1

VALUES AND CULTURE

When children become a liability for their school's performance education has come to an end.

Professor Gert Biesta (n.d.)

THE HEADLINES

- There is an established culture in your school. If the culture is not of your deliberate making then it will have crept into the vacuum you've left and grown unchecked all by itself.
- An agreed set of values that permeate throughout the school is one of the foundations of good behaviour as these values influence and inform your policies and your decision-making.
- A school vision will lead naturally from a strong set of shared values and will communicate your collective ambition for your children. It will be a tangible thing to visitors to your school, evident in every aspect of school life.
- This vision and these values are susceptible to professional pressures on school leaders such as those that arise from inspection, external exam results and government floor targets. A collective strength and commitment to standing by your values can help leadership teams from compromising their values when faced with difficult decisions and situations. Being open about what those pressures are, discussing them honestly with each other and with governors or the leaders of a multi-academy trust can protect against succumbing to the pressure.
- A positive behaviour culture amongst the staff is sustained by ensuring negativity is systematically and routinely challenged, and that colleagues receive the support they need to deal with the potential sources of the negativity.

- Deciding on what kind of school you want to be can help when trying to translate a school's vision and values into a behaviour policy. Completing the following sentence openers can be useful:
    - We are a school for …
    - We are a school where …
    - We are a school with …
    - We are a school that …

Professor Gert Biesta's superb paper 'Why "what works" still won't work: From evidence-based education to value-based education' (2010) should be mandatory reading for all school leaders. In it, Biesta persuasively highlights the deficits in knowledge,[1] effectiveness[2] and application[3] that exist as limitations in an evidence-informed or evidence-based approach to decision-making in educational leadership. Do not make the mistake of interpreting this as a view that evidence is unimportant – he doesn't say that – rather it should be used as a helpful reminder of what can be omitted or lost when we fail to take into account the *role* evidence should play in our decision-making.

Biesta summarises this neatly by contending that, 'If evidence were the only base for educational practice, educational practice would be entirely without direction'. And that 'Questions about "what works" – that is questions about the effectiveness of educational actions – are always secondary to questions of purpose' (Biesta, 2010: 500).

It is a call to ensure that an examination of how school leaders use the significant power available to them and their school's values is given sufficient weight when they formulate policy and make decisions that affect the hundreds of children and adults in their care.

Nowhere is this more important than in the leadership of behaviour.

Why?

There is an ever-present risk of school leaders making up policy on the matter of behaviour in isolation or as they go along, or by simply lifting an idea from another school because, from a distance, it seemed to work for them or has superficial appeal. I've done this myself on more than one occasion. The regularly reported immediate increase in stringency of uniform standards when a new Headteacher takes on a school which had previously poor standards of behaviour suggests itself as one such example.

The behaviour of children, and school leaders' responses to it, are two of the most emotive and controversial topics in the teaching profession. Listen in on any staffroom conversation or social media bunfight and you won't have to wait too long for it to surface. The acceleration in emotion that these topics can bring about can make cool, measured discussion and

decision-making difficult. I've been in precisely this position numerous times, both as a teacher exasperated with my own inadequacy or with what I perceived as poor support from my leaders, and as a Headteacher when I knew colleagues felt exactly the same way about me. As a school leader it provoked an overpowering urge to do something, anything right that second to help my colleagues and to show them that I was a tough, uncompromising Headteacher who wouldn't take any messing from the children. Of course, what I was really doing was suppressing my own insecurity and hiding the fact that I didn't really know what to do. It was inaction masquerading as action, procrastination dressed up as decisiveness.

This urgency, and its accompanying stress response, can cause leaders to make those knee-jerk decisions to satisfy demands that can come in the form of:

> 'Everyone says you've got to do something about Luke Hadley/Year 8/break times/haircuts/phones!' [Delete or amend as appropriate.]

Colleagues look to us as leaders for solutions and we are keen, sometimes desperate, to provide them with those solutions without delay. However, decisions made in the heat of the moment whilst coping with the glare of expectant onlookers are more likely to be taken in order to meet the immediate needs of the decision maker rather than the needs of the children and adults involved. It is one thing to know this. It is quite another to hold your nerve and tell everyone that the road ahead may feel long and bumpy, that there are things we can do straight away to help, but that lasting improvement will take time in the way that losing weight takes time. The worst part of this inevitably temporary respite is that the problem remains essentially unsolved and must be confronted sooner or later, perhaps once it has deteriorated.

Improving behaviour is neither swift nor simple and we know this for sure because we would have cracked it by now if it was. Without a reasoned and careful consideration of the values – the principles that should guide and influence the behaviour of the adults – that are important to a school community, and the culture that the community wants to foster, leaders run the risk of developing policies seeking to improve behaviour that are desiccated, transactional documents that do not coexist well with the other policies and practices that all schools have. What's worse is that they then fail to reflect what happens out there in the real world of the classrooms, corridors and playgrounds where teachers will fill in the gaps for themselves.

One such example of a practice entirely at odds with a school's stated values sticks in the memory from my first day as a Headteacher. I was in my

office well before school started when a colleague came in and handed me a sheet of A4 paper, saying, 'This is the rota for Year 10 to clean the staffroom'.

Without a moment's hesitation I responded with, 'If the staffroom is dirty, we'll clean it or it will stay dirty. I'm not having children cleaning up after adults'.

I regret the way that I made that decision. I should have thanked the member of staff, explained to her what my thoughts were and then explained to the whole staff team why this was incompatible with what we were trying to do as a school and that the practice had now ceased. The swiftness with which I did it stemmed from the glaring dissonance between that particular practice and the school's stated values. We quite clearly gave no regard to the dignity of the children by doing this, and I could find no justification to rob them of some of their learning time so that the staffroom could be clean.

That example and a host of others led me to take a good look at our values as an organisation and how, or if, they manifested themselves in the day-to-day life of the school. If they didn't, and I worry that schools' values sometimes get decided in a senior leadership team (SLT) or staff meeting but only exist in a pristine display in the entrance hall, then we needed to make some changes to ensure that they did.

