

Customer voice research: behaviour and discipline powers in schools

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The research

The Department for Education required research that:

- Provided deep and comprehensive insight into the extent to which teachers and school leaders hold barriers to using their statutory 'powers to discipline'.

The research involved:

- 28 x 1.5-2 hour depth interviews with teachers and school leaders who then completed a post-task exercise where teachers provided their considered thoughts on the barriers to using the 'powers to discipline'; and
- 2 x group discussions with a range of teachers who had completed a pre-task exercise to provide their considered thoughts on the barriers to using the 'powers to discipline' before attending the groups.

The research was conducted in London, Birmingham and Leeds between 2nd and 20th of August 2010. A total of 45 hours of interviews were conducted.

Teachers were drawn from a highly diverse sample pool that included a range of subjects, schools (primary and secondary), teacher experience and expertise, and taught a wide range of pupil ability (including SEN), background and ethnicity.

Behaviour management in teaching

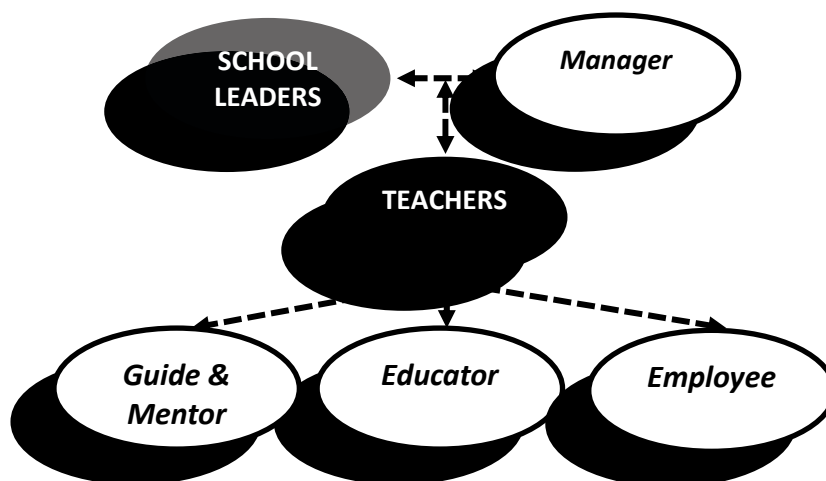
2CV sought to gain an understanding of how teachers and school leaders saw their roles in order to understand the role of the 'powers to discipline' play within them.

This contextual insight revealed that:

- Teachers felt they played increasingly multifaceted roles to accommodate the way modern teaching has evolved into a more holistic and individualistic view of pupils' needs.

"Teaching's like acting – you have to learn to play many parts. Sometimes you're the parent, sometimes a role model. It's not just about teaching a lesson these days" (Male teacher, Secondary Comp, Birmingham)

- They broadly saw their role dividing into:



'Educator' – their primary role and ultimate goal in teaching;

'Employee' – an obligatory aspect of being part of an organisation but one that can obstruct dealing with pupil behaviour (e.g. to avoid completing extensive paperwork); and

'Guide and Mentor' – dealing with personal and social issues, in particular behaviour management.

- The role of Guide and Mentor was felt to be an increasingly prominent part of teaching and on occasion was felt to blur the lines between teaching and parenting.
- Teachers believed the role of Guide and Mentor was particularly demanding as they felt every teacher/child situation needs treating individually and towards fostering a sense of 'mutual respect'.
- Specifically, teachers felt the role of 'disciplinarian' was the most challenging and disliked as it was dissonant with their desired relationship with pupils and rejected the term in favour of 'behaviour management' and its inclusion of both rewards and sanctions.

- Teachers felt the inherent challenges within the Guide and Mentor role meant it was most likely to inhibit their ability to achieve the role of Educator, in part because they felt it was the role they felt least prepared (and formally trained) for, and in part because it was the role they were least supported in.
- NQTs were most likely to experience difficulty adopting the role of Guide and Mentor and often cited this as a key reason for considering leaving the profession.

The behaviour challenges

The majority of teachers claimed that behaviour management (especially in the classroom) is *the* biggest challenge they face in teaching and directly affects their morale, confidence and happiness.

