George Orwell is watching you!

School behaviour policies and social justice

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Abstract

Pupil behaviour in UK schools continues to be an obsession in policy and education debate. Conservative governments, especially since 2010, have pursued an illiberal agenda which, this paper argues, is entirely associated with their project to create an education system based on performativity and competition as part of a neo-liberal economic and political culture.

Key words: social justice; pupil behaviour; GERM; behaviour tsars; school uniform; off-rolling; inclusion; exclusion; behaviour hubs

Introduction

I must begin with an apology to George Orwell (1903-1950) and an explanation. Orwell was of course opposed to totalitarianism and believed in democratic socialism. These ideas are embedded in his great novel, *1984* (published in1949), where, in a dystopian story, he warns of the extreme control typical of authoritarian regimes. I am using him here under the sign of his novel to foreground what I see as attempts at similarly excessive control and challenges to ideals of liberal social justice – in the way school pupils are treated or disciplined. Of course, good behaviour is a necessary condition for learning. My arguments are about the style and method of ensuring pupil compliance, learning and good behaviour. Many strategies and practices employed to do so now and in the past raise questions about social justice and pupil rights.[1]

Consideration of social justice in society or schooling is a basic philosophical theme. Yet few of the education books, government policies, research papers and commentaries on behaviour issues that I have seen explore this concept, or even begin with a statement about it. A key exception is the work of James MacAllister and colleagues in Scotland.[2]

At the most basic level, a sliding scale of 'degrees of stricture' could be utilised to describe a school's regime, with opposing typologies at either extreme, ranging from relaxed, democratic and progressive approaches at one end through to autocratic control of pupils at the other. Possibly most schools are in the middle of the sliding scale, with some veering more to one side or the other. I can offer examples of the extremes observed in the 500 or so schools that I have visited since the 1960s, mainly in the UK but also across the world.

At the progressive end of the scale, in 1970, I was a founder member of

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Countesthorpe College in Leicestershire, a 14-18 comprehensive school in the Leicestershire Plan for comprehensive education.[3] From the air, the school looked like a circular spaceship. It contained mini-school teaching pods, and enacted democratic practices via the moot (a term for an Anglo-Saxon council gathering) in which staff and students would debate key issues about the school. Pupils called staff by their first name and the school had only one rule: pupils should not behave antisocially. Some of the curriculum content was negotiated via pupil projects; that is, there was an attempt at pupil-centred learning. There was an adult and relaxed ethos throughout the school. Many schools in the Leicestershire Plan for comprehensive education – long before the arrival of academisation, expensive school uniforms, principals calling themselves 'chief executives' and the regimentation of behaviour – displayed some of the most happy and relaxed school regimes that I have seen anywhere.

At the other extreme, and in our own day, is the so-called strictest school in Britain, the Michaela Community School, a free school in London. According to media characterisations, it is run by the strictest headteacher and teacher in the world, Katharine Birbalsingh. She is admired by the Conservative government, and has received a CBE for her efforts. Ofsted categorises Michaela as an outstanding school. As I found out from the ITV documentary about it, it is a disciplinary offence at Michaela for a pupil not to follow with their eyes the teacher as she moves around the classroom.[4] The whole documentary struck me as deeply shocking and disturbing in terms of the way pupils were treated, the way they behaved (well, but out of fear), the way teachers conducted themselves in their interactions with pupils, the school's regime and procedures, and Katharine Birbalsingh herself who had centre stage for much of the documentary, with Tom Bennett, the behaviour tsar (whom we'll meet again later) grinning his approval. The documentary gave a pure depiction of the culture described in Orwell's *1984* and its current manifestation in North Korea. Zoe Williams of *The Guardian* suggested that Birbalsingh sees mainstream state schools as the wild west and herself as Clint Eastwood.[5]

