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"MISS, YOU LOOK SH*T": BOUNDARIES, NEGOTIATIONS AND CARE — FOR YOU

#INSULTOFTHEWEEK

Pupil: "Miss, you're unique."

Me: "Oh thanks."

Pupil: "No Miss, that is not a compliment."

IN THIS CHAPTER YOU WILL

- Learn how to hold our own boundaries for self-care in a culture that does not support it.
- Discover how holding these personal boundaries helps us support pupils with challenging behaviour.



INTRODUCTION

Yes. This a book about behaviour and we're starting with how you care for yourself. Why? Because our young people with behavioural needs deserve the best.

These pupils have some of the greatest needs. They have some of the biggest challenges to being included in school, education and our society, because of their own experiences and attitudes, as well as the discrimination and prejudice that are stacked against them. Therefore, they present some of the most challenging behaviour to the adults around them, and that gets tricky sometimes. These pupils need the most capable educators supporting them. You have a responsibility to look after yourself, and I know that as teachers we're generally pretty rubbish at this, but that's no longer good enough. Whilst I advocate for an improved wellbeing focus in the education system's infrastructure, I also believe we have more power than we realise as educators on the ground. This chapter provides the first steps.

You have a responsibility to be ready to work with these vulnerable young people, to be as patient, as understanding and as human as you can be with them. So too right we begin with looking after ourselves. If we can't hold a boundary for ourselves to eat lunch every day, how can we hold a boundary for a pupil who we know is on the verge of self-destruction?

A COMMON SCENARIO

Please alter job roles in accordance with your situation.

Lunchtime is forty minutes. After dealing with a behaviour incident, you've lost ten minutes. On your way to the canteen, your Head of Department grabs you to ask "can you just provide work for Deci who is still in hospital this week, recovering from her operation? It needs to go in the post this afternoon, as her laptop won't connect to the school's system, so I'll need it at the end of lunch." Your next lesson is the other side of the school, with the notoriously ill-behaved 9F2. You need to allow ten minutes to get there and check that the key for the cupboard that contains your equipment for the lesson is still in the drawer – if not, you need to find the caretaker.

So you're left with twenty minutes at best. Your options are:

- Option A: Skip lunch return to your classroom and find or create the work for
 Deci, spend an extra five minutes trying to find your HOD (who has gone into
 a meeting) and leave the requested work on her desk wonder if her meeting
 will finish before the emergency post goes out.
- Option B: Run back to your classroom, pick up some worksheets to photocopy
 on your way back to the canteen, cross your fingers you can get served quickly,
 don't get caught in any incidents (or other requests) and buy the on-the-gosandwich option the same lunch you've had for the last three days.







- **Option C: Say no but offer an alternative** to have some work ready for tomorrow by breaktime.
- Option D: Say an outright no to your HOD.
- Option E: What else can you think of?

Before we investigate the implications of these options, I want to add a caveat: there are ideal world answers and there is reality. We can't always practice exactly what we would like to (because we are human). However, thinking through these options outside of the moment and preparing for them to reoccur, we can notice patterns and those moments where we kick ourselves for not doing or saying what we really wanted to – and thus we are more likely to make decisions we feel aligned with in the moment. The options:

OPTION A: SKIP LUNCH

FOOD

I have done this many times myself, especially when running my Amnesty International lunch club. If you needed proof that this affects your teaching, I would like to share this insightful observation from one of my pupils – a pupil classed as 'low ability' and unlikely to pass their exams:

Pupil: Miss you're being more snappy today, what's up?

Me: I'm fine, get on with your work.

Pupil: You're not usually this grumpy, have you had lunch?

Me: No, had a club.

Pupil: Eat your lunch Miss.

Me: We're not supposed to eat in front of you – rules.

Pupil: Please eat Miss.

Food is a basic need, and whilst I'm not going to go into a lecture about any type of diet or nutrition programme, I will advocate this:

Healthy diet (sleep pattern, exercise, lifestyle) = energy = patience, understanding and empathy – and a heightened ability to support pupils with challenging behaviour.

During my NQT year we had coaching sessions, the coach told us that one of the main 'takeaways that worked' for NQTs in all the coaching was to have a constant stash of high energy, healthy snacks in your teacher's desk. So simple, so helpful.

