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What do school staff perceive to be the most effective strategies to manage low-level disruption?

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Table of Contents

Abstract

Low-level disruption occurs frequently in classrooms in England, with some teachers reporting such disruptions in every lesson (Ofsted, 2014). This has a significant impact on children's learning and progress as well as causing stress and anxiety for teachers (Moore et al, 2019). Some key approaches school staff may use in their classroom include a behavioural, humanistic, systemic and psychological approach (Parsonson, 2012). Teachers may use one of these approaches or multiple and can adapt them to meet the needs of the learners in their class (Rogers, 2015). This project aims to investigate the strategies school staff use the most and find most effective in managing low-level disruption in the classroom. The research followed an interpretive enquiry approach to gain an in-depth understanding of school staff's opinions. First, semi-structured interviews took place at the researcher's placement school, which were then thematically analysed, and main themes were used to develop a questionnaire that was distributed through social media to evaluate the generalisability. The findings of the research suggest that school staff perceive maintaining high expectations, praise and rewards and positive relationships as effective strategies to manage low-level disruption in the classroom, which correspond to the theoretical foundations of behaviourism and humanistic approaches.

Introduction

This research project aims to investigate what school staff perceive to be the most effective strategies for managing low-level disruption in the primary classroom. The decision for this focus was due to the increasing concerns about the impact low-level disruption has within schools in England (Hart, 2010; Ofsted, 2014; Moore et al, 2019). It can be argued that high-level disruptive behaviours such as bullying and aggression have the biggest impact in schools as behaviours are extreme and often cause harm (Clunies-Rosset, Little and Kienhuis, 2008). However, whilst these behaviours are still a great concern to children and school staff, research suggests that low-level disruption has a greater impact as it occurs more frequently, with some teachers reporting such disruptions in every lesson (Steer, 2005, Ofsted, 2014).

The research was first conducted at the researcher's placement school, where semi-structured interviews took place with 3 teachers and 1 teaching assistant. Following the first data collection phase, a questionnaire was developed and distributed on social media to engage with a larger sample size and to test the generalisability of initial findings.

This research aims to identify strategies that school staff perceive to be effective in managing low-level disruption which may help practitioners and new early career teachers.

Literature review

This literature review will first discuss what is meant by low-level disruption and its impact on a school classroom before discussing the importance of managing behaviour and common strategies used to manage it.

What is low-level disruption?

The meaning of low-level disruption often lacks clarity and has a broad range of meanings due to individuals' different experiences of this (Tennant, 2004; Nash,

Schlosser and Scarr, 2016). This was highlighted by the Elton Report (1989), which found difficulty in establishing criteria for the meaning of low-level disruption due to varying perceptions of teachers.

Research suggests that low-level refers to behaviour that is low in intensity and does not cause physical harm to others (Sullivan et al, 2014). Low-level disruption is commonly perceived as off-task behaviour where children are distracted from learning and working in the classroom (Turner, 2003; Tennant, 2004; Narhi et al, 2015; Yusoff and Mansor, 2016). Additionally, it is suggested that disruption in schools refers to the disturbances caused to either the learners themselves, teachers, or peers as a result of behaviour which inhibits learning and a positive classroom environment (McGoey et al, 2010; Esturgo-Deu and Sala-Roca, 2010).

More specifically, a radar report carried out by Ofsted (2014) asked 1,048 teachers to identify the most common behaviours associated with low-level disruption. The most frequent behaviours included disturbing other children during learning, calling out and fidgeting with equipment. Additional behaviours identified included swinging on chairs, humming and a lack of engagement in work (Ofsted, 2014; Sullivan et al, 2014).

Having explored the research on "what is low-level disruption", it can be defined as off-task behaviour in the classroom that does not cause physical harm to others but rather is distracting and disruptive to learning. It includes behaviours such as calling out, making unnecessary noises and disengagement with set tasks (Ofsted, 2014; Sullivan et al, 2014).

The impact of low-level disruption

Research suggests low-level disruption within classrooms negatively impacts teachers' mental health and increases their stress levels (Kyriacou, 2009; Beltman, Mansfield and Price, 2011; Kipps-Vaughan, 2013). This is expanded by Scott, Hirn and Alter (2014) who suggest that constant interruptions throughout lessons cause teachers to question their ability as practitioners and leave them feeling frustrated. Additionally, a recent study conducted by Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2017) found that

disruptive behaviours cause difficulty in lesson planning, as often the learning process takes longer due to constant disruptions, which can make it harder to cover the curriculum. Whilst this research was carried out within secondary schools, its findings are still relevant as primary schools also cover a broad curriculum. Contrastingly, many teachers believe low-level disruption is manageable and does not negatively impact them or their lesson plans (Ofsted, 2014). Though this may be the case for some, an additional survey of 723 teachers found that 1 in 20 teachers felt low-level disruption had a high impact on their lessons (Ofsted, 2014). Bennett (2017) enhances the validity of these findings suggesting low-level disruption is a main issue for teachers in England.

Overall, there is recent and sufficient evidence to suggest that low-level disruption often has a negative impact on teachers and school staff, increasing stress levels and disrupting lesson plans (Kipps-Vaughan, 2013; Ofsted, 2014; Scott, Hirn and Alter, 2014; Bennett, 2017).

Not only does low-level disruption impact teachers and school staff, but it can also have a negative impact on children and their learning (Ofsted, 2014; Moore et al, 2019). Low-level disruption can cause children to lose up to one hour of learning daily because teachers have to stop to address such behaviours or children become distracted (Ofsted, 2014). This is expanded by Moore et al (2019), who found that children's progress can be negatively impacted due to lost time and distractions from low-level disruptive behaviours. However, Bru (2009) found that not all children are negatively impacted academically by low-level disruption. It is rather the children that present the disruptive behaviours than the rest of the learners in the class. Although this research was carried out in Norway, the sample size was large and consisted of 2332 pupils. Therefore, the generalisability is reliable, and findings could be applicable to schools in England. Findings by Bulotsky-shearer et al (2011) agree and suggest that children who present low-level behaviours often lack concentration and motivation towards tasks. Therefore, they are likely to achieve lower academically than the rest of their peers.

