Parents as a problem?

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Abstract
A survey of views on unacceptable behaviour by 2575 teachers included threats from parents and other third parties; these constituted a relatively infrequent but serious problem to teachers. Written-in comments indicated that some parents contributed to a range of routine disruptive behaviours by supporting their children against the school when confrontation arose. Structural modelling indicated that the more serious problems, including conflict with parents, were due more to social background factors impacting on the school than effective within-support to teachers. Within-school support was more important in ameliorating routine disruption, but many respondents felt that demands for external accountability took up senior management time and attention, and inhibited management from giving effective support. While government initiatives are now supporting schools against difficult parents, reducing the current confrontational ethos in accountability is likely to be more difficult.

Introduction
Current concern about the incidence of high-level disruption in schools, which has even led teachers experienced in South African townships to advise their colleagues to avoid working in Britain (Braid & MacGregor 2001) led to the commissioning by the National Union of Teachers to a survey of the level of unacceptable behaviour experienced by members of the Union in a representative range of local authorities. The survey covered lower-level disruption to lessons as well as high-level disruption verging on the criminal such as drug use and dealing, threats of violence and the possession of offensive weapons. One aspect of the survey was the incidence of threats by third parties including parents to pupils and staff, the extreme manifestation of a range of reported incidents where parents supported their children against the mandate of their school. This reflects the general emphasis by politicians on the rights of consumers while increasing the demands on producers, in this case parents and teachers (Labour Party 2001). While there are many examples of productive cooperation between teachers and parents, for example parent governors contributing their expertise to their school (e.g. Troman & Woods 2001) the political emphasis on consumerism in education tends, as Torman & Woods point out, to set consumers (parents, on behalf of their children) against producers (teachers). While this is unlikely to be a decisive influence on the majority of parents, it could tend to encourage those who are truculent
of disaffected from education. During the course of the survey the Government started consultation on enforcing the duties of parents in respect of high-level disruptive children (DfEE 2001a, Morris 2001); the problem of lower-level but more frequent disruption to lessons currently remains unaddressed. Problems with parents were among a range of types of ‘unacceptable behaviour’ included in a survey of teachers in England and Wales, analysed for the National Union of Teachers by the University of Warwick. In this paper we look specifically at this area of concern.

The sample
Questionnaires were sent out to 17188 teachers resident in 13 local education authorities (LEAs) selected to give a geographical and social spread. The areas included large towns with a mix of affluent and deprived areas (Bournemouth); cities with industrial and deprived inner-city areas (Bristol, Cardiff, Islington [Inner London], Leeds, Leicester, Middlesborough Tameside), counties including a mix of rural areas and large towns/cities (East Sussex, Nottinghamshire); and predominantly rural counties, though with areas of deprivation in some rural and town areas (Norfolk, Northumberland, and Pembrokeshire). A total of 2575 (15.0%) questionnaires were returned in time to be used in the analysis. A few teachers, who worked in adjacent authorities to those where they lived, or in private schools, reported on these. As in other similar surveys, two thirds of respondents were 40 or over; more than two thirds were female. Most were highly experienced; over half had 16 years experience or more. Four-fifths were full-time; of the remainder two-thirds were part-time and one-third supply. The great majority (nearly 90%) worked in primary and secondary schools, with slightly more in secondary schools; around 4% worked in under-5s and special schools respectively, and about 1% in pupil referral units and as LEA centrally employed teachers respectively. This distribution of respondents reflects the composition of the teaching force in general, and shows strong similarities to a survey of NUT members on performance management, carried out a month before with a similarly sized sample in a similar geographical spread of authorities (Neill 2001a). The current sample contains a slightly higher proportion of respondents who would be likely to report misbehaviour than the performance management sample; it is therefore likely that non-respondents would have been working in schools with fewer problems than respondents. However a proportion of respondents reported, in their completion of the closed-response questions, in written-in comments, or both, that they had encountered no problems in their schools. The strong similarity in the distribution of respondent types across the two surveys, which were investigating very different topics, confirms the representativeness of the sample for this survey, and incidentally of the sample for the performance management survey. Respondents were asked to indicate their main responsibility; where several were indicated the most senior was chosen. Over half the sample were classroom teachers, with about a tenth being middle management and curriculum co-ordinators; other groups constituted 2-4%. The ‘unidentified other’ group (about 8%) included supply teachers and key stage co-ordinators in primary schools. Distribution between local authorities generally reflected authority size. Half the respondents worked in schools with 20% of pupils or below on the special educational needs (SEN) register, three-quarters 30% or below and less than 10% of schools (including the special schools) above 50%. Similar but higher proportions were eligible for free school meals (the commonly used measure of poverty in the United Kingdom, but an unreliable one as take-up of free school meals is voluntary) - half with 25% or below eligible, three-quarters 45% or below, and 10% with above 60% eligible.

