

# Understanding and Supporting Behaviour that Challenges in Primary Schools: A Function-Based Approach

## Research

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## **Understanding and Supporting Behaviour that Challenges in Primary Schools: A Function-Based Approach**

**Audience** Welsh Government policymakers; practitioners responsible for supporting children with Additional Learning Needs; local authorities; regional consortia; national and local bodies in Wales with an interest in promoting and supporting children and young people's emotional/mental health.

**Overview** This report considers the role of functional assessment in maintained primary schools in understanding and responding to learner challenging behaviour. Behaviour scientists conducted assessments of problem behaviours and made concrete recommendations to teacher to improve learner outcome.

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**Action required** The findings and recommendations have been fed back to the Welsh Government for their consideration.

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Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.

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# **Executive summary**

## **Review**

Behaviour problems in schools are a growing concern. There is significant evidence that behaviour in schools has deteriorated since the pandemic (National Education Union, 2023). Teachers report an increase in both low-level disruptive behaviour and more dangerous high-impact behaviours. Reports from school staff, data on absenteeism, and rising rates of fixed-term and permanent exclusions present a worrying national picture (Welsh Government, 2023; Welsh Government, 2025b).

These challenging behaviours stretch schools' resources and expertise. To provide effective, targeted and compassionate support, teachers and school leaders need to understand the reasons why some learners display persistent, challenging behaviour. A significant body of international evidence has shown that schools which implement School-Wide Positive Behaviour Support (SWPBS) with high fidelity observe decreases in problem behaviour and increased wellbeing among learners and staff.

SWPBS is a tiered, whole-school approach to supporting and creating positive school cultures. All learners benefit from the universal, proactive strategies aimed at improving wellbeing and preventing challenging behaviours. A small percentage of learners will also benefit from higher-tier support, including bespoke, function-based interventions. Functional assessment is a core component of SWPBS and can help teachers understand why some learners engage in challenging behaviours, providing a framework for effective and compassionate intervention.

## **Aims and Objectives**

The aim of this project was to explore the feasibility and perceived effectiveness of using functional behaviour assessment (FBA) as part of a tiered SWPBS framework in Welsh primary schools. The specific objectives were:

- To assess whether FBA could help schools better understand and respond to persistent challenging behaviour.
- To co-produce individualised, function-based behaviour support plans with teachers.
- To gather teacher perspectives on the process, outcomes, and implementation of function-based interventions.
- To explore the potential role of behaviour specialists in supporting school staff to adopt evidence-informed, compassionate practices.

## **Functional Assessment**

A functional behaviour assessment (FBA) is a tool used to identify the underlying purpose or function of challenging behaviour. Understanding the function of a behaviour helps us to

better understand the learner as an individual and to inform effective intervention. The assessment involves gathering information through observation and interviews to identify the triggers and consequences that may be maintaining the behaviour. In this project, a certified behaviour specialist delivered training to teachers on function-based approaches and supported the assessment process.

The specialist observed each learner in the classroom and conducted interviews with the class teacher and relevant school staff. Together, the specialist and teacher developed an individualised behaviour plan designed to support a more positive experience in school and to help the learner develop skills needed for long-term success.

## **Methodology**

The project used a mixed-methods design. Behaviour specialists carried out functional assessments for nine learners across six primary schools in Wales. These assessments were based on classroom observations and staff interviews and informed the co-production of behaviour support plans. To evaluate the acceptability and feasibility of this approach, an independent researcher conducted follow-up semi-structured interviews with participating teachers. Thematic analysis was used to identify key themes related to the implementation, impact, and perceived usefulness of the intervention.

## **Interviews and Analysis**

Teachers reported that, in all nine cases, the FBA process helped to clarify the function of the learner's behaviour. This allowed the development of behaviour plans tailored to the learner's needs and the school environment. Teachers were able to implement these plans and reported improvements in behaviour. All participants agreed that they and the wider school staff benefited from the process, becoming more confident and knowledgeable in responding to challenging behaviour. Teachers reported that learners' behaviour improved and that classroom environments became more manageable and positive.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study and in line with current policy priorities in Wales, we make the following recommendations to strengthen practice, inform future research, and support the implementation of function-based approaches as part of a tiered behaviour support model.

### **1. Guidance for the teaching profession**

Based on the review of international evidence, the Welsh Government should provide national guidance, investment, and practical support to help schools develop and embed School-Wide Positive Behaviour Support (SWPBS) as a consistent, relational, and inclusive framework across all tiers (universal, targeted, and specialist).

### **2. Evaluate and Strengthen Universal (Tier 1) Supports**

Investigate the implementation of School-Wide Positive Behaviour Support (SWPBS)

in Welsh primary schools, including its fidelity, reach, and perceived impact. Explore how universal supports interact with targeted interventions to promote sustainability and whole-school cultural change. Schools should be equipped to identify early signs of behavioural difficulty and respond with timely, contextualised support. Investment in early years and primary settings is particularly important, with an emphasis on proactive strategies that reduce the need for exclusion.

**3. Expand Study Scale and Contexts**

Extend research into secondary schools, special schools, and Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) to assess the adaptability and relevance of function-based approaches across developmental stages and diverse educational settings. Particular attention should be paid to transition points and differing organisational structures.

**4. Address a Broader Range of Behavioural Presentations**

Examine the effectiveness of functional assessment and support planning for less overt presentations of behaviour that challenge, such as internalising symptoms (e.g., anxiety, withdrawal) and passive disengagement. These behaviours can be easily overlooked yet have significant impact on learning and wellbeing.

**5. Enhance Measurement through Longitudinal and Quantitative Methods**

Future studies should incorporate standardised assessment tools, systematic behaviour tracking, and longitudinal follow-up (e.g. 6–12 months post-intervention) to better understand the sustained impact of function-based supports. Further research should explore barriers and facilitators to implementing SWPBS and function-based approaches in diverse Welsh contexts, including secondary and specialist settings. Areas for evaluation should include exclusion rates, wellbeing, and academic attainment.

**6. Promote Family and Multi-Agency Engagement**

Strengthen the involvement of parents, carers, and external professionals (e.g. educational psychologists, health services, and behaviour specialists) in the design, implementation, and review of behaviour support plans. This collaborative approach can enhance consistency, improve understanding of pupil needs, and embed support across systems.

**7. Develop National Capacity and Infrastructure**

Provide professional learning opportunities for school staff, including ALNCoS and senior leaders, to build confidence in implementing functional assessment and evidence-informed responses. Local authorities should consider commissioning or training behaviour specialists to provide expert input and ensure fidelity of implementation across schools.

**8. Develop National Capacity and Infrastructure**

Implementation of function-based approaches should be supported by trained professionals (e.g., certified behaviour specialists), especially for complex or high-risk cases. Local Authorities should develop pathways for specialist input and ensure supervision to maintain fidelity and confidence in practice.

## **Glossary**

### **ACEs**

Adverse Childhood Experiences are defined as traumatic or stressful experiences that occur during childhood, which can directly harm a child or affect the environment in which they live.

### **ALN**

Additional Learning Needs – Refers to pupils who require additional support to access education due to learning difficulties or disabilities.

### **ALP**

Additional Learning Provision – Specialised educational support provided to children and young people with ALN to help them access the curriculum and achieve their full potential.

### **BST**

Behaviour Skills Training - an evidence-based instructional method used in the classroom to teach learners new skills or to modify existing behaviours.

### **CICO**

Check-in/Check-out - A daily mentoring system where the learner checks in with a key adult at the start and end of the day to review behaviour goals and receive positive encouragement and feedback.

### **FBA**

A functional behaviour assessment is a structured and evidence-based approach used to better understand the factors contributing to behaviours that challenge.

### **IDP**

Individual Development Plan is a statutory plan maintained by a school, PRU, FEI or local authority that sets out a description of a child or young person's ALN, the ALP called for by their learning difficulty or disability, and other associated information. IDP's replace Individual Education Plans (IEPs) under the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018.

### **LEA**

Local Education Authority – Regional governing bodies responsible for education services within a specific area.

### **ODR**

Office Discipline Referral – Refers to a formal record of student behaviour incidents that require intervention by school administrators, often used to track patterns and inform behaviour management strategies.



## PBS

Positive Behavioural Support is "a multicomponent framework for developing an understanding of the challenging behaviour displayed by an individual, based on assessment of the social and physical environment and broader context within which it occurs, and incorporating stakeholder perspectives and involvement." Gore et al. (2013).

## PSA

An independent UK body that oversees health and social care regulators to ensure they protect the public and maintain high standards in professional regulation.

## PRU

Pupil Referral Unit – A type of school in the UK for learners who are unable to attend mainstream or special schools

## SEL

Social and Emotional Learning - Small-group sessions teaching pupils how to manage emotions, build friendships, resolve conflict, or recognise their own stress responses.

## SWPBS/PBIS/ SWPBIS

School-Wide Positive Behaviour Support (SWPBS), also known as Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports (PBIS), or School-Wide Positive Behaviour Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS), is a multitiered approach to building positive school environments for all pupils and staff within a school community.

## TOCA-C

Teacher Observation of Classroom Adaptation – Checklist – A teacher-rated assessment tool used to evaluate students' social and behavioural adaptation in the classroom, helping to identify those at risk of behavioural difficulties.

## UKBA(cert)

Post-graduate training certificate in behaviour analysis, UKBA(cert) have undergone rigorous supervised training, completed post-graduate training in behaviour analysis, and agree to a code of ethics, complaints procedure, and engage with annual continuing professional development.

## WSAEMW

Whole-School Approach to Emotional and Mental Wellbeing – A school-wide strategy that integrates mental health and emotional wellbeing into the curriculum, policies, and daily practices to create a supportive learning environment for all students.

# 1. Introduction

The Welsh Government report [Exclusions from Maintained Schools: September 2021 to August 2022](#) documented an increase in exclusions of all types of school exclusions in Wales in the 2021/22 school year. However, these figures must be interpreted in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, during which many schools were closed or operating under significant restrictions in 2020/21. As a result, exclusion numbers during that year were atypically low.

