



Discipline in Scottish Schools : Teachers' Views

Summary Report of the Discipline
Working Group

November 2005



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The Discipline Working Group

First Published 2005
The General Teaching Council for Scotland

© 2005
0-902481-09-6
978-0-902481-09-1

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Printed and bound in Great Britain

The General Teaching Council for Scotland (“the Council”) was set up under the Teaching Council (Scotland) Act 1965. It was the first such body for teachers in the United Kingdom and, indeed, one of the first teaching councils in the world. One of the fundamental principles underlying the work of the Council is that of professional self-government.

The public interest is represented on the Council. Its membership of 50 consists of 26 elected registered teacher members; 18 appointed members representing local authorities, directors of education, directors of social work, further and higher education institutions, the churches and the Scottish Council of Independent Schools; and 6 members nominated by Scottish Ministers.

The Council is an advisory non-departmental public body (NDPB), but differs from other NDPBs in that it is funded from the annual registration fees paid by registered teachers and not from the public purse. With regard to the public interest, policy statements and general advice issued by the Council are made available to the public and Minutes of meetings of the Council are made available to the press and on the Internet, subject to confidentiality in the Council’s case work.

The principal aims of the General Teaching Council for Scotland are:

- ❖ To contribute to improving the quality of teaching and learning;*
- ❖ To maintain and to enhance professional standards in schools and colleges in collaboration with partners including teachers, employing authorities, teacher education institutions, parents and the Scottish Executive Education Department;*
- ❖ To be recognised as a voice and advocate for the teaching profession;*
- ❖ To contribute to the development of a world-class educational system in Scotland.*

The Council’s key functions are:

- ❖ To maintain and enhance the quality of teaching in Scotland;*
- ❖ To maintain standards of professional conduct and competence in teaching;*
- ❖ To provide advice on the entry requirements for initial teacher education and the supply of teachers;*
- ❖ To enhance the status and standing of teaching and the teaching profession;*
- ❖ To develop the strengths of Council staff;*
- ❖ To run an effective and cost-efficient organisation.*

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1 Introduction

In September 2003, "Teaching Scotland", the magazine of the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS) published an article on discipline and its impact on teacher professionalism. The article was from teachers in one large secondary school and drew attention to their concerns over a rising tide of pupil indiscipline, the negative impact of the Scottish Executive policies on social inclusion, and the lack of appropriate sanctions for teachers to use to deal with disruptive pupils.

This article evoked a significant amount of correspondence from other teachers, all sharing similar concerns about indiscipline and teacher morale.

The full Council of GTCS considered that this spontaneous expression of teacher concern was a matter germane to the Council's remit and required a response. As a consequence, the Council set up a Discipline Working Group (DWG) of seven members, representing elected, nominated and appointed categories of membership to undertake a focussed research study "to look at the difficulties relating to indiscipline". In addition, the Chief Executive wrote to the Minister for Education and Young People outlining the Council's concerns and intimating that the DWG had been created.

The research study included an analysis of the development of the debate around pupil behaviour over the past two years and an analysis of the wide range of available data including new data collected by the Discipline Working Group using focus groups and a survey of teachers. The report which follows summarises the key issues identified in the study and draws attention to the recommendations which have been endorsed by the Tenth Council of the GTCS.

2 Summary of Key Issues

2.1 Key Issues from the Analysis of Existing Data

There are few surprises in the analysis and the data which comprise the report from the Discipline Working Group. There are, however, many reminders to the teaching profession and to education policy makers that key aspects of pupil behaviour and learning remain unsatisfactory and are inhibitors on our shared desire to raise the quality of education in Scotland.

Most pupils behave. Most teachers are effective and committed to their task. Most schools deliver high quality learning opportunities to most pupils. But 'most' is increasingly perceived by the profession and policy makers to be not enough.

The analysis constantly reiterates the problem of low-level disruption in schools and classes. It is growing, it is stressful, and it reduces the learning opportunities for all pupils. It affects almost all schools but is even more prevalent among boys and in secondary schools.

The analysis is critical of the policy development and policy implementation process. In the opinion of many teachers there has been too much policy, produced too quickly and based on insufficient experience and unsatisfactory evidence.

When policy fails, teachers feel that they are blamed. But, from their perspective, the chain of policy implementation is full of weak links. The mutual support and understanding of intentions and difficulties between Scottish Executive and local authorities, between local authorities and schools, between schools and their staffs, is severely lacking. It is almost as if policy makers believe that creating a policy ensures its implementation, when, in fact, implementing a policy is a slow process and much slower than the rhetoric that created it.