On a wider perspective, take some time to examine your food plan. You may have great intentions to get home with your veggie box and Ottolenghi meal every night. You manage it until Tuesday then you're put on a detention rota, there's an emergency meeting with some parents and reality is more beans on toast (with the







mouldy bits picked out) most nights. Be realistic and get someone to help you – outside eyes are always good. You make two decent meals a week and then batch and freeze, one ready meal a week and a constant supply of healthy bars, bananas and dates (or whatever works for *you* to maintain a healthy body and mind) in your desk.

BOUNDARIES

I have been lucky enough to work with experienced Leadership Development Coach and founder of Inspiring Women Changemakers, Anju Handa who, in her clear guide on setting boundaries, advocates: "If you do not clearly demonstrate and communicate your boundaries, how can you expect others to respect them?" (Handa, 2020). She is completely right. Pupils pick up on how we act and how we respect ourselves – if they see you not holding boundaries with others, they will know (subconsciously) that they can push your boundaries later. You'll see many parallels with this later when we examine how to retain boundaries with pupils.

There is often a belief, especially when you start teaching, that you must do everything because everyone else is. MYTH BUSTER: this is not true, even if it appears like that from the outside with some people. Only *you* can decide where your boundaries are and only *you* can (lovingly) maintain them.

If you don't maintain your own boundaries then pupils, HOD, Governors, people who don't know how to queue properly, your children, your partner will all step over that boundary – sometimes without knowing that they are. This sets a pattern – they will experience this as the norm, and it will happen again:

- "Pleeeeeeeeaaasse Miss, can I sit next to my friend this lesson? Just once?" Say yes and they will ask you again next lesson. Your seating plan no longer exists.
- "You don't mind if we postpone your idea until next meeting, do you? Geoff needs to talk about the new visualisers." Say yes, and this will happen often with your ideas.
- "Please don't tell my Mum, she said I won't get the new iPhone for my birthday
 if school rang about my behaviour again.". Say yes, and not only will you be
 asked this again, but behaviour will deteriorate.

As a self-rule, hold your boundaries 99% of the time. The other 1% is that part that *is* for times that we're flexible, for ourselves, for an easier life and for others' ease. It's your judgement call, but be warned; if that percentage creeps past 1% of the time there will be consequences; will you still be able to reinforce the previous boundaries, or not?

OPTION B: RUN BACK

ENERGY

As an eternal optimist (or as my partner says – unrealistic) this is my favourite choice and usual downfall. Option B relies on luck and multitasking skills.







There are so many variables out of your control; if you *do* manage to pull it off that can be dangerous too – first you get a kick from succeeding, "I achieved everything despite the odds", then it may also come with external kudos, "I don't know how you manage it all", which the ego loves. The danger, however, is that the goalposts shift, sometimes without you noticing; this has then become your new norm. The result: you're not just doing this mammoth juggling act when your HOD asks a quick favour, but this becomes every lunchtime and break and afterschool.

One term I found myself simultaneously leading a Year 7 form of 35 and doing one-to-one interventions with my Year 11 GCSE pupils. This plate spinning can only be sustained for a limited length of time. Add an external factor – a cold, period pains, financial worries, family troubles or illness, an experience of racism, sexism, homophobia etc., and the whole thing goes pop.

If you are susceptible to Option B return to your own boundaries. Let's look at the physics again.

Imagine you are an energy bowl with a finite amount of energy dependant on the amount of sleep, food, physical and mental rest and exercise you get.

- How much energy do you have in your bowl right now?
- How much do you need for yourself?
- Do you have any spare?
- How many lunchtimes per week are you doing this juggling act?
- How many really? A small tally by your desk can help if you are unsure.
- How many is realistically sustainable, how many would you have in an ideal world?

Note that some option Bers will not recognise their choices as a problem. Sometimes it's not – in the moment. We all work in different ways and have varying capacities for different things. But also look out for other areas in your life where the pressure is building. A classic is "keeping it all together" at school, but turning into a firebreathing dragon at home, crying on the way to work regularly or losing the ability to really listen to people close to you.

OPTION C: SAY NO BUT OFFER AN ALTERNATIVE

There's an art to this, and it *can* be done successfully and in fact can be more positive in the long run. The art of holding boundaries, whilst negotiating, again, is a skill needed in bucket loads with pupils with challenging behaviour.

