

## Part A – Thinking about students with challenging behaviour

### Students who don't 'fit' the system

Although there is now an emphasis on personalised learning (DCSF, 2008) this is more about tracking the achievements of all children in meeting the same curriculum targets rather than valuing diverse abilities. It is possible that great strengths are lost because of an insistence on a 'one size fits all' provision. Some of the greatest men and women, such as Einstein, did not shine at school because their abilities lay in a specific direction. One Nobel Prize winner nearly didn't get to university at all because he had not been able to pass a language exam. Someone created some flexibility in the system and ultimately let his specific talents shine. There are many stories of individuals classed as 'behaviour problems' in

school who had creative or entrepreneurial skills that brought them great acclaim in later years.

### Reflection point

Do you know anyone who has achieved success in life even though they were often in trouble in school? Can you find out if there was someone who believed in them and gave them a chance?

## Risk and resilience

Many of our most challenging students who do not ‘fit the system’ have experienced disadvantages or trauma, such as loss, abuse or neglect. For some this is a temporary situation, for others this is their whole life. Children who have multiple adversities are more at risk from negative outcomes (Werner, 2005). They often behave in ways considered unacceptable in school, which then reinforces rejection and disadvantage. This spiralling cycle of social exclusion can either be set in stone in school or broken by a different approach. It may be that for some of our children there is nowhere else to make a difference. This chapter expands on what a ‘different approach’ might mean and how to put this into operation.

Resilience is promoted by factors within the child but also within their environment – including what happens in school. The three most important things a teacher can do are:

- Show students you think they are worth your effort – that there is something special and lovable about them. You may have to dig deep but nearly everyone has positive qualities – even if well hidden.
- Expect the best in all situations and let students know you are not going to give up on them but do everything you can to enable them to shine – this means identifying their strengths
- Give pupils opportunities to participate, have a say and a place in the class. They are important members of the school and it matters that they are there.

## Do you label students *as* problems or see them as young people *with* problems?

Teachers may see their role as attempting to fit these square pegs into round holes – a difficult and thankless task. Trying to ‘make’ others fit

our own expectations is rarely easy and can become a battle of wills, the struggle for power and control. The alternative is not to condone unacceptable behaviour but to create flexibility in the system to celebrate the individuality of each student. Holding on to a view of pupils as whole people, with qualities as well as quirks will enable you to find those elements you can work with. Seeking out the glimpses of good and re-conceptualising students in terms of their competencies and resources will help. There is a meaning to everyone's behaviour, even if we cannot initially make much sense of it ourselves.



### Case study

On Sunday, 11-year-old Matthew spent the day with his Dad, who had recently been separated from his Mum. Together the two of them made jam and spent the evening delivering pots as gifts to friends and neighbours. When Matthew got home late his Mum was angry with him and with his Dad because his homework wasn't finished. Matthew went to bed feeling confused and upset. On Monday, he was suspended from school for an episode of violence when he banged a classmate's head against a wall.

The behaviour was unacceptable and sanctions appropriate, but labelling Matthew as 'violent, cruel, a bully or a monster' puts him in a position which offers little escape. It acknowledges only one aspect of who he is as a person and also leads to self-fulfilling prophecies. We all tend to live up to the labels we are given. Reframing Matthew's behaviour as a sign of distress paints a different picture of him. He can be said to be behaving like a monster but if he is acknowledged as a person rather than a problem there are things to build on. In all interactions with students it is essential to make it clear that it is their behaviour that is unacceptable – not them. Acknowledging the 'whole person' also makes it easier to work with families (see Chapter 6).



### Activity

Issues of loss, including family breakdown, may lead to feelings of anger and confusion as well as sadness. Sometimes parents are so distressed themselves they are not emotionally available to their children at a time when they need it most. Children below the age of 7 often believe the break up was their fault in some way or that Dad would have stayed if they had been 'good enough'. Pupils may be distracted and feel insecure which affects their learning.

What might schools do to reduce the impact of families splitting up on children's learning and behaviour? Research the following:

- Programmes dealing with loss and change in school
- Helping parents talk with children about separation and divorce.



**Do you see children as monsters or behaving like monsters?**

Figure 7.1

## Focusing on solutions rather than problems

We have a problem-saturated society. When we try to identify positives people often seem to prefer to jump back into negativity. They are not used to doing it! An increasingly influential force in school psychology is solution-focused thinking (Ajmal & Rees, 2001). This switches conversations around to a different focus. If we were dealing with a challenging student a solution-focused approach would ask questions such as:

- What is working well?
- When does the student behave well?
- What are the circumstances of any positives – for example, with which teacher or adult is the behaviour most appropriate? What is this person doing that seems to work?
- Does this student have any supportive relationships?
- What strengths does this student have?