Methods
The questionnaire contained three sections of closed questions and seven boxes for written-in
open-ended comments. The closed questions, which were drawn up in consultation between the National Union of Teachers and the University of Warwick, covered biographical details on individual respondents; four questions on their schools; two series of questions, on behaviour problems witnessed by respondents, and problems personally experienced by respondents, and questions on training, support, and the role of non-teaching staff and LEAs. Finally respondents were asked if behaviour had worsened since they started teaching. It was stressed that respondents should complete the questionnaire anonymously and that written-in comments were voluntary. Questionnaires were distributed to NUT members in the selected local authorities and there was no reminder letter. ‘Split-half’ reliability assessments were performed by entering the data into the analysis in three sections as questionnaires were achieved, and comparing the responses of the sections. There were no educationally significant differences between the data for the three sections, indicating both the overall reliability of the data, and that early returns, which might have been expected to be from more aggrieved teachers or union activists, did not differ from those of later respondents, whose attitude might have been expected to be more relaxed.

Most of the analysis was conducting using the package SPSS for Windows version 8 (SPSS Inc., 1997); structural modeling used the package EQS (Bentler 1995, Byrne 1994). Questions were recoded to give a pattern by which high frequency of unacceptable behaviour was coded high, and a high incidence of mitigating factors was also coded high, so that there would be negative correlations between the presence of high levels of unacceptable behaviour and the presence of, for example, in-school support.

As the first stage in the modeling process, the responses to the proposals were grouped using factor analysis with Kaiser’s varimax rotation. New variables corresponding to the factors revealed were constructed by calculating the mean of the variables loading on each factor. Variables which loaded onto more than one factor were included only on the factor for which they loaded highest. These variables were then correlated with each other and with the biographical variables as a guide to an appropriate model structure. The data for the factors and biographical variables was then transferred to EQS and the model was built up to reflect the likely causal links.

Threats from parents and pupils

Respondents were asked how often they came across problems on a four-point scale - every year, term, month or week? The questions were framed in this very specific form to limit subjectivity in the responses. Responses were recoded 1-5, with 5 representing weekly incidence, and 1 representing no report of a problem. (As respondents were not specifically asked if a problem was not encountered, ‘no report’ cannot, strictly, be taken as indicating that a problem did not occur, though some respondents wrote in to specify that problems which were not ticked did not occur in their school). We may group unacceptable behaviours into two broad groups; behaviours with a mode of 5 (equivalent to weekly), and behaviours with a mode of 1 (equivalent to occurring infrequently, and not at all in some schools). Within these two broad groups the means allow us to make finer discriminations.

Problems with parents fell into the ‘infrequent’ group, experienced on average between once and several times a year, comprised threats to pupils of third-party violence, as well as bullying, damage to property, abuse / insult to the teacher personally, and other actual or threatened incidents. The most serious subgroup of problems - including threats of violence by parents as well as being pushed or touched by pupils, threats of violence to teachers by pupils, offensive weapons, possession of drugs and, especially, traffic in drugs - were infrequent, and the majority of respondents had not experienced them.
These less frequent misbehaviours may be compared with the ‘weekly’ group, the first subgroup includes five types of misbehaviour in lessons (interruptions, answering back, disruption, offensive language, and refusal to work) which nevertheless made the day-to-day business of teaching virtually impossible for some respondents. The second subgroup (conduct violations, dress code violations, threats of pupil-pupil violence, and defiance) represent rather more serious threats to the rule structure of schools, which are encountered weekly by between a half and a third of all respondents. There is therefore a roughly inverse relation between the seriousness of behaviour problems and their frequency.