REFLECTION POINTS

- Can you think of a time or times when you have felt under pressure to solve a behaviour issue quickly?
- What was it about the situation(s) the made you feel pressurised?
- How did you cope with the pressure and expectation?
- What did you say to the people around you?
- How did the situation turn out?
- Were the solution and the actions you took consistent with your values?
- What would you have done differently?

When children leave our school they should be …

For most of my teaching life I thought that the idea of a school vision was an empty gesture. I listened with some interest when the subject was brought up on leadership courses such as the National Professional

Qualification for Headship (NPQH), but I'd seen enough inane management speak in my time and thought that much of what I saw was more of the same. ('An outstanding school where outstanding teaching leads to outstanding learning' remains my all-time favourite.)

I changed my mind on that, as with many other things, when I became a Headteacher, but this time quite by accident. One of the things that I did manage to get right when I first took up the post was to talk to all the staff and governors and as many of the parents as I could about their hopes for the children of the school. I, of course, asked the same of all the students too. I framed all of the discussions around the question:

> What should our children be able to do when they leave here?

I decided on this approach as I wanted to force us to think of the end point (as far as our involvement was largely concerned). That is what I understood a vision to be – an almost literal look forward to the hopes and aspirations of the future.

The results were illuminating. The parents' responses centred around enabling their children to live and work independently; the students' answers were remarkably similar to each other's – they wanted school to equip them with the skills and knowledge to realise their ambitions of getting a job, a flat, a car, a boyfriend or girlfriend and to earn their own money. Not too much to ask, you might think, but the life outcomes for people with learning difficulties in the UK at the present time are all gut-wrenchingly poor (O'Brien, 2016) so this should give a very sharp focus to anyone working in schools with children with special educational needs.

I dreaded trying to assimilate all of this information into something coherent, yet it quickly became apparent that some key characteristics emerged. From this we ended up with our school vision. We had decided on the things that we valued and that we would explicitly aim to develop in our students in order to give them the best possible chances in adult life once they left our secondary special school.

> When students leave [this school] they should be ambitious, articulate, caring, confident, determined, independent, resilient, respectful, responsible and successful.

I wanted it to be free from teacher jargon and easily understood. I was also determined that we would centre the positive side of our behaviour policy on recognising these things when we saw them. I came to see via this process that it was possible to have a meaningful and tangible school

vision that laid out what we valued and that was visible in the day-to-day life of the school. However, in order for it to become tangible we had to ensure that our curriculum was aligned with our vision. If we weren't providing our students with the opportunities to develop confidence or to become more articulate, to take just two examples, then we were back to the vision simply being a slogan on a glossy prospectus that no one in the school could recite.

It was also important for this school vision to be a positive influence on our behaviour policy. We chose to reinforce the school values by recognising them whenever we observed our students doing well. Everyone had told us that these things were crucial, so we had to do whatever we could to provide our students with the opportunities to get better at these things. I remember Kieran in Year 11 getting to the top of a challenging pitch at a climbing wall as part of his Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme programme and shouting down to me, 'Look, Mr O'Brien! I've been successful!' We used bonus points as a device for recognition (not reward; see Chapter 7 for the difference) and it became commonplace for children to come up to me in the playground at break or lunchtime to tell me that their teacher had made a point of letting them know that they had made good progress with their independence or that they had been particularly determined that day.

The penny really dropped for me that a school vision could be a truly real thing when I toured prospective parents around the school – one of the most important parts of my week. I always shared feedback from parents with the staff and governors and I remember doing a little jig down the corridor of our main block the first time a parent told me that she was struck by how confident and articulate our students were. This observation was made time and time again by visitors, teachers and parents alike, and each time it was a further affirmation of what we were trying to do.

There is one major point I want to stress about how our values informed our behaviour policy – that equity was built into it. Too often I see policies that are by their very nature inequitable. I don't mean a confetti of rewards for all here. I mean how, for example, higher attainers are more likely to be beneficiaries of a behaviour reward system that purports to recognise effort and application but instead recognises poor proxies for effort and application, such as attainment. Too many schools and too many policies effectively reward some children for finding school easier than others.

> We need to acknowledge that some children find schools easier places to feel and be successful than other children.

It amazes me that we don't make a bigger deal of this fact, and I strongly urge you to keep this at the front of your mind when we look into policy in more detail in Chapter 2. If we don't, we run the risk of inadvertently valuing the pure attainment of children, inevitably those who attain most highly, over the progress that all children make from the position in life in which they currently find themselves.

REFLECTION POINTS

- What is your school vision?
- What are the values upon which your school is built?
- Does your behaviour policy encourage you to recognise those values when you see them displayed by children?

'Culture exists in every organisation, but is yours by design or by default?'

This provocation by Mark Finnis (2018) should make all leaders feel at least slightly uncomfortable because, despite a strong set of values and our best efforts to maintain them, practices and habits from individuals or teams can creep in over time, which inhibit our progress towards our behaviour goals and contaminate our culture. The quote certainly forces me to think about problems that have arisen under my leadership and how I could have prevented them by being clearer about the culture that I wanted in the teams that I led, instead of weakly allowing issues to fester when they were minor.

Too often when discussing behaviour we dive straight into trying to answer, 'What shall we do?' when we should spend time first on answering the far more important question 'Why are we doing this?'. This prioritisation of doing (sometimes mistakenly called 'strategy' if it isn't consistent with everything else the school is doing) over ensuring our actions are consistent with our values is likely to result in an incoherent set of policies and limited, if any, progress. Any new ideas, whether that be across the whole school, in a department or for an individual teacher, need to pass the values test before they are let loose on children.

