

## Why do students misbehave?

Of course, there is a whole range of complex reasons behind student misbehaviour. Where a child has serious problems in behaving, there will normally be a range of contributory factors at work. In this chapter, I deal with those areas over which the teacher can have some direct control, or where you have a reasonable chance of making an impact by using specific strategies or approaches.

When you face misbehaviour all or most of the time, it can be tempting to feel that this misbehaviour is premeditated. When a well-planned and well-managed lesson goes wrong, it is natural to become defensive. You put a great deal of hard work into your lessons: why don't your students appreciate this? Surely, you start to believe, they have ganged together beforehand and decided to disrupt your lessons? The belief that they're 'out to get you' can quickly develop into a defensive teaching style. While it is certainly true that there are some students who make a conscious decision to misbehave, in reality the majority of poor behaviour stems from very different factors. You will find ideas below for solving some of the most common issues.

Of course, in some schools it is the overall ethos at fault, an ineffective senior management team, or a useless behaviour policy. In other schools, it is about the sheer weight of numbers of children from difficult backgrounds, or with serious special needs. Unfortunately, the individual classroom teacher can have little real impact in these situations, beyond doing his or her best for the students. It is very much a personal decision about how much stress you are willing to take, and the likelihood of an improvement in the near future. If you do find yourself working in a particularly challenging situation, the last chapter of this book gives some advice on handling stress.

### School and learning

#### *Boredom*

School simply doesn't suit some people. If you think back to your own schooldays, you can probably remember times when you were bored out of your mind. If a student has been taught that school is important, and learning is a vital tool for future life, they will put up (on most occasions) with this feeling of boredom, without resorting to misbehaviour. However, if children have learnt to see school as a trap, as a place where they are forced to stay despite their lack of interest, it is likely that they will misbehave when they are bored, either to dissipate the feelings of boredom, or to add some interest to lesson time. Winding up the teacher or getting the class to mess around will inevitably seem more interesting to the children than studying some dry and dull topics.

#### *Dealing with boredom*

The obvious answer to dealing with boredom would seem to be: make school more interesting! If I think back to my teaching practices at college, I can remember having plenty of time to plan exciting and interesting lessons to engage my students. However, things are not quite so easy for practising teachers, who have so many other demands on their time. In addition, there are the pressures of 'getting through the curriculum' and 'applying the national strategies'. This can mean that you are sometimes forced into delivering boring lessons or creating a timetable that focuses too much on certain subject areas.

It therefore becomes a question of priorities – if you know for a fact that your students have a low level of concentration, and succumb easily to the temptation to misbehave, then you will need to make ‘dealing with boredom’ one of your main concerns. Put curriculum concerns to one side for a while, and re-engage them with the process of learning. Here are a few suggestions about how you might do this:

**Make the work fun and interesting:** if you can get your students viewing the lessons as fun, rather than as work, they are less likely to become bored, restless and disruptive.

**Make the work seem real and meaningful:** some students don’t feel that school relates to their everyday lives. Show how the work you do in lessons has links to jobs that your students might do in later life, or to topics that interest them.

**Use lots of variety in your lessons:** students with a low boredom threshold find it hard to focus on one activity for any length of time. Keep your lessons varied, use lots of different exercises and plenty of practical and active work.

**Use all the senses:** spice up the work by using sensory activities. Try using some blindfolds to block out sight while focusing on smell, touch, taste or hearing.

**Keep the tasks short and focused:** for students with short attention spans, use lots of short tasks rather than one or two longer ones. Give praise when each task is finished, or a reward of some type to encourage further effort.

**Offer a ‘get-out’ clause:** sometimes, a restless student or class will need a ‘get-out’ clause, for instance 5 minutes off from work for a chat. Know when applying a bit of flexibility is better than flogging a dead horse.

**Do a deal:** a class that gets interesting and exciting lessons most of the time will generally be willing to put up with the occasional period of boredom. Where you do have to teach a dry subject, ask them to bear with you in return for some fun stuff in the future. Similarly, you might do a deal whereby a class works really hard for 20 minutes, then gets a 5-minute break to chat and relax.

