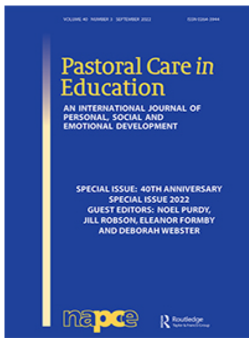

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The case for trauma-informed behaviour policies

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ABSTRACT

Current behaviour policies, which focus around reward and deterrent, have only limited long-term effectiveness. They assume that students can exercise self-control and follow rules, when motivated to do so. Students with special educational needs and disabilities typically have many intrinsic challenges to self-regulation, due to executive function difficulties, leading to them having frequent negative experiences of behaviour management practices which compound the challenges they face in schools. When children struggle to follow the rules, their anxiety tends to rise and they may experience many situations during the school day as threatening, leading to the 'fight, flight or freeze' response. This escalates behaviour that schools view as challenging. An alternative approach to management of behaviour comes from 'trauma-informed' education where all behaviour is seen as a form of communication and an opportunity to develop self-regulation. Pastoral care staff can lead the way to a view of students as on a journey of increased self-insight and self-management that will stand them in good stead throughout their lives.

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Introduction

The biggest challenge to pastoral care currently is not new but rather what I see as the continuing misunderstanding of the behaviours and needs of a large percentage of children in mainstream schools, that is, those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). I see this as a systemic issue, with blame not being placed on teachers, but in schools' adoption of behaviour policies that by design particularly disadvantage this group of children. Many students with SEND challenge teachers through a lack of conformity to rules. I recognise that the behaviour of many students which is found to be unacceptable in the school context is likely to stem from attempts to self-regulate, for example, to reduce feelings of stress and anxiety through shouting or movement. Rather than misbehaviour being viewed as the expression of need, we describe it as 'challenge' and in our actions we risk causing further harm to already vulnerable pupils. In this paper, I lay out what I see as the problem with typical current

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behaviour policies, consider some of the reasons for their prevalence and their frequent consequences, before making some suggestions for a more just approach.

The problem

UK school behaviour policies uniformly revolve around reward and punishment as advised by the Department for Education (2016). Some schools choose to predominantly apply rewards, however I concur with Kohn (1993) who concludes that lack of a reward can also be experienced as a punishment. Students are aware of what they perceive as 'fair' and 'unfair', a child who typically behaves well may not be rewarded for something that another child is and so are left feeling that they have not done well enough, or not been treated fairly. Government guidelines require headteachers to 'determine any disciplinary penalties for breaking the rules' (Department for Education, 2016, p. 4) but when administering punishment they should consider any special educational needs students may have although it is not stated what this consideration might comprise. Reward-based policies have been in operation for decades, and although evidence suggests that they have short-term effectiveness for some children they are also critiqued as reducing internal motivation (Freiberg & Lamb, 2009). Given their universal application, we could expect that effectiveness would be mirrored in statistical terms, however the ultimate marker of behaviour, that of school exclusions, remain persistently high (GOV.UK). Exclusions are discriminatory as children with SEND and those from minority groups are disproportionately affected. Such policies are predicated on the theory that children can understand what they are expected to do, and are able to physically, cognitively and emotionally follow the rules if motivated to do so. The following of rules, even when we understand what we are expected to do, relies on memory, planning and self-regulation, three aspects that many children with SEND will find difficult. Alongside the challenges of conformity sits the lack of recognition that behaviour is a form of communication and can therefore be seen as having value (Durand, 1993). Placing effort and focus on the following of rules de-emphasises insight into what a child is experiencing and trying to communicate at any point. When we consider children for whom clear communication can also be difficult (Kerns et al., 2015) this appears to represent a lost opportunity.

Rules are enforced in an attempt to provide a learning environment that is calm and ordered, which is seen as a prerequisite for learning to do well in academic skills (Department for Education, 2016). Again, this seems to detract from an emphasis on something that might include more value, that is, classrooms being a creative space where learning about human relationships as the foundation of success can happen. Considering these points, I suggest that blanket adoption of reward-based behaviour policies risks a downward spiral of

increased disadvantage and potential harm to already vulnerable pupils. Being required to face the consequences of not being able to follow expected patterns of behaviour can be seen as one of the ways in which schools may be 'trauma-producing' (Petrone & Stanton, 2021).

