

Wielding a cane is not the way to improve behaviour

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“I had a terrible education,” Woody Allen once said. “I attended a school for emotionally disturbed teachers.”

It’s hard to know how to explain the findings of this week’s *TES* poll of teachers about behaviour. Were they having a bad day, telling it as it was, or proving themselves as dysfunctional as the teachers in Woody Allen’s one-liner?

A sample of 5,472 teachers answered a simple question: “Do you think teachers should be given the right to use corporal punishment in extreme cases?”

The results will shock those who swallow the stereotype that most teachers would not swat a fly with their *Guardian*: strongly support the right, 7.3 per cent; support, 13 per cent; no opinion, 7.2 per cent; oppose, 28.7 per cent; strongly oppose, 43.8 per cent. So, a whacking 20 per cent of teachers support the reintroduction of caning.

Is behaviour in our schools really so grim that a fifth of us would speak softly but reach for a big stick?

For most people, the time when corporal punishment existed in schools is as quaint as feeling your money was safe in the bank. Never such innocence again.

In the 1970s comprehensive I attended, pupils and staff would whisper of the naughtiest pupils being sent to the head to be caned. It was the last gasp of an era in which teachers asserted their authority by pulping someone’s flesh with a stick.

But even then, corporal punishment was doomed. The lobby group Stopp - the Society of Teachers Opposed to Physical Punishment - was working towards its goal, achieved in 1986, when caning in state schools came to an end.

I know all this incidentally from a few hours of typing “caning” and “corporal punishment” into an internet search engine. Be warned: if

Woody Allen's teachers were emotionally disturbed, there are far more worrying types stalking cyberspace, and I fear they are clutching canes.

We delude ourselves if we think corporal punishment will make things better. As Peter the Hermit said: "Young people today think of nothing but themselves." That was in 1274. Today, they would be messaging their human rights lawyers.

The Conservatives, now dismantling the backdrops to their Birmingham conference, offer a policy that may play well with the hardliners in *The TES* survey. They promise to abolish the independent appeal panels, which, in school mythology, are prone to overturning a head's decision to exclude a pupil permanently. They suggest that this will empower heads to reimpose standards, enhance the authority of teachers and send out powerful messages about the need to conform. But in reality it won't.

The independent appeal panels may be uncomfortable for those who sit before them; they may throw in challenging questions about school behaviour policies and exclusion procedures; and they may be unpleasant. But the process serves a larger purpose. Without it, the temptation to kick out today's naughty children will be too tempting, and put us at endless risk of legal challenge.

Without the binding judgment of an appeals panel, the parents of any permanently excluded child would be free to take every school to court. We would be hiring lawyers, compiling hefty cases and fighting off litigation threats. Independent appeal panels spare us that.

It is a reminder, if we need one, that in the complex world of education - built on a web of social relationships - simple solutions are too frequently too simple. They may play well to the conference fan club, the tabloid rottweilers and the incurable nostalgics, but behaviour isn't something that will be simply improved by a populist policy.

If, as the one in five teachers in The TES poll suggests, we put our hand in the box where the cane is kept, let's remember that the name on that box is Pandora.