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Changing student behaviour in schools located in areas of socioeconomic deprivation: findings from the ‘coastal academies’ project

Abstract

Ofsted (Ofsted, 2013; see also Weale, 2014), the government regulator of standards in education for England, identified a link between student performance and ‘deprived coastal towns’, with a realisation that these areas have ‘felt little impact from national initiatives designed to drive up the standards for the poorest children’ (Ofsted, 2013). Having recognised locality as factor in school performance in research undertaken on coastal academies in 2010 (a longitudinal study of one coastal secondary (school age 11-18) academy) extensions to the research resulted in a comparative analysis of six underperforming coastal secondary schools that had converted to academy status by 2010 under the Labour Government’s academies agenda (realised through the Education Act of 2002) to support ‘nationally challenged’ schools in tackling educational inequality.

In our research we qualitatively examined the ways in which our coastal academies approached the task of changing their predecessor schools’ culture of under-performance. All six schools were located in coastal regions of high socio-economic disadvantage, including high levels of unemployment, limited parental involvement in their children’s education and low parental and young people’s aspirations. This paper identifies that behaviour is managed on three levels in the coastal academies – school, classroom and individual (Swinson, 2010) – through diverse and locally appropriate strategies. By putting student needs foremost these ‘first wave’ coastal academies managed and improved young peoples’ behaviour in the classroom.

Key Words: Behaviour; classroom management; schools; coastal; academies; deprivation.

Introduction

Managing and improving young people’s behaviour in the classroom is an ongoing issue that has serious implications for children and young people’s learning and educational performance. It arouses passionate debate, and has prompted the last three governments to appoint ‘behaviour gurus’ (Mason, 2015), is frequently reported in the media as a serious problem in schools (e.g. Adams, 2015; Paton, 2014), and has spawned a vast range of

literature from a variety of perspectives (e.g. Cowley, 2010; Unison, 2015; Grundy and Blandford, 1999), with much of the latter aimed at supporting teachers in their daily classroom practice. Reasons behind poor learning behaviour, however, are complex, and there is no easy ‘quick fix’ that transforms a class of perhaps disengaged and/or apathetic students into model learners. In this paper, we draw on our research in six ‘first wave’ secondary academies to show how school leaders in highly deprived coastal areas around England have tackled the issue of motivating their young people to learn, thereby reducing the levels and impact of challenging behaviour that interrupt learning.

Research context

Introduced in the Education Act of 2002 by the Labour government, ‘first wave’ academies were intended to bring private-sector entrepreneurial approaches to education together with the public-sector aims of tackling educational inequalities and contributing to community regeneration. An important feature emphasised by the government was that academies were independent from the local authority (LA – local administrative body); they were managed by a team of independent co-sponsors, and theoretically had greater freedom to introduce innovative ideas and practices. Groups of academies have subsequently been able to become ‘multi-academy trusts’ (MATs), in which one trust – or organisation – has become responsible for the management and performance of a number of academies; most MATs include between one and three academies, although 51 MATs are responsible for more than ten schools (Andrews, 2016). By 1st January 2016 5096 schools in England had academy status. The belief was that these structural changes would lead to substantial improvement in student outcomes as measured by examination scores.

In practice, however, academies’ autonomy has limitations; although they can educate students in the way that they believe is most appropriate, they still have to comply with national policy demands in terms of student attainment and inspection requirements. Academies are also highly controversial; for those on the political right, academies are seen as a means to increase choice within the education system by promoting innovation and injecting new freedoms, energy and ideas (Chapman, 2013), while for those on the left, academies are regarded as a form of privatisation of the education service that will lead to greater social segregation (Machin and Veroit, 2011). In addition, and despite some ‘impressive results’ in turning round the examination performance of some academies in particularly challenging circumstances (Chapman, 2013, p.336), academies have had mixed results; recent research reports by the Education Policy Institute (Andrews, 2016) and the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER; Worth, 2016) found high levels of variability in performance in both multi-academy trusts and LA schools, with NFER’s research stating that ‘Academy status explains very little of the between-school variation in student progress’ (Worth, 2016, p.vii).

