

Restorative practice

Continuing our series on behaviour management, **Paul Howard** looks at restorative approaches to poor behaviour and conflict.

The official response to the Steer committee report on behaviour in schools, published in April 2009, at best continues to emphasise management of pupils' behaviour by staff. At worst it promotes zero tolerance – as in the Department for Children, Schools and Families' 'Behaviour Challenge' and the revised Ofsted framework, both launched last September.

Disappointingly, Sir Alan Steer's report, *Learning behaviour, lessons learned*, made scant reference to restorative practice. This offers an alternative to retributive approaches which are typified by a third party intervening to deal with the problem. Such approaches

- reduce the responsibility of those directly involved. (Merely telling others to be more responsible is an ineffective way of cultivating responsibility.)
- invariably fail to address the problem
- are driven in the main by a concern that a rule has been broken.

The alternative entails those involved in a conflict taking responsibility for its resolution. In the process, the underlying causes are attended to. Finally, the principal focus is on the damage done to relationships and the need to repair them.

Informal practice

Hannah, a deputy head, finds Lee outside his classroom. She stands side on to him and calmly initiates a dialogue.

"Lee, I can see you're unhappy. What happened?"

"Billy and Dean were winding me up 'cause I couldn't do the work."

"Then what happened?"

"I lost my temper and threw a book at them. Then Mrs Jones sent me out."

"What were you thinking at the time?"

"I wanted to hurt them."

"And what were you feeling?"

"Angry. It wasn't fair I got sent out and she didn't do anything about them."

"Who else was affected?"

"Mrs Jones."

"How was she affected?"

"She had to stop teaching."

"What do we need to do to put things right?"

"I need to apologise to Mrs Jones. I shouldn't have thrown the book, but she needs to know what was going on. I want the others to stop winding me up."

"Are you OK to sort this out with Mrs Jones?"

"Can you talk to her?"

"You would like me to be with you when you talk to her?"

"Yes."

Hannah's use of relaxed body language, calm tone and open questions minimises the risk of Lee responding with fight or flight. The fact that she will listen helps him to take responsibility for what he has done and ownership of what needs to happen next.

Mediation

Bob was Gemma's Year 9 form tutor and maths teacher. He was concerned about her behaviour. To help understand her, he took detentions issued to her by others. Gemma saw this as hassling.

Gemma found maths a struggle; her main response to difficulty was to get out of the lesson. When she went to leave, Bob, who was near the door, asked her to stay. Gemma pulled the door open and it hit Bob's foot, bouncing back and hitting her. She accused Bob of doing it deliberately.

Bob and Gemma agreed to mediation where each heard how the other perceived things. Gemma heard about Bob's wish to help. Bob realised Gemma thought he was always on her case.

Gemma said she needed extra help and for Bob to stop taking other teachers' detentions. Bob needed Gemma to accept that the incident in the doorway was accidental and for her to ask for help when needed. Gemma apologised for accusing Bob of harming her and he apologised for not realising her need for support. Gemma accepted the offer of additional maths support.

As education is essentially relational, it is the centrality of relationships that makes restorative practice the appropriate response to behaviour issues. To check this assertion, imagine turning up for work and finding all your usual resources had evaporated. Would teaching and learning still be possible? There can be only one answer to this question – 'Yes!'

As the cases in the boxes show, restorative practice can be delivered informally or formally. There is widespread evidence of its effectiveness, including:

- reductions in the use of exclusion and other sanctions
- reductions in recidivism
- improved relationships
- less teacher time lost through playground incidents carrying over into the classroom
- a consistently high success rate where mediation is used.

Restorative practice is not a panacea, but provides a basis for cultivating personal and collective responsibility. It is also an antidote to the demonisation of young people that's certain to grow in popularity among politicians in the run up to the general election.

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