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Introduction

Hello and welcome to ‘How to Manage Behaviour in the Classroom: The Complete Guide.’ This book gives you all the practical strategies, tried-and-tested tips, useful techniques and real-world advice you need to create a focussed, positive learning environment, every time you teach.

It’s a book based on experience and a book rooted in the reality of classroom life. There are no magic bullets and no golden wands to wave. But everything from here on out will help you to foster a classroom culture which allows you to raise achievement, maximise progress and provide students with the kind of productive, stimulating experiences they will remember, value and learn from.

Everything to come rests on a simple proposition: children and young adults are learning; we are teaching them. This dictum extends beyond the formal curriculum and into the world of morals, manners and behaviour – just as it has done for many years previous.

Part of our job as teachers is to help students understand what is acceptable and what is not, how to behave in certain situations, what the unwritten rules of society amount to, and how to rise up to meet and exceed the high expectations with which others present us.

Thinking about behaviour in this way – as something students are learning – helps us to focus what we are best at – teaching – on that part of the job we might like the least, or find the most difficult to deal with.

You are a good teacher, I'm sure of it. You know how to plan learning, open up ideas, and develop understanding. You also know how to stimulate students' curiosity and challenge them to think more deeply. You can use these skills – skills you already possess – to manage behaviour effectively, even brilliantly.

Seeing behaviour management as an extension of the wider teaching in which we engage does not mean denying the responsibility pupils have to behave well, or the necessity of applying sanctions if they break the rules. But it does mean seeing even these things as part of students' learning. In childhood and the teenage years, boundaries are pushed. This is an extension of the trial and error and uninhibited play which form the cornerstone of much of our development. We are trying to ascertain, whether knowingly or not, how we may interact with the world around us.

Thinking about behaviour in this way has an important consequence.

If we accept that students are learning about behaviour then we accept that their behaviour can be changed. As such, we avoid labels and speak always about the behaviour, never the child. This means we don't say things like 'you're a troublemaker' but instead say things like 'your behaviour is causing trouble and I would like you to make a different choice'. The first formulation labels the child as fixed and unchanging; the second formulation labels the behaviour and indicates that change is possible.

It is easy to see why the latter option is always to be preferred.

With those thoughts at the front of our minds, let me provide a brief overview of what you can expect in the chapters which follow.

Chapter One does the groundwork for us, examining what behaviour is, where it comes from and how we might look at it critically in the context of the classroom. Chapter Two builds on this by providing a sociological analysis of behaviour in the classroom and an explanation of how we can think effectively about, and begin to shape, the kind of learning environment we want.

Chapter Three looks at rules, boundaries and consistency, providing guidance on how to formulate and apply the first two before explaining why the third one is so important. Then, in Chapter Four, we look at

practical strategies we can use to ensure our planning is as effective as possible in facilitating excellent behaviour.

Chapter Five turns our attention to that most vital of behaviour management tools: praise. Then, in Chapter Six, we look at one of the major bugbears for many teachers when it comes to behaviour, how to eliminate low-level disruption.

Chapters Seven and Eight sit as a pair, the first examining how we can build rapport and the second looking at strategies for creating engagement. Chapter Nine then examines a series of common behaviour problems and scenarios, offering three practical solutions for each situation.

All of these chapters are concluded with a short bullet-point summary of the key aims. I have collected all of these together in Chapter Ten to give you an easy point of reference, to which you can turn whenever you need help but are short on time.

So there you have it: our path has been staked out and all that remains is for me to invite you to walk along it. I hope you find the journey informative, useful and interesting. But, most of all, I hope it gives you everything you need to establish a superb environment for learning every time you teach.

What Is Behaviour?

We begin, as we must, by trying to define what we actually mean by behaviour. To do so will give us a clearer sense of what we are seeking to manage whenever we find ourselves faced with a roomful of students. Without a sound basis for defining behaviour, we risk operating from a position of uncertainty. This makes it harder for us to think critically about the behaviour in our classrooms, to make good decisions about how to manage it, and to reflect with accuracy on the results of our efforts.

