

Managing Behaviour

By Geoff Barton

It was Mrs Thatcher's guru Sir Keith Joseph who once commented, acidly, that the first words English babies learn are "It's the Government's fault".

That knee-jerk tendency to blame someone is familiar in many schools, and never more so than in relation to behaviour. In the dark days of the winter term - between let's say between October and March - student behaviour, in tandem with bad weather, the clocks going back and institutional tiredness, can be a real focus of complaint. "There's no support ... there's no consistency ... student X is treated as a special case ... senior management are never around ... school sanctions aren't clear ... there's no one on call ...". Feel free to add your own familiar phrase to the list. These are certainly some of the expressions of annoyance and irritation that I've heard throughout my twenty-odd years in several schools.

I'm not saying that such complaints are necessarily unfair. Teaching is a stressful job in the easiest of schools with the most malleable and amenable of young people. But even there the pressure of constant interactions (more than 1000 a day according to some researchers), the need to exert authority, and having to respond to even the lowest-level disruption can quickly undermine our enthusiasm and self-esteem. And in most schools there will be a cohort of students who provide a

much more serious level of challenge than that, exacerbated by a wider culture that emphasizes rights and downplays responsibilities.

Equally, we all know how morale-sapping the downward-spiral of staffroom complaining can be, and for teachers it can be all too easy to blame the media, or senior management, or Government reform. Whilst one or several of these may contribute to a sense of plummeting behaviour standards, it can be sometimes difficult for us in the frenzy of daily school life to take a detached view of what is really happening and what the causes might be.

Perhaps it was ever thus. Take this lament:

“Young people today think of nothing but themselves. They have no reverence for parents or old age.”

This particular whinge comes not from a staffroom of today, but from Peter the Hermit. It dates back to 1274. Even then it seems, deep in the dark ages of history, people felt that kids showed no respect.

Which brings us to our main theme and the much-quacked centre-piece of Tony Blair's final term, namely the “respect” agenda.

The underlying notion here, it seems, is that there isn't enough respect in society. Whether it's yobs on street corners, tagged and ASBO-d Vicky Pollards marauding around town centres, or bad behaviour in schools, there isn't – as if it we were talking about something tangible like oil supplies – enough respect in circulation.

So in education, it seems, what we needed was another committee. The history of Alan Steer's working party on school discipline is a pretty simple one. In early February, just before Ofsted's annual report revealed pupils' behaviour was unsatisfactory in nine per cent of secondary schools, education secretary Ruth Kelly made a speech to headteachers urging a "zero tolerance" approach to low-level disruption in schools.

That struck some of us as misguided and certainly at odds with many local authorities' expectations that we should be reducing fixed-term and permanent exclusions, not sending them in a triumphal volley through the roof. And in any case how zero is zero? If a child answers back to a teacher, does that count as exceeding civilized norms, or should we accept that it is what teenagers sometimes do and tell them how they should be speaking? If a student mutters "bollocks" under his breath when I say that his work isn't good enough, is that crossing the line, and if so should I quash my empathetic tendency to think that perhaps in the

same situation I might have thought the same thing but showed a little more verbal restraint?

As BBC2's Catherine Tate might say, "Whatever". In May, the prime minister pledged to tackle the growing problem of "disrespect" in society and Ruth Kelly announced the establishment of a taskforce to develop a national "strategy" on behaviour in schools.

The brief of the taskforce was to advise the government on how to tackle low-level persistent bullying and aggravating behaviour that disrupts teaching in schools.

Led by Sir Alan Steer, a headteacher from Seven Kings High School in Ilford, Essex, we know we are in the hands of someone with a strong track-record. The rest of the group also comprised headteachers from schools with a reputation for managing behaviour well.

The group came up with a huge number of recommendations, many of them eminently sensible. Here are a small number of examples demonstrating the scope of their work:

Recommendation 3.1.2: schools should use self-evaluation tools for reviewing behaviour and attendance

Recommendation 3.1.3: the DfES should review the delivery and appointments mechanisms for the Behaviour and Attendance Consultants for the Secondary National Strategy.

Recommendation 3.2.2: a National Behaviour Charter of responsibilities and rights should be created and would apply to all members of the school community.

Recommendation 3.3.3: the National College for School Leadership should review the behaviour related elements of its training programmes for aspiring and serving school leaders.

Recommendation 3.5.24: parents who do not fulfil their responsibility to arrange appropriate supervision for their child during the first five days of an exclusion should be compelled to do so – eg a parenting order.