This brings me to consider why we have these kinds of policies. In my experience, the biggest argument, that is put forward by teachers, is that they are necessary to ensure order and fairness. Fairness is often equated with equality, that is, treating everyone in the same way. Typical pupils are often quick to challenge teachers who appear to favour or discriminate in the awarding of points or other rewards. The problem with applying the same rules, and rewards, to all children, is that this assumes that they all start from the same base. Many teachers are aware of this issue, and attempt to address it by giving rewards to those who, for example, show effort. Rather than having a meritocracy based on achievement, they use rewards to foster an environment of engagement. While this would seem to represent an improvement in terms of equity, it still excludes children who will, or can, not demonstrate engagement or effort in the usual way.

I think behaviour policies are also favoured by teachers for the guidance that they provide. Clear policies, which draw lines around what is, and is not, permissible, are an aid to teachers in bringing clarity and as a way of conforming to the demands of the institution. By telling children the rules dictate that the consequences of your actions are so, and you have been told this before, they seek to maintain relationship with their pupils, have command over their classroom and present the image of a respected and competent member of staff. With all else they must focus on in the classroom, applying simplistic actions to behaviour represents efficacy. Of course, teachers are also under considerable pressure from senior leaders, governors, and parents to manage their classrooms in what is seen as the expected way. Scrutiny of behaviour is part of a school inspection by Ofsted, the UK government standards body.

Children who are categorised as having 'special educational needs' are those who always, or sometimes, find it harder to learn than their peers (Department for Education, 2014). It is a broad-brush term including a wide range of specific needs, including physical access to learning environments, additional teaching in a particular subject area or across the board, and support with coping with emotional challenges, such as anxiety. What a great many of these children will have in common are difficulties with some of the skills that come under the umbrella of 'executive functions' (Timpe, 2016). Whether a child is labelled as autistic, or having ADHD, or if they have Down syndrome or dyslexia, they are very likely to experience difficulties with some or all the following: attention and persistence, processing, planning, impulse control, memory, decision-making, sequencing, prioritising, cognitive flexibility, problem solving, self-monitoring and self-regulation. Every task included in a school day requires these skills, they are

essential for development, learning and behaviour (DePrince et al., 2009). Some students will have specific difficulties in relation to one or two aspects, others will struggle across the board. Pupils who persistently fail to execute tasks, due to differences in executive function, are particularly challenging to teachers and are at risk for poor later-life success (McCoy, 2019).

When considering the challenges in adhering to rules, it is important to consider the intersection between executive function skills, anxiety and trauma (DePrince et al., 2009). One of the groups of children most prone to school exclusion are those with special educational needs, and particularly those with social, emotional and mental health as a primary need (Gov.uk, 2021). Exclusions typically happen due to 'persistent disruptive behaviour' (Gov.uk, 2021). Prior to an exclusion there is frequently a pattern of reprimand, poor behaviour being highlighted, and children experiencing humiliation for actions which they may have limited control to influence. In the interests of perceived 'fairness', behaviour policies are usually applied to all children, regardless of their abilities to conform to them. Students who regularly fail the school expectations are likely to build-up anxiety about their school day. At the most extreme end of this is school refusal (Filippello et al., 2020) but more typically are those with high rates of absenteeism and even persistent lateness (Gov.uk, 2021). It makes sense that students who know they will find it very difficult to be successful in school will feel anxious and develop resistance. Anxiety may stem from intrinsic difficulties, including with executive functions, or from environmental factors, such as bullying or lack of support at home. It is frequently very difficult to disentangle these factors. Children who struggle to manage their own behaviour will challenge their parents and peers, as well as teachers, and experience social exclusion (Slee, 2019). They are likely to be very aware of their differences even when they have no insight into them, leading to anxiety that compounds over time. It is possible to see the unrelenting nature of feeling different, worrying about consequences and dealing with being reprimanded by adults and peers, as leading to or exacerbating trauma (Kerns et al., 2015). Trauma often causes the brain to shut down and learning to stop, compounding anxiety and leading to further difficulties with executive function (Jacobson, 2021) and students stuck in cycles of fight or flight that require huge amounts of energy, or stuck in a dissociative freeze state. A spiral of experiences and anxieties work to compound poor self-image, a lack of self-belief, lack of motivation, a learned helplessness and/or rebellion.

The risk of school exclusion to children with SEND has been known for many years, and yet very little has changed, at least in the UK. A cynical view is to consider the possibility that schools lack motivation to address their behaviour policies because children who have learning support needs are both resource intensive and likely to reduce academic success. There could, therefore, be an incentive to implement policies which make it almost impossible for children

who challenge to be included in mainstream schools. Exclusion for persistent disruptive behaviour can therefore be helpful in meeting the performativity agenda.