PART A: BOUNDARIES AGAIN

You must hold your own boundary and therefore self-worth with your HOD. Depending on their character or your relationship, this could be a quick non-thinking reflex or a monumental, heart wrenching undertaking.

Some doubts that might arise are: "can I really put my (pathetic sandwich with no butter because I ran out) lunch before a child's education? A child who is already ill? I need that pay rise next year and it's performance related, maybe this is a test of







my performance? Everyone else skips lunch, I'm weak if I don't", and so on. These are all completely justified as thoughts, but they don't mean you need to automatically agree if you're not comfortable with doing so. There may also be differences in gender, race, age, status etc. that make you feel uncomfortable in saying no directly. Deborah Frances-White examines this power play between women and men, both when women are being asked for something and when consent is being assumed, "If someone takes without asking because they assume they're entitled, your no can come as a surprise to them and it can feel like a confrontation" (Frances-White, 2018: 211). If you feel holding your boundary would be interpreted as a confrontation, it is understandably harder to consider maintaining it. Frances-White then goes on to explain that sometimes saying no to someone within your community, a friend or someone you identify with can also be challenging, as "Their expectation of alliance is higher" (2018: 217). I have seen this play out in schools where, for example, a black pupil who is challenging a teacher's authority may revert to bringing up their similarities - the teacher is also black - to attempt to strengthen allegiance and avoid punishment. All these factors (and you will think of more) will be the underlying reasons why you find yourself agreeing to extra pressure or work that you know is not good for you, or your pupils. These are real feelings, thoughts and experiences and I'm not suggesting that you suppress them. Spending time thinking about these things outside of the context can be empowering, and I would like to invite you to tinker with the notion of alternative thoughts, and experiment with how that will play out next time. Explore the possibility that, if you eat your sandwich, and get twenty minutes to switch off, you'll be more able to handle 9F2 in period 5.

Remember:

Healthy diet (sleep pattern, exercise, lifestyle) = energy = patience, understanding and empathy – and a heightened ability to support pupils with challenging behaviour!

When Tyler starts telling you he "can't be arsed" with his coursework *again* after lunch, you'll have the patience and energy to take him aside, have a conversation with him, hold your boundaries and find a way forwards (unlike last week when you had to call pastoral after he set his book alight). Which brings me to the key message of this chapter:

You having time to refill your tank, physically, emotionally, energetically is the *best* thing you can do to help support pupils with challenging behaviour.

So once you've convinced yourself, or at least decided to entertain the idea, that your lunchtime is vital, you need to negotiate this with the HOD. Who may or may not agree with you.

PART B: NEGOTIATING

- 1. Understand: "Deci is still in hospital? I hope the operation went well. Yes, it's important we keep her learning going."
- 2. Set your boundary no need to justify yourself: "I won't be able to create something now."









- 3. Offer an alternative: "However, I could adapt the sheets we're doing in a way she'd really enjoy and might be more suitable for the hospital environment. I could get this to you for tomorrow by first break."
- 4. Listen: Nine out of ten times the firm boundary and the alternative is enough for most managers to agree. If there are objections, repeat the process:

HOD: "But we really need it now."

You: "Yes, I can see the urgency." (Understand) "As I said, I'd be happy to get a suitable version of the work to you for tomorrow break time." (Maintaining set boundary) "If not, there is a copy of the key points we covered in the lesson on my desk, you can help yourself to this now and send it so she has something to at least read until I send her the work tomorrow." (Offering an alternative)

Note, you do *not* need to justify your (own, possibly unpaid!) time, do not offer that:

HOD: "But what are you doing now?" (Listen)

You: "Preparing for 9F2, I'm going to get on." (Maintaining boundary)

Preparing is a useful word – we know that preparing is you eating your lunch, getting a break and mentally preparing for 9F2. It does also encompass finding that key and setting up your equipment. You have been truthful and kept your boundary.

OPTION D: SAY AN OUTRIGHT NO

This option may be entirely appropriate. It could be the third time this week they've left it until the last minute for this type of request, you have already promised something similar or you feel it is not your task. Communicate clearly and neutrally. A succinct version of the previous conversation:

"Oh dear." (Understand) "That's not something I can help you with I'm off to prepare for 9F2." (Set boundary) "You could check the homework resources for something that's already ready?" (Offer alternative)

[space for response] (Listen)

"I can't help then, I must get off." (Maintain boundary)

OPTION E: WHAT ELSE CAN YOU THINK OF?

