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Introduction

Once upon a time, a fresh-faced, idealistic young teacher emerged blinking from teacher training camp. Armed only with a dream of putting the education world to rights, brand new elbow patches and a burning ambition to be the most popular teacher in school, he tackled the world head on. He challenged the establishment and won. He changed the face of education forever. The kids loved him, his results were outstanding and Benedict Cumberbatch won an Oscar for playing him in the film. And then I woke up.

I have to admit I found the real teaching world a bit of a shock and came down to earth with a bump. Dealing with teenagers who didn't want to be in school wasn't easy and I soon realised how ill-equipped I was in terms of practical classroom management strategies. I'll be honest and tell you I *really* struggled with some students and I was pathetic at keeping the more challenging groups under control.

To be fair, it was the same story for most other members of staff. This was a tough school, but even so, there were still one or two exceptions who seemed to have the respect and adulation of even the hardest students. These were the teachers the kids adored. When they walked down a corridor the students would make a beeline for them to say hello and have a chat, the mood in their classroom was almost always upbeat and as soon as they began to teach a respectful hush would immediately descend. 'That is the kind of teacher I want to be!' I thought. Now to find out how they do it ...

I found that the simplest way was to ask them – the students, that is, not the teachers. I wanted to hear *them* tell me what it was they wanted to see in a teacher. So, over the years and in several different settings, I compiled questionnaires for my classes, of all ages between 7 and 18, designed to root out the answer to that one big question: what makes the best teacher you've ever met?

I used the questionnaires to probe deeper than that, of course. I wanted to know what these teachers said, what they did, what teaching methods they used, what strategies they employed to help kids when they were down, how they used humour in the classroom, how they encouraged the students to work harder, how they got them to follow instructions, what they did that made them smile.

Call me obsessive (I've had worse) but there was a hidden agenda. I had watched these individuals in action for some time before it hit me: these teachers were enjoying their careers far more than their peers. The teaching day wasn't a grind to them. It wasn't the gruelling endurance test that some teachers would have me believe. Here were teachers who enjoyed coming to school to teach students who enjoyed being taught.

I wanted to be one of these teachers, not the jaded moaner grumbling into his coffee in the corner of the staff-room every break-time. And that is why I spent so much time questioning my students. The results won't surprise you, as they didn't surprise me. All the expected criteria were there. The following list (in no particular order) represents the features that the students said they most wanted to see in their 'best teacher'.

- They treat us in a friendly manner.
- They acknowledge when we do something right.
- They know how to have a laugh.
- They give out information in a fun and interesting way.
- They trust us.
- They are firm and fair, with the same rules for all.
- They are always in control.
- They are there for us, they care, they listen.

As I said, no surprises, yet it took me a long time to realise just how important this short list really is and why it embodies the key to both preventing and dealing with behaviour problems in the classroom. You see, after years of compiling my little questionnaires, it dawned on me that the reason these teachers were having such an easy time in the classroom wasn't only because they provided interesting

lessons and were firm and fair. There is an important reason why the essential attributes listed, taken as a whole, are so effective in preventing problems and helping students feel content: they satisfy three crucial human needs.

You'll no doubt be familiar with Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory. It suggests that all humans share basic needs and that once a group of needs is met or satisfied, we move up to the next level. The lowest level consists of our most basic needs – shelter, food, water and safety. Then we progress into the realms of a wide range of emotional and psychological needs – from the need to achieve through to the need to contribute, the need for love and a whole host of others in-between. These needs must be met in order for us to feel content and whole.

I like things to be simple so I've lumped into three groups what I feel to be the most important of the psychological needs in terms of classroom management. The first group falls under the heading of *empowerment* and includes things like recognition, freedom, autonomy, achievement, contribution, choice and competence. Second is the need for *fun*, which includes curiosity, interest, growth and learning, adventure, amusement, surprise and variety. Finally, there is the need to *belong* – to be accepted, valued, appreciated, needed, related to or connected with something beyond oneself.

If you think about this it makes perfect sense. We humans don't function well without adequate control, choice, autonomy and freedom in our lives – we need to be empowered. We can't live happy lives without at least some variety, humour, activity or fun. And we feel isolated and alone if we're not valued or appreciated by others or connected to them in some way – we need to belong. When these three needs are not being met – when they are missing from our lives – we feel frustrated and discontented. And that's when the problems start.

Consider the following scenario: imagine a thoroughly boring lesson. You know the type I mean – a teacher handing out worksheet after worksheet, standing at the front of the room, talking like a shop window dummy going through the motions. There is no engaging warm-up activity to grab the students' attention, no variety or choice in terms of lesson tasks or level of challenge, no novelty or intrigue, no humour, no laughter, no sense of discovery, no interaction or movement around the room, no music, no curiosity, no energy, no recognition or praise for efforts made and no attention given to differing learning styles. It's the kind of lesson that makes kids want to get up and walk out.

What usually happens in a lesson like this? You guessed it: students misbehave.

It might start with fairly innocent activities such as doodling or passing notes, but left unchecked these activities become increasingly disruptive: getting up and walking around, throwing things, shouting silly comments, dishing out abuse to the teacher, not doing work, tapping pencils, refusing to follow instructions, dictating their own terms, using mobile phones and so on. What results is the typical behaviour problems arising from frustration and dissatisfaction – from needs that have not been met.

Remember, our psychological needs are crucial to us and must be satisfied – they are a primeval, subconscious thirst which must be quenched and are as important to us as water and sunlight are to a plant. If the teacher doesn't provide a means to meet these needs as part of regular day-to-day practice, then students will seek satisfaction in less appropriate ways of their own devising.

