

To what extent is behaviour a problem in English schools? Exploring the scale and prevalence of deficits in classroom climate

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The working atmosphere in the classroom is an important variable in the process of education in schools, with several studies suggesting that classroom climate is an important influence on pupil attainment. There are wide differences in the extent to which classroom climate is considered to be a problem in English schools. Some ‘official’ reports suggest that behaviour in schools is ‘satisfactory or better’ in the vast majority of schools; other sources have pointed to behaviour being a serious and widespread problem. The paper details four studies conducted over the past decade which aimed to explore these disparities. The aim of the research was to gain a more accurate insight into the extent to which deficits in classroom climate limit educational attainment and equality of educational opportunity in English schools. The findings question the suggestion that behaviour is satisfactory or better in 99.7% of English schools and the concluding section suggests ways in which deficits in classroom climate might be addressed. Although the study is limited to classrooms in England, OECD studies suggest that deficits in the working atmosphere in classrooms occur in many countries. The study therefore has potential relevance for education systems in other countries.

Classroom climate as a concern of educational research

Classroom climate is one strand within the broader field of research into classroom management and pupil behaviour (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006). Fraser argues that the concept of classroom climate is difficult to define in precise terms, describing it as a ‘subtle and nebulous notion’, embracing ‘climate, ambience, tone, atmosphere and ethos’ (Fraser, 1989, p. 307). Interest in classroom climate can be traced back to (at least) as far as the work of Walberg and Anderson in the 1960s, and their testing of the Getzels–Thelen theory of the classroom as a social system (Walburg & Anderson, 1968). As with Anderson’s ‘Learning environment inventory’ (Anderson, 1973), and Moos and Trickett’s ‘Classroom Environment Scale’ (Moos & Trickett, 1974), classroom climate research has often positioned itself within the ‘ecological’ strand of approaches to research into classroom management issues (Doyle, 2006). The majority of these studies, including those of Eder (1996, 1998) and Engels *et al.* (2000) focused on *pupil* perspectives on classroom climate. Eder and Mayr’s ‘Linzer questionnaire of school and classroom climate’ (Eder & Mayr, 2000) made the point

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that classroom climate was a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon. The questionnaire contained 42 questions, and attempted to elicit information about 14 facets of pupils' experience of the classroom and the school, including dimensions of social warmth, strictness/control, peer group pressure and pressure to conform, learning community, rivalry and perturbation. Saldern and Littig's (1987) 'Landau social climate scale for grades 4–13' also identified a wide range of factors influencing classroom climate. Other researchers have attempted to focus on particular aspects of classroom climate, rather than exploring the breadth of factors which might influence classroom climate. Peter and Dalbert (2010) attempted to assess classroom climate through the study of just two factors: pupil willingness to learn, and pupils' sense of community; Wubbels *et al.* (2006) focused on the influence of teacher-student relationships on classroom climate. Other studies on classroom climate focused on social or external influences on pupils' behaviour and attitudes to school (see, for instance, Perry & Weinstein, 1998). More recently, research into classroom climate has focused on the teacher's skills of managing culturally diverse classrooms as a determinant of classroom climate (Siwatu *et al.*, 2013).

Three of the four studies described focus on teacher perspectives on classroom climate, rather than the emphasis on pupil perspective which has dominated much of the previous research in this field. All four studies focus primarily on the issue of pupil behaviour, and the degree to which teachers feel that they are able to create and maintain a working atmosphere in the classroom which is ideally conducive to learning.

Why is classroom climate an important issue?

The idea that the working atmosphere in the classroom can have a negative impact on pupil attainment is not a new one (Rutter *et al.*, 1979; Rutter & Maughan, 2002). Van Tartwijk and Hammerness (2011, p. 109) make the (perhaps obvious) point that 'learning is much more difficult, if not impossible, in a disorderly environment' (see also Marzano *et al.*, 2003). More recently, Sir Michael Wilshaw, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools has argued that the progress of over 700,000 pupils in English schools is being impeded by low level disruption (Ofsted, 2013, p. 9).

Some studies have suggested that the working atmosphere in the classroom, and standards of pupil behaviour are major influences on how well pupils are likely to achieve. The Hay McBer Report (2000) on effective teaching suggested that disruption and classroom climate were two of the most significant influences on pupils' learning opportunities and progress. Commenting on a summary of research on effective teaching in the US, Wragg (1997, p. 44) also concluded that 'class management seemed to bear most strongly on how well pupils achieved'. Elliott and Phuong-Mai (2008) argue that several major studies on comparative international performance in education suggest that poor levels of classroom behaviour may well account in part for the superior performance of Russian and Chinese pupils compared to their English and US counterparts.

There are also important issues of equality of educational opportunity related to the issue of classroom climate. As I have argued elsewhere (Haydn, 2012), one of the biggest inequalities of opportunity in the English education system is whether pupils are in classrooms which are under the relaxed and assured control of their teachers or

in classrooms where the teacher is not in complete control of the lesson, and some pupils may be disrupting the learning of others.

Another area where classroom climate may have an important influence on educational systems and outcomes is in the field of teacher recruitment and retention. There are very few things in professional life less edifying than being, in effect, locked in a room with 30 children not fully under your control. In England, over 40% of teachers leave the profession within five years of qualification, and difficulties in coping with poor pupil behaviour emerges as one of the most commonly cited reasons for leaving teaching (Cockburn & Haydn, 2004; Barmby, 2006). In addition to learning deficits caused by poor classroom climate, Ronfeldt *et al.* (2013) have pointed out that high levels of teacher attrition and turnover also have a damaging effect on pupil attainment.

The context of the research: differing views on the problem of behaviour in English schools

For the past two decades, there have been differing views expressed about the extent to which behaviour is a problem in English schools. In 1994, the then Secretary of State for Education stated that poor pupil behaviour affects ‘a small number of pupils in a small number of schools’ (Patten, 1994). In the same year, Claus Moser argued that in inner-city areas, the problem of indiscipline in schools was much more common and that ‘tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of children still have totally unacceptable educational experiences, disadvantaging them for life’, because teachers were able to do no more than ‘crowd control’ (Moser, 1994). Michael Barber’s (1994) survey of 10,000 secondary school pupils in the midlands appeared to lend support to Moser’s view. The survey reported that 25% of pupils acknowledged behaving badly in school, and 33% reported that they encountered disruption in class on a daily basis. Barber argued that ‘a disruptive minority of 10–15% of pupils are seriously undermining the quality of education in as many as half of all secondary schools’ (Barber, 1994). Citing the same study, he claimed that 92% of pupils in their GCSE exam year (for pupils aged 16) suffered from disruption to their learning through poor pupil behaviour.

Nearly 20 years on, we appear to be no nearer a consensus on the extent to which behaviour is a problem in schools. The Steer Report, a government commissioned enquiry into the issue of behaviour in schools reported a very positive and reassuring picture, stating that ‘the overall standard of behaviour achieved by schools is good and has improved in recent years’, noting ‘a steady rise in standards’ (Steer, 2009, p. 4).

However, as in the 1990s, there are some inconsistencies and disparities in the picture which is presented about behaviour in English schools. In spite of the evidence contained in the Steer Report and successive Ofsted inspection reports, the statements of politicians are at odds with the suggestion that behaviour is less than satisfactory in only 0.3% of schools (Department for Education, 2012a). In a ‘Leaders’ Debate’ on 15 April 2010, Prime Minister David Cameron cited a figure of 17,000 assaults on teachers as ‘a typical year now. . . We’ve got a real problem here’ (Cameron, 2010). Schools Minister Nick Gibb (2012) has argued for ‘order to be restored in

the classroom’, and Secretary of State for Education Michael Gove (2010) announced that he would ‘not rest when the learning of thousands of children who are desperate to do well and get on is disrupted in classrooms where discipline has broken down’. The disparity between these statements and the picture presented by Ofsted and Steer raises the question of whether politicians are exaggerating the scale and prevalence of behaviour problems in English schools, and ‘talking up’ the issue for political purposes. However, there is evidence which questions the fairly rosy picture painted by Ofsted and Steer, including recent surveys of teachers and head teachers in England.

A *Times Educational Supplement* survey of 400 heads found that 35% of heads believed that pupil behaviour had deteriorated over the past 12 years (TES, 2010), and an Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) survey of over a thousand teachers reported that 60% of them believed that they had disruptive pupils in their classrooms, with 98% reporting that this had at times resulted in disruption of pupils’ work (ATL, 2009). An earlier survey of teachers by the NUT found that 69% of teachers reported experience of disruptive behaviour ‘weekly or more frequently’ (Neill, 2001).

Surveys of pupil perceptions of classroom climate also suggest that disruption is not confined to a small number of inner-city schools. A recent PISA report stated that in England, 31% of pupils felt that ‘in most or all lessons... there is noise and disorder’ (Bradshaw *et al.*, 2010), and Chamberlain *et al.* (2011) reported that a majority of pupils in England said that they had experienced disruption to their learning.