Pupil behaviour – a major issue of concern

Schools and governments in England have been greatly exercised by worries about pupil behaviour, since the seminal Elton Report, *Discipline in Schools*, compiled in 1989.[6] Since then, there have been hundreds of research reports, government papers and policies, and charitable and civil society interventions. The education trade unions have also regularly reported that among the most urgent challenges faced by teachers is poor pupil behaviour. Stephen Ball and Meg Maguire have referred to behaviour issues as being one of the major discourses in education in the UK – and especially in

terms of 'control'.[7]

It is no accident that, historically, this increasing focus on behaviour was strongly linked to the enactment of the Education Reform Act in 1988 which introduced the national curriculum. Many educationists and classroom teachers do not pay sufficient regard to the fact that the national curriculum's imposed list of subjects for schools, essentially an old-fashioned grammar-school curriculum, was brought in with new and rigorous assessment arrangements to monitor every detail of implementation. Furthermore, it came with an inspection system, Ofsted, created in 1992 under the Education (Schools) Act, to overhaul and centralise the monitoring of all aspects of schooling in England. This regime was implemented in 1993, with the aim of policing the delivery of national curriculum subject matter, as well as the quality of teaching and school organisation. Of course, teaching the equally relevant cross-curricular subject matter, themes and skills was an afterthought, and not part of the legally constituted national curriculum,[8] nor subject to the same legislative rigour.[9]

These new legally binding inspection arrangements and policy developments heralded the arrival in Britain of the increasingly international obsession with, and global competition around, student achievement, typified by the Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA). This is a triennial assessment of 15-year-olds across the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries for competence in reading, mathematics and science, and sometimes in other areas – such as behaviour.[10]

A better typification of this global movement for education by numbers, turbo accountability, league tables and intense quantitative obsession with the measurement of teachers, pupils, exam results and schools is the term coined by the esteemed Finnish educationist, Pasi Sahlberg: GERM – the Global Education Reform Movement. Finland, which has the best education system in the world (with Estonia fast catching up – I visited in July 2022) is the only country to eschew this global obsession.[11]

It is understandable therefore that where results, statistics and league tables rule the education system, the maximum diligence and application must be required of pupils. Thus the obsession with good pupil behaviour to ensure maximum compliance with this treadmill system.

George Orwell arrives

I explored social justice in education (among many other themes) in my international study *Disruptive Behaviour in Schools: a complete guide* (written in 2016, but unpublished and now undergoing updating and revision). From my research into government policy towards pupil behaviour over many decades, I will pick out a few examples of what I

consider to be major infringements of social justice. But first, some background.

New Labour governments from 1997 to 2010 were active in the field of behaviour issues in schools, promoting dozens of initiatives. Their approach tended to be more liberal and supportive in style. More draconian and unsympathetic stances have tended to occur under Conservative governments (and the Coalition) from 2010. For example, in September 2011, education secretary Michael Gove announced he was scrapping the requirement for teachers to record instances when they use physical force (so teachers could hit or manhandle children with no record of this?). Furthermore, Gove encouraged former members of the armed forces to take up teaching, supposedly to ensure more male role models and greater 'authority' in classrooms. Because of his hard line and stringent policy initiatives, Gove suffered the indignity of being asked by David Cameron to step down in July 2014 as education secretary, because his name and policies were apparently seen as toxic by the teaching profession, and continuation in his role might have threatened Conservative chances of election success in May 2015. In fact, the teaching profession had already voiced its concerns during the Easter teacher conferences in 2013 when the ATL (Association of Teachers and Lecturers), NAHT (National Association of Head Teachers), NUT (National Union of Teachers) and NASUWT (National Association of Schoolmasters/Union of Women Teachers) all passed motions of no confidence in him.[12]

In the same month, September 2011, when Gove was making his controversial statements, prime minster David Cameron, in a speech on education, promised to restore 'order and respect' and discipline in schools, partly by reviewing whether parents of truanting children should have their benefits cut.[13] This reflected the content of a report by the right-wing Conservative think-tank, the Centre for Social Justice. It reviewed school exclusions and requested the government to embark on radical reforms, including financial sanctions to coerce parents who failed to cooperate with schools over general discipline issues, including truancy.[14]

The way matters of pupil behaviour and school discipline have been approached since 2010 often challenges liberal notions of social justice. I will focus on five areas: behaviour tsars; extreme school policies on behaviour and school uniform; off-rolling; internal school-based exclusion/inclusion; and the latest government policy idea of behaviour hubs.