Behaviour management

As discussed, low-level disruption can significantly affect children and teachers (Ofsted, 2014). It is, therefore, vital that teachers manage behaviour in the classroom to reduce such behaviours occurring. This directly relates to teaching standard one, where teachers must create a safe environment where they effectively manage behaviour (DfE,2011). Ruttledge (2022) states that school staff frequently believe behaviour management involves dealing with and disciplining inappropriate behaviour rather than a means of promoting positive behaviour. Whilst behaviour management still involves dealing with inappropriate behaviour, it also aims to prevent such behaviours from occurring in the first place by implementing a wide range of strategies such as rules, rewards or sanctions (Reynolds and Muijs, 2018). This is expanded by Johansen, Little and Akin-Little (2011), who state that behaviour management involves implementing effective strategies to reduce disruptive behaviours and increase the engagement of pupils so that learning can take place.

Approaches

There is no one set strategy or approach that school staff should follow when managing classroom behaviour (Parsonson, 2012; Rogers, 2015). However, there are a wide range of strategies and approaches that can be used depending on the needs of children in a class (Armstrong, 2021). This section will discuss the theoretical foundations behind commonly used approaches and the strategies that can be used within the classroom.

Behavioural approaches

The behavioural theory of humans, developed by Watson (1928), centres a relationship between behaviour and the environment (Bull and Solity,1987; Woolard, 2010). A key belief is that behaviour can be learned, shaped and managed through everyday experiences and the environment people are in (MacBlain, 2014). In terms of a classroom environment, children are encouraged to possess desirable behaviours rather than disruptive behaviours from their teacher and the specific

strategies they implement (Omomia and Omomia, 2014). Strategies that stem from a behavioural approach include the use of classroom rules, rewards, sanctions, high expectations, being consistent and positive or negative reinforcement (Gable et al, 2009; Hart, 2010).

A study carried out by Papageorgi and Economidou Stavrou (2021) found that rules and high expectations have a significant influence on student engagement and motivation in the classroom, which encourages desired behaviours and reduces unwanted behaviours. Whilst this study focused on the environment within music lessons, the findings are relevant and could be transferred to other subjects in the classroom. These findings are expanded by Alter and Haydon (2017), who found that rules and high expectations are effective strategies as they establish what is expected of children. However, they state that rules alone are not the most effective and should be combined with other behavioural strategies such as rewards and positive reinforcement.

The work of Skinner (1953) is a key influence on behaviourism. Skinner (1953) built upon this theory recognising that using positive reinforcement by rewarding and praising children will strengthen desired behaviours (Miltenberger, 2015), and negative reinforcement such as sanctions, will reduce unwanted behaviours (Kaliska, 2002; Little and Akin-Little, 2008). This theory has gained previous criticism within research as it can be seen as a means of bribery or temporary obedience (Johansen, Little and Akin-little, 2011) and can cause children anxiety in fear they are not showing the desired behaviours (Yuan and Chen (2012). However, a recent study conducted by Bear et al (2017) found that the use of positive and negative reinforcement did not have any harmful effects on children. They found these strategies to be most effective when they were not overused and concluded that positive reinforcement increases motivation and encourages children to develop autonomy over their behaviour. Although this study was not carried out in England, its large sample size of 10,344 increases the reliability of its findings. Additionally, these findings are echoed by Payne (2015) who carried out their research in England.

Humanistic approaches

Unlike behaviourism, a humanistic approach does not wish to change behaviour but rather understand and show support (Causton, Tracey-Bronson and Macleod, 2015). This approach accepts disruptive behaviour as an unmet need where children's feelings and emotions are considered, and solutions are encouraged (Tulasi and Rao, 2021). This theory was developed by Rogers (1985), who believed behaviours cannot be taught, but they can be facilitated by school staff. The focus should be on the whole child, and the environment should be maintained and adapted to meet the needs of all children in a class. Rather than directly telling a child to display desired behaviours, they are supported through encouragement of reflection so that a child can develop autonomy and self-awareness of their behaviours (Horner, 2010). Specific strategies that follow this approach include providing choice, understanding behaviour from a child's point of view and finding and offering solutions (Causton, Tracey-Bronson and Macleod, 2015).

Whilst a humanistic approach can be effective in managing behaviour in the classroom, Khatib, Sarem and Hamidi (2013) suggest school staff can be reluctant to use this in practice as it diminishes their role in the classroom, and they worry they will lose control. However, research carried out by Skinner et al (2008) found that care and autonomy support shown by school staff helps to decrease disruptive behaviours and encourages children to engage with desired behaviours without a teacher directly telling them what they should do. This research was carried out over 4 years, which positively impacts the reliability. Additionally, Beymer and Thomson (2015) provide an explanation for the findings suggesting people are motivated when they are given a choice and can control their own learning. Suggesting that when children are forced to follow certain behaviours, they are more likely to rebel against them. Overall, this suggests that using a humanistic approach can be effective in managing behaviour in the classroom by promoting autonomy and encouraging children to make the right choices with support.

Systemic approaches

Systemic approaches focus on the environment and influences of social interactions rather than the individual (Cooper and Jacobs, 2011). A key belief of this approach is that disruptive behaviours emerge from social interactions between a person, their family, their community and school (Hart, 2010). An example by Lindquist et al (1987) explains that disturbances within a child's family or community may cause a child to display disruptive behaviours in school because of overlapping systems. This suggests that there are underlying reasons behind the behaviour of a child. Therefore, this approach aims to understand and support pupil behaviour (Hart, 2010), which is similar to a humanistic approach. Additionally, disruptive behaviours may occur from an unmet need or disturbance within a school environment and therefore, a strategy is needed to ensure needs are met (Cooper and Upton, 1991). Common strategies that follow a systemic approach include creating a high-quality, effective learning environment where solutions are offered to help behaviour (Hart, 2010). Also, interventions or reframing of words from "put your hand up" to "I like that you are excited to share your answer" are often used to encourage emotional regulation and autonomy to manage behaviour (Tyler and Jones, 2002; Osher et al, 2010).

