

# Chapter 1

## The dynamics of classroom behaviour

Day-to-day school teaching normally takes place in a rather unusual setting: a small room (for what is asked of it), often inadequate furniture and space to move, a 50-minute time slot (or less) to cover set curriculum objectives, and 25–30 distinct, and unique, personalities, some of whom may not even want to be there. Some of our students come from very supportive homes, some go home to frequent shouting, arguing, poor diet, family dysfunction and worse ...

The ability and motivation to learn in this formal setting of school varies enormously. And it doesn't take long for students to work out what their teachers are like ... Why would there not be some natural, normative, stresses and strains associated with a teacher's day-to-day role?

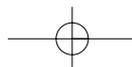
### **We teach each other**

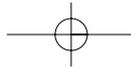
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Into that rather unusual setting, where students and teachers bring personal agendas, feelings and needs, and where certain obligations and rights have to be balanced, both teacher and student are “teaching” each other through their daily relational behaviours.

It is not simply enough to detail student disruption as a discrete issue only pertaining to the student. In any school the same students may behave differently, in different settings, with different teachers. The teacher's behaviour and the student's behaviour have a reciprocal effect on each other and on the ever present “audience” of peers.

The case examples that follow (as noted earlier) are taken directly from my work with colleagues as a mentor-teacher, and observing myself and my colleagues widely across the schools in which I have worked.





## 8 CLASSROOM BEHAVIOUR

These shared observations are the basis of our professional self-reflection that enable and support our “choices of change” and call forth the necessary skills of our behaviour leadership.

As you read these case examples I encourage you to reflect on how teacher behaviour and student behaviour act reciprocally on each other. The nature, extent and effect of disruptive behaviour, in this sense, is not simply the result of students acting disruptively; behaviour is also learned within its context.

### **“Overly vigilant” management**

Corey has been described by some of his teachers as “a bit of a lazy lad” and a “bit of a pain!” Any support from home for basic organisational skills and the application of day-to-day responsibility at school is “limited”. In the classroom he is leaning back in his seat, a vacant look in his eyes – he’s looking out of the window (to partial freedom perhaps?). His attention is hardly gripped by the task requirement in his maths class. It’s his third lesson with this teacher.

The teacher walks over to him and, standing next to his table, asks, “Why haven’t you started any work?”

“I haven’t got a pen, have I?” Corey, at least, is honest at this point.

“Don’t talk to me like that!” The teacher doesn’t like Corey’s tone and manner (“lazy sod”).

“Well I haven’t got a pen, have I? What d’you expect me to say?!” Corey folds his arms sulkily, averting his eyes.

“Well get a pen then!” At this, Corey gets up and walks out of the classroom. The teacher hurriedly catches up with him.

“Where do you think you’re going? Get back in here!”

Corey, with feigned exasperation, says, “You asked me to get a pen! Gees – I’m just going to get one from my locker.” He clicks his tongue and sighs loudly.

“I meant get one from another student – you just don’t walk out of my class.”

Corey slopes off towards the back of the classroom to a mate.

“Hey Craig, give us a pen.”

Craig answers, “I’m not giving you a pen – gees I didn’t get the last one back.”

Corey walks back to the teacher (most of the class is now enjoying this little *contretemps*). “He won’t give me a pen.” He grins.

Corey’s teacher says, “Look I’m sick of this. You know you’re supposed to bring pen and paper ... ”

Corey butts in, “Yeah well people forget sometimes y’know!”

“Look if you can’t come to my class prepared to work, you can leave and go to Mr Smith (the year head).”

“Yeah – well I’m leaving. It’s a shit class anyway!!” Corey storms out.



The teacher calls after him. "Right! I'll see you in detention!"  
Corey (now half-way down the corridor) calls back. "I don't care!"

A small incident like a student without a pen (almost unbelievably) becomes a major fracas. I've seen this happen with some teachers. Maybe the teacher is having a bad day (maybe the student is too). Maybe the teacher is characteristically petty, churlish, pedantic, sarcastic – whatever. What can be seen, though, is that the teacher's behaviour contributes as much to this incident – and its management – as that of the student.

In another classroom a similar incident is taking place. The teacher walks across to a student who has been un-engaged in his learning task for several minutes. She has given him some take-up time – after all, he may be thinking, he may just need a few minutes to get his ideas formed and focused; he may be another lad 'with' ADSD (attention deficit spectrum disorder).

She greets him and says, "Bradley, I notice you're not working ... can I help?" She avoids asking *why* he hasn't started work yet.

He says, "I haven't got a pen."

"You can have one of mine," replies his teacher.

As it is still the first few lessons, the teacher still has not sorted out which students are genuinely forgetful, or maybe lazy, or maybe just seeking attention or indulging in some "game-playing" or even struggling with the classwork ... She has a box of blue pens and red pens, some rulers, some spare erasers and some pencils (all taped with a 1 cm band of yellow electrical tape around the tip – to track them back to the box – itself yellow). On the box, in large letters, it reads: RETURN HERE – THANKS IN ADVANCE Ms Brown.

The offer of a pen is met with "Yeah – but I haven't got a red pen have I?"

"There's one in my yellow box," (she points back to the teacher's table).

"Yeah, but I haven't got any paper," (he grins).

"Bradley – there's A4 lined and plain paper next to the yellow box." She finishes with a wink and, "OK, Bradley? – I'll come and see how you're going a little later." She walks away giving Bradley some "take-up time". Her tone and manner indicate that she is aware of Bradley's avoidance "game-playing" but is confident that he will get what he needs and actually start some work. She comes back, a little later in the lesson, to chat with Bradley (in the on-task phase of the lesson), to re-establish and check on the progress of his work and to give some encouragement and support.



## 10 CLASSROOM BEHAVIOUR

NB Some teachers argue that in “giving” “such” students pens (and so on) we only perpetuate their irresponsibility. Would they rather simply argue? – punish? It is normally the case that only a few students come to class without pens/paper/books (and so on). My colleagues and I would rather provide such – in the critical first meetings – as we establish our leadership and relationship with the class. If the student continues to come to class without equipment (say three times in close succession) we have a one-to-one meeting to ask questions and offer support. With some students we’ve found it beneficial to provide a small “table pencil-case” that the student picks up at the start of the day from (say) the tutor teacher (with red and blue pen, eraser, pencil, ruler ... ) and then returns at the close of the day.

### **“Overly vigilant” behaviour**

A Year 3 student (diagnosed as “special needs”) has a small soft toy on her table next to her daily diary writing task. The teacher walks over and in an unnecessarily stern voice says, “You know you’re not supposed to bring toys to your table don’t you?” He snatches it up and walks off. The girl (naturally) protests and he adds, “Get on with your work or you’ll finish it at recess ...”. Who would speak to a student like that? He did. This is even more disconcerting as he knows she has special needs.

He could have walked over, looked at the toy even smiled – (miserable sod) and given a fair and simple “directed choice”. For example:

“Danielle, it’s a nice toy you’ve got there (...), it’s work time now and I want you to put it in your locker tray or on my table” (here he could use a softer directional voice), “and carry on with your writing. I’ll come and see how you’re getting on soon ...”

This leaves her with both a behavioural choice, a “task-focus” and expectation of cooperation.

A female student walks into class a few minutes late. Melissa, a Year 9 student, likes a bit of attention, she’s grinning at a few of her friends as she enters. She is wearing long, “dangly” earrings (non-regulation). She is quickly noticed by her teacher.

Teacher: “Right – come here [in a sharpish voice – visibly frustrated with Melissa’s lateness and ‘*grand dame*’ entrance]. Why are you late?”

Student: “I’m just a *few* minutes late.”

Teacher: “Why are you wearing those ... things?”

Student: “What?”

Teacher: “*Those* things – you know what I’m talking about – those stupid earrings.”