Behaviour tsars

Since his death in 1950, George Orwell has reappeared under various names and disguises, beginning with his stint overseeing behaviour in schools as a 'behaviour tsar'. Of course, wearing his *1984* hat, George would be quite happy with this title. 'Tsar'

usually described East and South Slavic monarchs known for their autocratic style of government. The behaviour tsars would be centralist, and tell teachers and heads where they were going wrong … although, to be fair, not necessarily in an autocratic manner.

The first incarnation of this George was Sir Alan Steer, who produced several reports under New Labour.[15] With the arrival of the Conservative-dominated Coalition government, a new behaviour tsar was appointed – Charlie Taylor, an old Etonian who had run a successful school for children with emotional and behavioural difficulties in west London.

George's third incarnation was in the form of Tom Bennett, appointed in 2015 to tackle classroom disruption, especially low-level disruption, such as children making silly comments, passing notes to each other and swinging on their chairs. All this hardly amounts to school riots or breakdown – and most teachers are competent in dealing with such minor infringements of classroom order. But Tom Bennett, with his new powers to direct and advise, could not refrain from telling teachers and heads what they already knew and might in any case handle quite easily themselves![16]

One wonders whether his was the right appointment, given that he was barred from running a nightclub because he did not control the behaviour of rowdy partygoers nor report this to the relevant authorities. He was deemed not 'a fit and proper person' and he had his licence revoked. But this did not worry the Coalition government who appointed him to a national position to advise teachers and heads on how to deal with misbehaviour![17]

Extreme school policies on discipline and school uniform

With the huge expansion from May 2010 of the academies programme, a large-scale cultural change occurred in schools as they converted. New-style regimes emerged – not only in individual academies but in groupings of academies – multi-academy trusts (MATs) whose principals could call themselves 'chief executives', suggesting a business and entrepreneurial spirit rather than an educational one. Many new buildings appeared, looking like the glass and steel headquarters of international companies. Chief executives developed stringent behaviour codes for pupils, along with elaborate school uniforms – modelled on the top public schools – with strict requirements for pupils to adhere to these dress codes down to the smallest detail. The best examples of this I can offer are of two comprehensive schools, one in the city of Leicester and one in the county of Leicestershire. The *Leicester Mercury* printed two stories of pupil uniform infringement and the punishments meted out, to which I responded in a letter (Fig 1).[18] Legally binding guidelines on uniform come into operation in September 2022, together with guidance on advising parents to shop around rather than buying from official school-nominated uniform suppliers.

Schools need to relax some of these rules

Dear Editor

It seems lately that hardly a day goes by without you quite rightly publishing a report of some absurd infringement of a pupil's rights at school, although the schools featured would argue that the pupils had infringed their school uniform and dress code.

On Saturday 11 September, you published a letter from a reader about a 12-year-old girl at Brookvale Groby, Leicestershire, being removed from classes because she wore the wrong kind of skirt - it did not have pleats in it! And on Monday (13 September) you published an account of 11-year-old Macie, at New College, Leicester, being sent to a 'reflection room' (invented by George Orwell, no doubt) because for her birthday she had a nose-piercing stud inserted. Both of these schools are good schools but neither would ever be 'outstanding' if I applied the criteria I use when travelling around the world researching schools and systems in different countries.

