



THE CLASSROOM OF TODAY:
Seat of Learning or Educational Warzone?

Contributors

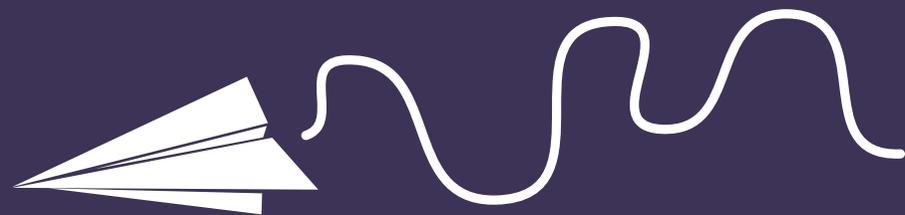
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Introduction

Discipline in schools has long been a controversial topic. We hear stories of violent teenagers, institutionalised bullying, and terrified teachers pushed to the brink, and yet official statistics tell us that behaviour is better than it ever has been, and a trip to visit a school certainly doesn't feel like a life-threatening experience.

We have asked six education professionals, with very different backgrounds and views, to give us their opinion on what behaviour in schools is really like. Six young people had a right of reply to these views. These articles show that opinion is very divided on this issue, and that perceptions, even among those who know the system inside out, can be very varied.

The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect those of the Children's Commissioner. They are intended to spark debate. We would welcome the views of other people involved in education – both young and older – on this issue. Please send any thoughts and feedback to:
cyp.participation@childrenscommissioner.gsi.gov.uk



David Blunkett

Rt Hon David Blunkett, MP for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough, Secretary of State for Education and Employment from 1997-2001



It sounds a frightening statistic: over 300,000 youngsters in 2008 were excluded from school for up to two days. Paradoxically, it almost certainly means that schools have got tougher and what was tolerated behaviour is now, quite rightly, understood to be unacceptable.

In fact, the number of permanently excluded has actually dropped. Not, as many commentators would have it appear, because the previous government were intent on ensuring that children were not 'thrown out of' school, but because learning support units were at last having the impact intended when as Education and Employment Secretary I dedicated so much initial funding to make it work!

It is worth remembering that in 1997 those excluded almost certainly spent the rest of their 'education' on the street. The average amount of tuition was around a day a week, and the number of both in school and external units was minimal. It is also true that the £500m spent on ensuring that schools were places of learning rather than thuggery did not have the early wins that many of us had hoped for.

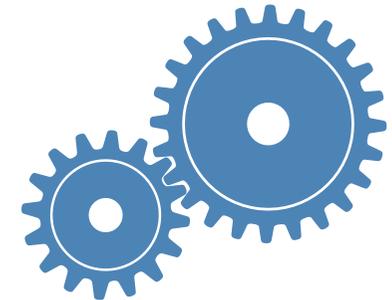
This may have been due to the fact that the term 'discipline' was hardly ever used, even under the rigours of Margaret Thatcher and John Major. It was as though teacher training had fallen victim to the 1970s sociological obsession with being 'non-judgemental'!

"It is worth remembering that in 1997 those excluded almost certainly spent the rest of their 'education' on the street."

Don't get me wrong. There are still schools (predominantly in London) which would make your hair stand on end. It is also true that what happens on the street spills over into the school, just as what is tolerated in the school spills over into the street. So, if carrying knives is a feature of everyday life, it is not surprising that some schools still have a problem with weapons in the classroom.

However, it is also true that for many youngsters living out such intolerable lives in dysfunctional families and fractured communities, the school is often the one haven of tranquillity, security and stability upon which they can rely. That is why the measures that started back in the late 1990s (and, with my substantial encouragement, the use of the term 'discipline') did make a difference in training teachers how to ensure order.

It is always said that a child not in school is a child that is not learning. Of course that is just as true for a child misbehaving or, crucially to parents, a child whose wellbeing and opportunity to learn is disrupted by the behaviour of those around them.



The 'blackboard jungle' of the 1960s and 1970s, the driving out of teachers and the resulting downturn in the teaching profession as a chosen career, were all familiar to us long ago.

Well, not all of us. Those who were creamed off into grammar schools rarely experienced such behaviour, and when they heard about it (often in later life) they were horrified. The dinner tables of the better off, the artificial and synthetic anger of newspaper columnists, and the justification for the 'flight' from the state sector, (particularly in London and the South), emerged from an image witnessed from the outside rather than from the day-to-day experience of parents themselves.

For, and this pains me, those who were really the victims of unacceptable standards of discipline and behaviour in school, who didn't understand what we were talking about in terms of an 'ethos of learning', were the people, on the whole, whose own experience of education had been dismal.

So, from red and yellow cards used in primary schools to reinforce the point, and anti-bullying policies required by all governing bodies (if not always understood and enforced by headteachers), through to the citizenship classes of 2002 and beyond, gradually it became appreciated that a reliance on truanting, throwing kids onto the street and driving parental preference to 'find another school' was not in itself acceptable.

I shall never forget the inner-city head, renowned in academic circles for his liberal views, who was perfectly willing to accept a 20% truancy rate rather than excluding a child from his school, or for that matter, imposing any meaningful discipline on the grounds that it was oppressive and authoritarian.

Thank God those days are passed. But now we face the opposite problem: the belief that 'out of sight is out of mind', and an encouragement for those heads controlling their own admissions policy – in practice if not in theory – to effectively dump difficult children on other schools, other pupils and therefore other communities.



The danger now is that we have moved, thankfully, away from 'minding' children and an expectation that nothing much could be done with them in inner-city or deprived estates, to a situation where the erosion of mutuality and reciprocity within the education system may well lead to a return to a free for all. We do know that those leading schools have all the same instincts as the rest of us. That is why allowing a 'beggar thy neighbour' approach is just as unacceptable as the behaviour of the children who, for as long as I can recall, teachers have moaned about.

