

Research suggests scale of disruptive behaviour in schools is underestimated

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(Phys.org) —The true extent of poor pupil behaviour in schools is seriously underestimated, according to an academic from the University of East Anglia.

Prof Terry Haydn argues that until the scale, nature and complexity of the problem is acknowledged, shortfalls in the working atmosphere in classrooms are likely to continue.

Research by Prof Haydn questions the positive picture of behaviour presented by the government. He says recent Department for Education and Ofsted reports suggesting it is at least satisfactory in 99.7% of English schools and good or outstanding in 92% of schools are misleading. He warns that even the acknowledgement last year by Her Majesty's chief inspector of schools, Sir Michael Wilshaw, that disruptive behaviour is impeding the learning of 700,000 pupils may seriously underestimate the extent to which poor classroom climate limits pupil achievement.

Published today in the journal *Review of Education*, Prof Haydn's findings are from four studies conducted over 10 years. The research aimed to gain a more accurate insight into the extent to which deficits in the working atmosphere limit educational achievement and equality of educational opportunity in English schools. It also explored the difficulties schools and teachers face in reconciling the tensions between educational inclusion - that is, not removing difficult pupils from classrooms and schools - and the right to learn of all pupils in an

environment which is most beneficial to learning.

Three of the studies focused on teacher perspectives on classroom atmosphere. They involved surveying 243 trainee teachers, who were also asked about their experiences as former pupils. Interviews were conducted with another 118 teachers, including 13 headteachers, across 80 schools. The fourth study surveyed the views of 708 secondary [school](#) pupils aged 11-15, from five schools.

The research used a 10 point scale, developed by Prof Haydn, which attempts to provide an indication of the extent to which deficits in classroom climate may hamper learning, with level 10 being where the working atmosphere is completely conducive to learning and level one being classrooms where learning is severely limited by pupil disruption. Many of the teachers interviewed felt that learning started to be affected as soon as the atmosphere fell below level eight on the scale, and this was a not uncommon occurrence. The research also indicates that the problem of behaviour is not limited to 'low level' disruption. Teacher and headteacher testimony suggested that schools and teachers often have to make difficult decisions about how to deal with 'pupils with problems', without simply excluding them, passing them on to other schools, or avoiding the challenge of admitting difficult pupils.

Prof Haydn, from the School of Education and Lifelong Learning at UEA, questions the view that any deficit in classroom climate can be attributed to inadequate teachers or poor headteachers. "This is not an aspect of education that is straightforward or susceptible to simple solutions or quick fixes. The suggestion that there are easy answers to the problems posed by challenging pupils underestimates the complexities of the issue, and the fact that cultural and 'out of school' factors are part of the problem, for example, unsupportive parents," he said. "The idea that level 10 is a natural or default state of affairs in terms of classroom climate, or that it is easy to create a classroom

climate where all pupils behave and are keen to learn and do well, with any group of pupils, is simplistic and unhelpful."

The research raises the question of the extent to which there is a right to learn in classrooms in England, for pupils who are keen to learn and do well. Prof Haydn argues that behaviour cannot be interpreted as satisfactory if some pupils are impeding the learning of others and if teachers are not able to teach the class in a way that focuses primarily on optimising pupil learning rather than on control issues.

"There is a real danger that underestimating the complexity of these issues might lead to a failure to work constructively to address them, or a tendency for politicians of all parties to simply blame schools and teachers for anything that falls below level 10," said Prof Haydn. "The reality is that schools and teachers will always have to work hard, and with considerable initiative and ingenuity, to minimise the problem of disruptive behaviour. In England, as elsewhere in the developed world, there are many pupils who are not perfectly socialised and are not wholeheartedly committed to learning."

Prof Haydn points out that international surveys of classroom climate show that teachers in England are often working in more challenging contexts than their counterparts in many other countries, where cultural and out of school factors, such as parental support for schools and teachers, are much more positive.

The research also suggests that classroom climate emerges as an important factor in teacher retention and job satisfaction, with one newly qualified teacher who was interviewed saying: "In terms of how much you enjoy your teaching, there's a massive difference between operating at levels seven and eight...which are OK...and level 10, when it's just a fantastic job, pure pleasure...you can get a real buzz out of the interaction with pupils. It's like the adverts for teaching on the TV but in

real life."

Prof Haydn calls for stronger support for teachers from parents, governors and policymakers, to help instil a culture among parents and young people that no pupil has the right to spoil the learning of others. Acknowledgement of the difficulties teachers face in working with difficult pupils, and higher levels of respect for [teachers](#) and schools from politicians and the media are also needed.

Funding to support alternative 'within school' provision for difficult pupils would be a practical way of supporting schools, given the sometimes dire outcomes for pupils who are permanently excluded. While many schools have come up with a range of creative and effective ways of keeping difficult [pupils](#) in school, and re-engaging them with learning, many of these courses and support systems need funding. Early intervention, in the form of universal, free and high quality nursery education would also be a helpful and cost effective investment.

'To what extent is behaviour a problem in English schools? Exploring the scale and prevalence of deficits in [classroom climate](#)', Terry Haydn, is published in Review of Education on April 14.

Provided by University of East Anglia

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