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Oxley, Laura, Asbury, Kathryn and Kim, Lisa (2023) The impact of student conduct problems on teacher wellbeing following the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic: an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. *British Educational Research Journal*. ISSN: 0141-1926

<https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3923>

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The impact of student conduct problems on teacher wellbeing following the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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Funding information

Economic and Social Research Council

Abstract

Given the recruitment and retention crisis within the teaching profession, it is essential that the factors contributing to this are examined. Studies suggest that there has been a general decline in teacher wellbeing since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, and student conduct problems are known to be a key negative contributor to poor teacher wellbeing. This study examines how student conduct problems influenced teachers' wellbeing following the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Specifically, it explores the extent to which student behaviour was seen as changing during the pandemic, and how this may have had an impact on teachers' wellbeing. Nine participants took part in this study. All the participants were teachers in schools in England (four primary and five secondary; nine female). The data were collected via semi-structured virtual interviews. Using a qualitative approach, the study undertook an in-depth analysis of the interview data using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. The findings suggest that the teachers experienced an increase in student conduct problems following the onset of the pandemic and that this negatively affected wellbeing for some. The teachers also reported an increased need for student support and differential needs for different groups of students. It is important that consideration is given as to how teachers can be effectively supported to manage student

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conduct problems and the potential impact of these on their wellbeing, particularly since the onset of the pandemic.

KEYWORDS

Covid-19 pandemic, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, student behaviour, teacher wellbeing

Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

The paper contributes to the existing literature on teacher wellbeing and student conduct problems, with a specific focus on the time period following the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. It explores the extent to which changes in student behaviour during the pandemic may have an impact on teacher wellbeing.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

The paper offers an insight into teachers' experiences of student conduct problems since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. The findings suggest that teachers have experienced an increase in student conduct problems during this time and that this has had a negative impact on wellbeing for some teachers.

INTRODUCTION

Many countries around the world have been experiencing a sustained teacher retention crisis. Supporting teacher wellbeing has been identified multiple times as a way to tackle this retention crisis (Jerrim et al., 2021; Kidger et al., 2016). For the successful implementation of this strategy, one must understand the factors that contribute to reduced levels of teacher wellbeing. Student conduct problems (often labelled as student misbehaviour) are one of the key factors associated with teachers' experiences of burnout (Aloe et al., 2014; McCormick & Barnett, 2011) and teacher turnover (Harmsen et al., 2018; Ingersoll, 2003).

Owing to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, many schools around the world moved their classes online and students were not able to socialise with each other in person for substantial periods of time. With time, many schools returned to pre-pandemic conditions, and students were expected to adapt to in-person learning again. However, it is unclear how well students adjusted to this return. In particular, whether student behaviour changed, as a result of the disruption caused by Covid-19, is of interest given the known association student behaviour has with teacher wellbeing. As such, the current study examines whether teachers in England experienced changes in student behaviour when students returned to school after a Covid-19 lockdown, and whether the impact student conduct problems have had on their wellbeing has changed since the pandemic.

This paper builds on the existing literature around the association between student conduct and teacher wellbeing in two key ways. First, the study focuses on teachers'

perceptions of any changes in student conduct problems in the specific time period since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. This focus is important as both teachers and students have experienced a number of changes in the education system over the course of the pandemic (McDonald et al., 2022) and the media narrative of 'back to normal' is not something that is easily achieved (Richardson, 2021). Second, the data are analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009), a qualitative method that focuses on individuals' lived experiences, to highlight the voices and perspectives of the teacher participants and their views on the impact of student conduct problems. Ensuring that teachers' voices are heard in the discussion about teacher wellbeing through this type of analysis, particularly since the onset of the pandemic, is key to helping those who are not practising teachers gain a fuller understanding of the current situation in schools and, importantly, how this may be impacting on the national teacher recruitment and retention crisis.

The association between teacher wellbeing and student behaviour

Teaching is inherently an emotionally intensive profession, requiring teachers to connect with multiple stakeholders. This can contribute both positively and negatively to teacher wellbeing. That is, while forming strong teacher–student relationships is an important part of the role of a teacher, and one of the core reasons why some teachers choose to remain in the profession (Spilt et al., 2011), managing student conduct problems can take a toll on teacher wellbeing (Li et al., 2022).

The quality of student–teacher interactions has been found to be associated with both teacher and student wellbeing. Maricuțoiu et al. (2023) conducted a meta-analysis of cross-sectional evidence on the association between teachers' subjective wellbeing and students' school experience (including academic performance, academic engagement, student wellbeing and student reports of teacher–student interaction). The meta-analysis included 26 eligible studies and it was found that most of the studies ($N=20$) focussed on assessing teachers' psychological functioning. The study categorised teachers' experience of high psychological functioning as eudaimonic subjective wellbeing. They found that there was a modest association between teachers' eudaimonic subjective wellbeing and the quality of student–teacher interactions, students' wellbeing and student engagement. However, the study notes that the direction of this relationship needs to be explored further.