The figure of 330,000 pupil exclusions in 2010–2011 (DfE, 2012b) also sits uneasily with the generally positive picture presented by the Steer Report and recent Ofsted judgements on the proportion of schools which were deemed to be less than satisfactory in terms of pupil behaviour. Even though only 5080 of these exclusions were permanent, given that the most common reason for exclusions of all types was persistent disruptive behaviour (accounting for 33.7% of permanent exclusions and 24.8% of fixed period exclusions from all schools), it seems unlikely that this disruption was limited to the 0.3% of schools where behaviour was deemed by Ofsted to be satisfactory or better. Given the fact that Ofsted figures on exclusions do not take account of ‘managed moves’ and ‘unofficial’ exclusions (Domokos, 2012), even these figures may understate the number of exclusions from English schools.

Recently published teacher biographies (Birbalsingh, 2011; Carroll, 2011) also claim that the scale of disorder in schools sometimes goes well beyond the picture of ‘largely low level disruption’ presented by the Elton and Steer Reports (Elton, 1989; Steer, 2009). The picture is further complicated by media coverage of the issue of behaviour in schools, which has sometimes served to sensationalise the issue (see Haydn, 2012, pp. 7–8, for some examples of this).

Thus, over the past six years, ‘official’ reports on behaviour in schools (Ofsted reports, and the government commissioned 2009 Steer Report on behaviour in schools), have presented a very positive picture of classroom climate and pupil behaviour, with Ofsted consistently reporting that behaviour was satisfactory or better in over 90% of schools (Ofsted, 2006, 2010, 2012; Morris-King, 2011), a figure rising to 99.7% in 2012 (Department for Education, 2012a). This portrayal of classroom climate and pupil behaviour has been challenged by other sources. In December

2012, Sir Michael Wilshaw, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools painted a less positive picture of behaviour in schools, which is at odds with the '99.7% satisfactory or better' figure cited by the Department for Education (based on Ofsted inspection reports) in 2012 (Department for Education, 2012a).

One of the aims of the research outlined in this paper is to examine the validity of the DfE/Ofsted/Steer Report view of classroom climate, in the context of these very different *forms* of evidence, which question the 'official' and very positive portrayal of the classroom climate prevailing in English classrooms.

Given the important part that classroom climate is thought to play in pupil attainment (see above), and in the light of the widely divergent presentation of what pupil behaviour and classroom climate is like in English schools, it seems pertinent to explore how educational research might help to ascertain with more precision, the extent to which pupil behaviour is a problem in English schools.

International dimensions of the issue of classroom climate

Concerns about classroom climate are not limited to schools in England. As Wubbels (2011, p. 113) points out, 'Teachers throughout the world cite classroom management, including discipline and student misbehaviour, as one of the most important problems they face' (see also, Pigge & Marso, 1997; Wubbels, 2013). Charles (2002, p. 1) identifies behaviour as one of the most serious problems facing teachers in North America:

Our schools are in the grip of a serious problem that is wreaking havoc on teaching and learning. That problem is student misbehaviour. If you are now teaching, you have had ample experience with it. If you are preparing to teach, be forewarned: it is the major obstacle to your success and has the potential to destroy your career.

Darling-Hammond *et al.* (2005) and Hammerness (2011) also identify deficits in classroom climate as a significant problem in education in North America. Nor are such concerns limited to North America and England. Deficits in classroom climate have also been identified as a concern in Sweden, Israel and Australia (Ben-Peretz *et al.*, 2006; Granstrom, 2006; Lewis, 2006).

The Panorama programme *Hard lessons from abroad* (BBC1, 3 June 1996) elicited considerable interest from teachers in England, when they saw the levels of behaviour prevalent in the Taiwanese education system. The programme showed classrooms with every pupil in the class keen to learn, immaculately behaved and wholeheartedly committed to working with the teacher and fellow pupils to learn as much as possible (and with able pupils spending break times helping those pupils who had not fully understood the lesson objectives). However, Elliott (2007a) argues that even in Pacific Rim countries, previously noted for their culture of order and respect for authority (Reynolds, 1996), Western cultural influences have to at least some extent had an influence on classroom climate, and caused concern about declining standards of behaviour in schools. The high profile given to international comparisons of education systems in recent years, in the form of PISA and TIMSS surveys, has also drawn attention to the issue of classroom climate. There is some evidence to suggest that teachers in England are working in more challenging con-

texts compared to their counterparts in many of our OECD competitors, in terms of pupil attitudes to learning and parental support for education. Cultural and ‘out of school’ factors also have a bearing on classroom climate, not least in terms of pupils’ attitude to learning and to the project of education in general.

Elliott (2009) cites successive OECD surveys (2003, 2004) which found that Russian, Chinese and Japanese pupils were least likely to report that there was noise and disorder in their classrooms, and that teachers in the US were more likely than those in the Russian federation to report that their teaching had been hampered by disruptive pupil behaviour. Mullis *et al.* (2000) also reported that in comparison to Japanese and German classrooms, lessons in the US were often interrupted and subject to distractions from pupils behaving badly. Professor David Reynolds explaining the success of Taiwanese school system noted that ‘Disruption... just doesn’t happen. The system here is so good, *the support from outside the school so strong*, that the lessons function without interruption’ (Reynolds, 1996; my emphasis). Some data from PISA research also suggests that teachers in England may be teaching in more difficult contexts than their counterparts elsewhere (Bradshaw *et al.*, 2010). Commenting on an OECD report which placed England in 32nd place in terms of the proportion of students who reported that ‘their teachers never or rarely have to wait long for them to quieten down’, Professor Sue Hallam also notes that cultural ‘out of school’ factors may have an influence on classroom climate, in pointing out that ‘the countries that have scored highly for discipline are known for being very ordered, and this obviously spills over to the education system’ (Hallam, 2011, p. 21).

Elliott and Phuong-Mai (2008) acknowledge the difficulties of making objective international comparisons which attempt to make correlations between behaviour and attainment, but nonetheless conclude that from the evidence available, it would appear that there remain significant differences in standards of behaviour across countries. They go on to point out that the countries where the working atmosphere is most positive are the ones who perform best in international comparisons of educational outcomes.

Why is it difficult to ascertain the scale and prevalence of deficits in classroom climate in England?

Ofsted inspection reports constitute one of the biggest datasets on pupil behaviour and the working atmosphere in the classroom. Behaviour is now a core element of the inspection process, and the most recent annual report of Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Schools is based on inspections of over 8500 schools (Ofsted, 2013). However, it is generally accepted that during the course of Ofsted inspections, patterns of pupil behaviour may not be completely representative of the rest of the school year, and that given the high-stakes nature of Ofsted assessment, heads are under significant pressure to ensure that standards of behaviour during the inspection are as high as possible. This is not to accuse Ofsted inspectors of naivety, and inspection processes make every effort to ascertain what behaviour is like in school over time, rather than on the days of inspection (Kennedy, 2012), but clearly, not all parties involved in the process are doing their utmost to get an accurate picture of the extent to which behaviour is a problem.

Under the current system of league tables, publication of inspection reports, and parental choice of secondary school, discipline and behaviour are sensitive issues for head teachers and governors, and it is difficult for them to be completely open about problems of behaviour in their schools. The moves towards a 'market' in secondary schools has created a system which means that (for understandable reasons), schools strain every sinew to present as positive a picture of pupil behaviour and classroom climate as possible (to both Ofsted and parents). As a government advisor on behaviour has noted:

What is very interesting around behaviour is that schools are very reluctant to admit they have an issue with behaviour... it's also interesting because it shows an emotional component to behaviour. There's an element of threat around behaviour that there almost isn't around any other issue. Deep down, behaviour is our biggest fear. (Taylor, 2011)

The move towards identifying behaviour as one of the four key indicators of school performance in Ofsted inspections may further increase these pressures; as Campbell has pointed out, 'the more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will become to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to measure' (Campbell, 1976).

The ability to manage pupil behaviour effectively is also seen as an important facet of teachers' professional self-esteem (Haydn, 2012), so it is not always easy to get teachers to speak with complete frankness on this issue. Perusal of recent literature relating to the issue of behaviour in schools (see, for example, DfE, 2012a), suggests that many sources of evidence have 'positions' which might influence their judgements, whether it be teachers' unions wanting to establish that teachers have a difficult job and need strong support, governing politicians, hoping to claim that their policies are helping to improve classroom climate, opposition politicians hoping to heap blame on government policies, or 'whistle blowing' teachers hoping to sell their books, or newspaper journalists, their newspapers. Even the Steer Report (2009), a major, recent funded study, which consulted a number of experienced and knowledgeable experts and practitioners in the field of behaviour in schools, is limited in terms of providing a transparent and comprehensive explanation of the grounds on which findings were based.

In spite of the high policy and media profile of behaviour issues in education in England it could be argued that we appear to have an uncertain grasp of the scale and breadth of the problem, that is to say, the extent to which deficits in the working atmosphere in classrooms are limiting efforts to improve educational standards in general and the prevalence of pupils with problems impeding the learning of pupils who are keen to learn. The main aim of the research reported in this paper has been to gain more accurate insight into the extent to which deficits in the working atmosphere in classrooms may be limiting educational attainment and equality of educational opportunity in England. A subsidiary aim of the research was to explore the difficulties which schools and teachers have to face in reconciling the tensions between educational inclusion (i.e., not removing difficult and disruptive pupils from

classrooms and schools) and ‘the right to learn’ of all pupils in a climate which is ideally conducive to learning.

