

No penalties?

Steven McNichol, an ATL member and senior lecturer in education, responds to Tom Bennett's views on behaviour management



I READ THE INTERVIEW with Tom Bennett in January's *Report* with great interest, as I lead the provision for improving the behaviour management skills of trainee teachers at a highly respected ITT institution, Bishop Grosseteste University in Lincoln. However, some of Bennett's proposals cause concern.

Rules

Bennett claims that the most effective rules are those dictated to children and enforced by the teacher, with no room for negotiation or adaptation. He says, "I tell my classes what the rules are and why we have them. I won't ask them what they think. I know what they need because I am an adult. This is not a democracy."

However, in many schools, teachers are encouraged to use pupils as partners during the design of class rules to support their contribution to the classroom environment. Children should be involved in the creation of the rules by which they will be governed, as when pupils contribute to rule-setting they better relate to the rules and therefore comply more often.

Sanctions, consequences and punishments

Bennett claims sanctions are a key part of behaviour management. In 2010, he wrote that "the threat of an immediate punishment is far more powerful than a promise of an equivalent benefit", and he continues to support this principle. However, the effectiveness of sanctions is not supported by research. In 2006, Ann Shreeve, of the University of East Anglia, and her colleagues found that pupils perceive penalties to be less effective than rewards, and most teachers feel penalty systems are ineffective in their schools. This may be because sanctions can create a negative atmosphere and punishment can actually increase undesirable behaviour. As Jerome Freiburg, of the University of Houston, writes: "Punished children perceive the teacher and the school as objects to fear and avoid. The result is truancy, tardiness and high levels of anxiety, all of which impair ability to learn."

Rewards

Bennett also claims that behaviour management "is not just about punishment; it's also about rewarding children". Again, Bennett is not the only one to believe that rewarding children is an effective means to manage behaviour. However, it can be argued that, although rewards may minimise disruptive behaviour in the short term, they have negative effects and stifle intrinsic motivation. When rewards are offered for appropriate behaviour, children simply behave in this way to gain the reward. Once the reward is removed, so is the inclination to behave appropriately.

Morality

One of the most pressing concerns I hold about the use of a system underpinned by rules, rewards and sanctions is not that of its practical effectiveness (which is far from clear cut), but the morality of the principles themselves. This type of approach to behaviour management

inherently affixes the source of discipline problems entirely to pupils, absolving teachers from the responsibility for any behaviour issues they may face as a result of poor teaching. Bennett's proposals amount to a power-based model designed simply to get pupils to comply, with minimal effort and reflection on the part of the teacher.

This 'teacher in ultimate control' approach leaves little room for cooperation and collaboration between pupils and staff, developing an ethos of 'staff v pupils' rather than 'staff + pupils'. The principles underpinning Bennett's approach could turn classrooms into battlegrounds, with ongoing skirmishes between staff and children damaging the positive relationships that need to exist for effective learning to take place.

The emphasis that Bennett's proposals place on sheer obedience may also stunt children's ethical development. The underlying principle is coercive, encouraging compliance with arbitrary power rather than personal, social and ethical development. Teaching pupils that they are simply expected to follow rules does not encourage them to develop a mindset that allows them to make good choices about how to conduct themselves outside school or in adult life. Nor do children learn to be moral by obeying rules that others make for them.

Bennett's 'one size fits all' proposals are bad for ITT and the behaviour-management training of teachers. We should be providing trainee teachers with the opportunity to experience and develop a range of skills and approaches. For qualified teachers, it is essential that professional development in behaviour management is balanced and offers a variety of approaches to maintain good behaviour in the classroom. ■

JOIN THE DEBATE...

report@atl.org.uk
@ATLReport
facebook.com/ATLUnion
Report, ATL, 7 Northumberland Street, London WC2N 5RD