

## What the students said

In writing this book I conducted interviews with a range of students, to find out their views on behaviour. The students were very clear and often extremely perceptive about how their teachers can make them behave. Some of their comments surprised me – perhaps reflecting a gap between teacher and student perceptions of misbehaviour.

The students represented a cross-section of a secondary school community, and were from a range of age groups and cultural and social backgrounds. I spoke to students who were generally well-behaved in lessons, and also to those who were typically poorly behaved. The students had a wide range of different abilities, some very able, and others with specific learning difficulties.

### Classroom control

*‘What makes a teacher good at controlling a class?’*

The students identified two types of teachers who were good at controlling their behaviour. The first kind could be described as

‘firm but fair’: the students liked this teacher, but he or she could also keep them in line. The second could be described as ‘strict and scary’: although the students behaved well, they did not really enjoy the lessons, and they felt that the teacher did not actually like the class. Here are some aspects of the two teaching styles described by the students:

#### *The ‘firm but fair’ teacher*

**Teaching style:** This teacher was firm with the class right from the first lesson, telling the class what was expected, rather than asking them. (The students described how some teachers ‘pleaded’ with them to behave.) This teacher demonstrated his expectations constantly, for instance sorting out the students’ uniform before letting them into the classroom. If necessary, this type of teacher would shout, but could also be ‘nice’, ‘funny’ and ‘like a mum’.

**The work:** this teacher made the lessons and the work seem interesting, so that the students had fun while they were learning. The teacher might play some games, perhaps at the beginning and end of the lesson. The learning was varied and the students were not asked to work in total silence. They were clear about how much work they needed to do to satisfy this teacher. If the lesson was hard, this teacher would reward the class for their additional efforts. It was felt important that they were not asked to do tasks beyond their capabilities. There was a very clear correlation between the students liking a teacher and liking the subject he or she taught.

**Discipline:** the students knew very clearly that this kind of teacher would give sanctions, but this was done in a calm and controlled way. If it was necessary to give a whole-class sanction, such as a detention, the teacher would let the good students leave first, so that they were not punished for the misbehaviour of others.

**Relationship with the students:** the students liked and respected this teacher – the teacher was described as happy and ‘alive’. They could relate to this teacher because he or she personalized the work and was happy to chat openly with them. They felt that this teacher actually liked them, and was always welcoming to the class.

**Students' perception of the teacher:** this sort of teacher had a good reputation within the school, and this was probably quite an important factor in student expectations and behaviour. They were aware that this teacher had both a 'good' and a 'bad' side and they were wary of getting on the wrong side of her.

### *The 'strict and scary' teacher*

**Teaching style:** the students said that this teacher was more likely to be male than female, with a strong, deep voice. One student commented that 'everyone does their work but they don't like this teacher'.

**The work:** the students had to complete their work before they were allowed to leave the classroom. At times, the students felt they were too scared of this teacher to ask for help.

**Discipline:** this teacher used the threat of sanctions to discipline the class, and was also keen on giving out detentions. The teacher always followed up on detentions and, if necessary, would actually come to collect the student to ensure that the sanction was served. The students had to line up in silence before entering the classroom. This teacher often used a seating plan as a form of control – for instance seating the students boy/girl alternately.

**Relationship with the students:** the students used the word 'threaten' quite frequently in association with this teacher. They did not feel that they could develop a close relationship with this teacher.

**Students' perception of the teacher:** apparently, this teacher 'looks like they're not scared of the students'. The teacher was given the respect of the students, but through fear rather than admiration.

### *'What makes a teacher bad at controlling a class?'*

Again, the students were extremely clear about what teachers did or did not do that might make a class misbehave. Much of what they said referred to the students' perception of the teacher's state of mind. There seemed to be a substantial gap between what this type of teacher said they would do, and what they actually did do.