Research approach and design

The research instrument used in three of the four studies described was a 10-point scale which has been widely used in teacher education in England and elsewhere. (The scale is accessible online at: www.uea.ac.uk/~m242/historypgce/class_management/10pointscale.htm; see also Appendix 1.) The scale is an attempt to describe the continuum between classrooms where the working atmosphere is completely conducive to learning, and classrooms where learning is severely limited by pupil disruption. It was devised and iteratively modified over a period of three years of classroom observations in a school where there were wide variations in classroom climate, ranging from classrooms where teachers were in relaxed and complete control of the class, to classes which were severely afflicted by very difficult pupil behaviour (as described in the lower levels of the 10-point scale). The modifications and adjustments to the wording of the level descriptors was based on feedback from teachers who worked at the school. Further detail of the genesis and development of the scale can be found in Haydn (2007). The scale is of course a construct, and does not encompass the full range of disruptive behaviours which can afflict classrooms. I have seen classes which would fall below level 1 as described here, and have witnessed all the levels on the scale (and as a former teacher, experienced many of them). Although the scale cannot claim to possess the external validity which would derive from having been tested in empirical studies by other researchers, its widespread use in teacher education in England (see, for instance, Hayes, 2010; HEA, 2012), and teacher recognition and acceptance of the level descriptors on the scale (see Haydn, 2007), suggests that the scale possesses at least a degree of face validity (Cohen *et al.*, 2007).

The idea in phrasing the level descriptors was to attempt to evince a chord of recognition in practising teachers and pre-service teachers, and to be sufficiently transparent and accessible as to be meaningful to others involved in the educational process—teachers, parents, governors and policy-makers. The scale was originally used in work with pre-service teachers, based on the idea that it would be helpful for them to have some ideas about where they stood in the classroom climate continuum, to think about levels to aspire to, about what factors influenced the working atmosphere in the classroom, and why there were differences both between and within schools (some student teachers reported seeing or experiencing level 1 to level 10 within the same school placement). Students who used the scale in the course of their teaching placement were also asked to consider what influence the scale had on their lesson planning and delivery, in terms of learning objectives and pedagogy. Implicit in the level descriptors is the suggestion that below a certain point on the scale, the atmosphere in the classroom will influence not just the outcomes of the learning process, but the inputs as well, in that below certain levels on the scale, planning may be directed to at least some extent towards the objective of control rather than learning.

The scale also aimed to get teachers and student teachers to think about the extent to which there is a ‘right to learn’ for pupils, free from the noise and disruption of others. It was not designed to be used to pass judgement on the class management skills

of teachers, but to get pre-service teachers (and teachers, departments and schools) to think about the factors influencing classroom climate, the influence of classroom climate on teaching and learning, and the equal opportunities issues surrounding the tension between the ideals of educational inclusion and situations where some pupils are impeding the learning of others.

Although initially used to get student teachers to think about the factors influencing the working atmosphere in the classroom, between 2002 and 2010, the scale was also used to gather information about teachers' and student teachers' perceptions of classroom climate in English schools. In some cases, this involved participants making judgements on the levels they had encountered in schools, in others, it also involved interviews with teachers based around their responses to questions focusing on the scale.

Unlike the majority of classroom climate instruments described in the first section of the paper, the scale considers classroom climate through the lens of the teacher rather than the pupil (for an example of a study exploring the use of 'student voice' to gain insights into classroom climate and pupil behaviour, see Munn *et al.*, 1990). Moreover, unlike the instruments devised by Clunies-Ross *et al.* (2008), Eder and Mayr (2000), Infantino and Little (2007), Mainhard *et al.* (2011) and Saldern and Littig (1987), the scale makes no attempt to cover a wide range of factors which might influence classroom climate or explore the ontology of such a concept.

Whereas Ofsted's judgements on behaviour in schools attempt to incorporate the views of parents, pupils and teachers, the 10-point scale is based solely on teacher perceptions of classroom climate. As well as focusing on 'pupils' behaviour around the school and in lessons, including the extent of low-level disruption', Ofsted's grading of schools on 'behaviour and safety' (using a four point scale from outstanding to inadequate) takes into account issues of attendance and punctuality, pupil safety, and bullying (Ofsted, 2014). The 10-point scale focuses solely on the working atmosphere in the classroom. Whereas the Ofsted inspection process is based on analysis of school data and observation by external agents, the 10-point scale (although formulated on the basis of classroom observations) is based on teachers talking about their own feelings about classroom climate and pupil behaviour, and as such is heavily dependent on the willingness of teachers to express their feelings in an open and 'honest' manner.

Like Pianta's study of the influence of teacher-pupil relationships (Pianta, 2006) the scale focuses on a particular facet of classroom climate; in this case, the extent to which the teacher is in effective control of the classroom, and able to teach in whatever way he or she feels is most likely to optimise pupil learning. A corollary of this is the extent to which pupils are trying their best to learn, cooperating fully with the teacher, and with each other, and the absence of any pupil behaviours which might hinder the learning of others, and that of the class as a whole. The scale differs from other classroom climate instruments in its attempt to provide a more nuanced calibration of the extent to which the teacher is in control of the classroom, and able to create and sustain a working atmosphere that is ideally conducive to optimising pupil learning.

Only one of the four studies detailed in this paper focused on pupils' views about classroom climate. In this case, the scale was not used (the questionnaire which was used can be accessed at <http://www.uea.ac.uk/~m242/nasc/cross/cman/quest.htm>).

The rationale for including a study focusing on pupil perspectives was to provide a form of triangulation (Cohen *et al.*, 2008) for the studies which focused on teacher perspectives.

All four of the studies were carried out in line with British Educational Research Association (BERA) guidelines, with the assurance of informed consent, right to withdraw and guarantee of anonymity (BERA, 2004).

In order to circumvent some of the problems described in the previous section, two strategies were used. One was to try to gain insight into the perspective of pupils or former pupils about the issues of classroom climate and pupil behaviour. This approach had been helpful in a previous piece of research, exploring the question of how much computers were being used in schools, with pupil/former pupil responses suggesting less use of computers than surveys asking head teachers and heads of department how much computers were being used in school (Haydn, 2004).

In terms of the studies which involved interviews with teachers and head teachers, a conscious attempt was made to try to interview heads and teachers that I knew quite well. Although there are clearly some dangers to this form of ‘insider’ research (see Elliott, 1988), a tentative hypothesis was that people with whom one had a reasonably close and positive working relationship might be more likely to feel that they could/should be more open and ‘honest’ in their responses, or at least less subject to the pressures and ‘agendas’ involved in school inspection processes, government sponsored official enquiries and teacher association surveys. This is of course a need to be transparent about this variation on ‘convenience’ sampling (Cohen *et al.*, 2007), and to acknowledge factors which may have distortion effects of a different kind to those caused by inspection surveys (for example, the danger that respondents may be inclined towards giving answers that they felt might please the interviewer). In terms of gauging the extent to which this approach might impact on the reliability of data from such a sampling approach, ‘face’ validity (i.e., the extent to which the data seems plausible and convincing to others experienced in the field) can be helpful in considering the authority of the findings in comparison to other studies (Moore *et al.*, 2012).

Exploring the issue of classroom climate and pupil behaviour in English schools: four studies

The next section of the paper provides details of four studies focusing on classroom climate and pupil behaviour in English schools carried out between 2002 and 2010.

1. Pilot study, 2002

A pilot survey using the 10-point scale was undertaken in 2002. The aim of the study was to experiment with the use of the 10-point scale and see if the descriptors seemed meaningful and struck any chord of recognition with people who worked in classrooms. Also, to explore the scale and prevalence of deficits in classroom climate, and to see if there were significant differences in classroom climate between inner-city urban conurbations and schools in ‘the provinces’ (as media coverage tended to suggest).

Table 1. Teacher perceptions of levels of control – inner city schools

| | |
|--|-----|
| Inner-city partnership(n = 41) | 8.6 |
| Averages for: | |
| Highest level seen/experienced | |
| Average level seen/experienced | 6.5 |
| Worst level experienced | 4.5 |
| Lowest level seen/experienced | 1 |
| 5 students had not seen or experienced above level 7 in the course of their school placement | |
| 40 out of the 41 students had seen or experienced under level 7 on the scale. | |

Table 2. Teacher perceptions of levels of control – rural and semi-rural schools

| | |
|---|-----|
| Rural/semi-rural partnership(n = 12) | 9.1 |
| Averages for: | |
| Best level seen/experienced | |
| Average level seen/experienced | 7.0 |
| Worst level experienced | 5.0 |
| Lowest level seen/experienced | 3.0 |
| 11 out of 12 students had seen or experienced under level 7 on the scale. | |

Using convenience sampling (Cohen *et al.*, 2007), 53 student teachers were asked to note the best, average and worst levels on the scale which they had either encountered or observed in the course of their school placement. Of these, 41 were in an initial teacher education partnership scheme based in an inner-city area, and 12 in an initial teacher education partnership which encompassed a more rural and semi-rural constituency. The results of the survey are given below in Tables 1 and 2.

