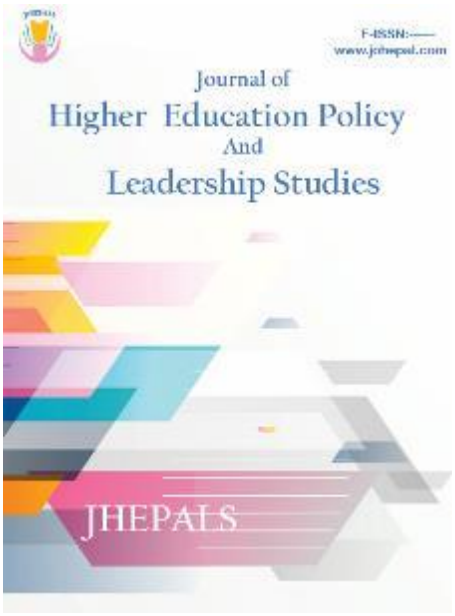
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Students' Perceptions about a Collaboratively Designed Behaviour Improvement Policy: An Exploratory Ethnographical Study

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Sarah Mullin *

Abstract

Prior to my appointment to the senior leadership team at a secondary school in England, the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) recommended that the school must 'ensure consistent application of sanctions in response to concerns expressed by pupils' (Appendix A). This was an area that I was keen to address. Consistent approaches to behaviour management can enhance relationships between teachers and students, enabling foundations for lifelong learning to be formed (Collins, 2019, Haydn, 2007). This exploratory ethnographical practitioner research explores pupil perceptions of behaviour management in response to the introduction of a Behaviour Improvement Policy that was designed collaboratively by staff, pupils and parents. Analysis of the data collected through focus groups and questionnaires have led to the assertions that (a) behaviour management is more effective when the school's policy is designed collaboratively by staff, pupils and parents; (b) successful behaviour improvement policies are dependent on school leaders being committed to ensuring its success; (c) effective outcomes occur when all stakeholders are actively involved in the implementation of the policy; (d) pupils perceive their school well-being is at an optimum when there are clear and consistent policies in place that promote positive behaviour. The purpose of my research is to evaluate pupil perceptions of the collaboratively designed Behaviour Improvement Policy, critically reflecting on my own leadership actions so that elements of practice may be transferable to other educational settings or lead to further inquiry.

Keywords: Pupil; Behaviour; Leadership; Management; Pastoral; Collaboaration

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Introduction

Pupil behaviour and learning outcomes are inextricably linked (Rhodes, 2019; Bennett, 2017; Steer, 2005; Steer, 2009; Gutman, Brown, Akerman, & Obolenskaya, 2009; Gutman & Feinstein, 2008; Steer, 2005). According to recent research from the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), a school's approach to behaviour management is likely to be most effective when considered in conjunction with staff, pupils and parents (Collins, 2019). On average, children with higher levels of school well-being have higher levels of academic achievement and are more engaged in school, both concurrently and in later years (Gutman & Vorhaus, 2012). Furthermore, students' school experience 'remains one of the most insightful indicators' of their future life outcomes (Bennett, 2017).

Prior to my appointment to the school's senior leadership team, the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) conducted an unannounced emergency visit at the request of the Department for Education (DfE). In their report, a recommendation was made that the school must: 'ensure consistent application of sanctions in response to concerns expressed by pupils' (Appendix A). This was an area that I was keen to address. I firmly believe that pupils must feel happy, safe and supported in their environment in order to thrive; I therefore wanted to implement a clear and consistent behaviour policy that would promote positive behaviour across the school (Rhodes, 2019). Pupil behaviour is regularly cited as impacting on the atmosphere in classrooms, influencing the educational progress children and young people make (Haydn, 2007). It was therefore agreed by the school leadership team that a careful review of the policy would be a priority for the school.

Research Aims

My aim was to design a Behaviour Policy in collaboration with staff, pupils and parents in order to improve pupil perception of behaviour management at the school. I was keen to enhance pupil engagement with school, ensuring that pupils felt that their voices were being heard, improving standards so that pupils felt that they were being treated fairly and consistently at all times.

