

How can schools improve the implementation of their behaviour policies?

Does a school's behaviour policy make a difference?

When we look at Teacher Tapp data, we can see that teachers experience fewer behaviour management issues as their careers progress. However, we can also see from other Teacher Tapp data that many teachers do not think that their schools enforce behaviour policies consistently or effectively. Written from analysis conducted at our first Teacher Tapp Hackathon, Clare argues that schools can decrease the challenge of behaviour to early career teachers by introducing systems to encourage the clear and consistent enforcement of behaviour policies.

What's the worst thing you can say to a teacher about behaviour?

When you're a class teacher managing a student's challenging behaviour, there's one thing you absolutely dread hearing:

"She isn't a problem for me in my lessons"

What's so bad about this seemingly innocuous statement? In this short piece I will explain how managing the challenging behaviour of students has little to do with the character of individual teachers and a lot to do with the character of school's behaviour policy and how it's enforced.

How has lesson observation for behaviour management changed?

At classroom level it can often feel that what happens in the classroom is solely as a direct result of your own skill set. This could be your behaviour management skill set, your pedagogical skill set, your subject knowledge or even your basic personality in terms of engaging students with their learning.

In fact, my school's observation form for many years examined these things precisely – one section on teacher planning, another on curriculum knowledge and understanding, one on teaching, one on learning and achievement, one on class management, another on behaviour and safety and the last on monitoring and assessment.

One exemplification of what we were supposed to be looking for in a lesson read 'students

learn exceptionally well and as a result acquire knowledge quickly and in depth'. Although we might question the validity of this goal, I considered this form to be an incredible improvement to previous observation forms and actively looked for evidence of each of the elements listed: evidence of a skillset developed within the teacher's own classroom over a number of years of classroom practice.

Do teachers get better at behaviour management over their career?

The shifting sands of classroom observation mean that we no longer use this form and in fact have not done so for several years. Indeed, I would now question the benefit of a teacher demonstrating exceptional subject knowledge if they do not build in episodes for retrieval. But when this form was written, the dialogue around retrieval practice or metacognitive frameworks was simply not a part of the narrative. This absence from the narrative extends to other components of effective teaching practice as well.

How have attitudes towards behaviour changed?

In my school, behaviour has not been part of our narrative at all until recently, as the general consensus was that behaviour was good. We had a strong rewards and sanction system that generally worked – particularly for experienced teachers. This seems to be a national trend – the greater the number of years spent in the profession, the more confident a teacher feels about behaviour management.

As visible above, a recent Teacher Tapp question has shown that experienced teachers also feel better supported in using their school's behaviour management systems. Although I haven't seen any data, I suspect that this is probably because experienced teachers:

- Are more confident with students in the classroom
- Are less worried about exposing themselves as having behavioural problems
- Generally have less problems to deal with
- Possibly have less contact time because of other responsibilities
- Can rely on their status within the school to moderate student behaviour

Equally, I suspect that this higher degree of confidence is probably not because the school has achieved a highly consistent and transparently implemented behaviour policy. This isn't a blind guess – my estimate comes from another Teacher Tapp survey suggesting that only a minority of teachers feel their behaviour policy is strictly and consistently enforced.

How do teachers perceive the enforcement of their school's behaviour policy?

Even if behaviour management improves over the course of a career, a strict and consistent behaviour policy seems important for supporting early career teachers. But behaviour policies don't enforce themselves and teachers may play some role in undermining their effective implementation. For example, 40% of secondary school teachers admitted doing something on the day of response, however minor, that deviated from their school's behaviour policy.

With this in mind, how can we create an environment where teachers can effectively and robustly realise their school's behaviour policy?

How can we make make sure behaviour policy is properly enforced?

We want teachers to enforce a school's behaviour policy. But this won't happen by itself. That's because there's a real difference between enforcing a school's behaviour system and feeling supported in using the system.

A teacher I once knew always set sanctions for homework and this would often escalate to a faculty detention. He routinely set the highest sanction and this was perceived to be a reflection on him rather than the student. The nature of the homework he set was questioned rather than the fact that the school leadership had given no guidance to subject teachers on how to set homework. There was no centralised approach to homework and nor had subject areas considered the nature of the homework that was set. Homework was set erratically and chaotically across the school and it simply wasn't considered to be an important part of learning by all students. Nonetheless there was still an expectation that it was set and that students should do it and if not a sanction should be set.

This contradiction in the practice of school policy and the expectations that are placed on individual teachers created a tension that at classroom level can sometimes be hard for a classroom teacher to recognise and even harder to act on.



Does behaviour policy put too much focus on individual teachers?

Another teacher always set sanctions for students who were late. Rightly so of course. But because this was not a standard response across the school it created tensions for the teacher and for his students. Because for children, a lack of consistency can be a very confusing thing to deal with.

Centralisation in a school can provide consistency and clarity, as well as helping early career teachers feel supported. If done in the right way it can reduce workload without reducing autonomy for those experienced teachers who are confident in their behaviour management. For newer teachers it is even more important. 41% of the most experienced teachers know a colleague who left teaching because of pupil behaviour.

I once held hard and fast to the rule that each teacher should set their own sanctions for what happens in their classroom: it gives you greater control in your own classroom. I no longer believe it does and certainly when I was a new teacher it definitely didn't. I now believe managing behaviour is about creating a transparent system that is supported at school level. It is about identifying what is important and supporting teachers to ensure that whole school systems are in place to support implementing the policy well.

That's why I think 'She isn't a problem for me in my lessons' is such a damaging and unhelpful phrase. It shifts the blame for challenging behaviour onto individual teachers rather than the school-wide process of enforcing a behaviour policy.

Summary

We can see from the data that behaviour management improves as teachers spend more time in the profession. But we can also see from the same data that behaviour management is a major challenge for new teachers and that behaviour policies are often applied inconsistently across schools. One way to help early career teachers could be to introduce systems, such as centralisation of sanctions, into schools to help ensure clarity and consistency of behaviour policy enforcement. This would help not only new teachers, but also students as well.