Olson (2002) states that teachers and school staff are often disinclined to use this approach in the classroom as it does not believe the behaviour lies within the child but rather the environment, which teachers can find frustrating when a child portrays frequent disruptive behaviours. However, the findings of Tyler and Jones (2002) found that school staff need to engage with this approach to see the full effects. They found that a systemic approach to managing behaviour was effective in reducing unwanted behaviours. Whilst this literature could be outdated, the research took place across 4 different groups, which increases both the validity and reliability of the results.

Psychodynamic approaches

In the classroom, psychodynamic approaches are influenced by the attachment theory and positive relationships between pupils and school staff are valued (Kourkoutas, 2012). The attachment theory aims to regulate emotions by providing security between the caregiver and care seeker (Archangelo et al, 2012) in the classroom. This means a child needs to know that school staff are there to guide and support them rather than be a threat to them (Riley, 2010). Psychodynamic approaches aim to build trusting and secure relationships and school staff should understand past experiences of pupils (Colley and Cooper, 2017). Additional strategies that can be incorporated in the classroom include appropriate tasks, promoting self-regulation and showing nurture, care and kindness (Geddes, 2017).

A study conducted by Dean and Gibbs (2023) found that there is a correlation between relationships and disruptive behaviour in the classroom. Their findings suggest that positive relationships between school staff and pupils create a supportive environment where pupils are more likely to show respect and disruptive behaviours are reduced. Although this study was carried out in secondary schools, the fundamentals are appropriate to a primary school setting. Their findings are echoed by Van Bergen, Graham and Sweller (2020), who found that positive relationships that showed care and kindness were effective in reducing disruptive behaviours. Negative relationships that showed unfairness and were hostile resulted in higher frequencies of disruptive behaviours.

Research approach

An interpretive inquiry approach was chosen to explore school staff's perceptions and beliefs of effective strategies to manage low-level disruption as this approach focuses on people and their experiences (Grant and Lincoln; 2021). It aims to understand individuals' actions and beliefs formed through their own experiences and interactions with others, often in a particular environment (Moss, 1994; Creswell, 2009; Yanow and Schwartz-shea, 2011; Grant and Lincoln; 2021). Further, this approach seeks to uncover multiple perspectives as reality is different for everyone (Willis, 2007). This allows a researcher to gain a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon (Morehouse, 2011).

This research approach is most appropriate for this research project as school staff's perceptions are being understood based on their experiences in a school environment. Data collected will be subjective to personal experiences which allows for a rich and in-depth understanding of individual perceptions (Muganga, 2015).

A limitation of this approach highlighted by Wagstaff and Williams (2014) explains that often researchers' interpretations, may be influenced by their own experiences, leading to inaccurate representations of a participant's beliefs and experiences. To overcome this, the researcher recorded and transcribed interviews, recommended by Braun and Clarke (2022), which ensures that participants' perceptions have an accurate representation.

Data collection

Data collection within this research project followed an exploratory sequential design, where the researcher first collected qualitative data through semi-structured interviews at their placement. This data was analysed and used to develop a questionnaire which was distributed online through social media. The use of this design enables the researcher to evaluate the generalisability of their findings through a new group of participants (Creswell and Clark, 2018; Dawadi, Shrestha and Giri, 2021). This is best suited for this research project as the researcher's

placement had a very small sample. It, therefore, enabled them to check their findings amongst a larger sample, as recommended by Coe et al (2021).

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were first conducted at the researcher's placement which consisted of 5 open-ended questions (Appendix 1) to obtain an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences and beliefs on effective strategies for managing low-level disruption (Denscombe, 2017; Creswell and Creswell, 2018). This has successfully been used by Pathak and Intratat, (2012) to explore perceptions of school staff as it enabled the researcher to be flexible and have the freedom to explore topics that arose rather than pre-empting them. Ruslin et al (2022) argue that semi-structured interviews are most effective in data collection as it enables the researcher to collect rich, extensive data of participants' unique perspectives rather than a generalised understanding which is usually obtained through standard interviews (Punch, 2009).

Due to the small sample available, participants were obtained through convenience sampling, where participants were selected due to their accessibility to the researcher (Kumar, 2014). Participants were given a consent form which outlined the study's requirements (appendix 2) as recommended by Kumar (2014). It was made clear to potential participants that participation was completely voluntary and there would be no repercussions for choosing not to, which is supported by Punch and Oceana (2014). Informed consent was received by 3 teachers and 1 teaching assistant.

Following the interviews, transcriptions were made, and they were analysed using thematic analysis recommended by Braun and Clarke (2022). This involved assigning codes to raw data to identify and report overall themes within the data (Denscombe 2017; Braun and Clarke, 2022). Thematic analysis can be a complex approach, and often, codes can be misinterpreted during analysis (Castleberry and Nolen, 2018). To overcome this, careful consideration was taken when assigning codes to data to enable an accurate representation of participants' perceptions, as advised by Sundler et al (2018).

Online questionnaire

A questionnaire (Appendix 3) was developed using Qualtrics to build on and support the identified themes from the thematic analysis of interview responses, as recommended by Creswell and Clark (2018). The questionnaire was distributed on social media, which invited teachers, teaching assistants and higher-level teaching assistants to participate, a total of 33 responses were received. The use of social media is recommended by Denscombe (2017) as it enables the researcher to reach participants who are linked to specific groups, such as teaching groups, and it provides a ready-made research population. The use of an online questionnaire provided greater anonymity of participants (Regmi et al, 2016), and it enabled data collection to take place over a shorter time frame. This was beneficial for an exploratory design as this approach can be time-consuming (Coe et al, 2021). The data collected was transferred into an Excel spreadsheet so that statistical analysis and thematic analysis could take place. This data was then connected with the data collected from the interviews so that integrated patterns could be identified, as advised by Creswell and Clark (2018).