The survey suggested that deficits in the working atmosphere in English classrooms were not limited to inner city schools; small semi-rural schools also encountered significant problems with poor pupil behaviour which was thought to have an impact on learning outcomes. The ‘average’ level reported in inner-city schools was 6.5 on the scale, against an average of 7.0 in a rural/semi-rural initial teacher education partnership. The student teachers were also asked how they responded to teaching classes which were not comfortably under their control. The majority acknowledged that they often resorted to ‘defensive’ teaching, designed to keep order in the classroom (giving the pupils a lot of written work, using text books and worksheets, getting pupils to watch a television programme), with a smaller proportion reporting that they might try something a bit different, such as group work or role-play (Haydn, 2002a). A group of 19 visiting German teachers was also surveyed, and reported slightly higher averages in German schools –7.4. Although the study was a small scale one it raised the question of whether deficits in classroom climate were more widespread than indicated by press and media coverage of education in England, where behaviour problems were commonly presented as being confined to challenging inner-city schools.

One outcome of the pilot study was that the levels appeared to ‘make sense’ to the student teachers surveyed. There were no comments questioning or modifying the level descriptors on the scale.

2. Pupils' views on 'the things that most put you off being in the classroom/learning a subject', 2002

Another indication of possible deficits in classroom climate emerged from a survey of 708 pupils from five schools, which asked pupils to comment on what factors most put them off being in a classroom/learning a subject. The survey was part of a broader research project on pupil disaffection, but this strand of it had the potential to provide some insight into pupil perspectives on classroom climate.

The five schools were all in the same city in the East of England, in an area not considered to be particularly extreme in terms of levels of social and economic deprivation. Some of the schools were popular with parents and oversubscribed. The schools were chosen because they had chosen to be involved in a research project which involved collaboration between schools and universities. Participating heads had chosen the focus on which the project research would be based, and had chosen to explore the issue of pupil disaffection from learning. The research was one strand (the 'classroom management' strand) of this broader study on 'The curriculum dimensions of pupil disaffection in schools' (Elliott *et al.*, 2001).

The questionnaire which was given to pupils across the five schools can be accessed at <http://www.uea.ac.uk/~m242/nasc/cross/cman/quest.htm>. Some subjects and teaching approaches evinced more disaffection than others, but another finding was that there were substantial numbers of pupils who were disaffected from the process of education more generally. This clearly has implications for classroom climate.

One question asked pupils to describe 'the things that most put you off being in the classroom/learning a subject'.

Of 629 comments in response to this question, 104 related to the poor behaviour of other pupils and teachers' inability to secure a calm and purposeful working atmosphere in the classroom. These comments came from pupils across all five of the schools involved in the survey. A small and representative sample of the responses is given in Table 3.

Table 3. Pupils reporting that poor behaviour by other pupils was a factor which deterred them from learning

| |
|--|
| 'Other people disrupting.' |
| 'Disruptive pupils.' |
| 'Other pupils messing around.' |
| 'When teachers can't control the lesson.' |
| 'Getting stuff thrown at me.' |
| 'People disturbing others purposely.' |
| 'People throwing things round the room.' |
| 'Teacher that can't control the class.' |
| 'Pupils disrupting the lessons (wasting time for our education).' |
| 'Pupils mucking around.' |
| 'People nicking or stealing your work and property and the teachers don't care.' |

The full case record of the research can be accessed online at <http://www.uea.ac.uk/~m242/nasc/cross/cman/quest.htm>. The outcomes of the survey again suggested that deficits in classroom climate were not limited to a handful of inner-city schools in urban conurbations; three of the five schools involved were popular and oversubscribed institutions.

3. Teacher perceptions of classroom climate, 2006–2007

The aim of this study was to gain more insight into the views of practising teachers about classroom climate, with a deliberate attempt to elicit testimony about the working atmosphere in classrooms from a wide range of teachers, from heads to newly qualified teachers.

Individual, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 118 teachers (including 13 head teachers) across 80 different English schools. The schools were not selected on the grounds of being particularly challenging or difficult. Nine of the respondents worked or had worked in schools ‘in special measures’, but many worked in schools which were oversubscribed, and had received various awards and distinctions. Seven of the respondents worked or had worked in the independent sector at some point. Overall, the teachers came from schools which were broadly representative of schools in the East of England.

Although there was a degree of ‘convenience sampling’ influencing the choice of participants, a deliberate attempt was made to select participants with whom I had some sort of working relationship or acquaintance, for the reasons explained in an earlier section of this paper.

After ethical procedures had been completed, participants were given a copy of the scale to read, reminded about the purpose behind the enquiry (to gain insight into levels of classroom control prevailing in English classrooms and factors influencing those levels), and asked a series of questions about classroom climate (see Haydn, 2007, for further development of these points).

Coding was done inductively, and responses were divided into testimony which indicated that classroom climate was not really a problem at the school (defined as ‘nearly all lessons functioning at levels 9 or 10 on the scale’), testimony which stated that behaviour was an issue, and teachers had to at least some extent plan lessons around control issues (the middle order levels on the scale), and testimony that acknowledged substantial and regular deficits in classroom climate, with levels falling into the bottom half of the scale. The selection of comments provided below attempts to provide a representative sample of participant responses. Again, a more comprehensive range of testimony can be found in Haydn (2007).

There were large numbers of responses (over 50%) which indicated that there were at least some classes where levels 9 and 10 prevailed, and which suggested that anything below level 5 on the scale would be highly unusual. However, there were very few responses (under 10%) which suggested that levels 9 and 10 prevailed at all times. Three such responses are given below:

This school is a bit of a litmus test in terms of controlling pupils. I reckon any teacher who is reasonably OK at working with pupils and using the school system intelligently won't have too much trouble once they have settled in and got their reputation established.

I'm very happy here and don't have any classes where I don't look forward to teaching them.

I'm aware that it's not a particularly rough school. . . there are a couple of classes where you have to just give some thought to how you are going to manage the class. . . but with most of them, you can pretty much go in and do whatever you want and just get on with it.

All 13 head teachers interviewed acknowledged that classroom climate and pupil behaviour were 'an issue' at their schools in the sense that pupil attainment might to some degree be compromised by poor pupil behaviour in some classrooms. Several of them also indicated that at meetings with fellow heads, behaviour was generally accepted as being an issue that afflicted most or all schools. Extracts from their testimony are given below:

I would be surprised if there were any schools where pupil behaviour did not have any impact on pupil outcomes.

Every timetabled lesson of every day there will be some lessons in the school where pupil behaviour will affect teaching and learning outcomes.

We all talk about this (pupil behaviour). . . the issue for us is certainly a powerful one. I would conclude quite confidently that if it is a problem for us, a comprehensive school with an intake that is if anything skewed upwards, it is likely to be a problem for most other schools.

It is important to stress that there were some schools where both heads and teachers felt that pupil behaviour was not a *major* problem, and that deficits in classroom climate were occasional and limited in scope. Several respondents felt that levels of behaviour never dipped below level 7 on the scale.

But such schools were in a minority. More commonly, teachers reported a mixture of classes, some of which were comfortably under their control, some of which required careful handling. One of the most striking aspects of teacher testimony was the number of teachers who had obtained posts in popular, oversubscribed schools, but nonetheless admitted to having to work hard to get complete control of some of their classes. One experienced teacher made the point that even in a school which was far from being 'at the sharp end', balancing the interests of all pupils was an issue that required difficult decisions on an almost daily basis:

This is not a school in desperate circumstances. . . we are heavily oversubscribed, parents are desperate to get their kids into the school. But within a few days of becoming a year head, I had been obliged to make several quite difficult decisions about what to do with pupils who were spoiling the lesson for other pupils by behaving badly. . . deliberately trying to undermine the teacher. . . quite blatantly breaking the basic rules of behaviour.

Twelve of the teachers interviewed reported that schools were under pressure not to exclude pupils, even when they were palpably interfering with the learning of other pupils and not fully under control. In some cases, this pressure was felt to come from the school's senior management team, in others, the local education authority, and in two cases, it was felt that rising numbers of exclusions might trigger an Ofsted inspection. Four examples of such testimony are provided here:

I am very experienced and am generally accepted by the staff as someone who is good at dealing with the kids but even I am finding it incredibly difficult to cope with the large number of pupils who are really serious cases, who are off the scale in terms of their behaviour. No one can do anything with them. It is impossible to stop them interfering with the learning of other pupils, but it appears to be just as impossible to get them alternative provision.

It is a condition of working at this school that you have to face serious disruption on a daily basis, pupils screaming obscenities, refusing to comply with requests to stop appalling behaviour, threatening, spitting, swearing. Staff have to learn how to cope with it and just do their best in the circumstances. You can't teach in the normal sense of the word, and you feel wretched for the poor kids who would like to learn but can't... you know you are letting them down.

The head is great, he leads from the front, he takes difficult classes, he is always about in the school, but he can't stop the really difficult kids running riot. He tries to get kids excluded but it's a real struggle, there is a lot of pressure to keep them in.

There are just too many really difficult ones... the system is overloaded. The poor head is at his wits end trying to get yet another senior member of staff to 'mind' a kid and keep him isolated from normal classes... yesterday there were at least six, and there just aren't enough senior staff to just drop everything with pupils and just 'mind' one pupil for the whole day. (For more extensive excerpts from teacher testimony, see Haydn, 2012)

The interviews with both heads and teachers suggested that *to at least some extent*, behaviour was an issue which affected most schools. There was only a handful of responses which indicated that behaviour was not a problem, although there were many who suggested that it was not usually a major problem, and that on the whole, classroom climate was generally good and that pupils were generally quite well behaved. However, most respondents acknowledged that there were at least some pupils who presented a significant challenge to sustaining a classroom climate ideally suited to learning, and that both teachers and heads sometimes had to make quite difficult decisions reconciling the tension between maintaining a classroom climate that was ideally conducive to learning and yet keeping all pupils in the room.