As a trained teacher I was lucky. I wasn't involved with youngsters of an age or in a situation which left me shaking and fearful at night. I did, however, teach some pretty rough young men who had no more concern for my blindness than they would for anyone else on the street that happened to be vulnerable. It was therefore necessary to be as tough and clear with them as the informal structure of their own social peer group pressure provided in terms of the structure of their own lives.

Now, with many schools rebuilt, with the benefit of new technology and above all, with the high quality of teaching and leadership that has emerged over the last decade, we can do better. Better, in teaching more imaginatively, in engaging youngsters particularly in their early teens in a way that relates to creative, innovative and inspiring education.

For in the end, it isn't imposed discipline from above but inspiration from the day-to-day experience of youngsters who suddenly realise that they have some talent that they may just - just - have a job and prospects for the future, and they have respect for themselves and those around them.

That really would be an education system for the future.

"I shall never forget the inner-city head, renowned in academic circles for his liberal views, who was perfectly willing to accept a 20% truancy rate rather than excluding a child from his school"



Response to David Blunkett:



Harrison Carter

UK Youth Parliament Sheffield

Most young people would agree with the need to support more imaginative and creative teaching. At the moment, exams dominate. This can mean that teachers are very exam-focused and don't always have the opportunity to push boundaries. Although exams have their place, it is also important that teachers have the freedom to inspire students with their passion and encourage more lateral thinking. Do we really want to educate a generation of robotic exam takers? Shouldn't education be about more than that?

I'm not sure I agree that schools now operate an 'out of sight, out of mind' approach. Whilst completing my GCSEs at a supportive comprehensive school, there was always emphasis on rehabilitation. We were always made aware of exclusion being an absolute last resort and systems were in place to ensure disruptive pupils returned to mainstream education when their behaviour improved.

The thoughts in the article don't really convey my personal experience in a comprehensive school. The idea that street behaviour spills into school life doesn't ring true to me – the procedures at school just didn't allow that to happen and I can't remember a time when it did. For me, education has been about getting a sense of aiming high, emphasis on achievement and a challenge to succeed.

"I'm not sure that I agree that schools now operate an 'out of sight, out of mind' approach. Whilst completing my GCSEs at a supportive comprehensive school, there was always emphasis on rehabilitation."

Anthony Seldon

Master of Wellington College



In November 2008, I was asked to a dinner after an education speech, and I found myself sitting next to Christine Gilbert, the Chief Inspector of Schools. Someone around the table asked me what I thought was the biggest challenge facing schools today. I said 'discipline'. Ms Gilbert pounced on me and gave me a lecture about why discipline in schools was now good. A short while afterwards, I listened to Sir Alan Steer, the government's 'discipline Czar', again talking about why he thought behaviour was very good in schools.

I found their statements hard to square with the seemingly endless stories that I hear of teachers finding it hard to teach as effectively as they would like, and to enjoy the job to the full, because a small number of students disrupt their lessons and create a negative atmosphere. To the many teachers who are driven out of the profession or whose lives are stunted by poor and aggressive student behaviour, discipline in schools is anything other than 'very good'. Surely, both sides can't be right, can they?

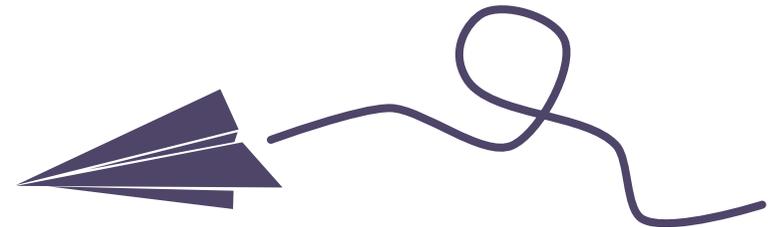
Any assessment of behaviour in schools is bound to be subjective. Those of a certain cast of mind who want to see ill-discipline, tend to have their prejudices confirmed, while the optimistic will tell you 'I can't see what people are complaining about. Young people today are better behaved than ever'.

"I found their statements hard to square with the seemingly endless stories that I hear of teachers finding it hard to teach as effectively as they would like."

The damage that poor behaviour can do is immense. Bad discipline cuts away at the very core of what schools are trying to do. In the classroom, it damages learning and therefore the life chances of the young. If a lesson is disrupted, and the teacher has to give undue time to student control rather than to delivering a lesson, it can deprive the class of much of its value. Ill-discipline can be deeply humiliating and damaging to teachers' psychological and emotional well-being. An unpleasant atmosphere in lessons because of negativity and aggression from students, or around school corridors, can undermine the most sensitive teachers, and it is often the most sensitive teachers who have the most to give to the young. I know of no precise figures on how many teachers leave the profession yearly because of poor discipline, but however high the figure is, it is unacceptable.

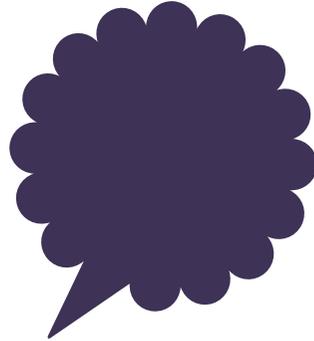
Where children get away with behaving badly, they do not internalise good models of respectful behaviour, and their behaviour outside the class suffers, as it does around the school at large, and beyond. Poor discipline undercuts the ethos of a school and trust between students and adults. Just one or two malign students can sour an atmosphere in a year group or even in a whole school. It can be deeply corrosive.