**Teaching style:** this kind of teacher 'acts as though they're scared of the kids'. The students found this hard to explain fully, but they certainly knew when it was happening. They also identified the feeling that the teacher didn't want to get on the wrong side of the children. Many of the students explained that this type of teacher 'shouts, but isn't strict', or is 'always shouting' and 'having a go at you'.

**The work:** the students misbehaved if the teaching was not fun, and if the teacher didn't explain things properly. With some teachers they did one type of work all the time, and this meant they became bored and subsequently misbehaved.

**Discipline:** this type of teacher used the threat of sanctions but didn't follow it through, either because the sanction was never actually applied, or because it was not chased up once given. Alternatively, the teacher used the ultimate sanction every lesson (for instance sending a student out), becoming over- defensive and giving excessive punishments, which the students felt was very unfair. The students explained that some teachers started off by being lenient with the class, then if the students misbehaved they 'pleaded' with them to behave, rather than 'telling' them to. The teacher typically allowed the students to sit where they wanted, rather

than using a seating plan. He or she was also defensive – likely to scream at the students before they had a chance to explain what was going on.

**Relationship with the students:** the students wanted to be treated as equals, and disliked teachers who talked down to them, or who gave the impression that ‘you’re not as good as them’.

**Students’ perception of the teacher:** the students felt frustrated by teachers who could not control them. One comment was that ‘some teachers bring it on themselves’. Another student commented that sometimes the class would not even give a teacher a chance, perhaps because he or she was new, young or inexperienced. There was also a strong feeling that some ineffective teachers had favourites, or treated boys and girls differently. The less well-behaved students felt that this teacher might ‘pick on’ them, having a go at one individual in particular.

*‘Describe your ideal teacher’*

Of course, there is not necessarily a correlation between what students see as their ‘ideal’ teacher, and a teacher who is good at controlling behaviour. However, the students were very clear that they wanted their teachers to be able to control the class, only they wanted this to be done in a particular way. When asked the question about their ideal teacher, all the students described someone who would fit very closely under the ‘firm but fair’ style of teaching.

**Teaching style:** words such as ‘funny’ and ‘nice’ came up frequently. An ideal teacher had a ‘bubbly personality’ and made everything fun, for instance playing with words to make the work more interesting. It was important for teachers to be ‘happy not grumpy’, and to have very few ‘bad days’. The ideal teacher was fairly strict, with the ability to be serious when necessary.

**The work:** the work was made fun and interesting, with lots of rewards. The lessons were varied, sometimes easy and definitely not always writing, preferably with some games included. The teacher would always help the students when they needed it.

**Discipline:** although this mythical ‘perfect teacher’ could be strict when the class behaved badly, he or she did not shout. The students said that the teacher should respond to the way that the class is behaving, becoming strict if needed, but stay ‘fun’ otherwise. The teacher should also give the students a chance before handing out detentions.

**Relationship with the students:** again, the students were very firm about wanting to be treated as equals, and indeed why not? They also wanted the teacher to have proper conversations with them.

**Students’ perception of the teacher:** the students felt that they would get to know this type of teacher well. The ‘ideal’ teacher is firm, but fair, and they would soon develop a good personal relationship with him or her.

## **Rewards and sanctions**

*‘What rewards work and why?’*

The students were surprisingly unimpressed by the majority of rewards given at school. Probably the main ‘reward’ they actually experienced, perhaps without properly realizing it, was verbal or written praise from a teacher they respected. The students were impressively

materialistic, suggesting that decent and tangible rewards would be far more likely to make them behave! Happily, some of the most motivated students identified the more subtle reward of a good education.

#### *Merits/commendations*

Younger students were keen on collecting merits, but pointed out that it was mainly the 'good kids' who wanted them, and they were therefore not particularly useful as a form of control. Some of the less-well-behaved students were honest enough to admit that, as they kept losing their diaries (where merits were noted), they had nowhere to collect them.

Merits were less effective if you didn't actually get anything in return. The students suggested that, if you received points for merits which could be 'cashed in' for prizes, they would be much more effective. The students also pointed out that some teachers forgot to give merits. Other teachers 'glazed over' the good, quiet children in the class, only handing them out to those students who were loud and noisy.