During 2020/21 there were 13,024 fixed term exclusions of 5 days or less (a rate of 27.4<sup>1</sup>) compared to 23,897 (a rate of 50.6) in 2021/2022. Similar trends are seen for fixed term exclusions of over 5 days and permanent exclusion. During 2020/21 there were 527 fixed term exclusions of over 5 days (a rate of 1.1) compared to 935 (a rate of 2.0) in 2021/22. During 2020/21 there were 131 permanent exclusions (a rate of 0.3) compared to 305 in 2021/22 (a rate of 0.6) (Welsh Government, 2023).

Importantly, a consistent year-on-year increase in fixed term exclusions of 5 days or less has been observed since 2013/14, suggesting that the upward trend in exclusions predates the pandemic and may be part of a broader pattern rather than solely a post-COVID rebound (Welsh Government, 2023).

The most common reasons reported for exclusion across primary and secondary settings are persistent disruptive behaviour, verbal abuse/threatening behaviour against an adult, other and physical assault against a pupil (Welsh Government, 2023). It is also clear that learners who engage in behaviours that challenge are unhappy and are not thriving in the school environment. Globally, teachers cite *low-level behaviours* as one of the most stressful aspects of their job (Agyapong et al., 2022).

While most learners respond well to consistent, positive, school-wide behaviour strategies, a small percentage of learners persist with behaviours that challenge. These learners may be labelled “difficult” or “challenging” and often have Additional Learning Needs (ALN). However, it is increasingly clear that socio-economic factors also play a critical role in the emergence and persistence of such behaviours. Pupils eligible for free school meals (eFSM), for example, are nearly four times more likely to face exclusion than their peers (Welsh Government, 2023), and this group consistently demonstrates lower attendance and attainment (Welsh Government, 2025). Emerging evidence also shows that learners who face multiple vulnerabilities—such as being eFSM and having ALN—are at particularly elevated risk of poor outcomes, including school exclusion and later involvement with social care or the justice system (Children’s Commissioner for Wales, 2020; Cogan et al., 2025). Once problem behaviours become entrenched, they can be difficult to address, often leading to placement breakdown and long-term disengagement. Early, targeted, and

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<sup>1</sup> Rates provided per 1,000 pupils

contextualised intervention is essential to mitigate these risks and support better developmental, educational, and wellbeing outcomes for at-risk learners (Biglan et al., 2012; Melvin et al., 2019).

School Wide Positive Behaviour Support (SWPBS) is an evidence-based framework designed to promote positive behaviour and improve wellbeing and engagement across whole school communities (Sugai & Horner, 2009). Originally developed in the United States, SWPBS has been widely implemented in mainstream primary school settings, particularly across the USA. In the UK, however, experience with PBS has traditionally focused on targeted interventions addressing behaviours that challenge specific pupils, often within special school contexts (Jackson Brown et al., 2014; Paris et al., 2019). More recently, the SWPBS framework has begun to be adapted for broader, whole-school use in both mainstream and special education settings. A study by Denne et al. (2023) outlines how the model has been successfully tailored to UK special schools, emphasising its role in reducing the use of restraint and creating more positive, inclusive learning environments. Case examples from schools in England and Wales highlight the potential of SWPBS to enhance pupil outcomes, improve staff confidence, and strengthen school culture. It establishes a tiered continuum of support, beginning with a universal behaviour offer that includes clearly stated expectations, explicit teaching of routines and social-emotional skills, and consistent, constructive encouragement of positive behaviour. SWPBS is grounded in the understanding that behaviour is learned and context dependent. It therefore prioritises preventative strategies over punitive responses and promotes the idea that prosocial behaviour is a skill set that can be nurtured and taught. Within this model, teachers and school leaders adopt a relational and compassionate approach, particularly when supporting learners who exhibit behaviours that challenge. When implemented with fidelity, SWPBS has been shown to reduce problem behaviours, improve classroom climate, and enhance academic outcomes (Sørli et al., 2018).

SWPBS is a multi-component intervention. The universal offer aims to establish a consistent, preventative, and positive behaviour culture across the whole school, reducing the likelihood of most challenging behaviours emerging. However, for some learners, additional targeted or individualised support may be required. These learners benefit from a deeper understanding of the function of their behaviour, typically through a Functional Behaviour Assessment (FBA). An FBA is a structured process that explores the purpose of a behaviour—what a pupil may be trying to communicate or achieve—by identifying the triggers, consequences, and environmental conditions that sustain it (O'Neill et al., 1997). This understanding allows staff to design more personalised, compassionate responses that meet the learner's needs while encouraging more prosocial behaviour.

Function-based interventions can take many forms depending on the needs identified. For example:

- Check-in/Check-out (CICO): A daily mentoring system where the learner checks in with a key adult at the start and end of the day to review behaviour goals and receive positive encouragement and feedback.

- Trauma-informed strategies: Adjustments to routines or interactions that help reduce triggers for dysregulated behaviour, such as offering a quiet space for emotional regulation or using co-regulation scripts during transitions.
- Social and Emotional Learning (SEL): Small-group sessions teaching pupils how to manage emotions, build friendships, resolve conflict, or recognise their own stress responses.
- Academic supports: For behaviours maintained by escape or avoidance, interventions might include academic support to reduce frustration.

These interventions are most effective when directly informed by the insights from an FBA and integrated into the school's tiered approach to behaviour support. NICE guidelines recommend function-based approaches in both educational and health contexts for supporting children and young people who display behaviours that challenge (NICE, 2015). International research consistently demonstrates that interventions designed using FBA are more likely to reduce challenging behaviours and promote positive alternatives than generic or reactive strategies (Ingram, Lewis-Palmer, & Sugai, 2005; Newcomer & Lewis, 2004).

A functional behaviour assessment (FBA) is a structured and evidence-based approach used to better understand the factors contributing to behaviours that challenge. An FBA can bring understanding to the issues of problem behaviour. The goals of FBA are to provide a clear description of the problem behaviours, identify the triggers such as time, people or lessons that predict the behaviour, and label the consequences that maintain the behaviour. A hypothesis can be generated about when and why the behaviours occur. Rather than focusing solely on the behaviour itself, the FBA process seeks to uncover the underlying purpose or 'function' the behaviour may be serving for the learner.

Through a combination of structured observation, discussions with staff, and where appropriate, consultation with the learner and their family, the assessment gathers information about the context in which behaviours occur. This includes identifying patterns, such as times of day, subject areas, or specific social dynamics that may act as triggers, as well as the consequences that follow the behaviour and may be rewarding. This process leads to the development of a clear, testable hypothesis about when, where, and why the behaviour happens.

Data are collected for FBA from observing the learner, speaking to the learner, their families, and teachers, and sometimes arranging the environment to find out exactly when the behaviours do and do not happen. The functional assessment will inform a behaviour support that includes teaching strategies to enable the learner to identify their own needs and strategies to develop independent solutions. A goal of the intervention will be that the learner does not need to engage in the problem behaviour because they have been taught alternative means to regulate and manage their environment and because school staff are sensitive to the learner's unique needs.

There is a substantial and growing body of international evidence supporting the use of functional behaviour assessment (FBA) and function-based intervention planning in educational settings. Research consistently demonstrates that behaviour support plans developed on the basis of a well-conducted FBA are more effective at reducing challenging behaviours and increasing prosocial engagement than generic or non-specific approaches (Scott et al., 2005; Gage et al., 2017). This includes improved outcomes for pupils with additional learning needs, lower rates of exclusion, and enhanced staff confidence in responding to behaviour.

However, the quality and fidelity of FBA implementation are critical. Studies have found that poorly designed or inconsistently applied assessments often fail to produce meaningful change and may even undermine staff confidence in behaviour support approaches (Hanley, 2012; Blood & Neel, 2007). For this reason, the delivery of FBA should be underpinned by high-quality training and professional supervision. In cases involving persistent, high-risk, or complex behaviour, it may be necessary for a certified behaviour specialist to undertake the assessment and support the design of an appropriate intervention plan. In the UK, behaviour analysts registered as UKBA(cert) with the UK Society for Behaviour Analysis (UKSBA) are trained to postgraduate level, have completed supervised practice, and are included on a Professional Standards Authority (PSA) register. These practitioners are skilled in working collaboratively with educators, families, and multi-agency teams to develop individualised, context-sensitive plans that reduce barriers to learning and promote longer-term inclusion and wellbeing.

In primary schools, behaviours that challenge often present in the form of persistent disruption, difficulties with emotional regulation, or withdrawn and avoidant behaviours. These may be underpinned by developmental factors, speech and language needs, or early adversity, and are frequently associated with barriers to learning, especially in the context of unmet literacy and communication needs. Recent research in Wales has shown that primary-aged children may begin to disengage from learning early in their education, particularly when they face multiple vulnerabilities such as socio-economic disadvantage and Additional Learning Needs (ALN) (Welsh Government, 2023). The primary school context offers a crucial window for early intervention, where embedding whole-school, preventative frameworks alongside tailored support can mitigate risks and promote wellbeing, belonging and inclusion from the earliest stages of a child's education.

## 2. Background to SWPBS

The following section provides an overview of the SWPBS approach.

### **School-Wide Positive Behaviour Support Universal Supports**

School-wide Positive Behaviour Support (SWPBS) is a framework for creating a positive and supportive school environment. SWPBS is also referred to as Positive Behaviour Interventions and Supports (PBIS) (Sugai and Horner, 2009). The assumption of SWPBS is that if school leaders create a positive environment where pro-social behaviours are routinely taught, modelled, and rewarded, most learners will behave pro-socially. The approach views behaviour through a compassionate lens: if a learner is routinely misbehaving despite the application of a positive behaviour culture, they likely have unmet needs and will benefit from understanding and a skills-based approach to improving behaviour. SWPBS emphasises prevention rather than consequences to promote a positive school culture and behaviour.

There is compelling evidence that School Wide Positive Behaviour Support improves behaviour, reduces episodes of violence and behaviour problems in schools (Estrapala, Rila and Bruhn, 2021; Scott, Gagon and Nelson, 2008) and prevents the development of severe disruptive behaviour for at-risk learners (Sørli et al., 2018). Schools that have implemented SWPBS have also reported reductions in exclusions (Curtis et al., 2010; Gage et al., 2020). Furthermore, SWPBS has been shown to improve school climate and academic achievement as well as reduce the factors that place a young person at risk for violent behaviours (Metzler et al., 2001). School climate refers to the overall tone and quality of school life, encompassing relationships among staff and pupils, feelings of safety and belonging, and the consistency and fairness of behavioural expectations and responses. When SWPBS is implemented with fidelity, it fosters a more predictable, respectful, and inclusive environment in which pupils feel valued and supported—conditions that are known to promote engagement, wellbeing, and learning for all.