Heads talked about these tensions, and the complexities involved in adopting a 'zero tolerance' approach to the problems posed by difficult pupils:

The school has a responsibility for every pupil that it takes on roll to give the best education possible for every pupil who is on roll. You have got to do your best for all of them. You can't just kick out all the ones who are not perfect pupils and claim that you are running a good school. You're actually evading the challenge of being a good school.

You can't have zero tolerance, we'd be putting out about half the kids who come here.

A friend got her son into a ‘good’ comprehensive school and said to me [head of a school in special measures]... There’s no bullying there, if there is any bullying, they get excluded. And I thought, yes, they get sent to a school like ours. They have to go to a school somewhere. . . it’s not a fair contest.

I’ve got a kid eight weeks away from his GCSE exams and a parent wants him excluded because of a fight with their son. There are some difficult decisions to make; it’s not black and white, clear-cut. Sometimes a pupil with a record of difficult behaviour is not clearly and obviously to blame for an incident. . . it might have been an incident with a pupil who has an even worse disciplinary record. Can I deal with it by some form of internal exclusion. . . what if there’s another incident. . . Do I think about what is the right thing to do ethically and morally. . . about what the staff think. About what particular middle class parents think. . . about what it will look like in the papers if there is another, more serious incident. . . do I just look to protect my own position rather than what is best for a disadvantaged pupil who has been making good progress overall in difficult circumstances?

Teachers also expressed concerns about how best to cope with the challenge of keeping all pupils in the classroom:

I’m senior member of staff, I’m very experienced and I am supposed to be good at managing pupils and classes—it’s supposed to be one of my strengths. And yet I’ve got a Year 7 class where I’ve got to plan the lesson around control. . . get their heads down, get them writing, punish someone early in the lesson to send out a message.

Even here there are classes where I can’t do what I would like to do with classes. There are times when I have to get the textbooks out and get them writing because some pupils are messing around. It’s tragic really because there are lots of kids who do want to learn, it’s very unfortunate.

So many lessons get spoiled by low level disruption, even for experienced teachers. You feel drained by the effort of keeping on top of them and guilty because you know that there are lots of kids who just want to learn.

Although heads acknowledged that some colleagues were more adroit than others in dealing with difficult pupils, several heads and teachers were keen to make the point that deficits in class climate could not be explained simply in terms of poor teaching, and that even very accomplished and experienced teachers sometimes struggled to get to ‘level 10’ with all their teaching groups in schools which had substantial numbers of difficult pupils. One AST (Advanced Skills Teacher) told me:

Well I’m an AST. . . I’m not saying that that means that I’m superman but it’s reasonable to say that there are some who struggle even more than I do and I go down to about level 4 with some groups.

A head of department said:

A good, experienced teacher can go in there with a really well planned lesson, execute it skilfully, in a way that engages most of the pupils, and you will still get some kids who will mess about, who will try and aggravate the teacher, who will try and spoil the lesson.

One sentiment which was expressed by the overwhelming majority of respondents was the acknowledgement that the current system did not distribute difficult pupils

evenly across schools, and this had an influence on both behaviour levels and pupil attainment. Just one example is given here:

It's difficult to do this job without thinking how unfair the system is. I've worked in several schools and it's so obviously not a fair contest. I used to work in an inner city school with a lot of difficult kids. The staff were great, a lot of them were fantastic teachers. My exam results there weren't great. . . now I work at a much easier school and I get a lot of praise for my exam results. I'm the same teacher.

The overall picture emerging from the interviews indicated that *to some degree*, pupil behaviour and disengagement from learning are problems in nearly all schools, and the questions of how to motivate pupils to want to learn, and how to get a calm, purposeful and collaborative working atmosphere in all classrooms, and stop some pupils spoiling the learning of others are relevant to large numbers of teachers in English schools.

4. *The perspective of 'former pupils' who were training to become teachers, 2009–2010*

Two cohorts of PGCE students (243 respondents in all) were surveyed, and asked about their experiences of being in classrooms, whether as pupils, observers, or support teachers, in terms of the levels on the scale which they had encountered.

The aim of eliciting the views of trainee teachers was to gain insights into classroom climate from people who had been 'on both sides' in the classroom. They had all been pupils in classrooms themselves—often fairly recently, and their experiences on teaching placement would hopefully have provided them with a different perspective on classroom climate. Moreover, they had no obvious reason to obfuscate, distort or mislead in terms of their experiences in classrooms.

The aim of the questionnaire was to try to ascertain how often classroom climate slipped below 'levels 9 and 10' on the scale, and how far down the scale things sometimes went (i.e., 'How bad did it get?') The responses to the questions posed are given in Tables 4–6. The sample is clearly not representative of former pupils across the full range of schools in terms of their socio-economic intake, but given that the respondents were all graduates, the sample was likely to be skewed towards less challenging rather than more challenging schools. The outcomes again suggest that it is not un-

Table 4. Question: In the course of your experiences in classrooms (as a pupil, observer, support teacher. . .), have you ever been in classes where the amount of learning that took place was less than it might have been because some pupils were impeding the learning of others and/or the teacher was not in relaxed and assured control of the lesson?

| Responses | |
|----------------------|-------|
| Never | 0% |
| Occasionally (1–5%) | 6.2% |
| Sometimes (6–10%) | 38.7% |
| Quite often (11–30%) | 43.2% |
| Regularly (over 30%) | 11.9% |

Table 5. Question: When you look at the 10-point scale for considering the working atmosphere in the classroom, what would you feel was the lowest point on the scale that you encountered (as a pupil, observer, support teacher. . .)? (In other words, ‘how bad did it get’ in your experience?)

| Responses | |
|-----------|-------|
| Level 10 | 0% |
| Level 9 | 0% |
| Level 8 | 0.8% |
| Level 7 | 2.0% |
| Level 6 | 11.9% |
| Level 5 | 11.4% |
| Level 4 | 24.4% |
| Level 3 | 25.9% |
| Level 2 | 11.9% |
| Level 1 | 9.5% |

Table 6. Question: Put a cross against the line that most accurately describes your experience of the working atmosphere in classrooms in your secondary school experience in Year 7–11 (ages 11–16)

| Responses | |
|--|-------|
| Always or nearly always at levels 9/10 (98% +) | 5.3% |
| Nearly always at levels 9/10 (over 95% of the time) | 13.9% |
| Usually over levels 9/10 (over 80% of the time) | 29.3% |
| More often at levels 9/10 than not (over 50% of the time) | 26.7% |
| More often than not <i>below</i> levels 9/10 (in more than 50% of lessons) | 17.3% |
| Generally <i>below</i> levels 9/10 (in more than 70% of lessons) | 7.8% |

sual for the working atmosphere in English classrooms to fall below levels 9 and 10 on the scale.

The outcomes of this survey of two successive cohorts of PGCE students provides some corroboration of the testimony from the teacher interviews conducted in 2006–2007, in the sense that it appears to be not uncommon for the working atmosphere in classrooms in English schools to fall below levels 9 and 10 on the scale. However, whereas the teacher interviews, taken as a whole, suggested that there are many schools where it is unusual for classroom climate to descend to the lowest four levels on the scale, the outcomes of the survey of student teachers presented a less positive picture, with over 70% of respondents reporting that they had encountered level 4 or below on the scale. Although there is no obvious reason why PGCE students should be less than straightforward about their experiences as pupils, in the absence of follow-up interviews, the outcomes should be treated with a degree of caution. Is there a tendency to exaggerate when looking back with hindsight? Is there a reluctance to concede that their academic success might derive from being ‘one of the lucky ones’ (Wilshaw, 2013) who attended a school where there was ‘a right to learn’?

However, in spite of these caveats, there are some correspondences with the testimony emerging from the teacher interviews conducted in 2006–2007. As with the teacher interviews, there is evidence to suggest that there are major variations in classroom climate both between schools, and within schools.

A summary of the outcomes of the four studies

Considered cumulatively, the outcomes of the four studies suggest that there would appear to be few schools in England where there are no deficits in the working atmosphere in classrooms, and where all classrooms in the school are regularly functioning at levels 9 and 10. A second important point to note is that there would appear to be massive variations, both between schools and within individual schools, in terms of the levels prevailing. 'In school variation' is part of the problem.

It should be stressed that there are many schools in England where the lower levels on the scale never or seldom occur, but teacher testimony from the 2006–2007 interviews suggested that many teachers believed that pupil attainment was affected even when the working atmosphere fell below levels 9 and 10 on the scale. Many teachers admitted that they sometimes kept control of the class by teaching for control rather than for learning.