Teachers out rightly rejected the idea of a 'one size fits all' approach to behaviour management and believed that whether/how they choose to deal with behaviour is dependent on their ability to make an analysis of what is driving the behaviour.

"You don't treat all children the same, how could you? You might not treat a child whose Dad has just lost his job in the same way as someone who you know is just showing off to their friends... You adapt your approach to every child in every situation" (Male school leader, Primary Faith Leeds)

"It's easily the most challenging aspect of my job and the thing you always worry about. If you can't control your class then you feel like a failure" (Male teacher, Secondary Comp, Birmingham)

Many teachers talked about this in terms of 3 steps:

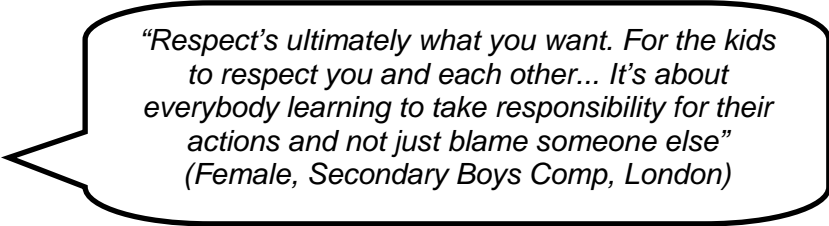
- **Step 1** – Observing the manifest behaviour (what the pupil is doing) e.g. shouting out in class, swearing or fighting;
- **Step 2** – Taking into account the probable motivation (or context) that is driving the behaviour e.g. hunger, low self-esteem or bereavement; and
- **Step 3** – Identifying the underlying ('real') behaviour to be managed e.g. distraction, attention seeking or disengagement from the curriculum.

Many teachers felt it was sometimes difficult to complete their analysis of certain behaviours as they felt schools did not always effectively communicate the pupil information required for teachers to do this. In such instances teachers reported deferring behaviour management to someone else or overlooking it completely.

Furthermore, teachers tended to divide the manifest behaviours into low, mid and high level. Teachers felt low and high level behaviour was easy to analyse and deal with: low because it was seen as the least problematic; and high because it was seen as the most serious and with clear structures in place for dealing with it. However, mid level behaviour was felt to be the most difficult to deal with as it was generally seen as escalated low level behaviours where strategies have been ineffective but do not warrant high level management techniques. Thus, teachers often felt ill-equipped to address mid level behaviours.

Managing behaviour: the ideal and the reality

Teachers shared a broad view of how they would ideally like to manage pupil behaviour. They talked about maintaining 'control' of the classroom by generating a shared sense of mutual respect and responsibility. They used the word 'control' very carefully as few teachers sought to autocratically control pupils. Rather, they sought to establish good individual relationships with pupils and felt this was essential for gaining and maintaining mutual respect.



"Respect's ultimately what you want. For the kids to respect you and each other... It's about everybody learning to take responsibility for their actions and not just blame someone else"
(Female, Secondary Boys Comp, London)

The key principles through which teachers feel they can most effectively manage behaviour were seen as:

- **Positive leadership** (role modelling positive behaviours e.g. cooperation, turn taking, sharing);
- **Teaching accountability** (sanctions that involve constructive and restorative tasks);
- **Prevention and de-escalation** (preventing behaviour and the necessary management processes from escalating); and
- **Consistency** (clear guidelines with scope for individual flexibility).

However, teachers identified 5 factors they felt inhibited their ability to effectively manage pupil behaviour.

Factor 1: The strategy gap

Teachers saw the need for different behaviour management strategies across low, mid and high level behaviours:



Teachers believed there were plenty of available strategies for dealing with low and high level behaviours but felt they had very few (if any) for dealing with mid-level. Failure to effectively deal with mid level behaviours could generate feelings of personal failure and ineffectiveness for some teachers.

Teachers often felt the removal of privileges was the most effective strategy for mid-level behaviours but felt restricted in their ability to implement this as they did not feel they had the strategies and guidelines for how to remove privileges or the reward systems in place to do this (especially in secondary schools and with girls).