Nonetheless the key objectives of the first-wave academies were to:

- challenge the culture of educational under-attainment
- produce improvements in standards, thereby helping to break the cycle of underachievement in areas of social and economic deprivation

- play a key part in the regeneration of communities by sharing their expertise and facilities with other schools and the wider community (Woods et al, 2007: 239).

Our research began as a longitudinal study of one school in a coastal area that was one of the last to convert to academy status during the Labour administration. The aims of the study were to follow the journey of staff and students in the school as they responded to the far-reaching policy demands of conversion, and to explore the impact of the policy as leaders inevitably faced new and exacting challenges in a fast-moving educational environment. Studying the experiences of a coastal academy was particularly important, as schools in coastal areas (i.e. located in seaside towns / cities) have a range of issues similar to those of inner-city schools but have been relatively neglected in terms of policy strategy and research (Weale, 2014). We were able to access additional funding in 2012 to extend the research to two further coastal academies, and again in 2014 to a total of six. This article reports on findings from data collected from these wider ‘coastal academies’ projects involving a total of six schools. All six academies were failing schools at the time of conversion, and all appointed new, experienced Principals at the time of conversion to turn the failing school around.

Research design

The methods used for the wider research were first, to study each academy’s publically-available data to provide context for the research, and then to visit each of the three academies in 2012 and six academies in 2014 for one day, in which we:

- interviewed the principal and/or a senior leader to understand strategic priorities, challenges and successes
- interviewed a sample of four teachers to gain a range of different views on the impact of the measures undertaken each year
- requested relevant documentation such as the academy improvement plan and organisational structure.

All six academies were located in coastal regions with high levels of poverty and deprivation, with students’ employment prospects on leaving school generally seasonal and/or low-wage; there were few professional or manufacturing opportunities, largely because of the long-term decline in labour-intensive jobs such as fishing, shipyards and docks. Local communities were reported as having multi-generational low or unemployment, and poor experiences of education had in some cases developed into a ‘low-trust’ culture towards the educational process; education was seen by some to have had little positive impact upon their own life chances and/or to have been a difficult experience at the time. It was partly for these reasons that four of the six academies reported significant challenges with student behaviour, and we report on the measures taken by these academies below. At the time of their interviews, staff from the remaining two academies had relatively little to report on this issue; their interviews were generally concerned with the more immediate challenges of school amalgamation together with the structural reorganisation and staff redundancies that they were experiencing at the time.

The complexity of challenging behaviour

Interviewees recognised ways in which levels of poverty and deprivation affected student behaviour, and several commented on the difficulty of young people's lives in these areas. The impact of poverty on children's education and life chances is well known: poverty is associated with higher rates of chronic illness and disability, partly through the effects of living in poor or insecure housing (CPAG, 2016); evidence from England shows that around one in ten children and young people aged between five and sixteen suffer from a diagnosable mental health disorder, and that around 80,000 children and young people suffer from severe depression (Young Minds, 2016). Young people growing up in poverty have fewer opportunities to go on trips, and may not be able to afford the necessary books or materials for their studies, all of which can affect their ability to concentrate and their performance at school (NUT, 2015). Research has also shown that nourishing school food can help improve children's behaviour and attainment (e.g. Orme et al, 2011; Teeman et al, 2011), suggesting that poor diet can also be a contributory factor to challenging behaviour.

The link between poverty, learning and challenging behaviour, however, is not necessarily straightforward; there is also research that provides evidence that the current school accountability measures of high-stakes testing and the more academic curriculum, introduced from 2014, have contributed to 'disaffection and poor behaviour among some students' (Hutchings, 2015, p.5). At the same time, we know that behaviour varies between schools, and that this depends on factors within the school such as the quality of school leadership, quality of teaching and a framework of clear and fair rules (Swinson, 2010). As we have seen, two of the academies visited reported few difficulties with their students' behaviour and, in others, some interviewees commented that students in their previous schools exhibited less challenging behaviour despite the schools' location in poorer areas.