Is discipline better in the independent sector? No one can say for sure, because there are no reliable quantitative measures. My surmise would be that it is better overall. Why might this be? Is it simply that the students themselves might be better motivated, come from homes where good manners may be more ingrained, because teacher:pupil ratios are up to half those of state schools, or that parents who are paying fees demand that classrooms and schools are orderly places? All these factors are significant, I am sure, but it goes beyond this.



House systems exist in many state schools, but are far more central in the independent sector. They often form the core unit of identity of the student, so rather than seeing themselves belonging to a school of maybe 1,000, they attach themselves to a house unit of perhaps only 50 other students, under the watchful eye of the housemaster or housemistress, and an army of house tutors. Older students have important jobs in looking after the young. Close bonds form between students and with teachers.

Parents can be very demanding indeed, of academic performance, extra-curricular life, and pastorally: but it is better to have overly demanding parents than to have them under-demanding and showing little interest.



One of the great sadnesses of education in Britain is how little dialogue there is between the state and independent sectors, for all the greater exchange over the last ten years. The independent sector has an enormous amount to learn from its state school colleagues about delivery of outstanding lessons, and about optimising good behaviour. The main learning from the independent to the state sector is in the domains of house ethos and unit size, school ethos and high expectations across a broad front of education. Maybe it is because the parents are paying, though I have seen enormous pride in state schools, both primary and secondary.

Pride and loyalty to units within a school and to the school itself, is essential for good behaviour. It is aided by the wearing of uniform smartly, by special clothes or insignia for houses, by playing for the school at sport, or representing the school in cultural or debating competitions. It helps when school buildings and grounds are well cared for and are attractive, calm and secure places for the young.

The best guarantor of good behaviour in independent schools is often the students themselves being intolerant of the poor behaviour of other students. The message then is not that poor behaviour damages adults, but rather fellow students. Many US schools have an 'honor code', which is written and overseen by the students themselves, laying out the values and behaviours that they want to see within their own schools. In some cases the students sit in judgement over others when serious breaches occur.

The behaviour of adults is vital in a good school. If the head or principal is a bully and aggressive, those values will be passed throughout the school. Equally, if they are weak and do not pick up on poor standards of behaviour, then again they are damaging the school.

'Positive psychology' can help inform behaviour equally in state as in independent schools. Associated with Professor Martin Seligman in the US since the late 1990s, increasing numbers of teachers are now being trained in this approach. At its heart, it aims to bring out the best in young people, playing to their strengths, having the highest expectations of them, and insisting that the young are appreciative and display gratitude. When I was beaten with eight strokes at my own school I had to shake the Head's hand afterwards and say 'thank you'. That might be going a bit far, but hearing the words 'thank you' and being in a community where pupils, parents and indeed teachers express their gratitude far more to each other powerfully enhances good behaviour.

"One of the great sadnesses of education in Britain is how little dialogue there is between the state and independent sectors."



Response to Anthony Seldon:



Luziane Tchiegue-Nouta Young Mayor Network Co-ordinator

Is discipline as good as it used to be in state schools? No. That's the bottom line and I agree with Mr Seldon on that note. However, pupils should not always be portrayed as perpetrators, because ultimately they are a product of their environment. The anti-social etiquette imposed on them at home is what they externalise at school. That's why there is a positive correlation between pupils from deprived backgrounds and poor behaviour. Of course discipline will always be better in the independent sector, not only because of the factors mentioned by Mr Seldon but also because their quality of life at home is so much better.

Education is a comprehensive service provided for young people through schools by qualified teachers. The fact that the teachers are required to be qualified should mean that they must have gained the knowledge and expertise to deal with poor behaviour and ill-discipline. Discipline is paramount in order for a good education system to work. If ill-discipline is seen as a major problem in schools, teachers' training should reflect that fact by incorporating a thorough unit within the syllabus that deals specifically with behaviour. But poor behaviour shouldn't be used as an excuse for teachers to quit their job. In fact I think it shows how unrealistic it was of them to think every pupil will show the same level of courtesy (however much we might think they should) towards everyone.

"We must all remember that bad behaviour is the externalisation of an even bigger issue present in a child's subconscious."

Although I can see the logic behind house systems and how they could be used to tackle bad behaviour, I can only encourage it if it's executed in a fair manner. Older pupils might abuse their power by bullying younger ones and 'hard to reach' pupils might be subjected to discrimination as they will hardly ever be chosen to be house leaders.

All in all, I think we must all remember that bad behaviour is the externalisation of an even bigger issue present in a child's subconscious. And instead of wasting time deciding who's to blame, we must ensure that good and productive relationships between schools, parents and social services are established to ease the process of dealing with a pupil on disciplinary grounds.

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Phil Beadle

English teacher at John Paul II School, Wandsworth,
author and columnist for Education Guardian



Let's get something straight from the off: government education policy exists for one reason only, and that reason is not to improve the education of our children. It is to get elected. Consequently, pretty well all policy feints and nigh on all the many tinkering with the way that we run our schools are designed to appeal to a pretty narrow demographic: the floating voter. Now, the floating voter is likely to be middle class and to have concerns about maintaining that status for their children. They fear their children mixing with kids from poorer families, lest some of that poverty rub off onto them. And so, in order to appeal to those middle class voters and their, one might argue, snobbish sense of entitlement, we give them a deliberately complex system with an array of educational providers that only those with educated parents and an ingrained cultural understanding of the importance of a 'good' education will be able to negotiate.

Those middle class parents able to negotiate the minefields of choice get their children, by hook or by crook, into what are termed 'good' schools. (Good here meaning those with a middle-class intake). Those who are less able to navigate the system find their children go to schools with the rest of the hoi polloi and receive a different variety of education. This carries on down the generations and is the chief driver of the disparity between the classes: the well off stay in their educational ghettos, the poor stay in theirs, and never the twain shall ever, ever meet. Education, which should be the key driver of social mobility in this ridiculous, class-ridden country, actually actively conspires to prevent it.

