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Better behaved

Reports of increasing violence and bad behaviour in schools are routine in the media. But when I spent a year observing an outer London comprehensive, I found a surprisingly ordered environment

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It is 9.40am at Seven Kings high school in Ilford, and a teacher is struggling to get a class of 16 year olds to pay attention. "Jamil," she says, "I asked you to stop talking."

She waits a few seconds, but Jamil doesn't respond. He's slouching in his chair, not meeting her eye. Her expression hardens. "Move it," she says, pointing to a seat on the far side of the room away from his friends.

Jamil looks up, defiant. "I wasn't talking, man!"

"Move, Jamil!" she says, keeping her voice low.

Slowly he stands up. Pushes back his chair, which falls over with a clatter. He doesn't stoop to pick it up, and ambles towards the seat she's indicated. A few minutes later he's got his head down, writing.

It could be just another minor skirmish in the long drawn-out conflict that is comprehensive education in Britain today. Indeed, why bother to mention it?

I mention it with good reason. In almost a year of following the life of an urban comprehensive school, this is the worst piece of behaviour I witnessed—the only incident in which a pupil showed open, angry resistance to a teacher's command.

Two years ago in Prospect ("Bollocks to that, sir," September 2003) a former teacher, James McLeod, described a classroom world in which pupils were often out of control and in which teachers shrank from confrontation with them. It contrasts sharply with the warm, safe, ordered environment in which I have spent a lot of time in the last academic year.

The contents of McLeod's article would not have surprised anyone who has read recent

newspaper articles on the subject or watched television exposés such as Channel 4's Dispatches programme, in which an undercover reporter filmed scenes of chaos.

In a recent survey of 2,500 teachers commissioned by the National Union of Teachers, almost a third of respondents said they suffered some form of physical assault at least once a year. A further third reported being threatened by pupils, and a quarter said they received threats from parents.

As with the wider issues of law and order, bad behaviour in schools is politically sensitive. Or to be more precise, to be seen as soft on it is a vote-loser. In this parallel world of knives, hoodies and foul language, in which children have been led astray by a hedonistic and violent popular culture, the only answer is zero tolerance. Lines must be drawn. The tearaways must be stopped. Something must be done.

And so in May this year, something was indeed done. So concerned was the government by the chorus of complaint that it set up a working group on the subject. Education secretary, Ruth Kelly, appointed Alan Steer, the head teacher of Seven Kings high school, as its chairman. By chance, Steer's school is the one that I have been observing. His report was published at the end of October and the government promised to implement its proposal to clarify the law to help teachers to deal with unruly pupils.

With all the headlines and aggrieved teachers, is it possible to get an objective sense of levels of violence and bad behaviour in schools? For violence at least, the British crime survey, which reports each year on a sample of 40,000 people, provides a useful snapshot, incorporating the serious incidents reported to the police and all those experienced by a huge cross-section of the population.

The survey's most recent findings suggest, perhaps surprisingly, that the rate of violence against teachers has dropped by more than 40 per cent in the past eight years. Drawing on its results, home office researchers found that in 2002 and 2003 1 per cent of teachers were physically attacked at work. Between 1994 and 1998 the level of assaults on teachers was almost twice as high, running at 1.8 per cent.

Verbal threats against teachers have also decreased, the survey found. Two per cent of teachers reported the problem each year between 1994 and 1998, but by 2002-03 that figure had dropped to 1.2 per cent.

This will come as no surprise to Alan Steer, the Seven Kings' headmaster, now known in the press as the "behaviour tsar." His is an outer London school with an intake of average academic ability and mixed ethnicity. Outside the school, pupils encounter crime, gangs, mugging: all the evils of urban living. Inside, there is an air of calm

purposefulness that looks effortless but is not.

"I would say behaviour standards here are immeasurably higher than when I came in 1985," he says. "There's less fighting, less aggression, less acceptance of aggression. I'm not saying I think Ilford has changed for the better. But I think the success of this school is in keeping street culture outside."