Two, 'What shall we do?' examples spring immediately to mind. My first few years of teaching were in a comprehensive and one thing that came around fairly regularly was a crackdown (their word, not mine) on uniform. In briefings, we would be instructed to 'go zero tolerance on uniform this

week'. It was done in response to a feeling that behaviour in the school had slipped – the top button being undone on students' shirts being a surefire sign that the insurrection was about to begin – and this would be a good way to send a strong message to the students. I'm not against uniform, but I know that any behaviour problems we experienced had nothing to do with how the students dressed, and weren't solved or improved one iota by an isolated tightening up of our policing of all children's clothing.

The other example is the creation of reward systems that monetise good behaviour by offering enticements such as Vivo points or iTunes vouchers in an attempt to improve behaviour. These systems are easy to implement and seemingly straightforward for everyone to understand, however, because they are all about material gain and nothing to do with valuing work or behaviour for their own sake, they can run counter to schools' claims that they aim to inculcate in their students a love of learning and a habit of life-long self-improvement. ('Shouldn't children be rewarded for doing the right thing, Jarlath?' – see Chapter 7 for more on this, and the answer is a firm 'no', by the way.)

A key part of developing culture for me has always been about reinforcing positive habits and routines in adults that typify 'how we do things round here' and, more importantly, eliminating poor practice that undermines or destroys a healthy culture. When I first took on leadership responsibilities there were times when I avoided confronting poor practice because I feared confrontation with a certain colleague. I can see now that there was a culture in my department and that it was created by me. But it wasn't by design, it was due to my wilful negligence. I would have had a hard time answering the oft-posed leadership question, 'What's it like round here when no one's looking?' This ate away at me and I remember sitting in the staffroom giving myself a talking to when it became too much. I felt nauseous at the thought of the task ahead but reminded myself that if I was serious about being a leader I should deal with things that I knew weren't right or get out of the way so someone else could lead. Only years later did I come across this aphorism from General David Hurley, former Chief of the Australian Defence Force:

> The standard you walk past is the standard you accept.

With behaviour this is not just true of leaders. This must become true for all adults working in schools. As I stated in the introduction to this book, behaviour is everyone's business and this helps us all support each other. This shared responsibility also helps guard against the rise of the Behaviour Guy that we encountered in the introduction. The dark, but fortunately rare, side of shared responsibility is where genuinely poor practice exists, which

leaders need to deal with. If we are afraid to inform leaders of potential maltreatment of children because we fear the consequences from our colleagues then, as General Hurley says, we condone it and this can ultimately lead to further bad things happening to children. In the worst situations we become complicit, and let us not forget that failing to prevent harm to a child or children is in itself a form of abuse. As the English Department for Education's *Keeping Children Safe in Education* (2018: 14) states:

> Abuse: a form of maltreatment of a child. Somebody may abuse or neglect a child by inflicting harm *or by failing to act to prevent harm*. [emphasis added]

REFLECTION POINTS

- When discussing ways of improving behaviour, how often do you and colleagues dive into the 'What shall we do?' instead of the 'Why are we doing this?'
- The next time you make a decision about behaviour ask yourselves 'How is this consistent with our values?'

What kind of school do we want to be?

This question is a useful way to frame discussions and decisions about how your values translate into the culture you're looking to foster in your school.

A school with unconditional positive regard

Unconditional positive regard is a concept developed by Carl Rogers (1902–87), a humanistic psychologist. As a key component in the development of a culture that commits to improving the behaviour of children who find schools difficult places to be successful I don't think it can be beaten, and indeed it is the cornerstone of some successful schools that work with children with social, emotional and mental health needs (Springwell Learning Community, 2016).

Without an unconditional positive regard for the children in your care, they are only accepted under certain conditions that you get to decide (conditions that may well be unknown to the children) and this positive regard is withdrawn when the children behave in ways that

breach those conditions. As an example, you might say that a child can only rejoin their class once they have learned the necessary social skills. This is akin to saying that you'll add the water to the swimming pool only when they have learned to swim.

Unconditional positive regard means accepting that the children in your school, and the adults too for that matter, are doing their best to deal with the situations in their lives as best they can. Is their behaviour inappropriate? Maybe. Is it destructive? Possibly. Unconditional positive regard does not mean that when children behave poorly you cock your head to one side, wrinkle your nose up and say, 'Aw, bless 'im'. It does not mean letting children get away with things. It means that your approach to improving the behaviour of children, especially those whose behaviour may be the most intense, starts from where the child is at and seeks to improve from that position rather than simply reaching without thinking for the tired and ineffective punishment escalator to ratchet up the unpleasantness until the child complies.

A school where it is safe to fail

'We're here to catch you, not catch you out', has become a mantra of mine over the past few years as I work with other teachers to improve the behaviour of children. After I and my colleagues had worked with a significant number of children who had left mainstream secondary schools, largely because of their behaviour, it became clear to me that this was a message that we simply had to convince them was true. They had learned that adults in schools were not to be trusted because, as they saw it, they would give them work that they couldn't do and then have a go at them when they didn't do it. They had learned that school was a place of inevitable and repeated and public failure, and the way they generally learned to cope with this was to avoid it wherever possible.

This meant sometimes fetching a child from the woods at the back of the school because they refused to go to a lesson, or finding a child sat atop the climbing frame in the middle of the playground after storming out of lesson, maybe ripping their work up in the process. You may resort to exclusion to deal with such situations, but we were never going to help those children to feel safe enough to learn in our classrooms if we continually rejected them, for that is how they perceived exclusion. We had to help them to move from a position of safety. Believe it or not, what they were doing was protecting themselves; sanctions held no fear for them at that stage and in fact could be preferable as they got them away from whatever they were trying to avoid in the first place. A sanction loses all its power if it has no deterrent effect or becomes desirable.

The late Donald Winnicott (1896–1971), paediatrician and psychoanalyst, did influential work developing the concept of what he called 'holding environments' (Winnicott, 1960) – that is to say, caring and supporting environments that lead to a firm sense of trust and safety. Winnicott suggested that it is a duty of parents to slowly but surely disappoint their children; knowing when to say no and being clear with their children that they are not their friend. This is also true for us as teachers. We mustn't indulge our students, but nor can we ignore their feelings entirely.