**Responses about individual unacceptable behaviours**

Threats from third parties (from written-in comments, usually parents, less often former pupils) were much less frequent than threats of pupil-pupil violence, being experienced by rather more than half the respondents (52.7%), but, like threatened pupil-pupil violence, where it did occur it appeared relatively frequently, with approaching a third of respondents experiencing these threats weekly (16.1%) or monthly (14.5%); it was less frequent for these threats to be an occasional (termly or annual) occurrence. Threats to pupils of physical violence directly by pupils [Pupil-pupil violence] were by far the most frequent of the serious problems witnessed by respondents, with five-sixths (83.2%) of respondents reporting it and approaching half (43.4%) experiencing it on a weekly basis, with a further fifth (19.3%) experiencing it monthly. A climate of threatened pupil-pupil violence is therefore part of the routine working environment for the majority of teachers. Though threats from third parties to pupils occur less frequently than direct threats by pupils, this is balanced by their greater seriousness in creating a general climate of violence.

Turning to discipline problems personally experienced by respondents, threats of physical violence indirectly by third parties e.g. parents [threats by parents] are even more serious than those from pupils, and nearly a tenth (7.9%) of respondents reported experiencing them more than annually - that is termly, or for some, monthly or weekly. However three-quarters of respondents (75.8%) did not report encountering threats of physical violence - though verbal abuse or insult, not covered by this question, are also potentially unsettling. of physical violence Threats directly by pupils were not experienced by nearly two-thirds of respondents (65.5%); they were a weekly (4.6%) or monthly (4.9%) occurrence for a twentieth of respondents respectively. However a quarter of respondents (25.0% total) encountered threats infrequently (termly or annually); and a situation where violent threats are a regular experience for a tenth of teachers should give rise to concern.

A concern, here and elsewhere was the presence of children who could not cope with ordinary classroom life, sometimes due to inclusion policies. Even small numbers of such children could have a disproportionate effect and in some cases teachers felt parents contributed to the difficulties they experienced with these pupils;

- All the above incidents are from one pupil only who is a totally disruptive influence both emotionally and academically to the other children in my class. On one occasion both the parent and child were emotionally disruptive in the class and the Head told me to go into the library with my class. This child seems inappropriately placed in a mainstream school. (Primary, female, 40-9)

- We have a tightly structured discipline policy but barriers are constantly pushed by 25% of pupils and 5-10% of parents / carers. (Primary headteacher, male, 50-9)

A third of respondents (33.9%) felt they had a lot of support from management in dealing with problem behaviour as a whole; over half (59.9%) felt they received some. Many respondents thought that heads and other senior management
were distracted from giving proper support by too much orientation to the demands of children or parents, or by administration and bureaucracy;

- Willing to supervise children removed from classroom & to contact parents. Unwilling to exclude. Children returned to classroom after violent incidents. (Primary, female, 29-39)

- Theoretically our head is an experienced practitioner in EBD - realistically the head is an expert in the paper war. (Centrally employed teacher, male, 50-9)

If you were a victim of an assault did you feel the support the school gave you was excellent / reasonable / poor / non-existent? [Support after assault]

Over a quarter of respondents (27.4%) answered this question; written-in comments indicated that some respondents who had not suffered assaults felt lucky not to have, or that while they personally had not, colleagues in their school had. A fifth (20.3%) of the respondents who did answer felt they had received excellent support, with over a third (38.3%) feeling it was reasonable. However nearly a third (29.4%) felt support had been poor and a sixth (12.1%) that it had been non-existent. Comments about colleagues’ experience suggested similar proportions, but could not be quantified exactly. In many cases respondents thought there had been little effective support or sympathy, again often because of maintaining enrolment or as a result of outside pressure, though there were reports of excellent support:

- There appears to be a reluctance to take up cases, particularly for supply, out of fear of backlash from parents or having to substantiate the case to parents who are invariably hostile. (Primary supply, male, 50-9)