"Government education policy exists for one reason only, and that reason is not to improve the education of our children. It is to get elected."

This is all supported by the right-wing press; all of whom send their children to private schools. In order to palliate the slight murmurings of moral angst they might have about spending vast proportions of their salaries to buy something that they could actually get from the state for free, they demonise both the children and teachers in the state schools they have managed to avoid.

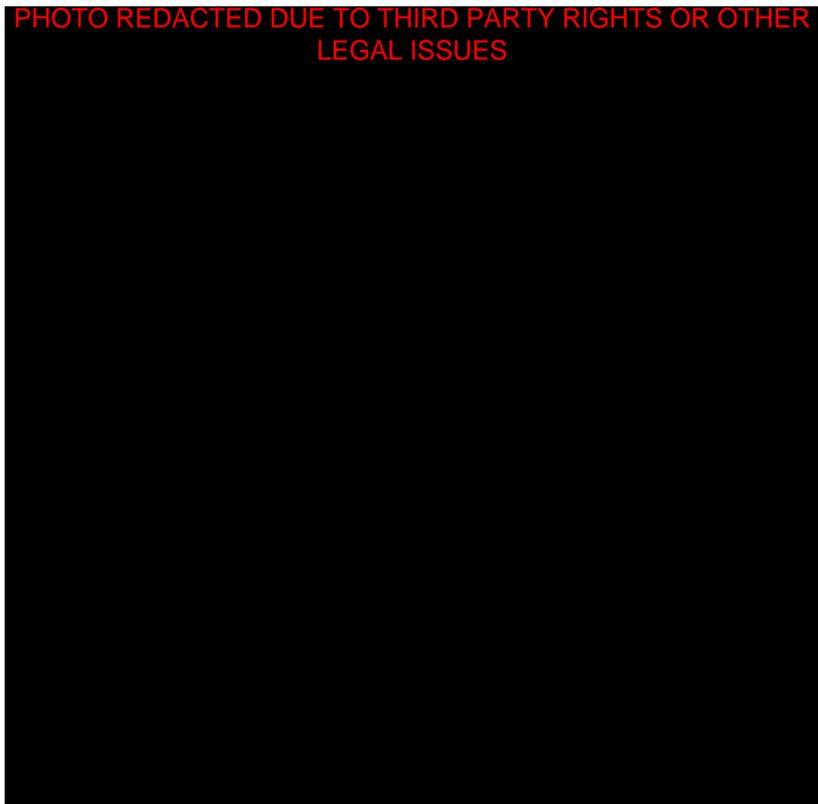
"Education, which should be the key driver of social mobility in this ridiculous, class-ridden country, actually actively conspires to prevent it."

Consequently, you will rarely, if ever, see a good news story about what happens in state schools. Results improve and they focus on the kids who have failed to cross the benchmark, or claim that it is because the tests are easier. Headlines routinely denigrate the substantial achievements in these schools, paint the kids as ineducable, knife wielding savages and the teachers as lazy, uneducated idiots. The fact that neither of these contentions is true is irrelevant. The writers who perpetuate these lies have probably never spent a single hour in a state school and see no reason to back up their hunches with any real experience.

And so, for political reasons, the children of the poor are bundled into the same schools, and painted by the press as feral, feckless idiots. The sadness here is that, in my experience, 90% of working-class children really want to do well at school, but they are boxed in the same room with the 10% who, for whatever reason, have such challenging lives that they are unable to behave in anything like an acceptable manner. Unless the teacher is marvellously skilled, (and there are many awe-inspiringly good teachers at the lower end), the 10% routinely sabotage the life chances of the 90%, as they are unable to do otherwise. Generally speaking, if one takes the 10% out of the account, young people are pretty similar at the core: they are delightful, interested, funny, gentle and a joy to be around; and will live up to (or down to) the expectations that are set for them. With a strong teacher who is passionate in his or her pursuit of the best for the

young people they teach they will thrive; a weak teacher who gives away too many inches will find that many miles are taken and that all involved have an unpleasant and chaotic experience.

Being in receipt of the gift of spending much of my time around these young people is both a personal and a political pleasure. I relish the relationships with them, all the while understanding that those relationships, though intense, are temporary. And I delight in their achievement. I feel I have done a good job if I have at least been a partial antidote to the message the factionalised structures of our education system has given the young people that I teach, and that after spending a year locked, against their will, in a small room with me, they leave with radically more self-belief than when they entered.



Response to Phil Beadle:

Nadine Madi
Luton YouthBank



Coming from a state school background myself, I agree totally with the statements about no positive news being broadcast. My high school was deemed one of the five worst schools in the county. The local residents and newspapers never had anything good to say about the school, teachers, pupils or exam results. It was apparent that students felt they had a duty to uphold the negative perception the school had. The younger students in particular would take part in vandalism, criminal acts and put on displays of extreme poor behaviour. I think part of the reason was because they would want to fit in and 'gain respect'.

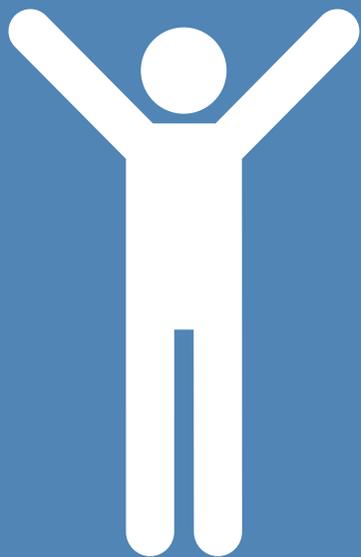
Two years ago, a local college federation took control of the school and one other in Luton and changed them into academies. The aim was to take away the negative stigma attached and make it a better place to learn and achieve. Over the past two years, this objective has slowly but surely become visible and students are no longer branded the way we were before.

