Feel Free to Smile

The behaviour management survival guide for new teachers

Nikki Cunningham-Smith

BLOOMSBURY EDUCATION
LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY EDUCATION
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, Ireland

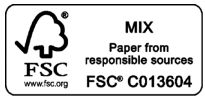
First published in Great Britain, 2021

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: PB: 978-1-4729-8448-7; ePDF: 978-1-4729-8450-0;
ePub: 978-1-4729-8449-4

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1 (paperback)

Typeset by Newgen KnowledgeWorks Pvt. Ltd., Chennai, India
Printed and bound in the UK by CPI Group Ltd, CR0 4YY



To find out more about our authors and books visit www.bloomsbury.com and sign up for our newsletters

Contents

Acknowledgements

Firstly, to my awesome husband Sam. I don't think words will justify how much of my other half he is, even in those moments of stress when I don't show it. Thank you for knowing just from a look when I need you more. Thank you for making me laugh but also making me feel like the most accomplished and successful woman, even before I have accomplished anything or proven my success. I love you. Let's keep laughing into our next adventure.

To my amazing parents Carl and Des for always asking, 'What's next?', so I could and would never rest on my laurels, but also for making sure nothing ever felt out of my reach or capabilities. They led by example of what a strong work ethic is and told me that they will always be boastful about me behind my back and never to my face. I don't know why but I love that sentiment. My biggest secret cheerleaders. I love you both and thank you for everything you've done for me and my family.

Thank you to my wonderful in-laws Julia and Colin for supporting us in so many ways, never hesitating to have our tiny human and entertaining her on those days when the deadlines loomed. For providing the Tenby holiday and the time for an hour's break from being a new mum to reengage my brain cells and develop the proposal for this book. I love and appreciate all you do for our little family.

To all of the wonderful educators who took the time to offer their stories, especially during a time of navigating a new landscape of teaching, with blended learning, and balancing your own physical and mental health and fears. Thank you for the love and passion you have for educating the future, especially in recent months when teaching has been so difficult. I dedicate the chapter 'So… you're wondering why we need you to stay' to all of you wonderful people.

To the first person who believed I had an interesting writing voice, Jon Severs, who regularly commissioned my words (even though I sometimes

couldn't understand why), and to Hannah Marston who received the proposal for this book, saw something in it and supported me in growing and nurturing it into the book you have today.

To all my friends both in and out of education, who kept being a reassuring voice in my ear, at whatever stage of my career, and who were positive voices when writing during lockdown and the first trimester, and the feat seemed bigger than me (I'm looking at you, Anna Johnson-Thorpe, Nessa Ward, Vic Raynor, Kay Humphrey, Dominique Evans, Tetters, Jen Marscheider, Heather Tucker, Serena Rivers and Shelly Hurrell). And to Kathy Balebela and Andy Laker, my ITT mentors whose advice I still hold close today.

To my darling Illyana, my daughter on the outside. This book was conceived whilst I was on maternity leave with you, in those moments of quiet and cuddles that you just don't get when the world is going at 100 mph. Your playroom became my office, and in our shared pandemic space you were my only co-worker but welcome company. Thank you for keeping up your Friday naps so that I could write in that time but most importantly for teaching me to find humour and seek fresh air when everything feels too hard.

To Xanthe, my daughter on the inside. At the point of writing this, you are still a wriggling companion, our own little team of two-in-one, keeping me on my toes, battling tiredness and nausea, my constant companion for this whole book writing process, giving me a well-needed kick (literally) when I've needed it, reminding me that I'm doing this to set an example to my daughters, my future Queens.

And to anyone who has been told that you need to work twice as hard for half the reward, keep plugging, keep banging down the doors to occupy the space, because you deserve to be there just as much as anyone.

Introduction

They may say never to work with animals and children, but when you see the joy, creativity, fun and downright hilarity that children can bring about in your daily life, I'm sure you'll join me in disagreeing with that sentiment. Teaching is an amazing career. No two days are ever the same and each lesson brings with it many rewarding and uplifting moments. But, like in every job, with those highs do come some lows, and bad behaviour may seem like one of those areas where you keep coming unstuck time and time again.