Winnicott suggested that emotional problems develop when a person had been deprived of such holding environments in childhood. The children referred to above came to regard schools as risky places to be, full of adults who were risky people to be around. Of course, we need to instil in all of our students that same sense of trust and safety, but it is doubly important for children with behavioural difficulties.

Before they have learnt that we are safe and trustworthy we need to be the ones who put the work in. Simply waiting for them to change won't bear any fruit and this is where I see some schools running out of patience, so the child leaves.

Wilfred Bion's (1897–1979) concept of 'containing' (Bion, 1962) – that infants become overwhelmed by experiences as they lack sufficiently well-developed internal control and that a parent's containing function involves assisting the child to develop their capacity for self-regulation – can be a helpful way of thinking about our role too. Early Years teachers regard this as obvious, but I firmly believe that those of us who teach teenagers could benefit from thinking more deeply about this too. Our responses to children when they become overwhelmed should be a well-understood feature of our behaviour policy.

A central part of our role as educators of still-developing young people, and something that we have in common with their parents, is to make sure that they can thrive (I initially wrote 'manage' and decided that wasn't ambitious enough) when we're not around anymore. Overly restrictive school policies or practices of individual teachers where having a go or risking failure is a high-stakes affair, or where getting into trouble results in public shaming, run the risk of hindering this quest for independence and may not, to borrow Winnicott's term, foster good holding environments. In such environments, failure avoidance can become a goal in itself. Failure (and be aware that failure as defined by you, the teacher, may not be the same as failure as defined by the child) is not seen as a chance to learn, to develop, to grow; it is something to be ashamed about or to avoid come what may, even in the full knowledge that it will result in consequences of a different kind such as punishment.

We need to reassure our students that making a mistake is not a failure and that, instead of criticism, they will be met with unstinting support.

We need to communicate to them through our actions and our words that we are there to catch them, not catch them out.

A school *for* the community

I've always viewed the role of schools as servants of their local community as vital. When I led a school through the process of becoming an academy (an English state school that is funded directly from central government and not via its local council (House of Commons Library, 2019)) one of the things I was concerned about was that we would lose the word *Community* from our title. This is not a minor point. It was a clear statement that we placed great importance on being a part of our community. Schools cannot and should not stand alone from their community; the more connected to and the more reflective of their local community they are, through things like representation on their governing body, the better.

On matters of behaviour, there are three main community groups that I feel need special attention (there will be more detail on this in Chapter 4): your neighbours, your neighbouring schools and your parent community.

Your neighbours

All schools need good relationships with their neighbours, be they businesses, homeowners or other organisations. Things may not always be rosy as neighbours may object to the behaviour of some of your children when, for example, coming to and from school or that litter is dropped over their fences into their gardens.

Your neighbouring schools

Schools are likely to have relatively intimate relationships with their neighbouring schools, and indeed many are literal neighbours. Collaboration between Headteachers, departments and individual staff; feeder schools; siblings from the same family in your respective schools, executive Headteachers running more than one school, multi-academy trusts, are all positives. There may be difficulties too at times when, for example, groups of children from different schools clash as happened close to my school recently with some children badly hurt as a result. Such things are almost always carried out in full glare of the public and some reputational damage can arise, with some rebuilding of trust needed.

Your parent community

I am a firm believer in working as equal partners with parents. I am interested in their views, listen lots and do my best to communicate often.

'Who isn't?' you might ask. Well, where behaviour is concerned, we sometimes run the risk of communicating, either inadvertently or deliberately, that parents' views are of little or no importance when we say things like, 'We hold parents to account as well and insist that they support their child by supporting our rules' (Mercia School, n.d.). Of course we want parents to support us, but we must ensure they can tell us when they disagree. If they are unable to tell us because we are unwilling to listen then they will tell somebody, and that will almost certainly be via social media and, occasionally, the press. To paraphrase Benjamin Franklin, in this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death, taxes and tabloid newspapers in September running stories of children put into isolation because of uniform violations. We can't say that we'll hold parents to account (that's not our job anyway) and not expect to be held to account by them. We are, after all, a public service. With that in mind we should avoid over-reach by, for example, deciding that we can tell students and parents about when children should go to bed (Hosie, 2017). We can't and shouldn't.

A school with a strong sense of belonging

A positive culture that supports good behaviour from the children can be helped tremendously by a strong sense of belonging for the children and an equally strong sense of belonging or collegiality from amongst the staff.

One of my major worries when I taught in a comprehensive school of 1,200 students (that's about average for an English secondary school) was that some children were to all intents and purposes invisible. They were the children that rarely, if ever, came to the attention of many adults either for positive or negative reasons. They kept their head down – The Grey Man as the army would describe them – and just got on with things, with few adults knowing their name. I worried about them, partly because one of my own personal aims in secondary school had been to do just enough to stay out of bother and remain unnoticed.

I worried that they felt, in common with the children known to almost all adults in the school because of their seemingly continual behaviour problems, that they had little or no stake in the school.

> I want all children to feel that they are someone important in their school.

Not important in a self-obsessed sort of way, more that they know the school is a better place for having them as part of it, that they contribute positively, that they matter, that people would notice if they weren't there anymore.

It should come as no surprise to you to learn that research indicates that students who feel a greater sense of belonging tend to be more motivated and engaged in school and classroom activities, and more dedicated to school (Osterman, 2000). Further, they tend to have higher enjoyment, enthusiasm, happiness, interest and more confidence in engaging in learning, whereas those who feel isolated report greater anxiety, boredom, frustration and sadness (Furrer and Skinner, 2003). There is research indicating that about a quarter of students, a worryingly high proportion, could have a low sense of belonging (Willms, 2003).

We can generate this sense of belonging – a form of emotional investment (O'Brien, 2015) – in many ways.

