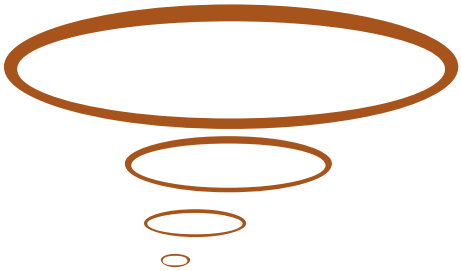
THINKING SPACE (2)



Engaging youth through restorative approaches in schools

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THE CURRENT discipline system in English secondary schools is failing many of our young people. Based on punishments and sanctions, the usual procedure for lack of compliance in school is a repetition of the same sanctions again and again, often increasing in seriousness as time goes on. If this system was successful in changing behaviour, there would be no need for this cycle of repetition.

This article will consider the current issues surrounding disruptive behaviour in schools. It will explore the use of school disciplinary exclusions in England and the cost to society of the current approach. The article will conclude with a suggestion for a change in the predominant school discipline system in England, advocating a policy that introduces restorative practice as a way of more effectively meeting the needs of both students and staff involved in dealing with disruptive behaviour.

What works?

The topic of disruptive behaviour in schools is one that is rarely out of the media spotlight. A recent example is the introduction of a 'behaviour tsar', Tom Bennett, under the Conservative government in 2015 (Mason, 2015). Bennett has pledged to tackle low level disruption in classrooms and has published his 'top ten tips' for teachers to maintain classroom discipline (Bennett, 2015), which mainly seem to focus on ensuring the authority of the teacher through the imposition of sanctions.

However Greene (2008:8) suggests that, 'the reality is that well-behaved students aren't behaving themselves because of the school discipline programme. They behave themselves because they have skills to handle life's challenges in adaptive fashion'. What about those young people who don't seem willing or able to make the decision to behave in a way that their school judges to be appropriate? Anyone who has worked in a school will recognise the description of the student who, despite being punished and sanctioned numerous times, continues displaying the same challenging

behaviour day after day. If a student makes an academic mistake, they are taught how to rectify this and offered support to help them learn, even if they make the same mistake more than once. However if a student makes a behavioural mistake, rather than being offered support to change their behaviour, they are subjected to punitive sanctions. Our school discipline system is failing a core minority of young people by not addressing their underlying needs and thus denying them the opportunity to take full advantage of their educational entitlement.

As highlighted by Goshe (2015: 45), there is a perceived concern that by helping young people when they make a behavioural mistake, rather than punishing them, they will become 'coddled', soft, or encased within a 'web of useless dependency'. Goshe suggests that:

> *…punishment is profoundly respected. It is seen as useful, practical and essential to ensuring personal accountability for choices. Unlike social support services which are seen as enabling the weak to be weaker, punitive practices are seen as right, rational and necessary for personal growth and transformation. Under this mentality, if someone fails to change, it is because the punishment was not harsh enough* (ibid).

This quote illustrates the stance that is taken by many schools when a young person continues to make the same behavioural mistakes or poor choices on repeated occasions, despite the sanctions put in place, eventually leading to an exclusion from school.

School exclusions

England has a school exclusion rate that is ten times greater than any other country in Europe (Kupchik, Green and Mowen, 2015). In England in the academic year 2011/12 (Department for Education, 2013):

1. 137,070 young people (4.26 per cent of the entire secondary school population) received at least one fixed term exclusion from mainstream state funded secondary schools.
2. A significant proportion of this group (37 per cent; 51,220 young people) received more than one period of fixed term exclusion in this year.
3. The majority of these exclusions were recorded as being due to persistent disruptive behaviour.

Between 2003 and 2010, exclusions remained fairly static with an average of 4.96 per cent of the school population receiving at least one fixed term exclusion from school each year (Kupchik, Green and Mowen, 2015). These statistics show a recurrent pattern, year after year. They indicate that the same young people are being given repeated fixed-term exclusions for the same type of behaviour, mostly for being persistently disruptive during lessons. Yet, as studies by Martinez (2009) and Searle (2001) reveal, school disciplinary exclusion is not an effective way to change

student behaviour. The literature indicates that students return to school displaying the same behaviour as before or more extreme behaviour, which leads schools to repeatedly exclude the same young people (Martinez, 2009). Exclusion causes feelings of rejection and resentment, it does not resolve the underlying issues that have led to the behaviour in the first place, and it denies young people their right to access education.

There are particular groups who are far more likely to be excluded from school than others. A report by the Office of the Children's Commissioner in 2012 found that boys, children with special needs, children from specific ethnic backgrounds, and children from low socio-economic backgrounds were most likely to be excluded. One particularly stark statistic stated that 'in 2009-10, if you were a Black African-Caribbean boy with special needs and eligible for free school meals you were 168 times more likely to be permanently excluded from a state-funded school than a White girl without special needs from a middle class family' (Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2012:9).