Ethical considerations

- Ethical clearance was granted by the headteacher and governing body.
- My research was guided by the ethical codes provided by professional research associations such as British Sociological Association (2002) and BERA (2018; 2004).
- Support and consent was sought from the headteacher and deputy head (academic).
- I ensured that everybody taking part knew the purpose of the research and understood what they were being asked to do.
- Anonymity was important for all those taking part; all data was anonymised to ensure confidentiality.
- Parental support and consent was sought.
- I informed my participants that they did not have to take part in the research and could withdraw from the study at any time.
- I acknowledged that there would be some disruption to curriculum learning time in order to provide time for pupils to take part in the focus groups and to complete questionnaires.

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- I considered whether a uniform approach was fair and accessible for all.
- I took into consideration the conflicting views, including biased points of view, taking into account those who may have felt obliged to respond in a certain way.
- I considered the ways that I may need to work with those who were resistant to change.

Actions taken

My first task was to explore the perceptions and experiences of all stakeholders including pupils, parents, staff and governors. I used two data collection methods: focus groups and anonymised questionnaires. These methods were selected after careful consideration of their benefits and limitations. My aim was to enhance validity and credibility through triangulation, considering a range of perspectives and achieving data 'saturation' (O'Donoghue, 2007, pp. 60-61), although I recognise that this can be a problematic term (Guest et al., 2006).

A pre-test/post-test questionnaire, which focused on qualitative responses, examined pupils' perceptions of behaviour management in the school prior to the intervention and then again after the implementation of the policy. I purposefully selected focus groups in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the issues being experienced as a result of the existing behaviour policy (Nyumba et al., 2018). The focus group method allowed me to act swiftly, gathering data from a wide range of stakeholders, allowing participants to suggest potential solutions, which informed my strategic planning and decision-making. I am, however, aware of the limitations in using this method, as the focus groups may not have represented the whole school community (Smithson, 2000).

Pupil perception of behaviour management was that it was not always consistent, with sanctions varying depending on the teacher issuing the sanction. Pupils felt that the sanctions given across the school were not always in line with the behaviour issue and that there was not enough focus on praising those who behaved positively.

I carefully researched the behaviour policies being used in other schools, drawing on research which explores the relationship between policy and practice. In his doctoral thesis, Stephens (2013) concluded that successful behaviour policies are dependent on 'those tasked with implementing it' being motivated and committed (Stephens, 2013); he further comments that effective outcomes occur when all stakeholders have 'active involvement' in the research process (Stephens, 2013). Bennett (2017) also suggests that school leaders must aim for the highest possible behaviour standards, implementing and proactively monitoring a clear policy which is used consistently by all members of the school community (Bennett, 2017).

As a passionate school leader determined to drive positive change to ensure the highest standards of behaviour at the School (Bennett, 2017), I carefully devised an action plan that responded to the voices of pupils, staff and parents (Appendix B). By engaging all stakeholders in the process, I was able to understand their concerns, critically reflecting on the existing sanction and reward systems and collaboratively producing a clear policy which could be applied fairly and consistently by all staff at all times (Appendix C).

Fullan (2003) suggests that a leader's role is to help change the environment-to introduce new systems which 'influence behaviour for the better' (Fullan, 2003, p. 1). By listening to the views of pupils and by taking on board their suggestions for a uniform behaviour system, I believed that pupils would feel that their voices were being heard; that they would appreciate that they were valued and feel that they were responsible for making positive changes to the school community (Gee, 2000). Shawer (2010) discusses a learner's ability to play a crucial role in their own development when they

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become active constructors of their own knowledge (Shawer, 2010, p. 336). To inspire the trust and respect of my colleagues, it was important for me to lead ethically and authentically, letting my passion shine through and showing that I was acting in the best interests of all stakeholders at all times. I truly believed that although it would be hard work initially, the impact of a new collaborative policy would benefit everybody involved. I stayed true to my core values and beliefs throughout the process, even when faced with some resistance by some colleagues during some stages of the process. I gave clear timescales for when tasks needed to be completed by and I set high expectations for the team throughout. Leading by example is a philosophy I actively promote and staff were not asked to carry out any tasks that I would not do myself. As a school leader, it was essential for me to inspire trust in my team, motivating them to share in my vision to achieve our goal.