- Student: “Mrs Daniels [her form teacher] didn’t say anything!” [Melissa’s tone is sulky, indifferent – she averts her eyes. The teacher senses – yet annoyingly “creates” – a challenge.]
- Teacher: “Listen, I don’t care *what* Mrs Daniels did or didn’t do – get them off now. You know you’re not supposed to wear them!” [He’s clearly getting rattled now. He believes it’s an issue on which he has to not only exercise discipline – he has to win.]
- Student: “Yeah – well how come other teachers don’t hassle us about it, eh?”
- Teacher: “Who do you think you’re talking to?! Get them off now or you’re on detention!”

This happened; it still does. Some teachers believe that such teacher behaviour is “legitimate” in that it shows who is ‘in control’ *and* it enforces the school rules. What message do the peer-audience, and Melissa, really get from the way this teacher dealt with this “uniform misdemeanour”?

If a teacher’s management style is this “vigilant” – unnecessarily and overly vigilant – there are many students who will naturally challenge and even “bait” the teacher (I was often tempted to myself, at that age!).

## Non-vigilance

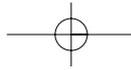
Walking across the playground at the end of Period Six, I noticed a couple of students riding their bikes towards the school gate doing mini-wheelies on the gravel (most students, most times, walk their bikes as per the school rule). I also noticed a colleague on end-of-day duty who couldn’t have failed to see the two lads. In the brief glance (en route to the staff room) he looked wistful, oblivious to the bike riders. Perhaps he was singing (to himself) one of the favourite ditties of teachers, “How many days till the end of term ...?” I was about 20 yards away from the lads and I called them over.

“Fellas (...), Fellas (...)” – eventually getting some eye contact from distance. “See you for a few minutes over here (...) Thanks.”

They stopped, akimbo their bikes, near the school gate. I thought they might just ride off (that’s happened before).

“What? What d’you want?!”

They called out across the playground. They looked annoyed with a “we’re-in-a-hurry-don’t-hassle-us” look. I wanted them to come across to me so that I could briefly chat with them away from their immediate peer-audience. This approach is often preferable in playground settings. It avoids audience participation and the



## 12 CLASSROOM BEHAVIOUR

“Greek chorus syndrome” (no offence to Greeks, you understand). I called them over again.

“Gees, what?! What d’we do?!” they called back.

“You’re not in trouble – a brief chat (...) now. Thanks.” I turned aside, walked a few paces and stopped facing away from them, to convey expectation (from distance) – take-up time (p. 102).

The whole “episode” (one of countless we engage in on our teaching and management journey) hadn’t taken long at all.

I saw them walking across the playground in my direction (out of the corner of my eye). I didn’t want to message a visual stand-off; I’ve seen teachers call students over with fists curled on hips, legs astride, messaging (no doubt) a kind of “showdown”.

They came over and stood nearby, with their bikes.

“Yeah? What?” (sighs, eyes averted, wry look). I tactically ignored the sighs (the sulky look, the marginal eye contact) so as to keep the focus on the main issue – bike-riding in school grounds.

I introduced myself and asked their names.

“Adam (...) Lukas” (still sulking and sighing).

“Fellas (...) I know you’re on your way home. A brief chat.”

“Adam and Lukas (...) what’s the school rule for bike-riding in school grounds?”

Avoid asking *why*.

“What?” Adam wasn’t sure what I was getting at initially. I repeated the question.

“What’s the school rule ...?”

“Other teachers don’t hassle us ...” He now knew what I was on about.

“Maybe they don’t.” I smiled – adding a brief “partial agreement” (p. 22) “What’s the school rule?” I asked again. This time Adam looked at me, grinned.

“It depends who’s here ...”

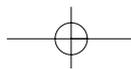
That’s the point. The students tend to know which teachers are “non-vigilant”.

NB Not all students will answer a “rule-directed question”. If they don’t, we can answer it for them. It is a way of raising “behaviour awareness”.

It does make it harder to exercise reasonable consistency in a school when some teachers ignore, or choose not to address, “small-beer” issues like “hats on in class”, “chewing gum in class”, “running in corridors”, “testosteronic play-punching and bonding around the neck”, “bike riding in school grounds”, and so on.

It is easy to fall into a kind of jaded tiredness when it comes to addressing such behaviours. If such “non-vigilance” is typical across a school it makes it doubly hard for others in the team to exercise “relaxed vigilance”.

Some students will “argue the toss” with the teacher when “called over” for a reminder about school rules (and so on). Some students will “do a runner”. Rather than get into a heated argument, my colleagues and I have found it very helpful



to use our small "behaviour monitoring book" (yellow cover; like the yellow card in soccer ...). We record their names, incident, date, and so on. We can find the names from the photo chart (or sometimes students nearby). In 24 to 48 hours, the initiating teacher who was on playground duty will then follow up with the said student(s) and a senior teacher. We don't normally chase students (unless it is a safety issue with young children). We have learned that it is not the severity of the consequence but the fair *certainty* that is effective in communicating that teachers will follow up and follow through (p. 106).

### **Relaxed "vigilance"**

As Melissa (Year 9) enters the classroom (late), to a little coterie of grins, the teacher acknowledges her with a smile, a small frown, and a welcome.

"Welcome Melissa" (her friends laugh). A little quieter: "I notice you're late; please take a seat." The teacher does not make an issue of the lateness or the fact that she is wearing dangling earrings at that point in the lesson. As Melissa walks to her seat (was that the gait of a supermodel?) the teacher is reclaiming whole-class attention and focusing on the lesson "as if nothing serious had happened at all" which is, of course, the case. The teacher's confident calmness and focus has minimised Melissa's initial audience-seeking entry.

Later in the lesson, when the students are "working", she calls Melissa aside (quietly) from her immediate peer-audience.

"Melissa – you were late last period and the one before that; we'll need to have a brief chat after class."

Melissa moans, "Why? I couldn't help it!"

"Well perhaps you can explain to me after class – I won't keep you long. Nice earrings." She quickly changes the focus.

"What?"

"Nice earrings ..."

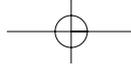
Melissa grins with ill-concealed suspicion. "Yeah!"

"What's the school rule about earrings, Melissa?"

The teacher avoids the pointless interrogative "Why are you ...?" or "Are you wearing earrings?" What's the point of asking a student "why" they're doing something inappropriate if we, and they, know they're doing it?

Melissa appeals to a well worn student ploy, "But Mrs Daniels didn't say anything in form-group about them." Here Melissa sighs, folds her arms and gives a sulky, frowning, look.

"Maybe she didn't." The teacher doesn't call Melissa a liar, nor does she pass judgement on her colleague's possible ignoring of jewellery rules. "I can check that with her." The teacher's tone is pleasant, not sarcastic or in any way provocative. She



## 14 CLASSROOM BEHAVIOUR

repeats the question. “What’s the school rule about earrings?” By using a direct question (“what?”) the teacher is directing the ownership back to Melissa. Melissa, again, mentions Mrs Daniels. The teacher “partially agrees” (briefly) “Yes – you said that.” but refocuses to the rule question.

“What’s the rule for ...?”

Melissa sighs, “Yeah – well ... we’re not supposed to.” She says it, sighing, in an “I-can’t-believe-why-we’ve-got-this-petty-rule ...” kind of voice.

The teacher then says, “Alright Melissa, it’s my job to remind you; you know what to do.” She smiles, “I’ll come and see how your work is going later.”

The teacher becomes task oriented now. She signals an end to this brief rule reminder, conveying the expectation that Melissa will take the earrings off. By giving the student some take-up time (p. 102f) she also minimises any forced “showdown” such as forcing Melissa to hand over the jewellery. If Melissa doesn’t take them off then the teacher knows the underlying issue is a potential power-struggle and rather than force her to take them off will use a deferred consequence (p. 155f).

