

## Inside the school where punishment is banned

Despite its 'outstanding' rating by Ofsted, Kilgarth School in Birkenhead is now adopting a radical new approach to discipline. Joseph Lee finds out why



Connor Williams, Brian Coyle, Connor Thomas and Alfie Adey are all pupils at Birkenheads's Kilgarth School Photo: India Hobson

By Joseph Lee

6:00AM BST 17 Oct 2015

The boys all arrive in taxis, but it's a rare touch of luxury in a school surrounded by deprivation. If you attend Kilgarth School in Birkenhead, Merseyside, just a stone's throw from the waterfront, it's because you have a statement of special needs for emotional, social and behavioural difficulties. So you have enough troubles without worrying how to get to school.

Some of the 11-to 16-year-olds enrolled at Kilgarth travel from miles away for its expertise, but most come from the low-rise pebble-dashed homes in the streets nearby, where ship funnels occasionally loom overhead. In streets like these, in neighbourhoods within a mile of the school, more than 70 per cent of children grow up in poverty.



Students Brian Coyle and Lewis Jones in class with deputy head Mick Simpson and teaching assistant Louise Plant Photo: India Hobson

‘A lot of our clients have experienced nothing in their lives except failure,’ deputy head teacher Mick Simpson tells me as we drive into the school. ‘They’ve been told off, shouted at. Some of them will come to us because no one has ever said no to them in their lives and meant it.’ Some have experienced neglect and abuse. Others have families working hard to cope with their conditions such as ADHD, autism, oppositional defiant disorder or foetal alcohol syndrome.

*"I genuinely want to build a better society and I believe in intervention"*

Steven Baker, head teacher

The school did pretty well at dealing with these challenges for several years, until early this year when it reached new heights. Ofsted inspectors rated it outstanding, crowning a series of awards for staff. The inspectors said students made remarkable progress, with some achieving five GCSEs after being failed

throughout primary school. Their behaviour was judged to be outstanding, with staff praised as ‘exceptionally skilled and sensitive’.

It was at this point that Kilgarth School decided to take an extraordinary step: it abolished punishment completely. ‘A lot of people looked at me like I had two heads when I talked to colleagues from other schools,’ head teacher Steven Baker says. ‘The hardest thing was the fear of the unknown. But if we carried on as we were, we weren’t going to get any better as a school. We had to push boundaries.’



Student Ryan Mercer Photo: India Hobson

A school that abolishes punishment might be seen as naive or in denial about the darker sides of human behaviour. But it's hard to say that about Kilgarth and its head. Before he became a teacher, Baker worked as a forensic anthropologist, examining human remains for the International Criminal Court investigation into the massacre at Srebrenica.

He says that experience not only brought him face to face with the worst aspects of humanity, it left him with a strong desire to try to improve things. 'I genuinely want to build a better society and I believe in early intervention,' he says.

I visit Kilgarth at the end of September, six weeks into their experiment (it started at the end of the summer term), to see how a school can be run without punishment, without even the threat of detention to keep boys in line. Out in the narrow corridors of the converted Victorian primary school, we soon see one boy walking out of class with a chair held over his head.



Art and ICT teacher Paul McConnachie and teaching assistants Emma Macready and Josh Ranson on patrol Photo: India Hobson

Before the abolition of punishment, the main tool for dealing with disruption was called ‘catch-up’, the school’s own name for detention. Everyone agreed it didn’t work. ‘The boys were invariably either angry at being given catch-up or bored or not engaging. And of course the same boys were back there every single day,’ Simpson says.

There are only around 50 students at the school so staff know them intimately, and using this knowledge has always been part of how they deal with disruption. Simpson tells me that one autistic boy has been stressed because another student is joining his class. Staff calmly work to reassure the student and bring him back into the lesson.

No punishments doesn’t mean having no rules. ‘We have got a structure and we work really hard to enforce it,’ Simpson says.



Teaching assistant Maria Martin watches Brian Coyle Photo: India Hobson

That structure was developed with the help of Dr Alice Jones, director of the school and families unit in the psychology department at Goldsmiths, University of London (the university will run a research project to examine how students' behaviour is affected by the new regime). She provided the answer to the question, what replaces punishment? – which is: rewards for good behaviour.

A growing body of evidence shows punishment is ineffective for students with behavioural problems in particular, Jones says. Many of these students don't show the same fear response as other children. 'Punishment doesn't really work for those kids. It doesn't affect their brains in the same way,' she explains. 'They're not making the associations between behaviour and adverse outcomes.'



