

# Summary Schools and pupils with behavioural problems

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## **Action on behaviour: structure and relationship**

What can be done to improve the education of pupils with behavioural problems? In these recommendations, the Education Council argues that schools need to create a steady preventive basis by organising strong education by a professional teaching team. This should take place in a clearly structured school that has clear rules. Within this context, there should be suitable attention on and scope for personal relationships between teachers and pupils. The basic pastoral care service provided to all pupils should comprise a clear educational climate in which the desired behaviour is established, practiced and rewarded, and where undesirable behaviour is ignored or, where necessary, punished.

This advisory report on behavioural problems in education covers primary education, general secondary education and vocational secondary education. It concerns pupils with behavioural disorders, but also pupils who schools or parents consider to have behavioural problems, which have not been investigated or registered.

The Education Council's recommendations are made on the basis of these principles.

## **1. A common-sense approach and prevention policy**

Actors in the education community and policymakers at the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science must take a common-sense and critical approach to the increasingly nuanced classification of problem behaviour and the day-to-day use of classifications used to describe this behaviour. Research has shown that behaviour – even behaviour that has a biological cause – can mostly be influenced by the pupils in question themselves together with the aid of teachers, school directors, parents, and assistants. This realisation is a determining factor in the attitude of the people involved and for their response to the behaviour, and therefore also influences the development of that behaviour. It is about teaching pupils to learn not to just go through life with all its limitations, but to gradually take more and more responsibility for themselves.

### *Teacher: indicate... but don't make a diagnosis*

Teachers have an important role in pointing out the problems they see. But it is the sole reserve of certain behavioural specialists to make a diagnosis. Difficult behaviour may be an expression of a range of problems. For example, extremely busy behaviour can be a symptom of ADHD, but it might also be due to autism. Or it could be an outward sign that a child is experiencing difficulties at home. Even an experienced teacher cannot always say for sure what is causing certain behaviour. Schools and teachers should therefore restrict themselves to describing what they actually observe and to referring children for a diagnosis as necessary. Do not use loaded language lightly. The teaching team and the entire school should agree to remain critical about the use of medical and psychiatric terms.

### *Prevention policy*

Behavioural problems can be exacerbated in certain environments. If we can change these environments, then we should change them. In this context, education policymakers work closely with the policymakers involved in designing the social and physical environments for pupils. The prevention of learning problems and their identification when the problems are still relatively small is high on the agenda of the Minister for Youth and Families. The Education Council is encouraged by this. In tandem with the Social and Economic Council of the Netherlands (SER), the Education Council urges the Minister to think through existing prevention policies concerning alcohol, drugs, and financial loans by young people.

## **2. Help schools to deal with behavioural problems**

A large part of care can be provided to pupils with behavioural problems within the primary process of an ordinary school, provided of course that the facilities available allow for this and that the teachers are adept in dealing with specific behavioural problems. The government should find ways to help ordinary schools strengthen their capability to deal with behavioural problems. Other schools could be given access to examples

of practice. Furthermore, training and additional staff resources are proven methods of increasing the capability of schools. Policymakers should place these topics on the agenda in their discussions with school leaders.

#### *A layered care structure*

Schools support teachers by providing a working system of pupil pastoral care, a clear educational care structure, good partnerships and adequate training opportunities. Each school also makes clear what care it provides, what it can reasonably provide, and when its limits have been reached. Regular schools would be well advised to ensure their care structure is layered. The basic pastoral care service provided to all pupils should comprise a clear educational climate in which the desired behaviour is established, practiced and rewarded, and where undesirable behaviour is ignored or, where necessary, punished. Schools could then develop one or more supplementary care packages for pupils who need more. In a very small number of cases (estimated to be a few percent), pupils' problems could be advanced. For these pupils, it would be best if the school established long-term partnerships with external experts.