Theorists such as Piaget (1959) and Vygotsky (1978) argue that children should be actively involved in their own learning (McLeod, 2018). By introducing a new system, which pupils helped to design in collaboration with their teachers, I believed that they would benefit from a consistent approach to issuing sanctions and rewards across the school by all teachers at all times. In September 2015, pupils and teachers worked collaboratively to design a new Behaviour Policy. We classified types of behaviour into a 'traffic light system' to ensure that the language we were using to describe behaviour was consistent across the school. In addition, a clear system for issuing sanctions and rewards was established through the introduction of the 'traffic light system' which classified types of behaviour incidents clearly into yellow, amber and red categories, depending on the severity or frequency of the incident (Appendix D).

Results

The introduction of the Behaviour Improvement Policy was well received by staff, pupils, parents and governors. In our subsequent inspection, the lead reporting inspector praised the improved policy both anecdotedly during his visit and also in his written inspection report (ISI, 2016). No recommendations for improvement were made. Evidence of the longer term impact of this intervention was evident in our 2019 inspection with highlights from the ISI report (2019) including:

- 'The personal development, behaviour and welfare of children are outstanding.'
- 'Pupils display an excellent understanding of the ethos of the school and fully support the high behavioural expectations and standards set by their teachers.'
- 'Pupils are proud of their school…they understand the school's system of rewards and sanctions and value the contribution this makes to high standards of behaviour in school.'

Feedback from pupil post-test questionnaires was also extremely positive with pupils commenting:

- Mrs Mullin has changed the dynamic of the school in a really positive way – *Pupil A*
- I feel during this year I have improved massively, I feel I owe this to Mrs Mullin as she has implemented an award and behaviour pyramid [SIC]. This helps not only me but other pupils to manage and maintain excellent behaviour and work to an outstanding standard. I feel this has improved the school massively-*Pupil B*
- I feel this year, the school has improved extraordinarily. Things such as the new reward or behaviour pyramids have really made the school a better welcoming place – *Pupil C*

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The new behaviour system has improved behaviour management at the school and the number of children being issued with more serious sanctions such as isolations, suspensions and exclusions has reduced dramatically in the years since it was implemented. This has been valuable for pupils and their parents who feel that they are being treated fairly and consistently and recognise that for every action there is a reaction, preparing them for life after school as a law-abiding citizen (Thornberg, 2009). In the second year of the new system, I had to introduce an additional layer of rewards in order to recognise the number of merit marks our children have received. In year one I was producing bronze, silver, gold and platinum awards for pupils who had achieved up to 150 merits in one academic year. By the end of year two, children were achieving in excess of 300 merits by the summer term and so a diamond level of reward was necessary. By putting in hard work in the early planning stages of this project, staying true to our shared vision and goal, I was able to earn the respect of all stakeholders who have benefited from its success.

Reflection

Gill (2006) characterises leadership into six core themes, one of which is envisioning a desirable future (Gill, 2006, p. 1). By focusing on a positive outcome for the school community, I was able to gain the approval of the headteacher and governors to introduce a new policy whilst also engaging all participants in the study. Adair (2005) argues that the secret success of running a business is leadership at all levels (Adair, 2005, p. 2). By giving all participants a key leadership role of vital importance, a shared approach to developing the system was adopted so that everybody had a shared responsibility towards its successful implementation.

