

Behaviour and Learning: The Development of Staff Efficacy in One School

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Abstract

In this paper we report a qualitative case-study of how a primary school Principal enhanced staff belief in their efficacy and practice in relation to children's behaviour. Thematic analysis was used to analyse interviews with the Principal and teaching staff. We identified four main themes relating to their attributions, beliefs and practices: 'Attitudes and Expectations', 'Leadership', 'Communication', and 'School Ethos and Practices. We conclude by considering how the Principal's own beliefs and leadership practices were associated with changes in the beliefs and practice of the staff.

Key words: School Leadership; Teachers' Efficacy Beliefs; Children's behaviour; Inclusion.

Introduction

In England inclusive education is not clearly defined in law. There are laws proscribing discrimination but only ‘expectations’ for schools to be inclusive. Thus during school inspections (as required by central government) evidence will be sought of ‘the extent to which schools provide an inclusive environment that meets the needs of all pupils, irrespective of age, disability, gender, race, religion or belief, or sexual orientation’ (Ofsted, 2014). School Principals will, therefore, hope to demonstrate that such an environment is in place whilst also ensuring that a number of other criteria (relating to the effective management of the school, children’s attainment and well-being) are satisfied.

A barrier to greater inclusion that has been frequently cited resides in recurring concerns expressed by teachers about how to ‘manage’ children’s behaviour in class (Avramidis, Bayliss, & Burden, 2000; de Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2011; MacFarlane & Woolfson, 2013; Steer, 2005). We suggest that in place of the frequent emphasis on the ‘management’ of behaviour, it is rare to find evidence of how children may be helped to ‘learn’ about their behaviour. Evidence of ‘unmanaged’ and problematic behaviour is likely to be reflected in Ofsted judgements about the quality of teaching and/or the overall management of the school (Ofsted, 2014). Mis-behaviour has also been cited as a cause of stress for teachers and attrition from the profession (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Klassen & Anderson, 2009; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011).

Within schools, teachers’ responses to misbehaviour have traditionally included a range of sanctions, generally punitive. In the event of serious mis-behaviour, an available legal sanction is the formal exclusion of children from school. Exclusion can have immediate concomitant costs (of administration and alternative educational placements) and possibly additional costs to society throughout life (Daniels & Cole, 2010; Scott, Knapp, Henderson, & Maughan, 2001).

The exclusion of children from school may be seen as a possible response to misbehaviour but does not necessarily convey an aspiration for inclusive strategies (Broomhead, 2013; MacFarlane & Woolfson, 2013; Woolfolk Hoy & Weinstein, 2006). Whilst legitimate, exclusion has been considered to signal discriminatory practices (Ainscow, Dyson, & Weiner, 2013; Jetten, Iyer, Branscombe, & Zhang, 2013) with evidence that some groups of children and young people (for instance those from socio-economically deprived communities and those in certain ethnic groups) are more likely to be excluded than children in the general population of children (Allan, 2010; DfE, 2014; Marsh, 2014). It is also the case that schools can differ in the rate and frequency of exclusion, and a number of reasons for differences between schools in otherwise similar circumstances have been proposed (Munn, Cullen, Johnstone, & Lloyd, 2001; Reynolds, 2010). Included amongst these factors are the effectiveness of the school management and leadership

(Osler, Watling, & Busher, 2001) and the efficacy beliefs of teachers (Bandura, 1997, 2006; Gibbs & Powell, 2012).

The ways in which school Principals create and communicate expectations and patterns of behaviour (sometimes described as the 'ethos' of a school) are undoubtedly complex. In the event of seeking to change the ethos of a school, the task for a Principal seeking to lead change is, likewise, complex and challenging. There are several ways of tracing the association between plausibly implicated factors.