Ethical considerations

It is important to consider all ethical issues when conducting a research project to protect all participants and to ensure integrity (Punch, 2009; Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Ethical clearance was granted from York St. John University and ethical guidelines were always adhered to. Gatekeeper consent was given by the headteacher at the researchers' placement (Appendix 4) as recommended by Palaiologou, Needham and Male (2015), which enabled the research to be carried out. Participants of both the interviews and online questionnaire were provided with clear explanations of the purpose of the research and their informed consent was sought prior to the data collection. Participant anonymity was ensured throughout this research project, participant names were excluded from all records to ensure confidentiality, and all data was stored securely as recommended by Kumar (2014).

Findings

Theme 1: Maintaining high expectations

Interview findings:
The most common theme to emerge from interviews conducted with school staff was maintaining high expectations of behaviour.

All participants spoke about the importance of having high expectations so that children know what is expected of them. The data suggests this is effective in managing low-level disruption as children have a "clear understanding" and "encouragement" of the correct behaviours they should follow in the classroom.

Participants also stated the importance of maintaining high expectations in the classroom. Most believed "consistency is the key" and when high expectations are not maintained, children can push boundaries and low-level disruption is more likely to occur. Participant B's response illustrates this:

> *"If you allow the behaviour to take place then you are promoting it and expectations are undermined. Maintain expectations in every lesson and remind children of behaviour expectations."* [Participant B, March 2023]

This response further suggests that using reminders is important in maintaining expectations in the classroom to manage low-level disruption. 3 out of 4 participants said they reinforce expectations regularly so that children are reminded of how they should behave. The participant who did not speak about regular reminders stated they would stop and wait until expectations are met. This would suggest that maintaining expectations is significant in managing low-level disruption.

Online Questionnaire Findings:

How do you maintain high expectations in the classroom?

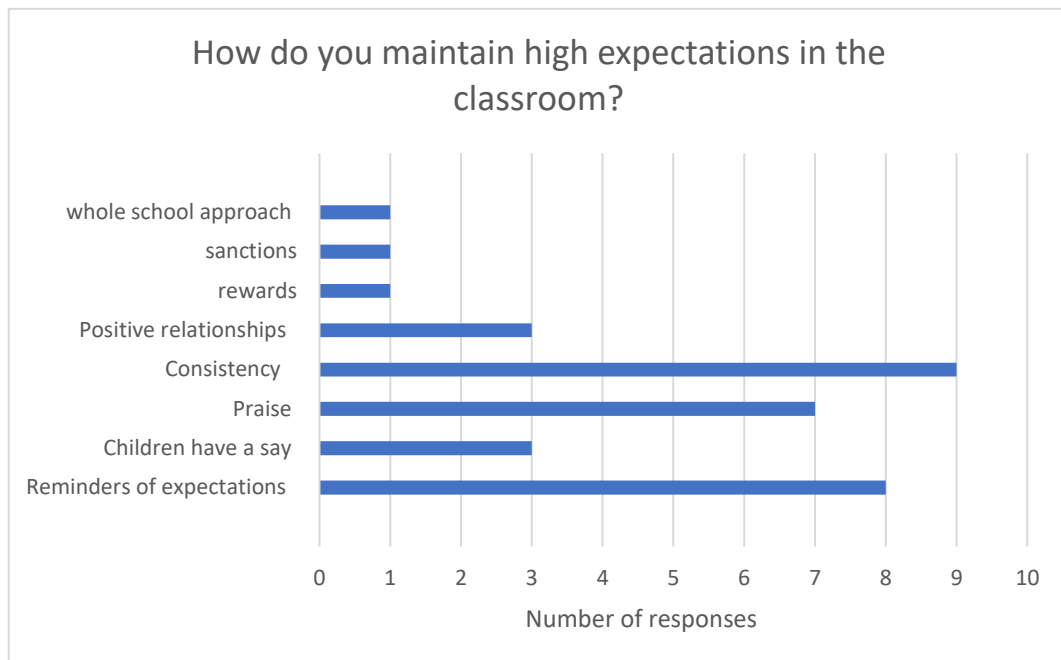| Category	Number of responses
whole school approach	1
sanctions	1
rewards	1
Positive relationships	3
Consistency	9
Praise	7
Children have a say	3
Reminders of expectations	8

Number of responses

Figure 1. How do participants maintain high expectations in the classroom?

Figure 1 demonstrates participants' beliefs of how they maintain high expectations in the classroom. Responses were thematically coded and grouped accordingly. The data suggests consistency and reminders of expectations are most used to maintain expectations which reflects the data collected from interviews. Additionally, the use of praise was an important aspect in maintaining high expectations which is a key theme that arose from interview data. Overall, there is evidence to suggest consistency and reminders of expectations are effective in maintaining expectations to manage low-level disruption.
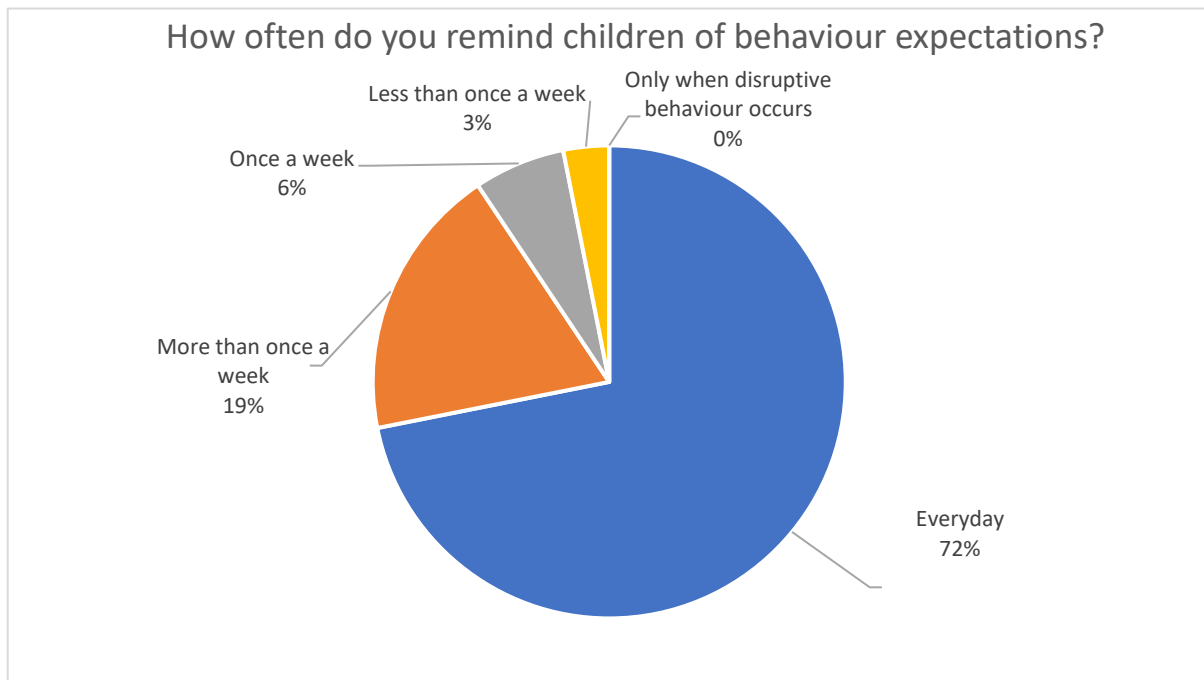
Figure 2. How often do participants remind children of behaviour expectations?