The power and extent of the rhetoric is such that even teachers come to believe that pupil discipline is being tackled but, when nothing much changes, their raised expectations are once again dashed. A particular flaw which the analysis highlighted was the piecemeal nature of change where individual schools receive justifiable media attention for successful initiatives to tackle behaviour and learning as if their success affected all or many schools. In fact, many of the recent successes have been particular, local, and non-sustainable, when the authors of this report would argue, based on experience and analysis, that the problem of pupil behaviour would respond better to “a clear set of national guidance and support”.

Other factors in the present situation include the question of violence in schools. While very much a minority experience, nevertheless teachers are clear that violence is increasing and that sanctions have to be available and be used against the violent young people.

But above all, the analysis illustrated the extent of teacher concerns with regard to social inclusion. Without being specific in defining what aspect of social inclusion concerned them most, many teachers would say that pupil behaviour in general had deteriorated since social inclusion policies were introduced.

2.2 Focus Groups

To underpin this analysis, DWG members also conducted focus group discussions in various parts of Scotland. In addition to confirming the trends in the analyses made by the Working Group, the focus groups also highlighted the importance of training and support for teachers, especially supply teachers; the perception that you learn more from your immediate peers rather than from the latest ‘expert’ who might lead a continuing professional development programme and be relatively divorced from your classroom reality; the lack of leadership from some local authorities who gave more precedence to monitoring than to supporting; and the need for managers throughout the education system to give even more attention to the contribution that poor physical conditions, environment and daily routines of schools made to pupil behaviour.

2.3 Survey of Teachers

In addition to the analyses of the DWG members themselves, a questionnaire devised by DWG and returned by 704 teachers produced a great deal of other data which was analysed by an independent consultant. That independent analysis highlighted the range of teacher views.

For example, with regard to the environment for learning, smaller class sizes was perceived as potentially the most positive factor impacting on pupil behaviour while school management was seen as potentially both very positive and very negative as far as pupil behaviour was concerned.

With regard to curriculum matters, teachers were able to relate positively to many of the contemporary initiatives on curriculum such as Assessment is for Learning and Curriculum Flexibility. But there were also other recent curricular initiatives such as Education/Industry Programmes and School/College Partnerships, which many teachers had, as yet, little experience of. The one area where there were diverse views was over the issue of mixed ability versus setting and streaming approaches. There may well be a primary/secondary divergence which the data could not make clear but, even so, the issue of classroom organisation remains divisive within the teaching profession.

With regard to pupil support, social inclusion again emerged as the most unpopular policy with most respondents interpreting social inclusion as meaning the integration of pupils with special needs and particularly with behavioural difficulties. Many respondents were quite clear that, in the face of such a policy, they required to use extraction from class and exclusion from school when necessary.

With regard to professional relationships and professional development, teachers recognised the crucial role that these played. Respect and support among teachers and between teachers and pupils were seen as the most powerful factors in maintaining positive behaviour. In addition, matters of in-school communication, including covering for absent colleagues and participating in meaningful CPD were seen to be important. The most contentious issue, however, was supply cover. While there was a general concern over the availability of supply cover, there was also a concern that even the available supply cover was often not appropriate for the needs of the individual school.

With regard to teachers' initial and continuing education, respondents to the questionnaire offered much specific detail on what works and what does not work. Where most were agreed, however, was that ongoing education and training is essential for teachers, particularly in helping deal effectively with pupil behaviour.

Finally, in this part of the questionnaire, respondents were asked about the skills of a professional teacher which are most effective. A number of areas were highlighted and, of these, the most often cited included the need for the teacher to have specific personal skills and interest in pupils; the need for good department and school leadership; and the need for positive learning environments based, mostly, on high expectations.

To conclude this summary of the questionnaire responses and of DWG evidence, teachers were invited to comment on the changes to school structures which would make them more effective. Familiar ground was revisited here, with teachers emphasising the importance of class size and class structure; the importance of support staff; the importance of effective school leadership; and the importance of parental support. But above all of these, two factors were most prominent – the need for an adequate supply of well-trained professional teachers and the need for continuity in curriculum policy that will see through to successful implementation many of the curricular changes mentioned above and characterised within the “Curriculum for Excellence” philosophy.

3 Findings and Recommendations

3.1 Training Needs

Teachers are clearly anxious to be better equipped to deal with pupil behaviour in all its forms. They recognise their training needs and welcome appropriate training. They see the training needs as being relevant in each of initial teacher education, Induction and CPD, but are concerned that the continuity and articulation across all stages of staff development is poorer than it could be.

It is recommended that GTCS, in partnership with other stakeholders, seeks a better framework within all stages of staff development for addressing issues of pupil behaviour, while bearing in mind the teachers’ view that training with and from their peers is highly effective.