Studies of school leadership and school improvement have, for instance, reported positive effects of a 'distributed' (or transformational) style of leadership (Hallinger & Heck, 2010a; Harris, 2013; Sammons, Gu, Day, & Ko, 2011). It has been suggested that the beliefs and practices of Principals inform and instantiate the ethos they seek to create in transforming staff beliefs (Goddard, Neumerski, Goddard, Salloum, & Berebitsky, 2010; Jordan, Schwartz, & McGhie-Richmond, 2009; Jordan & Stanovich, 2003; Ross & Gray, 2006; Sammons et al., 2011) and, thereby, determine the extent to which inclusionary teaching is evident (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Jordan et al., 2009; Jordan & Stanovich, 2004; Muijs et al., 2010; Stanovich & Jordan, 1998). In this context the beliefs and practices of individual classroom teachers, and their response to unacceptable behaviour, may be seen not as a product of an isolated incident, teacher or child but as a product of the synergy of collective beliefs (Gibbs & Powell, 2012; Jordan, Glenn, & McGhie-Richmond, 2010).

In an earlier study (Gibbs & Powell, 2012) we surveyed the relationship between the collective efficacy beliefs of staff and rates of exclusion in primary schools across the North East of England. Schools sampled ranged in size, socio-economic context and setting (urban or rural). In a recent review it was noted, however, that there remains a lack of evidence about what might enable the development of teachers' efficacy beliefs (Klassen, Tze, Betts, & Gordon, 2011). To add to understandings of what might enable staff to develop and sustain positive beliefs in their efficacy in this study we sought to gather evidence of the beliefs and practices of staff in one school. In line with our foregoing comments about the potential influence of school Principals the motivating question for this illustrative case-study was, therefore, how did one primary school Principal affect the beliefs and practices of classroom teachers?

Method

Context

Differences in schools' performance and improvement trajectories have been related to both the levels of disadvantage in the community (Perry & McConney, 2010; Sammons et al., 2011) and teachers' expectations (Rubie-Davies, Flint, & McDonald, 2012). However, it has also been found that a positive school ethos can ameliorate negative expectations that might be anticipated on the basis of a school's socio-economic context (Gibbs & Powell, 2012). Establishing the socio-economic context for studies of teaching and learning is, therefore, important. The study reported here was planned as an opportunity to study in greater detail what took place in one primary school in a socio-economically disadvantaged urban setting where expectations and practices relating to children's behaviour and learning were being addressed in novel ways.

The school had participated in an earlier questionnaire survey of teachers' individual and collective efficacy beliefs (Gibbs & Powell, 2012). From amongst all schools that had participated in that study, we identified schools where responses to the questionnaire survey indicated high teacher self-efficacy and high collective-efficacy beliefs about teaching and including pupils who might present problematic behaviours. We selected such schools because we wanted to explore areas of good practice and investigate 'what works'. From those willing and able to participate we identified a school that best suited our purposes. The characteristics of the Primary School that participated in this study was situated in an inner-city area with significant socio-economic deprivation. (It should be noted that the participating school was not in the locality served by the first author's service). For comparison, at the time of this study the national average for primary age pupils entitled to free school meals was 19.2% (DfE, 2011). Details of the focus school and for comparison others willing to participate are shown in Table 1.

Participants

All members of the teaching staff were asked if they would participate. From those agreeing, a purposive sample (of eleven staff including the Principal) was selected in order to gather the views of a cross-section of teachers in the school including the Principal, one deputy Principal, class-teachers (male and female) with a range of teaching experience, and two newly qualified teachers.

Table 1.

School characteristics

	Focus School	Mean average and standard deviation for all schools willing to participate
Socio-economic deprivation (%ge pupils eligible for free school meals)	44%	28%; 19%
Number of pupils	511	316; 125
Staffing	The staff comprised of 19 Teaching Assistants, 22 Class Teachers, 2 Deputy Principals and the Principal. At the time of the research the principal had been in post for 3½ years.	Details not available
Number of Fixed Term Exclusion in the year	7	6; 11