Have a think. Knowing your own weaknesses and strengths, are there other options? What do you see colleagues doing who are able to maintain boundaries more successfully? Think of a time you did successfully hold a boundary with someone, what did you do and how did it feel afterwards?







THE 1% SHIFT

It may be overwhelming (few of us are living the exact, self-care, boundaried, fun life we imagine *all* of the time), or you may not know where to start. The best way to find your first step, I have found, is inspired by Red School's work concerning the '1% shift', a method (explained in detail in the Action Box) that involves finding a small step you can take towards your overall aim. I am a graduate of the Menstruality Leadership Programme, in which I got to practice this approach in relationship to my menstruality – and for my self-care and work ethic in general. In their book *Wild Power*, Alexandra Pope and Sjanie Hugo Wurlitzer discuss "the power of small moves to make big changes [...] You may find yourself constantly sitting under the thumb of what you think you 'should' be doing, falling into 'idealised' thinking and abandoning the real possibilities before you" (Pope and Wurlitzer, 2017: 212). It's a sentence that resonates wholeheartedly with teaching and schools.

The 1% shift is a miraculous method. I know, I've tried and tested it and use it a lot. Within teaching it took me from feeling lost, stressed and out of control, to working with and on behalf of the pupils I enjoy working with the most, being the author of this book, being invited to do my TEDx talk, speak as an expert on teenage behaviour on BBC Radio 4 and spend much of my working life engaged and motivated. When I was working fulltime in a mainstream large comprehensive secondary, I knew that whilst it was 'good for my career' to get 'experience under my belt' that it wasn't working *for me*; which inevitably affected my teaching. As my Nana used to say, I couldn't see the wood for the trees. I didn't know what needed to change, but I promised myself I would start to explore the possibilities – 1%.

At the time I was mentoring a trainee teacher and one evening I went to the university to do top up training with them. I met with a co-ordinator of the PGCE course who had been there when I trained. She asked me how I was doing - I decided to tell the truth – the 1%! I felt like a fraud – I was there because I was the mentor, it was me who was supposed to be promoting the profession. However, I knew the balance in my life wasn't right. I shared honestly some of my experiences and frustrations about my role. The co-ordinator then set up fortnightly coaching sessions for me with one of the tutors – this was even free of charge because I was alumni. These happened within school time so as not to add any more hours to my day. It only lasted for around five sessions, but it was enough for me to work out that the current environment was not sustainable for me. With the support of the coach, I requested to go down to four days a week the following year - this was the magic. The extra day was exactly what I needed to give me clarity of my direction with education. Of course, there was a wage cut, however I accounted for most of that by taking on a Teaching and Learning Responsibility (TLR) within the school that enthused me – the Lead on Equality and Diversity – another important 1% shift that eventually led me on my path. The extra day a week gave me time to write, reflect and mostly just breathe. From there, it was a couple more terms until I decided that I needed to work on a freelance basis







within schools and have time to write, train and speak on the inclusive education I am so passionate about creating.

My 1% approach (along with the Menstrual Cycle Awareness I was practising), led me to put myself first so that I can do the best for the pupils. Now I am teaching part time in a special school for SEMH pupils *and* I get to use my performance, communication and writing skills to advocate and train on behalf of these vulnerable pupils – who are so often voiceless. I could not have stepped here directly from the lost stress-head I was a few years ago – following my 1% crumbs was what did it.

I have re-purposed Red School's step-by-step explanation of the practice of the 1% shift for this chapter's Action Box.