3.2 Policy Review

In equipping themselves to improve pupil behaviour, teachers are confused by the range and variety of schemes and initiatives which presently exist. They are also concerned that the Scottish Executive has high ambitions for better behaviour but does not always seem capable of turning these into the forms of action which are observable at the level of the individual school and classroom.

DWG recommends that the Scottish Executive critically reviews the large number of initiatives which it has commissioned or endorsed and reduces these in number both so as to speed implementation and to reduce confusion.

3.3 School Leadership

Notwithstanding the desire to see better behaviour initiatives rationalised, teachers also believe that the key to success in behaviour and learning often rests with the leadership of each school. They believe that leadership is not confined to curricular and managerial issues but also needs to cover the pastoral needs of young people and there is therefore a desire among many teachers to see pastoral care better reflected in the management structures of schools than it is in some of the structures which have been implemented following the McCrone settlement.

While commending the initiatives on improving school leadership which have been recently introduced it is recommended that even more resource be devoted to them.

3.4 Class Sizes

The question of class sizes still pre-occupies the thinking of many teachers who believe that further reductions in class size are the single most essential step towards reducing discipline concerns and increasing learning opportunities.

DWG is aware of discussions which the Scottish Executive has instituted on this matter and recommended that further reductions in class size are introduced as soon as possible.

3.5 Parental Support

The importance of parental support in reinforcing behaviour standards needs no further emphasis. It is often the case that those families which might need most support in developing positive attitudes to schooling are the most difficult to reach.

DWG recommends that specific initiatives in home-school liaison are extended and that most emphasis is given to actions which improve communications from home to school, make parental involvement more highly regarded by schools, and create standards of responsibilities which apply both from school to parent and from parent to school.

3.6 Curriculum Renewal

Teachers are conscious of the Scottish Executive programmes for curriculum improvement and are generally supportive of these. They believe that the timing of the daily curriculum, the phasing between the different stages of the curriculum, and the perceived relevance (by pupils) of the curriculum are all important.

DWG recommends that curriculum renewal be given the highest priority and the greatest resources by the Scottish Executive.

3.7 Social Inclusion

Above all other concerns among teachers with regard to improving pupil behaviour and learning there stands the contentious issue of social inclusion. While social inclusion covers a vast array of policy objectives for the school system including giving due regard to the views and needs of every child and young person, teachers often perceive the policy as being mainly about including every child in the mainstream school, irrespective of behaviour and irrespective of their effect on other pupils. Teachers will assert that the alternatives to inclusion need to be used more often than the “exceptionally” which

the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc. Act 2000 envisages, without this being seen as a failure or an unwillingness to embrace the broad thrust of social inclusion policies. Indeed they would argue that the most important provision is to ensure that all children are in a positive learning environment whether in mainstream or elsewhere. They will also assert that the need for alternative provision must be acknowledged and met by every local authority, that the alternatives must be available and clearly understood, and that exclusion from school but not exclusion from schooling is a very important alternative which local authorities must also provide. The other recommendations of DWG will yield few benefits if the concerns of teachers over inclusion and exclusion are not addressed. Accordingly, if the wider, and important, objectives of social inclusion are to be implemented by teachers, the Scottish Executive must make them more precise and independent of the discipline agenda.

Above all, DWG recommends that the Scottish Executive conducts an urgent review of the impact of social inclusion and pays particular attention to the aspect of the 2000 Act which requires that a child should be educated in a mainstream school unless that "would be incompatible with the provision of efficient education for the children with whom the child would be educated".

3.8 Respect

In conclusion, DWG draws attention to action that cannot be specified in any single initiative but which is the most important aspect of a stable civic society with stable schools, and that is 'respect'. As the consultant reported in his analysis of teacher responses to the DWG questionnaire:

Mutual respect among staff and Respect for pupils are regarded as potentially the most positive factors in their effect on pupil behaviour. Respondents emphasise the need for mutual support and respect since that helps teachers' self-esteem, self-confidence and professionalism, helping them to do a good job – "Feeling that you are not alone and there is someone there to discuss problems with increases morale". Pupils can then see the staff as a team otherwise the school is divided. Respect, for and between staff and pupils, is capable of creating a climate for positive working relationships – "mutual respect among staff provides a very good model for pupils & support for staff".

Respect for pupils is seen by many as essential – "It goes without saying you respect pupils. This is not the issue", otherwise there is likely to be chaos and this would negatively affect learning. In many responses it is suggested that pupils who feel valued, trusted and consulted try much harder to please the teacher – "incredible repercussions for good - comes back tenfold" and "showing respect for pupils - this approach if constantly applied elicits respect by pupils for me. Then learning can occur in a positive atmosphere". Teachers are seen as important, often the only, positive role models that many pupils have and it is suggested that if teachers cannot show respect, even in the face of bad behaviour, they are not helping to improve the situation.

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