Although there are always a huge number of factors that can contribute to a person leaving the teaching profession, it cannot be ignored that a large contributor, especially among newly qualified teachers (NQTs), is the behaviour of pupils. While teachers are professionals, it is important to remember that we are mere mortals – even though it may feel at times that the requirement that is missed out on our job specification is to be superhuman. As teachers, we are often put in a position where we feel like we are getting it wrong multiple times a day. A reset starts when the bell goes or when the next lesson transition occurs. This can either bring about an exoneration from a lesson gone wrong, or it can continue our spiral towards feeling inadequate. Some teachers have the ability to dust themselves off and try again. Some have skin thicker than a rhinoceros, so regardless of what has happened, it will have no effect on their demeanour or outcomes. But there is a good majority who will take it to heart. They may even take it further and end up in a place where they feel like they have failed not just as a teacher, but as a person. This state of mind can have a detrimental effect on one's ability to teach and one's mental wellbeing. After all, if you spend the majority of your time in an environment where you are made to feel inferior, you will begin to believe that you are.

Now more than ever, we need to find ways to make sure that those amazing human beings who are entering our wonderful profession (like

you!) choose to remain, and also choose to remain for the right reasons. We need to make sure that there is a culture of support, no matter what school you are in, and that there is an opportunity to ask for help to improve your own personal practices, through modelling, coaching and CPD. I want teachers to be able to reach out and ask for help if they're struggling with behaviour, without it feeling like it will go as a strike against your name, or be used against you at a later date. I want you – and all NQTs – to know that it's OK and perfectly normal to struggle with behaviour, particularly at the start of your career. It isn't about you being a bad teacher or 'not cut out for the job'. You need to collect and practise a range of skills and strategies for successful behaviour management. Handling bad behaviour in the classroom is not something that's inherent in your personality, rather it's something you can – and will – develop and improve over time.

Most importantly to me, there needs to be scope to find humour in the horror! As in life, nothing is prescribed, and sometimes the best-laid plans are the ones that are just as likely to go wrong. If there was one sentiment that got me through my initial years in teaching, it was the lyrics from a song that said, 'I will find strength in pain', as sometimes my lessons were painful, but the strength that I was able to take from them was the ability to be a reflective practitioner: to understand what had happened and think about what I could do differently next time. But more than anything, it was the ability to talk to my colleagues, get support and laugh at some of my most monumental mess-ups. It is not lost on me how many comedians have a background in teaching. You are, in essence, in the league of stand-up every day. Ready to be respected or heckled, ready with a cheeky retort to keep that stage sailing smoothly and your audience hanging on every word. With this in mind, I want to help you develop a mindset that is indicative to humour, not taking yourself seriously all the time and creating a safe, reflective space to help you improve your practice.

How I hope this book will help you

This book will consider a series of common scenarios related to challenging behaviour in the classroom, from completely losing control

of a lesson, to being outsmarted by the class clown. These scenarios are experienced every day by teachers up and down the country. If they happen to you, there really is no reason to be mortified and think that teaching isn't the right career for you. Instead, your focus should be on reflecting about what happened and developing some tactics to deal with the same situation next time. I hope the book will become a space where you do not feel ashamed of the moments that went awry and where you can instead look back at these moments with fondness and the occasional red face. For each behaviour scenario presented, I offer a set of practical strategies for you to choose between, based on the needs of your pupils. And spoiler alert: 'not smiling before Christmas' isn't one of them! You should practise the strategies you feel are most relevant for the next time you're faced with a similar situation, to boost your confidence and ensure you're ready to handle it.

I bring along with us for the ride thoughts from other educational practitioners: those who have been in their post for years and bring with it wisdom, and also some newbies who are just starting out with their fresh concepts and ideas. I hope these contributors will demonstrate to you that all teachers are experiencing the same scenarios as you and I hope that what you will have in front of you are cracking tales of resilience, reflection and moments of 'Really? Did that just happen?!'

With these two unique perspectives, it's incredibly important for you to understand that there are some stereotypes attributed to teachers when it comes to years of service. For example, if you've been practising for a long time, you are an oracle but you are also more cynical, with PTSD-esque flashbacks because, 'You haven't seen the things that I've seen, man!' Or, if you are fresh into the teaching sphere, you are so doe-eyed and optimistic that you don't know anything and are absolutely not yet equipped to contribute towards educational dialogue on any topic, let alone behaviour, especially as I definitely saw you smiling in front of your class the other day and it's only October… you fool! Both of these stereotypes have the potential to be damaging when we start to think of ways to promote an open and honest dialogue around behaviour. All inputs and opinions are incredibly relevant if we are to work on the joint outcome of providing exceptional educational opportunities for our learners whilst also supporting colleagues and our own sanity, helping us stay motivated, and most importantly, one step ahead of those most likely to derail our lessons.