FINLAND AND WELLBEING

At the start of 2019, I partook in a Finnish Education Research Trip observing, teaching and interviewing across five schools and with Local Authority equivalent policy makers (for more information see Further Reading). Beforehand, I had a list of research questions to ask the schools, staff and pupils. Because Finland is famous for its teacher trust and autonomy, that list included "How do you approach staff wellbeing?" It took me a week of feeling lost, but by the second school I realised I was asking the wrong questions. The schools I visited did not have specific staff wellbeing policies or added on tokenistic, well-meaning but ultimately useless events like 'Soup-vembers' (a well-meaning concept I once witnessed fall flat in a large British school, due to a lack of thought around logistics) because the infrastructure of Finnish education gives their teachers more flexibility in their timetables, more autonomy in the classroom, longer initial teacher training at a higher level (compulsory Master's degree for every teacher) and possibly the magic bullet - no inspection body like Ofsted. Is everything therefore perfect in Finnish schools? Of course not, I saw a small number of stressed teachers and a rather spectacular canteen food fight during my visit. However, I also saw an overwhelming majority of teachers who were fully-fledged human beings; not teacher-robots. Every teacher I interviewed could list hobbies, leisure or extra learning that they actually did (not just listed on their CVs and dating profiles). When a teacher – or pupil – in Finland is not timetabled to be in lesson they are not expected to be on site. A teacher I stayed with for a week didn't have lessons until midday on a Monday that term. The time was hers – she could stay at home and plan, meet with parents and carers, walk the dog (in the metre thick snow), or have a lie in. When a school's timetable promotes that level of trust and individualised space for work-life balance, and therefore wellbeing, Soup-vembers are not necessary.

For those of us not teaching in Finland, or other countries with such approaches, we may not have this kind of flexibility and we may have to fight harder to maintain boundaries for our own self-care. It begins with knowing that taking the steps to maintain these vital practices for yourself and ultimately for your pupils is essential.







Interview

You're definitely not going to be at plus ten all the time. This is definitely not about pretending that everything is fine.

Frederika is a vivacious educator, speaker and consultant in Positive Psychology, specialising in Positive Education and Character Education. She has an MSc in Applied Positive Psychology and is currently studying for her Professional Doctorate in Education. She is the founder of "Educate to Flourish CIC", a not-for-profit organisation that supports children and provides them with tools to flourish in life. She is also the European Representative for IPPAed, the International Positive Psychology Association's Positive Education.

I have been lucky enough to collaborate with Frederika and witness her zest for life on many occasions – sometimes involving staying up until 2am enthusiastically putting the education system to right. Her personal circumstances have been full of challenges, not least in supporting her two daughters with ongoing serious medical issues, including open-heart surgery. Alongside this, however, she uses the tools of Positive Psychology to support her own wellbeing, and lucky for us she shares this in her work as an author, trainer and lecturer in Positive Education.

How can you teach and look after the wellbeing of children if you're not well yourself?

Beginning from the parent perspective, Frederika reminds us:

We entrust our most precious living being to teachers. They spend their entire days, most of their lives actually, with teachers. Why would we not want those teachers to be well? It's absolutely essential. The stats are horrific on teacher wellbeing; we need to do something. There's clearly stuff that needs to happen at a systemic level, but ultimately if you can't change the system and overhaul it, then you need to be able to do the stuff for yourself. I come from the perspective of Positive Psychology, and there are things that we can do. We live in an imperfect world, so we think: what can I do to protect myself to boost my resilience and look after my wellbeing as much as I can? I always think of it as using the tools as best you can to be the best you can be under the circumstances you find yourself in.

Frederika gives an oh-so-familiar example around behaviour from her years as a teacher, highlighting the teacher's common affliction of perfectionism and demonstrating the importance of accepting what you *can* do:

I felt like every lesson was a failure because I couldn't control the class, I couldn't control the behaviour. I spent most of the time being beetroot red

(Continued)







because I was about to explode. One of the big things to do in these circumstances is to focus on the little wins. There was one 15-year-old in my classes, he was very disruptive. He was one of the kids who was always one of the hard guys, 'no one messes with me' and I couldn't connect with him. Then one lesson, I don't know what had happened, he was just a delight. So at the end of the lesson I asked him to come over and he was looking like what the ?!*&. I just said to him, "I want you to know it was such a pleasure to teach you today. Whatever's gone on for you today, hold on to that because today you shone in this lesson." He just looked at me and said, "could you write that in my diary for my parents to read?" I said, "of course I will, I will do this for you every single lesson if that's what you want." It was just a tiny little breakthrough but 18 years later, that one moment – I can still remember that. Now if we can go through our day and instead of focusing on all the shit that piles upon us, we can focus on that one good thing that went really well that will help us.