- What are they able to manage?
- What have they learnt?
- What helps them cope?
- What comforts them and makes them feel better?
- What helps them calm down?
- What has worked well in the past?
- What can this pupil be proud of?
- How does the student visualise life without the problem?
- What can we build on here?
- What can we put in place so the student knows they are being successful, being supported, being valued?
- What would the student see as solutions for themselves? They might be the only person to know what the real options are (Berg & Steiner, 2003).

## Thinking about behaviour itself

Behaviour only has meaning within a context. There is virtually no behaviour that does not have an appropriate context somewhere. Screaming and yelling is what you are supposed to do at a big match if your team scores: screaming and yelling in the classroom is seriously frowned upon. It helps students to succeed at school if they are taught in a structured and supportive way what is appropriate behaviour in a classroom. They also need to know what is not acceptable and why. In the first place it may be more constructive for teachers to assume ignorance rather than defiance or disobedience. This is particularly important for transitions into a new school or new class (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Roffey & O'Reirdan, 2001).

Sitting still and writing, not talking, obeying school rules, wearing the 'right' uniform and so on are not about being 'good' but being part of a social order. These behaviours have no moral quality, neither are they particularly 'natural' for lively young people. Expectations are on pupils to ensure a controlled environment. Most students take up this position of being a 'good student' in the same way as you take up the behaviours of what you understand as a 'good teacher'. Students in fact have few real choices. Even though sometimes we offer choices and consequences to maintain 'appropriate' school behaviour these are controlled by the power of the institution. Acknowledging this may help us see how much even the most defiant students accept what is required of them, even if they don't manage it sometimes.

School demands and expectations do not always make sense to some pupils and may undermine their need for a sense of agency. If they have little choice over much that happens in their lives they are going to try

and control what they can, actively or passively. If you give pupils choices and where possible the right to have a say in what concerns them – whilst showing them that what they do or don't do matters to you – this is more likely to gain their cooperation. If you try and tighten control for the sake of it you are in for a battle you are unlikely to win.

## The meaning of behaviour for students

It is useful to have some idea of what certain actions mean for students. Many behaviours, for instance, can be interpreted as 'coping mechanisms'. Meanings are often hidden, not deliberately but because the triggers are deeply buried in past experiences.



### Case study

One young girl displayed difficult behaviour with one male teacher only – and only at certain times. For a long time no one could understand why. Careful analysis revealed that the distressed behaviour only occurred on days he was wearing a blue check shirt. It was then discovered that the girl's abusive father, with whom she no longer lived, used to wear a similar shirt. The teacher wearing a blue check shirt brought back painful memories of home that triggered emotional upset. When he stopped wearing the shirt the behaviour improved.

Sometimes it requires only a good relationship, a suspension of prejudice and a moment of listening to have a way of understanding. Being prepared to do so may be linked to how the student is positioned by the school in the first place. Psychological survival is a motivation for many behaviours, and underpins emotions that are associated with fear and defence. Young people who have had difficult experiences may construe the world as a hostile place and see demands, expectations and social interactions as potentially threatening. No one needs to tell you to f-off unless they interpret what you are asking as a threat. We live in a society that is increasingly based on competition, fear of failure and wariness of others. This may account in part for the numbers of young people who need to protect their sense of self by whatever means is at hand. Making an effort to understand what a student's behaviour means for them gives us more chance of working together to change it.

You can help to discover meanings by looking at patterns in behaviour, by talking to children about the pictures they draw, sometimes just

by asking indirect and open questions and listening – for example: ‘You seem a bit bothered lately, what’s up?’. You may only get a useful answer if the student feels safe with you and does not feel interrogated. It works better if you are doing something together, like tidying up or walking around the playground rather than in a face-to-face encounter.

Should you find yourself in a situation where a student discloses abuse you must make it clear immediately that you are obliged to tell someone whose job it is to protect children. Check out the child protection procedures in your school and which staff member has responsibility for this.

Sometimes you can ‘reframe’ behaviour for a student which interprets its meaning in terms of qualities rather than deficits. For example, young students sometimes explode at the taunt ‘Your mum is a ...’ even before the sentence is finished! If the student is given credit for loyalty they may then listen to why it is not necessary to punch the perpetrator on the nose!