Factor 2: Feeling disempowered

Teachers often felt that the policy and legislation put in place to protect pupils has resulted in a sense of teachers having fewer rights to manage behaviour. This message was often felt to be explicitly reinforced by some pupils and parents (e.g. *'You can't touch me'*). As a result, teachers felt there is no awareness or shared understanding of their rights and responsibilities (or those of pupils) and critically, a belief that they are not protected, either by management or government.

Factor 3: Fear of extreme consequences

Teachers claimed to experience an underlying sense of fear in working with children. They feel a huge sense of personal responsibility, pressure and expectations are placed upon them. When it comes to behaviour however, they often felt that this can quickly spiral out of their control.

Their biggest fear was that they may deal with/or be seen to deal with behaviour wrongly or inappropriately and that ensuing consequences will be very serious: damage a child or teacher, especially their career.

Factor 4: Ineffective behaviour policies and processes

Teachers agreed that behaviour policies are an important and potentially effective tool but the extent they were seen to be effectively implemented varied.

Ineffective behaviour policies were generally seen as those where teachers were:

- Unaware of it or rejected its suitability;
- Devised by school leaders with limited/no input by teachers;
- Presented as big, wordy documents presented alongside lots of other information; and
- Focused solely on discipline and punitive strategies.

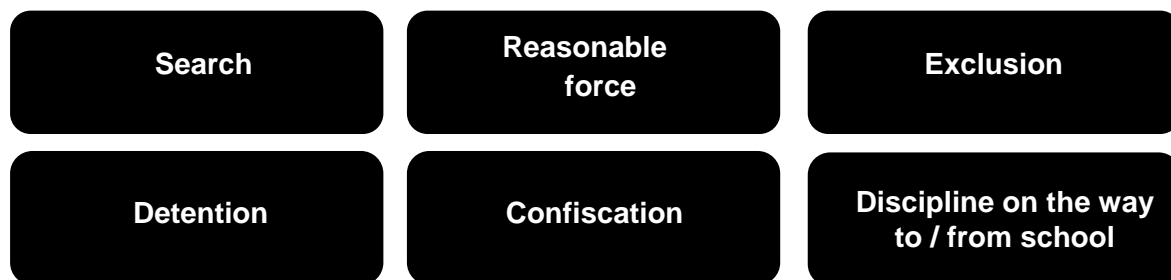
Factor 5: Perceived lack of support

Teachers often did not feel supported by the behaviour of other stakeholders:

- **School leaders** – clear discrepancy between the level of support school leaders felt they provided and that of teachers who often felt responsibility was heavily devolved.
- **Parents** – often criticised for having a 'them vs. us' mentality leading to active attempts to challenge teacher decisions.
- **Other teachers** – a lack of cohesion and support that can lead to behaviour management attempts being undermined.
- **Pupils** – repeatedly pushing boundaries and adopting group behaviours.
- **Government/ LAs** – seen to be completely removed from behaviour management (especially by teachers and those in Academies).
- **Unions** – perceived to lack a real role except to support teachers should any issues be escalated to a serious level.

Barriers to using the 'powers to discipline'

The powers to discipline explored in the research were as follows:



Teachers held a range of barriers to using the 'powers to discipline'; some overarching and some specific to each power.

The overarching barriers were as follows:

- **Awareness** – none of the teachers who took part in the research had heard of the 'powers' and did not recognised them as a distinct group of statutory or legislative powers coming from government. Even amongst school leaders awareness was low and was couched in a belief that adopting them was at their discretion. Even when presented with descriptions of the 'powers' there was little apparent understanding of what they pertained to or how to implement them.

"I was unaware of many of the details of the 'main powers' available to teachers. My understanding was that it was down to the individual school to decide what we could and couldn't do" (Female teacher, Primary, Leeds)

- **Disengagement** – teachers claimed to find the powers disengaging (conceptually and semantically). 'Discipline' was felt to be too out-dated, negative and punitive, and 'powers' too controlling and dominating.

"Powers' sounds really antiquated and out of touch with the realities of what it's like to be a teacher today. It reminds of the slipper and the cane; it's certainly not aspirational for me as teacher" (Female, Secondary Comprehensive, London)

- **Uncertainty** – teachers did not consider the powers empowering. They did not feel protected to use the powers and were very fearful of them being detrimental to themselves/their career as well as to pupils.

"I don't feel confident that the Head would back me up if a student accused me of something while I was searching them or trying to break up a fight. I would get automatically suspended and it could be the end of my career" (Male, Secondary Boys Comp, London)

- **Lack of clear rights and responsibilities** – teachers felt there was no clear shared understanding of their role, rights and responsibilities in behaviour management. They often felt the ‘powers’ beyond their remit and compromised their right to feel safe, confident and comfortable. They often deferred responsibility to school leaders, parents, SSPs and behaviour teams.

“It’s not clear what our rights and responsibilities are. Different teachers have their own ideas about where the job stops. I don’t think we should have to risk our own personal safety though, that’s not what I signed up for” (Female, Secondary Comp, Leeds)

The specific barriers for each of the individual ‘powers’ explored in the research were as follows:

- **Reasonable force** – the word ‘force’ was considered inappropriate (too aggressive, negative and extreme) and the word ‘reasonable’ was considered too ambiguous and subjective. Teachers were much more open to the idea of using ‘physical control/protection’ and used this language to explain their own experiences. They completely rejected the notion that force would be used to ‘maintain good order and discipline’. There was a strong belief that very clear and specific guidelines need to be set out to enable teachers to feel comfortable using this power.

“The main requirement is a definite and succinct definition of the term reasonable force. I am still unsure what reasonable force constitutes and I know many other teachers who feel the same” (Male teacher, Secondary Comprehensive, Birmingham)

- **Search** – many teachers lacked awareness of this as a power and there was little willingness to formally search property and no willingness to physically search pupils due to concerns about the severity of potential allegations for doing this. There was a strong belief that search should be carried out by specially nominated and trained individuals, like SSPs.

“There’s a relationship you have to build up with pupils you can’t just decide to search a pupil half way through a lesson. It’s not something for the classroom teacher to deal with” (Female teacher, Secondary Grammar, Birmingham)

- **Disciplining to and from school** – the majority of teachers lacked awareness and questioned the relevance of this power to them as they often felt their responsibilities for behaviour management were defined by the school boundaries and situations where they are officially ‘on duty’ and present. There was a belief amongst many teachers that the responsibility of discipline to and from school was that of school leaders and parents.

- **Confiscation** – whilst this was frequently practised it was considered very difficult to implement effectively. Often confiscation policies were blamed as they were not felt to be clear or supportive enough and focused on items that teachers believed created behaviour issues during the process of confiscation e.g. mobiles and jewellery. There was a belief that confiscation policies should be more clearly and carefully laid out and focused on dangerous items.

“Many teachers are also afraid to confiscate items even though students are breaking rules because they feel responsibility for the items – most staff do not know that they are not liable” (Female teacher, Secondary Comp, Birmingham)

- **Detention** – high awareness of this power but varying levels of implementation (more in secondary than primary). Many teachers believed that post-school detentions are largely ineffective (a punishment for teachers more than students and often failing to be constructive and restorative). The removal of 24 hour notice for after school detentions was empowering, but there was more positivity around the idea of detentions on non-teaching days where the time spent in detention could be carefully planned and properly implemented.

“I would like to see detentions being more productive – e.g. community service types of activities within the school and the wider community” (Male teacher, Secondary Comprehensive, Leeds)

- **Exclusion** – teachers often expressed a desire to avoid exclusions where possible. There was a belief that the process was incredibly complex and that there was a high risk of exclusions being overturned. Most importantly there was a belief that exclusion was ineffective and potentially detrimental to a pupil’s long term education. Teachers were much more in favour of inclusion systems where pupils were dealt with within the school (e.g. by SENCOs).

“Permanent exclusion should be a very last resort. Parent and child must see that everything has to be done to exhaust the school system. I think managed moves are better for the child than exclusion, sometimes all they need is a new environment, second chances are good for kids” (Female teacher, Secondary Comp, Birmingham)

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