#### *Awards evening and certificates*

For those students with supportive parents who were proud of their achievements, certificates were viewed as a very popular reward. The students suggested that certificates should be given as publicly as possible, for instance in assembly, so that the reward seemed more tangible.

#### *Other suggestions for rewards*

The students wanted tangible rewards for good behaviour. They liked the idea of 'desk duty', running errands for the office and for teachers (and missing lessons as a result – a very popular option). Another popular tangible reward was badges, or prizes such as Mars bars and cans of Coke. What a materialistic bunch we teach!

#### *'What punishments work and why?'*

The students had strong views on how efficient the various sanctions were at making them (and their peers) behave. Overall, they felt that the majority of punishments were useful for the 'good' students, who actually wanted to succeed. However, they felt that many sanctions were ineffective for the 'bad' students, because they didn't care (or pretended not to care) about being punished.

#### *Detentions*

The students had mixed feelings about detentions. Depending on why they were given, and how they were run, they felt that they were either a useful method of punishment, or else a complete waste of time. Some students said that they didn't turn up to detentions, because there was no real pressure to do so. Others said that if they understood why the detention was given, they would turn up for it.

Another point that students made was that they sometimes felt they were being punished for needing help. Clearly, in one case, a teacher had given a detention for lack of work during

class time. However, the student perceived the detention as a punishment for lack of ability. Whole-class detentions were seen as being extremely unfair.

Short detentions were viewed as an effective method of punishment, but long detentions were generally disliked. Detentions given at break and lunchtime could cause problems for the students, as they then had no time to eat. In fact, I have experienced the difficulties that this can cause, when a student misbehaves in a lesson directly after a break-time detention because of hunger or low energy levels. The students felt strongly that the teacher should set them work to do during a detention, or some type of community sanction, such as picking up rubbish. They suggested that this could then lead to a shortened detention.

#### *Being sent out/taken off the timetable*

The 'red-card' system, where a student is removed from the classroom, was viewed as a good punishment, mainly because it got the very difficult students out of lessons and allowed the others to continue with their work uninterrupted. The students were also aware that such a high-level punishment went on school records. However, they felt that being sent out of a lesson did not have much of an impact on the behaviour of the 'bad' students, because it was viewed as a big joke. (It could be, of course, that these students played down their embarrassment at being given a severe sanction by making a joke out of it.) Taking a student off the normal timetable because he or she had misbehaved was also viewed as a bit 'stupid'. It was felt that the student had then achieved exactly the desired result – to get out of lessons and avoid doing any work!

#### *Exclusion*

The majority of the students did not expect ever to be excluded. However, they had firm views about how exclusion was seen by those who did merit such a severe sanction. While they did feel that exclusion helped create a climate for better behaviour in their lessons, I was surprised to find that they also felt exclusion would mean 'a day off school to do what you want' for the most poorly behaved students in a school.

#### *Other forms of sanction*

The students felt that being put on report was a very useful sanction, particularly if they had to report to a teacher at lunchtime. They also suggested that it would be useful to have a meeting with the teacher, the parents and the head if a student was consistently misbehaving. Phone calls and letters home were seen to work if the parents of the student were supportive. Many of the students said that they did try to avoid this particular sanction.

### **Other factors affecting behaviour**

#### *'What effect does the classroom environment have on your behaviour?'*

The students felt that if a classroom was already scruffy, they would be far more likely to drop litter on the floor. If, on the other hand, the class environment was bright and colourful, this made them want to keep it that way. Some of the students felt that the rooms they were taught in were 'dull' and 'cold'. If this was the case, they were less than happy about working in these rooms, and more likely to misbehave as a result.

