



SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE
Education Department

Insight 15

Teachers' Perceptions of Discipline in Scottish Schools

Welcome to *Insight*

Insight is a publication of the research group within Information, Analysis and Communication Division, which is responsible for providing analytical services within the Scottish Executive Education Department (SEED). Their work is part of a multidisciplinary unit (consisting of researchers, economists and statistics staff) and the staff undertakes and funds economic analysis and social research in the fields of: school education; children, young people and social work; architecture; and tourism, culture and sport.

The Scottish Executive is committed to the use of sound evidence in the development of policy and practice as well as in the evaluation of policy and its implementation. We therefore want to disseminate the results of research that SEED has undertaken and funded, in a manner that is accessible, interesting and attractive.

Insight aims to present the essence of research projects in a format that will be useful and informative for practitioners, policy makers, parents, academics, and anyone else who has an interest in economic and social research in these areas.

The views expressed in this *Insight* are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the Scottish Executive or any other organisation(s) by whom the author(s) is or are employed.

Copyright © November 2004, Scottish Executive Education Department

ISSN 1478-6788 (Print)
ISSN 1478-6796 (Online)

Insight may be photocopied for use within your own institution.

A limited number of additional copies can be obtained from the Dissemination Officer, Information, Analysis and Communication Division, Scottish Executive Education Department, Victoria Quay, Edinburgh EH6 6QQ (telephone 0131-244-0316). Copies of *Insight* and our other publications can be downloaded from our website: www.scotland.gov.uk/insight/

Teachers' Perceptions of Discipline in Scottish Schools

Pamela Munn, Margaret Johnstone and Stephen Sharp
Moray house School of Education, University of Edinburgh

Introduction

Discipline in schools, or more accurately, the level of indiscipline in schools, is an emotive topic. This is so because good discipline is seen as fulfilling two separate, but related functions. First, it is a means to an end, effective learning. An orderly, purposeful classroom with pupils actively engaged in learning provides positive conditions for learning. So reports of disruption in the classroom naturally create concern about learning opportunities, about effects on pupils' achievements in national examinations and about life chances. Good discipline, however, is also an end in itself, an outcome of schooling. We expect schools, together with parents, families and others, to promote behaviour demonstrating courtesy, kindness and respect. Reports of indiscipline, therefore, make us wonder about the kind of society we are becoming. The importance and sensitivity of the topic is reflected in the attention paid to it by government. There have been two major enquiries into standards of discipline since the 1970s in Scotland: the Pack Report in 1977 which also considered truancy; and, most recently, Better Behaviour, Better Learning, the report of the Discipline Task Group in 2001. In 1989 the Elton Committee reported on discipline standards in England and Wales. All these reports stimulated research and development activity designed to assess the nature and extent of indiscipline, to encourage new approaches to promoting good discipline and to share experience and ideas among schools, local authorities and others.

Aims of the Study

In 2003 the Scottish Executive commissioned a team from the Universities of Edinburgh and Strathclyde to undertake an evaluation of the implementation of some aspects of developments following Better Behaviour, Better Learning, which will report at a later date.

The survey reported here was part of that research, providing part of the context in which developments about discipline in schools were taking place. The survey had the following aims:

- to gather teachers' and headteachers'¹ perceptions of the nature and extent of indiscipline in Scottish schools;
- to explore whether teachers found indiscipline difficult to deal with;
- to investigate whether teachers identified particular kinds of pupils as particularly troubled or troublesome – for example boys rather the girls or pupils having special educational needs;
- to identify teachers' priorities for dealing with indiscipline;
- to compare perceptions of these matters over time.

Study Methods

One of the key aims was to compare and contrast results with previous surveys which we had undertaken. This meant that, by and large, the same questionnaire and the same schools were used although, of course, the teachers in these schools were different. We surveyed secondary teachers in 1990, 1996 and 2004 and secondary headteachers in 1990 and 2004.

We surveyed primary teachers in 1996 and 2004 and primary headteachers in 2004 only.