- The management are frightened to death of having to discipline any pupil severely (i.e. expel or suspend or involve parents very much). The consequence is constant inappropriate behaviour, even here. I decided to leave this school as of July 2001. (Independent secondary school, male, 40-9)

- I have had verbal abuse from parents but, thankfully, personally, not physical - 3 colleagues have. (Primary, female, 50-9)

- We have telephone connections in all classrooms for immediate response. Every class has a LSA for 1/2 day minimum. All incidents are followed up and pupils excluded / parents involved / apologise. (Primary, male, 40-9)

- Pupil threw a hard sweet at the back of my head. Investigated - suspended. Pupil brought in with mother. Met me to apologise. (Secondary, female, 29-39)

Very few respondents (2.1%) felt that local education authorities (LEAs) had been very supportive helping the school address pupil behaviour; an eighth (13.1%) felt they had been fairly supportive. A third of respondents were undecided, and over half (50.3%) felt that they had been not very or not at all supportive. The written-in comments indicated that LEA support had been slow or inadequate, and that the authority tended to support disruptive children rather than staff or cooperative children;

- We had many exclusions 2 years ago. None at present. The ‘Haven’ is used by very disruptive pupils, supervised by non-teaching staff with no special training as such. They are at times with the children on their own. This I find unacceptable. Two adults are on sick leave. Parents object that ‘good’ children do not use the special facilities in the ‘Haven’. I agree. (Primary, female, 50-9, East Sussex.)

- Outside agencies do not know what to suggest with children who are too young to reason with, draw up agreements with etc. We are trying to compensate for poor parenting skills. (Under-5s, female, 40-9)

- Help needed with parents / pupils who are persistently misbehaving. Schools need to feel empowered. Parents need to be identified by school and then lea help given. (Primary, female, 40-9, threats of violence from parents marked as ‘major problem area’)

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Approaching two-thirds of respondents (59.5%) felt that behaviour had become very much worse since they started teaching; together with those who felt there had been a fairly marked deterioration, this meant that over four-fifths of respondents (80.3%) felt there had been a deterioration. A tenth (9.5%), often young teachers who felt unable to comment owing to their limited experience, were undecided; a similar proportion felt that there had been little or no deterioration (10.2% total). Many found parental attitudes a major part of the problem, raising issues both with the sanctions available to teachers and teachers’ own security;

- Please help - we do have a very good behavioural policy but how do we cope with abusive and violent parents - ?!!? There are too many entrances to our school, adults, youths & parents come & go as they please! We need direction from the L.E.A. (Primary middle management, male, 40-9)
- Fights parent / parent - termly. (Primary, female, 50-9)
- More evidence of parents on drugs / alcohol abuse. (Primary, female, 29-39)
- Many parents believe and side with their children against the school and have very weak systems of discipline themselves. The children know we are powerless and take advantage. (Primary, female, 50-9)
- The main difficulties occur when parent(s) are challenging the school and look at us as the enemy. (Primary, female, 50-9)
- It feels that pupils think the rules do not apply to them personally. Their parents are largely responsible for breaking the dress code, and feel that it’s their right to do so. (Primary, female, 29-39)
- A lot of poor pupil behaviour in our school is condoned by parents and also is a direct result of instructions parents give their children e.g. if they get into trouble in class they must walk out of the lesson and phone home! (Secondary, female, 40-9)
- Experienced mumbled threats of suing from parents and I had one unfounded accusation of shaking a child violently. This was not pursued. (Primary, female, 40-9)
- I feel children now have such disgusting behaviour as they are the product of bad parents of bad parents. There is no respect, the children do not want to accept any rules or boundaries as they have not been brought up that way because their parents weren’t either. They resent authority even in Nursery and their parents are even more resentful. They are probably more badly behaved than the children. (Primary, female, 29-39)
- - I am very concerned about the vulnerability of staff regarding allegations by pupils & parents. I feel the whole system works on the principle of guilty until proved innocent and a legacy of suspicion. (Primary, female, 40-9)
- - Not pupils - but parental expectations i.e. not taking any responsibility, just accusations - no trust - too much compensation culture. Some parents need attention more than kids; we are a handy scapegoat for them to ‘shout’ at. (Primary, female, 29-39)
- - Parents are more argumentative and unsupportive, and more and more I am hearing children telling me and other staff how their parents feel school / teachers / education is crap - so why should the kids do what we want? (Primary, female, 29-39)