There is a view in the school that violence and aggression are not the way to solve disputes. Usually, though not always, the pupils at Seven Kings subscribe to it, as do most of their parents.

"I used to get a lot of parents saying, 'I've told 'im not to take any nonsense. If anyone messes 'im about, 'e's to thump 'em,'" Steer laughs. "I think schools are much kinder places than they used to be. But what unfortunately has also happened is that society has changed and schools are having to meet different challenges. I think there are issues about parenting. If you asked, you might well find the kids here rarely if ever sit down with their parents to eat a meal, for example. But I fundamentally believe schools can make a difference. Kids live up to certain expectations."

Steer talks of changes in society and in families that may have a negative effect on behaviour in school. Yet he does not feel he experienced, during his own teaching career, the golden age of deference and strict discipline in which so many politicians and journalists believe.

Nor do I. The school I attended in the 1970s – a big, largely middle-class, successful comprehensive which had until recently been a grammar school – still had corporal punishment, which was meted out for quite minor offences from unruly behaviour to smoking. Contrary to popular myth, the cane did not instil a sense of fear or discipline in the pupils. It was viewed in a pragmatic, almost indifferent manner. I can even remember complaining that girls were the subject of sex discrimination because we were not caned. If we strayed, we spent an hour in detention. The boys could receive a five-minute caning and be smoking another cigarette behind the sixth form block long before we emerged.

There was a workaday level of violence in my school that would not be acceptable today. Disputes were often settled with pre-arranged fisticuffs, which usually took place by the flagpole at four o'clock. The teachers were only marginally more humane. I can recall on one occasion a shy boy being reduced to tears by a sadist of a history master who made him stand for a long period on a chair in the middle of his class as retribution for a perceived bit of minor rudeness. I myself was less traumatised by the hour I spent locked in a windowless stockroom after being cheeky to a teacher. Does anyone want a return to this sort of routine brutality?

Better, surely, to do what good schools do now, and to try to keep the corridors and classrooms calm through high expectations, constantly reinforced. Arrive at Seven Kings at 8.30 any morning of the week and you will find one of the school's senior teachers on the gates, greeting pupils as they arrive: "Morning Mohammed! Good result in the football last night! Hello Donna! How's your sister getting on? Sanjay, tuck your shirt in! Thank you!" The stream of chatter and command always runs on similar lines, and tends to receive a cheerful, if sometimes rueful, response. This reinforcement of little things like uniform rules, coupled with a sense that the staff actually like the kids, keeps the big things at bay.

In a single week at his school in East Anglia, James McLeod encountered several instances of verbal abuse and aggression, and one incident in which a 15-year-old boy broke the lock on his classroom door after being told to stay in for five minutes at break. Are children in East Anglia worse behaved than those in Ilford? It seems unlikely. McLeod mentioned that his school had recently failed an Ofsted inspection. That gives a clue to where the problem lay.

At Seven Kings, a range of strategies is employed to ensure behaviour is under control. Pupils queue up outside classrooms before lessons, for example, entering only when the teacher tells them to—"so the chaotic scenes before "sir" or "miss" arrives are largely a thing of the past. All classes are seated according to a plan devised by their teacher—"so the most unruly pupils do not sit together.

There is a well-developed pastoral system, so classroom teachers never feel they are alone in dealing with a difficult child. Year heads are on hand to deal with incidents, and if they are serious the child is sent home until parents come in to talk about his or her behaviour. Some of the worst offenders are isolated from their classmates in the lobby of Steer's office, but more often than not the room is empty.

Amid the heightened national anxiety about behaviour, there is an acceptance that children will be children. Steer is relaxed when I tell him about Jamil and his chair-kicking. In fact he is relieved that this is the worst incident I have come across.

"It was bad," he says. "But it isn't an assault. It's a kid losing his temper. It's easier to relate to pupils if you remember they're children. Sometimes children don't behave rationally."

He wouldn't want to suggest Seven Kings' pupils are all paragons. There are a number whose behaviour causes serious concern. They are watched closely, their "temperature" taken several times a day. In the worst incident so far this year—"one I didn't witness"—a boy squared up to two senior members of staff who confronted him

about a serious breach of the rules. He didn't hit anyone, but if the incident hadn't been handled with calm authority he might have done. He was suspended, but later allowed back.

