

‘I was, like, listened to and it made me feel proud’

It is around 4 pm at a local comprehensive school and the last lesson of the day is over. I had arranged to ring Ellen, the Drama teacher, and she answers the phone in her classroom.

I'm interested in working with some of your students, Ellen ... Negative leaders; kids who perhaps are a bit difficult; okay in Drama, but maybe not really behaving or focused in other subjects. Have you any...?

She interrupts, 'Naughty kids. You want to work with some naughty kids?' I hear her call to the other teachers in the room, 'She wonders if we have some problem kids she can work with.' There is general hilarity in the background! She returns to the call, 'How many do you want?'

The school has an active Drama department, led by a very experienced teacher who is committed to the subject and to the students. When Ellen speaks about two young students, Ashley and Kayleigh, her no-nonsense description is underpinned by a great deal of warmth and you can sense immediately one of the reasons why these two students like Drama, despite their reputation as disruptive students in other subjects. They have been encouraged to believe that they have something to offer.

Difficult or challenging students tend to be attracted by Drama and it is often difficult to persuade colleagues in other subject areas that a nightmare student they may be dealing with in, say, Maths, is behaving well and working well in Drama. Ashley and Kayleigh are such students. They are seen as strong-willed but not always cooperative or focused in classes other than Drama. A teacher describes them:

They are both quite different ... they have a very big sort of face in the classroom if you like and will often lead quite disruptive behaviour, because other kids look up to them. They're well respected.

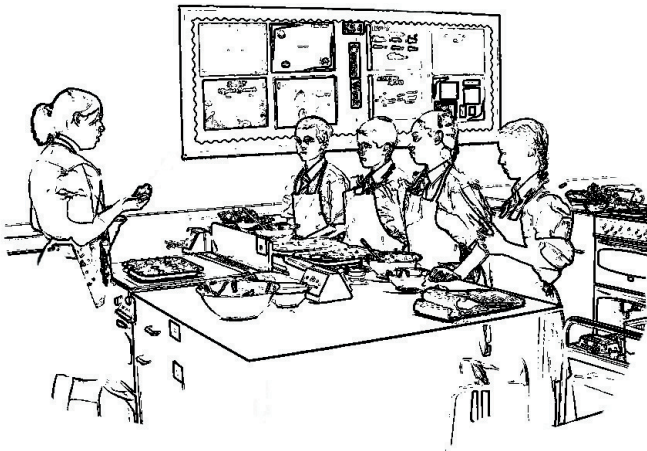
They appear to have an influential role among their peers, and it is hoped that this project might help them redirect their negative energy into something more positive. Ellen says that when she approached them to see if they would be interested in doing some peer teaching they became intrigued and agreed to an initial meeting the following Friday morning.

She was understandably nervous just before the lesson and said, 'I'm going to be good to my teachers from now on.'

Lauren's lesson

Lauren taught a triple food lesson which spanned both morning and lunchtime breaks, finishing before afternoon break. The room was meticulously organised. She had her lesson plan in front of her, the worksheets were photocopied, a food demonstration area had been designated and the ingredients arranged in sequential order, down to the last grain! Lauren looked the part. She seemed far smarter than I had been used to in our earlier encounters. She decided to put her blazer on prior to the lesson. It was clear to me that she not only had put a lot of work into the planning and preparation for this lesson, but she seemed to be relishing the role of playing teacher. Her whole demeanour suggested that she had a sense of purpose, a responsibility and that she was up for it!

Lauren introduced the learning objectives and using the board proceeded to list the aims for the lesson. She was confident and showed no signs of her earlier nerves. The first part of the lesson covered basic food hygiene. She involved the students by asking lots of open-ended questions: for example, 'Why is it important to wash your hands in Food Technology?' If students were struggling to provide answers Lauren did not answer her own questions but re-worded them or gave clues, ensuring that the students were thinking for themselves. She showed a high degree of skill in questioning students.



Being able to have a dialogue was good because each of you could see where the other was coming from [...] and when you're both working together things get sorted out easier.

The trainee teachers became increasingly comfortable in describing situations which they didn't know how to respond to – such as when two students were being energetically disruptive. Here, the two girls disagreed, one suggesting that the teacher separate the miscreants and the other taking a different tack – but what was important was that the logic of the alternative responses was brought out and discussed.

The two girls reminded their audience that there was no one strategy that would work for every situation:

There's not just one way you can handle all kids because everyone's different and different personalities. Like you can't be soft with all the children and you can't be hard with all the children. It's because some children have different personalities and you have to treat them in different ways.

Again, good advice, rooted in the realities of their own experience.

Although the questions were mostly about how teachers might respond to difficulties, some trainee teachers wanted to know more about the things that helped the two girls to focus positively on learning. They agreed that they preferred a climate in which they felt trusted and were praised:

Praise does get me. I feel happy and I'm like, yeah, and I'll do more. It makes me feel happy about what I've done and I'm happy to work.

I think the best reward is somebody telling you you've done well.