Some respondents felt that the problems were exacerbated by the emphasis on ‘consumers’ rights’ by politicians, OFSTED and the media over the last decade;

- - The attitude of parents is usually to say they can’t cope and pass the problem on to teachers and the school. It’s a problem for society as a whole, not just schools. (Primary, male, 60+)
- - Parents are encouraged to point the finger of blame at schools if their children do not behave well or do well at school. The status of teaching is low because the Government and the Media are always saying we are underachieving. (Primary, male, 50-9)
- - As HT of an inner city primary school I feel that pupil behaviour, parental refusal to accept
responsibility, LEA avoidance of school difficulties and a government policy of blame the schools / teacher is leading to a situation where teaching and learning in ‘tough’ schools will be almost impossible in the near future.

(Primary, male, 50-9)

- Much of the behaviour arises from the low status conferred on the teaching profession by low pay and damaging remarks from OFSTED, Woodhead, etc. Putnam’s prizes do nothing to restore public confidence in the professionalism of teachers. If the profession was respected, young people would aspire to join it.

(Secondary, male, 40-9)

- Pupil behaviour reflects a meaner, nastier, more selfish society…Either go for the free market and don’t expect schools to have to cater for parents who choose not to raise their children properly or start reminding parents they too have responsibilities. [I’ve worked in the Sudan so I am NOT blaming poverty!] (Secondary male, 40-9)

Some schools (and some individual teachers) had been able to sidestep the problem by removing themselves from contact with difficult children, but there also remained a number of teachers (especially those working in specialist units for difficult children) who felt that not enough allowance was made by adults for troubled children;

- Ultimately, as a Vol. Aided R.C. school, parents are advised to find another school - we then have a place available which sometimes goes straight to a ‘nice’ pupil from the school that received our rogue. (Secondary, female, 50-9)

- Schools seem to wish to remain bastions of academic life. Children today can be very troubled by their home circumstances. Teachers may not be the best people to offer support. We need to look at much more play therapy, counselling and help for troubled children. (Centrally employed teacher, female, 50-9)

Responses of individual groups

Older (50+) teachers were less likely to report a range of problems, including threats of third-party violence to pupils, and, threats by parents. However, the general lack of marked differences related to experience is striking (and contrary to expectations at the time the survey was designed), in contrast to the effect of age. It appears that late entrants to the profession make up by their life experience for their lack of teaching experience, or that pupils judge experience from age and act accordingly. Full-time teachers were more likely than part-time or supply teachers to have encountered threats of third-party violence to pupils. Supply teachers received more threats from pupils and parents. This suggest that the more marginal position of supply staff resulted in them encountering more serious threats to the actual conduct of their lessons (there were no differences between types of staff for the most frequent lower-level problems) but otherwise full-time teachers, as the permanent staff, encountered the more serious problems. Middle management, heads of year, curriculum co-ordinators and the leadership group encountered threats of third-party violence more often; again these were the teachers who were most likely to have to take responsibility for dealing with problem outsiders. There were highly significant differences between phases, with almost all behavioural problems significantly more frequent in secondary schools. However there was no significant difference between phases in threat of violence from parents. Pupil-pupil threatened violence and third-party threatened violence was more frequent in cities, and less likely to be reported in rural counties and private schools. The same pattern applied to threats from pupils and threats from parents, though there was some variation in the local authority areas where particular problems were most severe. Overall, the pattern is consistent with a priori expectations.
An explanatory model of the responses

Structural modelling, as its name implies, gives an overall picture of the structure of the relationships between all the categories covered in a questionnaire; the advantage of this approach is that it can make allowances for complex interactions between categories. In this case, for example, female teachers are concentrated in primary schools, which have better support systems; structural modelling can indicate which of these three inter-related influences is in fact related to differences in unacceptable behaviour. The large number of questions on different types of unacceptable behaviour and on support available to teachers were grouped into factors to give a more manageable model.

