

Disarming the classroom terrorist

Imagine your head suggests that, because of your unreasonable way of dealing with people, brought about by your overblown ego, inadequate personality, chaotic lifestyle and dysfunctional marriage, you should see a Difficult Person Coach. Further still imagine your partner and colleagues are going to have a case conference to discuss your state of mind. Once you've calmed down, chances are you would ask your head to explain exactly what he or she means. The loose, judgemental thinking behind this nightmare scenario lies at the heart of our continuing difficulties with pupil discipline.

Despite the constant stream of initiatives, in discipline remains at the top of the Education Minister's agenda (TESS 23 Jan) and misbehaviour is seen as problematic as ever. Our understanding of the motives behind difficult behaviour doesn't live up to our inclusionist aspirations. The inclusion drive has expanded specialist jobs and expertise but paradoxically may have deskilled everyone else. Behaviour remains an issue where we expect so much yet teach so little. It's so much easier to condemn than understand. Yet you won't see this issue considered in many policy documents.

Our partial understanding leads to 'hit or miss' interventions whose outcomes are poorly evaluated and so we don't learn. It also leads to unhelpful feedback to pupils. Being told you're obnoxious won't increase your self-awareness. Understanding is the hallmark of a healthy school and it's only within attuned relationships that children AND teachers begin to understand themselves. We need to match our new insights into how children learn with a better understanding of how they interact with school.

We instinctively distinguish pupils who are deliberately misbehaving from those who just can't help themselves. If the child has a syndrome like 'ADHD', teachers are not implicated in the problem and so don't feel threatened. But most 'problem' pupils don't come with explanatory labels. We assume they're in control of being 'out of control'. Primary teachers recognise 'challenging' behaviour as an emotional response while some 'developmentally blind' secondary teachers see the same behaviour as a defiance of authority.

Teachers tend to put their own behaviour down to the situation, but pupils' behaviour down to their dispositions. Support agencies try to take a situational view of behaviour to avoid individualising what is a structural process. This has left the child-centred perspective frozen in the seventy's notion of 'maladjustment'. Readers of the vacancies section of this newspaper will have noticed the term 'EBD' (emotional and behavioural difficulties) as the catch-all label for pupils with more than the 'normal' level of disruption. With our 'one-size-fits-all' mindset, if children don't fit they must have 'EBD'. Teacher unions demand more 'EBD' provision, on the assumption that such pupils are a discrete identifiable group. But we have never had a government definition or professional agreement about what constitutes 'EBD'. Ascribing this label is more a function of value judgements than objective assessments, more politics than science. When it comes to understanding others there is no objective reality. Fortunately

psychology has never come up with a way to rank children emotionally. EBD' is a one-dimensional construct loosely used to explain multi dimensional children. We urgently need more useful conceptualisations of children's emotional development and resilience.

The most 'challenging' pupils don't have problems managing their emotions. They are anti-authority and more interested in terrorising than pleasing adults. Some are over-autonomous; others are aggrieved, feel picked on and can't let go of their sense of unfairness. Pupils like this are thought to have a 'conduct disorder', a psychiatric euphemism for pest. I prefer 'specific oppositional disorder' - SOD for short.

Some teachers think schools should shift 'misfits' to so called 'specialist provision'. But even within the same school it's difficult to agree on what is a behaviour problem. Ask ten people what they think of David Blane and you'll get ten different takes on his behaviour. The relativity of misbehaviour, including violent incidents will be apparent to any teacher who has moved from a disadvantaged area to a leafy suburb only to hear complaints about relatively trivial misdemeanors.

The practice of not opening a Record of Need for this group has meant that these children's needs have never been identified. The Additional Support for Learning Bill has given a fresh impetus to considering behavioural issues. However, rather than argue about who should get what plan we should follow the BBBL lead that locates behaviour within learning and teaching. Just as we now talk about assessment FOR learning, we need assessment FOR behaving. Assessment needs to focus on the skills that enable pupils to manage the complex social and emotional demands of school. Any model needs to start with the premise that misbehaviour is a natural part of growing up and opposition is part of every day life - even in the staff room! Pupils taunting teachers are like dogs tugging a shoe; anyone who has played tug with a dog will know it's not the shoe it wants but the mutual tugging.

There are many paths to a greater understanding or at least a clarification of our perceptions. They include joint problem solving groups and new curriculum programmes such as Critical Thinking Skills and Cooperative Learning. We need to involve pupils more in discussions about their state of mind. We need to attend more to the E in EBD, the one thing we all have in common yet often deny - our emotions. Schools are normative and judgemental in how they type pupils, but their norms and values are rarely made explicit.

The Citizenship agenda gives school leaders the opportunity to articulate a shared set of values and so generate an ethos that results in consistent and objective views of pupils. This would also empower teachers to communicate their concerns to management.

Just as governments need to understand terrorism better and avoid making a bad situation worse, schools need a smarter analysis of their own classroom terrorists. And just as there are only political, not military solutions to terrorism, so discipline systems need a bedrock of understanding