I am off to look at Spanish state schools in a few weeks' time - no uniforms required - and then to Estonia where the only item of uniform is a school cap! And the lack of a school uniform does not hold back Estonia from creating one of the best school systems in the world, fast competing with Finland (no uniforms). Pupils in schools in England increasingly look as if they work in City of London offices and with their uniform styles modelled on grammar schools and the great public schools. I doubt if they had a voice this would be their choice. If pupils did, little Macie could be proud of wearing her birthday nose stud at school.

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Figure 1: letter to *Leicester Mercury*

Off-rolling

Off-rolling is the practice of removing a pupil from the school roll without using a permanent exclusion, when the removal is primarily in the best interests of the school rather than the pupil. There is no easy definition of off-rolling, because pupils can leave school, or be out of school, for many reasons. Off-rolling includes pressuring parents to remove their child from the school roll. This practice has attracted publicity recently, but its use is as old as the hills. Off-rolling can include excluding pupils officially (but not permanently). The Conservative government has expressed concern. Ofsted offers guidance to inspectors, and has also commissioned research.[19] And the House of Commons library published its own research.[20]

Internal school-based exclusion

Behaviour support units (BSUs) or learning support units (LSUs) are based in schools, whereas pupil referral units (PRUs) are special facilities usually not on school premises. I do not want to cover PRUs here but to deal with the in-school BSUs or LSUs that are now present in many schools and where controversial practices that threaten pupils' rights and social justice may be employed. These units can be operated on the basis of education principles very different from mainstream school, and some can represent challenges to social justice and the rights of pupils. There are shocking features inherent in the system, beginning with the fact that the Department for Education does not have any records or statistics on the national picture with BSUs, unlike their collection of data, for example, on actual school exclusions.

BSUs are essentially a form of internal school exclusion. I have visited several of these units. In them, pupils can be consigned to a special room, or area, for misbehaviour. They can be there for hours, days, months or even years. Variations on the basic pattern include the use of isolation booths, which can be seen as a national scandal and as representing an abuse of a pupil's human rights. In an analytical piece in *The Guardian* in January 2020, Richard Adams explored the issue of isolation booths in state schools.[21] These booths often have a chair, a desk and three high sides to encourage the isolation of each pupil. Some schools are even converting toilets to make such units. The teaching profession is divided about their use. Some schools favour the 'zero tolerance' such units represent, while many schools with BSUs implement a regime of removal from class which is less severe and custodial. This is not a debate about effectiveness – internal and temporary exclusion arrangements can be successful. It is about human rights and pupil rights.

During the 1980s, and thereafter, schools gradually developed variously labelled seclusion rooms, inclusion rooms, referral rooms or learning support units. But these were sometimes just 'sin bins' rather than places to positively encourage learning. Quite

apart from the names of the units, their roles vary enormously. Some schools operate a time-out room, where pupils can remove themselves to go and calm down. Other schools have developed rooms with solitary sitting cubicles, as discussed above. The children might have to go to the exclusion room for break times, or all day. Increasingly, schools have developed more elaborate LSUs, sometimes purpose-built and linked closely to the school or within the main school building.

I draw on academic research but also on my own observations in schools. I have encountered dozens of different types and models of internal school discipline methods based on internal exclusion or withdrawal systems that involve the removal of the offending, misbehaving pupil to another part of the school. Almost all of these were in secondary schools. Most were benign and kindly in their style of management, but one or two were intended to be harsh and authoritarian.

One I visited was in a north London school where the referral room was deliberately stark. Pupils sent there worked in silence, bringing with them the class work they were supposed to be doing. The teacher in charge was stern and unfriendly, either naturally or because she thought this the best approach. I told her about another model of a referral room that I had visited in another school in the East Midlands which adopted an approach at the other extreme from hers. She was unimpressed, declaring it 'namby-pamby'.

