

Limited resources leave school leaders with few options to manage poor behaviour

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School leaders in England feel compelled to continue using a system of escalating punitive measures to manage student behavior, even though they recognize it fails some pupils, new research suggests.

The findings are from a [qualitative study](#) which investigated why more

[school](#) leaders are not exploring alternative approaches to behavior management. It argues that resource limitations and other concerns have left teachers feeling trapped within the prevailing system of mounting punishments. Under this, more than a thousand students are excluded, and almost 150,000 suspended, every year.

Educators interviewed for the study often acknowledged the potential benefits of alternative methods, but believed they had little choice but to follow the established orthodoxy. The most common reasons included cost, resource constraints, parental perception, and lack of time.

Most schools in England follow a "behaviorist" approach to student discipline, reinforcing positive behavior and implementing escalating sanctions for repeated misconduct. Initially, students may receive a verbal warning for poor behavior, followed by mid-level punishments like detention. Those who persist eventually face suspension and ultimately may be excluded from [mainstream education](#).

The approach seems effective with many students, but there are concerns that it is still failing a significant minority. Government data have, for many years, consistently shown that persistent, disruptive behavior is the main reason for suspensions or exclusions from school. The latest available figures suggest that about 1,500 students are excluded, and 148,000 suspended, each year for this reason.

The study was conducted by Dr. Laura Oxley, now at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, drawing on research she undertook while at the University of York. The newly-published element documents very in-depth interviews with a small group of 14 school leaders in England using a method called Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. This was just part of the full study, which also surveyed 84 behavior referral units in England and involved interviews with teachers in other [education systems](#) with different

approaches to discipline.

Given the scale of the research, the findings should be interpreted cautiously. They do, however, highlight a possible cycle shaping behavior management policy in England. Specifically, political and resource constraints limit schools' capacity to experiment with alternative approaches, resulting in scarce evidence for their efficacy. This reinforces the view that the existing model is the only option.

Prior to her academic career Oxley worked with children who were at risk of exclusion from school, their families, and senior school leaders to support schools to provide appropriate educational provision for children who exhibited persistent misconduct. She held roles as an Exclusions and Reintegration Officer in East Yorkshire, and as an Education Inclusion Officer in Cambridgeshire.

"This is not a call to scrap the existing system, but to consider ways to enhance it," she said. "For significant numbers of children, the current approach isn't working."

"Fundamentally, if a child persists with the same behavior despite multiple punishments, it's unlikely that they don't comprehend the consequences. In those situations, instead of escalating the punishment, we should be asking why we aren't trying something else? Unfortunately, even if school leaders have the motivation to try a different approach, they often feel that they have little choice. This means the same, standardized approach often prevails, even though it doesn't suit every child."

Widely-cited alternative behavior management techniques include 'restorative practice' (RP) and 'collaborative and proactive solutions' (CPS). RP focuses on rebuilding positive relationships between students, or students and teachers, after breakdowns occur. CPS involves

identifying the triggers behind persistent misbehavior and addressing them collaboratively.

While neither method suits every situation, trials have yielded encouraging results. A 2019 study, for example, found that RP improved behavior and reduced bullying. Although these approaches are already used by some schools in England, neither is currently used widely.

In Oxley's study, school leaders identified cost, time and resource constraints as barriers to these alternatives, as they tend to be labour-intensive and require a thorough culture change. Most feared that they would place an intolerable extra burden on already overstretched staff. Issuing sanctions was seen as more efficient. Even providing space for private discussions with challenging students was sometimes considered unfeasible. One teacher explained: "We don't have the staffing or capabilities for that".

Some school leaders were concerned that teachers might perceive restorative approaches as a challenge to their authority in the classroom. There is evidence that training can change teachers' perspectives on handling challenging students, fostering a deeper understanding of the psychological context. Again, however, limited time and resources pose barriers to this, the study suggests.

Participants also expressed unease about parental reactions to alternative approaches. One school leader told Oxley: "A lot of pupils would tell you that it's harder to do a restorative meeting than it is to miss your break time. It's more difficult to get the message across to parents." Some cited cases where heads had been "held to ransom" by parents demanding the exclusion of so-called "problem" pupils.

Oxley suggests these pressures have fostered a culture of risk aversion in schools, impeding potential reforms. "We need to give teachers and

parents opportunities to understand the alternatives available," she said. "The fact that researchers know methods like RP could work in situations where the current approach is not promoting behavior change is irrelevant if teachers don't share that confidence."

The study highlights insufficient promotion of alternative methods in current Government guidance, which prioritizes the sanctions-based approach. It emphasizes, however, that providing adequate funding and time to enhance teachers' and parents' understanding of collaborative and restorative [behavior](#) management techniques is essential to cultivating a "desire for change".

"At the moment, alternative approaches are often dismissed as unrealistic," Oxley said. "This stems from a lack of large-scale evidence due to limited opportunities to explore them in schools. Education researchers must address that by studying real experiences in schools, moving beyond limited trials. This will empower more [school leaders](#) to see restorative practice and other methods as valuable and viable, generating momentum for change."

The findings are reported in the *Psychology of Education Review*.

More information: Laura Oxley, Identifying the barriers to alternative approaches for behaviour management in schools, *Psychology of Education Review* (2023). [DOI: 10.53841/bpsper.2023.47.1.71](https://doi.org/10.53841/bpsper.2023.47.1.71)

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