Data from the 2006–2007 interviews with teachers and head teachers also suggests that there are many schools which have to make difficult decisions about whether to keep challenging pupils in the classroom so as to avoid resort to pupil exclusions, at the risk of these pupils exercising a negative influence on the working atmosphere in the classroom, and on 'the right to learn' of 'pupils without problems'. Some testimony from both teachers and head teachers suggested that they felt in a sense, trapped in a vice—under pressure from the local education authority not to exclude pupils and risk triggering an Ofsted inspection because of increasing exclusion rates, and yet also under pressure to optimise school examination results (Haydn, 2007).

It is of course important to be very cautious about any claims made arising out of these four studies. The scale of the enquiries does not begin to match the size of Ofsted inspection datasets over the past decade, and they do not have the status of a government commissioned enquiry such as the 2009 Steer Report. It is also important to acknowledge the weaknesses and limitations of the scale; it is 'impressionistic', it has not been subjected to inter-observer reliability tests—one teacher's 'level 8' for example, may be another teacher's 'level 6', and use of the scale depends on high levels of trust in order to evince 'honest' responses. However, the findings, considered in conjunction with evidence from the Children's Commissioner (Atkinson, 2010), exclusion statistics (Department for Education, 2012b), teacher association surveys (Neill, 2001; ATL, 2009; Times Educational Supplement, 2010), and international comparisons of classroom climate (Bradshaw *et al.*, 2010), do cast at least a scintilla of doubt on the judgement that poor pupil behaviour is a problem that affects 'a small number of pupils in a small number of schools' (Patten, 1994), and that behaviour is satisfactory or better in 99.7% of schools (Department for Education, 2012a).

The arguments advanced in the paper are not putting forward the claim that these four studies represent an authoritative verdict on the extent to which behaviour is a problem in English schools, and the prevalence of deficits in classroom climate. It is argued, however, that there are reasons to question the current 'official position' on pupil behaviour and classroom climate, and that there is an urgent need for further research into these issues, given the role that classroom climate can play in influencing levels of pupil attainment. Moreover, careful thought needs to be given to the form which such research should take, given the weaknesses and problems associated

Table 7. Summary of the four studies

| | Sample/aim/format | Summary of findings |
|--|---|---|
| 1. Pilot study (trainee teachers) 2002 | Questionnaire given to 53 student teachers. First trial of the 10-point scale to test the wording of the level descriptors. Aim to explore scale and prevalence of deficits in classroom climate in English classrooms and whether there are significant differences between inner-city schools in urban conurbations and schools in 'the provinces'. | All respondents report the working atmosphere in the classroom sometimes falling below levels 9 and 10 on the scale. Average level for inner-city schools 6.5, average for provincial schools 7.0. (Very small sample.) |
| 2. Pupil perspectives on classroom climate, 2002 | Part of a larger study on pupil disaffection. Questionnaire survey of 708 secondary school pupils aged 11–15, across five schools in the east of England. (Questionnaire online at http://www.uea.ac.uk/~m242/nasc/cross/cman/quest.htm .) | In response to the question 'What puts you off being in the classroom/learning a school subject?', over 100 comments on poor classroom climate/teachers not being able to control the class/pupils disrupting the lesson. (Case record online at http://www.uea.ac.uk/~m242/nasc/cross/cman/mostoffputting.htm .) |
| 3. Teacher interviews, 2006–2007 | Interviews with 118 teachers, including 13 head teachers. Aim, to explore the scale and prevalence of deficits in classroom climate and elicit teachers' views on the reasons for deficits. 10-point scale used as part of interview process. | Almost all respondents report classroom climate falling below levels 9 and 10 on the scale on some occasions. Considerable variation in classroom climate, both across and within schools. Many schools where lower levels on the scale never or seldom occur. |

Table 7. (Continued)

| | Sample/aim/format | Summary of findings |
|--|---|--|
| 4. Survey of trainee teachers, 2009–2010 | Questionnaire survey of 243 student teachers (two successive cohorts of students). Aim, to explore the scale and prevalence of deficits in classroom climate from the perspective of student teachers, using the 10-point scale, and drawing on their experience as both pupils and teachers. | Almost all respondents report classroom climate falling below levels 9 and 10 on the scale on some occasions. Substantial proportion of respondents report quite frequent deficits in classroom climate, with a high proportion reporting that they have encountered some of the lower levels on the scale, where there is quite substantial disruption of learning. |

with ‘official’ and government controlled enquiries. Table 7, below, provides an outline summary of the four studies.

Discussion

How to explain the disparities in views about the problem of behaviour in schools? The problem with ‘satisfactory’

As the recent DfE review of behaviour in schools points out, ‘defining poor behaviour is not straightforward and there are many alternative definitions’ (Department for Education, 2012a, p. i). The disparity between Ofsted judgements on the proportion of classrooms where behaviour is deemed to be satisfactory and the data emerging from these four studies may rest partly on differing interpretations of the word ‘satisfactory’. It can at least be argued that the working atmosphere in the classroom is not satisfactory if some pupils are limiting the learning of others, or if the teacher has to plan lessons around ‘control’ factors, rather than ‘learning’ factors. Teacher testimony from the 2006–2007 interviews suggested that in some English schools, even experienced and accomplished teachers are obliged to do this with some teaching groups.

In addition to differing interpretations of where to draw the line on what constitutes ‘satisfactory’ behaviour, there is also an important difference between classrooms in which the working atmosphere is ‘satisfactory’, and a classroom climate that is perfectly conducive to learning, in terms of the impact on pupil attainment.

It is simplistic to think that a class is either under the teacher’s control or not. The outcomes from interviews with experienced teachers make it clear that there are degrees of control in the classroom: classroom climate can be viewed as a continuum,

between classrooms where the teacher feels completely in control of proceedings, and there are no pupil behaviour issues which might impede the learning of others, and at the other end of the continuum, classrooms where the teacher has very limited control over what goes on in the classroom, the amount of learning which can take place is limited by the poor behaviour of some pupils and the teacher's inability to focus exclusively on pupil learning. The research indicates that there are times when teachers feel that they can prevent low level disruption by planning lessons around 'control' rather than focusing purely on pupil learning (Haydn, 2002a, 2007). This is where the intermediate levels on the scale (levels 5 to 8) provided some of the most interesting teacher testimony.

If used in the right way (i.e. not as a stick to beat teachers with), the scale may help to provide some insights into 'in school variation' in relation to managing pupil behaviour, particularly with regard to the intermediate levels on the scale. Just as it is important not to consider teachers' skills in managing pupil behaviour the only factor which determines classroom climate, it is important to acknowledge that teacher expertise in this area is one of the important variables which impact on classroom climate. Many of the teachers involved in the survey acknowledged that in nearly all schools, there were some teachers who operated at higher levels on the scale than others. If professional dialogue about behaviour issues can avoid a retreat into reticence and defensiveness, there is the possibility of collaborative action to explore ways of dealing with disruptive and disengaged pupils. It can also lead to concerted action to support colleagues who are working with particularly difficult teaching groups. It might also be used to instigate professional discussion and debate about 'thresholds' for pupil inclusion within classrooms. At what point does a pupil forfeit the right to stay in a classroom? Are there any principles or criteria which might be agreed amongst those involved?

The scale may also be useful in making teachers (and pupils and parents) aware of the range of differences which can occur in classroom climate, and the desirability of exploring all means of trying to ensure that levels 9 and 10 on the scale prevail. The following quotes from some of the interviewees point to the dangers that might stem from teachers not being fully aware of the full breadth of atmospheres possible, and the advantages of becoming aware of the parameters which prevail even within the same institution:

It is possible that there are staff here who have neither experienced or seen a level 10 lesson... who think that the norm... or an inevitable fact of life in teaching... at least in this school... is that pupils talk while they are talking... that they move around and ignore the formal structure of the lesson at some points. (Assistant head)

There are some trainees who get dependant, demoralised and on the verge of packing it in because they are struggling to get to the higher levels on the scale. But they're actually doing quite well, they're getting there. They've got to realise that in a school like this, it takes time to get to know the kids. One of the key things is whether things are going in the right direction... are they getting better or worse as the placement goes on? (Assistant head)

It is helpful to think that there are lower levels on the scale than the ones I am working at. I have become aware of the massive differences even within this school... the time of day,

the weather, the area of the school. . . some departments have it more sewn up than others.
(Experienced teacher)

I have worked with some teachers who seem perfectly happy with levels around 7 and 8; they don't seem that bothered about going the extra mile to get the kids really sorted out so that they can just go in there and relax. (Head of year)

This last extract lends some support to Michael Wilshaw's claim (2013, p. 3) that there is 'a casual acceptance of low-level disruption and poor attitudes to learning' by some teachers. However, there was other teacher testimony where teachers expressed guilt, angst and frustration at not being able to create and sustain a working atmosphere which allowed all pupils to 'do their best'. More teachers expressed the view that it was often very hard to get to 'level 10', rather than that they 'couldn't be bothered', or didn't think that classroom climate was important.

There is also the complication of pupil attitudes to learning. The quintessential 'level 10' lesson is not just one where the teacher is in relaxed and assured control of the lesson, able to teach in whatever way they feel will be best for learning, but where all the pupils in the room are doing their best to learn. A pertinent question for teachers to ask when thinking about classroom climate is to consider to what extent pupils are trying to the best of their ability to work with the teacher, and with each other (William, 2011) to learn what the teacher is trying to teach. This is another facet of classroom climate that is partly influenced by social and cultural attitudes to education outside the classroom.