Many changes have been made to the school (or academy as it is now known) both visually and behind the scenes. Uniforms have changed, staff replaced and retrained, discipline used more effectively and consistently and curriculum revised. As a result, students began to arrive at the academy every morning smartly dressed, prepared to learn and had removed the metaphorical chips from their shoulders.

"I think I have learnt more life skills, been given more opportunities and met so many more interesting people than I would've done at a private school."

Exam results play a big part in a school's reputation. It's human nature for a parent to want the best for their child. However, I believe that a pupil can do just as well at any state school compared to a private school. Yes, it is true that state schools educate the local 'problem students' and the students cannot be hand-picked but that is what gives the school character. I imagine it can be very daunting for a teacher to be put into a classroom of loud, challenging teenagers, but I'm sure that the satisfaction gained by that state school teacher when their students reach Year 11 and open their results envelope in late August is greater than you could imagine.

From my experience of state school, I think I have learnt more life skills, been given more opportunities and met so many more interesting people than I would've done at a private school. You socialise with and get to know a range of other young people from a mix of different backgrounds and I am sure that some of the people I went to school with will be tomorrow's pop stars and entertainers, lawyers, doctors and even 2012 Olympians. You never know, some of us state school lot could even put David Cameron out of a job!



Julian Critchley

Head of History at Buller's Wood School, Kent

"I'm being bullied by 12-year-olds", I told my new colleague. He nodded sympathetically and passed the chocolate. To tell the truth, I was also being bullied by 13- and 14-year-olds. I had several classes in which my control extended only to the edge of my own desk, and it seemed to be getting worse. I was a 35-year-old newly qualified teacher, who had left behind a senior government job. I had dealt happily with unreasonable colleagues and angry cabinet ministers. But I couldn't get my bottom Year 7 class to sit down and shut up.

I thought I'd be ready. I was as anxiously attentive as anyone else when our teacher training course had covered behaviour. I read the books, practised the techniques, and prepared carefully for each lesson. Nothing helped. I got support from senior colleagues. The most disruptive students were shipped out temporarily. Parents were rung, detentions awarded, seating plans revised; I was pulling all the levers, but they didn't seem to be attached to anything.

"I had dealt happily with unreasonable colleagues and angry cabinet ministers. But I couldn't get my bottom Year 7 class to sit down and shut up".

Much of my problem was to assume that it is possible to improve behaviour simply by pulling a lever. This is a trap that media and government repeatedly fall into. Michael Gove's recent announcements about allowing teachers to use physical restraint, or order instant detentions, are just another attempt to address a complex problem with simplistic solutions. Other common prescriptions include a reversion to a 1950s grammar school ideal – children in rows, standing when an adult enters the room etc – as if reverting to teaching methods of half a century ago will re-establish the orderly classrooms of our grandparents. This misses the point entirely.

Office of the Children's Commissioner
The Classroom of Today: Seat of Learning or Educational Warzone?

Poor behaviour is a symptom of a problem which can have many different origins. My experience as a teacher in a London comprehensive for the last five years suggests that most poor behaviour arises as a result of what occurs within the classroom – the personal interactions between teacher and students.

The rest is largely due to baggage which the students arrive with. These two causes both present different challenges to individual teachers, and to the education system as a whole. Neither is best addressed by blanket prescriptions or authoritarian crackdowns.



The first cause is more straightforward to deal with because it is largely within the gift of the teacher and school. What I didn't fully appreciate five years ago was that I did have the tools I needed to address poor behaviour, but I didn't have the experience to use those tools effectively. Ofsted guidance and model behaviour policies are blunt instruments. Different circumstances call for different approaches, and a good teacher quickly learns that the most important weapon in their armoury for dealing with poor behaviour is their own experience and practice.

Each class has its own character, and the effective teacher employs a range of approaches: that class is not high ability, so I must ensure the material is well-pitched to retain interest; that class has three disruptive students, so I need to neutralise them while keeping the rest on task; and so on. Any experienced teacher could quote any number of examples of how different students respond to different tactics. This is why teaching is a profession in which professional judgment must be delegated as far as possible to classroom teachers.

However, dealing with the baggage some students bring with them is a lot tougher. Even vastly experienced teachers with a full box of tricks, can still be stumped. A small minority of teenagers lack the basic social skills to function effectively in society. They arrive at secondary school with a distrust, or even hatred, of any kind of authority. They have no way of managing a disagreement without aggression, defiance, and occasionally

violence. Often, their home lives are so chaotic that they see school as an irrelevance. These are children who live with verbal and physical violence every day, and to them no school sanction could ever be sufficient to enforce consistent compliance. The child hidden deep within appears occasionally, but most of their relationships with adults and authority are so dysfunctional that it is almost impossible to reach them.

These young people have been failed by home circumstances which have damaged their ability to manage life; and by an education system which apparently has no way of addressing or repairing that damage. In too many cases, all the system does is insist on conformity to norms of behaviour which are so alien to these children that they can only fail to comply. The issue of behaviour management for these children cannot be the same as it is for the majority. For these children, the 'normal' classroom, and the 'normal' rules of behaviour are not normal. Such children may need to be taught in separate classes with a wholly different curriculum, at least for a while. They require staff who can act as surrogate parents, teaching them how to meet society's expectations of them, as a prerequisite for more traditional study.

"We are making a serious error in our approach to behaviour in school if our system addresses only the symptoms."