The influence of school catchment area/locality on behaviour

As a first step in understanding and addressing behaviour-related issues, teachers and school leaders interviewed commented that it was important to know the catchment area or locality that the school served. One described the extent to which location and community culture influenced the measures that were taken within the school:

'There are similarities [between schools] ... you know, the demographics and that, but every one, they're always different. They're always based in a community ... The local community, the local culture has a big say in how you run things. Your response to that' (senior leader).

Teachers and leaders from different academies offered different analyses of their local situation:

'... as redundancies kicked in, there's more and more and more families that haven't worked for years and years, and we're getting them kids [in the academy] ... [We have] this second generation, in some instances

third generation, of parents that get by ... with not working, with not getting an education and not seeing the benefit of getting an education' (teacher).

Another reported that:

'So there's a lot of child protection and safeguarding issues ... Big, often groups of, self-harming so it's a big issue, bullying ... [Students] just can't get along with each other for very long and create positive relationships, so we spend a lot of time on that ... They really, really struggle with social relationships' (senior leader).

A third described how local primary schools managed, rather than *'dealt with'* poor behaviour:

I think primary schools will ... manage behaviour but they don't deal with it ... We know that with behaviour issues that have been managed but not dealt with. In a small school environment they can manage that quite well but once it gets to this level, and you get all of those behaviours from five different primary schools, all in one year group, that's quite a challenge (senior leader).

The point here is that this type of knowledge allowed leaders and teachers to address educational and behavioural issues within the context of their students' lives and the type of education they experienced in primary school. Teachers and leaders from all six academies reported that engaging their students with learning was a challenge – not all students saw the 'point' in education, for whatever reason – but, as we can see from the teachers and leaders' comments above, this lack of engagement took different forms and needed different approaches to encourage students to learn, participate in school life and behave appropriately in the school environment.

A three-level approach to managing behaviour

All leaders reported a diverse approach to behaviour management strategies, but all worked at three levels - school, classroom and individual (Swinson, 2010). All saw the issues of engaging students with learning and their behaviour as closely linked; all aimed to raise the quality of teaching and learning to engage students more effectively and to support teachers and support staff with behaviour management techniques in the classroom. An important, connected aim was to widen students' horizons by providing them with new experiences; to excite them about learning new things and to show them other potential careers and opportunities. The long-term aim for all these academies was effecting a culture change towards one in which students not only wanted to learn but took responsibility for their learning, knowing that it would enable them to make informed choices in the future

School level strategies

The learning environment in the predecessor schools was reported in two ways; some spoke of an ethos of *'apathy and failure'*, while others reported that *'the kids ruled the school'*, either by missing lessons, being physically destructive through activities such as breaking windows and lighting fires, or by intimidating staff:

'My first week, I was called on call down to the Science department. Three Year 11 classes all refusing to go into their classroom. So 80 students all stood on a corridor, big lads ... [and] three teachers just not having any idea what to do' (senior leader).

In the latter academies, the immediate priority was to create a sense of order within the school which was achieved in a variety of different and often complementary ways, although all academies employed some of the following whole-school strategies:

- Ensuring **parents were aware of how the new academy** was to be run:
'The local context of the community [was] very, very challenging, and [parents] can be quite aggressive in their 'This is our need, this is what we want and who are you to...'. And so ... [the Principal] took people head on and explained, always very politely, that 'No, this is what we're doing and this is why we're doing it. And yes, you might think that, but this is still what we're doing and why we're doing it' (senior leader).
Ensuring parents knew about their children's difficult behaviour, and challenging them to *'take responsibility'* and *'at least help us'* was an important aspect of this approach in one academy.
- Having **clear expectations of student behaviour** and a **clear sanction system**. These included:
 - Set procedures for all aspects of the school day, with careful regard to the 'flow' of students around the school and noting (then changing) potential flash points for challenging behaviour such as the lunch-time queue.
 - One school incorporated a behaviour PowerPoint presentation at the start of every lesson for at least the first year following conversion to academy status. This included information on matters such as jewellery, hair styles, uniform and shoes, together with the sanctions for non-compliance and the reasons behind the rules.
 - Ensuring students stayed on campus at lunch-time, and shortening the lunch break to 30 minutes.
 - Banning social media from the campus; delivering lessons and assemblies on e-safety.
 - Introducing a new uniform so that students *'believed that they were smart'*. Three academies had strict rules regarding uniform to encourage this kind of ethos although one reported that, in rural and isolated schools, insisting on uniform details could be counter-productive:

'The only thing about uniform is that it can lead to conflict and if you're a school in a position where you have other schools they [students] can move to easily, you can do that. We're not in that position. It's either this school or a long bus ride. So unless you want to be driving people out every day, it's difficult being that strict with uniform. But I think it works in cities' (teacher).