Form groups

Although I loved teaching physics when I worked in a comprehensive and in a school for boys with behavioural difficulties, the job I loved the most in those schools was that of form tutor. I regarded it as vital to a well-functioning school for a couple of reasons:

- In a school where a child may have well over ten teachers a fortnight, I could be that constant presence in their life, know them better than anyone else, spot issues early and keep in regular touch with their parents.
- I wanted to develop a strong feeling with my tutor group that they took pride in being part of a tribe and that they looked out for each other.

I enjoyed being part of a vertical tutoring system when I was at school. I loved being friends with older children who looked out for me if I was in bother and we had a policy of siblings being together too, so that my brother, a year younger than me, joined B5 with me when he went up to secondary school.

The house system

I was humbled recently to be invited to present the awards at the annual prize-giving evening at my *alma mater*. I told the assembled children that I was very proud to be an alumnus of the school, but that I would have died for my house, Basildon House. The house system is one successful way that schools foster a sense of belonging. It cuts across year groups, provides opportunities for student leadership, builds competition between houses and students can take a fierce pride in representing their house. This extends too to representing the school at sporting events and

performing in school productions, both good signs of a school with a healthy extra-curricular life.

I will never forget the final assembly for Basildon House. Our much-loved Head of House cried openly in front of us as we marked the demise of this adored institution – a victim of the 1988 National Curriculum that made our school decide to form into year groups instead.

Fundraising

One of the things I miss most about teaching in a comprehensive secondary school was sixth form fundraising week. Every year we gave the sixth form free rein and every year they impressed us with their ingenuity. I loved the buzz around school in those weeks and you could see how the enthusiasm spread throughout the school to the younger students. I have fond memories of having one of my shins waxed on stage in the main hall two years in a row, without pain relief I'll have you know. The following year, I and another teacher wrestled in inflatable sumo suits. Sure, it was a bit of fun, but those aspects of school are part of their lifeblood as vibrant places for young people to grow up in and thrive.

I've got your back

A sense of belonging for the adults in a school can have significant benefits in terms of mutual support for behaviour. One of the inherent weaknesses of our job is that we work in isolation from our colleagues for most or sometimes all of the week. In a school where you don't feel that you have the support of your colleagues and/or senior managers, this feeling of isolation can be magnified and makes dealing with behavioural challenges significantly harder. When I worked in a school exclusively for children with behavioural difficulties, our team spirit and mutual support was solid. Even though I was the deputy I had no hesitation in calling on any of my colleagues for support at times, and they were the same. There was no hierarchy when it came to behaviour support and this sense of security meant that we felt that, between us, there wasn't anything that we couldn't handle. There were no utterances of *the* most unhelpful phrase in the teachers' behaviour lexicon, 'Well, *I* never have any problems with him'.

A school that doesn't write off children

Teachers are, on the whole, very positive people. It's part of the self-selection process when people make the decision to enter the profession. We believe deeply in the inherent goodness of the role and of the glorious possibilities for children if we do the job to the best of our abilities and, as such, we're generally an upbeat bunch to be around. I've had my moments, but I confess

that not every day in my classroom has been, '*Carpe diem*' and '*Oh, Captain, my Captain!*'. Being positive people in a profession that is positive by definition does not mean that we aren't negative at times about government policy, our leaders, certain children or certain parents, and any or all of them may be negative towards us too. We are also prone to fatigue, fear and insecurity just like all other human beings and we can become ground down by persistent poor behaviour such that our own behaviour can be affected and our judgement and perspective impaired. I'm not stating here that we need to fix a forced smile on our face and just get on with it; although teachers are past masters at this. I am going to examine the creeping, sapping negativity that can spread like a mould in a damp store cupboard about certain children, families or year groups if we don't eliminate it. As Dave Whitaker, a special school executive principal, says:

> Schools work best when adults believe in children and children believe they believe in them. (Whitaker, n.d.)

Leaders therefore have two subtle tasks: separating genuine concerns about behaviour and ensuring they are dealt with so that colleagues are well supported, and then dealing with what is left. This requires good listening skills and some subtle questioning with colleagues to elicit sufficient information to work out what precisely the problem is. What is left is likely to take the form of one of the examples below, and deal with it we must. It is a vital part of school leadership that we address behaviours from adults that can erode the culture we're continually building.

I have been heavily influenced in managing this aspect of the leadership of behaviour by the work of Dr Aaron Beck, an American psychoanalytic therapist, on depression and on ways to recognise and deal with negative thoughts that lead to emotional responses (Beck, 1976). This form of thinking is called 'cognitive distortion' or faulty thinking. There are many features of cognitive distortion, but the main ones I see that school leaders need to eliminate are detailed below.

Predicting failure (also known as the 'fortune teller error')

> 'Harvey is going to cause chaos in my lesson today.'

The fortune teller error is a response to a situation where you have already set your mind to failure. At the beginning of Chapter 2, I use the particularly egregious example of when I used to start certain children further up the ladder of warnings before lessons had even begun. You can immediately see why this is dangerous. No amount of support or new ideas to improve

behaviour will be worth it because a lack of success is inevitable, the outcome decided.

As leaders we have to challenge this prediction of failure, but we cannot then leave our colleagues bereft of support because, as in the situation above, they still require help to deal with the situation and to see it more positively. Underlying the overt writing off of a child or class may well be a lack of confidence as to how to proceed, or an insecurity on the part of the teacher, and this is unlikely to improve without our help.

A colleague of mine developed a scripted response to this prediction of failure each and every time she came across it. 'We plan for success in this school', she would say. It didn't have to become an argument; she would repeat that to make her point and then offer to support with that planning.

Ignoring positives and focusing on negatives

'My class have been an absolute nightmare all week.'

This form of cognitive distortion is in effect a filtering of reality and leads us to over-generalise. We can apply this to ourselves too as teachers tend to be our own harshest critics.

No child generates negatives all the time, so as leaders we do need to help colleagues retain some balance here. Looking for positives is not a way of minimising the impact of things that have happened that were bad. On the contrary, it can allow us to seek ways in which to improve things. This is the heart of solution-focused thinking. As Dr Geoffrey James says in his book *Transforming Behaviour in the Classroom: A Solution-focused Guide for New Teachers*, 'The solution is the key, investigating the nature of the problem is unnecessary' (James, 2016: 25).