¹ We use teachers to include headteachers henceforth unless we wish to draw attention to differences in perception.

Response rates have declined over all the surveys but the structure of the sample and the numbers responding meant that we can present a statistically sound account of teachers' views.

Even if the views of teachers had not changed markedly over time we would not expect the percentages of teachers reporting the prevalence of behaviours to be exactly the same. In comparing responses over time we have used standard tests for significance to report whether the differences in perceptions over time are greater than those due to random variation in the data.

There are two further points to bear in mind about the data.

- We are reporting teacher perceptions, not objective measures of indiscipline. It is possible that we are reporting a decline in teacher morale so that they perceive indiscipline more readily than in the past.
- We report how frequently teachers encounter a particular behaviour in the classroom or around the school. The emphasis is on the behaviour not on the number of pupils behaving in particular ways. Teachers said the vast majority of their pupils were well behaved.

Perceptions of Indiscipline in Primary School in 2004

Insight question: Behaviour in primary classrooms and around the school

The survey listed a range of behaviours and asked teachers how frequently they had met them in a specific week. The behaviours ranged from the seemingly trivial, such as talking out of turn to the more serious, such as physical aggression toward the teacher. The 699 primary teachers reported that the most frequently encountered behaviours on every day during the survey week were the low level behaviours such as talking out of turn (77%), hindering other pupils (47%) and making unnecessary noise (43%). Headteachers' views were similar. It is worth stressing that no teacher reported encountering very serious behaviour such as physical aggression towards themselves or sexist or racist abuse every day during the survey week.

This picture of daily life in classrooms from primary teachers and headteachers was very similar to the pattern of daily behaviour around the school. Running in corridors, unruliness while waiting and showing lack of concern for others were the most frequently encountered behaviours. Racist and sexist abuse towards staff were the least frequently encountered.

Did primary teachers find indiscipline difficult to deal with?

We did not assume that teachers necessarily found troublesome behaviour difficult to deal with. Their training and experience as well as the extensive availability of a wide range of materials could have been seen as equipping teachers both to prevent the opportunity for disruption and to respond to it effectively when it took place. The majority of teachers did not find behaviour difficult to deal with, although about 3 in 10 primary teachers did. The actual behaviours found difficult varied. This reflects the fact that behaviour takes place in a particular context and what works in one situation will not necessarily work in another.

The most commonly used strategies to deal with difficult behaviour were:

- Verbal rebukes or telling off 95%
- Reasoning with the pupil 93%
- Using humour 88%.

None of these strategies was seen as universally effective although the largest number of teachers, 24%, saw negotiating with pupils as the strategy most likely to pay dividends.

Insight question: Teachers give reasons for indiscipline.

Teachers' explanations for difficult behaviour fell broadly into three main categories. These were *changes in society* including lack of automatic respect for authority and a greater readiness to challenge adults; the existence of a drug culture which meant some children had very chaotic lives; and awareness of rights without a corresponding awareness of responsibilities. The following gives something of the flavour of these kinds of comments:

Many children have difficult home circumstances. School offers stability but it is merely a plaster on a wound. How can children concentrate when there is so much going on in their lives?

We have no wish to go back to the bad old days when children were afraid to talk to their teacher, but respect is a two-way thing.

A second category of response concerned teachers' feelings of *lack of skill and expertise* in teaching pupils with a wider range of special educational needs than in the past. We know that greater numbers of pupils are now being diagnosed as having, for example, autistic spectrum disorder or attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Whether the increase in numbers is a real increase in the incidence of these conditions or greater awareness and improvements in diagnosis, is a matter of some debate. Nevertheless some teachers feel unable to teach children with these disorders without substantial extra help. One teacher commented:

I have a pupil with ADHD. His medicine has been changed three times this session. His behaviour is intolerable. Both of us need help!

A third category of explanation lay in schools themselves. In some cases the reasons for behaviours being difficult to deal with was a lack of commitment to school policy.