The data collected from the online survey suggests most participants remind children of behaviour expectations regularly with 72% of participants doing this daily and 19% more than once a week (Figure 2). In accordance with the interview findings, there is evidence to suggest that reminding children of behaviour expectations regularly is an important aspect of maintaining high expectations to manage low-level disruption.

Theme 2: Praise and rewards

Interview findings:

Another common theme to arise from interview responses was the use of praise and rewards. All participants felt that using these strategies are effective in managing low-level disruption in their classroom practice.

The data collected suggests that praising children who are displaying positive behaviour is effective in managing low-level disruption as it encourages other children to make the right choices and ensures that children who are making the right choices feel valued. Participant C's response exemplifies this:

> "I focus on praising positive behaviour I can see, and other children will adjust their behaviour to match" [Participant C, March 2023]

Most participants also noted that it is important to praise children who often do not show the correct behaviours. Half of the participants explained it is important to find small things that a child is doing right so that they can be encouraged to follow behaviour expectations. Another participant stated that when they saw a pupil who often caused disruption doing the correct thing, they would give "over the top" praise.

A similar impact was recognised for the use of rewards in the classroom. Most participants perceived rewards as an important strategy to reduce low-level disruption because they felt it motivated children to make the right behaviour choices and made pupils "feel appreciated" for following expectations. Participants felt the use of rewards is most effective with younger children than children in upper key stage 2. A participant explained that rewards were given out frequently in key stage 1 either every lesson or daily. Conversely, participants used rewards less frequently in key stage 2 and used them on a weekly basis.
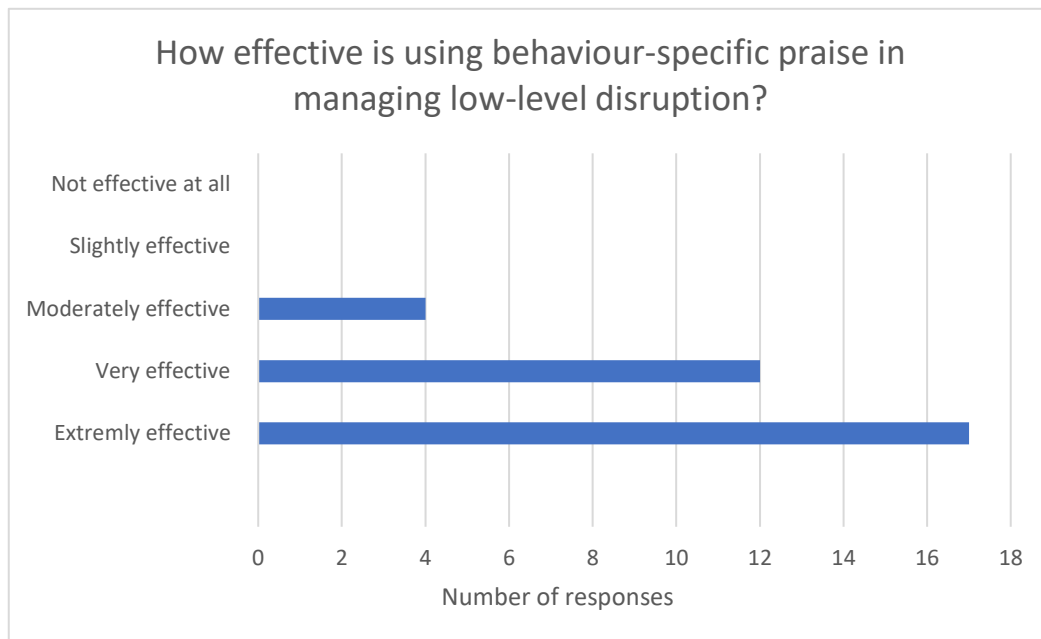
Online questionnaire findings:

Figure 3. How effective is behaviour-specific praise?