An unfortunate side effect of this way of thinking is the labelling of children. which we come onto next.

Labelling

'Ciara is unteachable.'

Some children develop reputations that manifest themselves as a label that describes the whole child, and once a label is attached to a child in a school it tends to stick. Describing a child as a nightmare, unteachable, or 'the worst kid I've ever taught' may seem on the surface like a teacher blowing off steam, but it is damaging. The language involved in labelling is inevitably emotionally loaded and ultimately unhelpful. The child and their family may be unaware of the precise label itself but children, especially as they get

older, tend to be keenly aware of what the adults around them in a school really think of them. Perversely, this can lead to a positive reinforcement of the child's behaviour. Some of the children that I worked with in a special school for boys with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties revelled in their reputation as impossible to handle. This was the sorry end to a long conflict between them and adults, and it became their only way to be successful. Before you scoff at the idea that they were successful, I'll briefly mention Dr Ross Greene (more of him in Chapter 8). An American clinical psychologist, he contends that children do well if they can, and if they're not doing well it is because they are lacking the skills to be successful. Well, in the examples above, these children found ways to be successful. Not ways that we would agree with, but by that stage our views on the matter may be irrelevant to those children.

All-or-nothing demands

> 'One more step out of line from you and you're off the school football team.'

This is a tactical glass hammer that seems to get pulled out of the toolbox as a last resort. The logic behind an all-or-nothing demand is that the child is extrinsically motivated to behave because the stakes are so high. This logic is flawed as it is based on the notion that previous misconduct was simply a premeditated choice to be naughty and, by bringing the child to the proverbial cliff-edge to see how steep the drop is, this will incentivise them to sort their life out.

It is likely to be inequitable as other children won't be placed in the same position, even though they are likely to find it easier to be successful, and the child is likely to see this too.

We can also make the mistake of dangling incentives in front of the child that are actually entitlements such as going on a trip or swimming and this is where, as a leader, I have had to intervene in the past to insist a child goes on a trip or swims and is not left at school as a punishment.

A different example of all-or-nothing is where a child is told, 'This is your last chance. One more mistake and you're out of this school'. Any school leader that says this to a child is communicating that they have already largely made their mind up. Do they really mean that? What if a child has years left in their school?

Fallacy of control

> 'He just does that from time to time. There's nothing you can do. It's not your fault.'

When applied to a class teacher, the fallacy of control amounts to them rendering themselves powerless. They may have come to the view that they have exhausted everything and are on a treadmill of dread with a child or class that has drained their confidence. This is a dangerous situation and requires us as leaders to shore up our colleague's confidence with as much support and encouragement as we can muster. Ideally, though, we are better leaders than this and we don't let situations get this far as we spot problems earlier.

There is, though, a cousin of this fallacy. It is the fallacy of control applied by the senior leader onto the class teacher. Undoubtedly done to be helpful – I've done it – but it has precisely the opposite effect. It looks like this: a teacher endures a difficult lesson or day with a child or class and, in a ham-fisted attempt to be supportive, I say, 'Look, he/she/they just goes like that from time to time. There's absolutely nothing you can do about it. It's not your fault'. The only helpful bit of that statement is the last sentence. The rest tells the teacher that they are helpless in the face of this inevitable onslaught.

No teacher is helpless. There is always lots they can do, but in situations such as these they may need our support to see what that might look like.

Emotional reasoning

'This school is a warzone.'

When we assume feelings reflect fact, regardless of the evidence, we are engaging in emotional reasoning, and nowhere in schools is this more likely to happen than when dealing with behaviour. Because of the intense emotions that discussions of behaviour bring about, we need to guard against this really carefully and use good sources of evidence upon which to base our opinions and inform our decisions.

A colleague of mine, a highly respected Headteacher in a great school, told me recently about just such a discussion in his school: 'I can find you two people within three minutes, one of whom will tell you that behaviour here has never been better, and the other will tell you that it's never been worse'.

Working on removing these forms of thinking from schools – intensely human organisations where the thousands of daily interactions inevitably lead to problems at times – is no mean feat. But, if you want the culture to be right, it needs to be an aim that colleagues all agree on and then tenaciously pursue.

At the heart of cognitive distortion is at least some level of insecurity from adults about their own confidence in dealing with some issues.

In Chapter 3 I will consider how working to improve colleagues' perception of their own expertise in behaviour can improve their sense of self-efficacy, and I know that this is a major step in eliminating cognitive distortion from your school.

REFLECTION POINTS

- Can you think of a time or times when you have had to challenge negativity amongst your colleagues?
- Did you identify the root cause(s) of the negativity?
- What kind of things did you say to your colleagues?
- Would a script have helped? For example, to make a situation less confrontational you might use a response that all leaders have agreed to, such as, 'We plan for success in this school'.

Risks to values and culture

This chapter has been almost exclusively about how leaders form, develop and sustain a school's values and culture. There are, however, things that school leaders can do, sometimes deliberately, sometimes inadvertently, that erode a school's ethos or indicate when a leader's principles become compromised and need resetting.

Before we get to the specifics, I want to introduce the concept of complexity reduction. Complexity reduction amounts to deliberately reducing the number of available options for action in any particular system or organisation. It is not inherently a bad thing; indeed, as I will remind us in a moment, schools require hefty amounts of this in order to function effectively. An example of complexity reduction might be the filtering process on the automated phone handling system of a satellite TV company where you are met with limited options – 'Press 1 for sales. Press 2 to report technical problems. Press 3 to try unsuccessfully to cancel your subscription' – with a catch-all option ('Alternatively, hold [for infinity] to speak to the operator') if, as is sometimes the case, none of the above seem to be what you're after.