For me, the most cheering feature of the recommendations is that it doesn't recommend another army of behaviour consultants on standby to parachute into schools. Instead, rather tactfully I thought, the committee raises questions about the strategy of importing people from outside to help us with behaviour issues inside our schools. More than anything else that demonstrates the feet-on-the-ground credibility of the taskforce.

On the other hand, many of the recommendations might be deemed to hit Basil Fawcett's criteria of "stating the bleeding obvious" and certainly stirred up the never-knowingly-contented hornets' nest of tabloid columnists, ever quick to tell us that schools are in crisis or that classroom chaos reigns.

So let's take a slightly more detached view. Courtesy of Chris Watkins' excellent pamphlet Managing Classroom Behaviour: from Research to Diagnosis (Institute of Education, University of London; London; 2000) here's a personal summary of four theories I think we ought to know about behaviour in schools. Then I'll suggest how they might shape our practice.

Theory 1: Schools make a difference: pupils' behaviour does NOT simply mirror behaviour at home.

Practice:

- This is important because it gives grounds for optimism. Many of our students are expected to behave far better for us than they do at home or with their friends. We should cling on to our expectations and not relax them because of external pressures.

- Ask your governors to give strong and public support to your current expectations. Make this public through the website, posters, prospectus and newsletters. The values of our schools should be our values, not the values of the local estate or small sub-groups of students or parents.
- Involve the governors also in the monitoring process, inviting some in each half term to walk around over lunchtime, watching behaviour, talking to students, giving you feedback on the ethos with the dispassionate eye of someone who doesn't normally spend much time in schools.

Theory 2: Schools that form tight communities do better – with a broader spectrum of adult roles, engaging students personally and getting them involved. These schools have a more diffuse teacher role, with frequent contact between staff and students in contexts other than the classroom. They use collaborative approaches lead to better behaviour – rather than individual teachers feeling isolated.

Practice:

- Encourage all staff, not just teachers, to see the importance of their whole-school role. Emphasise the way our authority is enhanced when doing cover, if we have been seen as an authority figure on duty.

- Demonstrate what good teachers do on duty – they interact with students, talking to them, asking them how they are getting on, blurring the boundaries.
- Write whole-school presence into the criteria for progression up the upper pay spine (the existing national criteria already imply it – just spell it out more).
- Don't rely on a behaviour policy to get consistency from staff. Use staff meetings to run light-hearted demonstrations by, say Heads of Year and the Head of Drama (we call ours the King Edward VI Players), showing a 'bad' model (shouting at a student for dropping litter) and then a 'good' model (avoiding confrontation, giving students choices, modelling assertive but not aggressive language).

Theory 3: The action teachers take in response to a 'discipline problem' has no consistent relationship with their managerial success in the classroom. However, what teachers do before misbehaviour occurs is shown to be crucial. The tariff approach to discipline can therefore make things worse, leading to a deterioration in discipline. In schools with low levels of disruptive behaviour, class teachers are not encouraged to pass problems on to senior staff. In well-disciplined schools, teachers handle all or most of the routine discipline problems themselves. Indeed, the over-use of hierarchical referrals is a characteristic of high excluding schools.

Practice:

- Fight shy of mechanistic approaches to behaviour management. Think carefully before having an ‘on call system’ in case it simply reinforces a dependency culture. I was once called to a classroom as a supposed emergency. I got there to find that a student had split a can of Coke in the classroom of a head of faculty.
- Emphasise strongly that classroom management is foremost the responsibility of every teacher: it’s part of the job. You refer issues to someone else only in adversity, and it’s the way you treat students that has the biggest impact on their behaviour.
- Track your most difficult students. Note which lessons they behave well in and where things fall apart. What are the common factors? Be analytical, tough-minded, happy to support the teacher, but not prepared to remove their personal accountability for managing behaviour issues in their own classroom.

Theory four: One of the most worrying aspects of theories of punishment is that they lead us into a fallacy: if we try to diminish a behaviour by mild punishment and it does not prove effective, the logic is to try more severe punishment. In other words, one is led into a fallacious escalation, rather like the postcard notice: “The beatings will continue until morale improves”.

Practice

- Have the confidence to take different approaches with some students, not necessarily escalating the sanctions but instead trying something different. Good schools show this flexibility rather than being locked into systems at all costs.
- Emphasise to the student what you are doing: too often behaviour management is done ‘to’ the student rather than ‘with’ her or him
- Hold on to your principles in the face of charges of being inconsistent. If your hunch tells you a different approach is needed with a particular child, go with it. You might even call it personalised learning.

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