

0159

'Take more time to actually listen!': Trust and power and pupil voices

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Background

Behaviour in schools is an emotive topic and of enduring political interest and sensitivity. The media often portrays schools as violent places and young people as increasingly unruly. This paper draws on findings from the most recent national study of behaviour in schools in Scotland (Munn et al 2009). This study is conducted at regular 3 yearly intervals in order to provide a clear and robust picture of positive and negative behaviour in publicly funded schools and of current policy and practice in relation of managing behaviour. The particular focus of this paper is the reflections of pupils in primary and secondary schools on these issues.

Research Questions

The four main aims of the study as a whole were to:

- Provide clear and robust information on the nature and extent of positive and negative behaviour in Scottish publicly funded schools in 2009;
- Provide trend information on key questions about positive and negative behaviour compared to 2006;
- Describe the range of behaviour management approaches in use and to report on staff's perceptions of their effectiveness;
- Describe the training and support provided to staff and their confidence in managing behaviour.

The research questions were developed from the aims above and from the research literature in this area. They are:

1. What do a range of stakeholders perceive and experience to be the nature and extent of positive and negative behaviour in publicly funded Scottish schools in 2009?
2. Are these perceptions significantly different from those in 2006?
3. What kinds of approaches are typically used to encourage positive behaviour and manage negative behaviour? Are staff aware of these and if so are they perceived as effective?
4. What kinds of training and support are provided to staff about managing behaviour? How effective are these in the opinion of participants?
5. How confident are teaching and support staff in promoting positive behaviour and in managing negative behaviour?
6. How are serious incidents followed up?

The sub-questions which were developed to explore these issues with pupils focused on:

1. Positive behaviour and negative behaviour around the school
2. Positive behaviour and negative behaviour in the classroom

3. School activities to promote positive behaviour
4. Pupil wellbeing
5. Teachers' interventions
6. Participation in decision-making.

Methods

There were four main strands to the research design overall: a large-scale survey of teachers, head teachers and support staff in primary and secondary schools (N=3587); school visits to 7 typical primary schools and 8 typical secondary schools; and local authority interviews (N=32). More detail on the methods of the study as a whole are available at

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2009/11/20101438/4>

Pupils' views were gathered through the school visits; using individual surveys and focus group discussions. Schools were selected on the basis of recent inspection reports. They were chosen to achieve a balance in terms of rural/urban location, denominational/non-denominational status and proportion of pupils entitled to free school meals. A total of 250 primary pupils and 316 secondary pupils completed the survey, with an even spread of male and female pupils. One P5 (age 8-9 years) and one P7 (age 10-11 years) and S1 (age 11-12 years) and one S3 (age 14-15 years) class were chosen at random by each school to participate in the survey. The research team worked in pairs to administer the survey in class time and were on hand to help pupils who had difficulty understanding the questions. A total of 76 primary pupils and 104 secondary pupils participated in the focus groups. Pupils in the focus groups were also selected by senior school staff who were asked to ensure a range of pupils and a broad range of views were included.

Frame

The framework for analysis was based on the 2006 survey and built on that used by Gray and Sime for the Elton Committee (DES 1989). It was based on the need to report, understand and evaluate findings which asked about specific types of positive and negative behaviour, and their frequency, but which also took account of differing school contexts.

Research findings

Given the coverage of school discipline in the media, the overall findings are surprisingly positive. Teachers were found to be significantly more positive about pupil behaviour than in 2006 and very confident about managing behaviour in general.

Most pupils in primary and secondary schools reported that behaviour was usually good around the school, in keeping with findings from teachers, headteachers and support staff. They were positive too about behaviour in classrooms.

However, pupils also had some very clear concerns about what happens in school. They valued an ethos based on rewards and recognition of endeavour but a majority noted that activities to promote positive behaviour often related to punishments or sanctions, particularly in secondary schools. Feelings about safety in schools were very mixed, but again particularly so in secondary schools. This may seem surprising in view of the priority now being given to this in policy terms and the widespread use of computer-based monitoring of attendance, contact with home through texting, swipe cards, CCTV etc. Reflecting findings from previous research, pupils had strong feelings about fair and unfair teacher interventions.

Perhaps most telling, in view of the range and specificity of their comments and criticisms, were their views on opportunities to participate in school decision-making. There was a high level of scepticism about mechanisms for participation along with numerous suggestions about how to improve this. The

need to 'Take more time to actually listen' was reiterated in each school in different ways and about many different issues.

These concerns give rise to broader questions. These questions centre on relationships between teachers and pupils and current and changing meanings of trust and power in schools. This paper will explore the different ways in which pupils in these primary and secondary schools construct trust and power and how this may reflect or refract wider societal views about children and young people and impact on those broader views.