This other model, my favourite, was in a city school in a poor area. It was a large double-size classroom with carpet in one part and using shelves and dividers to make sections of the room more private. Brightly painted, it contained lots of potted plants and a fish tank with tropical fish. The children were sent there for help with literacy and numeracy but also for behaviour infringements. Several teachers worked in the unit. The teacher in charge believed that a pupil's deficiencies in skill and learning went hand in hand with behaviour problems. He believed that many misbehaving pupils are really sending out a cry for help because they have literacy problems. The school has now closed this unit, for reasons of cost, but a new learning support unit exists in its grounds, partly financed by the local and national government.

In 2016, Val Gillies published her disturbing three-year analysis and ethnographic research study of inclusion and exclusion issues, *Pushed to the Edge: inclusion and behaviour support in schools*.[22]

She chronicles the dramatic expansion of internal school exclusion systems. These internal school behaviour support units are now a common feature, yet the use made of them, and the details of the number of their pupils, are usually unrecorded by the school and certainly by local authorities. The Department for Education (DfE) has no figures. You can obtain statistics for PRUs, but when I have asked simple questions of senior officials in the DfE, to support Val Gillies's research, nobody seemed to know the statistics. There is little monitoring or oversight of these rehabilitative systems. Yet

school children can be removed from mainstream classes for weeks, months or years.

While compiling her book, Val Gillies interviewed pupils, their parents, and teachers, and the usual inequalities and disparities that we have long known about from research studies of exclusion over the years came to the fore – such as the prominence of issues around race, gender and class. Val Gillies's research places the experiences of these young people in the larger context of the politics and practice of exclusion and explores fundamental questions about social justice, equal opportunities and institutional racism. All of this is set against a background of neo-liberal demands to constantly improve national levels of achievement in schools, with those who, for whatever reason, do not or cannot play the game, brushed aside into in-school segregation units.

Behaviour hubs

In 2021, the UK government began to roll out its latest initiative to improve pupil behaviour in schools. Once again, the so-called behaviour tsar, Tom Bennett, was involved, this time with a team of specially chosen advisers and so-called 'experts' on behaviour issues in schools. The idea was to create behaviour hubs, a concept similar to that used in the case of music education in schools when the government required local authorities, music teachers and music services to form local music hubs.[23] The idea of partnership, which seems a good one in itself, is to locate schools with excellent practice and link them with schools that may be less successful in dealing with misbehaviour. This kind of approach has been used before, not just with music hubs, but with an entire pairing of schools in a local area. For example, several years ago my own local education authority in Leicester was aware of the poor overall performance of some schools, so it grouped successful schools with lower-performing ones, so that good practice could be shared.

This new programme of hubs will be based on Tom Bennett's 2017 analysis of behaviour in schools.[24] His review identified a number of core principles for successful school behaviour management including:

- having a clear understanding of what the school culture is
- having high expectations of pupils and a belief that all pupils matter
- consistency and attention to detail in the execution of school routines, norms and values.

The programme will be fully funded by the DfE and will offer schools, where required, advice, training, mentoring, networking and access to relevant online resources. While these core principles were included in a report on behaviour issues, they are of course sound principles for the general operation of any school. But once again, the issue is whether this whole new initiative is necessary – telling teachers and heads, and

grandmother – how to suck eggs. Ofsted finds most schools in England to be 'good' or 'outstanding' in its recent annual report.[25] This would suggest that most schools and teachers are being successful, and are not experiencing, nor being overwhelmed by, significant behaviour issues.

Conclusion

There are a considerable number of difficulties and problems in schooling today in the UK, including the aftermath of the pandemic and the way school pupils have been affected in terms of their disrupted schooling, the impact on their learning and achievement, and their mental health.[26] Amongst the stresses and strains that schools currently confront, the issue of pupil behaviour remains a major concern. It is vital that all of us of a liberal disposition stand up for social justice and for the rights of school students to be treated fairly and with dignity, and to play a part – ideally in democratic schools – in devising and adhering to sensible and humane rules of conduct.

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