As demonstrated in Figure 3, participants were asked how effective they believed behaviour-specific praise is in managing low-level disruption using a 5-point Likert scale (1-5) (extremely effective- not effective at all). 51.5% of responses believed it is extremely effective in managing low-level disruption, whilst 36% believed it is very effective and 12% moderately effective. This suggests that praising correct behaviours is effective in managing low-level disruption which aligns with the interview findings.
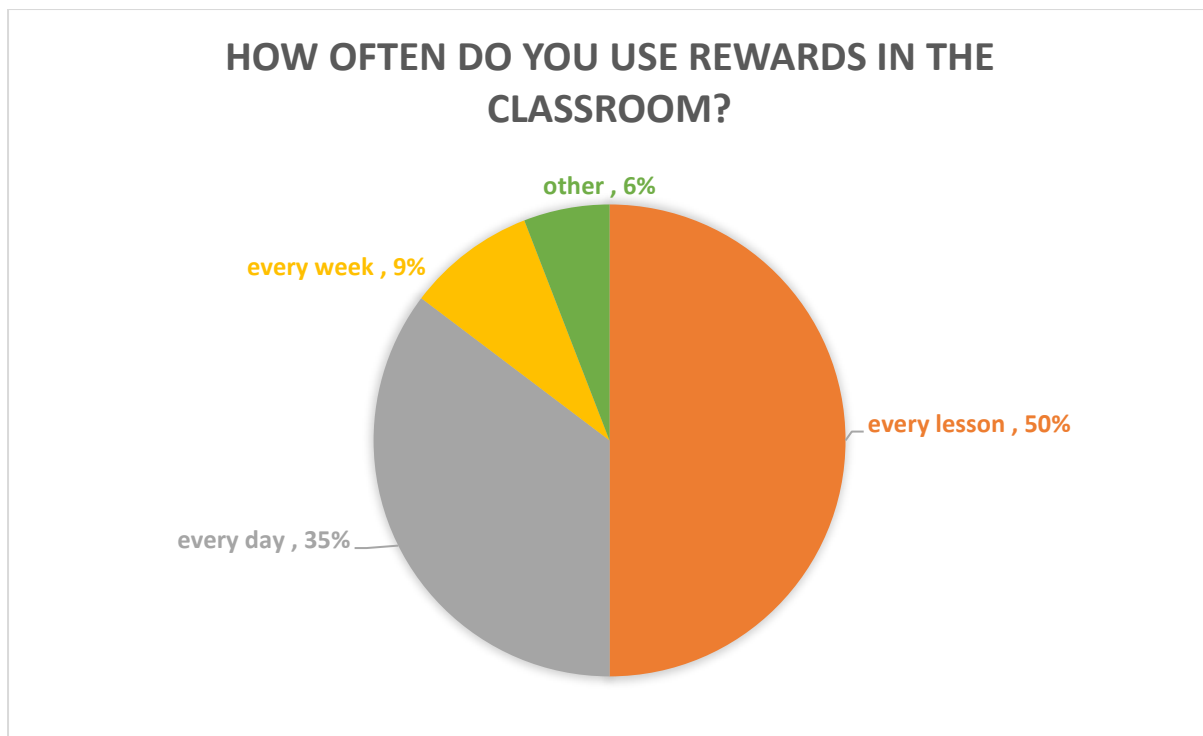
Figure 4. How often do participants use rewards in the classroom?

The data shown in Figure 4 aligns with the findings from initial interviews suggesting rewards are effective in managing low-level disruption. 50% of respondents used rewards in every lesson, whilst 35% used rewards daily and 9% used them weekly. An implication that emerges from these findings is that 6% of responses selected other and it is unclear what this suggests. To develop this further, the researcher could have given respondents an option to explain this. Overall, there is evidence to suggest that the use of rewards is an effective strategy that school staff use very frequently.

Theme 3: Forming relationships

Interview findings:

An overarching theme throughout interview responses was the importance of forming positive relationships with pupils.

There is evidence to suggest positive relationships are a key influence on effectively managing low-level disruption. All participants spoke about the value of positive relationships and stated that children would "want to impress you" and are unlikely to "want to upset you" when positive relationships are formed. One participant explained that building positive relationships enables "mutual trust" and children will want to follow the correct behaviour expectations.

Additionally, most participants felt that forming positive relationships was the most important factor in managing low-level disruption. Children will not value rewards, praise, or expectations if they do not have a positive relationship with staff. This is illustrated through the response of Participant D:

> "Children need to know you are there to support them and help them grow. When they do not see this, they will not want your rewards" [Participant D, March 2023].

Furthermore, when forming positive relationships with children, all participants spoke about knowing and understanding the needs of all the children in the class. Most participants spoke about knowing children on an individual basis so that they can understand how best to support them in the classroom environment. One participant explained that knowing the individual needs of their children allows them to pick appropriate seating and suitable resources that will support good behaviour in the classroom.

Online Questionaire findings:

What stategies do you find most effective to manage low-level disruption?

Category	Value (approx)
Other	3
Sanctions	2
Positive relationships	28
Individual rewards	8
Whole class rewards	7
positive praise	29
class rules	18
High expectations	21

Figure 5. What strategies are most effective in managing low-level disruption?

Participants were asked to select up to 3 strategies they found most effective in managing low-level disruption in the classroom (Figure 5). 84.8% of participants believed that forming positive relationships with children is an effective strategy. This finding increases the reliability of the interview data and gives evidence to suggest that forming positive relationships is effective in managing low-level disruption.

Discussion

Maintaining high expectations

The data collected found that most participants felt that maintaining high expectations and frequent reminders were important and effective strategies in managing low-level disruption. These findings share the theoretical foundations of behaviourism, where expectations should be set and reinforced so that children can learn and understand desirable behaviour expectations in the classroom (MacBlain, 2014).

Participants in the interviews felt it was important to set high expectations and share these with their class so that children had a clear understanding of what is expected of them behaviourally. This gives children clear outcomes and can encourage self-efficiency (Smith, 2020). The findings are consistent with those of Sieberer-Nagler (2016), who states that children will not know how to behave unless they are given clear expectations that are explained to them. Unlu et al (2013) agree with the findings, providing expectations are simple and clearly communicated so that children can understand them.

For expectations to be maintained, participants of both the interviews and online questionnaire (figure 1) perceived reminders of expectations as an important strategy. This enables children who often have difficulty following expectations to have additional opportunities to follow them (Roffey, 2011). Narhi et al (2015) support the use of reminders and found that frequent reminders of expectations are an important factor in enhancing classroom management. In addition, figure 2 demonstrates that participants of the online questionnaire remind children of behaviour expectations frequently, with 72% doing this daily. These findings are supported by MacSuga-Gage, Simonsen and Briere, (2012), who suggest that children in primary schools need ongoing reminders to effectively deter disruptive behaviours.