We do have a discipline policy but no-one follows it – teachers are left alone with problems and just hope that problems do not rear their heads.

Of course, these categories are not mutually exclusive and the teachers reported multiple causes for troublesome behaviour.

Insight statement: The majority of pupils are well behaved.

Primary teachers perceived the vast majority of their pupils to be well behaved. They tended to identify a small minority of pupils as troublesome and these tended to be boys. Teachers further distinguished between a small and determined minority of pupils causing persistent low level behaviour problems and the few pupils exhibiting major personal problems being acted out in school. Interestingly, pupils with a Record of Need did *not* feature as particularly difficult to deal with given teachers' concerns about their lack of expertise.

Perceptions of Indiscipline in Secondary Schools in 2004**Insight statement: Behaviour in secondary classrooms and around the school.**

As in the primary survey, the questionnaire for secondary teachers and headteachers listed a number of behaviours in the classroom and asked teachers how frequently they had met them in a specific week. The same range of behaviours was listed. The 528 secondary teachers reported that the most frequently encountered behaviours on a daily basis during the survey week were also the low level behaviours reported by their primary colleagues. These were talking out of turn (79%); eating in class (64%); calculated idleness (62%) and hindering other pupils (61%).

As in primary schools, no secondary teacher reported meeting physical aggression, or sexist or racist abuse towards themselves, every day during the survey week. The picture presented by headteachers was similar.

Did Secondary Teachers Find Indiscipline difficult to Deal With?

This picture of daily life in classrooms from secondary teachers and headteachers was very similar to the pattern of daily behaviour around the school. Both groups reported persistently infringing school rules, showing lack of concern for others and general rowdiness in their top categories.

Insight question: What do teachers do to deal with indiscipline?

About 5 in 10 teachers found dealing with behaviour difficult. As with their primary colleagues, no particular behaviour stood out as particularly difficult. Much depends on the context in which the behaviour occurs. What might, at first glance, seem relatively trivial behaviour could nevertheless be difficult to deal with because of its prevalence and repetition. The following secondary teacher sums up this situation:

What I find most exhausting is the low level constant disruption caused by pupils who cannot concentrate on a task ... at times I feel I accomplish very little, because so much of a lesson is wasted supplying pencils, chasing up homework, cajoling/nagging, giving punishment exercises etc to pupils who are perfectly pleasant but who cannot/will not take responsibility for their behaviour/education.

Secondary teachers and headteachers used a very similar range of strategies to deal with troublesome behaviour. The most frequently reported were:

- Verbal rebukes
- Using humour
- Reasoning with pupils.

Views on the effectiveness of strategies were also similar. We can speculate that much depends on the context in which behaviour occurs and on the history of the relationships between pupil and teacher in predicting what will work. Indeed every one of the 17 strategies listed in the questionnaire was seen as both effective and ineffective.

Like their primary colleagues, secondary teachers' explanations for indiscipline lay to some extent in changes in society and the wider range of skills and of support needed to teach children with special needs. However, there was a kind of explanation offered by secondary headteachers more seldom than by their counterparts in primary. This was the difficulty of applying consistent standards and the need for staff to adhere to agreed policy and procedures. We should stress that these views are not statistically representative but derive from the invitation to write freely about school discipline having completed a long and demanding questionnaire. One headteacher wrote:

A small number of teachers cause a disproportionate number of difficulties. They are small in number but a serious problem.

Some 77% of secondary headteachers noted that a change in teaching style would improve discipline in their school. Likewise some teachers commented upon apparent inconsistencies within the schools' senior management teams.

The older the pupils become the more intervention seems to be relaxed, as if, 'oh well, they've only got another year or a few months,' so nothing is done.

Secondary teachers perceived the vast majority of their pupils to be well-behaved. They tended to identify a small minority of pupils as troublesome and these tended to be boys in S4. A small number of teachers and headteachers offered ideas to improve school life for disaffected pupils, ranging from more extra-curricular activities to a more vocational curriculum.