### *Lack of motivation to learn*

There is a difference between a student who is bored by school, and a student who lacks the motivation to work. Some students lose their motivation because they find the work too hard, perhaps because they have a specific learning difficulty. Other students might have a fear of failure, or some kind of mental block about a particular subject. If we can match the work closely to each student’s abilities, then we will perhaps be able to re-motivate them. Other students lack the motivation to learn simply because they have never been taught that learning is important, or that it can be fun.

### *Dealing with the lack of motivation to learn*

There are many ideas in this book about how you can make your lessons fun, interesting and engaging, particularly in Chapter 7. And if you can achieve this, you might be able to turn your students back on to the whole idea of school, and of learning – a wonderful achievement for any teacher! Here are a few more ideas about how to deal with a demotivated student or class:

- Make the learning that will take place in the lesson very clear, by stating your aims at the start of the lesson.
- Make the reasons for the learning very obvious, perhaps by connecting what happens in class to a job that the student might do after school.
- Divide the lesson into individual tasks and set targets for exactly how much the student must complete in each section.
- Offer rewards for completing each part of a learning task, to encourage the students to see education as rewarding.
- Encourage the children to find ‘learning partners’ – other students they can work with who will motivate and encourage them, keeping them on task.
- Find out where the demotivated child’s talents lie (for instance in drawing or on the computer), and include some of these activities in your lessons, to develop a sense of success.
- Sometimes the problem is because the work is too easy, rather than too hard. Introduce some areas that will really stretch the class or the student – children often respond really well to work that they feel is beyond their age range. Make it clear that you are trusting them to take this difficult, ‘adult’ work seriously.

#### *Lack of interest in the subjects*

It is a fact of life that some students are simply not all that interested in some of the subjects that they are taught. Perhaps the subjects don’t seem relevant to them and their experience of the world, or perhaps they have a lack of aptitude for certain areas of the curriculum. The current trend for specialist schools obviously aims to capitalize on students with talents in a particular subject area. Some subjects have, unfortunately, developed a rather negative image. I know from talking with teachers of modern foreign languages that subject perception can cause difficulties in managing behaviour.

In the primary school, the teacher might notice a worsening of behaviour in literacy lessons, or in art sessions. Because the class teacher sees the child in all the subject areas, it can be slightly easier to find ways of getting around an apparent lack of interest or ability in one specific lesson. In the secondary school, a student who behaves impeccably in PE or drama might be a nightmare to teach in English, and vice versa. The English teacher might come to view this student as really difficult, and be surprised to hear that he or she succeeds in more practical subject areas.

#### *Dealing with lack of interest in the subjects*

Again, the obvious answer to this problem is to get your students more interested in those subjects they view in a negative way. If you are a secondary teacher working within your subject specialism, your own subject will of course be your passion – your favourite curriculum area. You need to find ways to show the students how interesting and exciting this subject can be. Here are some suggestions for doing this:

Find out what really interests your class, and use these areas of the curriculum to deliver your subject. For example, if you teach French, and your students are fascinated by computers,

spend some lesson time creating menus, or postcards, or a vocabulary book, on the computer. If you teach history, and your students are keen on drama, then use lots of role play and speaking and listening activities.

At secondary level, get an overview of any difficult individuals across the different curriculum areas. Talk to other staff (or to the student) to see where the child's strengths and interests lie, and incorporate some aspects of these into your own lessons.

Check that apparent lack of interest is not a symptom of an unidentified special need. Some children with literacy problems will disguise their difficulty by pretending not to be interested in the lessons.

At primary level, where a whole class has issues with a particular subject, then use the lure of other, more exciting, lessons to keep them on task. If they want the reward of the fun stuff, they must work hard in all their subjects.

Set up some whole-school, departmental or cross-curricular projects to up the level of interest in particularly unpopular subjects. For instance, if maths has a tricky reputation in your school, then hold a 'fun with maths' day to show how exciting it can be.

