

Behaviour and Boys Books

Geoff Barton

Shelly Newstead, The Buskers Guide to Behaviour, Common Threads Publications, £8.50; Louisa Leaman, Classroom Confidential, Continuum, £9.99; Lucinda Neall, Bringing the Best Out in Boys, (video and booklet), Hawthorn Press, £XXX; Michael Gurian and Kathy Stevens, The Minds of Boys, John Wiley & Sons, £15.99

People mocked former Education Secretary Kenneth Baker when he told civil servants to compress all key policy information to no more than a side of A4. How superficial and trivial, they sneered. But me, I'm with Ken. Whilst I always enjoy reading books on education, too many feel as if they would have benefited from a little nimble-fingered hatchet work at the editor's desk.

This goody-bag of behaviour books shows us the best and worst features of the genre. The shortest is Shelly Newstead's Busker's Guide to Behaviour. With echoes of the semi-comic Bluffer's Guide series, this seems an odd title when it comes to something as central to good teaching

as behaviour. We might imagine a busker's guide to using Ofsted jargon or blagging your way through an interview, but behaviour? The blurb says: "Buskers are people who have great intuition and courage of their convictions". The series aims to provide an underlying rationale for practical approaches, aiming to be light-hearted, clear and using current theory.

I found the conversational style ("no hang on a minute, don't rush off to chapter 2") irritating rather than reassuring, but teachers' tastes in such matters will vary as much as our common interest in, say, grape varieties. Some of the messages, however, are sensible, such as her view that many school reward systems only teach a superficial kind of behaviour. She is especially dismissive (as I am) of mechanistic discipline systems that have grown adults totting up points for good behaviour and subtracting points for naughtiness. But even at 70 small-format pages it could have been a shorter book.

Behaviour management is undoubtedly a tricky subject to distil within a book of any size. Many of us have marvelled in the presence of a gifted teacher who effortlessly tames hormonally-challenged adolescents without uttering a word. Louisa Leaman's Classroom Confidential attempts to forensically dissect the key elements of effective classroom

management. Thus we should keep our pupils motivated by pitching the lesson content at the right level, know in advance what pupils' abilities are, give praise, and make lessons interesting. So far so predictable. But it's in the 'how to' that we seek value for money in such books.

This one is useful in its guidance on what we might call the micro-skills of teaching – where to stand (“move around the class and make students feel they are being watched from all sides”), how to write on the board without turning your back, that kind of thing. It would be useful for a new teachers and many will welcome its matter-of-fact style.

When asked to review Lucinda Neall's book Bringing the Best Out in Boys a couple of years ago I was highly enthusiastic. It contained so many new theoretical perspectives – including an unexpectedly compelling section on boys' testosterone levels – plus real, practical advice. You felt you were in the hands of a savvy seen-it/done-it teacher. Now there's an accompanying video. Boys of different ages at the Nobel School, Stevenage, tell us what they like: interesting lessons, a variety of activities, teachers who are firm but fair. They want to be respected and never ever bored.

I'd be surprised if many girls would disagree with any of these. And that's part of the problem. Whereas the book provided a range of genuinely new insights, the video tells us little that we wouldn't have predicted. You could as easily spend your £XXX on a pack of new camcorder tapes and film your own students. Certainly the quality of the filming and editing are no better than you could produce at school.

Whilst there are some short clips showing how a teacher might intervene in a corridor when two boys are fighting ("boys can we try solving this using words rather than fists?") and how to encourage boys to take an interest in your subject ("Mitch, I know English isn't your favourite subject but just think what A-levels you could take if you got a really good grade". Mitch nods remorsefully). But it's all a bit sporadic and doesn't really live up to the promise of providing "communication strategies".

More compelling is The Minds of Boys, an American import that contains the apparently obligatory cheesiness of a second rate Disney animation. But dispensing with the sick-bag at the end of the introduction, I found the authors' overall thesis compelling. They show us how the development of schooling in the past fifty years has squeezed out many of the styles that would have benefited some boys, such as the

demise of a hands-on apprenticeship model of learning. They look at ways parents can support their sons' development in the pre-school years; what teachers need to know about boys' brains; and – devastatingly – the destructive impact that unregulated television can have. “Never”, they say “not in his toddler years, his prepubescence, not even in his adolescence allow your son to have a TV in his room”.

Here's a book that's not afraid to shy away from giving advice and, unusually, one that fails the Kenneth Baker A4 format test. Bravo.

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