

CIRCLES – NOT RED LINES; PAUL DIX

School behaviour policies tend to run in straight lines.

Many are travelators to fixed term exclusions with written warnings, formal meetings, written contracts and sworn promises made in blood (well red pen). A series of red lines and serious threats designed to crush undesirable behaviours. Of course these exclusionary systems that demand the child changes immediately are reflected in classroom practice. After all, if your leaders are excluding children for minor infringements why wouldn't the class teachers.

Often red lines come with tariffs in a desperate bid for faux consistency; no pen ? Ten minute detention, wrong uniform? Day in the booth, 'looking at me in a funny way', etc. The language of red lines gives us 'monitoring reports', 'final warning meetings' and 'isolation'. It's all part of filtering the good children from the bad. It's all a bit binary. An unevidenced authoritarian fantasy. And it isn't what children need now or ever.

Schools that are serious about improving behaviour and relationships seek to reduce exclusion and increase inclusion. Simple. They are wired differently, with circles in policy that play out in practice.

Let's go round again

Relational levers replace a hierarchy of punishment, conversations teach new behaviours and co-regulation means children gradually learn how to regulate themselves better. Schools who focus on circles have classroom behaviour plans that are focused on support and relationships. They have a Triage model for children who need extra help during the lesson that is a planned process of regulation, repair and return to learning.

Coaching circles replace monitoring and the road of increasing punishment is replaced by circles of consistent rational practice. For children who are really struggling there are 360 degree reviews that seek to find answers, not to threaten cliff edges. Support, even with the wobbliest behaviours is designed to be circular, to be repetitive when needed but also unrelentingly positive. With circles there is no final line, no threat to ramp up punishment, no chance of anyone giving up on a child.

Restorative conversations, done well are not easy chat circles. They demand so much more from the child than sitting in silence (supposedly thinking about their crimes, in reality thinking about what's for dinner) can ever do. Holding up the mirror to poor behaviour is uncomfortable for anyone. Having to think about who has been affected deliberately teaches empathy. Asking about what they have thought about since the incident, encourages reflection and considering how to make things right is a tough moral question.

Walking and talking, manipulating play dough together or cleaning up the classroom takes the pressure off the conversation to allow for deeper reflection. A restorative conversation across a desk feels like an interview, feels like a prelude to an apology, feels like too much eye contact. The environment that you create for the conversation is more important than anything. 'Oh we do restorative conversations in the booths' they cry. Oh do you, do you really?

Shifting from isolation rooms where children are over controlled to the point where they are said to have 'failed the room' is a tricky but important move (I know you are expecting a reference to 1984 here, alas, no). It needs leadership, a splash of good training and a staff

team who have had time to create a collaborative plan. Done well the transition can be seamless. People respond to a kinder approach. Children pick up on it straight away and the response is real. It is contagious.

Relationships that flourish

Within weeks of removing the 'removal' room and implementing a kinder, more informed Triage system the SENCO of a large secondary told me she had had more disclosures in the last 6 weeks than in the last 6 years.

The children had started to trust their teachers again. Relationships started to flourish.

We also discovered that of the 20 pupils in the onsite Alternative Provision, 19 lived with their Grandparents. Amazing just how much was being held back, how alone some children had become with their problems. Almost as if the previous regime was designed to suppress the harsh reality of children's lives in favour of PR. If you kick out all the children who are struggling your spreadsheet of exam results might look better but you have seeded your community with resentment for another generation or two.

I visited last week and followed the 'On Call' team. There were children who were struggling, children who needed to come out of lessons but there was not an angry word. From students or teachers. Everyone was calm, and rational and focused on helping. Children were taken to calm spaces to regulate, learning coaches prepared them to return to learning and I saw the deputy head from a previously zero tolerance regime lying on the floor doing an Alvin and the Chipmunks jigsaw with a dysregulated year 7. **Straight lines are great for spreadsheets but children work in circles.**