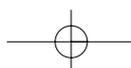
The “student tribal tom-toms” convey the message around the class that this teacher will address issues that relate to school rules (even earrings) but they also appreciate the *way* this teacher does it.

Is it worth the teacher’s brief effort to address the student’s lateness and earrings in *this* way? The “simple” answer is yes. *Relaxed* vigilance enables workable consistency – we’ll never get perfect consistency across teacher leadership, just reasonable and workable consistency. This teacher sends the clear (fair) messages about arriving to class on time and jewellery rules but in a least intrusive way that keeps the workable and respectful relationship between teacher and student intact. She also addresses the lateness at a time of *her* choosing instead of over-reacting *at the point of attentional entrance*.

NB If the student is late to class say three times in close succession the teacher is better served setting up a one-to-one meeting with the student (say at lunch time) to check for reasons and offer support. It is worth checking if this student is also late to other classes so that a year-level collegial response can be considered.

### **Inappropriate language**

I was team teaching in a maths class a couple of years ago. My colleague and I had finished the whole-class teaching phase of the lesson and we were moving



around the room to encourage, assist, refocus students during on-task learning time.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw a student throw an eraser, parabolically, to another student who missed the catch. Cassie called across the room – loudly – to the student who had dropped it.

“Gees, you silly bitch!” She said this in a laughing, “matey”, kind of way (had she meant her friend to catch it?).

The other girl laughed – as did many in the class. My colleague was closer to the fracas than I was but hadn’t taken any action regarding the student’s language so I called to Cassie, across the room, to come over to me (away from her immediate coterie). She stayed seated.

“What? What do you want?!” She gave me a sulky, frowning, look across the room.

I repeated, “See you for a minute over here thanks.”

I had said this in a firm (but relaxed) way while working with another group of students. She stood up, arms folded.

“What did I do then, eh?”

I wasn’t going to discuss anything across the distance of several rows of students. I had directed her away from her immediate classmates to avoid unnecessary embarrassment (to her) and also to speak to her (briefly) about her behaviour. Cassie certainly knows how to “play to the gallery”.

I added for a third (and last time), “I want to see you over here. Now (...). Thanks.” I turned my eyes away from Cassie (yet again), and turned aside to the group I was working with to convey “expectation”. If she had refused to come over I would have communicated a *deferred* consequence. (See later, p. 88, 146, 155f).

She came over and stood next to me, with folded arms, skewed eye contact, eyes raised to the ceiling and sighing.

“What do you want?” she said, in a careworn, “I’m-doing-you-a-favour-by-coming-across-to-you” tone of voice.

It’s hard to keep the focus on the “primary” issue or behaviour. Ignoring the sulky non-verbals, I said, “I called you over so I wouldn’t embarrass you in front of your classmates.”

“What?” She seemed oblivious as to any reason why I’d need to speak to her.

“You threw an eraser at Melinda and she dropped it. You called across the room to her that she was a silly bitch.” I’d said all this quietly. She looked at me, incredulously.

“What!? She don’t care if I call her that. She’s my friend anyway. Gees!!” (... the social injustice of it all!).

Should we simply accept “street” language, as some social commentators suggest

## 16 CLASSROOM BEHAVIOUR

we should? Should we accept “friendly banter” expressed in language that includes words like bitch, slut, a—hole, d—head, poofter, w—er, and so on? If I do let such language go I’ve tacitly said, “I don’t care if you speak to each other like that in our class” (and I do care). (See later, p. 192f).

I *partially* agreed with Cassie. “Maybe Melinda doesn’t care. I do.” (I meant it.)

She sighed and said, “So-reee!” (sorry).

I *briefly* reminded her of our classroom agreement about respectful language.

“Can I go back to my seat now?” Her tone and manner continued to evidence sulky indifference.



It would have been pointless at this point to add, “Look you don’t really mean you’re sorry! Say it properly, as if you mean it!” (I’ve seen teachers force students like Cassie into face-losing, or verbal slanging matches, because of the tone of voice in which an “apology” is given).

As Cassie was leaving the class later that morning she said to me, “This class was OK till you came”. That was probably true (as her version of “OK” goes.) The class had got used to being *very* noisy; with frequent calling out, cross-talking and the sort of banter I’d heard from Cassie that morning. Above all there was clearly a lack of focus during “on-task learning” time. There were several students like Cassie who hadn’t had the issue of friendly banter addressed until this

occasion. She was more amenable in the following lessons. We developed a basic, respectful understanding about expectations, about “focus”, and why we are here together in this place. It took time, effort and continued goodwill.

### **Being a reflective practitioner**

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However many years we have been teaching we can always benefit from some reflection on our teaching and management practice. I once heard a teacher say, “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks”. My colleague was in a small group of teachers discussing behaviour management practices and skills. I knew my colleague had management problems in a number of classes (but unfortunately found it hard to share those concerns). The discussion group was a collegial forum to enable such general sharing of concerns. When she had said this a little too defensively, (“You can’t teach an old dog new tricks”), I replied, “But you’re not a dog; you’re a human being”. My wry smile was returned by my colleague. “If we’re willing, and see a need for fine-tuning, even change, in our management practice and if we are aware of more effective management practice, we *can* always learn ... with support ...”. The discussion continued on about the nature of, and challenge of, change in personal behaviour as a teacher leader.

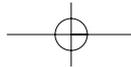
### **“Primary” and “secondary” behaviours**

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In many of the exchanges between teacher and students in this book, you will note a frequently recurring theme: that of a student’s non-verbal and verbal behaviour potentially increasing the stress a teacher faces when seeking to address student behaviour. Elsewhere I have described such behaviours as “*secondary* behaviours”. The student’s pouting, sighing, sulking, tut-tutting, raised eyes to ceiling, and huffing behaviours and their procrastination and argumentative stance are *secondary* to the *primary* issue that the teacher addresses (Rogers 2006b). These “secondary behaviours” are also often more stressfully annoying than the “primary” issue or behaviour.

A student has not cleaned up his work area, and it is getting close to the “bell” (breaktime). The teacher reminds the student to clean up. The student says, “Alright, alright ...” but sighs as he says it, rolls his eyes to the ceiling, leans back in his seat, leans forward again, but makes no initial move to start cleaning up. It is as if he’s saying, “Here-we-go-again”; “blah-blah-blah”.

The *primary* issue (litter on the floor) is hardly on the radar screen of teacher concern; it is merely a necessary class reminder. Even the words the student uses (“alright”) are barely “amenable”. It is the *tone* of the voice, the expelled sigh, the upward turn of the eyes; those body language signals appear to say, “I don’t care

**18** CLASSROOM BEHAVIOUR

– don't hassle me!" It is these *secondary* behaviours that appear (quickly) as more disconcerting, or frustrating to the teacher than the issue of the litter itself.

I was teaching a Year 10 social studies class a few years back (as mentor-teacher). It was my first session with them. During the whole-class teaching phase of the lesson a student in the back row leaned back in her seat and sprayed a small can of what looked like perfume around the room. It had clearly annoyed some of the class. Others (her friends and her audience) laughed. Several boys started to join in the feigned "Ahhh!! – stinks!" It was behaviour that couldn't be ignored. I called across the room to her, by name.

"Anne (...) Anne (...)" – I'd remembered her name from roll call. She looked across the room at me with a look of (feigned?) surprise.

"Yes – what?" (oh "the sigh"). She leaned back in her chair, the can of perfume spray still on the desk. She grinned.

"You've got a can of *Impulse* (that's what I thought the brand was) and you've sprayed it around the room." It helps to be specific and briefly "describe the reality"; (a sort of "wavelength check"). "I want you to put it on my desk or put it away in your bag. Thanks." I gave her a directed choice rather than walk to the back of the room and either tell her to "hand it over" or just take it.

"It's not *Impulse*, it's *Evoke*," was her response. No doubt she said it to garner more group attention ("Notice me, everyone!") Her tone of voice seemed to suggest: "Let's play verbal ping-pong shall we?"