Running alongside all this, I'll take you on a whistle-stop tour of the research that is out there to back up the practice with the theory (because I am a teacher after all and every day is a school day!). While this element won't be too weighty, it will be useful for you to see that these behavioural issues are being looked at across the globe, with varying conclusions and suggested practices.

The words that I share with you are my take-homes and opinions about how to deal with commonly found classroom scenarios related to behaviour. I'm forever grateful for the behaviour books that I read in my early career, but I always thought that I was a buffoon in the classroom, as the situations that were presented in them did not seem to be realistic to me. Why was I the only one who, after explaining the task and asking the class if they had any questions, had a pupil raise their hand and say, 'Miss, why were you buying so much chocolate so late last night in Asda? Couldn't you have sent your boyfriend to go and get it?' (More on this in Chapter 1…) With that in mind, I hope this book presents to you some realistic scenarios you might come across in the classroom, along with practical advice on what to do to get your lesson back on track – and to get you and your pupils smiling again!

Chapter 1
So… you're wondering why we need you to stay

In the last 12 years, I have had the fortune to work in a multitude of jobs throughout secondary education. Straight out of university, I got my first job temping as a teaching assistant (TA) in an inner-city school in Nottingham, and quite frankly I was hooked. It was one of the toughest jobs that I've ever had. The free school meals percentage was high, and when completing data, it was almost easier to tick who wasn't EAL (English as an additional language) and PP (pupil premium). While the building was amazing, the personal lives of the majority of our pupils were not. And yet, teachers rocked up day after day in the most challenging of work environments, and delivered to those pupils the best they knew how. It was a tough environment, and I realised just how tough it was when I attended my first end-of-term staff debrief and realised that there were over 20 teaching staff leaving, and of those, some were even leaving the profession altogether. My mind boggled. This was my first experience of being in a school through my own choice and I loved going to that job so much. It shocked me to think that this very same school environment was driving some teachers away.

Though there were challenges, and lots of them, some of those pupils were the most hilarious humans that I had ever (and still have ever) come across. The camaraderie of the staff was binding and kept us all working towards the same goal, even if it seemed at the time that that goal was to get to the pub on Friday after school for our own personal debriefs, rather than the one led by the senior leadership team (SLT). An SLT that would join us on occasion to take part in the cathartic release of the week's trials and tribulations. My experience as a TA was not the same as that of the teachers, but I got to hear a lot of incidents that had taken

place from a lot of different viewpoints: the teachers' (both sober and tipsy!), the pupils' (don't worry, they weren't in the pub with us – their pub was down the road), and sometimes, when I had been there to see what had actually taken place, my own. I often had my own professional (and oh so naive at times) opinion on the matter. But one thing that I always took from the interactions was the teachers' passion that was tinged with frustration of wanting to do the best job possible, but just not being able to. Hands were tied by the constraints of the teaching environment, whether that be resources, parental engagement, lesson planning or changing of exam specifications. But the one recurring topic, which seemed to be a decider in how these amazing people saw themselves as educators in the classroom, was behaviour. Both in and out of the classroom.

Certain names would be a recurring theme for the topic of conversation, and what fascinated me the most was that one of these pupils happened to be in all of the same lessons as the pupil I was supporting in my TA role. On a daily basis, I could watch this pupil transform from a willing participator, engaged in learning, and a caring member of the class, to someone who was hell bent on disrupting, disengaging and taking others along for the ride of no learning. The only thing that remained constant was the teachers who were being affected negatively by his behaviour, continually working to try and change his actions so they wouldn't disrupt learning. I was also seeing some staff feeling it was a personal attack on them when another colleague would utter those fatal words, 'Oh, he behaves for me.' I remember there was one teacher who felt so victimised that, at the end-of-term debrief, she let us know she would be leaving teaching to 'work with people who would listen to her'. All I could think of was how amazing her lessons had been, and how if I'd had her teach me when I was at school, I may have actually been interested in that subject. I wondered why she couldn't see what I (and the majority of her class) could see.