Adopting a School-Wide Positive Behaviour Support (SWPBS) framework has important implications for school behaviour policies and for how decisions around exclusion are approached. The framework encourages a shift away from reactive or punitive models towards a preventative, instructional approach in which behaviour is explicitly taught, reinforced, and supported. As such, behaviour policies aligned with SWPBS tend to emphasise relational, restorative, and skill-building strategies rather than relying heavily on sanctions. While exclusion may still be used as a last resort in cases of serious harm or risk, SWPBS provides schools with a structured means to intervene earlier and more effectively. This reduces the likelihood of exclusion through targeted support and function-based planning. This aligns with national policy aims to improve inclusion, reduce inequalities, and promote equitable outcomes for learners with the highest needs (Welsh Government, 2023).

The defining features of SWPBS are:

1. Proactive approach: SWPBS is a proactive approach that seeks to prevent problem behaviours before they occur. It involves setting clear expectations for behaviour and teaching learners the personal and emotional skills they need to meet those expectations.
2. Universal Behaviour Offer: SWPBS is designed and implemented school wide. Teachers and school leaders set clear and positively stated behaviour expectations. Positive behaviours are taught and modelled until they become a routine part of the school culture. Ideally, all learners, staff, and administrators are involved in creating and maintaining a positive, consistent and supportive environment. When the universal supports are fully implemented, most learners will thrive in the school environment.
3. Tiered interventions: SWPBS uses a tiered system of support. While most learners will respond very well to universal supports, a minority of learners require a greater understanding and a bespoke approach to support.
4. For these learners, a functional behavioural assessment can help teachers understand the behaviour and develop compassionate and effective support interventions. Teachers collaborate with behaviour specialists to understand behaviour and develop bespoke plans.
5. Collaborative approach: SWPBS is a collaborative approach that involves the entire school community, including learners, families, and community members. It emphasises communication and collaboration between all stakeholders.
6. Positive consequences: SWPBS emphasises the use of positive consequences to encourage positive behaviour. This involves recognising and acknowledging learners for meeting expectations, rather than only focusing on consequences for negative behaviour. While unsafe or dangerous behaviour is not tolerated, the emphasis is always on creating a positive and supportive learning environment.
7. Fair sanctions: It is accepted that sanctions are sometimes necessary to deter challenging behaviour and signal to the school community that aggressive and dangerous behaviours are not acceptable. However, if a sanction is used repeatedly with the same learner, school staff acknowledge that the sanction is not effective in changing behaviour and may be damaging to the learner's relationships with staff. The learner will require a bespoke approach.
8. All levels of intervention focus on teaching and learning, antecedent manipulations, reinforcement, data-based decision making, and evidence-based practice (Eber et al., 2008; George, Kincaid and Pollard-Sage, 2008; Hawken et al., 2008).

Overall, SWPBS is a comprehensive approach to creating a positive and supportive school environment that emphasises proactive and preventative evidence-based decision-making, collaboration, and positive encouragement.

## **Tier 1: Universal Behaviour Offer**

SWPBS may appear slightly different in every school as it is an individualised system tailored to each school's unique population, culture, and needs. There are some core elements that must be present in every school for SWPBS to have success. These include: (a) a SWPBS committee or leadership team, (b) an overriding school philosophy made up of 3-5 simply stated and agreed values, (c) specific expectations for each area of the school comprised of observable behaviours, stated positively, (d) an acknowledgement system to reward learners who are following the rules, (e) specific, consistent strategies for learners who need extra support, and (f) a data collection and evaluation systems for problem solving (George, Kincaid and Pollard-Sage, 2008; Turnbull et al. 2002).

Firstly, schools and committees must formally decide on their school values and rules. Schools decide what is important to them, and devise 3 to 5 simply and positively stated values. Once the values have been established, they are further defined as specific behaviours or rules in different environments around the school. If the rule is to respect others by tidying up after yourself in the dinner hall, learners will be taught this rule explicitly and with corrective feedback (Horner, Sugai and Anderson, 2010). The values and rules are written into a publicly posted school-wide behaviour matrix (Kelm, McIntosh and Cooley, 2014)

This element of the SWPBS approach aligns well with requirements in Wales. Schools are required to establish and regularly review a written behaviour policy that promotes good conduct, supports learner wellbeing, and fosters an inclusive school environment. This duty is outlined in Welsh Government guidance Inclusion and Pupil Support (Welsh Government, 2016), which sets out that governing bodies must provide a written statement of principles to guide the headteacher in developing the school's behaviour and attendance policies. Section 4.1 of the guidance emphasises that these policies should clearly articulate expectations for behaviour, apply consistently across the school, and align with whole-school approaches to emotional wellbeing and inclusion.

Within a School-Wide Positive Behaviour Support (SWPBS) framework, this statutory requirement is operationalised through the collaborative development of three to five simple, positively stated school values that reflect the priorities of the school community. These values are then defined as specific, observable behaviours appropriate to different school settings. For instance, a value such as 'respect' may be enacted through helping others in the classroom or tidying up after oneself in the dining hall. These behaviours are explicitly taught, modelled, and rewarded through feedback (Horner, Sugai & Anderson, 2010). The values and expectations are typically summarised in a school-wide behaviour matrix—a publicly displayed reference that promotes shared understanding and consistent practice



across staff and learners (Kelm, McIntosh & Cooley, 2014). In this way, SWPBS supports schools in Wales to meet their statutory obligations while embedding a preventative, relational, and inclusive approach to behaviour.

Rules are primarily taught at the beginning of every school year and then learners are reminded of them continuously throughout the year through systems of acknowledgement and reinforcement, and corrective feedback (Horner and Sugai 2015). Once the rules have been taught a system of acknowledgement is implemented with the function of rewarding the prosocial behaviours specified by the school matrix. This system strengthens and maintains the taught behaviours (Simonsen, Sugai and Negrón, 2008). Specific praise has been shown among the literature to decrease problem behaviour in classrooms and is a key part of effective classroom management (Briere et al., 2015). Specific praise refers to citing the exact behaviour a person has engaged in to warrant the praise statement for example, “Good job pushing your chair in”. In a SWPBS setting, teachers should be referring learners back to school values “Good job pushing your chair in, that’s showing respect to property and others”. An optimal rate of specific praise or general praise has not been agreed upon amongst the evidence base, however it has been shown that either a ratio of 4:1 positive to negative comments (Reinke, Herman and Stormont, 2013), or between 6 and 10 positive statements every 15 minutes (Sutherland, Wehby and Copeland, 2000) is sufficient to see positive behaviour change. These are proactive tactics that are used to prevent inappropriate behaviours from occurring, however a system also needs to be formulated to address inappropriate behaviours when they do occur.

Before developing a system to correct inappropriate behaviour, inappropriate behaviour must be defined within the school and its specific population and wider community. In this way, all staff and learners understand exactly when sanctions will be implemented, and data collection can become more accurate if definitions of inappropriate behaviours are universally understood (Horner and Sugai, 2015). Once inappropriate behaviour has been identified and operationally defined schools need to develop a hierarchy or continuum of consequences based on number of behaviours, and severity of behaviours and this is available publicly (Kelm, McIntosh and Cooley, 2014).

It is important to clearly define what the word consequence means within a SWPBS system. Whilst it can involve forms of sanction, there is a larger focus on prevention of future behaviours through teaching and reinforcement approaches. In a school using a SWPBS approach staff are trained to react in the following way to instances of inappropriate behaviour whether the behaviour warrants further action or not; staff name the problem behaviour observed, and they then state what the expectation is in terms of school values “You’ve called out whilst I’m talking, raise your hand if you want to talk to show respect to others”. Staff would then model the appropriate behaviour and ask the learner to imitate. Finally, staff should acknowledge and encourage the learner for having engaged in the appropriate behaviour (George and Kincaid, 2008).

Other consequences used throughout the literature include redirecting learners engaged in inappropriate behaviour (such as calmly guiding a learner’s attention or activity away from a

disruptive behaviour and toward a more appropriate task), changing seating arrangements or other environmental manipulations such as moving tempting items away, warnings, rewarding alternative appropriate behaviours, conferencing with parents and/or learners, providing choices, contingencies contracts, praising other learner engaged in appropriate behaviours, and learners having to remain inside for all or part of their playtimes (Netzel and Eber, 2003; Reinke, Herman and Sprick, 2011; Reinke, Herman and Stormont 2013; Sugai et al., 2000).

These universal systems benefit most learners, but some learners with Additional Learning Needs may require bespoke supports, a compassionate approach, and specialist support to thrive in school. A functional behaviour assessment can support the development of individualised behaviour plans.

## **Tier 2: Targeted Supports**

While universal supports are sufficient to encourage positive behaviour in most learners, some learners require a bespoke approach. These learners sometimes have additional diagnosis, a history of trauma, and may not have the skills required to succeed in school. These learners need and deserve individualised assessment, understanding, and support. A Functional Behaviour Assessment (FBA) is a process used in School-wide Positive Behaviour Support (SWPBS) to identify the underlying function of problem behaviour and to develop effective interventions.

### **Functional Behaviour Assessment**

Functional assessment is an evidence-based strategy that teachers can use to better understand behaviour (Flanagan, et al., 2020; Nessleroad et al., 2022) and develop compassionate, child-centered intervention. Austin et al. (2015) demonstrated that functional assessment led to positive outcomes for learners in maintained schools in Wales. The functional assessments showed that learners engaged in problem behaviour for different reasons: some learners used problem behaviour to recruit attention and others sought to avoid or escape from task demands. When the teachers understand why the learner engages in problem behaviour, they can better prevent and respond to such episodes. The functional analysis will help teachers identify the skill deficits that lead to problem behaviour. These skills may include asking and waiting for: a teacher or peer's attention, help, or a break. Some learners need additional support to persist with difficult or boring tasks or tolerate and manage emotions. Studies have demonstrated that interventions lead to better outcomes when they have been informed by a functional analysis (Ingram, Lewis-Palmer and Sugai, 2005; Santiago et al., 2016).