Data

Two group and two individual interviews were conducted in the school. All interviews were conducted by the first author. Data were collected by taking contemporaneous notes, audio recording and transcription of each interview. The sequence of interviews enabled us to search for triangulation of – or challenges to - different perspectives (Denzin, 2012). Triangulation was achieved in stages. Following an initial group interview with four members of staff, the Principal was interviewed to gain her views about the school and staff practices. This was, in turn, followed by a second group interview (involving five other members of staff). Finally a class teacher who professed high teacher self-efficacy in the original survey (Gibbs & Powell, 2012) was interviewed in order to probe more deeply into her own beliefs but also to explore issues raised in previous interviews. Respecting the confidentiality of issues that were noted required care in discussing matters mentioned by other members of staff and steps were taken to ensure confidentiality. These precautions are followed in the illustrative extracts in this paper by fully

anonymising all participants (except the Principal, identified only by her role) and ensuring there was no cross-referencing to other discussions in any one meeting. By these means we are confident that sources were independent and that the triangulated convergence of evidence was authentic.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013; Lemke, 2012) was used to analyse the data and both authors were separately involved in the analysis. The first author generated initial codes for the entire data set. He then collated coded data in provisional themes guided by the research question (how does a Principal influence and positively affect teachers' beliefs in their efficacy as classroom teachers?) and relevant literature. The second author then scrutinised the data and the provisional themes. The final main themes and selected quotes from the data were then discussed by both authors to achieve consensus and complete the joint writing of this report.

Findings

As we read and reread the transcripts of the interviews it became apparent there were four interlinked themes running through what the Principal and staff had told us. We labelled these as:

- Attitudes and expectations;
- Leadership;
- Communication;
- School ethos and practices.

In what follows we illustrate and discuss each theme in turn.

Attitudes and expectations

It was evident that the attitudes and expectations of the staff had changed since the present Principal's appointment. The Principal told us that her experience in a previous post had been that when staff were faced with inappropriate behaviour, a typical response was to refer the issue to the school's senior management. Compared to what was expected in all other areas of the curriculum, this strategy risked creating the impression that staff could not deal with behaviour effectively. As the Principal said:

Why is it acceptable that if the child struggles with, let's say, times tables, you put a bit more effort into the times tables. You don't suddenly bring them to the [Principal] and say "they don't learn their times tables, everyone else has!"

you teach them. And for me ... it is ridiculous, the idea, really, that a teacher thinks that it's acceptable that if a child's naughty you go and get the top authority, because that actually all it's doing is reinforcing to the child that their own teacher can't cope.

So, faced with similar beliefs and practices when she came to this school, in collaboration with the deputy Principals she promoted the view that

... a child's behaviour is not about what [a child] is choosing not to do; it's not a personal response to the grown up, it's about a relationship between a paid adult and someone who's a needy child.....[so] we teach behaviour, we don't manage behaviour.

Thus, while the explicit message was that this was to be a guiding principle about children's learning, the Principal was indicating that she expected that staff, too, would reflect on their roles and responsibilities. Thus, as we describe later, with a clear view of current practice and a vision of what was needed for staff development, the Principal was seeking a transformation in staff beliefs and expectations (Hallinger, 2003; Harris, 2013). By the time of our interviews, it was evident that these expectations were shared and accepted by the majority of teachers. Thus, teachers said, for example:

I'm doing it because it's actually about setting really clear targets and they [children] understand what's expected, I'm allowing them to succeed and I'm setting them up to succeed.

[Children] know how to behave, they know what's expected of them...

Leadership

It was evident that an important function of leadership for this Principal was the communication of a positive attitude and an ethos of collaboration, as described by Hallinger (2003) and Harris et al. (2013). The Principal's views about her style of leadership were explicit in what she told us. She described it as 'distributed', but there was also a clear intention that her leadership should, by being *transformational* (Robinson, 2009; Ross & Gray, 2006), motivate individuals and the staff as whole to believe in their capacity to bring about change. Thus, as she said:

I don't believe in hierarchical leadership. If somebody asked me about the model of leadership that I want, it's like collegiate leadership or certainly distributed leadership; because, you know, this school should not depend on the force of my marvellous personality or my ability to get things sorted out.'

The teachers we met, whilst using slightly different terminology, confirmed that this was the style of leadership they experienced in practice. As one classroom teacher told us:

We have to have a whole school policy, but people have to believe it... it's embedded... I certainly don't think it's a top down policy.

