just where do you go for that?"
- Participant 1

DBMS with supportive layers acceptable to schools

"I think that both approaches could work alongside each other. I do think you need to have consequences for behaviour that's inappropriate. But I think you need to build in more layers before you get to that point, of support and understanding and relationship."
- Participant 4

What next?

Schools can't address the factors leading to poor behaviour and overcome barriers to using non-disciplinary approaches alone.

Improvements needed to school systems and structures, and support around schools

1. Department for Education statutory behaviour guidance for schools should endorse a focus on relational and restorative practices alongside disciplinary approaches and update their guidance on isolation room use

2. Department for Education should acknowledge the importance of behaviour, attendance and wellbeing outcomes alongside academic progress and attainment. This needs reflected in Ofsted assessment criteria and other school and pupil success criteria
3. Invest in specialist support services around schools, for example mental health and wellbeing services and access to Alternative Learning Provision (ALP)
4. Support and resources for schools to:
   a. improve their pastoral care and Personal Social Health Education (PSHE) and citizenship education
   b. improve transition
   c. improve parental engagement
   d. address the negative impact of the pandemic
   e. address the negative impact of social media
   f. add supportive layers to their behaviour approach
5. Training, support and resources for school staff:
   a. to understand and address low-level disruption, passivity, neurodivergence and attendance concerns
   b. to understand SEND and SEMH needs
   c. on relational and restorative approaches

Recommendations for schools

1. Reflect on behaviour management policy and practice, in particular:
   a. isolation room use as a sanction
   b. level of inclusivity and flexibility within their sanction system to meet pupil needs and supportive layers/nurture offered
   c. focus given to use of relational and restorative practices and other identified facilitators of positive pupil behaviour
   d. school culture and ensuring staff delivery of sanctions is with kindness and respect
2. Use data collected to monitor and inform support and interventions for pupils, and any changes needed to the overall behaviour management system. Care should be given to monitor those with vulnerabilities
3. Invest in relational and restorative training and resources, and learn from schools that have embedded these practices successfully
4. Invest in staff wellbeing and support

Recommendations for researchers

1. Collate existing evidence for behaviour management approaches and their impact on academic attainment/progress, behaviour, attendance, mental health and wellbeing
2. Work with experts and school staff to identify and/or develop relational and restorative training and resources for secondary schools
3. Pilot relational and restorative practices in secondary schools and assess their impact on behaviour, academic, attendance, mental health and wellbeing

Find out more

Get in touch with us at s.bell@bristol.ac.uk or visit arc-w.nihr.ac.uk/biss where the full report will be available soon.