The FBA process typically involves three main steps:

1. **Gathering information:** The first step in a functional behaviour assessment involves systematically collecting information about the behaviour of concern. This includes identifying when the behaviour occurs, what precedes it (antecedents), what happens during the behaviour itself, and what follows it (consequences). Data are typically

gathered through multiple methods, including direct observation of the learner in natural school settings, structured interviews with staff and caregivers, and a review of existing learner records (such as previous support plans, attendance data, or incident reports). Reviewing these records can provide important historical context and help identify any patterns or triggers that may not be immediately visible during observation.

2. **Understanding data:** Once the data have been collected, they are analysed to identify patterns and understand the underlying function(s) of the behaviour. The function can be considered the purpose, or the reason for the behaviour. Analysis involves identifying the antecedents and consequences that are associated with the behaviour and using this information to develop a hypothesis about the function of the behaviour.
3. **Developing interventions:** Based on the information gathered and analysed in the first two steps, interventions are developed that target the underlying function(s) of the behaviour. These interventions are designed to teach learners alternative behaviours that serve the same function(s) as the problem behaviour, or to alter the environment to reduce the occurrence of the challenging behaviours.

Overall, the use of functional assessment in SWPBS helps to ensure that interventions are effective in addressing problem behaviour by identifying the underlying function(s) of the behaviour and developing interventions that target these functions.

## **Behaviour Skills Training**

When a learner demonstrates challenging behaviour, it is often because in some way, those behaviours benefit the learner. The challenging behaviour can result in attention from staff or the avoidance of stressful demands in the classroom. For long-term behaviour change, teachers should consider if the learner has the skills to cope with the demands of school and regulate their emotions and behaviour. Behaviour skills training can help a learner develop alternative, prosocial responses by explicitly teaching and practising self-regulation, communication, and problem-solving strategies (Ervin et al., 2018; Reitzel et al., 2013).

However, there will be cases where learners continue to experience significant difficulties despite well-implemented support. In such instances, the information gathered through functional assessment and skills-based intervention can play an important role in informing referrals for further assessment, including consideration of Additional Learning Needs (ALN), access to specialist provision, or support via Education Other Than at School (EOTAS), where appropriate. In this way, BST forms part of a broader, graduated response to learner need—helping to determine both what support is effective and whether the current educational placement remains appropriate.

Behaviour Skills Training (BST) is an evidence-based instructional method used in the classroom to teach learners new skills or to modify existing behaviours. The BST method typically involves five main steps:

1. **Teaching:** In this step, the teacher provides verbal or written instructions on the target behaviour or skill to be taught. The instructions are clear and may include examples of how to perform the behaviour or skill correctly. Behaviours may include asking for help, persisting with boring or difficult tasks, resolving peer conflicts, or independently managing sensory needs.
2. **Modelling:** Once the instructions have been provided, the teacher models the correct behaviour or skill for the learners. This involves demonstrating the behaviour or skill in a clear and visible way and may include verbal commentary on the steps involved.
3. **Practice:** Learners are given the opportunity to practice the behaviour or skill themselves.
4. **Feedback:** In the final step, the teacher provides feedback to the learners on their performance of the behaviour or skill. This feedback may include praise for correct performance and suggestions for improvement.

BST can be used to teach a wide range of behaviours and skills in the classroom, including social skills, academic skills, and self-regulation skills. It can be implemented in a variety of formats, including individual teaching, small group teaching, and whole-class teaching. By using BST in the classroom, teachers can help learners develop the skills they need to succeed academically and socially, while also promoting positive behaviour and a positive learning environment.

## Conclusion

Behavioural difficulties in schools are a growing concern, with significant implications for learner wellbeing, educational outcomes, and school inclusion. Learners who experience persistent difficulties with regulating their behaviour are at increased risk of lower attainment, strained relationships, and exclusion from school. In Wales, exclusion data consistently show that certain groups of learners are disproportionately affected. Pupils eligible for free school meals (eFSM), those with Additional Learning Needs (ALN), learners in care, and those from Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic backgrounds are significantly more likely to be excluded than their peers (Welsh Government, 2023). Children and young people with social, emotional, or mental health needs are also overrepresented in exclusion statistics (Luke & O'Higgins, 2018; Paget et al., 2018).

To better support these learners and prevent exclusion or placement breakdown, schools must move beyond reactive responses and focus on understanding the underlying drivers of behaviour. This includes recognising the interaction between individual needs, classroom context, and wider systemic factors. Functional behaviour assessment (FBA) offers a

structured and compassionate method for identifying the purpose of behaviour and informing personalised intervention. Crucially, this approach aligns with the Welsh Government's Whole-School Approach to Emotional and Mental Wellbeing (WSAEMW), which promotes preventative, relational, and inclusive practices across school systems. When embedded within this wider framework, FBA can support schools to create nurturing environments where all learners are given the opportunity to thrive.

While there is a substantial international evidence base showing that School-Wide Positive Behaviour Support (SWPBS) and function-based behaviour interventions are effective in reducing challenging behaviour and improving school climate, there remains limited evidence of their systematic implementation in the UK—and even less within the specific context of Welsh primary schools. Educational research increasingly recognises that the success of an intervention is shaped not only by its design but also by the setting in which it is applied. Factors such as policy environment, professional learning models, cultural norms about behaviour and discipline, and language medium all influence implementation. What works in one national or regional system may not translate directly to another without adaptation.

For example, recent evaluation work from England has documented the successful implementation of whole-school behaviour approaches aligned with SWPBS principles in secondary school settings. The Behaviour Hubs Programme: Interim Report (DfE, 2023) highlights improvements linked to consistent expectations, structured staff development, and the strategic use of positive reinforcement to celebrate appropriate behaviour. However, Wales differs from England in several key respects—including a devolved education system, the Curriculum for Wales, bilingual education settings, and distinct national priorities around inclusion and wellbeing (e.g. the Whole-School Approach to Emotional and Mental Wellbeing framework).

This research project therefore sought to explore whether it is feasible to implement functional behaviour assessment (FBA) in Welsh primary schools, and to better understand teachers' experiences of working with a behaviour professional to support learners with persistent behavioural challenges. Identifying both the practical enablers and contextual barriers to implementation in Wales is an important step toward adapting international evidence in a locally responsive and sustainable way.

### **3. Research Aims and Methods**

#### **Research Aims**

The aims of this research were as follows:

1. To explore how functional behaviour assessment (FBA) and positive behaviour support (PBS) can be used effectively in mainstream primary schools in Wales to understand and respond to behaviours that challenge.
2. To examine the feasibility and impact of using individualised, function-based behaviour interventions developed through school-based collaboration between teachers and behaviour specialists.
3. To assess teacher perceptions of PBS-informed training, support, and intervention processes, and their reported impact on classroom behaviour and teacher confidence.
4. To generate evidence-informed recommendations for future policy, guidance, and training to support behaviour in schools in line with the Whole School Approach to Emotional and Mental Wellbeing (WSAEMW) and Additional Learning Needs (ALN) reform.

#### **Aims and Objectives**

The aim of this project was to explore the feasibility and perceived effectiveness of using functional behaviour assessment (FBA) as part of a tiered SWPBS framework in Welsh primary schools. The specific objectives were:

- To assess whether FBA could help schools better understand and respond to persistent challenging behaviour.
- To co-produce individualised, function-based behaviour support plans with teachers.
- To gather teacher perspectives on the process, outcomes, and implementation of function-based interventions.
- To explore the potential role of behaviour specialists in supporting school staff to adopt evidence-informed, compassionate practices.

#### **Research Questions**

The research questions were:

1. How feasible is it to implement functional assessment processes within mainstream primary school settings in Wales?
2. How do teachers perceive the value and impact of behaviour specialist input and function-based intervention plans for pupils displaying behaviours that challenge?
3. What are the key elements that support or hinder successful implementation of individualised PBS interventions in classroom settings?
4. What impact do these interventions have on teacher confidence and learner behaviour, and what can be learned to inform future practice at scale?

## Methods

This study used a mixed-methods approach combining direct behavioural assessment with qualitative evaluation. The key components were:

1. **Participants:** The project was conducted in 9 mainstream primary schools in North Wales, involving 10 teachers and 9 learners identified by schools as at risk of exclusion due to persistent behaviours that challenge.
2. **Functional Behaviour Assessment (FBA):** Certified behaviour specialists conducted FBAs for each learner, involving structured observations, interviews with school staff, and analysis of antecedents and consequences to hypothesise the function of the behaviour.
3. **Co-production of Behaviour Support Plans:** Individualised intervention plans were developed collaboratively with teachers based on the findings of the FBAs. Interventions included evidence-based strategies such as Check-in/Check-out, trauma-informed routines, social-emotional learning, and academic support.
4. **Teacher Training:** Behaviour specialists provided training on function-based interventions and behavioural principles to participating teachers.
5. **Qualitative Interviews:** After implementation, semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participating teachers to explore their experiences, perceptions of impact, and barriers to implementation.
6. **Analysis:** Interview data were analysed using thematic content analysis to identify key themes relating to feasibility, perceived effectiveness, and teacher learning. Observational outcomes and teacher feedback were used to evaluate behavioural change.

## Participants

A total of 9 learners and 10 teachers from 6 primary schools in North Wales participated in the project. The learners were referred because they displayed persistent, challenging behaviours that put them at risk for exclusion. All the participants were observed being physically aggressive to peers or school staff.

## Schools

Participants were recruited via snowball sampling through collaboration with the Regional School Effectiveness and Improvement Service for North Wales (GwE). Schools were identified because they had previously expressed interest in research collaboration with Bangor University and had experience working with learners demonstrating significant behavioural needs. Initial contact was made by a member of the Bangor University research team via email and telephone, and interested schools were invited to a virtual briefing session delivered over Microsoft Teams.

The study was conducted between Spring 2022 and early 2023, during which time participating schools committed to engaging in the full process of functional behaviour

assessment and co-producing a behaviour intervention plan. Each school agreed to provide access to a nominated classroom teacher, senior leadership support, and permission for observation of a learner identified as displaying persistent, aggressive behaviours.