The evidence that the Principal's belief that affirmative communication was an effective intervention in supporting and endorsing success was warranted by what a class-teacher said:

The senior management are always positive. If they see something they like, even if it's as simple as your children lining up, they always find time to come and tell you. Makes you believe a bit more in yourself [if] it's noticed.

Communication

As we have already noted, the Principal recognised the importance of communicating her vision, and to both lead and transform practice. It was clearly important for the Principal to be a visible presence around the school, actively engaging in discussion with individual members of staff and children and not relying only on formal meetings or messages. This was part of a conscious determination to model the informal discussions between staff that she believed would help support staff development, and cooperative problem solving. In the group interviews it was evident that teachers also recognised how they too enabled and supported each other by being open and talking about and reflecting on both problems and solutions to achieve inclusion and learning for all. We gained a sense that what the teachers told us was the essence of a community of support and learning as described by McMillan and Chavis (1986). As one class-teacher said:

There is a lot of communication between teachers and ... you will discuss with other teachers what actually works...you learn from other staff....

The importance of 'communication' in support of colleagues was emphasised as part of the work and transformation of thinking in the staff team as a whole:

Communication between the staff is really key... your successes are the children's successes... 'It just takes the emphasis away from thinking... how badly will my children behave today, how badly will that particular child behave today, it's... look at what this child has achieved or my class has achieved, look at how we have worked as a team.

But communication doesn't have to be verbally explicit. Examples of how ideas and ways of practising can be communicated by example were evidenced in the views of another teacher, who said:

When I came here I hadn't been teaching that long and I [was given the opportunity to work with] two very experienced teachers who... worked really well together, and I learned different things from both of them. But one of them was ... so calm with everything, and that made me think about how to deal with children... I try to take that on board and find that way of dealing with the children really does work.

In his study of teachers' attributions, commenting on staff-room cultures Miller (2003) noted how some staff-room discourses affected teacher morale. He illustrated this with an example of a teacher who said how difficult she had found it to talk in the staffroom about her success in bringing about some change in the behaviour of a child in her class. In contrast, at the time we conducted our interviews there was evidence of a developing positive and enabling discourse amongst staff in this school. We found a culture in which collegiate discussion amongst staff served to affirm teachers' beliefs and practices and sustained a much more positive ethos than most examples reported in Miller's study.

School Ethos and Practices

It was very evident in what she told us that the Principal was determined to create and sustain a positive school ethos that would enable staff to jointly reflect on and learn from what worked. Thus, in keeping with her previous practice and experiences she had formulated 'Golden Rules' to be shared and agreed with teachers, pupils and parents, seeking their cooperation in making these rules effective. The 'Golden Rules' defined the ethos for the school in terms of what was *positively* expected of all members of the community: staff, pupils and parents. Whilst the rules originated from the Principal, they were undoubtedly intended to be, and clearly were, developed, shared and endorsed by staff.

The rules also appeared to have had a direct influence on the efficacy beliefs of staff, at both the individual and collective levels. Thus, for example, one teacher told us about how her experiences in this school had shaped her belief in her ability to pre-empt problems:

As you become more experienced as a teacher then situations arise all the time, different kinds of things so it's about being prepared for what you can be prepared for and get systems in place within the classroom ... if you have belief in yourself and confident in what you're doing then it does mean that you start being prepared... You know what's going to happen, and you're aware of it before it happens.

It was also evident that members of staff recognised their responsibility in creating and maintaining the positive ethos – for their own benefit:

And, just looking around... these [rules] are the ethos and all of these are in every class, so it's sort of the whole ethos of the school, about behaving and knowing the rules: we don't hurt each other, we always try our best...

I think it's very much an expected thing...that we are inclusive... That's not the ethos in [some] schools, but it is here. And it's very open sort of ethos, it's very strong as well. It comes through very strongly.