Throughout the process, I responded to feedback which allowed me to reflect on the whole school vision plan and strategic direction of the school. I was able to adapt my plan along the way, listening to advice from the headteacher regarding how previous behaviour incidents had been dealt with and how pupils and parents had previously responded to positive and negative behaviour incidents. By engaging in professional learning conversations with my headmaster and colleagues (Schuck, Aubusson & Buchanan, 2008, p. 206), we were able to enhance the proposed policy so that it was a realistic, manageable model that met the needs of our school.

My ontological, epistemological and methodological research positions changed throughout the research stage as I considered constructivist/interpretivist approaches. Regular meetings with the headteacher helped me to consider my research position in line with my desired outcomes and focus of the study. This resulted in questionnaires/qualitative data collection being used as an additional method for data analysis. Other changes included taking a realistic view of the rewards and sanctions that could be imposed in line with parental expectation, for example, I was advised that the pupil suggestion of a celebratory school trip might not be perceived favourably as a reward by parents. By acting on the advice received, I was able to adapt the reward pyramids so that they were well received by pupils and parents alike. Regular feedback was important in helping me to reflect on my learning, making improvements to the intervention where necessary (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Price et al., 2010). I introduced an online recording system for behaviour incidents using SIMS, allowing me to monitor and evaluate pupil behaviour on a regular basis, leading to further opportunities to enhance behaviour. At the end of the process, I evaluated the perceptions of behaviour management in the school as compared to pupil perceptions of behaviour management in the school before the study began.

Pupil perceptions of behaviour management at the school had improved remarkably.

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Hargreaves (2007, 1994) suggests that practitioners should adapt to educational changes in a positive way (Hargreaves, 1994, p. 124). However, research into the impact of educational reforms in England (Troman, 1996; Woods et al., 1997; Gleeson & Shain, 1999) has provided a range of responses from practitioners, ranging from enthusiastic compliance to adaptation to forms of resistance (Troman & Woods, 2000) I have certainly developed my leadership skills as a result of my learning, particularly working with staff with a vast range of individual learning needs and motivations. (Lumby & Coleman, 2007, p. 2). I have learned that it is important to ensure that all staff share a key role in the process so that they can appreciate, understand and value its significance, allowing them to also share a part in its success.

Undesirable behaviour in schools can have a long-lasting impact on the outcomes of the child themselves in addition to other pupils (Collins, 2019). If student behaviour is problematic, the learning potential of all children is impacted. Children who are excluded from school due to behaviour issues are at a greater risk of underachieving academically, and are less likely to enter higher education. Furthermore, undesirable behaviour in schools can limit the child's future life choices (House of Lords, 2011); it is therefore essential for schools to have a clear and consistent behaviour policy in place which school leaders embed effectively and monitor carefully to ensure it is effective (Collins, 2019).

It is compulsory for children in England to remain in some form of education until they are aged eighteen (DfE, 2019). Government policy has resulted in greater numbers of children aged 14-19 attending Higher Education institutions (UCU, 2013). Whilst younger students will predominately behave in a positive manner, some will behave undesirably in their new setting (UCU, 2013). Promoting and maintaining good behaviour is therefore an important role for both school teachers and university lecturers. Some of the young people attending Higher Education settings may have been disaffected at school, even perhaps being excluded from school due to challenging behaviour; challenging behaviour may therefore be present when the student enters higher education, causing a disruption to their fellow students (UCU, 2013). Whereas previously, students were able to attend Higher Education institutions out of choice, compulsory education may result in students attending institutions reluctantly and this may also impact on their behaviour (UCU, 2013). It is therefore important that schools have a clear and consistent behaviour policy in place which school leaders embed effectively and monitor carefully to ensure it is effective (Collins, 2019).

Conclusion

The improvements at the school where the Positive Improvement Policy was introduced are visible: behaviour is dealt with consistently and fairly, parents are able to access their child's behaviour records electronically and a shared language exists so that everybody is using common terminology.

The policy is reviewed at least annually in conjunction with staff, parents and pupils. Due to Covid-19, additional adjustments will need to be made to the policy to ensure it meets the needs of the school community living through a global pandemic. It is wonderful, however, to know that there is a firm foundation to build on which works for the schools' learners.