Theoretical models of teacher–student relationships indicate that healthy relationships can have a positive influence on teachers' professional and personal self-esteem, which thereby influences teachers' perceptions of their own wellbeing. Spilt et al.'s (2011) theoretical model, for example, proposes that teacher–student interactions contribute to teachers' perceptions of student behaviour. For instance, a positive teacher–student interaction with one student may lead the teacher to be less likely to perceive that student's behaviour as a conduct problem compared with the same behaviour displayed by another student, with whom the teacher has had negative interactions. Such interactions can underpin teachers' emotions—positive and/or negative—which in turn influence their wellbeing.

Various empirical studies have tested and expanded on Spilt et al.'s (2011) theoretical model. For example, Evans et al. (2019) conducted a cross-sectional study of 230 teachers working in British inner-city primary and secondary schools. Participants were asked to think of a specific student in their class who often gets into trouble and to answer a series of questions, keeping this student in mind and considering their behaviour over the past 2 weeks. The use of self-report questionnaires in this study is a potential limitation, as the use of a single assessment measure at one time point from one participant may introduce bias to the results. However, the questionnaires have been widely used in other studies and validated

in a sample of caregiving professionals (Leiper & Casares, 2000). Evans et al. (2019) found that the association between student conduct problems and teachers' affective response was mediated by relational conflict. It was suggested that this indirect effect was lessened by relational closeness and an argument is made for relationship-focussed reflective practice in teacher training, to reduce the potential for student conduct problems to contribute negatively to teacher wellbeing.

The Emotional Appraisal Theory, proposed by Chang (2009), suggests that teachers respond in habitual patterns to student misbehaviour, with the teacher's judgement of the situation leading to unpleasant emotions, such as anger, frustration, anxiety and guilt. Over time, these repeated experiences can lead to emotional exhaustion, which is one of the major components of burnout. Similarly, Fernet et al. (2012) propose a model which shows an association between perceived school environment factors (including students' disruptive behaviour), with the motivational factors of teachers' autonomous motivation and self-efficacy. Both autonomous motivation and self-efficacy were found to negatively predict emotional exhaustion. Self-efficacy was also found to negatively predict the other two factors of burnout, depersonalisation and personal accomplishment.

In line with theoretical models, empirical evidence supports the notion that student conduct problems are negatively associated with teacher wellbeing. For example, Aldrup et al. (2018) drew on data from a longitudinal study of 222 secondary school teachers in Germany. The teachers were asked to rate student misbehaviour in their classroom, the teacher–student relationship and their wellbeing in terms of emotional exhaustion and work enthusiasm. The study found that higher reports of teacher-rated student misbehaviour were associated with higher numbers of reports of exhaustion and lower numbers of reports of enthusiasm for work (Aldrup et al., 2018). Conversely, Kengatharan (2020) gathered data from 703 teachers working in state schools and found that teachers' reports of positive student behaviour were positively associated with teachers' job satisfaction.

Testing the mechanism by which student conduct problems may be associated with teacher wellbeing, de Ruiter et al. (2020) examined the proposition that teachers' emotional responses to classroom incidents of misbehaviour were influenced by the perceived history of the student involved. They found that teachers reacted more emotionally negatively towards students who they perceived had been more disruptive in the past, compared with similar events with students who were perceived as less disruptive. The emotion of anger was found to be associated with teachers' emotional exhaustion and dedication. The suggestion that a teacher's perceived history with a student can influence their emotional response provides support for another model for understanding the relationship between teacher burnout and student conduct problems.

Some evidence indicates that teachers at different career stages manage student behaviour differently. For example, Glock and Kleen (2019) conducted a study with 130 inservice and 135 preservice teachers in Germany, who were asked how they would respond to a scenario of a student who was misbehaving in one of their classes. They found that teachers earlier in their career were more likely to choose harsher interventions in response to student conduct problems, such as school suspension, whereas more experienced teachers were more likely to use milder strategies such as ignoring and using non-verbal responses.

Moreover, Alasmari and Althaqafi (2021), in their mixed-method study involving 80 Saudi teachers of English as a foreign language, found differences between novice and experienced teachers' classroom management strategies, with more experienced teachers finding proactive strategies to be more effective. These findings suggest that teachers at different career stages may manage student conduct problems, and the impact on their own wellbeing, differently.