For participants of both the interviews and online questionnaire (figure 1), consistency was an important aspect when maintaining high expectations. Freiberg,

Templeton and Helton (2013) explain that a consistent approach provides children with security and trust, which can help to reduce disruptive behaviours as it supports the classroom environment in being calm and predictable. Additionally, participants felt consistency ensures children cannot push boundaries, which makes their approach to managing behaviour fair to all children (Mclean, 2015). This correlates with the report of Rhodes et al (2019), who states that a consistent approach enhances positive behaviours in the classroom.

Praise and rewards

Findings from both the semi-structured interviews and online questionnaire found that most participants used praise and rewards frequently in the classroom to manage low-level disruption. This supports the theory of Skinner (1953) and behaviourism, which argues that positive reinforcement using praise and rewards should be used to manage behaviour as it encourages desired behaviours and decreases unwanted behaviours (Miltenberger, 2015; Nelson and Kauffman, 2020).

Respondents of the interviews emphasised using behaviour-specific praise on children or groups who were specifically following behavioural expectations, and respondents of the online questionnaire believed praising positive behaviours was an effective strategy in reducing low-level disruption (figure 3). This is consistent with the finding of Sieberer-Nagler (2016) and Royer et al (2019), who found that using behaviour-specific praise, where teachers or teaching assistants praise pupils who are showing desired behaviours and specifically describe what is being demonstrated by a pupil, is effective in reducing disruptive behaviour.

Participants of the interviews suggested that behaviour-specific praise encourages other children to make the right choices which correspond with the findings of Lane et al (2012), who found that praising positive behaviours can help to reinforce behavioural expectations as they remind children of the desired behaviours they should be following. Participants also noted that they felt praise made pupils who are following behavioural expectations feel valued and appreciated. Findings produced by Manzoor, Ahmed and Gill (2014), suggest the reason for this is that the language teachers use in the classroom is invaluable to children, particularly at primary age,

as it helps to create a positive environment where children are motivated to follow expectations when they are praised.

Figure 4 shows that 50% of participants from the online questionnaire used rewards in every lesson and 35% used them daily. Additionally, interview participants used rewards daily in key stage 1 (KS1) and weekly in key stage 2 (KS2). Most participants felt that rewards motivated children and showed them appreciation for following expectations. Whilst these findings contradict those of Deci, Koestner and Ryan (2001), who suggest that rewards do not increase motivation. They correspond with recent findings from Phungphai and Boonmoh (2021) who found that rewards should be used frequently as they positively influence children and increase their engagement and self-development to help them meet behavioural expectations. A potential limitation of these findings is that it is unclear whether respondents from the online questionnaire used rewards more frequently in KS1 or KS2. Therefore, this is an area which could be further explored.

Forming relationships

Forming positive relationships with pupils was a valued approach to participants of both the interviews and the online questionnaire in managing low-level disruption. This is consistent with the findings of Dean and Gibbs (2023) and Van Bergen, Graham and Sweller (2020). Also, this finding corresponds with the theory of a psychodynamic approach and attachment theory, where teachers and children should form positive relationships so that children can trust their teacher and the teacher can best support their pupils (Riley, 2010).

Qualitative and quantitative findings suggest that participants view the formation of relationships as an effective strategy, resulting in children wanting to impress their teachers by following expectations. This is supported by Brown, Powell and Clark (2012), who found a correlation between positive relationships and increased positive behaviour. An explanation for this finding can be supported by the findings of Englehart (2012), who argues that children need positive relationships to enable a supportive and caring environment. When teachers do not give up on disruptive behaviours and form good relationships with the pupils in their class, children will be

more willing to show teachers they can follow expectations. One participant commented on mutual trust, which can be formed through positive relationships. Brackett et al (2013) state that established trust enables a positive classroom environment where healthy interactions can take place.

School staff felt that positive relationships are the most important strategy for managing low-level disruption. Multiple participants suggested that for strategies such as rewards and praise to be valued by children, they must have a positive relationship with them. Thus, it could be implied that other strategies may not work as well when positive relationships are not formed. This is consistent with the study of Yassine, Tipton-Fisler and Katic (2020), who found that behaviour management strategies cannot be effective without positive relationships. They found a reduction in disruptive behaviours when positive relationships were built and combined with additional strategies such as rewards.

Another finding that arose was the importance of understanding the needs of all children so that school staff have a clear knowledge of how they can best support individual children and their behaviour. This finding corresponds with the theoretical foundations of a humanistic approach as staff valued knowing the needs of their children so that they could understand behaviour from a child's point of view and offer solutions such as change of seating (Causton, Tracey-Bronson and Macleod, 2015). This finding is supported by the research of Egeberg, McConney and Price (2016), which explains that knowing the children in a class can give school staff knowledge of the underlying reasons behind their behaviour. This allows school staff to offer tailored support and solutions for managing behaviour.

Limitations

Potential limitations of this study include the small sample size of the research. Both questionnaires and interviews had a relatively small sample which could affect the generalisability of the findings (Denscombe, 2017). However, it could be argued that the findings are still reliable as the combination of qualitative and quantitative data used in this study is recommended by Creswell and Creswell (2018), who state that

using this design can increase the researcher's confidence in the validity and reliability of the results as well as providing in-depth data collection. Additionally, it would be beneficial to carry out a pilot study prior to the distribution of the questionnaire to check its suitability and to ensure there are no deficiencies (Hassan, Schattner and Mazza, 2006). Whilst there was no issue with the distribution of the questionnaire, if this research were to be carried out again it could be an effective way to identify any potential problems.

Implications for practice

This research provides suggestions for school staff, particularly teachers and teaching assistants, on managing low-level disruption in the classroom.

Firstly, an overarching theme of the findings was the importance of forming positive relationships with pupils. It is important that children feel supported and nurtured by school staff which encourages them to respect their teachers and follow expectations in the classroom. School staff should also understand each child individually and their needs and backgrounds. In doing this, it can allow school staff to tailor their approach to behaviour management. Personalised support can be put in place to meet all children's needs which can help prevent disruptive behaviours before they occur.

