

Shifting the Blame

A head teacher recently shared with me one of his biggest headaches. The caricature described was familiar - 'only happy when he gets his own way, flies off the handle at the least provocation, refuses to accept his behaviour creates a problem, it's always someone else to blame.' The fact that he was describing one of his teachers came as little surprise. I've often thought the profiles of troublesome pupils and teachers are strikingly similar, for example both strongly resist any attacks on their autonomy. It made me wonder if any of the BBBL funded reviews of behaviour policies addressed this issue.

Disruption has always been assumed to be the 'fault' of pupils, requiring some kind of change on their part. Pupils are sent to anger management sessions, stress clinics, social skills groups etc. An increasing army of mental health specialists is employed to 'treat' pupils who are given an ever-expanding set of pseudo medical labels to explain their problems. Meanwhile disruptive teaching remains one of the biggest open secrets in education. Yet, just as bullies set the tone in the playground, the self-protective cynicism of such teachers is a corrosive agent festering away in many staff rooms.

The vast majority of teachers aspire to do the right thing. Some teachers however find it hard to reflect dispassionately on disruption, ground down by the demands of school life. It is a particularly emotive issue because it threatens core aspects of teacher self-worth. Unlike most other jobs, teaching is linked with temperament and personality, most clearly evident for example in conveying authority or establishing classroom climate. Consequently teachers struggling to control a difficult class can feel demoralised. This can lead to seeing disruption as an attack on them. The public context makes such challenges hard to ignore and can create a desire to get even. The more insecure or inexperienced the teacher, the more personally they take the challenge and the more personalised their reaction. Unfortunately such personal attacks are just what disruptive pupils don't need. The more challenging the pupils, the more disempowered teachers may feel and so the more insensitive they will be to the impact of 'throw away' personal remarks. Pupils accept descriptions of their behaviour but find comments about their personal qualities – such as, 'you're a selfish so n so' threatening and fuel the 'I'm being picked on' gripe.

The disruptive teachers are often the ones looking for quick solutions but claim they never learn anything from training. In learning situations they often behave like the pupils they complain about but don't see the connection between learning and behaviour. They tend to have little time for guidance, learning or behaviour support. If they ever ask for advice they are likely to object to the suggested strategies. Giving rewards for example grates because they think pupils shouldn't get a reward for behaving well.

Although rarely talked about formally, we know a lot about the mind-sets that lead to disruptive teaching. Many teachers manage to

transform difficult pupils' attitudes while others amplify their problems. Teachers are 'programmed' like all of us to be 'on the look out' for problems. Teachers differ however in what they pay most attention to when regulating their own and others' behaviour. Some use interests, goals such as personal growth and relationships to determine what they do while others are more control oriented.

Some teachers try to establish their authority through excessive or ineffectual power that sets them up to be challenged. Others hold limiting beliefs about their abilities to 'handle' difficult groups and are driven by a fear of losing what little power they have. They may also hold pessimistic views of pupils and so prefer a command and conquer approach. Consequently they stress control via strict negative rules and adopt a punitive style that emphasises discipline over learning. Their manner may signal that they take themselves too seriously and convey a sense of pomposity. Similarly teachers with little sense of humour are more likely to have their authority challenged.

Some teachers have a malleable idea of personality and believe behaviour is learned and can change. Others assume a pupil's personality is unchangeable and think behaviour is pre determined. Such teachers have a need for definite answers, based on their preference for certainty over ambiguity and can leap to conclusions on little evidence and then show a reluctance to entertain views different from their own. They seem to 'seize' on and then 'freeze' on their judgements. They believe pupils' characters can be judged through a one-off incident. They also tend to over-use personality labels such as 'pest' rather than situational descriptions on the assumption that pupils are the same in every class.

The disruptive mindset is more likely to form confrontational attitudes that pupils considered problematic are not to be trusted, don't want to work and will do anything to avoid it. Contact with these pupils is seen as a battle that must be won at all costs. They will be referred to a higher authority as soon as they refuse to comply, a practice encouraged by some referral structures. While some teachers think of themselves and pupils in the same terms and are interested in what pupils think about teaching and learning, other teachers see pupils as different from themselves -like lion trainers see lions.

The solution is far from simple but schools need to find the time to reflect on how the school influences teachers' behaviour and give honest feedback to teachers displaying some of these features. The trick is to do so in an objective and non - personalised form. We need to confront this issue without stigmatising teachers in the way we do with pupils, that make it even harder to engage them. We need to develop conceptual structures to get beyond the caricatures painted here and help teachers consider within a competence based rather than blame culture how their own behaviour contributes to any disruptive context. Do we have the maturity to challenge such sacred cows and Bite the Bullet for Better Learning?