Student behaviour and teacher wellbeing during the Covid-19 pandemic

There may be useful learning to be gained from previous circumstances in which schools have experienced significant disruption with extended and unplanned closures, such as weather-related events (e.g. Hurricane Katrina) and other pandemics (e.g. SARS). Harmeey and Moss (2023) conducted a rapid evidence assessment of research on learning disruption to identify key recommendations for schools to follow as they reopen following unplanned and extended closures. Their findings included the need to attend to mental health needs for both staff and students. The review noted that teachers often felt that they were not equipped to deal with the increase in acute mental health needs following an unplanned school closure. Whilst Harmeey and Moss's (2023) study reviewed similar situations involving school closures, it is important to acknowledge that the Covid-19 pandemic disruption was at a scale that had not been experienced before within UK schools.

In the UK and other countries, many students experienced remote learning for a period of time and almost all students had to cope with unpredictable closures at their schools during the Covid-19 pandemic (Kim et al., 2021). When families experienced disruption owing to school closures, Gassman-Pines et al. (2022) found that this was associated with worse child behaviour, more negative parental mood and an increased likelihood of lost tempers and punishment at home. Student conduct problems continued to be experienced during online classes. In a study of teachers' reports of student conduct problems during online teaching by Baysal and Ocak (2021), they found that the common disruptive behaviours were: making noises, absenteeism and distractibility. To overcome these challenges, teachers employed strategies of taking attendance, encouraging students to turn on their webcams, encouraging intrinsic motivation, getting family support and organising meetings with parents.

In the same period of students accessing their classes online, there was an intensification of problems in teacher wellbeing. Prior to the onset of the pandemic, teachers already reported low levels of wellbeing owing to a variety of factors, including workload. Specifically, during the pandemic, teachers' emotional reactions and poor mental health increased significantly between May and December 2020 (Nabe-Nielsen et al., 2022). The results of one teacher survey found that teachers felt an increase in symptoms of anxiety and depression between March 2020 and February 2021 (Cohen-Fraade & Donahue, 2022).

Various factors seem to have contributed to teachers' decreased wellbeing throughout the pandemic. These factors included additional workload and responsibilities (Baker et al., 2021); a move to online delivery of lessons during the lockdown (Lizana & Vega-Fernandez, 2021); and instability and frustrations around Covid safety measures (Robinson et al., 2022). Teachers reported feeling emotionally exhausted and experiencing high levels of task stress and job ambiguity (Chan et al., 2021). It is important that student conduct problems are understood as a stressor within this wider context. As many of the studies conducted on teacher wellbeing during the Covid-19 pandemic were based on self-reported surveys, the present study adds an important dimension to this area of literature with the more in-depth semi-structured interviews and analysis used.

Aims of the study

This study examines nine teachers' experiences of student behaviour and the impact it had on their wellbeing by July 2022, as schools were emerging from the pandemic, compared with before the pandemic. Specifically, the research question (RQ) is: *Did teachers report differences in experiences of student conduct problems, and the impact of these on their wellbeing, in July 2022 compared with pre-pandemic?*

METHODS

Research design

Using a qualitative approach, this study undertook an in-depth explorative analysis of how teachers in England experienced student behaviour, specifically student conduct problems, following the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. An IPA framework was used for this study. The main principles of IPA are phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography (Smith et al., 2009). The IPA researcher aims to put aside preconceptions and focus on each participant's data in their own right before engaging in cross-sample analysis (Smith et al., 2009). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis aims to develop an understanding of participants' lived experiences, which makes it an appropriate approach for an exploration of teachers' experiences. Its idiographic focus also makes IPA a suitable framework for working with a small sample of participants.

Participants and measure

Nine participants took part in this study, from an initial sample of 24 teachers who had taken part in a seven-time-point longitudinal qualitative study of teachers' experiences during Covid-19 (Kim et al., 2021). The nine participants in the current study are those who were still engaged at Time 7 (July 2022), which was the only timepoint at which explicit questions about student conduct and their relationship with teacher wellbeing were asked. The focus on student conduct at this time point was considered to be appropriate as teachers and students had been back in school for a period of time following the school closures during the pandemic, hence offering the opportunity for teachers to reflect on any changes in student conduct. The original sample of 24 teachers were recruited via emails to existing personal and professional networks, as well as via social media advertising. Participants were compensated for their time with a £20 retail voucher for each interview they took part in, including the current interviews.

All nine of the participants were teachers in schools in England (four primary and five secondary; nine female; mean age = 40.22 years; standard deviation, $SD = 8.59$), with a mean of 12.11 years of teaching experience ($SD = 6.30$), as reported at Time 1 (T1; April 2020).

As can be seen in [Table 1](#), the participants (Ps) were categorised according to their school type (Primary or Secondary) and their teaching role (Senior Leadership Team [SLT] or Classroom Teacher [CT]). The classroom teachers were also grouped according to their teaching experience at T1 (Early Career Classroom Teachers [ECT; 5 years of experience or less], Mid Career Classroom Teachers [MCT; 6–18 years of experience], and Late Career Classroom Teachers [LCT; 19 years of experience or more]). This resulted in five participant groups: Primary SLT (P1–3), Primary MCT (P4), Secondary ECT (P5–6), Secondary MCT (P7–8) and Secondary LCT (P9). To provide context for the quotations shared in this study, the participant number and group are reported next to each quotation.