A total of six primary schools participated, drawn from across three local authorities in North Wales. The schools represented a mix of urban and rural contexts, and although not a formally stratified sample, efforts were made to ensure a degree of contextual diversity. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from headteachers, classroom teachers, and the parents or carers of participating learners. All schools received a short pre-intervention training session and follow-up support from a certified behaviour analyst (UKBA(cert)) who was part of the research team.

## **Learners**

All learners were referred to the project by their class teachers because they were displaying persistent, high-intensity behaviours—particularly verbal and physical aggression—that had not responded to typical in-school behaviour strategies. These behaviours were significantly disrupting learning and had, in all cases, resulted in fixed-term exclusions from school. Despite these exclusions, staff reported that there had been little to no long-term change in behaviour, and learners remained at risk of further exclusion. In several instances, teachers noted that the exclusions had not addressed the underlying drivers of behaviour and, in some cases, had further disrupted the learners' routines and relationships.

Nine learners took part in the study. They were distributed across year groups as follows: one learner in Reception, one in Year 1, one in Year 2, two in Year 4, one in Year 5 (the learner who had previously attended a PRU in the afternoons), and three in Year 6. At the time of participation, none of the learners had a formal diagnosis of a learning difficulty, neurodevelopmental condition, or mental health need. All learners were attending their current mainstream placements on a full-time basis, except for the Year 5 learner, who had recently transitioned back from part-time attendance at a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU).

Only one of the nine learners had a formally documented Individual Development Plan (IDP) that included full-time one-to-one staff support. An IDP is a statutory planning document under the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 that outlines a child's identified Additional Learning Needs (ALN) and the Additional Learning Provision (ALP) required to meet those needs. The other learners had not yet been formally identified as having ALN at the time of the study. School staff reported that although concerns had been raised, the process of assessment and evidence-gathering required for formal identification and provision planning was ongoing. In some cases, referrals to Educational Psychology or external advisory services had been initiated but were subject to waiting times.



The project aimed to intervene at an early stage—prior to formal ALN identification—to offer staff structured support in understanding the function of these behaviours and in designing targeted responses. Teachers highlighted that learners’ behavioural patterns were escalating in both intensity and frequency, and were concerned that, without additional support, further exclusions were likely, and school placements could be at risk. The use of FBA provided a mechanism to move beyond surface-level descriptions of behaviour and explore more sustainable, individualised approaches within the current placement context.

All learners referred to the project displayed persistent behaviours that were significantly interfering with their learning and the safety or wellbeing of others. While the formal inclusion criteria focused on persistent, high-intensity behaviour that had not responded to typical classroom interventions, it was not a requirement that the behaviour involve physical aggression. However, in practice, all nine learners were reported to have demonstrated physical or verbal aggression towards staff or peers, including hitting, kicking, throwing objects, or threatening behaviour. This pattern aligns with national data showing that verbal abuse and physical aggression are among the most common reasons for exclusion from Welsh schools (Welsh Government, 2023).

The inclusion criteria for the study were:

- The learner demonstrated persistent behaviours that challenge and disrupt;
- The behaviour had not improved despite the use of standard in-school strategies;
- The learner was at risk of exclusion or had already experienced one or more fixed-term exclusions;
- The school was willing to participate in a functional behaviour assessment process and co-develop an individualised support plan.

Although aggression was not explicitly stated as a required characteristic for inclusion, it emerged as a consistent feature in all referred cases. This suggests that, for many schools, aggressive behaviour represented a tipping point that triggered the request for additional support.

Several of the participating schools self-identified as having embedded “trauma-informed” approaches—meaning that their staff had received training on the effects of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and aimed to create emotionally safe, supportive environments for learners. However, staff still reported feeling ill-equipped to understand or manage the intensity and persistence of behaviour shown by some learners. Their engagement in this project reflected a desire to build further capacity through evidence-informed, function-based approaches that complemented existing relational practices.

The parents and teachers of each of the learners provided informed consent for the project and agreed that the data may be used to inform this report. They agreed that the behaviour specialist would observe the child in school and speak with staff about the learner’s behaviour. The parents were informed that they could withdraw their child and the child’s

data at any time before this report was written. They understood that their child's data would remain anonymous.

## **Teachers**

There were nine classroom teachers who participated in the project. One teacher was not available for final interview to evaluate the project, so a total of eight teachers were interviewed. All teachers had completed their Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT) year and had been teaching for at least 1 full year at the time of the study. All the teachers gave informed consent for their participation in the project and agreed to direct quotes given in the interview could inform this report.

## **Behaviour Specialists**

All four members of the research team were certified behaviour specialists who hold a UKBA(cert). Those with a UKBA(cert) have completed post-graduate training in behaviour analysis, have undergone rigorous supervised training, completed post-graduate training in behaviour analysis, and agree to a code of ethics, complaints procedure, and engage with annual continuing professional development. The behaviour specialists all had an enhanced DBS certificate and up-to-date safeguarding training. They are regulated by the UK Society for Behaviour Analysis (UKSBA) which maintains a PSA accredited register.

## **Procedure**

### **Staff Training**

The behaviour specialists delivered a two-hour training session on the functions of behaviour and compassionate interventions via Zoom to groups of teachers prior to any intervention within the setting. The training was delivered after the end of the school day, at times that were convenient to the teachers. The training was entitled: "Thinking Behaviourally" and included information on the following areas:

1. Why behaviour happens
2. The importance of defining positive classroom behaviours
3. Teaching, modelling, and acknowledging positive classroom behaviours
4. Making positive behaviours a habit
5. Responding to inappropriate behaviours in the classroom: the importance of consistency
6. Understanding persistent problem behaviour
7. Common functions of problem behaviour
8. Differential Reinforcement
9. Behaviour Skills Training

## **Functional Assessment**

The behaviour specialist visited the school for one half day to observe the learner in the classroom and around school. The behaviour specialist recorded information about the exact behaviours that were causing challenges, and what was happening before and after the behaviour happened. The teacher and other appropriate members of staff were asked to complete a written functional assessment questionnaire (See appendix A) and speak with the behaviour specialist. In two cases, the learner did not engage in the behaviour of concern during the first visit, so a second visit was conducted. The behaviour specialist analysed the data to form an initial hypothesis about the triggers for the behaviour and the consequences that maintain the behaviour. During this FBA, the behaviour specialist spoke with the teachers to develop an understanding of the learners' skills.

## **Co-Production of Individualised Behaviour Plans**

The behaviour specialist worked with the class teacher and relevant school staff to design a plan that could be effectively run in the school. The plans included information about how the teachers could adapt the classroom environment to support learners and especially neurodiverse learners feel comfortable in the classroom. In addition, the behaviour specialist advised on teaching programmes that may help the learner better problem solve situations. Several learners engaged in peer aggression because they became frustrated when they were not able to successfully join play and games. The intervention might include ideas about how the play can be altered to be more inclusive, and also a programme to teach the skills the learner needs to negotiate and engage with peers. If the learner engaged in challenging behaviours to escape difficult academic tasks, advice might include both strategies to alter the task and give learners the skills they need to ask for help and the patience to persist with difficult or boring tasks. The behaviour specialist trained the teacher to deliver the plan, returned to the school to observe the plan being implemented and offered suggestions for modifications, and was available to answer any questions the teachers had about the plan. The specialist returned to the school for one or two more observations to assess the impact of the plan and make changes if necessary.

Due to the limited scope of the study and the Covid-19 mitigations in place during the 2022–23 academic year, direct observational measures of pupil behaviour were not collected. As outlined in the Methods section, the study instead relied on teacher interviews and professional judgement to assess changes in behaviour over time. However, the inability to gather systematic pre- and post-intervention data represents an important limitation, as it constrains the ability to draw objective conclusions about behavioural change.

Had conditions allowed, direct behavioural measures might have included structured classroom observations, frequency counts of target behaviours (e.g. incidents of physical aggression or task refusal), ABC (Antecedent-Behaviour-Consequence) recording, or teacher-completed behaviour rating scales such as the TOCA-C (Teacher Observation of

Classroom Adaptation Checklist). These tools would have provided a more detailed and quantifiable picture of pupil progress and allowed for closer alignment with evidence-based evaluation methods. Future studies should aim to incorporate such measures to strengthen the reliability and generalisability of findings.

## **Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis**

Semi-structured interviews with the participating teachers were conducted by a researcher after a period of approximately 1 month following the functional assessment and behaviour plans being completed. All participants were asked the same questions about their thoughts on the project and SWPBS. Researchers asked if participating in the project had resulted in behaviour change for the learners and staff (See Appendix C for detail). They asked if the staff believed the FBA and resulting support plan intervention would be maintained in their school, if their feelings about the project had changed over time, and for details of changes the teachers had made to their classroom or the school behaviour policy because of the project. Staff were asked to identify the main factors they felt helped in the implementation of the support. The aim of the interviews was to assess which elements of the project staff felt had been implemented in their school, and to survey their opinion on the barriers and facilitators that may have impacted the project. The researcher was mindful to not influence responses or ask leading questions.

Qualitative methodology and thematic analysis were used and to analyse data from 9 semi-structured interviews. The authors and researchers used a constructivist approach and used thematic analysis to understand the subjective experiences of teachers who participated in the PBS in Schools Project (Charmaz, 2014). A constructivist approach can support qualitative analysis by providing a theoretical framework that recognises the role of social and cultural factors in shaping individuals' experiences and interpretations of their experience. According to constructivism, individuals actively construct their own understanding of the world through their interactions with their environment and others. As such, the researchers considered how individuals make meaning of their experiences and how their social and cultural contexts influence their interpretations.

Interview transcripts were analysed through thematic analysis following the six steps laid out in Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis was selected as the most appropriate analytic method due to its flexibility and its suitability for identifying commonalities and divergences in participants' reported experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach was preferred over more interpretive or discourse-based methodologies as the study aimed to generate practical insights relevant to school-based intervention, rather than focus on linguistic framing or deep narrative structure. Thematic analysis also allowed the researchers to remain close to participants' words and experiences, while identifying patterns that could inform future practice and policy.

Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-step process:

1. Familiarisation with the data through repeated reading of transcripts;

2. Generating initial codes to identify meaningful features of the data;
3. Searching for themes by grouping related codes into broader categories;
4. Reviewing themes to ensure they accurately reflected the dataset;
5. Defining and naming themes to sharpen their focus and analytic coherence;
6. Producing the report, integrating analytic commentary with illustrative quotes.

The process was iterative, and reflexivity was maintained throughout, with the research team meeting regularly to discuss coding decisions and interpretations to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the analysis.

## **5. Findings**

### **Functional Assessment and Behaviour Skills Training**

The results of the functional assessment confirmed that the learners referred to the project demonstrated challenging behaviours that severely interfered with theirs and others learning and the teaching in the classroom.

#### **Reason for Referral**

All nine participants were referred to the project because they displayed aggressive behaviour to peers and four of nine learners were sometimes aggressive to school staff. Aggression consisted of hitting, kicking, pushing, throwing objects at people and rude and abusive language. Three learners would run out of the classroom and were at risk to leave school during the day.

#### **Results of the Functional Assessment**

The functional analysis revealed clear explanations for each learner's aggressive behaviour. The functions included attention from peers and staff. Sometimes when the learner wanted and was not able to get the attention they craved, they became upset and were aggressive. Sometimes the learners were aggressive when they found a situation confusing and were not sure what was expected of them. It was recommended that the staff try and mitigate these situations when possible and also support the learner to develop the confidence to ask for clarification. If they were aggressive, they would get help and attention from an adult. Some of the pupils expressed that they wanted to improve their social skills, and it was recommended that they be given explicit teaching about developing friendships and social skills.

Recommendations across cases included proactive strategies to reduce triggering situations—such as ensuring clear instructions, using pre-correction, and increasing adult attention for prosocial behaviours—as well as supporting learners to develop confidence in asking for help or clarification. Several teachers also trialled explicit teaching around social communication and friendship-building. While most of the interpretations were drawn from teacher reports, structured observations, and behavioural pattern analysis, two pupils also directly articulated that they wanted to “be better” at making friends or “not always get in trouble.” These insights, though developmentally limited, underscored the importance of listening carefully to learner voice in understanding behavioural function.

Staff were then able to put in place practical mitigations tailored to the individual needs of each learner. For example, in cases where confusion or unpredictability triggered behaviour, visual timetables and pre-teaching of routines were introduced to help the learner anticipate what would happen next. Where demand avoidance was a factor, tasks were broken down into smaller steps with clear success criteria and choices built in. In situations where social difficulties led to frustration, staff implemented structured opportunities for peer interaction and taught specific turn-taking or help-seeking scripts.

In all cases, the interventions included an element of teaching skills, where learners were supported to develop strategies to regulate their emotions, recognise triggers, and communicate their needs more effectively. Staff used techniques such as modelling, role-play, and immediate feedback to help reinforce these skills. Over time, this dual approach—reducing environmental triggers while building the learner’s capacity—helped reduce reliance on aggressive behaviour as a means of coping or communicating.

## **Description of Interventions**

The behaviour support plans created for each learner were informed by the outcomes of the functional behaviour assessments and co-designed with the class teacher to ensure feasibility and alignment with classroom routines. Although individualised, the interventions shared common elements and were shaped by key behavioural principles, with an emphasis on compassion, prevention, and skill development.

Common features of the interventions included:

- **Environmental adjustments:** Many learners were found to engage in aggressive behaviour in overstimulating or high-demand environments. In response, several interventions included adjustments to the classroom setting to reduce sensory or social overload. This included access to low-stimulation quiet spaces or visual supports that helped structure transitions.
- **Routine and predictability:** Behaviour plans often incorporated clear visual schedules, predictable routines, and pre-corrective prompts to help learners navigate the school day with greater independence and security.
- **Teaching self-regulation skills:** All learners received direct teaching in self-regulation strategies. This ranged from emotion naming and breathing techniques to structured de-escalation strategies taught and practised during calm moments (e.g., through social stories or role-play).
- **Communication supports:** For some learners, difficulty expressing distress or requesting help was identified as a trigger. Supports included visual or verbal help cards, modelling of help-seeking language, and praise for using alternative communication in place of aggression.
- **Adult support and relationship-building:** Several learners were given regular ‘check-ins’ with a key adult, both to review expectations and build a sense of connection and safety. In some cases, staff also used personalised reward systems to reinforce positive behaviour and effort.
- **Consistent staff responses:** Plans included clear guidance for staff on how to respond to early signs of distress or escalation. These often included step-by-step guidance to avoid unintentional reinforcement of the behaviour (e.g., avoiding accidental attention following aggression) and ensuring consistency across staff members.

Each of these strategies was rooted in the understanding that behaviour serves a function. The behaviour specialist worked closely with class teachers to ensure that the interventions

were not only evidence-informed but also manageable within a mainstream classroom context.

Teachers reported that the clarity of the plans, and their alignment with the observed function of the behaviour, helped them feel more confident and consistent in their responses. They also highlighted that these strategies improved not only the learner's behaviour but their own ability to meet the learner's needs in a proactive and compassionate way.

## **Semi-structured interviews with teachers**

From analysis of the data, three core themes emerged from the interviews with teachers, each with several sub-themes. The themes are categorised below.

Themes and subthemes from semi-structured interviews

### **Themes and Sub-themes**

1. Seeking help with behaviour
  - 1.1 Wishes to better understand behaviour
  - 1.2 Understand the learner
  - 1.3 Doing their best for the learner
2. Benefits of working with a behaviour specialist
  - 2.1 Appreciate the expertise
  - 2.2 Additional perspective
3. Benefits of participating
  - 3.1 Improvements for the learner
  - 3.2 Consistency in the staff term
  - 3.3 Professional Development

Examples for each are provided below.

The teachers were all asked why they participated in the project.

### **Theme 1: Seeking Help with Behaviour**

The teachers expressed that they needed help supporting the learner to improve their behaviour. They identified that they had tried many strategies that had not worked and welcomed external support. They expressed that they wanted to understand the purpose or function of the behaviour and consider the behaviour in the context of ALN. In all cases, the teachers expressed that they wanted to do their best to support the learner to succeed at school. This theme implies that the teachers feel they would benefit from specialist help with learners who display challenging behaviour.



## 1.1: Wanting to understand the behaviour

P9: “we had a couple of learners exhibiting very challenging behaviour, and just wanting to know more about how we could support them better and gain more knowledge and understanding”.

P8: “we introduced a visual timetable, which didn't go down as well as we hoped. And so we thought, actually, we do need more specific strategies that were based on observation”.

This sub-theme highlights openness and reflects a shift away from blaming the child and towards a more reflective, needs-led approach. It also signals teachers' willingness to engage with behavioural science to better support inclusion.

## 1.2 Understanding the learner

Teachers valued opportunities to explore individual learners' needs in context, beyond the surface-level behaviour. There was recognition that understanding the learner as a whole person was key to making progress.

P3: “the child in question has ADHD, and it was about me trying to gauge what we could accept from him in terms of a behaviour and what we couldn't”.

This sub-theme highlights the importance of holistic, individualised approaches — consistent with the principles of the ALN system and trauma-informed practice — and illustrates how functional assessment helped reframe perceptions of behaviour.

## 1.3 Doing their best for the learner

Teachers spoke with a strong sense of care and responsibility. Many described feeling emotionally invested in the success of the pupil and were motivated to find solutions that would reduce distress and increase engagement.

P2: “there was just a lot of behaviour things since COVID, as well, it's really like racing around here. It's not just academically, it's emotionally as well. And we wanted to make sure that we were really providing for the children in both ways and making sure that there was something in place that would support them”.

P8: “Okay, so we signed up to the project, because we felt as though, although it's quite a nurturing environment, and we are, you know, we do use a lot of strategies already, that benefit the majority of the children, we felt that this particular child in this class just need that extra”.

This sub-theme reinforces the ethical dimension of teaching, and the emotional labour involved. It shows that, for many staff, the project aligned with their core values and professional identity as educators.

## Theme 2: Benefit of working with a specialist

The teachers discussed the benefits of working with a certified behaviour specialist to give advice about learners who display significant challenging behaviours. They identified that they did not have expertise in assessing the functions of behaviour. They benefited from both the expertise and an outside perspective. This theme shows that the teachers appreciated both the expertise from the professional and the opportunity for someone novel to observe and consider the behaviour.

### 2.1 Appreciate the Expertise

Staff described the input of a behaviour specialist as both reassuring and practical. They appreciated the structured framework and professional confidence that came with an external expert's guidance.

P9: "We're not experienced, or qualified...So, getting somebody who is to be able to analyse that behaviour and let us know exactly what is going on is really helpful. We might, you know, we might have an idea of why children are doing certain things, but we don't see everything".

P3: "The communication I've received has always been great and timely. The way I've worked with other projects, and it can feel a little bit patronising at times, but that hasn't been the case with this stuff. I've always felt like, don't get me wrong, like, (*behaviour specialist*) knows her stuff. And when she talks about certain stuff, I've never felt patronised, or felt like I can't ask a question, or I can't approach anybody who's been involved or been in the school or done anything. So, I've been I've been really impressed with it".

P1: "She came she just observed him for a day wrote a report and it couldn't have been any more like, perfect..."

This sub-theme illustrates the value of building external capacity into schools, especially where behaviour is complex and persistent. It also suggests that collaborative expertise is welcomed, not resisted, when sensitively introduced.

### 2.2 Additional perspective

Teachers described the behaviour specialist as helping them see things differently. By observing patterns and offering insight, they encouraged staff to think more critically and compassionately about what the behaviour might mean.

P2: "I think it was really good to step back and think about that child specifically, which, like I say, you don't really get time to do so it was really nice to just think about him for a minute".

P7: "To see it from someone else's view, to see the behaviour, because it's such a big thing when you're working with behaviour, with children, sometimes you feel that you might be making the situation worse, but to see it from someone else's point of view, that's what I found helpful".

This sub-theme supports the value of reflective practice and the need for safe, non-judgemental professional spaces to analyse behaviour. The external view provided not only new insight but also validation for what staff were already doing well.

### **Theme 3: Positive Results**

In this theme the teachers identified the benefits of working with a specialist and implementing behaviour plans based on functional assessment. They remarked that the learner's behaviour improved, and also the staff team felt more confident and skilled.