Seven Kings' head of pastoral support is Doug Harrison, whose memory of pupil behaviour is even longer than Steer's. He arrived in 1975 when the school, formerly Beal girls' grammar, merged with Downshall boys' secondary modern.

He has seen changes, not all of which have been for the better. Peer pressure is stronger than it used to be, he believes: "There's always been peer pressure, but I think now there's more questioning of the school. Kids on their own are one thing. Kids with their mates are different. How you deal with that is important. You have to get them away from their immediate surroundings, you ask them to come for a chat. But discipline is about investing time in kids."

"Take Danny. He has been pushing at the boundaries recently. So staff make time to talk to him, to 'smother him with love and affection,'" says Harrison. "The other day, Danny was spotted taking a burger out of the canteen to eatâ€"something that is not allowed. A member of staff told him off. Danny got angry. Handled wrongly, he might have got angrier; as it was he soon simmered down."

Another of Harrison's jobs is to support newly qualified teachers. In his article, McLeod complained that he had had hardly any guidance on how to manage pupils' behaviour before he was put in front of a class. Most of his training actually took place on the job. So his experience illustrates what can go wrong when a school does not have a strategy to deal with bad behaviourâ€"in particular, for making sure that vulnerable, inexperienced teachers are helped on discipline.

Recent surveys of newly qualified teachers by the Training and Development Agency for Schools show that about one third of respondents feel their training in this area is only adequate or less than adequate. However, two thirds feel it is good or very goodâ€"and that figure has been rising.

The agency's assistant director of initial teacher training, Jackie Nunn, accepts this is an area of major concern to teachers. The agency has launched a project to support teachers, entitled Behaviour4Learning, and more than 100,000 items have been downloaded from its website in less than a year.

But Nunn rejects the notion that new teachers are being placed in the classroom without preparation on how to manage pupils: "The idea that it's left to chance in some way, or that there's enormous variation between courses, is quite unfounded," she says. "I was a teacher trainer myself. If there was any course in the country where

teachers weren't being prepared properly, it would lose its accreditation."

But despite these assurances, in a report on managing behaviour earlier this year, the schools' inspectorate Ofsted commented that more needed to be done to make newly qualified teachers feel confident in the classroom. The one or two sessions which many received during their initial training were not enough, the inspectors felt.

Philip Garner, head of postgraduate teacher education at University College Northampton and director of Behaviour4Learning, says teachers who are not confident enough to deal with bad behaviour can let their whole school down. "If children can learn how to behave inappropriately, they can learn how to behave appropriately," Garner says. "If a teacher walks past trouble, goes in the other direction, the kids notice. They know who those teachers are and they don't respect them. Staff know who they are as well, and have utter disdain for them, if the truth were told, because they don't support the whole enterprise of trying to establish an environment which has shape and order."

It's a view which is echoed by Danny Coyle, the acting deputy head of St Aloysius College in Archway. Two years ago, he says, the pupils were running his school. And the staff were hiding in the staffroom, trying to avoid confrontation.

Those readers who have been thinking that Seven Kings' success with its behaviour strategy could not be replicated in a tougher inner city comprehensive should take note. St Aloysius's pupils come from some of London's most deprived homes, many from Hackney and Newham. And it's an all-boys school—"another factor which often makes behaviour hard to control. To add to the school's woes, it survives in dilapidated, brutalist buildings—"part 1960s, part Victorian"—with narrow corridors and dark courtyards where pupils are often out of the view of the staff. Schools don't get much tougher than this.

"You've got to sit on these kids, all the time," Coyle says. "Monday's the worst day because they've been on the streets all weekend. By Friday, you've got them used to being at school, but you're shattered."

Two years ago the school was placed in special measures by Ofsted. Its head, who had been at the school for more than 20 years, departed. A new head lasted only a term.