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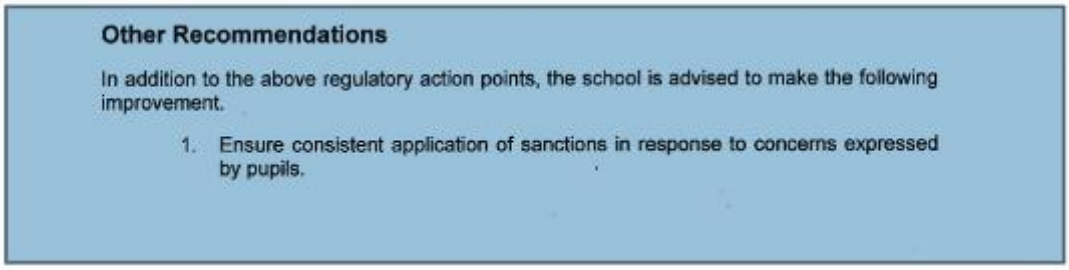
Sarah Mullin is a Deputy Headteacher from the West Midlands in England. She is currently completing her professional Doctorate in Education where she is researching the under representation of women head teachers in secondary schools in England. Sarah is renowned for delivering CPD to student teachers and early career teachers across the UK and she coaches women aspiring to school leadership. She is the author of the number 1 best selling book *'What They Didn't Teach Me on My PGCE'* and she is the founder of *#EduTeacherTalks*, a YouTube channel for teachers by teachers. Sarah received the 'Contribution to Education of the Year' award in 2019 and she has recently been named a 'Rising Star in Education and Academia.' She has previously been named as an 'Inspirational Woman' and has previously been shortlisted as a finalist in the categories of Headteacher of the Year, Teacher of the Year and a Positive Role Model (Gender) by the National Diversity Awards.

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Appendices

Appendix A.: ISI Inspection Report Recommendation



Other Recommendations

In addition to the above regulatory action points, the school is advised to make the following improvement.

1. Ensure consistent application of sanctions in response to concerns expressed by pupils.

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Appendix B.: Action Plan

Actions	Time	Resources/People inc. Sources of support and challenge	Success Criteria	Comments/amendments to plan
Problem Identification Audit and evaluate current system gathering staff and pupil feedback 'WWW/EBI'	May – July 2015	*Focus groups *Questionnaires *Time allocation for questionnaires to be completed *Staff members to issue questionnaires and return to SMU	A deeper understanding of current practices and areas for improvement through staff/pupil feedback	*Parent feedback gathered *Feedback from SLT gathered *Compared models used in other schools *Compared model in Senior school with Prep school to compare patterns
Literature Review/Research	May – August 2015	*Online journals *Academic research into positive behaviour approaches and sanction/reward systems *Dialogue with other schools *Fact finding: researching reward/sanction models that currently exist	A thorough investigation of research supporting the need for a single uniform system	*Conflicting researchers' perspectives *Feedback from mentors about available resources and reality of applying certain systems in the school
Formulate Research Question, Research Proposal and present my hypothesis to the HT and DHT.	August 2015	*From the evaluation questionnaires, conversations and research activities, determine a research question and proposal. **Research Question:** How do you feel the introduction of a uniform Positive Behaviour system has helped you to manage your behaviour?	HT/DHT are satisfied with the level of research carried out. The AHT/DHT are convinced that my hypothesis will have a positive	*My ontological, epistemological and methodological research positions kept changing throughout the research stage as I considered constructivist/interpretivist approaches. *Feedback/suggestions for improvement from HT/DHT resulted in
Research Design and Methodology	September – December 2015	**Methodological research position:** interviews and observation *Pupils and staff to collaboratively design the new system: a traffic light system to identify levels of behaviour – red = serious, yellow = moderate, green =low-level. *Pupils and staff to collaboratively design the sanction	Teachers will be using the pyramid systems at all times. Pupils will know and understand how they will be rewarded/sanctioned	*Behaviour not accounted for in initial activity had to be added to the traffic light grid.
Discussion of Results	March 2016 – Performance Management	*Head/Deputy Head/Governors/Parent feedback *Time to produce results grids/graphs/charts and analyse these *Time to and edit audio/video files. *Time to write up the research project.	Head is satisfied with the intervention and agrees for it to continue	
Conclusion and Further Steps	March 2016 – March 2017	Make improvements/amendments to system and roll out into Sixth Form and consider rolling out into Prep School	Model is successful and is replicated in other areas of the school	Model may have to be adapted to meet the needs of different learners, for example detentions are not issued at Prep level and merit marks would not have the same value to Sixth Form as they do in Senior School.