These kinds of "secondary behaviours" are much more annoying to teachers than the "primary behaviours" that trigger them: the sighs; the head movements; the averted eyes or the eyes to the ceiling; the supercilious grin and, of course, the annoying time-wasting things that some students say.

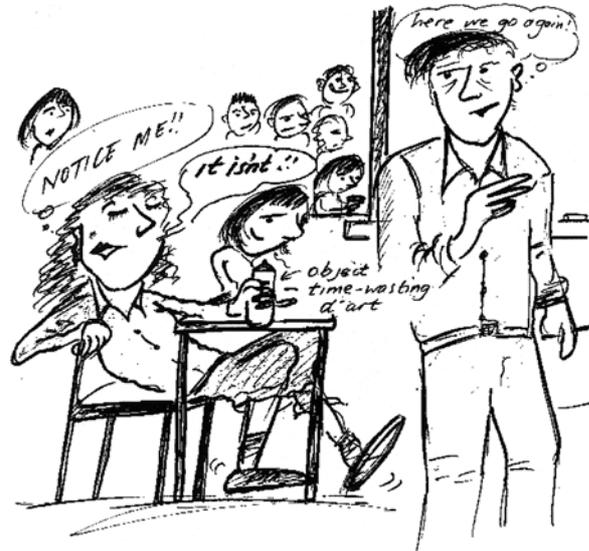
Rather than argue with Anne about the spray perfume ("I don't care if it's Chanel number bleedin' 9!! Put it away now or !!"), I said, "I want you to put it in your bag or on my desk," repeating the "directed choice". Her bag was under her table.

"But it stinks in here!" She still wanted to play verbal ping-pong. A bit of brief, partial, agreement can help avoid pointless argument.

"I know it stinks." She was actually right on that score. Local factories produce some awful smells that – on a hot day – waft, almost palpably, into the classrooms at this school. "And I want you to ..." I repeated the directed choice.

At that point I took the minimal risk of leaving Anne with the directed "choice", as it were, and reclaimed group attention by saying something like, "Looking up here everyone (...). Thanks.", and going back to the diagram and topic I had started to address earlier. Out of the corner of my eye I noticed her slowly (ever so slowly) put the "*Evoke*" perfume in her bag.





If she hadn't put it away I'd have spoken to her later in the lesson, during class time, away from her direct audience. If she had refused, full stop, to put it away, a deferred consequence would have been made clear to her (see pp. 88, 155f).

The hard thing always, in such situations, is to communicate a sense of calmness and personal self-control when dealing with such "secondary behaviours". Yes, there are times when it is appropriate and necessary to communicate one's frustration and anger (Chapter 7), and to assert, but in this case, with this silly game-playing, a directed choice, avoiding argument and refocusing the class are more effective. Of course, I could have:

- walked over and grabbed the perfume off the table, "Right! I'll have that!"
- demanded she hand the perfume over, "Right ... give it to me ... give it to me now!" (What if she doesn't, what if she says, "No!! – can't make me!")
- said, "Don't you ever speak to me like that! Who the hell do you think you are?" (or words to that effect)
- been sarcastic or rude, in order to embarrass her in front of the class
- told her to leave the room.

Some of these options (above) are no doubt transitionally tempting! What I am trying to say is that we, in effect, teach each other in these episodic transactions. Anne is learning something about *appropriate* teacher authority and leadership and (where necessary) about facing the consequences of her behaviour. So are the audience of her peers.

**20** CLASSROOM BEHAVIOUR

This is a drawing of that Year 10 class I worked with. You can see one lad throwing (“I was only passing”) a ruler to a mate. Another has a personal stereo plugged in. Anne is into serious seat-leaning and task avoidance. It took some time to refocus this class (p. 222f).

There are always many things I *could* do or say. There are always many “ifs”, “could-bes” and “what-ifs” in behaviour management with challenging students. There is also no guarantee that any approach will always work in all situations.

There needs to be, however, practices and skills that reflect our values about how we lead, guide, encourage and support young people. Later, in Chapter 3, the practices and skills of behaviour leadership are explored in some detail. This first chapter explores the natural, daily, dynamic within which we need to exercise our behaviour leadership. Behaviour is complex at times; situational and relational behaviour also has its audience-seeking effect, which can either work for the teacher’s (and class’s) benefit or work against the teacher.

We can ill afford to lose the goodwill of the 70–80 per cent of cooperative students by forcing the challenging student to lose face and thereby making it easy for the 70–80 per cent to “side” with the disruptive student or, conversely, allow ourselves to be “backed-into-a-psychological-corner”.

In another Year 10 class I was moving around the room during on-task learning time and noticed a student with an iPod (something I come across frequently these days) – tiny earphones in his ears and clearly enjoying the music that I could hear, faintly, as I worked with students nearby. Walking over to him I made eye contact and beckoned with my fingers for him to take the earphones out. He did. I could hear the pulsating, heavy metal buzz more intensely now.

“It’ll help if you turn it off,” I suggested. He did.

“Nice iPod,” I observed.

“Yeah,” he agreed.

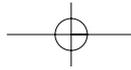
“Brock,” I asked, “What’s the school rule about iPods in class?” Students are allowed to bring iPods or hand-held electronic games or mobile phones to this particular school but they’re not supposed to use them in class – for obvious reasons one would think. It’s hard to communicate to a student who – in Brock’s case – has serious “heavy metal” going on “upstairs”.

Instead of answering the question I had asked (“What’s the school rule about personal stereos in class?”) Brock pointed to his regular teacher and said, “Ms Snaggs doesn’t mind if we have them on – long as we’re doing our work ...” He didn’t say this rudely, even cockily (some do); he was stating it as a matter of fact.

In my team-teaching-mentoring role in this school, I had noticed that a few teachers didn’t seem to care if students brought, and played, their iPods as long as they got their classwork done as well. No doubt at all – of course students can work with iPods, in their ears (even head-banging music ...); that’s not the issue. The school rule is clear (and fair) and there for a reason – “no personal stereos in class time”.

Some teachers “over-service” a student’s verbal “secondary behaviour” by entering into a pointless discussion about the veracity of what the student has said, or they try to defend the reasons for the rule (generally an unwise course); “Brock ... look ... I don’t make the rules do I?” Some teachers almost sound like they are “pleading”. They present with a defeated, if affable, and well-meaning tone, suggesting that whatever happens the student will have their way despite what the fair rules may say. “Other teachers might let you play personal stereos but they’re not really supposed to, *are they?*” It is pointless *asking* the student to reason (*at this point in the lesson*) about something he may see as unfair; besides it is a time-wasting exercise distracting away from the business of teaching and learning.

Some teachers become overly vigilant and defensive, and will cast ineffective aspersions on other colleagues. “Look I don’t care what Ms Smith does or doesn’t do! In my class you don’t have personal stereos on – *full stop!* Now – give it to me.” When students want to appeal to “what other teachers do (or let us do)” a *brief* partial agreement is helpful followed by a refocusing to the right or rule affected, or a refocusing to the task:



## 22 CLASSROOM BEHAVIOUR

"Miss Donkin lets us have personal stereos in social studies."

"Maybe she does (partial agreement) (...) however in this class the rule is clear. I want you to put the personal stereo on my table or, if you like, in your bag (or pencil case) ...". The teacher beckons to the teacher's table.

Whenever I've given this directed choice (at primary or secondary level), I've never had a student (yet) say, "OK, I'll put my expensive personal stereo" (or other objet d'art) "on your table".

### **Residual "secondary behaviour"**

Jaydon is chewing a largish, viscous, fruity-smelling chewing gum. The teacher walks over and quietly says, "Jaydon (...)". Brief eye-contact is established.

"Yeah, what?" "Morning."

"Oh yeah. Morning."

The teacher asks how his work is going and adds: "The bin is over there."