Procedure

The participants were interviewed over Zoom in July 2022, using a semi-structured interview format, as the seventh and final round of interviews in this longitudinal study. Participants were financially compensated for their time and the project received ethical approval from the institution of the second and third author. This study analysed an extract from the interviews, focussing on the answers to the following four questions:

TABLE 1 Information on teacher participants.

Participant number	Participant group	Years of teaching experience at T1
P1	Primary SLT	7
P2	Primary SLT	15
P3	Primary SLT	20
P4	Primary MCT	14
P5	Secondary ECT	5
P6	Secondary ECT	1
P7	Secondary MCT	12
P8	Secondary MCT	14
P9	Secondary LCT	21

Abbreviations: SLT, Senior Leadership Team; MCT, Mid Career Classroom Teachers; ECT, Early Career Classroom Teachers.

1. What has been your experience of student behaviour throughout the pandemic?
2. Can you share a specific example of when you have dealt with an incident of challenging student behaviour since the first partial school closures in March 2020—one that stands out in your mind. Please describe what happened, when and where, who was involved and what you were thinking and feeling in as much detail as you can.
3. Have incidents of challenging student behaviour affected your mental health and wellbeing?
4. Do you think there has been any change in the way in which challenging student behaviour has impacted your mental health and wellbeing throughout the pandemic, compared with before the pandemic?

Participants were encouraged to respond freely to the interview questions, the responses for which were audio-recorded, transcribed and anonymised.

Data analysis

To begin the analysis, the interview extract transcripts were read and re-read by the first author, to familiarise themselves with the data, and exploratory comments were noted. The researcher then conducted an inductive analysis on each interview extract to identify individual participants' experiences of student conduct problems since the onset of the pandemic and how they felt this had impacted on their mental health and wellbeing. The analysis was structured around three levels: descriptive, linguistic and conceptual. The descriptive comments highlighted the aspects which appeared to be important to the participant, whereas linguistic comments focussed on the participant's use of language. The conceptual comments took a more interrogative form, considering where particular features of the interview may prompt further questions (Smith et al., 2009). Once the exploratory coding was completed, themes within each extract were identified and mapped in a table, with relevant quotes from participants collated there. This table was then used to conduct cross-interview analysis, highlighting the themes that were consistent or different across the sample.

Positionality and reflexivity

The IPA framework encourages an epistemological openness (Smith et al., 2009), allowing researchers the freedom to decide upon the most appropriate stance to take. The authors

have taken a critical realist approach in this study. It was felt that this approach fitted with the double hermeneutic lenses acknowledged within IPA. That is, the experience being examined has first been interpreted by the participant and is then further filtered through the interpretation of the researcher. The critical realist stance accepts that this process is taking place, while recognising that the interpretation of the experience is still linked to what can be termed objective reality.

The first author engaged in reflective practice during the analysis of the interview data. Smith et al. (2009) describe Husserl's work on the reflective move required within phenomenology. The researcher is required to bracket their preconceptions and existing knowledge to attempt to understand the essence of the phenomenon, as experienced by the study participants. This is not an easy task to do, as we draw our understanding of the world from our own position (Oxley, 2016). However, the authors attempted to do so, while acknowledging that interpretation of the phenomenon is perhaps the closest understanding we can attain. The codes were combined to identify themes by grouping codes referring to similar phenomena together. All of the authors engaged in collaborative discussion about, and reflection on, the themes that were developed.

RESULTS

Using an IPA framework, we examined whether teachers reported differences in experiences of student conduct problems, and the impact of these on their wellbeing, in July 2022 compared with pre-pandemic. The following themes were developed: *an increase in student conduct problems*; *an increase in need for student support*; *differential impacts for different groups of students*; and *increased impact of student conduct problems on wellbeing for some teachers*.

An increase in student conduct problems

There were increases in student conduct problems, particularly difficulties in social interactions with others, complying with school rules and settling into routines. Eight participants reported that they felt there had been an increase in student conduct problems since the onset of the pandemic. One Secondary ECT (P5) stated; 'There's been that kind of edge of maliciousness, like they're quite deliberately trying to invoke a reaction. They want you to be hurt or angry or whatever, and they try to make it personal.' This quote suggests that this participant has experienced, not only an increase in, but also a change in the nature of student conduct problems.

A Primary SLT (P1) told the interviewer:

I think they've really found coming back into school hard. We've seen a massive increase in children seeking adult support and guidance with their behaviours, and they show us that by an increase in swearing, an increase in throwing things, really short tempers in a lot of children.