Although there is no simple relationship between the working atmosphere in the classroom and pupil attainment, in the interviews which were part of this study, the overwhelming majority of teachers and head teachers expressed the belief that pupils learn best when there is a calm, purposeful and collaborative atmosphere in the classroom. In the words of one teacher:

Your teaching actually gets better when you are at levels 9 and 10. . . your exposition is more fluent, you can think of things off the top of your head. . . you seem to be able to think of lots of good ideas because you're not thinking at the back of your mind about control and surveillance issues.

Many heads and teachers acknowledged that under the present system of allocation of pupils to high schools, 'pupils with problems' are not distributed equally between schools and that some schools have to accept large numbers of difficult pupils. The working atmosphere in the classroom is important not just because it impacts on pupil attainment, but because there is a social justice issue at stake. It was interesting to hear one teacher who had worked in two state schools before moving into the private sector talking of pupil 'overachievement' in the private sector school, where all the classes ran at levels 9 and 10 on the scale:

The kids here aren't that different from the kids at X and Y in terms of how bright they are. There's an amazing amount of overachievement really. When you look at their IQ Test scores, they're nothing special and yet in terms of results, they do really well. Nothing is allowed to get in the way of their learning, and there's none of the settling them down, getting them quiet stuff that wastes so much time. We have some kids here who are bone

idle, who don't want to do well and have to be forced... but they are never allowed to spoil the learning of others.

Perhaps surprisingly, some of the teachers interviewed spoke positively about the enjoyment and 'buzz' they derived from 'wrestling with' groups which were extremely difficult to manage, and where they were around levels 4–6 on the scale. There was less evidence of pre-service and newly qualified teachers waxing lyrical about this challenge. But without exception, those teachers who had experience of working at levels 9 and 10 described it in very positive terms, as the following excerpts show:

I cannot stress how wonderful it is to teach a well behaved class. It actually enables you to lower your guard and completely relax.

As you are walking round the classroom, or looking out of the window, you think to yourself, there aren't many people who have a job as fulfilling and enjoyable as this.

In terms of how much you enjoy your teaching, there's a massive difference between operating at levels 7 and 8... which are OK... no big hassle... 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.

The converse of this of course, is that teaching is difficult to enjoy if the working atmosphere with the majority of your classes is below, say, level 6 on the 10-point scale (and perhaps higher).

Whatever definition of 'satisfactory' is used in measuring the working atmosphere in the classroom, it is difficult to accept that this figure currently rests at 99.7% of schools when, in addition to the data referred to in this paper, a recent survey of 2000 pupils found that 80% of them reported that 'they had experienced disrupted learning caused by the bad behaviour of a minority' (Atkinson, 2010, p. 8).

The scale of the problem

It is possible that Ofsted reports seriously underestimate the scale and prevalence of deficits in classroom climate and their effects on pupil attainment. Many of the teachers interviewed felt that learning outcomes started to be affected as soon as the 'level' fell below level 8 on the scale, and this was a not uncommon occurrence. There is a real danger that underestimating the prevalence of these deficits might lead to a failure to work constructively to address them, or a tendency to simply blame 'inadequate' teachers for anything that falls below 'level 10'.

Teacher testimony suggests that 'official' reports on behaviour also fail to fully address the very complex problems which many schools and teachers face in trying to keep even the most difficult pupils in classrooms without allowing them to spoil the climate in which learning takes place. The outcomes of the interviews with teachers in 2006–2007 suggests that David Bell's (then head of Ofsted) assessment of the impact of poor behaviour was a more plausible and accurate assessment of the extent to which behaviour is a problem in English schools:

All schools to a greater or lesser extent, even if they are otherwise orderly or successful, have to deal with a number of pupils who cause disruption. You can have relatively small numbers of pupils having quite a substantial and disproportionate effect on the others. (Quoted in *The Times*, 3 February 2005)

The complexity of the problem

Suggestions that the problem of poor behaviour in schools is a fairly straightforward issue to sort out (Ofsted, 2006; Kelly, 2006; Wilshaw, 2010) are unhelpful. This is not an aspect of education which is straightforward or susceptible to simple solutions or quick fixes. 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 in high school who are not perfectly socialised, and who are not wholeheartedly committed to learning (Elliott & Phuong-Mai, 2008; OECD, 2009).

As McPhillimy (1997) notes, even with pupils without problems, it would be rather surprising if large groups of pupils forced into classrooms, in many cases against their inclination, did not mess about and misbehave. Level 10 is not a natural state of affairs. It takes a great deal of skill to get to a position where the teacher is in completely relaxed and assured control of the classroom, able to undertake any form of activity, however complex, without having to even think about control issues, and having persuaded all the pupils in the room to commit themselves wholeheartedly to learning. Elliott (2009) argues that teachers need to develop a range of complex and sophisticated skills in order to achieve and sustain these outcomes with the most challenging teaching groups (see also Haydn, 2012). Teachers in England also have to work with significant numbers of pupils who have not been well socialised or well parented before entering primary schools, with DfE figures for 2010–2011 reporting 38,000 fixed term exclusions from primary schools. The recent DfE overview of behaviour in schools suggests that between 5% and 8% of young children have serious behaviour problems (Department for Education, 2012a): Batmanghelidjh estimates that approximately 1.5 million children in England are profoundly neglected or abused (quoted in Toynbee, 2010). Nor are such pupils distributed evenly across schools.

Much of the commentary in newspapers and from politicians in England is profoundly unhelpful and misleading, and displays a lack of understanding of the challenges which teachers and schools face in the area of class management. There is often an assumption that the ‘default’ state of affairs in classrooms is level 10 on the scale: that any competent teacher in a well-run school will be operating at level 10 with all their classes, and that any ‘deficit’ from that level is due to bad teaching or poor school management. There must be someone to blame. As Elliott (2007b, p. 24) argues, solutions need to include the development of meaningful understandings about ‘the social, historical and cultural factors that play a significant part in contemporary school dynamics... teachers need wisdom as well as techniques’.

What might be done to improve the working atmosphere in the classroom?

The first step is to acknowledge the scale and complexity of the problem. The overall tenor of the Steer Report and the Ofsted statistics on behaviour cited by the DfE create the danger that behaviour and classroom climate are not seen as an important and urgent issue, and that there is not much need to change things.

Using successful schools as ‘a stick to beat the others with’ is also unhelpful. The suggestion that it is ‘a completely level playing field’ and that pupil intake is not a variable in attainment and behaviour outcomes is inaccurate and misleading. It is a classic example of policy-makers using appraisal systems to ‘dump blame’, rather than focusing on how to improve things (Deming, 1982). As Professor Peter Mortimore (one of the architects of the school improvement and effectiveness movement) explained:

School effectiveness was immensely attractive to politicians. . . By side-lining the effect of intake, it permitted policies which focused on detail in the school and were therefore relatively cheap. . . Whilst some schools can succeed against the odds, the possibility of them all doing so, year in and year out, still appears remote, given that the long term patterning of educational inequality has been strikingly consistent throughout the history of public education in most countries. . . We must beware of basing a national strategy for change on the efforts of outstanding individuals working in exceptional circumstances. (Mortimore, 1999, p. 37)

In 2006, announcing the Steer Enquiry into behaviour in schools, Secretary of State for Education Ruth Kelly explained that the working group would come up with recommendations that are ‘proven to work. . . and then we can say to schools, you should adopt one of these programmes and there is no excuse any more for poor behaviour in the classroom’ (Kelly, 2006). A similar approach could doubtless be used to eliminate crime in society, but given the intractability of the problem of behaviour in schools, it seems unlikely that solutions will arrive ‘shrink-wrapped’. If it is so straightforward to eliminate poor behaviour, presumably we would have achieved this by now.

As Elliott and Phuong-Mai (2008) point out, the issue of the working atmosphere in classrooms is bound up with profound and complex cultural issues; it is not simply a function of rules, sanctions, and pedagogical practice.

Taylor also argues that ‘out of school’ factors need to be considered, if meaningful progress is to be made: ‘By far the greatest weakness of our system—huge class-related inequalities of outcome—is much more to do with factors outside school (economic inequality and the effect of parental choices), than inside’ (Taylor, 2012, p. 30)

In order to address these ‘out of school’ factors’, there needs to be stronger support for teachers from parents, governors and policy-makers; acknowledgement of the difficulties that they face in working with difficult pupils, and high levels of respect for teachers and schools from politicians and the media, as is the case with many of our OECD competitors.

Part of this is for politicians of all parties to resist the temptation to label vast swathes of schools as ‘failing’ or ‘coasting’ where they fail to match the outcomes of outstanding schools. There are sometimes reasons to explain differentials in attainment which lie outside the quality of leadership and teaching in a school. The political

and media rhetoric around teachers creates the impression that whilst there are some inspirational teachers, there are many thousands who are incompetent and who should be sacked. One newspaper front page, in addition to noting ‘the laziness, complacency, incomprehensible jargon and sheer incompetence of many teachers’, pointed out that the then Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Shephard) ‘goes to bed every night with a comprehensive school master—she is one of them’ (*Sunday Express*, 9 June 1996). Such a headline would not make sense to readers in most other OECD countries. This ‘steady drumbeat of negative rhetoric’ (Taylor, 2012, p. 30) will not be helpful in persuading parents that they should give strong support to teachers when their children are disrupting the learning of other pupils.