"What?" he asks.

"The bin is over there." This *incidental* direction in part "describes the reality" (there is a bin) and invites some basic "behaviour awareness" (put the chewing gum in the bin) by reminding the student where the bin is. It is said respectfully, a little tongue-in-cheek, as if to say "You know that I know that you know what you should do ...".

If the student engages secondary dialogue "But other teachers don't hassle us ...!" (blah, time-wasting, blah), the teacher will *briefly* acknowledge with partial agreement and refocus.

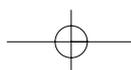
"Other teachers may let you chew gum. Here, in this class, the rule is clear and the bin is near ... Ta." The teacher walks off expecting cooperation by giving the student some take-up-time (p. 102f).

Ten seconds or so later the student shuffles off to the bin sighing and muttering. "I'll put it in the bin, I'll put it in the bin n'yah, n'yah (in a *sotto voce* whine) ..."

The teacher *tactically* ignores this "residual secondary behaviour" and observes (out of the corner of his eye) that the student has slumped in his seat, sighed, and slowly restarted work (more residual "secondary behaviour"). A little later he goes over to the student and re-establishes the working relationship by focusing on the task. "So, how's it going then? Let's have a look. Where are you up to?"

You can imagine what could happen if the teacher over-services all those residual behaviours. "Look!! When you put chewing gum in the bin, you put it in the bin *without* a fanfare – alright?!" or, "Why can't you do a simple thing like put chewing gum in the bin without making a song-and-dance about it?!" That would unnecessarily re-escalate any residual tension as well as over-servicing this kind of attentional behaviour.

Some teachers try to ameliorate what they see as the perceived upsetness of the



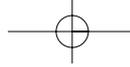
student; they take the huffing and puffing and muttering as an indication they've upset the student. "Troy, Troy, I don't make the rules do I ... be reasonable ...". This kind of good intent only over-serves the sulkiness and pouting. It is – generally – better to *tactically* ignore such behaviours *until* the student is back on task, as it were, and then have a brief "re-establishing" that focuses on the task (the classwork) at hand (p. 100f).

If a student's "secondary behaviour" is too disturbing, or rude, in tone or manner, it will need to be addressed, briefly and firmly, and with a focus on the unacceptable behaviour and a refocus back to the task or expected behaviour: "I'm not speaking to you like that, I don't expect you to speak to me like that". This to a student whose tone of voice is rude, cocky or arrogant. At this point it is also prudent to give "take-up-time" as the student sulks off back to his seat.

If such sulking and pouting is *characteristic* of the student's behaviour, an after-class chat that involves some modelling and feedback may be a helpful way to help the student become aware of his typical behaviours and then work on a "plan of understanding" (p. 182f). If such follow-up is carried out early in the teacher-student relationship, and with supportive respect, it can go a long way to seeing a reduction in residual "secondary behaviours".

We will also come across students who, through their behaviour, say (in effect), "You can't make me!" or "I don't have to do what you say ...". I have seen some infant students really upset their teachers by turning aside and refusing to look at them after the teacher has specifically given a direction: "Bronson (...) Bronson (...) Look at me. Look-at-me!!" I've seen teachers put their hand under a child's chin and force it up to engage attentional eye contact. I've seen teachers bodily turn young children around so they are facing their teacher. I can understand such teacher behaviour, and in some *carefully thought-through* behaviour modification contexts, such teacher behaviour *may* be appropriate. But if the teacher is getting frustrated and forcing the child's head up the resistant child may well be saying (through his/her behaviour) "You can't make me!", or "I can do what I want and you can't stop me". The child's "private logic" is, at this point, "correct"; annoying, but correct. *Who is controlling whom?* The issue of challenging children is addressed more fully in Chapter 6.

- At younger primary age, children are not always aware of their 'secondary' behaviours. It will help to have a chat with them later (one to one) to explain and even briefly model such behaviours to them (see p. 108).<sup>1</sup>
- Sometimes "secondary behaviours" are the result of habit; the student may be unaware that their non-verbal behaviours appear as sulky; pouty; indifferent; testy – displaying a "chip on the shoulder" (with some students there is "a bucket of attitudinal chips"! ). In these cases early and thoughtful follow-up to



## 24 CLASSROOM BEHAVIOUR

acknowledge the teacher's concern and gain some shared understanding, and then work on changes, is crucial (p. 106f).

- Sometimes such behaviour is the student's bad-day syndrome; sensitivity in the teacher will acknowledge this (privately) and encourage the student to be aware of their behaviour in the future.
- Sometimes such behaviour is provoked by the teacher through their own insensitive, petty, even confrontational behaviour.
- Sometimes the student, too, will use their secondary behaviours in a provocative way to "test" out the psychological, relational, "territory" Shakespeare speaks of: "*some kind of men ... that put quarrels purposely on others ... to test their valour ...*" (*Twelfth Night* 3, iv). Such behaviour is often used as a territorial posturing; particularly in males.
- For some students their secondary behaviour may be a form of "exitatory stimulation" – where the student uses his attentional behaviour as a form of "conditioned stimulation".<sup>2</sup>

One of the harder messages I had to learn as a younger teacher was that I cannot simply and easily "control" others' behaviour. I can control myself *in* the teaching and management situation (although that, too, is not always easy ...). To the extent that I thoughtfully control myself, my language, my "manner" and my approach to the students, is the degree to which I can invite cooperation or, conversely, find my students becoming difficult, or even resistant. The skills addressed later in Chapters 2, 3 and 4, specifically address the issue of effective teaching, behaviour leadership and discipline.

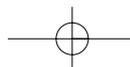
I have also learned not to make demands on reality that reality won't bear.

### **Our "explanatory style" in behaviour management: creating or managing stress**

Some teachers bring an *overly* demanding "explanatory style" to classroom management and discipline; a *characteristic* way of defining and explaining social, relational, reality. One's explanatory style can not only affect how one relates to others, but can also affect one's emotional state and well-being (Bernard 1990; Seligman 1991; Rogers 1996b, 2002).

When stressful events come to us, it is not only, or *simply*, the stressful event that directly causes how we feel, and how effectively we cope and manage. Our "explanatory style", our "working beliefs" about behaviour – what students *should*, and *shouldn't* do – also contribute significantly to how effectively we manage stressful situations.

Some of the unhelpful, assumptive, beliefs that, of themselves, can increase



one's stress are directly related to how we perceive and explain what is happening when a student is attentionally demanding, rude, arrogant, lazy or indifferent. "Secondary behaviour" is a typical case in point. When a student slouches, sighs, rolls his eyes to the ceiling or gives a malevolent grin, some teachers will "automatically" react to such "secondary behaviours" in a stressful way; often saying (later) that "Children *must not* question or disagree with their teachers" (their superiors), or "Children *should* do what I say the *first time*", or "Children *should not* answer back". The most common belief statement I hear is, "Children *should not* be rude, they *should* respect their teachers" (full stop).

The "should" and "must" part of the explanatory style is often the problem. There is an imperative here; a demand on reality that is often unrealistic – unrewarded in reality. There are many children who show disrespect, who do not respond, comply, or "obey" the first time; who answer back; who are *uncivil*. It is unpleasant of course, and frustrating when this happens. However, when we say, "students *must* obey me ...", "*must not* answer back ..." or "*must* respect me ...", we are making absolute demands that, if not met, contribute to the level of our stress and also to how effectively we handle management situations. If we say, "He *shouldn't* answer back to me" when he did (in reality) the internal self-speech can increase the amount of stress one feels at that point; particularly if the intensity of cognitive demand (shouldn't!) is a *characteristic* way that one explains such stressful reality.