This challenging behaviour was broadly suggested to be the result of a lack of routine and difficulties building social relationships on the back of periods of isolation. One Secondary LCT (P9) stated; 'I don't want to make sweeping claims about behaviour, but it feels like at least more students have struggled with social behaviour'. A Primary MCT (P4) also suggested that a lack of routine may be the underlying reason for the increase seen in challenging behaviour, saying:

For me most of the challenging behaviours have been this academic year, and I would have said that they probably are from just being back in a routine or having been out of a routine for so long and coming back into it.

As well as the students struggling to build and maintain relationships with each other, teachers also experienced difficulty forming relationships with the students owing to staff absences. A Secondary ECT (P5) told the interviewer:

I think sometimes because we've had so much change and uncertainty, whereas before we had that kind of consistency. And students were very aware where you were, you were always where you were going to be ... they'd rock up in your classroom and [a supply teacher] took over for the second time in two months, you're not there [as their usual teacher] for another week and a half ... so there was that kind of in and out, the students were in and out. So, that was hard to build and foster those relationships.

This is potentially an important issue as previous research (Spilt et al., 2011) has suggested that forming strong teacher–pupil relationships is a key aspect of the teaching role, contributing to teachers' decisions to remain in the profession.

Misuse of technology was also perceived to have contributed to the increase in challenging student behaviours. Teachers experienced a conflict between having had to encourage students to use technology more as a necessity, for example when teaching online, and now asking them to return to pre-pandemic rules, such as no mobile phones being allowed. A Secondary ECT (P5) explained that:

Before a student would have been caught furtively on the phone underneath the desk or something, now we have students that feel it's completely acceptable to take a photo, just in the classroom, like that's okay.

This more blatant disregard for the conduct expected in schools creates a greater opportunity for teacher–student conflict, as teachers will be more likely to feel that they need to challenge this behaviour. A Primary SLT (P1) talked about how the necessity of using technology to continue teaching during the school closures in the pandemic has created a different relationship for young children with this technology. P1 said that:

One of the things that's happened is that during the pandemic we asked parents to hand over technology to really young children and ask them to trust us with that. We were teaching them through, so we were like you've got to get your child online, so they need to have access to a tablet, they need to have access to the internet, and it's okay because we're going to be there, we're going to still be teaching them through that, so that's exactly what parents did, they handed over technology to children. And now we're saying, well, you know you shouldn't have done that because now they don't know how to be nice to each other, and they're just going onto WhatsApp and being really horrible.

The circumstances of the pandemic have perhaps allowed students access to certain aspects of technology, such as tablets and the internet, which would not usually have been encouraged by teachers at a young age. The implications of this are now being seen reflected in the children's behaviour, for example 'being really horrible' on WhatsApp, as described by P1.

Behaviour in younger children was described as being more severely impacted by the pandemic period than the behaviour of older children in the school. One Secondary ECT (P6) stated; 'I think behaviour has got worse in the lower Key Stages, much more difficult to deal with'. Further supporting the experience of behaviour being more unsettled in the lower Key Stages of secondary school, one Secondary MCT (P7) told us; 'Our current Year 8s are just wild and we've never had a cohort like it' and a Primary SLT (P3) stated:

In early years and in reception, their behaviours have changed because they're not, for want of a better word, socialised. They're lockdown babies. They've spent their entire sentient life in one home environment with very few people, and they've got no idea how to get on with others, they've got no idea how to negotiate, they've got no idea.

However, one Primary SLT (P1) reported that they had not experienced any real change in student behaviour during or after the pandemic disruption, saying; 'Mostly across the school 99%, you know, it's just the normal school behaviour policy works and that's absolutely fine'.

One Primary MCT (P4) reported that they had, in fact, experienced a decrease in student conduct problems during the pandemic when the school was closed to most students, explaining that:

During the closures, when we'd got such small classes, [student behaviour was] very straightforward, very good, because you could give them the time and the energy and they were often in a new situation anyway or it was a bit more flexible, there was less pressure.

An increase in need for student support

A higher level of need for student support following the onset of the pandemic, was highlighted by all participants from various aspects. One Secondary LCT (P9), talking about when the students first returned to school after the lockdown, said: 'I definitely remember there seemed to be a high incidence of students who needed additional support to get into lessons or time out of lessons'. Another participant (P3, Primary SLT) told the interviewer: 'All of the support mechanisms disappeared ... Inevitably, students' behaviour for those really challenging and really vulnerable children in many cases deteriorated. It didn't necessarily deteriorate violently, although it did in some cases.' There was variation in whether the participants felt that their schools were able to meet this increased demand. A Primary SLT (P1) talked about the difficulties with ensuring that the necessary funding was available to support the student needs, saying:

We haven't got the funding to really properly put in place what these children really need, which is opportunities out of the classroom, it's opportunities to talk through things with adults, and we've got so many of them that our pastoral lead and our parent support advisor are just not enough.