- Framing detention as 'study support' for those who have not completed their work to encourage a positive approach to the extra time spent in school.
- Regular appraisal and reappraisal of all strategies to ensure that they were having the desired effect; changing the system if not.

- **Discipline with dignity.** This approach meant that teachers and support staff did not shout because students were likely to shout louder and swear more creatively than staff. In addition, shouting was seen to have a limited effect:

'Some of our young people are not equipped emotionally to be able to deal with conflict, to manage conflict; the way they see conflict managed at home is through violence, aggression, and shouting, and that's the model that they use. There's no point shouting at some of our kids ... it just doesn't work' (senior leader).

Negative feedback from staff and sanctions were delivered as far as possible in less public spaces to avoid developing a visible group of students who were *'always in detention'*; positive referrals supported students who were behaving and/or learning well.

- **Reward systems.** These generally took two forms:
 - Achievement merits that led to different levels of reward, such as going straight to the front of the lunch queue or a reduction in cost for a trip.
 - An end of term attendance reward trip for students with a record of attendance that reached a certain percentage, and a formal appeals procedure for those who believed their absence was justified. In some cases the students selected the trip destinations.
- **Widening students' horizons.** The aim here was to expose students to new experiences so that they would be curious about the world, understand some of the choices they could make in the future and learn in a variety of different approaches to life. One senior leader commented that *'We'll just grab anything that makes a difference and kind of excites the kids'* as a route to engaging them with learning behaviours. Opportunities included:
 - School trips to places such as the Globe Theatre, the London Dungeon, Hampton Court, universities and residential outdoor learning centres; international trips to places such as Auschwitz and Disneyland. In one academy it *'took a while'* before the trips became popular, but by the time of the 2014 research visit, staff reported that they were always fully booked.
 - International school partnerships that enabled exchange trips in both directions.

- One academy employed students from a local independent (fee-paying) school in the year between finishing their examinations and entering university. One group of these students swam the British channel during their placement, which was seen to provide *'inspiration'* to academy students.
 - Running successful sports clubs with teams that competed up to county level; improving sports facilities through, for example, a full-sized 3G pitch and encouraging local community groups to use it.
 - Introducing a wide range of extra-curricular clubs focusing on areas such as dance, hairdressing, Japanese and Manga.
 - Offering regular career information, advice and guidance, so that students were aware of what they needed to achieve academically if they wanted to pursue a particular career.
- Ensuring all **data systems**, such as SISRA analytics, functioned effectively to give teachers the information they need to support student behaviour. This was complemented by ensuring a consistent approach to behaviour across the school and by regular continuing professional development to support inclusive, high-quality teaching to engage students with their learning.

Participating academies reported that these measures enabled an atmosphere that was calmer and more purposeful than in the early days of the new academy and that, as these measures took effect, they could encourage students to develop their soft skills, make positive contributions to the school routine and feel increasingly valued both as individuals and members of school community. As one senior leader commented:

'You've got to have order in a school like this because if you don't have order, you've got nothing. The staff can't teach. So [to start with] it was about order, discipline, care' (senior leader).

Classroom and individual level strategies

There was a similar approach at the classroom and individual levels, with the aim of ensuring a coherent approach across the school that gave students stability and a sense of safety. As behaviour improved, so students were encouraged to become more responsible in their attitudes to learning and *'to learn for them, rather than [teachers] forcing them to learn'* (senior leader); in turn, this helped to improve general levels of behaviour although, as senior leaders regularly commented, high-quality teaching was of the utmost importance:

'The quality of what you provide in the classroom [is linked] to the behaviour outcomes of the students; there's a clear relationship there' (senior leader).