We are making a serious error in our approach to behaviour in school if our system addresses only the symptoms and not the causes. It is absolutely right to expect teachers to develop the expertise needed to manage behaviour effectively, for those majority of situations where behaviour is within that teacher's control. However, if a student cannot function under a 'traditional' behavioural system, then it is not enough to simply apply sanctions until he or she is excluded, leaving a trail of devastated classes behind and dozens of other children's education affected. We need to find an alternative way of allowing all our students the education they deserve.



Response to Julian Critchley:

Jessica Taylor
Leicestershire YouthBank



I can straight away spot some similarities to my own school, I remember being in a class and thinking, 'Is this teacher about to have a break-down?' Schools are full of young people who have emotional baggage. I've seen teachers deal with it in different ways. There are always a few people who like to play the game, to see how far they can push a teacher. They are normally the ones who seem not to think too much about their future, or at least pretend not to.

Young people don't like sitting in seating plans. We like to sit with our friends. I felt being put in a seating plan was uncomfortable at times and how much are you expected to learn sitting in a seating plan, uncomfortable?

I know sometimes teachers are really concerned about the students who cause a scene or are creating a distraction from learning, but their concerns for these young people may be leading the more focused, behaving students to have to go without the full attention of their teachers. This can cause the focused student to wonder, if I go off the rails, will I get some gratification? I do agree with the idea that something needs to be done to change the way the classroom system runs at this time. However, I think extra consideration needs to be given to students who do care about grades and get their heads down. I also believe more needs to be done to improve the situation and bring back the point as to why we all go to school in the first place.

"I think extra consideration needs to be given to students who do care about the grades and get their heads down."

Daniel Owers

Teacher in an inner-London primary school



My job as a primary school teacher of nine years is nothing like I imagined it would be. Indeed, there are many aspects to my job that I don't think anyone outside of education would consider to be the responsibility of a teacher. I have found myself to be an extra parent, helping pupils develop basic manners and levels of hygiene; counsellor, teaching them how to resolve conflict and deal with extremes of emotion; medical advisor, contacting parents to remind them to change their child's out-of-date asthma inhaler and (finally?) a facilitator of learning, helping children develop life-long learning skills.

"Some of my colleagues say that there is no time to 'get on with the job' of teaching"

The balance of those aspects of my job has to be tuned and adjusted according to the needs of the young people in my charge, depending on the location of the school and socio-economic background of the pupils therein. The majority of the pupils I taught in my previous, rural school had time and space in their home lives to explore and question the world around them, with families who had the desire and the skills to develop their children's learning outside the classroom. The students I currently teach, in an inner-London primary school, require much more help with their self-confidence and social skills.

In my current school, some of my colleagues say that there is no time to 'get on with the job' of teaching, that we have to spend most of our time 'undoing the terrible mess some parents have made of their children.' This does sometimes feel true, when so much time has to be devoted to raising self-esteem and dealing with unchannelled emotions. However, in today's world, this is all part and parcel of teaching – it is the job,

whether we like it or not. Ignoring the potential barriers to learning, caused by disruptive home lives, fights in the playground or similar is a mistake and attempts to teach, in the traditional sense, while these barriers remain can be meaningless. Helping a child develop the confidence to read their work to a friend when all they would previously do was scribble over their writing or tear the page out is just as rewarding as working with a child to solve a challenging maths puzzle. I feel privileged to be in loco parentis for the adults of the future, and focus on whatever aspect of the job needs more attention at a given time.

I spend a lot of time trying to understand the behaviour exhibited by some of the pupils in my school. This too is nothing like the behaviour I expected to see from five to 11-year-olds when I came into the job. Some are abusive and violent towards each other, and sometimes they are abusive towards the adults in school. Others demonstrate a great deal of attention seeking behaviour. At first glance this behaviour is shocking. However, for the main part, the children who behave in these ways are those with violent and abusive family backgrounds, or those who do not receive sufficient care and attention from their parents. As a teacher, I have to do all I can to convince these children that our school will meet their needs and provide a safe, caring environment in which they can learn. The one pupil who decides, albeit subconsciously, that their needs are not being met, or that their time is being wasted can seriously disrupt the learning of the rest of the class.

"Ignoring the potential barriers to learning, caused by disruptive home lives, fights in the playground or similar is a mistake and attempts to teach... while these barriers remain can be meaningless."

Just like the media perception, bad behaviour from a few students can indeed seriously overshadow the positive behaviour and hard work being done by the majority of the children in a class. Indeed, it takes a supreme effort to steer the conversation in the staff room away from that negative behaviour. On the whole, though, the children I teach are delightful. They want to do well and aim to please the adults who they trust and consider are on their side. I find it extremely rewarding to be in the position to see pupils grow in all aspects of their development – social, emotional and academic. Yes, it could still be argued that a child's social and emotional development is not my job. But in many cases, if I didn't deal with those aspects of their lives no-one would.

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Response to Daniel Owers:

Jacob Sakil
Young Mayor of Lewisham



When reading the article the teacher wrote, there were a lot of points I agreed with. One point I felt was key is a teacher's duty really to work on all parts of a young person's character so that they might understand and learn from everything they're taught. From mannerisms to personal confidence and learning lifelong skills. From a personal view everything that he'd mentioned sparked an image of a deeper meaning of what a teacher is: a mentor, a helper, a source of knowledge and guide to help you learn more about yourself.