This quote was in relation to P1's school experiencing an increase in suspensions following students returning to school after lockdown. A Secondary ECT (P5) discussed a strategy that their school was implementing to try and meet increased student needs following the lockdown, telling the interviewer that:

We've just launched a new respect policy where we talk, and we model respect a lot and we talk about ... respect that staff have for each other and we're kind of modelling that as well. But we've got this idea that you are exactly the same with our dinner lady as you are with our head of school ... you are expected to treat them in the same respectful manner. There's no kind of hierarchy in terms of the respect that you give someone.

Some participants felt that they and their colleagues had increased their understanding and awareness of the struggles that some students were facing since returning to schools after the lockdown. A Primary SLT (P2) stated that:

A deeper understanding of [the struggles that some students are facing] means that maybe you're a bit more empathetic to it and maybe better placed to offer some support that's a bit more specific that might help rather than, you know, just 'I'll go out and I'll get him in then'.

One Secondary LCT (P9) commented on the way in which staff understanding seemed to have changed, saying: 'I think if I say we had to become more understanding, that sounds wrong because it's not that we weren't understanding beforehand, but I think we had to tread more softly a little bit'.

Other participants felt that their colleagues did not necessarily respond in a helpful manner to challenging student behaviour, and this had an impact on the participants' own mental health and wellbeing. One Primary SLT (P1) explained that:

I felt like somebody else's decision was having an impact on my reputation as a SENCo and things that I'd worked really hard for, and the sort of relationships that I worked really hard to build up felt had been damaged.

For this participant, their colleagues' responses to student conduct problems had a greater impact on P1's mental health and wellbeing than the conduct problems themselves, suggesting that the wider school ethos may also affect teacher wellbeing in relation to student behaviour.

Differential impacts for different groups of students

Differences in the impact of the pandemic on different groups of students were highlighted by participants. There was a common theme of exacerbation of group characteristics, with quiet students appearing to become more withdrawn and assertive students appearing to become more overtly challenging. As a Secondary ECT (P5) mentioned:

I think in different groups of students there's been a clear change in behaviour. So maybe the students that were perhaps a little bit more challenging or a little bit more ... let's call them assertive. Assertive usually about their rights. Those kinds of students. They are now defiant, so they've kind of, it's exacerbated that.

One Primary SLT (P1) talked about the increased instances of behaviour from students accessing the school's targeted mainstream provision: 'We have children show us that they're not coping with things. They show us by hurting staff and by kicking, hitting, biting, swearing'. For these children who are already accessing additional support within the school, the impact of the pandemic appears to have had a greater detrimental effect on their behaviour than for the students in the overall mainstream provision at this school.

Increased impact of student conduct problems on wellbeing for some teachers

There were variations in the impact that teachers reported student behaviour having on their wellbeing following the onset of the pandemic. Some participants felt that there was no change in the impact of behaviour on their wellbeing compared with pre-pandemic. For example, in relation to discussing the impact of behaviour on their wellbeing, a Primary MCT (P4) stated:

You always have days when incidents of challenging behaviour are difficult, and you wonder whether you made the right choices, and did you do the right thing and should you have handled it differently? I don't think that's changed between pre-Covid and now.

As a further example, one Secondary LCT (P9) said; 'I don't think it's affected my mental health. I think it's made me ... just an additional thing to pay attention to during lessons ... who's struggling emotionally'.

However, despite these examples, the interviews suggested that other participants felt that there had indeed been a change in the impact of student behaviour on their wellbeing, following the onset of the pandemic. It was indicated that this was primarily owing to the increased incidents of student conduct problems that they were having to manage, which links with the other identified theme of [an increase in student conduct problems](#), discussed earlier in this paper.

A Secondary MCT (P8) told the interviewer:

I had more students taken out of that lesson or sent out of that lesson because of their behaviour than I've had, I think, that I can remember in recent years because a lot of them would be at that starting point in the lesson, where I would come in and they'd be almost metaphorically swinging from the ceiling sometimes. And I found that very hard. And there were a couple of times when I'd felt quite teary because I felt like nothing that I could do could control that class.

Another Secondary MCT (P7) added to this same perception, stating:

It's a real weekly low point, it's ..., 'Oh I can't bear this, I'm sick of hearing myself nagging'. And I feel like overall just this year I still can't hear myself complain about poor behaviour because I never used to nag so much or moan so much about poor behaviour. And I'm sick of hearing myself moaning about it. So, yeah, just you're ground down a bit more really by student behaviour.

It is important to note that the findings only suggested a greater impact on wellbeing, as a result of increased student conduct problems, for some teachers. This was not a unanimous finding across the whole sample of study participants. However, it is noteworthy, especially given the context of the current retention crisis in the teaching profession. The differences in experiences of individual teachers should be taken into account and this suggests that differing levels of support may be required from schools and senior management for different teachers.