In addition, school staff viewed maintaining high expectations as having significant importance when managing behaviour in the classroom. It is important that children know what is expected of them and that school staff are consistent in their approach. This means behavioural expectations should be the same every day so children cannot push boundaries.

Finally, praising and rewarding desirable behaviours can encourage other children to follow and make children showing desirable behaviours feel valued and appreciated, making them more likely to continue following behavioural expectations.

Conclusion

This research project aimed to find out strategies that school staff perceived to be effective in managing low-level disruption. The data collected has provided evidence to suggest that multiple strategies are commonly used in the classroom, which school staff perceive to be effective in managing low-level disruption. These include maintaining and reinforcing high expectations, using praise and rewards, and forming positive relationships. Notably, forming positive relationships with children was perceived to be the most valuable strategy. The data collected suggests that additional strategies, such as praise, are most effective when children have an established positive relationship with school staff.

Going forward, it is important to note that every class is different, and therefore, strategies may not work for all classes or may need to be adapted. This research can impact future practice by encouraging school staff to incorporate these strategies into their practice which they can adapt to meet the needs of their classes.

Whilst both interview and online questionnaire respondents found rewards to be an effective strategy to manage low-level disruption, it was noted that interview participants did not use rewards as frequently in KS2. Further research could be carried out to explore the differences between strategies used in KS1 and strategies used in KS2. Additionally, as the researcher conducted interviews at their placement school with a small sample, it could be beneficial to carry out semi-structured interviews with a larger sample and in multiple schools to assess the findings against this research.

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Appendix:

Appendix 1:

Semi-structured interview questions.
1.) How often do you find low-level disruption occurs in your class?
2.) How do you manage low-level disruption in the classroom?
3.) Do you use any incentive rewards? How do they work?
4.) Have you had classes where the school behaviour management strategies have not worked? What strategies did you use to overcome this?
5.) How do you involve parents regarding behaviour?

Appendix 2:

QTS6004M Research project information

Project title: What do school staff perceive to be the most effective strategies to manage low-level disruption?

Project information:

I am carrying out a research project during my final school placement as part of my BA Primary Education degree at York St John University school placement SE3.

For my research project, I am looking at primary school teachers' perceptions of effective behaviour management strategies in managing low-level disruption in the primary classroom. My research will be an interpretive inquiry where I would like to carry out semi-structured interviews with school staff at my placement school. The answers from my interviews will be used to create a questionnaire that I will then post on social media. All participants will be kept anonymous, and participants may withdraw at any point.

There is no compulsion upon anyone to participate; you are free to decline the invitation. Whilst I would hope that you find participation interesting and enjoyable, your participation/non-participation will not affect the way that you are treated or taught on this placement.

Raw data will not be openly available. If requested, each participant may have access to their own data. There is no need within the research for raw data to be openly available. The research report will present analysis of data.

If you have any queries, useful contacts are:

Interview participation consent

Participation in the interview is entirely voluntary and you can withdraw your data at any point up to 1st May 2023. Data responses from the interview will be securely stored on one drive and will be anonymous. All data will be destroyed in June 2023.

Brief interview overview: It will be a semi-structured interview on the topic of behaviour management and low-level disruption and should take no longer than 15 minutes.

1. I understand that my participation is voluntary, and I can withdraw my consent at any point until the 1st May 2023.
2. I understand that direct quotes from my interview may be used in the research project, but these will be anonymous.
3. I understand that my interview data will be securely stored on OneDrive until June 2023 when it will be destroyed.

I confirm I have read and understood all of the above.

Signed by _____

Date _____

Appendix 3:
Online Questionnaire
What do school staff perceive to be the most effective strategies to manage low-level disruption?
Question 1) What strategy/strategies do you use the most to manage low-level behaviour in the classroom?

Question 2) How often does low-level behaviour occur in your classroom?

Always	
Most of the time	
About half the time	
Sometimes	
Never	

Question 3a) Of the following strategies which do you find are most effective to manage behaviour in the classroom? (Select up to 3)

High expectations	
Class rules	
Positive praise	
Whole class rewards (Such as a class marble jar)	
Individual rewards (Such as stickers)	
Positive relationships	
Sanctions (Such as missing break time)	
Other (Please explain below)	

Question 3b) If you selected other, please provide details below. If you did not select other, please move to the next question, or write N/A.

Question 4) How do you maintain high expectations in the classroom?

Question 5) Do you find that promoting high expectations reduces low-level behaviour and promotes positive behaviour?

Yes	
No	

Question 6) How often do you remind children of behavioural expectations?

Everyday	
More than once a week	
Once a week	
Less than once a week	
Only when disruptive behaviour occurs	

Question 7) How effective is using behaviour-specific praise in managing low-level disruption?

Extremely effective	
Very effective	
Moderately effective	
Slightly effective	

Not effective at all	

Question 8) Do you find that praising children who are showing good behaviour helps to reduce low-level behaviour in the classroom?

Yes	
No	

Question 9) What rewards do you use in the classroom?

Question 10) How often do you use rewards in the classroom?

Every lesson	
Every day	
Every week	
Never	
Other	

Question 11) Does the use of rewards reduce the amount of low-level behaviour that occurs in the classroom?

Yes	
No	

Question 12) Do you find using sanctions (such as missing break time) are effective in managing behaviour?

Yes	
No	

Question 13) Do you always follow through with consequences?

Yes	
No	

Question 14) What do you find to be the most effective?

Contacting parents with positive behaviour	
Contacting parents with Negative behaviour	
Neither	

Question 15) When addressing behaviour in the classroom, what do you focus on most?

Positive behaviour	
Negative behaviour	

Question 16) Do you have any additional comments for this questionnaire? (Optional)

Appendix 4:

Headteacher permissions:

I have read this student's ethical clearance form and give my permission for the conduct of this small-scale research project.

Additional parental passive consent is not required.

Headteacher's name:

Headteacher's signature: _____

Date: _____

Students:
This completed form must be scanned or photographed and uploaded to the permission submission area on Moodle **prior to commencing your research project and by 27 January 2023 at the latest**