A solution

I believe that there is a multi-faceted solution to this issue, which will lead to benefits for all, including staff and families. The role of pastoral carers would be multi-dimensional, as it is now, with the primary objective to encourage schools to work in a trauma-informed way, particularly in regard to managing behaviour. This would lead to revised behaviour policies with benefits for students with SEND as well as across the board. As we are all aware any child can go through a period of disruption when they need greater support and care.

Trauma informed education is an evidence-based approach with benefits including improved attendance, academic achievement, emotional regulation, confidence and relationship building (Roseby & Gascoigne, 2021; Wall, 2021). The approach includes: an understanding of the impact of trauma, support for students to feel safe, addressing student needs holistically, connecting students to the school community, embracing teamwork, and anticipating and adapting to the needs of students (Jacobson, 2021). It is a way of working that focuses on kindness, compassion, developing pupils' insight into their own behaviour and building self-regulation. Rather than setting up the spiral outlined above it would promote an alternative upwards trajectory of developing understanding and insight that builds self-belief, healthy self-esteem, caring for self and others (Freiberg & Lamb, 2009). Instead of children being either rewarded for conforming, or missing out on rewards due to rule breaking, schools would adopt a view of students having 'not yet' achieved appropriate self-regulation. Pastoral care would encompass the delivery of support that increases self-awareness and puts in place strategies to build self-control over time. We need to recognise and remember that executive function skills continue to develop through childhood, adolescence and even into people's 20s (Best & Miller, 2010). This approach will also be helpful to teachers in not taking personally students' lack of conformity and allowing them to respond rather than react.

Pastoral care staff would lead the way in training school staff, leaders and parents to understand what happens in the brains of young children in a range of situations. Highlighting the limited responses we all experience when placed in a situation we find frightening or threatening, that of 'fight, flight or freeze', would give staff the foundation awareness of what is not overtly visible in a child's behaviour but we need to intuit. Policies need to recognise the need for children in a heightened state of arousal to have a space to calm down, not as a punishment but as a learning process. Once calm, children can be helped to

find the answers to questions such as those proposed by Cotton (2017) that is 'what happened', 'how did it make you feel', 'what could you do differently next time' as part of a restorative approach (Sellman et al., 2014).

Trauma-informed education has its foundation in positive relationships (Jacobson, 2021) which makes it profoundly and fundamentally pastoral. When school staff are viewed as being there to help and support, rather than control and discipline, students can achieve greater calm and confidence. Errors in schoolwork and behaviour can be seen as positive learning opportunities. These approaches will lead to happy and confident children who are not pushed into 'fight or flight' by the pressures of a performative classroom. This will necessitate a change of mindset in some staff who may fear relinquishing long-established means of control. I find the concept of the 'least dangerous assumption' (Donnellan, 1984) helpful here. When a child 'mis-behaves' it is easy to jump to conclusions about wilful non-conformity, but what if the child has arrived at school in an already heightened sense of anxiety and they are struggling to see that what is happening in the classroom is benevolent? They can experience any form of challenge, whether from teacher or peer, as a threat, pushing them into a fight against the perceived danger or a flight into helplessness. When staff assume the latter view, arguably the 'least dangerous assumption', they will offer calm support which can reduce anxiety and avoid the student challenge. Staff who can carefully observe their class and notice any form of escalation can put in place strategies to help the student notice what is happening within and encourage them to put in place self-regulation strategies. When this isn't effective, the no blame, 'not yet' approach reminds the student of what they can do next time. Trauma-informed environments welcome the appropriate expression of need, which further encourages students to manage their own levels of arousal and tolerance.

The approach suggested here includes clear expectations of student, and staff, behaviour. Students are still held accountable for their actions (Jacobson, 2021). The school community need to have high expectations for themselves and others. When expectations are not met, as is inevitable at times, this is seen as cause for reminders and further support not reprimand. The focus on a growth mindset, self-control being a work in progress, builds communities that recognise that we all fail at times, and reflecting on errors is how we learn. Trauma-informed schools teach students to use their strengths to overcome challenges. They encourage acceptance of different ways of being and of the importance of mutual support, rather than competition.

Conclusion

This then is a plea for those leading pastoral work in their schools to start a conversation about how they can better serve their community in terms of reducing anxiety, minimising trauma, and building happy and supportive

communities. Rather than implementing special support for groups of children a change to the institution would be more effective and benefit all. School staff want to come to work knowing that they can focus on the well-being of their pupils, which in turn will support their learning, rather than having to spend a good part of their school day operating a policy that can be seen as limiting their autonomy. Better ways of providing pupil support needs to be embedded in teacher education courses, enacted by school leaders through revised policies. Most importantly, no matter where pupils go when they leave school, there is no path that will not be made smoother by self-insight and self-regulation, the most crucial skills for a happy and successful life.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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