In summary, we found that there were reported increases in student conduct problems, higher needs for student support, differential needs for different groups of students, and a greater impact on wellbeing for some teachers in July 2022 compared with pre-pandemic.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to examine teachers' experiences of student conduct problems and the impact they had on teachers' wellbeing in July 2022 compared with pre-pandemic, as schools were emerging from a period of Covid-19-linked disruption. We identified four themes in this exploration of differences in teachers' experiences of student conduct problems pre- and post-pandemic: *an increase in student conduct problems; an increase in the need for student support; differential impacts for different groups of students; and increased impact of student conduct problems on wellbeing for some teachers.*

The study findings suggest that these teachers had experienced an increase in student conduct problems since the onset of the pandemic. With student conduct problems being linked to teachers' experiences of burnout, including greater emotional exhaustion and lack of job satisfaction (Aldrup et al., 2018; Aloe et al., 2014; McCormick & Barnett, 2011), any rise in student conduct problems is an important aspect to consider as we prepare for post-pandemic changes in education. The issue of a rise in student conduct problems is especially pertinent when the increased reporting of teachers' negative emotional reactions and poor mental health during the pandemic (Nabe-Nielsen et al., 2022) is taken into account, as student conduct problems may be a contributing factor to the decline in teacher wellbeing. Given study findings that student behaviour is associated with job satisfaction (e.g. Kengatharan, 2020), this is naturally concerning in the context of a teacher retention crisis. Teachers in the present study reported that they were spending more time dealing with student behaviour issues. This was an additional aspect of emotional labour and workload that teachers need to be able to manage, in addition to the increased workload and responsibilities that teachers took on over the pandemic, creating additional stressors (Baker et al., 2021) and resulting in reports of a lower quality of life (Lizana et al., 2021).

The findings highlight that not all teachers experienced the impact of student conduct problems on their wellbeing in the same way. Some of the teachers did not report a significant impact or change since the onset of the pandemic. However, others reported an increase in the impact of student behaviour on their wellbeing. It is possible that some of the teachers may have had protective factors that buffer the effects of stressors on their wellbeing, such as greater social support, increased autonomy and existing coping strategies (Kim et al., 2021), which was not examined directly at this time point of the study. Further research is needed to determine the characteristics of the participants and their environments which may prevent and buffer the effects of specific stressors.

While students' problematic behaviours in online learning environments (Baysal & Ocak, 2021) included issues around the use of technology (e.g. turning off their webcam), now that students are back in school in person, there have continued to be conflicts around the use of technology (e.g. mobile phone use during lessons). Participants also highlighted concerns about students struggling with routines and peer relationships, probably as a consequence of being away from the usual school environment for a prolonged period of time during the pandemic. Moss et al. (2020) found that there was a general agreement, among the teachers surveyed in their study, that children need to settle back into their normal school routine and readjust to that context before the children's learning could resume in a meaningful way.

An additional need for student support was experienced by teachers, following the onset of the pandemic, as a response to the increase in student conduct problems. There were variations in the findings as to whether the teachers felt that their schools had the resources, ability and willingness to meet this increased need. Differential impacts were experienced for different groups of students, with teachers reporting that pre-pandemic characteristics were exaggerated following the onset of the pandemic. For example, in this study, participants reported previously assertive students becoming more challenging and previously

quiet students becoming more withdrawn. While withdrawal is not necessarily a conduct problem, considered more as an internalisation of distress than an externalising behaviour (Bayer et al., 2012), it is still of concern to teachers in managing the classroom environment and responding to student needs.

Teachers' experiences of past student behaviour may influence their emotional response to classroom incidences of misbehaviour (de Ruiter et al., 2020; Spilt et al., 2011). For example, if a teacher remembers a student as being assertive pre-pandemic, they may then perceive this student's behaviour, following the disruption caused by the pandemic, to be challenging as there is a preconceived expectation of assertiveness, combined with a general decline in teachers' wellbeing and an increase in emotional exhaustion. These findings offer support for Chang's (2009) Emotional Appraisal Theory, which proposes that repeated experiences of student misbehaviour and teachers' habitual patterns of responses can lead to teachers' experience of emotional exhaustion, which is a component of burnout, and thus a concern in the context of the teacher retention crisis. However, this point was not explicitly addressed within this study.

There was found to be an increased impact of student conduct problems on wellbeing for some teachers following the onset of the pandemic. Glock and Kleen (2019) found that teachers earlier in their career were more likely to respond to student misbehaviour with harsh interventions than teachers later in their career. This suggests that ECTs may experience student conduct problems differently to teachers who are more experienced, which may also result in a different impact on their wellbeing. However, this study did not find that there was a difference, between the experiences of ECTs and more experienced teachers, in the impact of student conduct problems on their wellbeing. This finding may be due to the limited experiences ECTs had of teaching students pre-pandemic, given that they were relatively new to the teaching profession, and thereby unable to fairly compare their experiences of student behaviour and wellbeing pre-pandemic. Nevertheless, this possibility does not detract from the finding that some teachers experienced more of an impact on their wellbeing than others, as a result of the increase in student conduct problems. With teacher retention being a key focus for the profession, it is important that these differences in the experiences of individual teachers are recognised, and the appropriate support offered to help all teachers manage both the student conduct problems and also the impact this has on teachers' own wellbeing.