Appendix C.: The School Positive Behaviour Policy

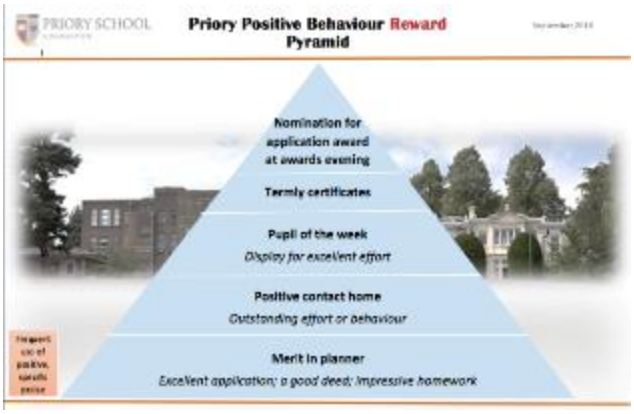
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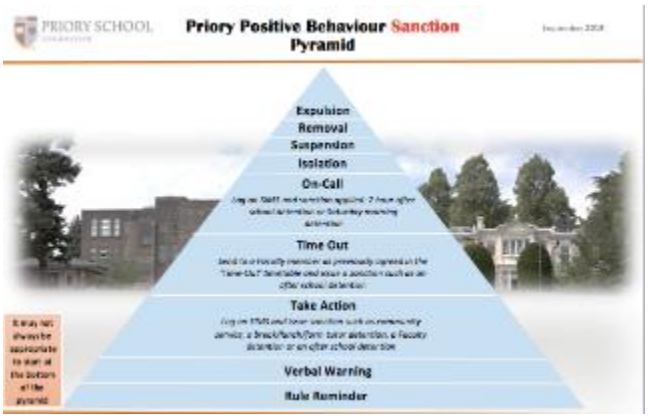
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Appendix D.: Sanction and Reward Pyramids

Mildly disruptive	Moderately disruptive	Seriously disruptive
Talking	Persistent talking	Violence
Forgotten equipment	Repeated forgotten equipment/uniform issue	Bullying
Uniform issue	Unkind behaviour	Damage to property