"If you had come here two years ago, you wouldn't have recognised it," Coyle says. "It was absolute chaos. Teachers not able to teach. Classrooms of pupils hidden under 20 hooded jackets, a loutish atmosphere. At Christmas 2003 I thought it was a battle we didn't have a chance of winning."

The turning point came when the diocese persuaded Tom Mannion, the head of

Cardinal Pole School in Hackney, to step in. He has overseen the introduction of more vocational courses and an uncompromising attitude to discipline. A huge pile of hooded jackets in Coyle's office pays testament to this new attitude. At the end of every day, Coyle accompanies the boys down Archway Road to the tube, checking the hoodies don't reappear as they pass through the gates. When he spots a white-haired old lady waiting for a bus on the other side of the road, surrounded by dozens of St Aloysius's boys, he sends an emissary to make sure she gets on the bus first.

St Aloysius was one of the schools targeted earlier this year by the undercover reporter from Channel 4's Dispatches programme. She failed to find the poor behaviour she was looking for and instead criticised the school for being too tough with its pupils.

Yet during my visit to the school the boys seemed to appreciate the staff being back in charge. A walk around the school demonstrated the point. The classrooms were calm and orderly. "I love this class!" Coyle kept saying as he opened the doors. "And this is a lovely class! See that boy there? He hasn't had one day off in five years!"

It was zero tolerance week for year 10 that week, and five boys were doing their work in the hall. The previous week it had been year 8, the week before year 7. Upstairs in the learning support centre, Cindy Evans was supervising boys who were "included" instead of being excluded—they came to school to work, but were not allowed to see their friends. In the music block, the only modern part of the school, eight boys from year ten were thumping on their desks to the sound of Verdi's Anvil Chorus.

Emmanuel and Matthew, two star pupils, came out of their maths lesson to talk. They had been through all the school's troubles, and they said loyally that they never really thought it was failing.

"The inspectors came on fireworks day," Emmanuel said. "Obviously something was going to happen." But he added that things were better now. "People were disrupting the classes, but now they've been sent home, or permanently excluded. In every class there'd be one or two children who didn't want to work, and that made it hard for the others."

In fact, the number of permanent exclusions has been low. Four of the school's pupils were being educated in a local pupil referral unit, but the last exclusion was about 18 months ago, after a pupil had been badly beaten up by three others. There have been rare episodes of boys bringing weapons into school—the last one, about eight months ago, was discovered when another pupil alerted staff.

"If we accept nothing, we win on the bigger things as well," Coyle says. "It's

emotionally, physically and intellectually exhausting. But you know the whole weight of the school is behind you." Exam results have improved, and so has attendance.

Coyle has been at the school for 16 years, and Evans for 11. Neither thinks the pupils' behaviour has got dramatically worse. They are less aggressive now, less hostile. While there are still gangs and violence in the background, now the pupils can leave them behind at the gates. "They can leave behind the lifestyles they lead outside. They can put their different heads on and become children again," Evans says.

Nationally, the number of permanent exclusions has been rising once more after falling for several years. Nearly 10,000 pupils were removed from schools in 2003-04, which was 6 per cent more than the previous year but still 20 per cent less than in 1997-98. There is legislation that says all excluded pupils should be educated for at least 20 hours each week, but in practice this does not always happen.

So which is it? Are things getting much worse thanks to the decline of home life and the pervasiveness of a transgressive popular culture? Or are pupils just as much trouble as they always were and a lot less trouble where schools get the behaviour strategy right? The experiences of both Seven Kings and St Aloysius suggest there are few problems that cannot be overcome with good leadership and hard work.

The recent report of Steer's group on behaviour acknowledges that this is the case. Although it recommended that the law on teachers' rights to discipline pupils and search them for weapons should be clarified, its message is broadly optimistic.

"Incidents of serious misbehaviour, and especially acts of extreme violence, remain exceptionally rare and are carried out by a very small proportion of pupils," it concludes. And it goes on to describe the atmosphere I experienced at Seven Kings high school.

"It is often the case," it says, "that for pupils, school is a calm place in a disorderly world."