

Do schools need lessons on motivation?

Laura Oxley on reward and punishment in the classroom in the latest in our series for budding writers (see www.bps.org.uk/newvoices for more information)

Kyle knew that he wasn't supposed to use his mobile phone during lessons. Yet here he was at 3.30pm, the end of the school day, and he was trudging down the corridor to another detention. It wasn't his fault he had arrived late to the lesson, and he felt a smouldering anger towards the teacher who made a sarcastic comment about the time as Kyle sidled into the room, trying to remain unnoticed. He would like to see how that teacher managed after a sleepless night with his baby sister screaming and his mum arguing with her latest boyfriend. When the morning finally arrived, there was no sign of his school uniform in the chaos of the laundry pile and, glancing in at the barren fridge, Kyle knew that breakfast was simply not going to happen. When he did get to school, the work for the lesson had already been handed out, and Kyle stared at the worksheet in front of him uncomprehendingly, silently asking himself why on earth he needed to know what $2n + 3y$ equals. He glanced over at the teacher, considering asking for help, but the teacher was with someone else at that moment. Slumping down in his seat, Kyle pulled his mobile phone out of his pocket and started texting. The shout from the teacher interrupted this as he stormed over to Kyle and demanded that he put his phone away and get on with the work. Sullenly returning his phone to his pocket, Kyle turned back to the worksheet, no more comprehending than he had been before, and now with the

prospect of yet another detention after school weighing him down.

Sadly Kyle's tale is not an anomaly. This is the experience of a core minority of children and young people who are trapped in a cycle of punishments and sanctions due to their school's ineffective and inflexible behaviour policies. As a professional working for the last 10 years in the education sector with young people at risk of exclusion from school, I have seen various strategies used to try and support them with their behaviour. Not all the strategies have been supportive; some have been punitive and designed to 'shock' the young person into behaving, for example in the case of a short fixed-term exclusion from school. The strategies that have worked best have been those that include the young people in the process of change and acknowledge that systemic changes often have to be made to enable that young person to learn new ways of behaving.

Having embarked last year on a PhD study about behaviour management systems in English schools, I have found that my professional experience resonates with the literature in this area. Yet the predominant approach to behaviour management in many English schools remains based on a system of punishments and rewards. Despite research (Geddes, 2006; Greene, 2009; Kohn, 1993) and statistics (Department for Education, 2013) that suggest that this approach is not effective for all students,

it continues to be used by the majority of schools and is promoted by government guidance (Department for Education, 2014) and policy advisers (Bennett, 2015).

Punishment is a way of controlling the behaviour of others. The use of punishment is based on an unequal power relationship, with the will of the teacher being imposed on the student under the threat of a negative experience if they do not comply (Kohn, 1993). The majority of students are able to conform to the school rules and follow instructions with little difficulty. However the minority of students, like Kyle, can find themselves in trouble on a regular basis. Students are rarely unaware of the rules, yet often they lack the skills to respond adaptively to the situations they find themselves in (Greene, 2009). A punitive response does not help these young people to learn these skills and instead creates feelings of resentment and rejection, often resulting in more extreme behaviour (Martinez, 2009). If a young person were to make an academic mistake, the school would offer extra support to teach the young person how to correct this, even if they were making the same mistake again and again (Flanagan, 2014). This level of support is rarely offered when a student makes a behavioural mistake.

It is debatable whether this system of behaviour management is even effective for those students who are not repeatedly in trouble. At first glance it may appear to be so, but research shows that most people actually conform to rules because of their own values and their relationships with others, rather than through fear of consequences (Flanagan, 2014; Greene, 2009). For the student who strays from their usual path of good behaviour, the short sharp shock of a detention may seem to make a difference. But research (Greene, 2009) suggests that it may actually be the disappointment of parents or the isolation from peers that causes them to avoid this experience in the future.

references

- Bennett, T. (2015). New behaviour tsar Tom Bennett's top ten tips for maintaining classroom discipline. Retrieved from tinyurl.com/qefkt2n
- Bombèr, L.M. (2007). *Inside I'm hurting: Practical strategies for supporting children with attachment difficulties in school*. London: Worth Publishing.
- Department for Education (2013). *Permanent and fixed term exclusion from schools in England: 2011–2012 academic year*. Retrieved from tinyurl.com/pab4wrr
- Department for Education (2014). *Behaviour and discipline in schools*. Retrieved from tinyurl.com/nod9uqf
- Flanagan, H. (2014, July). *Restorative approaches*. Presentation at training event for Cambridgeshire County Council, Over, Cambridgeshire, UK.
- Geddes, H. (2006). *Attachment in the classroom*. London: Worth Publishing.
- Glasser, W. (1985). *Choice theory in the classroom*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Greene, R.W. (2009). *Lost at school: Why our kids with behavioural challenges are falling through the cracks and how we can help them*. New York: Scribner.
- Kohn, A. (1993). *Punished by rewards*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- Martinez, S. (2009). *A system gone berserk: How are zero tolerance policies really affecting schools? Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth*, 53(3), 153–158.
- Ryan, R. & Deci, E. (2000). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 25(1), 54–67.
- Thorsborne, M. & Blood, P. (2013). *Implementing restorative practices in schools*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