Since then, I have made it my own personal mission to champion incredible colleagues who have felt that they are less than good, particularly because of challenging classroom behaviours. I have coached in schools to offer this support to try and engage with staff to make them see that some small tweaks can enable them to stay. Introducing a reflective practitioner approach often allows them to be able to see this. And it's this exact same thing that I want to share with you in this book.

But before we start, I want to explore a little more the reasons why bad classroom behaviour is chasing so many new teachers away from the profession, explain why we really need *you* to stick with us, and offer a few practical strategies that might just make all the difference.

Why is bad behaviour causing teachers to quit?

In March 2018, the Department for Education published some interesting research into why teachers were leaving the profession. The researchers interviewed 80 primary and secondary teachers about the reasons they believed were key in influencing decisions to quit. Many reasons were cited, from workload to accountability, but the issue of behaviour came up time and time again. The findings relevant to behaviour included the following:

- The teachers interviewed believed greater levels of support and understanding from the SLT were needed, for example, in terms of the management of pupil behaviour, and the ability to have open and honest conversations. This would help support teachers' relationships with their SLT and reduce feelings of pressure in terms of scrutiny, accountability and workload.
- Teachers found it difficult to be creative in their planning and teaching, due to being hindered by time or challenges around pupil behaviour.
- Commonly, teachers had been aspirational (some referred to themselves as 'idealistic') before entering the profession and felt that they would be:
  - 'Firm but fair'.
  - Approachable – the type of teacher that young people can turn to for advice.
  - Able to motivate pupils and make a difference.

  They often mentioned wanting to emulate the example of a good teacher they had known during their own schooling – inspiring young people and engaging them with a subject.
- Although a small number (five) had anticipated some pupil behavioural issues, they had expected that they would be 'respected' as

teachers. However, when in the role, some perceived that this was not always the case.

- Teachers commonly reported the 'high' of seeing young people make progress or connect with a subject, such as a lesson that they felt had gone well and where pupils demonstrated that they had understood the content. The attitude of pupils had a large influence on these teachers; where young people were motivated to learn or were enthusiastic, teachers reported that this increased their positivity towards their role. Where there were disciplinary issues, this proved challenging in terms of maintaining an effective lesson, but also created additional workload when communicating with parents or carers and logging behavioural issues on a central system. A small number had enjoyed the challenge of working with pupils with complex behavioural issues, to help support them and make a difference.
- Early career teachers made the decision to leave the profession much more quickly than more experienced teachers. Generally, their reasons for leaving the profession did not differ compared to more experienced teachers. However, they were more likely to report that they found poor pupil behaviour difficult to manage.

Adapted from Department for Education (2018)

It doesn't make it very difficult to see that there is a clear link between the reasons that teachers leave our profession and the behaviour of pupils. Studies are repeatedly showing this factor coming out in several forms, whether that be the personal emotions related to struggling with behaviour or not feeling supported by the systems and structures around them (the behaviour management policies, middle and senior leadership, the parents and the local community). It's disheartening to see that early career teachers are more likely to exit the profession due to behaviour, but it's also understandable. Resilience to a situation is something that is built up over time, and if the expectations of a scenario are not what you are expecting, it can be quite a shock to the system. Sitting on Twitter a few weeks into September, you can see the cries for help ringing out from NQTs:

- 'I've just had a hellish lesson, I don't know if this is for me.'
- 'I forgot everything. I feel so stupid.'

- 'Thank God it's Friday. I can hide with this glass of wine for the next few days and think about school never.'
- '#HELP'

Supportive measures can be hard to come by if you feel scared to articulate that you are struggling at any stage of your career, especially if you fear repercussions such as pay progression being affected or a stigma being attached to you as not being seen as one of the school's 'good' teachers. Whether we care to admit that it is part of the narrative in schools, it is there: a secret league table, and not wanting to be the one who lets the side down, especially if there are any visitors to your classroom that day.

I am a big believer in transparency and honesty when it comes to making progress. Support begins from knowing the areas that need to be focused on to move forward, and once this has been identified, sensible, practical and pragmatic steps need to be put in place. A removal of some of the negative culture that can be associated with behaviour management is a helpful place to begin.