#### **3.1. Improvements for the Learner**

Teachers consistently reported that the implementation of behaviour support plans, grounded in functional assessment, led to noticeable and meaningful improvements in learner behaviour. Across all participating schools, teachers observed a reduction in the frequency and intensity of the behaviours that had previously disrupted learning or posed safety concerns. These improvements were not solely anecdotal; teachers attributed them to specific changes in the learning environment and the adoption of evidence-informed strategies that aligned with each learner's individual needs.

For example,

P8 reflected: "And we can see already what a big difference it's making."

This view was echoed across interviews, with teachers frequently using language such as "calmer," "more settled," "less explosive," and "able to engage" when describing changes in the learner. In several cases, staff noted that the learners had begun to develop more functional ways of expressing needs or regulating their emotions — key developmental shifts that went beyond simple compliance. Importantly, these gains were achieved in classrooms where, prior to the intervention, the learner had been considered at risk of exclusion or disengagement.

The improvements were attributed to several key features of the intervention:

- Clarity and consistency: Learners benefited from the clear expectations and routines introduced as part of the universal SWPBS framework, which created a more predictable and supportive environment.
- Function-based support: The use of functional behaviour assessment meant that interventions were not generic but instead addressed the specific reasons the learner was engaging in challenging behaviour. For instance, where avoidance of difficult tasks was identified as a function, additional scaffolding or adapted work reduced frustration and increased engagement.
- Positive reward and skill-building: Teachers reported that reinforcement strategies included in the plans helped build prosocial behaviour, while structured check-ins gave learners more opportunities to experience success and feel connected to adults in school.
- Reduced need for reactive strategies: As behaviours improved, teachers reported a decreased reliance on reactive or exclusionary responses. Learners spent more time in class and were able to participate in learning more consistently.

Taken together, our data suggest that the behaviour support plans had a positive impact not only on reducing behaviours that challenge, but also on promoting inclusion, learner confidence, and emotional wellbeing. In some cases, teachers reported that the intervention had "turned things around" for learners who were otherwise on a trajectory towards exclusion. Given the preventative nature of these outcomes, this theme represents a central justification for wider implementation of function-based support in mainstream primary settings.

P8: "And we can see already what a big difference it's making"

### 3.2. Consistency across the Staff Team

Staff noted that the project improved whole-team communication and consistency in managing behaviour. Everyone involved with the learner was "on the same page", which created predictability for the pupil and reduced mixed messages.

P4: "Making sure that we are consistent as staff as well so because we knew we were going to work on those things, we sort of focused on those things, and I think it all becomes a bit more consistent and we were all just a bit more conscious of what we were doing I think so. It created that discussion of what we could do and make sure that we're all doing the same things. So yeah it was really useful".

P8: "We can see already what a big difference it's making because it is one of the classes where we've got two teachers at the moment, and so ensuring that we are on the same page as well".

This theme highlights how system-level benefits can emerge from individualised interventions. When one plan is co-owned by a team, it becomes part of the school's wider culture — supporting both the pupil and staff wellbeing.

### 3.3 Professional Development

Teachers described the project as a valuable learning experience. They gained practical tools, new ways of thinking, and greater confidence in working with behaviours that challenge.

P1: "it's been a huge impact on us all. It really has, you know, all positive and we just really enjoyed it really, really enjoyed it. Like I said, it's not just improved children. It features us as well".

P8: "all the things that were mentioned were very insightful, really. Some of them were already known, and some of them weren't already known. And it really gave us a good insight".

P4: "And I think you know we've not just used it with a particular child.... we tried to use the strategies for the other children as well. I think you know the ideas definitely work as a whole class".

P9: "I've got that information for the rest of my career, that will mean you've got it for school for the rest of our learners after me. So, it'll definitely benefit us in the future".

This suggests that the impact extended beyond a single intervention — contributing to teachers' longer-term professional growth. It underlines the value of embedding behaviour expertise into staff development and induction programmes.

## 6. Limitations

While this study offers valuable insight into the feasibility and acceptability of function-based behaviour support in primary school settings, several limitations must be acknowledged. These limitations do not undermine the value of the findings but instead point to important directions for future research and development.

### 1. Scope and Scale of the Study

The most significant limitation was the small number of participants. The project involved 9 learners and 10 teachers across 6 maintained primary schools. Due to the timing of the study (spring 2022), which coincided with ongoing COVID-19 disruptions, school staffing was inconsistent, and research activities were frequently rescheduled. These factors limited the breadth of implementation and the potential for richer data collection. Considerations for future research should include:

- A larger and more diverse sample of schools and learners across Wales to increase generalisability.

- Schools with varying levels of behavioural need and demographic characteristics.
- Consideration of multi-phase or longitudinal designs that allow for greater stability in data collection.

## **2. Focus on Primary Schools**

This study was conducted exclusively in primary school settings. While the findings are promising, it remains unclear how well this model of support would transfer to secondary or alternative education settings, where challenges around behaviour, developmental stage, and staff structure may differ. Considerations for future research should include:

- Exploration of how functional assessment and SWPBS-informed practices can be adapted and implemented in secondary schools, special schools, or pupil referral units.
- Examination of whether staff confidence, intervention feasibility, and learner outcomes differ by age or setting.

## **3. Specific Behavioural Focus**

All learners in this study were referred due to presenting with physically aggressive behaviour. This narrow behavioural focus means the findings may not generalise to pupils who exhibit other forms of behaviour that challenge, such as persistent task refusal, internalising behaviours, or passive disengagement. Considerations for future research should include:

- Investigating the effectiveness of function-based approaches for a broader range of behavioural presentations.
- Consideration of tailoring assessments and support plans to better understand and address less overt, but still disruptive, patterns of behaviour.

## **4. Emphasis on Targeted Support**

This project focused on learners requiring individualised support (Tier 2/3), and did not assess the impact of universal (Tier 1) whole-school approaches. While some participating schools already had established behaviour charters or positive recognition systems in place, these were not evaluated as part of this study. Considerations for future research should include:

- Examining how Tier 1 universal SWPBS approaches are currently implemented in Welsh schools.
- Exploring how targeted and universal supports interact, and whether consistent whole-school implementation improves sustainability and equity of outcomes.

## **5. Lack of Quantitative Outcome Data and Follow-Up**

Although qualitative interviews provided encouraging accounts of behaviour change and teacher confidence, the study did not include standardised behavioural outcome measures or follow-up data to assess whether gains were maintained over time. Similarly, the study did not directly involve families or external professionals, limiting the scope of systems-level impact. Considerations for future research should include:

- Behavioural observation data or standardised outcome measures to quantify learner progress.
- Follow-up at 6–12 months to assess whether plans are sustained and whether behaviour improvements persist.
- Exploration of opportunities to involve families and multi-agency teams in the planning and implementation process.

## **6. Independent evaluation**

One important limitation of the current study is that the behaviour specialists who supported the implementation of the functional behaviour assessments (FBA) and co-produced behaviour support plans were also involved in evaluating their effectiveness. While efforts were made to minimise bias using structured observations, standardised interview protocols, and independent qualitative analysis, the absence of a fully independent assessor may have introduced the potential for expectancy effects or confirmation bias. Future studies would benefit from the inclusion of an external evaluator to provide an additional layer of objectivity and strengthen the reliability of findings.

## **7. Conclusions and recommendations**

### **Conclusions**

The findings from this study highlight the potential value of functional behaviour assessment (FBA) as part of a tiered, whole-school approach to supporting learners who exhibit behaviours that challenge. Teachers reported increased understanding of pupil behaviour, enhanced confidence in responding to it, and improved outcomes for learners following the co-production and implementation of individualised behaviour support plans. The involvement of behaviour specialists was viewed as a key enabler in embedding compassionate and evidence-informed practices.

Despite these promising outcomes, further research is needed to explore the long-term impact and scalability of function-based approaches within diverse educational settings. The inclusion of independent evaluation would also strengthen future findings.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study and in line with current policy priorities in Wales, we make the following recommendations to strengthen practice, inform future research, and support the implementation of function-based approaches as part of a tiered behaviour support model.

#### **1. Guidance for the teaching profession**

Based on the review of international evidence, the Welsh Government should provide national guidance, investment, and practical support to help schools develop and

embed School-Wide Positive Behaviour Support (SWPBS) as a consistent, relational, and inclusive framework across all tiers (universal, targeted, and specialist).

**2. Evaluate and Strengthen Universal (Tier 1) Supports**

Investigate the implementation of School-Wide Positive Behaviour Support (SWPBS) in Welsh primary schools, including its fidelity, reach, and perceived impact. Explore how universal supports interact with targeted interventions to promote sustainability and whole-school cultural change. Schools should be equipped to identify early signs of behavioural difficulty and respond with timely, contextualised support. Investment in early years and primary settings is particularly important, with an emphasis on proactive strategies that reduce the need for exclusion.

**3. Expand Study Scale and Contexts**

Extend research into secondary schools, special schools, and Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) to assess the adaptability and relevance of function-based approaches across developmental stages and diverse educational settings. Particular attention should be paid to transition points and differing organisational structures.

**4. Address a Broader Range of Behavioural Presentations**

Examine the effectiveness of functional assessment and support planning for less overt presentations of behaviour that challenge, such as internalising symptoms (e.g., anxiety, withdrawal) and passive disengagement. These behaviours can be easily overlooked yet have significant impact on learning and wellbeing.

**5. Enhance Measurement through Longitudinal and Quantitative Methods**

Future studies should incorporate standardised assessment tools, systematic behaviour tracking, and longitudinal follow-up (e.g. 6–12 months post-intervention) to better understand the sustained impact of function-based supports. Further research should explore barriers and facilitators to implementing SWPBS and function-based approaches in diverse Welsh contexts, including secondary and specialist settings. Areas for evaluation should include exclusion rates, wellbeing, and academic attainment.

**6. Promote Family and Multi-Agency Engagement**

Strengthen the involvement of parents, carers, and external professionals (e.g. educational psychologists, health services, and behaviour specialists) in the design, implementation, and review of behaviour support plans. This collaborative approach can enhance consistency, improve understanding of pupil needs, and embed support across systems.