It is easy to dismiss such an approach. Behaviour, after all, is something we know well and with which we are familiar. However, if we want to manage behaviour as effectively as possible, we must begin by turning inwards and examining the assumptions on which our present thinking rests. If we ignore this, we ignore the important process of building foundations upon which our endeavours can sit. It may be that our understanding of behaviour turns out to be sound, but it is better to know this for certain than to assume it to be the case.

For these reasons, this chapter will be more theoretical than the remainder of the book. This is necessary to achieve our aim. However, everything we consider will be related back to classroom practice; it will also provide a framework for the extensive practical guidance which follows.

Behaviour in General

The term 'behaviour' refers to the outward actions in which we engage. These actions are the effects of external or internal causes, or a mixture of the two. For example, I may raise my hands because a ball has been

kicked towards my face (external cause), I may go to the kitchen because I feel hungry (internal cause) or I may decide to swerve my car to avoid hitting a rabbit which has strayed onto the road (combination of external and internal causes).

From this starting point we can argue that behaviour effected by external causes is a reaction to something in our environment. Behaviour effected by internal causes is a response to something happening within us. And behaviour effected by a combination involves the intermixing of the environment and that which is internal.

In terms of the classroom, we could imagine students looking up involuntarily to see who is knocking at the door as an example of the first type of behaviour. Then we could imagine students disengaging from their work because they feel hungry as an example of the second. And we could see students deciding to work hard because their teacher, with whom they have a strong relationship, has asked them to as an example of the third.

The argument being made is that external and internal causes often lead us to react without conscious thought, whereas a combination of the two nearly always leads to decisions being made about how to act.

Yet, we also know that all of us – especially children and young adults – can behave in ways which, upon reflection, appear unexpected, regrettable or motivated by a conscious decision we are surprised we took.

For example, we might say something in conversation, believing it to be an appropriate point, and then, upon hearing ourselves say it, immediately regret the decision.

From this it can be suggested that even behaviour which is the result of active decision-making on the part of the individual will not necessarily accord with that individual's desires or intentions. Sometimes it will, sometimes it won't. And, in many cases, the reasoning underlying what has happened may be opaque, at first glance, to all concerned.

Most teachers have come across such situations. A student behaves poorly in class, even though they want to do well. When we ask them why they behaved in such a way, they are unable to articulate an answer, despite knowing it was they who made the choice to act.

This throws up an extremely important point about behaviour in general. We learn how to behave within the society and culture in which we are brought up. This does not mean that our behaviour will be identical to others brought up in a similar way, nor does it seek to exclude differences which are the result of biological factors. But it does intimate that coming to understand how to control and direct our own behaviour is a learning process – often a tricky one.

To this end, all children and young adults, throughout their school lives, are learning how to behave as members of a wider society and culture, as well as learning the content of the curriculum. For this reason, it is important to remember that all teachers are teachers of norms and values – of moral instruction in a broad sense – as well as teachers of subjects and topics.

This is why behaviour management is a significant part of every teacher's job. It is not that all students are predisposed to test the will of the teachers with whom they find themselves. Instead, it is that all students are learning about behaviour – what is acceptable and what isn't, what works and what doesn't, what consequences result from certain decisions – throughout the time that we teach them.

The extent of this learning varies considerably from student to student. This reflects the fact that some students go through their entire school career exhibiting what might only be described as excellent behaviour, whereas others may have a much different time of it, showcasing behaviour that is contrary to what their teachers (and perhaps they) would want.

All of this indicates, though, that behaviour is malleable. If students are learning about how to behave, about the consequences of their actions, and about how to control and direct the decisions they make, then the things we do in the classroom can really make a difference.

And it is this fact which underlies the entirety of this book, as well as your decision to read it.

Behaviour in the Classroom

The classroom is a specific place in any child's life. It is a space about which they have certain preconceptions and towards which they have certain dispositions. On top of this, they have relationships with their

peers and their teachers which influence how they view the classroom in which they find themselves.

This demonstrates how any situation in which we find ourselves (and, therefore, in which we will exhibit behaviour) is characterised by both the physical environment and our response to and interaction with that environment.

So, for example, students in our class perceive the walls of the classroom, the desks, the whiteboard, the displays, their fellow students and ourselves. This is the physical environment. But they also perceive all these things through a system of meaning, signs, memories and assumptions, with this being altered and modified to greater or lesser extents by subsequent interactions.