Comparisons Over Time

A unique feature of the study is that it allows comparison of teachers' views about the nature, extent and seriousness of indiscipline over time. In order to do this we need to report the kinds of behaviours teachers were encountering in the classroom and around the school on a weekly basis. This is because some behaviour such as physical aggression towards staff is infrequent. We begin by reporting changes in teachers' general views on how serious the problem of indiscipline is. We then report more specifically on changes in perceptions in classroom behaviour and in behaviour around the school. In general, the picture presented is that of a significant increase in perceptions of indiscipline as a serious problem. Secondary school teachers and headteachers portray a more striking change in perception over time than primary teachers.

Insight question: Is indiscipline getting worse?

The percentage of secondary teachers who see discipline as either a serious or very serious problem changed over the years from 36% in 1990, to 34% in 1996 to 59% in 2004. This is quite a marked rise and has statistical significance. As already indicated, the changing nature of society was seen as a possible explanation for this state of affairs. As one teacher wrote:

In my long experience in teaching I have seen an accelerating decline in the standards of respect of pupils for themselves, for other pupils and for teachers.

How Serious is the Problem of Indiscipline?

We should also mention that our 2004 sample of teachers was slightly older than previous samples and contained more principal teachers. Nevertheless the increase of this magnitude cannot be attributed solely to changes in sample characteristics.

Secondary headteachers appeared less pessimistic than teachers. About 14% had seen the situation as serious or very serious in 1990 and in 2004 this was 26%. Headteachers tend to have a broader view of the school than teachers and may be concerned to portray their schools in a more positive light. Nevertheless over 1 in 4 headteachers seeing discipline in their schools as a serious or very serious problem does give pause for thought.

Some 69% of secondary teachers reported that the time they spent on discipline had increased, compared to 51% in 1996. Of course, more time spent on discipline could mean that any problem took a long time to move through the system or be effectively dealt with, rather than imply more problems. As one teacher put it,

It's low level indiscipline [but] chasing up detentions etc is tiring and time consuming.

Just over 4 in 10 teachers saw violence as a problem in their schools in 2004, as compared to just under 3 in 10 in 1996. These teachers were asked to be more specific about the kind of violence which was a problem. Almost all cited verbal aggression between pupils (97%) and verbal aggression to teachers (87%). These were statistically significant increases from 1996. Just under 80% of those seeing violence as a problem cited physical aggression between pupils and 18% reported physical aggression to teachers. The report of physical aggression among pupils is a slight decrease on the 1996 figure. The slight increase in teachers seeing violence as physical aggression towards teachers (18% in 2004 and 14% in 1996) is not statistically significant.

Primary teachers' reports on the seriousness of discipline as a problem were rather different from those of secondary teachers. The percentage of teachers who saw the situation as serious or very serious rose over the years from 17% in 1996 to 22% in 2004.

Insight question: The main differences between primary and secondary schools.

The generally more optimistic picture from primary teachers was confirmed by looking at whether time spent on discipline had increased. There was very little change between 1996 and 2004 on this question. Furthermore, there was no change in perceptions of violence being a problem, with 1 in 5 primary teachers continuing to report this. Where the change is noteworthy is that a statistically significant increased percentage of that 1 in 5 saw verbal aggression and physical aggression to teachers as part of the problem of violence.

Changes in the Classroom

Turning to the specific behaviours that *secondary teachers and headteachers* report we can see from Table 1 that the prevalence of asterisks indicating a statistically significant change over time is very striking.

Insight question: What kinds of behaviour do secondary teachers encounter in their classrooms?