For the Principal it was clear that her analogy between being prepared to teach a subject and being prepared to teach behaviour was also central to her belief that good teachers were essentially inclusive in their practice. As argued by Jordan and colleagues (Jordan et al., 2009; Stanovich & Jordan, 2004) it is the Principal's responsibility to endorse the professional responsibility of all teachers to teach all children, and to prepare for that. The Principal was clear that:

On a simple level ... everyone's included because the teaching's effective... Teachers who have belief in themselves as teachers and routinely plan and deliver lessons ... who are good and outstanding teachers will always have more inclusive classrooms... They've understood how to get there so those children are included all the time and they understand it's a two-way traffic between teaching and learning ... Because confident teachers will be looking around all the time to find a solution to the problem and therefore children will be included... And it's about pro-active teaching, teachers that pro-actively plan, know their children ... All that stuff that actually makes an inclusive school.

To help support the development of the skills and confidence of the staff the Principal provided relevant training, so that as one teacher told us:

It is the whole school ethos that we have and nurturing sense of learning behaviour that we have, we've had training, we've had people from EBD teams in to look at the way we ... what we do with behaviour in school.

This view of the need to train, prepare and plan so that all children learn was echoed throughout our discussions with the staff. One teacher, reflecting on her professional development during her time in this school said:

I've learned a huge amount... it's made me think about why I do things the way I do. And looking at the whole policy is letting me go through all that thought process and actually see that there's good reason behind why we do it.

Another teacher spoke quite explicitly about the way staff conceptualised inclusion and taught ‘behaviour’:

I have the idea that ... because we have a behaviour learning policy... we are actually differentiating children’s behaviour needs the same way as their learning needs. So you’re not looking at that little boy in your class who actually is not able at that point in his life, to concentrate for more than 20 minutes, and say, well everyone else has to do it so you have to too. We’re actually saying whereas a child is not ready to do number bonds to 10 and wouldn’t be expected to and would be given support with cubes, we are actually going to support that little person get [his behaviour] right for 20 minutes and accept that that is a real success for them.

Thus, it seems to us that the school’s ethos and policy provided a framework for inclusion within which individuals and groups of teachers thought about, prepared and planned what they would each separately and collectively do to support all aspects of children’s learning.

The positive ethos and practices were subsequently warranted in the most recent Ofsted report (2016). In writing to the Principal, the chief inspector noted that:

Your love of the job shines through in all your actions. You put families and children at the heart of all you do... setting high standards of positive relationships throughout the school. Your strong leadership mirrors this commitment and its members are excited about their roles in leading the school forward. This positive climate has resulted in a stable teaching staff who are passionate about improving outcomes for pupils... This holistic approach is having a positive impact on outcomes for all pupils.

Discussion and Conclusions

We are certain that the evidence above indicates a considerable degree of triangulated congruence in the beliefs and expectations of all staff (Principal included) in this school. Such a positive ethos is not, in our experience, found in all schools. Many school staff in similar circumstances would be less likely to espouse such positive and inclusive beliefs in helping children to learn. Indeed, in the current climate of performativity, many teachers are struggling to sustain positive beliefs in their agency – see Gibbs (2018). It is also rare, we think, to hear staff talk about helping children to learn about behaviour. As we noted in the Introduction, much of the extant literature discusses how teachers ‘manage’ behaviour rather than cooperatively discussing how they can be more agentically inclusive and help children to learn about their behaviour. What

we heard in this school (reiterated later by the Chief Inspector in 2016) was a product of the enthusiasm and determination of the Principal who had gained the respect and cooperation of staff. However, in other hands ‘determination’ might be manifest as a strong sense of direction, top down. Here, it is true to say, was a strong sense of vision, but the vision was to promote enablement, mutual learning and collaboration.

In this paper we have reported the views of teachers in one large inner-city primary school. One of the main aims of the study was to establish what helped these teachers develop beliefs in their efficacy in helping children learn about their behaviour. Thematic analysis of the data from interviews with the Principal and 10 class-teachers was carried out. The findings suggest that the teachers’ beliefs in their efficacy and inclusivity were shaped by the ‘Attitudes and Expectations’, ‘Communication’, ‘Leadership’ and the school’s ‘Ethos’ shared across the school. We also found that the individual and collective beliefs in teachers’ efficacy were linked via ‘Reflective Practice’ and the collaborative ethos that the Principal sought to encourage. The development of the teachers’ inclusive practice was, they reported, associated with the shared ‘Preparation and Planning’ and teaching ‘Methods’ they used.