Frederika also works with Character Strengths – 24 characteristics of our personality that affect how we think, feel and behave. Knowing where our strengths lie can be the key to us approaching challenging situations, by playing on these strengths and using them as a lens to fulfilment. Frederika gives an example: one of your strengths is curiosity, and you're having difficulty getting through your marking, how could you use this strength to re-frame the task? Maybe set up some enquiries – I wonder how many pupils spelt the key vocabulary wrong? Or I wonder how many Pupil Premium pupils understood the concept? There is more information and a survey to find out your own strengths at the VIA Institute on Character – and by completing it for yourself you also add to their data for the studies.

I asked Frederika what a key message would be to herself 18 years ago, struggling with behaviour in the classroom.

There is only one of you. In the extreme case, once you're gone, you're gone and if you let yourself be depleted and swallowed up by the job, by the stress and everything else then that's it. What else is there? However you show up, whatever you are able to do it has to be enough in that moment and you owe it to yourself to look after your wellbeing because it's much harder to get it back than to work on it.

Source: Interview with author, 2020

Action Box

Next lesson

Before your next lesson, set aside a minimum of five minutes of uninterrupted time.







Start by giving your imagination free rein and let yourself dream up what your teaching life and personal life could look like if you put yourself first. Get a large sheet of paper and coloured pens and dream big [...] how many hours are you working per week? How often would you cook? What would you eat? What sleep pattern would you have? How much time would you spend with your own children, family or friends? What type of school are you in? What type of pupils do you work with? How would you be treated by colleagues and pupils? What type of teacher are you? What kind of role do you have within the school? There are no limits. Don't censor yourself – dare yourself to use your imagination. (Keep this paper somewhere safe.)

Now ask yourself what 1% of that change would be. Let it be something really small, seemingly insignificant and imminently doable.

Make a small note of it where you will see it, on a Post-it, by your bed, on your phone.

Next week

Do your 1% shift.

Long term

Do the 1% shift regularly.

Schedule in another five minutes where you re-meet with your big dream. Get the paper out. See how the 1% shift has made a difference, consider shifting to 2% or finding another 1% in a different area. As Red School warn – it does get addictive.

What has any of this got to do with behaviour?

As educators, holding our own boundaries for self-care is necessary. Many of us do not work in a system that does this for us. It is different for everyone, spending time to find out what works for you specifically (at different times of the day, month or year) can pay dividends.

When you take radical responsibility for your own behaviour, you can make a bigger positive impact for others – your pupils.







Further reading

Setting Healthy Boundaries - Anju Handa

A useful cheat sheet outlining how to establish effective, authentic communication in the workplace that can be found at www.inspiring womenchangemakers.co.uk/cheat-sheets/(accessed 26 March, 2021).

For Flourishing's Sake - Frederika Roberts

As well as outlining what Positive Education actually is, Frederika's latest book shares examples of the benefits of Positive Education, an international range of settings it can be used in, how it helps academic process and the practicalities of how staff are supported with it, how you might use it yourself in a school that does not support it and the cost implications. Published by Jessica Kingsley Publishers. Frederika also hosts the For Flourishing's Sake podcast at www.forflourishingssake.com/ (accessed March 26, 2021).

What on Earth makes Finnish Schools SO Good? - Adele Bates

A 3-part series of blog and vlog posts outlining the findings of my Finnish Education Research Trip. Topics covered include: inclusion, SEND, behaviour, Early Years, assessment, curriculum, staff structure, wages, parent and carer involvement:

https://adelebateseducation.co.uk/what-on-earth-makes-finnish-schools-so-good/ (accessed 26 March, 2021).

https://adelebateseducation.co.uk/finnish-education-part-2/(accessed 14 April, 2021).

https://adelebateseducation.co.uk/finnish-education-balance-for-better-part-3/ (accessed on 14 April, 2021).

Wild Power – Alexandra Pope and Sjanie Hugo Wurlitzer (founders of Red School)

An absolute must for any menstruating person who wants to harness the power of their cycle, discover how to make school life work with the cycle and get rid of any inconveniences that it causes. It includes three 'maps' to guide you through the energies, tasks and challenges presented as you journey through each cycle. A well-thumbed copy of this sits on my bedside table at all times. Published by Hay House with accompanying podcast Wild Power Series.