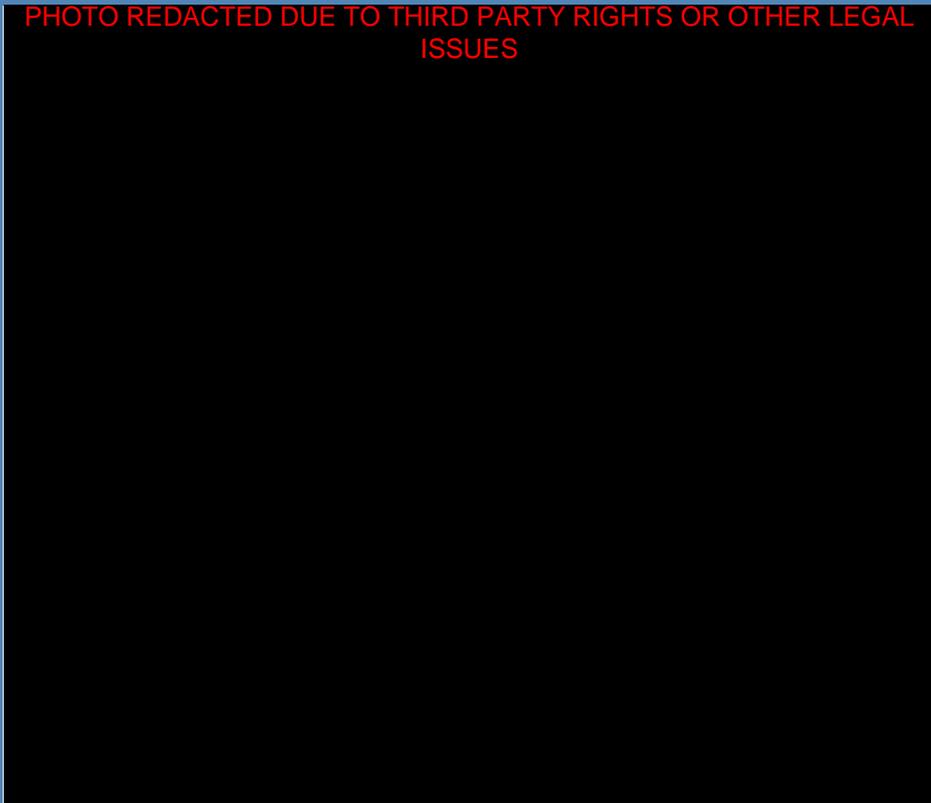
In any job, you'll try to adjust your priorities to match what's going on around you. So when thinking about being a teacher in an inner-London school it is only understandable to see a teacher stretching a teacher's job description. This is something I see daily whilst being in secondary school.

I've seen many teachers argue the same point that there is no time to 'get on with the job' and a lot of children who are willing and eager to learn suffer because of the attention the teacher has to give to the children who have difficulties with learning because of behavioural problems or mannerisms. I know a lot of the problems with children in school are because of problems at home.

"I think a way of dealing with these problems is to set up mentoring and guidance groups in all primary and secondary schools in London."

I do agree that a lot is expected of inner-city teachers. They have to deal with problems they may not be equipped for and are only able to learn by experience. I think a way of dealing with these problems is to set up mentoring and guidance groups in all primary and secondary schools in London. A good way to help a child learn and progress is to be able to talk to an older peer or someone their age so that it's a learning and healing process for everyone. This means a lot of the burdens teachers hold can be lifted and young people in inner-city schools can learn how to express themselves in different effective ways. The way in which we teach our children should be more about expressing and learning from each other, because after all 'It takes a community to raise our children.'

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Maggie Atkinson, Children's Commissioner for England, with children at Portchester Community School in Fareham, Hampshire, a UNICEF Rights Respecting School. © UNICEF UK / Carmen Valino

Dr Maggie Atkinson

Children's Commissioner for England



You could be forgiven for thinking that most teenagers leave the house for school every morning armed to the teeth and intent on creating as much mayhem as they can get away with. They then return home to terrorise their neighbours and stay up all night playing violent computer games.

You may also think that the few who escape this fate are living in constant fear, kept indoors by their over-anxious parents until the day they become passive victims of the armed bullies. And they too stay up all night playing violent computer games.

This doesn't match my experience of talking to hundreds of young people on a daily basis. Neither does it match the experience of anyone I know of who works with young people. I also strongly suspect that it doesn't match the experience of those journalists writing stories about the plague of feral youth. But it sells papers, and has done for years. Today's stories are about happy-slapping hoodies. Fifty years ago they were about mods or teddy boys.

I'm not so naive as to assume that what I see as Children's Commissioner is typical of what goes on when there isn't a VIP being shown round the school. However, I have worked in and with schools since 1979.

I taught English and Drama in two pretty ordinary, truly comprehensive schools. I remember the most difficult young man I ever taught asking if he could bring in his bugle on 11 November and the entire year group, deeply into studying war poetry, observing the Last Post, two minutes silence, and Reveille. I had been told it would be chaos. It was anything but.

I remember tough youngsters applauding each other's poems, stories and acted scenes. I watched them engaging in serious, sometimes heated, always exhilarating debates and discussions. I recall having to put a steadying hand on a pupil's arm as the final scene in Steinbeck's 'Of Mice and Men' was played out on a professional stage. He didn't know the book, and was so hooked into the play that he thought somebody should step in and stop the inevitable shot at the end and that it might as well be him.

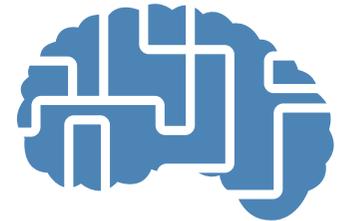
I remember pride and sadness in equal measure at examination results mornings, speech nights and farewell parties. The two schools I worked in were not on Easy Street. Young people can work out with unerring accuracy whether you consider them worthy of your effort and time, and if you show them you value them the result can be fantastic. If you treat them as if they are not worthy, or you don't try, they give back what you give to them. But the vast majority are the salt of the earth, and want to do well for their teachers and each other.