The factor analysis showed four clearly defined factors, reflecting behaviours of different levels of frequency and seriousness. The two aspects of parental threat load onto different factors. The second factor may be termed ‘threats and incidents’. It included threats of violence by pupils, pushing and touching, threats of violence by third parties such as parents, and serious incidents. All of these are liable to be highly disturbing to teachers. The third factor can be described as ‘violence to pupils’, including threatened violence from third parties, and from other pupils. These incidents differ from those in the second factor because threats of pupil-pupil violence, especially, are much more frequent. The first factor, and the one accounting for most variables, may be termed ‘frequently encountered’ unacceptable behaviour. It contained what may be regarded as the routine behaviours which nowadays disrupt school life - interruptions, answering back, disruption to lessons, refusal to work, offensive language, defiance, conduct violations, dress code violations, abuse / insult, bullying and damage to property. Finally, the fourth factor, ‘drugs and weapons’ includes traffic in drugs, possession of drugs and possession of offensive weapons - among the most serious, but rarest, incidents. There are three types of independent variables which could affect teachers’ experience of unacceptable behaviour; their own characteristics, such as age and seniority; characteristics of the schools they teach in, such as age-range taught and proportion of pupils receiving free school meals; and features of school and LEA management, such as training and support.

Building the structural model

The model required ‘frequent disruptive behaviour’ to be separated from the other three, more serious, types of unacceptable behaviour (threats and incidents, violence to pupils, and drugs and weapons). Both types of disruptive behaviour were related to pupil characteristics (only the percentages on the special educational needs register and receiving free school meals had a significant effect, the effects of pupils with English as an additional language and living outside the catchment area being negligible), and to the support available to teachers and pupils (support from senior management to teachers experiencing behaviour problems, teachers’ views being taken into account in policy formulation, support for pupils with behaviour problems, support from the LEA), but the proportionate effects were different, though the two types were closely related. Pupil characteristics had a quite strong effect on the more serious types of behaviour, including conflict with parents, and the effect of support was weaker than that of pupil characteristics. Frequent disruption was very strongly related to support, but inversely - good support was related to fewer problems. The effect of pupil characteristics was less than half as strong as that of support. In other words, for the more serious problems, support, though still beneficial, was over-ridden by the effect of the problems pupils brought into the school from outside, but for frequent disruption support could make a significant difference. The relative effect of influences from inside and outside the school is discussed more fully below.

Support was strongly related to age-range, being rated lower in secondary schools than primary and under-5s schools. Women reported better support than men, but this was related to the higher proportion of women in the primary sector;
the direct effect was negligible. In other words primary schools offer better support to their teachers, irrespective of sex, than secondary schools, though this may of course be due to the mainly female staff of primary schools. Pupil characteristics were also more favourable in primary than secondary schools; this could be a cause or effect of the better support available in primary schools.