Callum Ogden-McLean with PE and science teacher Andrew Pritchard Photo: India Hobson

Rewards, on the other hand, have been shown to stimulate learning: we want to repeat whatever makes us feel good. And Jones says they have another benefit in that they can keep on motivating when punishment has reached its limit. ‘Once you’ve found yourself at half past nine in the morning and you’re already in detention, where’s your impetus to conform for the rest of the day? It’s already gone.’

The system that emerged involves a daily report card for every student, called a Personal Achievement Sheet. In each lesson students gain marks for examples of positive behaviour in categories such as effort and getting on with others.

Staff constantly look for behaviour to praise, giving positive feedback to keep them on track and adding points to the student’s score. And points mean prizes, tangible benefits ranging from tea with the headmaster – more popular than you might think – to Friday-afternoon fishing trips. A house points system also encourages students to work together on good behaviour, with the team who earn the most points winning £600 towards a trip of their choice.



Teaching assistant Josh Ranson with Luke Crawford, Connor Thomas and Lewis Jones Photo: India Hobson

The best rewards go to students with the highest scores, who also receive Olympic-style medals. ‘I never even considered that having a medal to take home would make a 16-year-old feel happy and proud, but it does,’ Simpson says.

Each student’s personal targets are also constantly raised, in a way that works a bit like a handicap system for good behaviour, to ensure that everyone is motivated to improve. As maths teacher Jane Westlake put it, ‘You can’t hoodwink the kids and say well done, well done, well done. You have to explain what you’re saying well done for. You have to be specific: empty praise, I think, is worse than none at all.’

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Steven Baker, head teacher

It’s not to say the school hasn’t already had some problems. Outside, boys are playing football on the multi-use games area, a fenced-in all-weather sports pitch that is nicknamed ‘the cage’. The game is being played energetically and fairly, but Simpson points out one student closely accompanied by a member of staff.

It’s a year-seven boy who now has one-to-one support after an incident that the deputy headteacher describes as ‘a serious assault’ on his first day of school. ‘We’ve sometimes been the only stable thing in these boys’ lives, so often the worst time of the year is when we’re just back from holiday and some of them have been in a chaotic home environment,’ Simpson says.



Maths teacher Jane Westlake, who in 2014 won a prestigious Pearson Teaching Award for Outstanding New Teacher of the Year Photo: India Hobson

If an incident occurs, the school deals first with immediate issues of safety, removing children from the classroom or from the school altogether if necessary.

Michelle Lee, a former professional footballer with Arsenal Ladies who is the school's behaviour lead, says that staff work hard to maintain the distinction between inevitable consequences like these and using exclusion as a punishment and threat. 'Logical consequences work: they're something that you can internalise and you learn from,' she says. 'But if it's a punishment, it's just seen as unfair and there's no learning.'

Staff then go to work on the underlying causes. In this case, the student was reintroduced to the school an hour at a time, so staff could understand his issues and he could get used to the environment.



Student Owen Walker Photo: India Hobson

If Kilgarth can succeed with a no-punishment system, it will be against a long history of such ideas failing or being quashed. Last month Barrowford, a ‘sanction-free’ primary school in Lancashire, was rated inadequate by Ofsted for poor teaching and behaviour.

According to Jacob Middleton, a historian who is writing a book on discipline in schools, alternatives to punishment have been proposed since at least the early 19th century. Some foundered on their own eccentricity, as when Joseph Lancaster replaced corporal punishment with putting children in cages.

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Mick Simpson, deputy head teacher

Back at Kilgarth, in the corridor I meet Kieran, a year-nine student who left a lesson after potentially dangerous behaviour. His troublemaking goes along with a quick wit: earlier he had bantered with the deputy head about how I’d portray their school in this magazine. ‘It’s like being kept on a prison island,’ he wailed. ‘It’s like a small version of Alcatraz!’

On his own now, and not performing for the class, he says punishment didn’t work and the new regime is better. ‘Last year there was seven or eight kids out in the corridor. Now there’s only three or four.’



Student Jamie Jones Photo: India Hobson

It's an incremental improvement, but this is what the school was looking for. 'There are kids who on their estates are unmanageable, who are causing families to be evicted from their homes, who are well known to the police,' Simpson says. 'And they've found their niche and are now plasterers or college students or have gone on to university.'

University entrants are rare – it's been years, staff admit – but Kilgarth can boast that not one of its students in recent years has ended up out of education, employment or training.

'Those are big, hard-edged facts, but it's the little golden moments you get 20 times a day that are the most rewarding thing,' Simpson says. 'The child who's on the corridor in crisis, and five minutes later you see him smiling back in a lesson. Stuff like that might seem like tiny victories but incrementally they become massive. They're the things that I think about.'

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