As well as strong moral support for the very difficult and important work that teachers have to do, 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 from school, ‘within school’ alternative curriculum options and support systems for difficult pupils are one way forward, and many schools have come up with a wide range of creative, imaginative and effective ways of keeping difficult pupils in school, and re-engaging them with learning (see for example, Gartshore *et al.*, 2010). However, many of these courses and support systems do need funding, whilst remaining much more cost effective than out of school provision.

Similarly, the provision of universal, high quality nursery provision would help to reduce the number of pupils who were ill-prepared for the social and behavioural constraints of the primary classroom. Although this is not cost free, in the medium term it would prove more cost effective than continuing with exclusions from primary school running at around 40,000 a year (Department for Education, 2012b), with the need for much more expensive interventions later.

There is also a need to improve the quality of vocational education and apprenticeships to match standards in other OECD education systems.

Given the complex challenges of working with very difficult pupils, it is also important that schools work collaboratively in this field rather than adopting a ‘*sauve qui peut*’ approach, eschewing the challenge of working with difficult pupils, and either trying to ensure that such pupils do not enter, or ‘passing them on’ to other schools, in a way that ‘decants’ large numbers of pupils to schools who are obliged to take them because they are not ‘full’:

In an age of zero tolerance and league tables, there is considerable temptation for the individual school, either directly or indirectly, to exclude pupils, or not to admit them in the first place. Pinning the responsibility on groups of cooperating schools seems the best way of minimising this practice. (Brighouse, 2005)

This point is also made by Whitty (2005), who argues that all schools in an area need to work together in the interests of optimum provision for all pupils, including being willing to take a fair share of the more challenging pupils.

There is also work to be done in getting across to all parents and all young people that no pupil has the right to spoil the learning of others. A culture has evolved in English schools where this sometimes happens. Schools and teachers will need whole-hearted support from policy-makers, governors and parents in order to change this

culture. Redrawing the cultural boundaries and norms around ‘the right to learn’ has often been an important part of ‘turning around’ struggling schools (see, for example, Haydn, 2002b; Abrams, 2013), but this could be done at consortium, LEA and national levels as well as at the level of the individual school.

One final point might be made: The Norwich Area Schools Consortium Research (Elliott *et al.*, 2001) revealed that for some pupils, school is a profoundly miserable and negative experience, particularly for those pupils who are not academically talented. The understandable attempts to ratchet up academic standards are not without some (unintended) negative consequences. John Holt’s description of pupils’ experience of schooling is not without resonance or relevance today:

They [pupils] understand it as being made to go to a place called school, and there being made to learn something that they don’t much want to learn, under the threat that bad things will be done to them if they don’t. Needless to say, most people don’t like this game and stop playing as soon as they can. (Holt, 1984, p. 34)

Schools are aware of the need to provide a stimulating and appropriate curriculum and obviously want all their pupils to have a happy and fulfilling experience at school but the exigencies of league tables and A–C pass rates have put some pressures on this facet of school life. Pupil *attitudes* to school and to learning are an important influence on their behaviour in the classroom; as Hallam (1996) points out, ‘They must want to learn; if you lose that you lose just about everything’. The government’s apparent lack of interest in social pedagogy is puzzling, given the success of German and Scandinavian schools in optimising outcomes for ‘at risk’ groups of pupils (see, for instance, Bunting, 2006, pp. 1–2).

Conclusion

There is evidence to suggest that the very positive picture of behaviour in schools presented by the Steer Report (2009), and the suggestion that behaviour is at least satisfactory in 99.7% of schools (Ofsted, 2012a) seriously underestimate the extent to which deficits in classroom climate and poor pupil behaviour are a problem in English schools. Even Michael Wilshaw’s assertion that low-level disruption may impede the academic progress of over 700,000 pupils in the English school system may seriously underestimate the scale of the problem of classroom climate and the working atmosphere in English classrooms (Ofsted, 2013). When looked at in conjunction with recent international evidence in this field (see, for example, Elliott & Phuong-Mai, 2008; OECD, 2009), it is possible that deficits in classroom climate (and as part of this, pupil and parent attitudes to learning, and to the project of ‘education’ more generally) play a significant part in explaining ‘in school variation’ in pupil attainment in English schools, differing levels of attainment, as well as exerting a negative influence on educational attainment in relation to other jurisdictions.

There is a degree of irony in the extent of these deficits in classroom climate given the importance attached by politicians of all political parties to raising standards of attainment in schools, and that calm, ordered classrooms where effective learning can take place are what the overwhelming majority of parents, pupils, teachers and policy-

makers want. However, until the scale, nature and complexity of this problem is acknowledged, these deficits are likely to persist.

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Appendix 1.

The working atmosphere in the classroom: a 10-level scale

The scale was devised to encourage student teachers to think about the degree to which teachers are in relaxed and assured control of their classrooms and can enjoy their teaching, and also, the extent to which there is a ‘right to learn’ for pupils, free from the noise and disruption of others. It is not designed as an instrument to pass judgement on the class management skills of teachers (not least because there are so many other variables which influence the levels—most obviously, which school you are working in). Its purpose is to get student teachers (and teachers, departments and schools) to think about the factors influencing the working atmosphere in the classroom, the influence of the working atmosphere in classrooms on teaching and learning, and the equal opportunities issues surrounding the tension between inclusion, and situations where some pupils may be spoiling the learning of others.

| | |
|----------|--|
| Level 10 | You feel completely relaxed and comfortable; able to undertake any form of lesson activity without concern. ‘Class control’ not really an issue—teacher and pupils working together, enjoying the experiences involved. |
| Level 9 | You feel completely in control of the class and can undertake any sort of classroom activity, but you need to exercise some control/authority at times to maintain a calm and purposeful working atmosphere. This can be done in a friendly and relaxed manner and is no more than a gentle reminder. |
| Level 8 | You can establish and maintain a relaxed and co-operative working atmosphere and undertake any form of classroom activity, but this requires a considerable amount of thought and effort on your part at times. Some forms of lesson activity may be less calm and under control than others. |
| Level 7 | You can undertake any form of lesson activity, but the class may well be rather ‘bubbly’ and rowdy; there may be minor instances of a few pupils messing around on the fringes of the lesson but they desist when required to do so. No one goes out of their way to annoy you or challenges your authority. |

- Level 6 You don't really look forward to teaching the class, it is often a major effort to establish and maintain a relaxed and calm atmosphere. Several pupils will not remain on task without persistent surveillance/ exhortation/threats. At times you feel harassed, and at the end of the lesson you feel rather drained. There are times when you feel it is wisest not to attempt certain types of pupil activity, in order to try and keep things under control. It is sometimes difficult to get pupils to be quiet while you are talking, or stop them calling out, or talking to each other at will across the room *but* in spite of this, no one directly challenges your authority, and there is no refusal or major disruption.
- Level 5 There are times in the lesson when you would feel awkward or embarrassed if the head/a governor/an inspector came into the room, because your control of the class is limited. The atmosphere is at times rather chaotic, with several pupils manifestly not listening to your instructions. Some of the pupils are in effect challenging your authority by their dilatory or desultory compliance with your instructions and requests. Lesson format is constrained by these factors; there are some sorts of lesson you would not attempt because you know they would be rowdy and chaotic, *but* in the last resort, there is no open refusal, no major atrocities, just a lack of purposefulness and calm. Pupils who wanted to work could get on with it, albeit in a rather noisy atmosphere.
- Level 4 You have to accept that your control is limited. It takes time and effort to get the class to listen to your instructions. You try to get onto the worksheet/written part of the lesson fairly quickly in order to 'get their heads down'. Lesson preparation is influenced more by control and 'passing the time' factors than by educational ones. Pupils talk while you are talking, minor transgressions (no pen, no exercise book, distracting others by talking) go unpunished because too much is going on to pick everything up. You become reluctant to sort out the ringleaders as you feel this may well escalate problems. You try to 'keep the lid on things' and concentrate on those pupils who are trying to get on with their work.
- Level 3 You dread the thought of the lesson. There will be major disruption; many pupils will pay little or no heed to your presence in the room. Even pupils who want to work will have difficulty doing so. Swearwords may go unchecked, pupils will walk round the room at will. You find yourself reluctant to deal with transgressions because you have lost confidence. When you write on the board, objects will be thrown around the room. You can't wait for the lesson to end and be out of the room.
- Level 2 The pupils largely determine what will go on in the lesson. You take materials into the lesson as a manner of form, but once distributed that will be ignored, drawn on or made into paper aeroplanes. When you write on the board, objects will be thrown at you rather than round the room. You go into the room hoping that they will be in a good mood and will leave you alone and just chat to each other.
- Level 1 Your entry into the classroom is greeted by jeers and abuse. There are so many transgressions of the rules and what constitutes reasonable behaviour that it is difficult to know where to start. You turn a blind eye to some atrocities because you feel that your intervention may well lead to confrontation, refusal or escalation of the problem. This is difficult because some pupils are deliberately committing atrocities under your notes, for amusement. You wish you had not gone into teaching.

Adapted from Haydn (2007), www.uea.ac.English/~m242/historypgce/class_management/10pointscale.htm.