"if you were repeatedly told you are irresponsible, lazy, violent, and were only passing exams because they had been made so easy that nobody could fail, how long would it take you to start believing it and act accordingly?"

No two classrooms are the same, and teachers vary enormously in their teaching styles, relationships with their students and – bluntly – their competence. However, the vast majority of classrooms I have seen are lively, interesting places to be. Teachers are teaching. Young people are learning. There may be a couple of pupils in a class who are bored and want to disrupt the class. But only a couple, and the majority of teachers can make sure this doesn't disrupt what the others in the class get out of the lesson.

All of the evidence suggests that teachers are better qualified and better trained now than 20 years ago, and that young people are doing better at school. That also matches my experience based on the classes I see and hear about.

That's not to say that the classroom of today is a 'Mr Chips' idyll, but neither is it the warzone of popular myth.



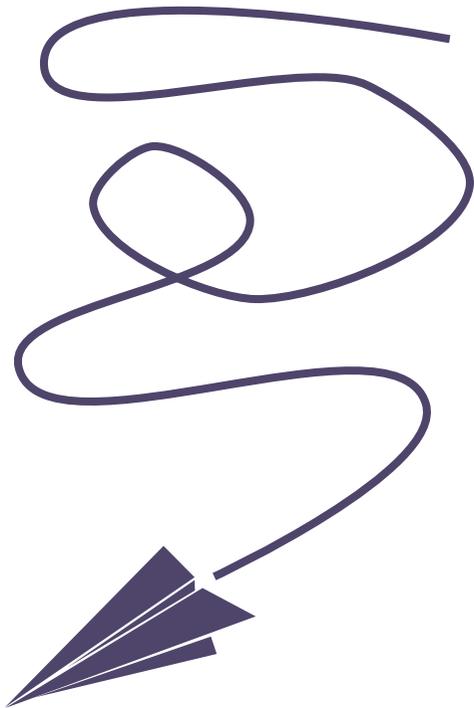
Whenever I talk to young people, they consistently ask me to do something about the way they are reported in the media. We are working in partnership with young people, other organisations and journalists to address this issue. This work will involve approaching national media with news stories about teenagers who break reported stereotypes; exposing poor reporting on the internet by blogging news stories of the day; and supporting local authorities to address their local media.

There are over 11 million young people under the age of 18 in England. That means over 11 million different experiences of being a young person. As a society, we need to be really careful to remember this, and not to insult them all with the same easy label. It isn't accurate and it isn't fair.

"There are over 11 million young people under the age of 18 in England. That means over 11 million different experiences of being a young person."

It also risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy – if you were repeatedly told you are irresponsible, lazy, violent, and were only passing exams because they had been made so easy that nobody could fail, how long would it take you to start believing it and act accordingly? That is the message our society is giving teenagers. Is it really what we want them to believe?

“Young people can work out with unerring accuracy whether you consider them worthy of your effort and time.”



Response to Maggie Atkinson:

Danny Lee
UK Youth Parliament Kent



What's new? The Children's Commissioner's comments on the depressing portrayal of young people is just a long line in the same story being repeated. It's easier for me to identify with racist taunts and jeers rather than being lightly offended with criticism and the labelling of being a teenager. Not once have I come under fire for being a 'feral' youth. Maybe I am too polite, but at the same time I don't have the time to get involved in anti-social behaviour. Finger-pointing at the media is an easy route to make a good point but everyone is a stakeholder in the well-being of the youth of today, including young people ourselves.

Being in a failing state school for much of my secondary education only made me a better person. I think Dr Atkinson understates the wild behaviour of some teenagers in classrooms though. She correctly points out the facade when VIPs scrutinise everything about a school – they wouldn't want to leave with a negative portrayal. It says a lot about trust. When the VIPs or Ofsted leave, failing schools are left with poor standards of teaching and the feeble attempts of many teachers to understand their students. I think only two teachers made any sort of impression, but they inspired me and gave me ambition, making it easier to focus, rather than terrorising my peers.

Teachers, and adults generally, need a new approach as young people evolve. I think adults need to be tolerant and trusting, and to stay at arm's length. Young people need to show respect and maturity. We all fail because there is little investment in the younger generation. We are short changed because adults think they have all the answers. They were children once too.



About the Office of the Children's Commissioner

The Office of the Children's Commissioner is a national organisation led by the Children's Commissioner for England, Dr Maggie Atkinson. The post of Children's Commissioner for England was established by the Children Act 2004. It requires us to refer to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) when planning and carrying out our work.

The Children's Commissioner has a duty to promote the views and interests of all children in England, in particular those whose voices are least likely to be heard, to the people who make decisions about their lives. One of the Commissioner's key functions is encouraging organisations that provide services for children always to operate from the child's perspective.

For more information about the work of the Children's Commissioner for England, see: www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk

Thank you

We would like to thank all the contributors, who have given their work free of charge to this publication. Thanks also go to the Young Mayor Network, YouthBank and UK Youth Parliament for putting us in touch with the young contributors.

Several of the photographs in this publication are taken from a visit made by Maggie Atkinson, Children's Commissioner for England, to UNICEF Rights Respecting Schools Harrison Primary School and Portchester Community School in Hampshire.

UNICEF UK's Rights Respecting School Award is an initiative leading to an award which recognises achievement in putting the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child at the heart of a school's planning, policies, practice and ethos.

Thanks to Harrison Primary School, Portchester Community School, UNICEF UK and photographer Carmen Valino.

Other images are taken from the film 'About the Children's Commissioner'. Thanks go to all of the young people featured from this film, which can be viewed on the Children's Commissioner page of our website at: www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk.