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BELONGING, BEHAVIOUR AND INCLUSION IN SCHOOLS: WHAT DOES RESEARCH TELL US?

The Art of Possibilities

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Belonging, behaviour and inclusion in school

Introduction

The policy climate is one of pressure on schools not to exclude yet at the same time the rate of exclusion and off-rolling continue to grow, with particular costs for working-class and Black students and students with special educational needs and disabilities

The professional context is a challenging one. Teachers and school leaders report their concerns that they have less time to collaborate and share vital information and understandings about children who are struggling. Potentially, this leaves both students and staff with fragmented advisory and support systems.

The wider environment is also impacting in some very significant ways on the education experience and futures of children and young people and our schools. The Covid-19 pandemic has affected us all but has further amplified very deep rooted inequalities in our communities, as well as in our schools. It has, however, led to broad acknowledgement of education and school life as a fundamental ingredient for healthy and fulfilling lives of children and young people. The death of George Floyd and the activism precipitated by the Black Lives Matter movement has raised compelling questions regarding inclusion, equity and diversity in our schools. Both of these significant phenomena provide us with an opportunity to reflect and look afresh at challenging issues and compel us to arrive at more effective and equitable outcomes.

The aims of this review are to:

- help broaden and deepen awareness of strategies and evidence beyond sanction-driven approaches towards insight into contextualised and multi-layered interventions and strategies;

- consider the evidence concerning the relationship between children, young people and teachers and other staff across the whole school who are vital to creating conditions and local systems for belonging to a safe, dynamic and equitable school environment.

The review will make reference to behaviour-focused approaches as well as student engagement approaches more broadly.

Beyond sanction driven behaviour approaches

Beyond sanction driven behaviour approaches

There is robust evidence of the impact of a sense of safety, belonging and well-being on student performance and engagement (Bodin et al, 2016; Cornwall, 2015; Dyson, 2018; EEF, 2019; Kelly-Ann Allen; Keyes, 2019; Lee, 2014; Mustafaa et al, 2017; Parker, 2010; Riley, 2019; Shochet et al, 2011; Townsend and McWhirter, 2005; Wang and Eccles, 2012).

The large scale international data derived from the TIMSS survey explores this relationship with respect to gender, attainment and sense of safety. At Grade 4, most students feel relatively safe at school: 60% of boys and 65% of girls reported feeling safe. At Grade 8, lower proportions of students reported feeling safe: 46% of boys and 49% of girls felt safe. Within the context of England and across the majority of international jurisdictions: girls were more likely to feel safe at school than boys, and younger children were more likely to feel safe than older children across most jurisdictions. Across most countries, including England, those students with higher attainment on science and maths scores were also more likely to report feeling safe in school (Vignette 1: The Premium of School Safety).

Vignette 1: The Premium of School Safety

Previous studies about school safety and bullying in schools found a clear association between school safety and student achievement (Bowen & Bowen, 1999; Chavatzia et al., 2016; Chen, Rubin, & Li, 1997; Hastedt, 2014; Perše, Kozina, & Leban, 2008; Rutkowski & Rutkowski, 2018; Shumov & Lomax, 2001). By providing data about how student perceptions of school safety relate to achievement differences within and across countries and genders, TIMSS 2015 further adds to understanding of this relationship.

In 13 out of 52 countries, the mathematics achievement of boys who agreed a lot that they felt safe in school was higher than that of their peers; the same was true of girls. In 11 countries, the science achievement of boys who felt very safe in school was significantly better than that of their peers; this was also the case for girls in eight countries.

In grade four in science, the largest achievement differences were found in Morocco, where boys who agreed a lot that they felt safe at school outperformed their male peers by 25 points, and girls who agreed a lot that they felt safe at school outperformed their female peers by 27 points. For grade four mathematics, we observed differences as large as 26 points for Norwegian girls, and 23 points for Danish boys.

(Prusinski et al, 2018; p5)

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Whilst the phrase of 'zero tolerance' is in common use, there is little evidence that this is a useful tool for supporting positive behaviour or behaviour change. This is due in part to the lack of research evidence and also due to the imprecise nature of the concept. Skiba (2000) offers an insightful overview of the antecedents of 'zero tolerance', rooted in the law enforcement realm and centred on the most serious of criminal offences, in particular gun crime and drugs offences. The zero tolerance approach was intended for use in extreme law enforcement contexts and to be met with very specific penalty.

Skiba (2000) describes the colloquial expression and loose application of 'zero tolerance' in behaviour management in schools, serving as a catch-all device that does not discriminate between low-level, infrequent behaviour issues or serious offence and harm. As a consequence, children and young people often perceive it as unfair and heavy handed. Skiba further highlights that inequity of this approach is not merely perception. In practice it is enacted disproportionately and most commonly upon poor students and Black students. This further intensifies a sense of unfairness amongst already marginalised groups of students and often ratchets up a conflict stance. Consequently, it becomes a counterproductive measure focused exclusively on presenting behaviour rather than any cause, prevention or alleviation (Bitsika, 2003).

Behaviour issues sit behind the most common reasons given for formal school exclusions and the phenomenon of informal 'off-rolling' in England (Bagley and Hallam, 2016; Timpson Review, DfE, 2019). Boys, Black students, poor students, students with special educational needs and students with mental health issues are over-represented in these figures (Bottiani et al, 2017; Bryan, 2010; Hutchinson and Crenna-Jennings, 2019; Olvera, 2017). This a similar pattern and outcome experienced by those students also described in Skiba's (2000) zero tolerance essay.

Social isolation and victimisation (Brown, 2018; Opie and Southcott, 2018; Salenius, 2016 and Shirazi, 2019) such as peer bullying tend to be born most severely and cumulatively by already disadvantaged students (Vignette 2: Intensification of Disadvantage).

Vignette 2: Intensification of Disadvantage

Some evidence suggests a circular relationship: the emotional distress caused by victimisation may impair behavioural and emotional regulation, lower self-esteem, and hinder social skills, increasing the likelihood of further victimization. Additionally, research has indicated that bullied children have lower educational qualifications, worse financial management and a lower income at age 50. These negative impacts are particularly concerning given the pre-existing disparities between some of the groups disproportionately affected by bullying and the general population. It is possible that school bullying perpetuates these inequities.

(Brown, 2018: 3)

Lacoe's (2016) large-scale study conducted over a three-year period across more than 700 middle schools, identified a clear correlation between ethnicity, sense of safety and attainment in the US context. Unfortunately, there is little evidence from the UK context to detail the interplay between ethnicity, behaviour matters, belonging and attainment. Lacoe's (2015) wider work on safety and behaviour reveals that there are racial disparities between students in the perception of school safety, safety measures and school exclusions.

As with the TIMSS study, Lacoe (2015) identified a stronger sense of threat among male students rather than female students. She also noted that use of some security measures were perceived differentially along racial lines. Approaches such as installation of CCTV resulted in increased sense of safety among white male students but increased a sense of threat amongst Black male students.

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Lacoe (2015) suggests that ethnic diversity and same race diversity correlate with tangible levels of increased safety in school, i.e. there are fewer reported incidents of peer victimisation in racially congruent school environments (Felix and You, 2011). Despite this, Black students in high diversity and same ethnicity schools are still more likely to perceive their school as less safe than white students who attend mainly white schools (Thibodeaux, 2013).

Lacoe (2015) also observed that behaviour management via school exclusions were more common in those schools with higher proportions of Black and minority ethnic students and in schools located in socio-economically disadvantaged areas. The Timpson Review of school exclusion patterns in England also highlights the disproportionate level of temporary and permanent exclusions amongst very specific groups of Black students (Timpson Review, DfE; 2019).

A number of authors suggest that from primary to higher education stages, a sense of belonging is a reliable predictor of attainment outcomes and is characteristically lower amongst students from marginalised ethnic groups (Borrero, 2012; Murphy and Zirkel (2015); Wong, 2003; Walton, 2017). Walton, (2011) recommends improving a sense of belonging in relation to Black pupils in particular, and other pupils from racial groups that face historically negative perceptions, stereotyping and 'othering'.

At the core of belonging is the opportunity to socially include and psychologically motivate; this is considered to impact as a protective and enduring strategy for students, particularly those vulnerable to social isolation and emotional threat (Allen, 2016). Grey et al (2018) recommend that developing a sense of belonging with marginalised minority ethnic students can serve as a means of enhancing 'interpersonal, instructional, and institutional opportunity structure[s]'. Their model is premised on a sense of cultural uniqueness and positive recognition of minority ethnic groups, rather than a sense of individual or group deficit. Their approach centres on a sense of individual enhancement, high quality and inclusive teaching and curricula, and enactment of belonging strategies across organisational levels.

Interactions between race, behaviour matters, belonging and inclusion are complex, nuanced and appear to intensify disadvantage over time.

There is strong evidence that student perceptions of school safety, implementation of safety strategies, exclusion as a behaviour management mechanism and perceptions of belonging, are racialised. There is also some evidence that the role of belonging, where it is deployed in context of an inclusive agenda, is potentially positive, protective and significant.

Work by Gregory et al (2019) and Fredericks et al (2019) describe a number of intentional and contextualised approaches and interventions that are useful in eliminating disparities in behaviour policy and management. These are characterised by a blend of preventative strategies and intervention strategies. This captures the more complex background of behaviour issues as well as deliberative responses to immediate and anticipated behaviour issues.

These approaches are also characterised by a clear strand focused on inclusion of equity and anti-bias practices in curriculum, as well as within core processes within the school. These approaches all call on involvement of students and involvement of parents to work in partnership on behaviour issues with staff. These

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models also draw on the understanding of the fundamental role of key adults in children's lives (Vignette 3: Teachers as Key Influencers).

Vignette 3: Teachers as Key Influencers

A growing body of literature underscores the importance of adult relationships in a secondary school setting (e.g. Anderman 2002; Greenberger et al. 1998; Shochet et al. 2011; Zimmer-Gembeck et al. 2006). In line with other research (Hattie 2009), the strongest factor impacting school belonging was teacher support. Students who believe that they have positive relationships with their teachers and that their teachers are caring, empathic and fair and help resolve personal problems, are more likely to feel a greater sense of belonging than those students who perceive a negative relationship with their teachers. Negative interactions with parents or peers can even be intervened by teachers, and while the family may be the first unit to which children belong, students often spend more time at school (Hamre and Pianta 2006).

(Allen et al, 2016: p27)

A number of studies draw on a range of interventions which connect with awareness of the external lives of their pupils (Allen et al, 2016). Examples include the now familiar breakfast club (Adolphus et al, 2013) offering a fundamental nutritional boost and neurologically beneficial start to the day; a fundamental further amplified in relation to provision of free school meals and food poverty in the context of Covid-19 (The Chidlhood Trust, 2020; The Children's Society, 2020; The Lancet, 2020).

A contextualised and ecological approach to interventions is especially important in understanding the nuance of effectiveness of strategies and interventions related to pupil behaviour. For example, the Good Behaviour Game aimed to provide a framework for students and staff to work through expectations and protocols around behaviour in a safe and positive form, accessible to a range of students. The initial impact evaluation was muted in terms of the effectiveness of this approach due to the very different ways in which the game was used by schools in terms of time spent playing the game, frequency of using the game and the quality of conversation during the game and any connectedness after play.

At further evaluation over a longer timeline and a further set of cohort data, some evidence emerged to identify that it was most useful with targeted groups, in particular, students with specific needs (Humphrey, EEF; 2018). EEF go further in their overall review of behaviour interventions and advise that a one-size fits all approach is rarely helpful to all students although consistent implementation of an approach is considered essential (EEFb, 2019).

A number of classroom level interventions are already in play nationally and internationally in efforts to foster connectedness. For example, Faughey's (2019) study reviews the role of cosmopolitan conversations in multicultural and multilingual classrooms; Garcia and Dutro's (2018) explore open and supportive conversations and environments in the service of highly significant issues facing children and young people such as migration and bereavement; Cook et al (2018) highlight the low-cost, high power of the dignifying and inclusive greeting to all students at the classroom door; Korperschoek et al (2016) offer insight into a range of classroom management strategies and programmes aimed at influencing student engagement. They found that most teacher-led interventions had some degree of impact on students but the most powerful effects were gained when teachers included social-emotional development. The most direct effect was observed on social emotional outcomes and a smaller but discernible effect on student attainment outcomes.

Whear et al (2013) found similar outcomes in their earlier systematic review of teacher-led interventions relating to social and emotional behaviour. Spitzer and Aronson (2015) make

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a similar case for supportive individual level interventions to enhance and restore positive identity and outlook, with evidence of lasting protection for isolated and vulnerable students. A number of other authors explore varied manifestations of student vulnerability and impairment that can arise from social isolation and trauma (Bryson and Childre, 2018; Chekstere et al, 2017; Cummings, 2017; Finn, 1989; Hastings, 2012; Schmitt, 2010).

Overall, there is a convincing body of evidence to support a contextualised and multi-level approach to behaviour, belonging and student engagement. Contextual awareness sits at the core of much of the evidence, alongside a bold call for caring actions (Carter, 2019; Cornwall, 2015; Fredericks et al, 2019; Riley, 2019; Tichner-Wagner and Allen, 2016; Walls et al, 2019; Wilkinson-Lee et al, 2011). The quality of teacher relationships with students, sense of belonging and enhancement of social and emotional learning emerge as very strong components within these models.

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Building a safe, dynamic and equitable school environment

Building a safe, dynamic and equitable school environment

This final section of the review focuses on the significance of positive and intentional efforts by, and for, school staff in creating a positive and inclusive working environment as a foundation for a safe place of learning, wellbeing and growth.

Quinn (2017 and 2013) has demonstrated through systematic review and longitudinal evidence, the significance of the relationship between children and young people and staff. The greater the degree of connectedness the more likely students are to experience a sense of belonging. In turn, this correlates with stronger levels of student engagement across multiple indicators. There is modest evidence of a positive impact on academic performance (Lee, 2014; Leithwood and Day, 2008).

Social and emotional learning is also highly effective when delivered via the classroom context as opposed to other domains such as youth clubs, and has potential for long-lasting impacts on pupil skills for life and work (Clarke et al, 2015). As such, teachers are a highly significant and valuable resource to students and there is no evidence of detriment of this relationship to teachers.

However, there is some evidence that the impact of challenging, complex and sometimes physical demands of pupil behaviour can become a source of stress and burnout for some staff (Aloe et al, 2014). Roffey (2012) makes a strong case for converging staff and student agendas and commitments in relation to wellbeing, with evidence of one being contingent on the other. Metaphorically, they are regarded as 'two sides of the same coin'. In the third edition of their handbook of student engagement interventions, Fredericks et al (2019) position both staff and student wellbeing as requisites within their multilevel approach.

This extract from Krissi Carter's Ted Talk speaks to the innovation that some schools are engaged in. In the full 10-minute talk Krissi provides an overview of the many changes made and the challenging questions that as a headteacher she had to confront together with her senior team, and more broadly with the whole school. The extract below speaks to multilevel innovation towards improved staff wellbeing and what an ambitious plan can look like in practice (Vignette 4: Staff and Student Wellbeing in Parallel).

Vignette 4: Staff and Student Wellbeing in Parallel

We know that if we want our students to have excellent health and wellbeing, we need to ensure that our staff have excellent health and well-being too. So together as a staff group we decided no more emails after 5.30; we scrapped lesson observations; we scrapped learning walks. Why? Because in the two weeks where SLT were going to go and watch teachers teach, the conversation in the staffroom would be, "Have you been seen yet?" instead of pedagogy and learning, and that's not what we wanted. So we do drop into each other's lessons now, but purely on a professional development basis. After every lesson teachers will get together and talk about the lesson to say what went well, what they are going to take and use in their own lessons. That's been a much more productive way in sharing what we do and in sharing good practice.

Not only that, we've changed the culture so much that people get disappointed if Senior Leadership Team don't come into lessons to look at the good work that their children are doing. In terms of marking, we scrapped the eight-hour marking policy, because what's the point of a student getting a piece of marking eight hours after they've finished the work. We do live feedback - marking and feedback happens there and then, straight away.

Our exclusions have gone down - we used to have over 100 exclusions every single academic year and we are pretty much down to single figures now.

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Our behaviour instances have plummeted, and not only that we have saved £175,000 by looking again at our structure and doing things differently. But each school is different and each school will need its own unique structure. So what I am hoping from my talk today is that you will look again at what your schools are doing and what your organisations are doing and challenge the status quo. Does it support mental health and well-being? Because at the end of the day isn't an organisation or a school where everybody feels trusted, supported and happy and less emotionally strained, an organisation that we would all like to work in?

(Carter, 2019)

In the lived reality of the school day, teachers and school leaders express a view that it is challenging to find time to collaborate and share vital information about children who are struggling. As a consequence they are unable to develop the full picture of need as well as provision, within their schools (EEFa, 2019, EEFb, 2019). Whilst school leadership teams are recognised as pivotal in setting the tenor and environment for student behaviour and engagement, teachers experience varying levels of support from senior leadership teams (Bennett, 2017; EEFb, 2019). Implicitly and more directly, the literature surrounding contextualised and multi-level approaches to behaviour, belonging and inclusion, point towards a vision of leadership that puts children and young people, their parents and their staff at the centre (Fredericks et al, 2019; Gregory and Skiba, 2017).

The work of Seashore-Louis and Murphy (2017), grounded in a long-standing record of systematic reviews of leadership, summarise many of these qualities and requisites in the form of caring leadership, wherein the leader's lens is firmly focused on trust, caring and deep

organisational learning with a very joined-up and integrated approach to working and problem solving. On a larger scale, drawing on the work of Riley (2017), the outstanding Telford and Wrekin education authority has scaled the concept of a multilevel approach to behaviour. This positions children and young people at the centre of a local level strategy aimed at creating the conditions required for all children and staff to transform behaviour through belonging and for all to thrive in its schools (Telford and Wrekin, 2019).

We know from the literature that schools have capacity, creativity and commitment to innovate and make progress in serving the needs of all children and young people. The issue of behaviour is very wide ranging and interventions are often short-term, and often comprise single foci rather than whole school initiatives. Evaluation and research are also not always at the heart of interventions. For these reasons, the research on behaviour as well as belonging is still in its infancy. The national behaviour strategy will also have some influence on next directions for schools as will further local manifestations of need in relation to Covid-19. There is a need for schools to innovate and to twin this with investigative work to understand and strengthen what works locally and how it can be further developed and sustained.

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