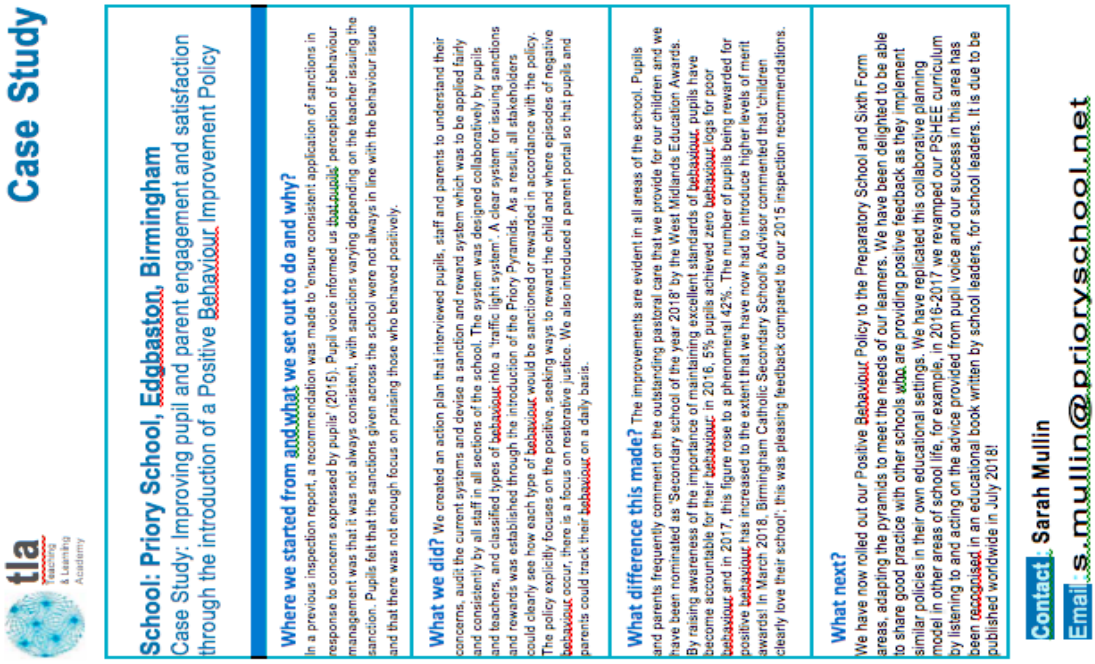
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Appendix E.: Teaching and Learning Academy Recognition for this Project



Appendix F.: Copy of this Case Study for the Teaching and Learning Academy



Case Study

tla Teaching & Learning Academy

School: Priory School, Edgbaston, Birmingham

Case Study: Improving pupil and parent engagement and satisfaction through the introduction of a Positive Behaviour Improvement Policy

Where we started from and what we set out to do and why?
In a previous inspection report, a recommendation was made to 'ensure consistent application of sanctions in response to concerns expressed by pupils' (2015). Pupil voice informed us that pupils' perception of behaviour management was that it was not always consistent, with sanctions varying depending on the teacher issuing the sanction. Pupils felt that the sanctions given across the school were not always in line with the behaviour issue and that there was not enough focus on praising those who behaved positively.

What we did? We created an action plan that interviewed pupils, staff and parents to understand their concerns, audit the current systems and devise a sanction and reward system which was to be applied fairly and consistently by all staff in all sections of the school. The system was designed collaboratively by pupils and teachers, and classified types of behaviour into a 'traffic light system'. A clear system for issuing sanctions and rewards was established through the introduction of the Priory Pyramids. As a result, all stakeholders could clearly see how each type of behaviour would be sanctioned or rewarded in accordance with the policy. The policy explicitly focuses on the positive, seeking ways to reward the child and where episodes of negative behaviour occur, there is a focus on restorative justice. We also introduced a parent portal so that pupils and parents could track their behaviour on a daily basis.

What difference this made? The improvements are evident in all areas of the school. Pupils and parents frequently comment on the outstanding pastoral care that we provide for our children and we have been nominated as 'Secondary school of the year 2018' by the West Midlands Education Awards. By raising awareness of the importance of maintaining excellent standards of behaviour, pupils have become accountable for their behaviour; in 2016, 5% pupils achieved zero behaviour logs for poor behaviour and in 2017, this figure rose to a phenomenal 42%. The number of pupils being rewarded for positive behaviour has increased to the extent that we have now had to introduce higher levels of merit awards! In March 2018, Birmingham Catholic Secondary School's Advisor commented that 'children clearly love their school'; this was pleasing feedback compared to our 2015 inspection recommendations.

What next?
We have now rolled out our Positive Behaviour Policy to the Preparatory School and Sixth Form areas, adapting the pyramids to meet the needs of our learners. We have been delighted to be able to share good practice with other schools who are providing positive feedback as they implement similar policies in their own educational settings. We have replicated this collaborative planning model in other areas of school life, for example, in 2016-2017 we revamped our PSHEE curriculum by listening to and acting on the advice provided from pupil voice and our success in this area has been recognised in an educational book written by school leaders, for school leaders. It is due to be published worldwide in July 2018!

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