Table 1 Percentages of secondary teachers and headteachers reporting different pupil behaviours as occurring/referred in the classroom at least once during a week, in 1990, 1996 and 2004

Type of Pupil Behaviour	% Secondary School Teachers			% Secondary Headteachers	
	1990 N= 883	1996 N=561	2004 N=528	1990 N=386	2004 N=275†
1 Talking out of turn	98	99	99	26	55
2 Making unnecessary (non-verbal) noise	80	80	88**	7	33
3 Hindering other pupils	90	90	95**	19	65
4 Getting out of seat without permission	71	71	81**	4	27
5 Not being punctual	83	85	94**	27	56
6 Persistently infringing class rules	72	72	84**	17	73
7 Eating/chewing in class	85	85	94**	6	29
8 Calculated idleness or work avoidance	90	92	94	18	56
9 Cheeky or impertinent remarks or responses	71	72	87**	21	75
10 General rowdiness, horseplay or mucking about	67	65	82**	17	68
11 Use of mobile phones/texting	-	-	58	-	41
12 Physical destructiveness	18	18	39**	4	38
13 Racist abuse towards other pupils	-	6	11**	-	11
14 Sexist abuse or harassment of other pupils	-	17	33**	-	30
15 General verbal abuse towards other pupils	66	69	79**	22	74
16 Racist abuse towards you	-	0.5	2*	-	3
17 Sexist abuse or harassment towards you	-	3	5	-	16
18 General verbal abuse towards you	21	27	45**	21	67
19 Physical aggression towards other pupils	50	50	56	21	83
20 Physical aggression towards you	2	1	8*	2	17

* indicates significant at the 5% level

** indicates significant at the 1% level

† all items are statistically significant

There were 20 possible classroom behaviours listed in 2004 and 19 of these were also used in 1996. As can be seen, 15 of these had increased in 2004 in a way that could not be attributed statistically to chance. A statistically significant increase can be observed even when numbers are quite small. For example, physical aggression toward the teacher rose from 1% reporting this in 1996 to 8% in 2004. This means 6 teachers reported meeting physical aggression during the week in 1996 as compared to 40 in 2004.

The much longer time span for secondary headteachers gives a more emphatic picture of negative change. All the increases are significant and 2004 pupil behaviour is seemingly worse. The type of pupil behaviour referred to headteachers seems more serious and the percentages dealing with behaviours are much higher.

A similar picture is presented in teacher and headteacher reports of behaviours encountered during the week around the school. Reports on 13 of the 17 relevant behaviours had increased in a statistically significant way and no pupil behaviour had decreased in incidence. (Table not shown).

The situation reported by *primary teachers and headteachers* was different as can be seen from Table 2.

Insight question: What kinds of behaviour do primary teachers encounter in their classrooms

Table 2 Percentages of primary teachers/headteachers reporting different pupil behaviours as occurring/being referred in the classroom at least once during a week, in 1996 and 2004

Type of Pupil Behaviour	% Primary teachers		% Primary headteachers
	1996 N=825	2004 N=699	2004 N=276
1 Talking out of turn	98	98	89
2 Making unnecessary (non-verbal) noise	84	86	66
3 Hindering other pupils	91	92	84
4 Getting out of seat without permission	79	79	65
5 Not being punctual	56	62**	58
6 Persistently infringing class rules	65	69*	72
7 Eating/chewing in class	26	22	21
8 Calculated idleness or work avoidance	70	78**	67
9 Cheeky or impertinent remarks or responses	44	52**	64
10 General rowdiness, horseplay or mucking about	57	61	62
11 Use of mobile phones/texting	-	1	4
12 Physical destructiveness	15	13	20
13 Racist abuse towards other pupils	4	4	8
14 Sexist abuse or harassment of other pupils	7	12**	19
15 General verbal abuse towards other pupils	64	63	74
16 Racist abuse towards you or staff	0.1	-	1
17 Sexist abuse or harassment towards you or staff	0.2	-	3
18 General verbal abuse towards you or staff	8	12**	35
19 Physical aggression towards other pupils	69	63**	75
20 Physical aggression towards you or staff	1	2	12

* indicates significant at the 5% level

** indicates significant at the 1% level

Comparing the two samples, 10 of the 19 behaviours were encountered by more teachers in 2004 than 1996. The most marked of these are the higher incidence of cheeky remarks, of calculated idleness and pupil to pupil sexist abuse. Although the latter is reported by a small percentage of teachers the trend is worth noting. This might imply that teachers are more conscious of sexist abuse and bullying rather than that there is a real increase, however.