In other words, if you don't give them fun, they will make their own. If you don't give them a sense of empowerment, they will assert themselves in their own way. And if you don't help them feel valued, they will opt out and form troublemaking splinter groups. (Have you ever wondered why gangs are so appealing to young people?)

Throughout this book I will present some ways of satisfying these three key needs in order to help you prevent and deal with a large proportion of problems in your classroom. I call the underlying framework the Needs Focused Approach™, for obvious reasons. I don't claim that *all* your problems will be solved, but by adopting the strategies and ideas that follow you will definitely see a dramatic reduction in the number of incidents you are currently dealing with on a daily basis. And I guarantee that if you start to adopt some of the key principles, you will start to see big improvements in your ability to deal with any problems which do occur.

We are going to look at ways of helping students experience a sense of belonging by helping them feel part of the classroom community and by building positive, mutually respectful teacher–student bonds. It makes a huge difference to struggling, troubled (and troublesome) students to feel accepted, welcomed and valued in school.

We will look at ways of empowering students by providing them with realistic chances to achieve and experience success, by giving them a degree of autonomy and choice and by ensuring their efforts are recognised and acknowledged. Again, this comes down to helping students feel valued as well as giving them confidence in their abilities to attempt and complete lesson tasks.

And we will look at ways of improving lessons by making them more interactive and appealing, more stimulating, more relevant to students' lives and more fun. Now and again you can be forgiven for having a lesson of book work or worksheets. Now and again you can be forgiven for a lacklustre performance and for not displaying your usual enthusiasm and love for your subject. No problem there, that's life. The problems arise when the majority of lessons all follow the same format. If there is a continuing lack of challenge, variety and novelty, there will almost certainly be a continuing lack of interest from the students.

As well as all these preventive tools, strategies and ideas for maintaining a positive lesson environment, you are also going to learn a wide range of very practical, highly effective responses to use when things go wrong. You will get some ideas for consequences which actually work, together with a method for issuing them which doesn't lead to confrontation. You will find new ways to help students follow your instructions and you will have a suite of proven strategies for addressing many of the specific behaviour issues you are likely to face in today's tough classrooms. Finally, in Part 2, we will go through a complete, step-by-step sample lesson with the noisy class – from getting them into the room, settled and ready to work, to dismissing them with a smile.

What I've learned is that you really *can* succeed with the most challenging, noisy, rowdy and difficult groups of students. You really can gain the respect of antisocial, hard-to-reach teens and children. You can get them following your instructions without arguments and without fuss. You can have them arriving at your classroom with a smile and joining in lessons with enthusiasm – no matter how unresponsive or sullen they currently appear. And you really can enjoy stress-free, rewarding teaching – no matter how worn out and drained you feel right now and no matter how far-fetched that seems.

Best of all, these changes can happen quickly. I believe *any* teacher can succeed with practically *any* group of students if they employ certain key strategies with the right attitude and approach. Why? Because I've been exactly where you are now and I know how it feels to struggle in the classroom.

At the start of my teaching career I used to go home in the evenings in a rage, so angry that my students could get away with the things they did, furious that there seemed to be no way of reaching and dealing with them. They didn't respond to staff who were pleasant to them and they laughed in the faces of staff who tried to discipline them. Nothing seemed to work.

I couldn't sleep, I had a constant headache and I was on edge all the time. I worried what my colleagues thought of me and I dreaded teaching certain groups because I knew they would walk all over me. How embarrassing. How humiliating. I became bad tempered at home and all my conversations with friends centred around the horrors I was facing at work on a daily basis. Eventually, I began to look for other jobs. I became resigned to the fact that I didn't have what it took to work in tough schools with tough kids. My dream was over.

Then, by chance, things changed. I became a fill-in teacher while I looked for a way out and took a job for one afternoon at a student referral unit (PRU). The unit had recently been placed in special measures and it was easy to see why. I was shocked to see kids literally running wild through the corridors, slamming doors, ripping books, screaming and shouting abuse, running into the car park and throwing stones at the building. And all of this was happening *during* lesson time. Most of the staff had no control whatsoever and some were in tears.

But I was hooked. The children here fascinated me as much as their backgrounds horrified me. I started to see that there were reasons for the way they behaved. It was no wonder that nothing seemed to work – most of the strategies I had been using took no account of the issues and problems they faced. I decided there and then that I wanted to really connect with these young people. I wanted to help them succeed and I wanted to learn the skills that would enable me to manage their behaviour. I ended up staying for more than five years and enjoyed some of the most thorough and in-depth professional training any teacher could hope for in the field of behaviour management. It was tough, but I consider myself so fortunate for that experience.

Many of the ideas in this book come from my time spent in PRUs and behaviour units where the behaviour of students is incredibly demanding and needs the kind of management which would be deemed disproportionate or unnecessary in other settings. You may therefore feel that some of the strategies would be impractical for your classes. It all depends on your particular circumstances, of course – the institution, the age group, your subject and the type of students in your care. What works in some classrooms will not necessarily work in others. My intention is to provide you with a wide range of ideas which you can dip into and use as you see fit – it is not necessary to follow every single step in a prescriptive manner in order to benefit.

It is also my aim to help you begin to enjoy teaching again by eliminating some of the stress associated with tough students and by giving you the confidence and skills to calmly succeed with any group you teach. These strategies have the potential to create swift improvements in your ability to manage student behaviour and big improvements in the way uncooperative and obstinate students respond to you.



Throughout the book you'll notice this little symbol popping up from time to time. It's there to let you know that there are additional resources available at go.hbe.com.au.

So, with the introduction out of the way, let's try out a quick strategy before we really get into the nitty-gritty ...