#### *School: teachers deserve coaching*

Some teachers are 'naturals' when it comes to dealing with behavioural problems, and they derive pleasure from their talent. This effective behaviour can be analysed, described and learned. Research has shown that the prevention and management of behavioural problems sinks or swims with a positive, active core approach, effective instruction, effective class management, the ability to deal with differences and the relationship between teacher and pupil. Furthermore, teachers need to be able to observe well, and be able to reflect on the reasons for the behavioural problems. Pupils can also benefit from teachers addressing behavioural change in a planned and structured manner.

Teachers need to know that they can rely on the support and help of their school governing bodies and school leaders. They should be taught a range of responses on their teacher training programmes, but also through on-going training. At the same time, teachers should not just 'muddle through' when problems are persistent. Each teacher should feel secure enough to be able to ask school leaders for extra support. Management is responsible for achieving a working climate where this is possible.

#### *Establish a Professional Academic Community for Behavioural Problems and Education*

There is a diverse range of methods and handbooks available on how to deal with behavioural problems. It would be beneficial if this knowledge were bundled and made more accessible. It is the responsibility of policymakers, in consultation with professional groups and sector organisations, to improve the infrastructure in this area. They could consider establishing a Professional Academic Community for Behavioural Problems and Education. This would be a collaborative partnership of researchers, trainers and practitioners (teacher from mainstream and special needs education). The aim would be to develop, test and implement a set of knowhow and instruments on behavioural problems in education, and to answer questions from individual teachers and schools.

### **3. Bring the actors involved in schools into formation**

#### *Activate parental responsibility*

Constructive partnerships between schools and parents is important in dealing with behavioural problems. Parent groups are also important. Parents and schools should keep each other informed about the nature of the problems and the situations where they occur. They can then look for solutions together and agree on the approach. The new Centres for Youth and Families could take a pioneering role in supporting parents. When problems are still minor (when the children are still young), they should be given help to prevent or alleviate behavioural problems. The school head remains responsible for the school; he or she alone is able to consider the wishes of the parents and pupils against the qualifications and capabilities of the team.

#### *Advisory care team as a branch of the Centre for Youth and Families*

There may come a point when a school has done all that is within its possibilities and its core remit. It is then a matter of professional responsibility to indicate that the limit has been reached. At this point, it is up to the advisory care team to make a follow-up plan and transfer responsibility for the pupil to another authority (e.g. special needs education, youth care services). Ideally, the school would continue to keep track of the pupil with

a view to the possibility of the pupil's return. The sector organisations could take this step-by-step approach as the basis for their national care reference framework.

The duties of the Centres for Youth and Families and the advisory care teams partly overlap. In the Education Council's view, the advisory care teams should continue to be kept informed after the inception of the Centres for Youth and Families, and retain control as far as possible of the care provided to children aged four to eighteen years and their parents. This would effectively mean that the advisory care team would become a branch of the local Centre for Youth and Families.

*Profiling special needs education (as assisting schools)*

Special needs schools (clusters 3 and 4) often have extensive experience with influencing behaviour. These schools could make more explicit what they have to offer to mainstream schools. What is their vision on behavioural problems? What action have they taken to influence behaviour? What results has this action achieved? Policymakers could alert special needs schools to the desirability of profiling themselves as an 'assisting school'. A structured approach to this could be established with the support of policymakers.

*Youth care services: a single point of responsibility per child*

The Education Council agrees with the advice of the SER to strive towards a situation where young people who require help are assigned a single professional to assist, coach and mentor them. This should preferably be done in a context where one of the agencies involved has overall responsibility and provides the coordinating professional.

*Teacher training programmes: behavioural problems as part of the core curriculum*

Knowhow on behavioural problems should be part of the core curriculum on every teacher training programme. The learning content of initial teacher training programmes should gain input from the expertise obtained by professional teachers in their day-to-day practice. Schools could give a stimulus to these informal learning processes of professional, and transfer them to other schools and teacher training programmes.