From here we can begin to understand why students may behave completely differently in the same classroom with two different teachers. The environment in which they exhibit their behaviour is not just a physical, external environment. It is also a cognitive landscape. One built upon the concepts, categories, experiences, memories and so forth which students possess and to which more is added every lesson.

To illustrate the impact of the physical environment, consider how you might alter your behaviour if you found yourself in a place where you felt unsafe. To illustrate the impact of our minds, consider how you would think about the place in which you found yourself if you did feel unsafe. And to illustrate the impact of the interactions we have with the physical environment, consider how you might alter your behaviour if someone in this unsafe place greeted you in a friendly, open and welcoming manner.

Contextualising this example leads us to the following:

A student is used to failing at school and being labelled as incapable of making good progress. They enter your classroom and see it as unsafe for them (psychologically) as a result. This leads them to walk in with a mental safety barrier in place designed to protect them from the unpleasant experiences with which they are familiar. This barrier manifests itself in attitude, appearance, and language (all constituents of behaviour).

Instead of meeting the expectations of this student and validating them, we put them to one side and put forward our own expectations. We greet

the student warmly, welcome them to our classroom and tell them we are looking forward to working with them in the lesson.

Harking back to the close of our previous section, this helps us to see how we are in a position to shape the behaviour which happens when we teach. By taking control of the situation in which we find ourselves and by asserting a positive sense of what our classroom is – both in physical terms and in terms of the interactions which happen there – we can shape and mould the thoughts students have, as well as the behaviours to which these give rise.

This again reiterates the points that behaviour can be changed, that it is learned and that the teacher has it within their power to manage this process – whoever they are and whatever their experience.

Of course, it goes without saying that with experience behaviour management tends to become easier, but then this is true of most things. And it does not exclude the possibility of excellent behaviour management from the very start of your career.

So we find ourselves with two key ideas, thus far, on which we are going to build the rest of the book:

1. Behaviour is learned. That is, it is a result, in no small part, of past experience.
2. Behaviour can be changed through new learning. That is, through new experiences.

These ideas allow us to see our own actions as meaningful. They help us to avoid falling into a situation from where we feel that, no matter what we do, we cannot manage behaviour as we would like. Starting with these ideas in mind means we can apply the practical strategies and techniques which follow with confidence and, crucially, with a strong rationale of how and why we believe they will work.

Behaviour as Communication

All behaviour which is apprehended by others communicates information, whether intentionally or not. Some of this communication is a direct result of what the person behaving does. Some of it is a result of the interpretations made by the person who apprehends it.

As an aside, I use the term ‘apprehend’ deliberately because, while we come to know of other people’s behaviour predominantly through sight (or a combination of sight and other senses), we can also learn of it without seeing the behaviour first-hand. We might see the results of someone’s behaviour, hear someone else talking about a third person’s behaviour, read about someone’s behaviour and so on.

Much behaviour has the intention of communicating messages. For example, I might stand up to greet you when you enter a room in order to communicate respect and friendship. Or, I might cross my arms when someone is telling me something I don’t want to hear, communicating displeasure and a closed-off attitude.

However, we are not always aware of the messages our behaviour communicates. This is particularly true of children and young adults who, as we have noted, are still learning about how to behave in the wider society and culture of which they are a part.

This can lead to problems.

A student may behave in a way which they believe communicates a certain message, whereas this message may be interpreted quite differently by the teacher who sees the behaviour. Alternatively, a student may engage in certain behaviour without even realising that this gives off a singularly unimpressive message.

We can contextualise this as follows:

A Year 9 student is bored in one of our lessons and wants the teacher to know this. They put their head on their desk as a result. The teacher sees this behaviour and interprets it as a direct challenge to their authority. This is because they see the student behaving in a way which is completely unacceptable in adult life.

Now, I am not suggesting that it is necessarily OK for the student to communicate their boredom (as adults, we know that boredom is a fact of life which has to be accepted at certain times). But, what we can see from the example is how, because they are learning about behaviour, students can sometimes fail to understand the actual content of the message their behaviour communicates.

In addition, we see here an illustration of the earlier point about the interpretation of behaviour. When we act, we are not in complete control