*'What subjects do you find it easiest to behave in?'*

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the students felt it was easiest to behave in the non-academic subjects, such as art, music and PE. They explained that these areas of the curriculum needed less concentration, and they felt more relaxed during the lessons. PE in particular was seen as being a fun lesson rather than a work lesson. The students also felt it was easy to behave during form or tutor time. This was partly because they knew the other members of their form well, and thus felt relaxed. In addition, form time was seen as different to lesson time, because they were not expected to work.

### **Student thoughts on misbehaviour**

*'What do you feel about students with poor behaviour?'*

The students had mixed feelings about poorly behaved students. Superficially, they found such students funny, and felt that they added interest to the lessons. Worryingly, they also saw a clear relationship between poor behaviour and being popular. The majority of students did not feel personally threatened by the badly behaved people at their school.

However, feelings of annoyance were also voiced. The students felt that these children took all the teacher's attention, and they said this was not fair. They also offered feelings of sympathy for teachers who were faced with difficult behaviour. There was a strong sense that these poorly behaved students should not be allowed to affect adversely the education of others.

Some of the students mentioned that they had been called 'boffins' by the less well-behaved members of the school, because they actually wanted to behave properly. This name-calling was, however, viewed with derision, particularly by the older students. These students said such insults were motivated by jealousy, because they wanted to work hard and get a good job. The students also said that there was a tendency for the boys to call the girls 'boffins'.

*'Why do students misbehave?'*

The students were very perceptive about why their fellow students misbehaved. They identified the 'ringleaders' whose example they would follow because they were scared not to. In addition, these ringleaders were seen as being popular members of the class, and being popular was viewed as a very important attribute. The students explained that they would follow the 'bad kids' because they were loud, daring and willing to challenge the teachers. Often, this misbehaviour would seem funny to the class, and they would therefore want to 'have a go' too, to see what effect they could create. If their friends were 'mucking about', the students explained that this would make them feel more confident about joining in.

The students identified boredom as a key factor in creating misbehaviour. By messing around, they would get attention, both from the teacher and from the rest of the class. In this way, they would look 'hard' in front of their friends and create a distraction from boring work. Another problem was an inability to control themselves. This lack of self-discipline was stronger at particular times of the day and week, or after particular lessons, such as PE. The idea of 'gangs' also came up. Those students who were unwilling to join a gang in poor behaviour expressed the fear that the others might become violent towards them, or turn people against them.

*'Describe a poorly behaved student'*

When asked to describe students with poor behaviour, the interviewees listed a number of characteristics:

- They 'backchatted' to teachers, talking rudely when their behaviour was challenged.
- They made a big deal out of being given a sanction, even when they had earned it.
- They enjoyed showing off, and wanted to get their own way all the time.
- If they didn't get their own way, they might walk out of the class.
- They 'acted hard' in lessons.
- They were willing to swear, both at other students and at the teacher.
- They didn't care about learning, perhaps because neither they nor their parents cared about getting qualifications.
- They were likely to smoke outside lesson time.
- They were also likely to be identified as a bully by other students.

In addition, the students mentioned some more 'positive' aspects related to poorly behaved students:

- They got respect from their peers
- They were more likely to get the teacher's attention
- They were more likely to be popular within the peer group.</bullet>

*'What should be done about poorly behaved students?'*

This question seemed to leave the students rather stumped. One suggestion was that there should be special schools for 'naughty' children. This would be a good idea, they said, because it would allow the people who wanted to work to get on with it. (Clearly, these students held no truck with the concept of inclusion!) A second idea was that the 'ringleaders' should get 'taken out' (by whatever method) early on. If this happened in the first year at school, the peer group would be better behaved, because they would not have picked up on how 'rewarding' misbehaviour could be.

*'Do you behave well? If so, why?'*

Those students who answered 'yes' had a strong motivation (usually from home) to succeed. Parental influence was cited as a very important factor, along with older brothers and sisters who had gone to university. These students were not afraid to stand out from the crowd, or to be termed 'boffins', because they knew it was okay to be smart. They wanted to do well, and get the best education they possibly could, because that way they could get the job they wanted.