**7. Develop National Capacity and Infrastructure**

Provide professional learning opportunities for school staff, including ALNCoS and senior leaders, to build confidence in implementing functional assessment and evidence-informed responses. Local authorities should consider commissioning or training behaviour specialists to provide expert input and ensure fidelity of implementation across schools.

**8. Develop National Capacity and Infrastructure**

Implementation of function-based approaches should be supported by trained professionals (e.g., certified behaviour specialists), especially for complex or high-risk



cases. Local Authorities should develop pathways for specialist input and ensure supervision to maintain fidelity and confidence in practice.

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## Appendix A.

### Functional Behaviour Assessment Questionnaire

#### Open-ended FA Interview

Client Name:	Client DOB and Age:
Date of interview:	Client Gender:
Respondent's relation to client:	
Respondent:	Interviewer:

1. Describe his/her language abilities.
2. Describe his/her play skills and preferred toys or leisure activities.
3. What else does he/she prefer?
4. What are the problem behaviours? What do they look like?
5. What is the single-most concerning problem behaviour?
6. What are the top 3 most concerning problem behaviours? Are there other behaviours of concern?
7. Describe the range of intensities of the problem behaviours and the extent to which he/she or others may be hurt or injured from the problem behaviour.
8. Do the different types of problem behaviour tend to occur in bursts or clusters and/or does any type of problem behaviour typically precede another type of problem behaviour (e.g. shouting preceding hitting)?
9. Under what conditions or situations are the problem behaviours most likely to occur?

10. Do the problem behaviours reliably occur during any particular activities?
11. What seems to trigger the problem behaviours?
12. Does problem behaviour occur when you break routines or interrupt activities? If so, describe.
13. Does the problem behaviour occur when it appears that he/she won't get his/her way? If so, describe the things that the child often attempts to control.
14. How do you and others react or respond to the problem behaviour?
15. What do you and others do to calm him/her down once he/she engaged in the problem behaviours?
16. What do you and others do to distract him/her from engaging in the problem behaviour?
17. What do you think he/she is trying to communicate with his/her problem behaviour, if anything?
18. Do you think this problem behaviour is a form of self-stimulation? If so, what gives you that impression?
19. Why do you think he/she is engaging in the problem behaviour?
20. What, if any, interventions have you previously used with him/her?

## Appendix B

Example of a functional assessment report and a behaviour support plan

### Functional Behaviour Assessment Report

*An information finding session was carried out in child X's school on 04.05.2022 with direct functional behaviour assessments and interviews with key members of staff carried out.*

*Based on this target behaviours for a functional behaviour plan were identified.*

- 1. Kind hands and words towards peers and adults (keeping hands and feet to himself, no bad language)*
- 2. Social skills / play skills with peers*
- 3. Ability to work / play / complete tasks independently*

*No aggressive behaviour or bad language was directly observed on this visit. However, it is reported that this behaviour happens most often when child X is expected to be engaged in independent tasks. It was observed that when child X was supposed to be working independently in various areas (with an array of appropriate and engaging activities) on average every two minutes child X sought interaction with the teacher or TA, and later with myself. Child X, however, sat without any attention from others for 18 minutes during assembly when the teacher and TA were not present and no individual teacher attention was available. Child X appropriately sought teacher attention in the classroom referring to activities that he was doing. When child X was called to work 1:1 with the teacher he sat at the table and engaged with the maths activity. Child X stayed on task for 2.5 minutes before trying to redirect the teacher's attention away from the activity. When redirected back to the activity child X complied but seemed unable to completely focus on the activity without heavy prompting from the teacher. At one point child X went to wash his hands engaging with the teacher throughout. When the teacher turned her attention to another learner child X quickly returned to the table. When the work was complete child X asked to do more work with the teacher.*

*Child X's teacher describes child X's aggressive behaviour to occur when unsupervised and they seem impulsive and he does not appear to be targeting a specific learner for a specific reason. Once child X has engaged in aggressive behaviour he is taken aside for a 1:1 discussion about what has occurred.*

*In a reading and writing group child X engaged with the game being played waiting for his turn amongst 5 other learners. However, throughout this time he was constantly gaining attention from the TA. During the second game, child X attempted off task behaviours such as trying to wobble the table and blow on the tower to knock it down. He was provided attention from the TA reminding him this was unkind and that he was trying to earn Dojo points. On child X's final turn he accidentally knocked down the tower losing the game. He became upset. The TA comforted him and redirected his attention. It is hypothesised that*

*child XXXX may be able to regulate his behaviours as this appeared to be a typical reaction for losing a game from a 6/7 year old. The scenarios and behaviours described above are hypothesised as attention maintained. They do not occur for example in assembly when familiar teacher attention is not available, and they are not reported to occur, or observed to occur when child X has high rates and quality of staff attention.*

## **Child X Functional Behaviour Plan**

### **Proactive Tactics**

#### **Behavioural Skills Training**

Behavioural Skills Training can be used to teach new skills including emotional regulation skills, play and social skills and communication skills. It involves introducing the skill and providing the rationale for it appropriate to the learner's ability. Role playing the skill and providing specific feedback for use of the skill. These are important elements as they provide the opportunity to practice a new skill, especially for the kind of skills we are teaching child X it is important to give him the opportunity to practice when he is calm and feels safe in his environment. Specific feedback is important so we are not just telling him he is doing well or a good job, but specifically telling him what went well and what we can practice. For example, "You did great there because you remembered to ask to leave the table even though I could tell by your face that you were upset, that's how we stay safe, letting your teacher know where you are". This also means *child X* is exposed to repetition of the rules to help him learn and remember. Once these kinds of sessions have been delivered, or what is covered in ELSA sessions, it is important that these skills are supported and generalised in the natural class/school environment. All staff should be aware, including teachers on the yard, and those that do literacy or numeracy sessions with him, of the strategies and skills that have been taught to *child X*. This includes the emotional regulation skills but also play or communication skills. This way *child X* can be reminded of using these skills both before, during and after situations by any staff member who is present. It is important to remind him throughout the day of any skills taught in sessions, so he can practice and become fluent in these skills throughout the school day. These are new skills just like reading or counting so he will not be able to do them straight away and will require support and encouragement. Important skills to cover include ignoring others (either their "silly behaviour" around you or their behaviour that is directed at you) this can be done in a number of ways for example walking away, telling an adult or simply ignoring a person if they are being unkind (whatever is appropriate), emotional regulation (remaining calm or calming down after being upset or excited etc.), asking for help, waiting (at this age talking about things we can do while we wait to help pass the time rather than expecting to simply wait without a distractor), trying your best (it's ok if things are hard and if you get things wrong, both in work and in social skills). There will be other skills that you know are important for *child X* in your school, or some of these that you know he can already do so do not need to be targeted. As it is hypothesised that *child X*'s aggression or bad language is because he is either upset or because he is attempting to interact/play with others and unsure how to do so appropriately that learning new skills could lessen the occurrences of these incidents.

### Tolerating Independent Tasks

*Child X* can appropriately gain staff attention and that should be encouraged. However, *child X* is unable to work or play independently for a significant period. A terminal goal of *child X* to be able to engage in an independent task for 5 minutes has been agreed with his classroom teacher. An initial goal of 2 minutes will be set. Once *child X* can reliably work or play independently in an engaging task the amount of time will be increased by 30 seconds. This will repeat until *child X* can engage for 5 minutes reliably. At this time supports should be faded (for example timer/proximity to teacher) until *child X* can complete or engage in tasks independently without extra support.

Set a timer for 2 minutes and show *child X*, explain to him that he needs to play/work on his own without an adult until the timer finishes. When the timer finishes, he does not have to have completed the task. When the timer finishes provide *child X* with lots of quality attention around the fact that he worked independently. If *child X* engages with you during the two minutes respond and redirect him back to his task with a lesser quality of attention than you provide for a successful two minutes, let other adults in the room know that you are running a session so they can do the same. Use the data sheet below to record his progress. If he completes the two minutes put a plus in the box. If he does not put a minus in the box. At the end of the day/week you can see his progress and see if any changes need to be made. Use a variety of activities and a variety of environments (sat at the table as a group, sat at the table during 1:1, playing in an area next to the table you are sat at). Run this as many times during the day as is practical/natural to do so. Some days there will be no opportunity to run these sessions while on others there will be lots.

## Appendix C

### Interview Schedule: Semi-Structured Teacher Interviews

#### Positive Behaviour Support in Mainstream Schools Project

**Purpose** This interview schedule was designed to gather participating teachers' views following the implementation of function-based behaviour support plans in their classrooms. The interviews were conducted approximately four weeks after the completion of the assessments and co-produced plans.

The aim was to understand teachers' experiences, perceptions of impact, and views on sustainability, as well as to identify perceived barriers and facilitators to implementation. All teachers were asked the same core questions. Follow-up prompts were used where clarification or elaboration was helpful. Researchers avoided leading questions and did not seek to influence participant responses.

#### Interview Questions

##### Overall Experience

- Can you describe your overall experience of being involved in this project?

##### Learner Behaviour Change

- Since implementing the support plan, have you noticed any changes in the learner's behaviour? Prompt: Can you give examples of what has improved or what remains challenging?

##### Impact on Staff Practice

- Have you noticed any changes in your own teaching practice or in how your colleagues approach behaviour? Prompt: For example, have there been changes in how behaviour is discussed or managed?

##### Sustainability

- Do you think the support plan and strategies introduced during the project will continue to be used in your classroom or school? Prompt: What factors do you think will support or challenge this?

##### Changes to Classroom or School Approach

- Have you made any specific changes to your classroom environment, routines, or the wider school behaviour approach as a result of this project? Prompt: For example, have any changes been made to policy, routines, or expectations?

##### Perceptions Over Time

- Have your thoughts or feelings about the project changed since the behaviour plan was first introduced? Prompt: If so, in what ways?

#### Facilitators

- What factors helped you to implement the behaviour support plan successfully? Prompt: This could include training, support from staff, pupil response, or school culture.

#### Barriers

- Did you encounter any barriers or difficulties when trying to implement the behaviour plan? Prompt: If so, what helped you overcome them (if anything)?

#### Reflections and Recommendations

- What advice would you give to another teacher beginning a similar behaviour support process? Prompt: What would you change or keep the same based on your experience?

#### Additional Comments

- Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience or the impact of the project?