Make very clear links between the subject and real-life jobs and people. For example, if you are teaching Spanish and a famous footballer moves to Spain, get the class to prepare a welcome pack for him.

## **The students**

### *Special needs*

Special needs can of course be an important factor in misbehaviour, and not just for those students with a specific emotional or behavioural difficulty. Where a child is struggling with the work, and the teacher does not manage to make it accessible, it is almost inevitable that there will be problematic behaviour. Before you meet your students for the first time, find out who has special needs and how their needs will impact on you as their class teacher. If a student does have a specific learning difficulty, for instance with literacy, it is your responsibility to know about that problem and take it into account. This will have an impact not just in English lessons, but right across the curriculum. It is all too easy to interpret learning difficulties incorrectly, leading to misbehaviour, which could be avoided by a full understanding. There is more detailed information on dealing with special needs in the next chapter.

### *Peer pressure*

When we find ourselves in a large group of people, our natural inclination is to 'follow the herd', and behave in a way in which we might not behave if we were on our own. Peer pressure can be a crucial factor in student misbehaviour, particularly in those classes where the number of tricky children is quite high. There is a great deal of pressure on young people to follow their friends, to win the approval of those who work alongside them. By misbehaving, students can achieve a great deal of positive reinforcement from their peers. If they manage to make the whole class laugh at the teacher, this gives them a great deal of status within the group. There is also a fear that if they don't 'follow the crowd', they will appear to be an outsider and will consequently be open to abuse, such as bullying. It is extremely difficult for anyone, let alone young people, to have the courage to stand out from

the crowd. If the majority of the class are involved in misbehaviour, it takes a very strong will not to simply go along with them.

### *Dealing with peer pressure*

It can be extremely difficult if the bulk of your class is misbehaving. Dealing with one or two incidents of misbehaviour within a generally well-mannered group is fairly straightforward – you simply take the troublemakers aside and ‘sort them out’. However, if the whole class is talking, or refusing to cooperate with you, panic can quickly set in, and you might find yourself shouting, becoming defensive and generally getting completely stressed out. Here are a few ideas for dealing with the problems caused by peer pressure:

**Impose a whole-class sanction:** show your students that peer pressure to behave in a certain way is not acceptable. You are in charge, and you have a definite idea about how your class will behave. In a situation where the whole class is talking, and refusing to listen to you, try writing your punishment on the board. Eventually a more observant member of the class will see what you have written and ‘shush’ the others.

**Focus on the positive:** even where it feels like the entire class is misbehaving, it is likely that there will be a handful of children who are doing as you wish. Focus your energy and attention on these students, praising and rewarding them for their good behaviour. If there is a culture of bullying in your school, do be a little bit careful about singling out individuals in front of the class. Take well-behaved students aside after the lesson to thank them for their contributions.

**Rearrange the seating:** in many situations there will be enough well-behaved children to enable you to separate the tricky ones out. Put any potential troublemakers next to those least likely to fall under their influence. Although it might seem rather unfair to these hard-working students, if it helps you get on with teaching, they are going to prefer it to the alternative of being unable to learn at all.

**Get the ‘ringleader’ on your side:** in most group situations, one or two individuals are in charge. It will usually be fairly obvious who the ringleader is in your class. Make a particular effort to get that student on your side, and you will find that the rest of the class quickly follows the lead. While I am not suggesting that you pander to an individual student, establish what motivates his or her misbehaviour, and find ways of dealing with it.

**Offer an alternative model:** eventually, if you follow the advice given in this book, your students will understand that there is an alternative. In the end ‘teacher pressure’ will win out over ‘peer pressure’, so do persevere.

### *Lack of self-discipline*

As we grow older, we learn that we must have self-discipline if we are to succeed in life. We might not want to get up at 7 a.m. every morning to go to work, but we know that if we want the reward of a salary we have to grit our teeth and get on with it. Some of our students have not yet learned the skills of self-control, self-discipline and concentration. This might be because they come from a home background where these skills are not taught, valued or modelled.