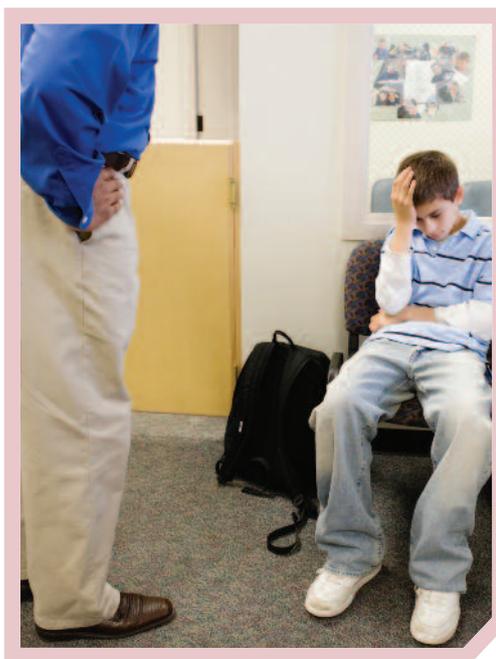
Serious incidents or repetition of challenging behaviour can eventually lead to an exclusion from school. The statistics for school exclusions nationally show that almost half of the students who had received a fixed-term exclusion from school had received this sanction more than once in one school year. They also show that the majority of fixed-term exclusions from school are recorded as being due to persistently disruptive behaviour (Department for Education, 2013). This suggests that there was a prolonged period of challenging behaviour leading up to this serious sanction, with the implication that any interventions attempted prior to the exclusion were not effective in changing student behaviour.

With the recognition that a punitive response is often ineffective, many teachers are already trying to move away from the use of punishments to control behaviour (Kohn, 1993). Rewards and praise are seen as better ways of encouraging students to do what is required of them in the classroom. However, while this is certainly a kinder way of responding, the basic premise of rewards and praise is little different to that of punishment. Both rewards and sanctions are forms of extrinsic motivation, specifically aiming to control behaviour and ensure compliance with the will of another. The problem with using rewards in a learning environment is that this detracts from the value of learning for its own sake.

Ideally, students should be intrinsically motivated to learn how to read and solve maths puzzles, but clearly this is not always the case. However, when children start school, they are eager to learn and curious about being introduced to new tasks. So what happens to change that as they continue on their educational journey? The answer is likely to be that these young people become caught in a cycle of extrinsic motivators (Kohn, 1993). For those who are fortunate enough to have the skills to conform to school rules and avoid punishment, the lure of rewards and praise often becomes the sole reason for completing school work. Many studies (Kohn, 1993; Ryan and Deci, 2000) have shown that the use of extrinsic motivators reduces future intrinsic motivation for the same or similar tasks. For ensuring obedience, rewards may be the way forward, but when concerned with a task

like learning to read, which is something in which it would be beneficial for children to develop a lifelong interest, rewards are unlikely to achieve this goal.

The behaviourist principles of sanctions and rewards are so embedded in our school discipline system that it can



The use of punishment is based on an unequal power relationship

seem difficult to think about trying something else. Yet, in the famous quote attributed to Einstein, the definition of insanity is to continue to do the same thing again and again while expecting different results. The good news is that there *are* evidence-based alternative approaches to behaviour management available and some schools are already beginning to adopt these approaches. One of the more well-known alternative approaches is restorative practice. Originating in the criminal justice system, where it has been shown to be both more effective and less costly than traditional punitive approaches (Flanagan, 2014), restorative practice is based on building and maintaining relationships, repairing any harm caused, and working collaboratively on a way forward (Thorsborne & Blood, 2013). This approach takes commitment and support from all school staff and would initially be more time-consuming than continuing with a system of punishments and rewards. But in the long term this approach would be far more beneficial to the young people involved as they are

given the opportunity to learn the skills they need to respond adaptively to life's challenges and to develop emotional awareness and empathy. Schools that have implemented this approach have seen improvements on both social and academic measures, such as a decrease in school exclusions, a reduction in persistent absence, and increased achievement in both English and maths (Flanagan, 2014; Thorsborne & Blood, 2013).

Other alternative approaches, such as Glasser's choice theory (Glasser, 1985), Greene's collaborative problem solving (Greene, 2009), and practical strategies for working with students with attachment difficulties (Bombèr, 2007; Geddes, 2006) are also based on collaboration and relationships. The basic principle of all of these approaches is that school staff are working with the young people to solve challenging behaviour issues, rather than imposing solutions on them. Research shows that choice and autonomy are key elements in building intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Enabling young people to participate in decision making about what happens to them in school is an effective way to engage students and teach valuable decision-making skills.

The aim of my own PhD study is to explore the experiences and beliefs of senior school leaders with regard to different approaches to discipline within schools. Through this study, I hope to be able to identify the perceived barriers that are preventing applied innovation in the field of school discipline and suggest possibilities for overcoming these. Further implementation of alternative approaches to behaviour management in schools is needed in order to build a strong evidence base for a change in school discipline. The role of psychologists should be to disseminate knowledge about these alternative approaches to school staff and provide support in implementing these different ways of working with challenging students. By focusing on building positive learning relationships, the emotional and relational needs of both students and staff can be more effectively met, and young people like Kyle can be given the opportunity to achieve success against the odds.



Laura Oxley is a postgraduate student in the Department of Education at the University of York
lo590@york.ac.uk