Only one behaviour decreased in teachers' reports, the important one of pupil to pupil physical aggression. The 63% figure gives no cause for complacency however.

Looking at behaviours around the school encountered during the week, the relative change is not as negative in the classroom. (Table not shown). Two behaviours showed a statistically significant increase, physical aggression to the teacher, from 0.6% to 2% and pupil to pupil sexist abuse from 5% to 9%. Three behaviours had a statistically significant decrease. These were pupils loitering in prohibited areas, physical aggression among pupils and pupils showing a lack of concern for others.

Priorities for Improvement

Insight question: What do you think the priority for improving discipline should be?

The top two priorities for both *secondary and primary teachers* were unchanged from 1996 and were:

- Offering more places in special units outside school
- Smaller classes.

There was a similar picture from secondary headteachers although 77% noted that a change in teaching styles would improve discipline in their specific school. Primary headteachers identified the need for more classroom assistants as well as the need for more special units and smaller classes.

Conclusion

This picture suggests it is essential to continue to focus on behaviour management as a key policy area. It is also important, however, to remember that there have been concerns about the standards of pupil behaviour for as long as there have been schools. Teachers saw the majority of pupils as well behaved. Nevertheless the trends in teacher perceptions suggest an increasing number of teachers encountering a wide range of potentially disruptive behaviours in the classroom and around the school. The most marked increases are from secondary teachers but there are increases in some, though not all, behaviours reported by primary teachers. There are three themes to which it is worth drawing attention.

1. Boys are seen as particularly difficult and challenging by both primary and secondary teachers.
2. Lower level behaviours continue to be the most wearing for teachers.
3. The reports of physical aggression towards teachers are showing a statistically significant rise for secondary and primary teachers. Although the numbers of teachers reporting physical aggression are small they show a trend in the wrong direction.

Finally, it is important to remember that in surveys people reply to the questions they have been asked. If the survey had asked about actions to promote good discipline we would have a rather different picture of life in classrooms from the one presented here. We know from a range of sources about the good work which teachers in collaboration with parents, pupils and a range of others in local communities are carrying out to make schools a happy and safe place.

The *Insight* Series

1. *Classroom Assistants: Key Issues from the National Evaluation*
2. *The Impact of ICT Initiatives in Scottish Schools*
3. *Moving On to Primary 1: An Exploratory Study of the Experience of Transition from Pre-School to Primary*
4. *Accelerating Reading and Spelling with Synthetic Phonics: A Five Year Follow Up*
5. *Assessment of Benefits and Costs of Out of School Care*
6. *Meeting the Needs of Children from Birth to Three: Research Evidence and Implications for Out-of-Home Provision*
7. *Key Findings from the National Evaluation of the New Community Schools Pilot Programme in Scotland*
8. *Scottish Qualification for Headship: Key Issues from the Evaluation*
9. *The Sitter Service in Scotland: A Study of the Costs and Benefits*
10. *Awards in Early Education, Childcare and Playwork: A Qualifications Framework for the Future*
11. *An Evaluation of the Higher Still Reforms*
12. *The Management of Supply Cover in the Teaching Profession*
13. *Parents' Demand for and Access to Childcare in Scotland*
14. *Evaluation of Personalised Laptop Provision in Schools*

If you have views on the *Insight* series or wish to find out more about SEED's research and economics programme, please contact Information, Analysis and Communication Division, Scottish Executive Education Department, Victoria Quay, Edinburgh EH6 6QQ or by e-mail on recs.admin@scotland.gsi.gov.uk

Astron 209653 11/04

This document is produced from 100% Elemental Chlorine-free material, environmentally preferred material and is 100% recyclable.



ISSN 1478-6788 (Print)
ISSN 1478-6796 (Online)