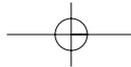
I have seen different teachers, managing the same student, in much the same situations, and seen quite different degrees of effectiveness in management, and teacher coping, that are not explained simply through personality style alone (Rogers 1996b). A more *realistic* belief avoids absolutistic imperatives: "I can't stand it when ...!!" is different in kind from "It's annoying, frustrating, unpleasant when ... but I can cope if I do X, Y, Z". We might still feel stressed holding this belief, *and* explaining difficult events in this way, but we won't be *as* stressed for *as* long. Of course our beliefs need to be buttressed and supported by skills of coping in management contexts. It is the *balance* between realistic beliefs and management skill that enables less stressful, more positive, coping day after day.

A *cognitive fixation* about receiving (indeed, demanding) respect can alter how we perceive, interpret and manage the sorts of "secondary behaviours" noted earlier. Whether we like it or not, we have to "earn" respect from our students by the effectiveness of our teaching (Chapter 4), our confident management and by the effort we make to build and sustain workable relationships with our students.

## Beliefs and standards

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The belief "Children *must not* swear ..." is not the same as having a standard



about respectful language. Having a more realistic and appropriately flexible belief about swearing – “I *don't like most swearing* however I won't let it unnecessarily stress me, while at the same time I will need to address it accordingly to situation, and circumstance” – will occasion a less stressful state of mind and (with some prior skill) enable a more effective management of swearing (see p. 192f).

It can help to learn to “tune into” and “dispute” unhelpful, self-defeating beliefs and explanatory styles that are often couched in “must” and “should” (“I *should* be able to control these kids!!”). By “reframing” the demands to preferences based in reality, we tune into workable reality without “dropping our standards”. We also reduce insistence-focused statements about reality (“He *must ...*”, “I *must ...*”, “Others *must ...*”) that can increase emotional stress levels. At the end of the day, reality has no obligation to obey our demands.

This is not mere badinage. Talking, even self-talking, is an action, and actions have effects. If I say “I'm no good”, that is overgeneralising. If I have an insistent cognitive demand behind such thoughts (“I *must* get it right all the time”), I'll set an impossible personal standard. If, however, I say “Look, I'm having difficulty with (a given student or class group)” and “What skills and support do I need?”, that is *accurate* self-talk. It is also realistic. Being more accurate, reasonable, and realistic about reality will help me in addressing my goals and managing inevitable, natural, stress.

Inaccurate, inflexible, demanding and negative self-talk can become an unreflective habit. If not addressed, it may become so *characteristic* that it is no longer a conscious activity. And while past performance and past experience may have interred our characteristic self-talk, it is in the present that we are using it and in the present that changes need to be made.

### **The bad-day syndrome**

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There will be days (naturally) when normative tiredness and concerns arising from one's personal life, the issues of the day and one's state of health will affect the quality of our day-to-day teaching and behaviour management. Even those days when we just feel “out-of-sorts” will have this effect. It is easy on those days for *our* frustration to spill over into our behaviour. We may become short-tempered, snappy and even angry.

It is important to telegraph to students when we're having a bad day. “You can probably tell I'm not feeling the best today. It's not your fault. [‘Well it is a bit’, you might be tempted to say!] I don't want to go into it all – but I'm a bit annoyed (or cheesed off). If you see me getting a bit ‘snappier’ today you'll know why ...”.



If we are unwell it will be important to briefly explain “I’ve got a bad headache, or ...”. If it is a more personal issue it is normally unwise to share details; it is – generally – enough to just telegraph the fact we’re having a bad day. Most students cannot really cope with such personal information (nor should they have to). I am amazed at how much personal information some teachers are apparently willing (and comfortable) to share with children – even primary-aged children: information about their relationships, their divorce details, their financial hassles and even concerns they have about their fellow teachers!

Children enjoy the sort of sharing about a teacher’s childhood experiences (“When I was a boy we did ...”) but it is inappropriate to use the teacher–student relationship to either “offload” one’s personal frustrations or to make students inappropriate confidantes.

We don’t need to go into details on our bad days; it is enough to let them know so that they can have some basic awareness of how we’re feeling, even occasion some sympathy with our shared humanity! Children understand that *everybody* has bad days.

There are bad days where we might say something inappropriate, or thoughtless, to a student; a throwaway line that we didn’t intend to use; a sharper tone; even an insensitive, churlish or petty comment. Tiredness, stress, being rushed and hurried (and harried) by others can easily chip away at our goodwill and patience. On such days we are wise and professional – human – to remember to acknowledge and apologise. Having done so, it will then be important not to engage in self-blame and to move on.

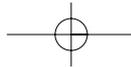
This is to be distinguished from teachers who *characteristically* discipline and manage in petulant, petty, mean-spirited ways; destined (it seems) to create, even sustain, unnecessary anxiety and unacceptable control over their students. While such teachers may still (in some schools) get “results”, they do so at a great cost to student well-being and self-esteem. I have worked with teachers who have refused to forgive students (even students who have made an attempt to apologise). I have seen teachers refuse to apologise when it was the right and proper thing to do, or who nurse a grudge against a student for a long, long time. They forget that we are all fallible. Such teaching and management behaviour needs (in my view) to be professionally confronted where it exists.

### **Coping with our personal, psychological, junk mail**

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Bad days, failure and self-criticism often seem to go together. We can at times be quite hard on ourselves, unfairly hard, when we don’t perform well.

I’ve sat and talked with teachers who, having got angry with a student or a



class, say “I *shouldn’t* have got angry like that ...”. Why ever not? There are many situations where we will get angry with our students. Yes, there are more effective ways of managing anger than shouting or yelling, but we *did* get angry. We are not a failure for that. We can always do something about poorly handled anger (Chapter 7).

Psychological junk mail comes loaded with global, stable, self-talk: “I *shouldn’t* have!” (we did); “It’s *not fair!*” (really?); “I *always* get it wrong!” (always?); “I’ll *never* get through to them” (never?). Maybe we shouldn’t have done, or said, X, Y, Z, but we did; that’s the reality. If we add to such self-talk repetitions of, and ruminations about, our failure (“I *shouldn’t!*”, or comments such as, “I’m an idiot”, “I’m stupid, a total failure” – total?, “I *never* get a fair deal”) we will naturally feel worse and cope less effectively with our failure, and our struggle.

I’m not suggesting a kind of cognitive ‘shrugging it off’ by saying it doesn’t really matter when it does; *it can and does hurt at times*. It *does* matter when we fail, when we get things wrong; but repetitive self-talk (like that above) acts like psychological junk-mail and we feel worse than we need to feel.

Natural feelings of failure are normal, and even appropriate. Learning to fail meaningfully means we acknowledge our fallibility (in ourselves *and* others). It will help to label the failure for what it is – a mistake, a lapse in judgement (even a lack of skills) – and instead of excusing the failure we ask what can be learned from it: “Do I need to apologise to anyone?” (probably); “What do I need to do?” (specifically); “Do I need support or help to move beyond this?” We can learn as much, at times, from what goes wrong as what goes right (a message we frequently tell our students).

By *relabelling* failure – “OK, I did get it wrong. I should have done X, Y, Z” – and then asking “What can I do now and what can I do *next time* in a similar situation?”, we redirect the emotional energy that can easily be eaten up by “mentally kicking oneself” (Edwards 1997). Tuning into negative self-talk is not easy; like any skill it needs to be acknowledged and practised as a kind of inner self-checking “mechanism” whenever we catch ourselves “posting psychological junk mail upstairs”. Maybe we can’t take control of the first thought that comes into our head but we can *learn* to take control of *subsequent* thinking and internal dialogue.

We’re likely to be using negative self-talk when we’re experiencing emotions such as frustration, anger or ongoing anxiety, a sense of “powerlessness”, or residual jadedness towards someone or about some situation or circumstance. The reason for disputing erroneous and self-defeating thinking is that it can bring about a more effective way of coping; emotional and practical coping. We will need to ask ourselves if our current thoughts – the way we explain hurtful or bad



events to ourselves – is actually helping to deal with our struggle; our failure. What are the consequences, the outcome, of *this* kind of thinking?