How to fall in love with teaching, despite bad behaviour

At this point, I think it would be great to hear from our first early-career contributor, fresh out of the blocks on a journey that will hopefully lead to many happy and fruitful years as an educator. Fresh-faced and ready to get the metaphorical dust on him from being at the chalkface, Stefan will take a look at what could impact new teachers in their formative years in terms of behaviour and reassure us that it's far from being all bad news.

Case study: Stefan Hines, NQT

I have taught for almost two years now and it is safe to say there have been many challenges as well as rewards! While it is one of the hardest careers I've faced, the rewards by far make it all worthwhile. If nothing else, it imprints a plethora of stories that you'll be telling for years to come about the impact you made on a child's life that day. As a science teacher, I feel that opportunity is even more present, and one example of this is when

teaching the topic of reproduction! I've taught this topic several times now to both Years 7 and 8, and the results are somewhat astonishing. Despite covering topics that are a little nerve-wracking for a new teacher, I have experienced heightened interest and brilliant classroom behaviour on all occasions… even when a Year 8 girl exclaimed to the class, 'Wait… what? We have two holes down there?!' Another girl approached me at the end of a lesson, horrified, to thank me for ruining her favourite song earlier that lesson when she asked, 'Sir, what happens when the sperm meets the egg?' I openly replied to the class, 'Well, think of it like the Spice Girl's song "When 2 Become 1". They fuse together and start dividing!' She also continued to tell me how she was off home to tell her parents that she now understands how babies are made, as 'it's gross'.

But as well as the funny moments, my teaching of this topic gave students the opportunity to understand themselves and ask questions in a safe space. One moment that always sticks in my mind was when a regularly disruptive student came to me at the end of the lesson and asked, 'So, you know you said in puberty it's common to have mood swings, is that why I feel angry quite often?' Giving him a deeper understanding of the changes teenagers experience helped him to understand why he perhaps felt particular emotions. Each lesson should always teach students something new. Occasionally, it may even teach them something about themselves.

Reflecting on why an effective behaviour for learning environment was achieved when teaching such topics, I think it's extremely clear: the students were engaged, they were interested, and I was confident in my delivery. I believe that my students were engaged in this topic simply because it was so relevant to them; students must have a reason to engage with learning, and one surefire way of getting their attention is by making it relevant. This can be achieved by discussing where topics fit into real life, and why the information you're about to teach them will be useful and help them in the long run. This is a principle I have fully taken on board, and at the start of lessons I regularly discuss with students what the point of the lesson is, and how and why it is relevant to them. No exam talk, no assessment objectives. Just relevance. In my experience, there is a clear correlation between relevance, engagement and behaviour.

I also fully understand that some of the content in this particular topic may have felt embarrassing to students; this made me ensure that I tackled the topic with a confident yet relaxed approach. When

teaching, your own emotions and body language are significant; if you are talking about something with confidence, the students will respond to that; they will believe what you are saying and want to learn more. By taking a semi-relaxed approach with students, it allows for effective relationships built on respect. This creates a safe space for learning, in which students feel comfortable and therefore engaged. The implementation of such thought processes and strategies across the board has helped me to deliver some of the best lessons I've had, regardless of topic! Relationships, relevance and confidence in delivery will secure desired behaviours in most scenarios.

So, what's the point in all this? Well, as much as the government and the rest of the country need us to keep teaching in schools, in the past two years it has become exceptionally clear to me that there is no greater need to keep at it than for the children themselves. The relationships you build in teaching are by far the greatest reward I have experienced from any career.

Stefan Hines is a secondary science teacher about to start his NQT year.

These words from Stefan highlight to me that we all enter teaching with the passion and determination we need to keep us coming back. I have never found a thought process more inaccurate than when I have had the phrase 'Those who can't, teach' uttered to me in jest, because those who can't, really don't teach. A passion for the subject alone is not one that usually draws people towards teaching. We are in the business of children and all the sticky tricky extras that come with it. And that is why I believe it must be a heavy heart and a lot of soul-destroying decisions that lead someone to leave. But that thought process is far from the be-all-and-end-all. In my opinion, teaching is in fact a bit of a calling. You didn't take the decision to apply for whichever route you went down and endure a year of training only for you to think this is totally not for you. I believe that any trainee teacher who successfully completes their training year has an extra hidden vat of resilience that isn't handed out to mere mortals, so kudos to you for tapping into it. And if you feel you haven't yet, I hope the behaviour management playbook will begin to tap into that resource on your behalf. You're welcome!