**Discussion**

It would be easy to claim that the survey exaggerates the seriousness of the overall problems - some respondents encountered very few problems, though this could result either from their decision to move to more privileged schools or to their school ‘unloading’ difficult children on to other schools which would not be able to refuse them, due to their under-recruitment. We should also note the comments of a few respondents that a survey of this type tends to encourage respondents to complain about a situation which they might otherwise have tolerated without comment. However several points suggest that the survey has external validity. First, as noted above in the discussion of the sample, the distribution of the sample is closely similar to that of a survey of performance management (Neill 2001a) - which also produced positive comments (supporting the performance management policy initiative). This suggests that neither survey is drawing only on the opinions of hostile and disaffected teachers. The possibility remains that these samples are both biased towards teachers with negative opinions. However the current difficulties in recruiting and retaining teachers provide an objective back-up to the written-in comments suggesting that pupil behaviour is a major reason for teachers leaving the profession. Two age-groups must cause particular concern - experienced middle-management teachers, who, as is apparent from the written-in comments, carry much of the burden in practice for dealing with difficult behaviour, and younger teachers who are deciding to get out of the profession while they still have the opportunity to develop a career in a more pleasant working environment. This pattern is consistent with other surveys of teacher stress (e.g. Troman & Woods 2001). It is clear from the comments of many respondents that problems were not confined to ‘difficult’ inner-city areas but extended to ‘quiet’ rural locations - but that in both types of area within-school factors, especially the attitude of senior management, could be critical in the effectiveness of school discipline policies. To an extent, as is apparent from the written-in comments, the attitude of senior management depends on individual personalities and results from decisions taken on appointments at school level, but there are also important factors due to policy impositions. Firstly, there is the burden of bureaucracy, the subject of a previous N.U.T. survey (Neill 1999); senior staff are forced, or decide, to spend time on paperwork rather than actually managing the school. This emphasis is encouraged by the emphasis on accountability and performance indicators such as reducing the number of exclusions and the promotion of inclusion policies. Many comments indicate that senior managers are reluctant to act to exclude difficult pupils, or are under pressure not to do so, and that, where there is no effective support at school or L.E.A. level (often because of financial constraints) middle management and classroom teachers are left to deal with the resulting problems. This reflects in increasing concern with accountability headteachers feel to a range of external stakeholders, including parents(Osborn et. al. 2000), accentuated by the general emphasis by politicians on the rights of parents as consumers on behalf of their children (Labour Party 2001). However it is questionable whether this approach is appropriate for a public service like education, where attendance is compulsory and producers (teachers) are increasingly reluctant to join the profession or stay in post. This issue is now being addressed by the government (Morris 2001, DfEE 2001) but it remains to be seen whether this will lead to an
alteration in the balance between parents and teachers, as there is already a range of legislation which could be used against parents and others who harass teachers (DfEE 2001) but seldom is.

The structural model shows that the relative importance of these effects differs between ‘frequent disruption’ - the relatively low-level disruption to lessons and other school activities which most respondents experienced on a weekly basis and which they felt interfered with the education of the ‘silent majority’ of cooperative children - and more serious types of disruption.

‘Frequent disruption’ related more strongly to effective support in school than to the educational (special needs) and social (free school meals) problems children brought to school. Respondents’ written-in comments indicated that effective support and collegiality was critical - some comments indicated that schools in difficult areas could be effective and supportive institutions to work in, while others complained of a lack of support even though the area was not a deprived one - evidence from this survey and elsewhere indicated that difficulties existed even in ‘leafy’ rural and suburban areas. This suggests that evidence for accountability can interfere with the actual effective functioning of schools; it may also be that the current demands for senior staff to show accountability may discourage effective disciplinarians from taking on these posts (cf. Troman & Woods 2001). Some respondents indicated that they had previously held senior positions and had now moved to less demanding positions. To reduce ‘frequent disruption’ it may be necessary to make more careful selection of appointments, where possible, at local level, and, at policy level, to reduce the bureaucratic pressure on senior staff which favours paper demonstrations of performance at the cost of actual effectiveness in school management. While the behaviours covered by ‘frequent disruption’ do not directly involve parents, they are critical to the effective functioning of schools as educational institutions and therefore to the educational effectiveness which parents could reasonably demand.

Both the structural model and written-in comments indicated that the more serious types of unacceptable behaviour were often due to relatively small numbers of children and parents - written-in comments indicating that such children were often indifferent to any of the available sanctions which the school could exercise and that the lack of support available at local authority level meant that schools were having to deal with children for whom they had no effective coping strategy. The current initiatives to increase the sanctions available to teachers (DfEE 2001a,b) may, if carried through, have a desirable effect in increasing the sanctions available and could have a knock-on increasing the acceptance of teachers’ authority in respect of the lower-level ‘frequent disruption’. The importance of reducing both types is evident from the written-in comments by teachers who are planning to leave the profession. It is not surprising that some teachers who have suffered assaults become disenchanted and intend to move to jobs where they are not at risk in this way; but it is also evident that low-level disruption wears teachers down and leads to them abandoning teaching. The pervasive problem of lack of respect for teachers among pupils and parents seems likely to be the more difficult of the two issues to solve in a climate where deference towards institutions and their representatives in general has decreased (Troman & Woods 2001), and as some respondents pointed out, this is a problem for society as a whole.
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