## Failure

Professor Martin Seligman, a leading researcher on *learned* helplessness and *learned* optimism has said:

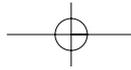
Failure makes everyone at least *momentarily* helpless. It's like a punch in the stomach. It hurts, but the hurt goes away – for some people almost instantly ... for others the hurt lasts, it seethes, it roils, it congeals into a grudge ... they remain helpless for days or perhaps months, even after only small setbacks. After major defeats they may never come back. (1991: 45)

According to Seligman *learned* helplessness derives from an explanatory style that believes, and explains, difficult and bad events in several dimensions: permanence, pervasiveness and personalisation. “It's *me* ...” (or, “It's *them!*”) “I *never* get it right ... it will last *forever* ... it will affect *everything* I do ...”.

An *optimistic explanatory style* acknowledges the annoyance, even pain, in failure, but avoids using abiding traits to explain the failure and bad events. Using qualifiers helps reorient: “Yes, I do *sometimes* get it wrong”, “*lately* I haven't been up to scratch with my lesson plans” and “it is *annoying* that I missed out on my promotion, so what do I need to do to improve or change?” The more optimistic explanatory style *acknowledges frustrating reality, but reframes* it, seeing the failure as having transient rather than permanent and pervasive causes. Further, the optimistic explanatory style avoids recumbent self-blame, or other blame: “It's *me* ...”, “I'll *never* change ...” and “I'll *never* get it right ...”. Acknowledging one's *temporary* stupidity, ineptness, laziness, lack of forethought and planning is, in short, acknowledging one's humanity!

It is the *habits* of explanation that lie at the heart of explanatory styles and personal self-talk. It is not simply the explanation we make in interpreting our episodic stresses; it is the *characteristic residual* explanatory style one falls back on in seeking to cope with stressful events. Seligman's research into learned helplessness and learned optimism is a positive and very practical resource in stress management and coping.

Contrast “I *never* ...”, “I *always* ...”, “I *can't* stand it ...” and “*Everybody* in this class is ...” with “I *sometimes* fail; *however* ...”, “*Some* people are *difficult* to work, with while others are not ...”, “It may be *difficult* (rather than ‘I *can't* stand it’) ... *but* when I ...”, “It *will* get better *when* ...”, “If I do X and Y, things will improve ...” and “Even if I've *failed* I am not a failure ...”. Private (internal)



speech has a self-guiding and self-regulatory function.

Failure doesn't mean we *are* a failure. Defining failure in global and stable terms, rather than in situational and specific terms changes our perception of both ourselves and those areas in which we failed.

Adaptive, and maladaptive, thinking behaviours are learned as well as habituated from our personal history. (Rogers 1996b) These thinking skills when matched with behaviour leadership and teacher skills enable effective coping and even enjoyable and effective teaching (bad days notwithstanding p. 26f).

### **You control us! Who controls whom and what?**

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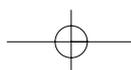
Working with a new Year 9 class once, I struggled to communicate the difficult message that it was *their* job to control *their* behaviour. Apparently their previous teacher (on stress leave) had battled with this class, week in and week out, and now it was my turn.

At the classroom meeting I conducted with this class, I raised the issue of their perception of "control" (p. 223). Many students indicated that it was "the teacher's job to control the class"; "It's the teacher's job to make us behave".

I asked "how?", and in the ensuing (and lively) discussion students' comments about teacher control ranged from "shouting" behaviours through to "intimidation" and "detentions". I further asked if they *liked* that kind of behaviour; and if they believed such behaviour was fair and helpful.

As we teased this out they agreed that it wasn't helpful to anyone really – being *forced* to behave through the "controlling" behaviour of teachers. What it amounted to is that these students effectively wanted the teachers to "control us" but part of *that* arrangement meant that they would make it a challenge for the teachers to control them: "you've got to prove you can control us". When students talk like this there is also the more important underlying message of security: they expect their teachers to be able to lead, manage and direct the day-to-day complexities of 25–30 students in a small room, engaged in teaching, learning and socialisation. To this extent their "cry of control" is valid; but our role is also to lead the students beyond mere simplistic, external, control to appropriate "self" and "shared" control.

It took a while but we finally managed to shift their thinking and their game-playing towards a new understanding: "As students ... we control ourselves ... You (our teacher) lead, guide and support us to manage ourselves. We give you that right and that responsibility to lead us in that way."



This shift is not a simple teaching exercise. Teachers need to be able to call on student cooperation through:

- shared understandings of core rights and responsibilities. This was expressed through a collaborative classroom agreement (see Chapter 2)
- the teacher's effort to teach with some enthusiasm, skill and willingness to address a wide range of student ability and to consider a range of teaching approaches (Chapter 3)
- the teacher's effort to communicate respect and care; particularly when they discipline (Chapter 4)
- the teacher's willingness to reach individuals as well as class groups (even a brief effort to get to know, and assist, an individual has a powerful effect on teacher–student cooperation (see p. 129f).

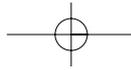
I have many, many, times discussed the issue of teacher management and discipline with students. They seem very able to sum up how confident, sure, “together”, able, (and so on) a teacher is. They seem to gain this knowledge by *how* a teacher *initially* expresses themselves in their management and their discipline, and how effectively the teacher manages to teach (Chapters 2 and 3). Those first impressions, in those first meetings in front of the group largely determine how the class group defines the teacher's subsequent role.

As one student wrote about taking teachers on the first impression:

*When you can see that you can get away with things with a teacher you often be stupid [sic] and go to other people's desks and don't take any notice of them [the teacher ...].*

This student is saying, in effect, that a “good” teacher needs to control the *situation* in which students behave. They normally then discuss (as this student does) how and why students do (or don't) “take notice” of teachers. Having notice taken of one's leadership and authority is primarily related to how relaxed one appears, how confident one's leadership style appears when *encouraging* and *directing* group and individual behaviour. (See Chapter 4, p. 55f.)

One's confidence is increased by having a plan for those first meetings with our class(es). This is discussed in the section on the establishment phase (p. 38f) and in the later section on language skills of behaviour management (Chapter 3) and effective teaching (Chapter 4).



## Don't smile until Christmas

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This is not the clearest, most helpful, maxim in teaching! I remember being told a version of this many years ago. *Imagine* standing in front of a group (in the corridor or in the classroom) with a tense, frowning, face – heavy impatient breathing – rocking back and forth on the toes ... Such non-verbal behaviour will – more than anything – indicate a lack of confidence in one's authority and "status". It may even provoke unnecessary, contestable, behaviour in some of our students. If a teacher stands in front of a class group looking anxious, arms folded in a protective – closed – body language, or a hesitant and sheepish smile that says, in effect, "please be nice to me ...", students may well read "indecisiveness", "non-assertion" or lack of confidence.

A confident, pleasant, relaxed smile, *while* we are communicating (not a sycophantic smile) can telegraph a *potential* confidence in student cooperation.

Of course, what the maxim is meant to say is that one needs to be firm and clear at the outset of our ongoing relationship with a new class about behaviour and learning. There is truth in this. It is much harder to reclaim unfocused, off-task, distracting behaviours than to *establish* positive, clear; norms from day one – first meeting.

I have heard many teachers say that they, in effect, "lost" the class because they tried to be "too friendly" from the first meeting with the class.

## The 70–80 per cent

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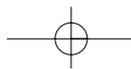
I have seen teachers lose the goodwill and potential cooperation of most of the class by the way they treat individuals and the group. Some teachers are surprised when the bulk of the class becomes resentful if the teacher treats any *one* individual with characteristic disrespect or fosters unresolved conflict. I have seen teachers use whole-class detentions to seek to put pressure on several disruptive students only to initially frustrate and then alienate the 70–80 per cent of cooperative students when they continue to use such detentions.