It can be hard for students with little self-discipline to cope with school. For instance, when faced with a huge open gym or playing field in a PE lesson, they might never have had so much space to contend with. It is hardly surprising then that they might run around and test out the new boundaries that are facing them.

### *Dealing with lack of self-discipline*

We need to train our students in the art of self-discipline if we are going to get them to behave as we wish. Self-discipline and concentration go hand in hand, and all teachers know how important concentration is for effective learning. As a drama teacher, concentration is one of a number of basic skills that I teach my students. Here are a few of the exercises that I use, ones that you could adapt to your own age range or subject speciality. These focus exercises can help settle a lively class at the start of a lesson. Alternatively, you might like to end your lesson or school day with some of these activities, preparing your students to leave in a calm state of mind. Focus exercises are essentially a form of meditation, where we focus on one thing for a length of time, blocking out the myriad distractions of the school environment.

**Listening:** ask your students to close their eyes and listen very carefully to the sounds around them, inside the classroom and beyond it into the corridors. They should listen for a minute or two. When the time finishes and they open their eyes, ask them about what they heard.

**Counting:** ask the children to shut their eyes and count backwards from 50 to zero. When they get to zero they should open their eyes and wait for the lesson to begin.

**Backwards spelling:** ask the children to shut their eyes and spell some words backwards in their heads. For instance, their full names or some key terms from the lesson.

**Statues:** get your students into a comfortable position and then freeze them completely still for a length of time (start with a minute or two, then work upwards). You can make the exercise into a test, challenging your class to improve each time. It is amazing how readily students of all ages will do this activity.

### *The teacher*

Although it is of course entirely unintentional, some teachers (perhaps all teachers) do contribute personally to their students' misbehaviour. If you think back to your own schooldays, you will know that there were some teachers for whom all or most of the students misbehaved. Have a think about why this was and whether you too make some of the same mistakes that your own teachers made.

By following the tips in this book, you will be able to stop yourself from encouraging misbehaviour most of the time. Here is a checklist of 'cardinal sins' that you should avoid at all costs. Ask yourself – which of these mistakes do I tend to make? If you bear that particular weak spot in mind, you may be able to catch yourself in the act and prevent trouble in the future.

### *The 'cardinal sins'*

**Winding them up:** do you engage your classes in lots of frenzied activities in an attempt to keep them occupied? Do most lessons seem to end up in chaos, and with you feeling completely frazzled? Remember – staying calm is the key, and this includes keeping your students calm too.

**Being vague or uncertain:** do you sometimes feel that your children are more in charge of the situation than you are? Where the teacher appears to hand over control to the class, and is uncertain about what he or she actually wants, the students are honour bound to push at the boundaries.

**Being rude:** do you talk to your students rudely? Do you use phrases like 'shut up' and 'don't be stupid'? Your students are people too – talk to them as you would to an adult, no matter how much they provoke you.

**Overreacting:** do you get wound up very easily, reacting to minor misbehaviour as though it were an affront to civilization? Don't forget that your children are just that – children! It is normal and natural for there to be at least some low-level messing around in your classroom.

**Being confrontational:** do you 'take on' your students when they misbehave, battling against them in a tit-for-tat competition of wills? I know how tempting it is to respond aggressively, but this can encourage confrontations that might end in physical violence.

**Being bad-tempered:** imagine sitting in a classroom, faced by a teacher who is constantly in a bad mood. Day after day he or she appears and nags at you, moans at you, complains about the smallest things. And you are forced to sit there and take it. I think that I'd misbehave in this situation – wouldn't you?

**Being negative:** are your first words on meeting your class, 'I hope you're not going to behave as badly as last time'? If they are, you may be committing the cardinal sin of negativity. Remember, frame everything you say in a positive light.

**Being boring:** have you lost your spark – the bit of you that made you come alive as a teacher? Be honest, are your lessons a bit dull with lots of emphasis on completing worksheets? If they are, then the children may well be messing around to stop themselves from falling asleep.