Regardless of the inequality of exclusions and the research which suggests they are not an effective way of dealing with challenging behaviour, a number of schools in England now implement 'zero tolerance' policies, which cause the number of school exclusions to rise rapidly. 'Zero tolerance' policies were first developed in America by the US Customs Agency to combat the drug trade and were then introduced into schools to address the issue of gun crime and extreme violence in schools (Kupchik, Green and Mowen, 2015; Martinez, 2009). There was never any intention that these policies should be applied for trivial disciplinary offences in schools and there is very little research to support their effectiveness (Martinez, 2009). As well as significantly increasing the number of exclusions from schools, 'zero tolerance' policies also create a rigid 'one size fits all' structure where the focus is primarily on the offence, rather the student (Kupchik, Green and Mowen, 2015).

The cost to society

The cost to society of these punitive school discipline regimes is high (Parsons and Castle, 1998). Young people who are disaffected from school and are out of lessons due to disciplinary exclusion or self-exclusion (truancy) are more likely to become involved in criminal activity and to be at risk of exploitation (Parsons, 2011). This increases the cost to public services, such as the police and social services. In addition, young people who are disengaged and excluded from education are more likely to be unemployed in adulthood, resulting in a long term cost to the taxpayer.

Despite this, schools and government education policy continue to advocate and use the sanction based system (Department for Education, 2014). The punitive response, which predominates in today's schools, limits educational authorities to simplistic choices. 'To punish or not to punish. How much punishment? How many detentions or days of suspension?'(Costello, Wachtel and Wachtel, 2009: 49). There needs to be another option. As Flanagan (2014) suggests, if something

is not working to change behaviour, then it is necessary to try something else. There is little point in continuing with the same approach, ever increasing in seriousness of sanction until the point of permanent exclusion from school is met.

Proposed approach

The good news is that there are alternatives to this type of discipline regime. One of these alternatives is to introduce restorative approaches in schools. This approach is evidence-based and proven to be effective at changing behaviour (Thorsborne and Blood, 2013). A restorative approach is based on building and maintaining relationships, on repairing any harm that has been caused, and working together to develop sustainable solutions to issues. All parties are involved in resolving the situation, rather than a punishment simply being imposed by an external authority.

Restorative approaches are not necessarily more financially costly than the current dominant approach. In the UK criminal justice system, restorative approaches are being increasingly used and this has been shown to be not only effective but also to save money (Flanagan, 2014). If we are willing to use an alternative approach to resolve criminal behaviour, surely alternative approaches to resolving challenging behaviour should be tried in our schools as well, where we are dealing, not with adult criminals, but with young people who are still learning and developing. They need to be taught other ways of behaving rather than being punished for lacking the skills they need to respond adaptively (Greene, 2008).

Being excluded from school is a significant risk factor for becoming involved in criminal activities (McAra, 2009). A major variable that contributes to this is simply the amount of time available to young people excluded from school. Attending school limits the time available to become involved in criminal behaviour and lessens the likelihood of involvement with older peers who may have a negative influence. If less young people were excluded from school, they would be provided with a consistent and safe environment to attend during the day.

Reducing exclusions through the use of restorative approaches in schools would also reduce the criminalisation of young people. Exclusion is a punitive measure that does not repair the harm that has been caused. Within the criminal justice system, restorative justice for youth crime in Northern Ireland has been successful, with re-offending rates lower than for most other sanctions and high victim satisfaction with the outcome (Department of Justice Northern Ireland, 2011). Early intervention with a restorative approach can improve behaviour and reduce the risk of escalation into persistent and serious offending, both in the realm of the school and the wider community (Youth Crime Commission, 2010). In the case of Hull Youth Justice Service, their 'Challenge and Support' intervention, which always included a restorative element, achieved a 48.7 per cent reduction over 2009/10 in the number of young people entering the formal youth justice system for the first time (Smith, 2014).

Over the past decade there has been an increased emphasis on diversion from formal criminal sanctions foryoung people, including greater use of restorative approaches within the youth justice system (Chaney, 2015; Smith, 2014). As this has become an increasingly high profile issue in politics (Chaney, 2015), the implementation of restorative approaches as an early intervention within schools would seem appropriate in line with the current political climate in which the dominant parties are beginning to move their discourse away 'from popularism and punishment towards rights and rehabilitation' (Chaney, 2015: 37).

To implement such a policy would require senior school leaders and teachers to understand and support the philosophy behind restorative approaches. This could be achieved by promoting the value of restorative approaches and publicising the evidence showing the effectiveness of the approach. High quality training and support for school staff would be an essential part of the implementation of this policy. Whilst this would be fairly time consuming and would have an initial financial cost, in the long term it would be far more cost effective than continuing with the current ineffective system.

Conclusion

To conclude, this paper recommends introducing a policy on the use of restorative approaches in schools. This would minimise the need for school exclusions and would in turn minimise the risk of young people becoming involved in offending behaviour, which would save the cost to the police and social services. Engaging all young people in education is vitally important and the introduction of restorative approaches in UK schools would move us a step further towards achieving this.

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