While it is natural to get frustrated by some individuals in a class group, we need the cooperation of the 70–80 per cent to successfully manage and support the 20–30 per cent of more attentional, difficult or challenging students.

## What we can, and can't "control"

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When I write, here in this book, about managing or disciplining students, I'm not



speaking about *controlling* the students; it's surprising the ease, the facility, with which we say, "I *made* the student put his hand up ...", or "I *took* the student aside and told him to ...". We can't simply *make* a student do anything, or *take* a student anywhere, unless of course he or she is either naturally cooperative, highly compliant or obedient, or unquestioningly compliant or obedient (which are not necessarily healthy personality behaviour traits at all). I have always discouraged my own children to "*simply* obey your teacher because they are a teacher". (Mind you – I've taught them skilful ways to address unfair or even unjust, teacher behaviour.)

Rather than asking myself how can I more effectively control "my" students, it is more appropriate, and much more constructive, to ask "How can I be a more effective teacher leader?" and "What can I do to bring more effective control to the teaching situation and learning context?" The way I manage myself, and my thinking and attitude, have a significant (even lasting) effect on how students behave (cooperatively or uncooperatively) when I am with them (p. 24f).

The approaches, and skills, developed in this book are a means to *that* end.

## Intent and relationships

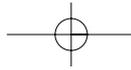
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Students hear and see the teacher's intention in a teacher's discipline and management of behaviour. If the *intention* read is one where the teacher is perceived as wanting to *merely* control, embarrass, shame or "hurt" the child then the acceptance of such discipline will be (naturally) resented and often lead to an unworkable teacher–student relationship. For example, where a teacher emphasises the severity of the consequence, rather than the certainty, then that is all the child will focus on (pp. 106, 148, 157).

If it is our intention to enable a student to take responsibility for his or her behaviour and to actively consider others' rights, and if our discipline has that as its aim, the child will more likely hear and see that intention in the kind of language and manner we use. The degree of cooperation, even compliance, in student behaviour, also depends on the kind of relationship existing between teacher and student.

In the establishment phase of the year the teacher is seeking to build a workable relationship with the whole class, as a group, also with the individuals. Even deceptively mundane expressions of humanity such as learning (and using) a student's name (at all times); positive greetings to the group and individuals (even out of class); remembering aspects and details of their individuality (a student's hobbies, special interests, events and birthdays) are all indicators of a teacher's effort to build and sustain positive working relationships.

Being pleasant (not sycophantic) to "unlikeable" students; going out of one's

**34** CLASSROOM BEHAVIOUR

way to say “hello” (to an unreturned or muttered response); not holding grudges and starting each day afresh are all aspects of relational teacher behaviour that children soon acknowledge, affirm and respond to in a positive way.

When students get to know that we care about them as individuals (as persons with needs, concerns, feelings), then our discipline is judged and accepted within the understanding that the teacher cares about them.

### **Building relationships**

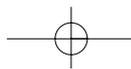
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It is, generally speaking, the positive relationships we develop with our students that we remember long after they have forgotten the history of the Tudors or positive and negative integers. I’ve often asked my own children, “What was maths (or French, or history) like today?” Sometimes they’ll talk about the subject matter, but more often they talk about the *kind* of teacher they have and what happens in the relational dynamics of the classroom. My children have quickly “sorted” out which teachers can manage which classes (and why); which teachers teach well (and interestingly); which are fair and considerate; and which are normally patient, have a sense of humour and, above all, care.

I went to a high school in St Albans for six months (aged 15). I was running late for science class one morning. The bus was late. I arrived at the classroom door huffing and puffing, anxious because Mr Brown was not the most empathetic teacher in the school. Entering the classroom I saw a *new* teacher; a supply teacher? (I wasn’t sure). He approached me at the door, smiling, and said, “You look a bit puffed out ...” (I’d been running). “I’m Mr Ryland. What’s your name?” His tone and manner immediately put me at ease. He spoke to me quietly; away from the class (and the immediate hearing of others). “Who do you normally sit next to?” Having told him I sat next to Roger (a friend), he explained we were doing an experiment on Archimedes’ principle (displacement of mass in water; Eureka!). “Roger will fill you in, eh? Catch your breath Billy. I’ll come over and see how you’re going later.” Not only did I feel better (less anxious and less embarrassed) but I was also more motivated (in a subject that wasn’t a favourite). Not only did I remember Archimedes’ principle, but I remembered the difference a teacher can make to how one feels and “works” as a student.

Contrast Mr Ryland’s treatment of my lateness and this personal account written by our oldest daughter when she was in high school (Year 9).

Vicki and I were sitting on the wall (where we usually wait for the lift home from Vicki’s grandpa) at the end of the school day. Miss Green (Vicki’s maths teacher) came over to us and said, “Have you made any effort to get that maths book yet?” And before Vicki could answer she said, “No, I don’t think you have. I told you to wait behind on



Friday and someone told me you only waited five minutes!”

“I couldn’t wait because my grandpa didn’t know I was staying behind and he would be worried.”

I chipped in at this point, trying to help out. “And it’s a bit hard to stay behind because we go home in a car pool.”

And Miss Green said, “I don’t think this has anything to do with you! I don’t think you know what this is about so I think you should just keep out of this!”

Well I just shut up (being the generally angelic and compliant student I am) but the truth is I knew a damn sight more than she did and instantly made up my mind I did not like this teacher.

### *How might he have felt ...?*

A colleague of mine found this missive on the worldwide graffiti board (you know – the Internet). It describes so well the normative frustrations of a teacher; frustrations that even Jesus must have felt:

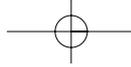
#### **The joy of teaching**

Then Jesus took his disciples up the mountain and gathering them around him, He taught them saying: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are they that mourn. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are they that thirst for justice. Blessed are you when persecuted. Blessed are you when you suffer. Be glad and rejoice for your reward is great in heaven.” Then Simon Peter said, “Are we supposed to know this?” And Andrew said, “Do we have to write this down?” And James said, “Will we have a test on this?” And Phillip said, “I don’t have any paper.” And Bartholomew said, “Do we have to turn this in?” And John said, “The other disciples didn’t have to learn this.” And Matthew said, “May I go to the toilet?” Then one of the Pharisees who was present asked to see Jesus’s lesson plan and inquired of Jesus, “Where is your anticipatory set and your objectives in the cognitive domain?” And Jesus wept.

(Anon)

### **Reflection**

- When you reflect on your own experiences at school what qualities, attributes, do you remember with affection? (or disaffection and pain!)?
- When you look at the dynamics of your classes does the concept of “relaxed vigilance” relate to your *characteristic* behaviour leadership (p. 117)? How do

**36** CLASSROOM BEHAVIOUR

- you respond to the concept of “control” noted in this chapter (p. 306)?
- How aware are you of “primary” and “secondary” behaviours in your students (p. 17f)? How do you conceive this ‘secondary behaviour’ reality? What skills, practices, enable you when you address such behaviours in your students?
  - In reflecting on your *normative* stress – how aware are you of your ‘characteristic explanatory style’ in coping with and managing stress (p. 24)?

**Notes**

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1. The issue of briefly modelling or “mirroring” a student’s behaviour back to them (*only* in a one-to-one relationship) should always be prefaced by a request “Do you mind if I show you what it looks (or sounds) like when you ...?” Also, such mirroring should not be conducted with children with autism spectrum disorder – it will only confuse or even upset them.
2. This is an interesting theory proposed by Mills (in Robertson 1997). Some children, according to Mills, use such behaviours to ‘ward off’ feelings of depression or stress. In their home background they may well be in a situation of high arousal (a loud home – quarrelling and shouting; significant sibling tension; television blaring ...) – the ‘excitation’ sought at school may well be compensatory. Robertson notes that the crucial factor in *any* effectiveness in dealing with such pupils is the calm attitude a teacher conveys (Chapter 5).