Implications

The findings of this study suggest that there could be a need for a higher level of student support as we emerge from the pandemic. An increased level of support has implications for school funding owing to associated resourcing costs, as well as support from government and local authority policies. Considering how the diverse requirements of students can be met by schools and supporting external agencies within the current system is an important next step. Supporting students to manage their own behaviour more effectively, through teaching strategies such as self-regulation (Agran et al., 2001) and self-monitoring (Ganz, 2008), could be one practical way of indirectly supporting teachers.

There is also potentially a need for additional wellbeing support for teachers, especially those who may find the reported increase in student conduct problems more challenging than other teachers. Identifying these teachers and offering additional support is an important step towards supporting and retaining teachers in the profession. Addressing a lack of senior leadership support with managing student conduct problems has been identified as one way in which wellbeing of staff in schools could be improved (Ofsted, 2019). Support from external agencies, such as Educational Psychology services, has also been highlighted

as important in helping teachers to develop positive ways of working with students who present with conduct problems (Armstrong & Hallett, 2012). For Early Career teachers, the Early Career Framework (Department for Education, 2019) offers guidance on five core areas, one of which is behaviour management, underpinned by the availability of structured training and support. This may be particularly helpful in supporting the wellbeing of Early Career teachers.

Limitations and future directions

This study used a qualitative IPA framework, whereby the focus is on understanding the individual experiences of participants that cannot be generalised to a wider population. The study examined state school teachers in England, so it is unknown whether the participants' experience would be similar for teachers in other countries or, indeed, for other teachers in England. Such examination would be relevant to ascertain whether there is a general need across England or whether there are specific areas that would particularly benefit from an intervention.

Although a small sample is appropriate for an IPA study, the composition of the sample may have been a limiting factor. Among the participants, there were no secondary teachers in senior leadership positions (Secondary SLT) and the majority of classroom teachers, except for one, were based in primary schools. Therefore, comparisons between the experiences of SLT and classroom teachers should not be made.

A further potential limitation of the study is the cross-sectional nature of the interview questions which asked the teachers specifically about student conduct. Although the participants were part of a sample taking part in a longitudinal study, data about the participants' experiences of student conduct and the potential impact of this on their wellbeing were only gathered at a single time point.

Future research may wish to address these limitations by examining the experiences of a larger sample of teachers over a period of time, which could then build on and supplement the findings of this study. The experiences of teachers from other countries could also be explored, to widen the scope of findings from this study which focussed on teachers in England. A more representative sample would be beneficial as this would allow exploration of any differences between primary and secondary settings, and SLT and classroom teachers. This would enable additional support to be targeted towards the teacher groups who would most benefit.

A variety of factors contribute to teacher wellbeing, which include workload and responsibilities (Kim et al., 2021), a lack of connection and the challenges of online teaching (Baker et al., 2021), concerns for students' wellbeing and frustrations with administrations around Covid safety measures (Robinson et al., 2022). The study focused on linking teachers' perceptions of student behaviour with teachers' wellbeing in the context of the pandemic given the limited research attention on this topic as we emerge from the pandemic. Future studies may wish to compare the strength of the contribution of each factor to teachers' wellbeing in the long term.

CONCLUSION

Teachers in the study reported experiencing an increase in student conduct problems since the onset of the pandemic. For some teachers, this has had a negative impact on their wellbeing. Teachers have experienced that there is an increased need for student support and a variation in whether they perceive that their schools have been able to provide this additional

support. Pre-pandemic behavioural traits appeared to have been exacerbated following the disruption caused by the pandemic, with previously assertive students becoming more challenging and previously quiet students becoming more withdrawn. As teacher wellbeing is a key factor in retaining practitioners in this profession, it is important to consider how teachers can be most effectively supported in managing the increased student conduct problems as we emerge from the pandemic.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank the participants for engaging so wholeheartedly in this research at a very busy time.

FUNDING INFORMATION

This research was supported by Economic and Social Research Council Impact Acceleration Accounts (grant no. ES/T502066/1).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

All the authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on reasonable request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available owing to privacy or ethical restrictions.

ETHICS STATEMENT

We confirm that the research presented in this article was carried out with due consideration to all relevant ethical issues and in line with BERA's Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research.

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How to cite this article: Oxley, L., Asbury, K. & Kim, L. E. (2023). The impact of student conduct problems on teacher wellbeing following the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. *British Educational Research Journal*, 00, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3923>