Measures at these levels were sometimes of the 'poacher turned gamekeeper' variety, in which previously challenging young people were given positions of responsibility which they then took seriously. Importantly, this type of measure was underpinned by a change in culture

towards one in which learning and behaving well were seen as increasingly acceptable to a greater number of students. Actions included:

- **Appointing prefects**, a head boy and a head girl:
'You couldn't have introduced prefects and head boy and head girl three years ago; they would have been pilloried. It wasn't the culture of the school to want to aspire to do anything else than sit at the back of the classroom and be, you know, a little bit the clown or, you know, rude etc. So that's quite a big step forward that we felt we were able to do that ... In fact our current head boy, he's a particularly adept poacher that's become game-keeper but a fantastic role model for the rest of the school because he's turned, he's changed' (senior leader).
- Encouraging **student voice** through conduits such as a Young Leaders Group. In one academy students designed new a curriculum around spiritual, moral, social and cultural development that, as a senior leader commented, has
'really benefited the academy because the students feel it's their subject ... so they will go with it' (senior leader)
- Introducing **'behaviour for learning' champions** who were trained to help within the classroom, for example in familiarising supply teachers with academy processes and procedures. Staff reported that these were often students who have had behaviour problems in the past.
- Introducing **lead students / ambassadors** to undertake break time duties and/or to meet and greet visitors; expanding this scheme to include peer mentoring for all ages. All positions had a formal application process.

These positions and initiatives were complemented by schemes **tailored to individual students** in the following ways:

- University academy sponsors encouraged English and maths undergraduate students to mentor academy students.
- Business sponsor employees mentored academy students.
- A business sponsor organised work experience in local businesses for students experiencing difficulty at school. A senior leader provided an example of how this could work:
'[Two students] did a ten week block in the call centre and they were very difficult in lessons, we had to take them out of lessons in here and they went in there, they did that block. And it just was a wakeup call. They went into the call centre and realised you couldn't shout across, it was all quiet and they didn't like it ... When they came back, they just said ... 'We'll behave, we'll go back in!' And they both went back in, absolutely no problem, and they'll probably get five A-Cs with English and Maths' (senior leader).

Other local businesses ran joint projects with this academy to offer more students a taste of the world of work.

- One academy worked with the Ministry of Defence to establish a combined Cadet Force on the school site, which *'we think will be good for order, discipline, routines, careers ... it's a hook in for a different kind of child'* (senior leader).

Finally, all these academies recognised that other, more intensive provision was needed for a minority of students who needed further support during their time at secondary school. Systems included assigning a key adult to each student in the academy; a behaviour for learning zone for students with significant difficulties; a Specialist Leader of Education for behaviour; the appointment of non-teaching welfare officers; employing an anti-bullying counsellor for one day a week; and training support staff in behaviour management strategies. Once again, all academies emphasised the importance of consistency in their approach to learning and behaviour management across the school so that students felt secure, valued and cared for.

Conclusion

The coastal schools in our research were 'first wave' academies located in areas of high socio-economic deprivation, intergenerational unemployment and low parental engagement. They were 'national challenge' schools that converted to academy status and engaged new schools leaders to help them tackle student underachievement. These schools faced significant student behaviour challenges on becoming academies and implemented a range of strategies at three levels – school, classroom and individual – to manage and improve the student behaviour. Each coastal academy effected a change in student culture towards one in which behaviour for learning and achieving became increasingly acceptable.

All of school leaders demonstrated a determination to show students that they were valued and that their efforts to change things were related to improving future life chances. The underpinning moral purpose behind the new culture for behaviour and learning within these coastal academies was summed up by one school leader, who clearly articulated that education is all about what students need to transform their lives:

'I think a good head teacher needs a very clear moral purpose. They need to be convinced that what they do changes the lives of people, and I think that if people have that moral purpose the job becomes an exciting challenge ... [Staff] can see it's about children, it's about individual fortunes. It's not about them, the teachers. It's about what the students need' (senior leader).

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