It seems evident throughout the data we gathered that the Principal’s vision and style of leadership was significant in developing and supporting the creative partnerships and collective efficacy that the staff now espoused. Her view that leadership should not be hierarchical but should be ‘distributed’, and provide the opportunities for staff to learn, is in line with the recent work of Harris (2013), Hallinger and Heck (2010a) and Hattie (2009). The Principal’s own belief that this was an effective strategy seems to have been born of her own successful experience in a previous role, thus herself evidencing the benefits of direct experience as a source of self-efficacy (Bandura, 2006). In her present school her leadership was instrumental in establishing an ethos in which attitudes and expectations were communicated, shared and developed in teachers’ classroom practice. This was manifest in the deliberate choice of language (helping teachers to see that behaviour was ‘learned’ rather than ‘managed’) and in ‘Golden Rules’ that made explicit the positive expectations of staff and pupils. These were, we suggest, the main vehicles for transmitting the core of her vision. The ethos and expectations promulgated by her also appear to have provided a psychological environment in which success was anticipated, recognised and endorsed. Thus, in Bandura’s terms the elements of ‘social persuasion’ that emanated from the Principal were instrumental in persuading staff to reflect and consider their current practice. This in turn supported learning through observation (‘vicarious learning’), direct personal (‘mastery’) experience of successfully helping children learn, and that it was, therefore, possible to teach effectively in different ways, helped to reconceptualise what ‘learning’ was about. Such demonstrations of

successful practice supported the development of a more positive, purposeful and inclusive ‘ethos’ and environment. In that environment, teachers were able to gain their own experience of ‘mastery’ as individuals and, importantly, as members of a collective enterprise. It was also evident, however, that there were clear views that this way of working was endorsed and actively, mutually, encouraged by all participants.

Therein, of course lies one of the limitations of a study of this nature. It was essentially a case study base on volunteered information about ‘what worked’ for these staff. Clearly as a case study we cannot infer any general conclusions other than how the data here illustrates how culture and efficacy beliefs may interact. We do not know if there were members of the staff who did not share these ideas. Nor do we know if there were counter examples of experiences that had eroded some individual’s confidence and self-efficacy beliefs. Likewise, we cannot, yet, tell if the ‘themes’ we detected amongst the teachers we met might be found elsewhere and associated with similar effects. However, the data we have are in accord with what might be expected on the basis of literature about the effects of transformational leadership (for instance Harris, 2013; Ross & Gray, 2006) and efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1997, 2006). Furthermore, we can report that Ofsted inspections of the school (in 2007, 2011, 2016) that covered the period when the main data were gathered and subsequently, consistently gave the school overall approval and reported on the ‘inspiration’ and ‘outstanding’ leadership of the school and that it met the needs of the children in the school.

So, in summary, this Principal’s beliefs in her self-efficacy and, consequently, her ‘transformational’ and distributed leadership (Hallinger & Heck, 2010b; Harris, 2013), provided a foundation and expectation for enhanced practice and efficacy beliefs amongst the staff. The evidence we found was that this supported collective beliefs, expectations and practices that enabled individual staff to grow in confidence in their own efficacy as inclusive teachers who can help children behave and learn.

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Appendix

Following a brief explication of the concepts of self- and collective-efficacy beliefs, the following prompt questions were used for the individual and focus group discussions:

1. What do you think helps you develop your beliefs about what you know you can do to help include children whose behaviour might sometimes seem difficult?
2. Is there a relationship between what you as an individual believe and what the staff as a collective group might believe about 'efficacy' in this respect?
3. Are collective efficacy beliefs the product of culture or leadership?
4. How do the individual and collective beliefs affect what individual teachers do in class?