Schools engage in complexity reduction in many ways so that they can function. Organising children into classes in various ways (by age, by attainment), timetabling discrete lessons and organising the curriculum into

discrete subjects are just a few examples. Sometimes this complexity reduction is done deliberately even though it is of no advantage to the children, or is even detrimental. Methods of assessment for particular subjects and the timings of exams are decided nationally irrespective of how any particular child could best display how much they have learned and when it is best for them to show this to you.

Biesta quotes Bruno Latour's work *The Pasteurization of France* in his paper referenced right at the beginning of this chapter as a good example of the pitfalls of complexity reduction:

> In his book on Pasteur, Latour argues that the success of Pasteur's approach was not the result of the application of this particular technique across all farms in the French countryside. Pasteur's technique could only work because significant dimensions of French farms were first transformed to get them closer to the laboratory conditions under which the technique was developed. (Biesta, 2010: 499)

Biesta goes on to say that:

> Again and again Latour argues that this is not the result of bringing facts and machines into the world 'outside' but of the transformation of the world outside so that it becomes part of the laboratory conditions under which things can work and can be true. (Biesta, 2010: 499)

One of my biggest fears for the education systems as they currently stand in the UK, Australia and the USA is that the culture of performativity, that is to say the pressure imposed by a heavy system of accountability in which the end-point narrative, the narrow definition of success as dictated by grades and attainment, can encourage school leaders to compromise their principles to do what they think is necessary to be successful. When leaders feel that their job is on the line and that the reputation of the school automatically attaches to them personally, this urge can be overwhelming. I've been there and felt its weighty presence. Ball (2003) discusses this pressure and contends that performativity: 'requires individual practitioners to organize themselves as a response to targets, indicators and evaluations. To set aside personal beliefs and commitments and live an existence of calculation' (Ball, 2003: 215). He continues: 'performativity produces opacity rather than transparency as individuals and organizations take ever greater care in the construction and maintenance of fabrications' (Ball, 2003: 215).

For a period of 15 months, my school was the only one of our county's 23 special schools to be rated less than good by Ofsted. Our school officially required improvement and, therefore, so did I. I felt that keenly every time I sat in a room with the other 22 Headteachers. They were lovely, supportive colleagues, but getting rid of that official grade couldn't come soon enough, and this can be where bad things happen in the name of progress.

To borrow from Biesta above, the transformation of a school so that it gets closer to the laboratory conditions under which things can work more easily can be done, but it comes at an inevitably human cost. As Biesta says, this, 'only tends to work under very specific conditions' (2010: 499) and I remain gravely concerned that we as leaders can be corrupted into trying to create those specific conditions, especially when it comes to behaviour. Rather than seek bespoke solutions to individuals' behavioural challenges, we tend to impose blanket policies, partly for ease of organisation and occasionally to mask the fact that we really don't know what to do to help this child. To continue the analogy, we risk creating something rather sterile by removing anything, and anyone, that is a perceived risk to being successful. Before you respond with, 'Who would do such a thing?!' I need to remind you that it sadly does happen. As I write, Ofsted (Bradbury, 2018) and the House of Commons Education Select Committee (2018) are both voicing concerns about a practice known as 'off-rolling' where children deemed to be a risk to the performance of a school are removed from the school's roll. Education Datalab have done some powerful work on this issue (Nye, 2017) and Warwick Mansell, a leading education journalist, has been reporting on this issue for a number of years too (Mansell, Adams and Edwards, 2016; Mansell, 2018). The House of Commons Library (2018) has produced a useful summary too.

This pressure to change a school to more closely resemble what the leader perceives a more successful school to look like can result in some, in my view, unnecessary conditions in the name of improving behaviour.

A policy where children move from lesson to lesson in silence is becoming more popular in England. I regard this as a sad situation. The logic is seductive – schools want vulnerable children to feel safe as they move between lessons and for children to get to their next lesson swiftly. No teacher, parent or child seriously disputes either of those things, but the way of achieving them says something about that school. If there are problems at lesson changeovers in my school then there is much that I can and will do about it, but a blanket ban on talking is not one of them. We miss opportunities to teach children responsibility when we insist on silence at these times. We communicate to children that we believe them to be incapable of succeeding at this safely, so we remove their agency.

Go back to your values – is this consistent with our aims of, for example, producing independent, considerate adults? I don't believe so and, further, policies such as this are more about meeting the needs of adults than they are about meeting the needs of children.

We engage in complexity reduction when we, ironically, make minor uniform infringements a major issue because uniform rules have become excessive. My current favourite rule about school uniforms is the one that allows long-sleeved shirts or short-sleeved shirts but children will be in trouble if they roll up their long-sleeves. This need to hyper-control children's clothing and their hair creates far more problems than it solves. Ultimately, we risk losing sight of what we're trying to achieve, what our school vision is, and we focus on the very short term when we try to micromanage situations or when we outlaw things that are neither disruptive to learning nor offensive to others – for example, a school rule that outlaws, 'saying "okay" when told off' (Sutcliffe, 2017).

No leader is without ego, and the culture of performativity – chasing that *Outstanding* badge from the inspectors, or seeking the *imprimatur* of the current Schools Minister – can infect the true, honest culture we all started out aiming for as naïve, inexperienced leaders. Staying firmly rooted to your values and living by them publicly and openly can protect against the temptations and pressures that you'll inevitably encounter in this highly challenging job. Don't end up like the Headteacher I once met who wanted one of his students to leave his school for mine. The boy had arrived in the September of Year 7 and within three weeks (15 days, 90 lessons) had been placed on a part-time timetable. This arrangement, going home at midday no matter how successful his day had been, lasted until the February when I visited him for an assessment for entry to our school. 'He cannot keep up at the pace we teach', I was told. Well, of course not. He's in school half as long as everyone else and already has learning difficulties. What did they expect? He came to our school I am pleased to say, and I reported the Headteacher to the local authority for illegally excluding the child daily for five months (more on exclusion in Chapter 12). My conversation with the local authority officer was brief. 'They're an academy', she told me. 'There's nothing we can do. Besides, the Headteacher is petrified of losing his [sic] outstanding grade from Ofsted and his [sic] Teaching School status and money along with it'.

