

Working with Teachers

For the past two years I have been running courses for teachers, from nursery through to sixth form, on how to work more effectively with boys. The courses are based on my book 'Bringing the Best out in Boys – Communication Strategies for Teachers' published in October 2002. This article looks at the approach I have taken and what lessons can be drawn as to how others could affect schools.

The Trouble with Boys

The teaching profession recognises that there is a problem with boys: in most schools boys' results are lower than girls' and many teachers find boys harder to engage and more challenging to teach than girls. Bottom sets and special needs classes bulge with boys, senior managers have many more boys referred to them for unacceptable behaviour and 80% of excluded pupils are male. Teachers recognise the problem and want solutions, but these must be practical solutions that can be applied within the pressures and constraints they are under.

I gained an insight into the problem of boys in school when observing a class about eight years ago. There was a marked difference in the way the teacher responded to many of the boys in her class compared with the way she responded to most of the girls. When she spoke to a girl, or one of the quiet conscientious boys, she was calm and encouraging with warmth in her face and her voice. When she spoke to the lively boys the warmth disappeared and the voice sounded irritated. I was witness to a vicious circle – the teacher responded to the boys in a negative way and they reacted negatively to her.

On another occasion the teacher expressed his frustration that the boys had taken up so much of his attention: he felt he wasn't giving the girls a fair deal. I had seen something different: when he spoke to girls his remarks had been positive; when he spoke to boys his comments had often been negative. Viewed in terms of quality rather than quantity, it was the boys that were getting a raw deal.

Developing a Model for Teachers

Since my background is in communication training, I decided to explore how teachers could communicate with boys in a way that would motivate and engage them. The first step was to go into classrooms and observe. Boys seemed to respond to energetic, concise and positive communication. They worked best with a clear framework, tight time-scales, firm boundaries and immediate consequences. But all this needs to be applied with a light touch.

Most boys seemed to be:

- energetic
- action-orientated
- physical

Given this, are schools set up for boys up to win? Every teacher recognises the energy boys bring into the classroom, but some make the mistake of trying to suppress it. The trick is to learn how to channel it into creative tasks.

When looking at what motivates boys, it seemed that four things they value are:

- excitement
- humour
- courage
- justice

If a teacher does not provide enough excitement or humour in class the boys are likely to do so themselves - not necessarily in a way the teacher approves of.

Boys want to be courageous and they admire peers they perceive to be courageous. In a school context boys might think it courageous play a dangerous game at break or to stand up to the teacher. Whilst teachers need to limit certain kinds of behaviour, it helps if they can recognise the positive motivation that might be behind it, and show boys other areas where courage can be practised:

"It was brave of you to admit you did that."

"It takes a lot of courage to do a presentation to the class."

Boys have an acute sense of justice, and while they usually handle a 'fair cop' well, they can become explosive when they think there has been an injustice.

What the Boys Said

Having arrived at a view of where boys were coming from, I interviewed 24 boys between eight and eighteen to check out my thesis. Most of their answers validated it, some helped me elaborate on an idea, others to drop an idea.

Two thirds of the boys used the word 'bored' or 'boring' when asked what school was like. This was no surprise. However, I had thought that boys would respond well to being asked for their opinions by teachers, but as many boys thought that would be uncomfortable or embarrassing as though they would like a teacher to do it.

When I asked boys if anything made them upset at school, many could not think of anything; however all of them could think of something that made them angry. One eleven year old explained this to me:

"Boys don't do upset – they go straight to anger."

An unexpected finding was about boys' experience of asking for help. Many boys did not like asking for help and had had bad experiences when they had – being told off for not having listened, being treated as though they were thick, having the thing they had not understood re-explained in exactly the same way, feeling shown up publicly. As a result

some had decided the best strategy was not to ask teachers for help, with obviously damaging consequences for their education. For some boys it is an act of courage to ask for help, and such requests need to be treated with sensitivity.

Initial Feedback from Teachers

Each draft of the book was sent to teachers, parents or teacher trainers for comment. They came back with examples, queries, validation, suggestions for improvement and disagreement. Disagreement, though uncomfortable, was very useful – it made me question whether what I was saying was valid. The use of sarcasm was a case in point. My view had been don't use it, since it could be used as a lethal weapon of control to put boys in their place. However teachers told me teenage boys love sarcasm. When I asked the boys some agreed, some didn't, others said it depended what mood they were in. I was left with this: there is a spectrum of humour ranging across banter, irony and sarcasm - enjoy the banter, but keep it light and take care with sarcasm.

Disagreement also forced me to explore the point more thoroughly in a way that incorporated the reservation that had been expressed. For example, when exploring how teachers can set boys up to win, I used the story of a five-year-old boy who found it hard to sit still. The children who were 'sitting beautifully' were picked to do the activity of their choice. The fidgety boy was left till last and told which activity to do. The teacher probably felt that this was a good way to teach the boy to be still. My feeling was that the teacher's strategy might result in disillusionment at age five and, if continued, disaffection from school as he got older. I suggested that the teacher could have set the boy up to succeed by asking him to be still for a short time:

"If you can sit still for one moment, I will be able to choose you."

Some teachers were shocked at the apparent inequity for the other children, and at how it seemed to reward bad behaviour. This was useful feedback, and enabled me to acknowledge this commonly held view in my explanation:

It may seem unfair to give the 'least well-behaved' child his choice of activity before others who are 'well-behaved'. In fact, this is an example of equal opportunities in practice, since Mitchell is less physically mature than the other children. By being flexible the teacher is able to set up each child in the class to succeed. (Neall p125)

Offering Training to Teachers

Teachers are inundated with initiatives and have little or no spare time, so I wanted to offer them practical communication techniques that took no extra teaching time and could be applied immediately. I distilled a one-day teachers course from the book that covers:

- the characteristics of boys
- freeing boys from labels
- raising boys' self-esteem
- improving emotional literacy
- showing boys respect

- alternatives to shouting and nagging
- channelling boys' energy
- boundaries and sanctions
- boys and humour

Audiences range from newly qualified teachers to those with many years' experience, from nursery through to secondary, from teaching assistants through to heads. Given the range of backgrounds and possible attitudes in an audience, at the beginning of the course I cover certain points to get everyone on side and prepared to participate fully:

- I make it clear that I recognise the difficulties and frustrations facing teachers, and that I value and respect the job they do. As a non-teacher, I hope to offer some insights and skills that might make that job a little easier.
- I explain the need to generalise during the course in order to draw useful conclusions about working with boys, but emphasise that each boy and girl is an individual with their own characteristics and needs.
- Having acknowledged the positive impact of equal opportunities and the upside of political correctness, I ask everyone to take a day off from politically correctness so they can say what they really think without censoring.

Having set up a framework of trust and honesty, we start by looking at teachers' perceptions of boys. This is useful to find out where a group is coming from and what their experience of boys has been. Anything that is said is written on a flipchart. Sometimes this comes out as pretty negative, sometimes more balanced. If it is too positive, I might say:

"Now tell me the things you've thought of but decided not to say in front of this group." This raises a laugh and the frustrations about boys pour out. Once the negatives are out, teachers are open to hear and understand the other side of the story. A typical list of perceptions would be:

- energetic
- boisterous
- untidy
- aggressive
- humorous
- short concentration span
- need a reason to do something
- challenging
- sense of justice
- don't communicate how they feel
- respond to peer pressure
- attention-seeking
- immature
- sensitive

- lovable
- forgiving

The session continues by:

- drawing teachers' attention to boys' qualities and needs
- showing them how to see boys' characteristics in a positive light
- giving them practical strategies to motivate and engage boys

Boys characteristics can often be seen as unwelcome or negative in school context. Yet every characteristic has a positive side to it and I work with teachers to identify these. For example a boy who shouts out might be enthusiastic or confident, the 'class clown' is humorous, someone who talks back to the teacher might be brave or have a strong sense of justice, a boy who is lazy may be laid-back or have his own agenda. Whilst I ask teachers to view boys through a positive light, that does not condone bad behaviour: any characteristic, personality or emotion can be accepted, certain behaviours need to be limited.

"I understand that you are angry, but it is not o.k. to swear in school."

The first part of a course is about enabling teachers to see boys differently; this is important, but only half the story. Teachers also need to know what to *do* differently, so that boys experience the change in the teacher and in turn respond more positively.

One of the strategies teachers find most valuable is Descriptive Feedback, where instead of (or as well as) evaluating behaviour, they describe it.

"You've been working quietly."

"You arrived on time three times this week."

"These adjectives give the work a sense of atmosphere."

"There's no date on this page."

Descriptive praise points out exactly what the boy is doing right so that he can repeat it, and to draws attention to anything he should be doing differently in a non-judgmental way. A science teacher who was trying this out said to a boy, "That line's straight," then moved on to see how other pupils were doing. When he returned the boy was measuring carefully from the margin to make sure his next line was even straighter! If that is the power of one positive description, what effect might we be creating if we continually describe what boys are doing wrong?

Descriptive praise is a powerful tool to encourage step-by-step improvements in behaviour. E.g.:

To a boy who tends not to write much:

"You've written a paragraph."

or "That's your first sentence completed."

To a boy who is often late:
"You were on time today."
or "You are five minutes earlier than yesterday."

The Response from Teachers

Since I did not have the advantage of having been either a teacher or a boy, I was prepared for a certain amount of flack for daring to tell teachers how to work with boys. As it turned out there was very little flack. Most teachers found it refreshing to be addressed by someone from outside the educational establishment who did not use jargon (or mention targets) and who approached the subject in an up-beat, non-judgmental and practical way. They were pleased to be able to explore an area that gave them considerable frustration, they were relieved to be able to see certain boys in a different light, fascinated by insights they got into where boys are coming from and heartened to have with practical strategies to apply.

Lessons for Working with Schools

Most teachers are idealists who want, or wanted, to make a difference in the world. Many find themselves over-stretched, stressed out and bogged down with paperwork and government initiatives. On top of this they have the frustration of seeing many boys working well below their true capabilities and directing their considerable energy into activities other than learning. In moments of frustration it is easy for teachers to get into a battle with boys instead of finding ways to channel their energy creatively. If we are to make a difference in schools then we have to make a difference to individual teachers. To do this we need to:

- start from where they are
- try to see the world from their point of view
- acknowledge how things seem to them
- assume a positive intent
- offer solutions rather than dwelling on problems

I look at this list and it seems familiar. I realise it's almost identical to the advice I give teachers on how to work with boys. Funny that.

References

Neill L. (2002) Bringing the Best out in Boys – Communication Strategies for Teachers. Stroud: Hawthorn Press

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