> As Gert Biesta says: 'When children become a liability for their school's performance, education has come to an end' (n.d.).

TAKING IT FURTHER – QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES FOR YOU AND YOUR COLLEAGUES

- What kind of school do we want to be?
  - A school with …
  - A school for …
  - A school that …
  - A school where …
- Is the culture in our school by design or by default?
- What do we believe are the biggest risks to our school's sustained success?
- Are there solutions available to us that could compromise our values?
- How will we, as a group of leaders, collectively ensure that the values of our school are central to our decision-making?
- How will we, as a group of leaders, help each other to prevent knee-jerk decision-making when it comes to behaviour?
- Have we gone too far with complexity reduction in any aspect of our behaviour policy, such that we may be creating problems where there needn't be?

Notes

1. *Knowledge deficit* – the inevitable structural gap that exists between the knowledge that can be generated through experimental research and the ways in which we can use this knowledge.
2. *Effectiveness deficit* – the acceptance that in fields such as education there is no mechanistic or deterministic relationship between an intervention and its effect. At best the relationship is probabilistic.
3. *Application deficit* – we can think of this as the conditions that need to be present in order for something to work. In medicine, for example, it could be that a drug is only effective if the patient abstains from alcohol. The outside world has to be transformed in some way to allow the knowledge to become applicable.

References

Ball, S. (2003) 'The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity', *Journal of Education Policy*, 18(2): 215–228.

Beck, A.T. (1976) *Cognitive Therapy and the Emotional Disorders*. New York: New American Library.

Biesta, G. J. J. [@gbiesta], (n.d.), Twitter.

Biesta, G.J.J. (2010) 'Why "what works" still won't work: From evidence-based education to value-based education', *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 29(5): 491–503.

Bion, W. (1962) *Learning from Experience*. London: Karnac Books.

Bradbury, J. (2018) 'Off-rolling: using data to see a fuller picture', *Ofsted blog*, 26 June. https://educationinspection.blog.gov.uk/2018/06/26/off-rolling-using-data-to-see-a-fuller-picture/ (accessed 17 September 2019).

Department for Education (2018) *Keeping Children Safe in Education: September 2018*. Reference: DFE-00248-2018. www.gov.uk/government/publications/keeping-children-safe-in-education--2 (accessed 17 September 2019).

Finnis, M. (2018) '33 ways to build better relationships', *Independent Thinking*, 6 April. www.independentthinking.co.uk/blog/posts/2018/april/33-ways-to-build-better-relationships (accessed 30 September 2019).

Furrer, C. and Skinner, E. (2003) 'Sense of relatedness as a factor in children's academic engagement and performance', *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 95(1): 148–162.

Hosie, R. (2017) 'Children should be in bed at 9pm and up at 6:30am, says new headmaster at one of UK's worst schools', *The Independent*, 11 September. www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/children-bedtimes-9pm-wake-up-6-30-am-headmaster-school-worst-performing-great-yarmouth-high-charter-a7940146.html (accessed 17 September 2019).

House of Commons Education Select Committee (2018) *Forgotten Children: Alternative Provision and the Scandal of Ever Increasing Exclusions*, 25 July. https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmeduc/342/34202.htm (accessed 17 September 2019).

House of Commons Library (2018) *Off-rolling in English Schools*, Briefing Paper 08444, 10 May 2019. https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/CBP-8444 (accessed 17 September 2019).

House of Commons Library (2019) *FAQs: Academies and Free Schools*, Briefing Paper 07059. researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN07059/SN07059.pdf (accessed 17 September 2019).

James, G. (2016) *Transforming Behaviour in the Classroom: A Solution-focused Guide for New Teachers*. London: SAGE.

Mansell, W. (2018) 'Are schools flouting the exclusion laws to protect their reputations?', *Times Educational Supplement*, 14 February. www.tes.com/news/are-schools-flouting-exclusion-laws-protect-their-reputations (accessed 17 September 2019).

Mansell, W., Adams, R and Edwards, P. (2016) 'England schools: 10,000 pupils sidelined due to league-table pressures', *The Guardian*, 21 January. www.theguardian.com/education/2016/jan/21/england-schools-10000-pupils-sidelined-due-to-league-table-pressures (accessed 17 September 2019).

Mercia School (n.d.) 'Are we right for you?'. www.merciaschool.com/page/?title=Are+we+right+for+you%3F&pid=27 (accessed 17 September 2019).

Nye, P. (2017) 'Who's left: The main findings', Education Datalab, 31 January. https://ffteducationdatalab.org.uk/2017/01/whos-left-the-main-findings/ (accessed 17 September 2019).

O'Brien, J. (2015) 'Emotional investment will pay dividends', *Times Educational Supplement*, 28 August. www.tes.com/news/emotional-investment-will-pay-dividends-0 (accessed 17 September 2019).

O'Brien, J. (2016) *Don't Send Him in Tomorrow*. Carmarthen: Independent Thinking Press.

Osterman, K.F. (2000) 'Students' need for belonging in the school community', *Review of Educational Research*, 70: 323–367.

Springwell Learning Community (2016) 'Unconditional positive regard – podcast', 12 September. https://springwelllearningcommunity.co.uk/news/unconditional-positive-regard-podcast/ (accessed 17 September 2019).

Sutcliffe, R. (2017) 'Huddersfield school introduces extreme rule book to crack down on behaviour', *ExaminerLive*, 8 September. www.examinerlive.co.uk/news/huddersfield-school-introduces-extreme-rule-13592779 (accessed 17 September 2019).

Whitaker, D. (n.d.) www.independentthinking.co.uk/associates/dave-whitaker/ (accessed 17 September 2019).

Willms, J.D. (2003) *Student Engagement at School: A Sense of Belonging and Participation: Results from PISA 2000*. Paris: Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.

Winnicott, D. (1960) 'The theory of the parent–child relationship', *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 41: 585–595.