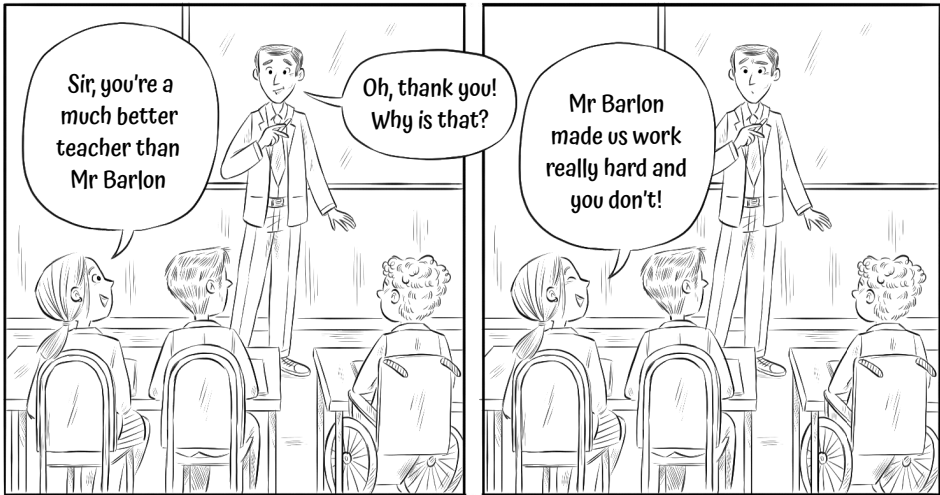


CHAPTER 2 **BEST OF THE BEST**



Within a few months of being in the classroom, we start firming up the list of 'things' which have worked for us. These are not the same for everyone, as we differ in our approaches, our strengths, our habits, our character, our interests, the way in which we want to deliver our subject, the ideas we feel most comfortable with, and the context of our classes and school. We don't always know why certain strategies are effective but, as we start teaching, we are on high alert to divide what we do into what seems to work and what does not.

However, we must accept that sometimes approaches we might try take time to perfect and shape into key parts of our armoury. We must not give up on strategies too quickly as there are always elements of unpredictability, lack of logic and human irrationality beating away in the heart of the classroom which could render even the most inspirational of ideas temporarily useless. As we become more experienced, those mischievous elements usually fall under our control as we develop a third intuitive eye, always ready to deploy Plan B, C, D, E ...

Despite this key challenge within teaching, most of us will find largely failsafe teaching strategies which form our go-to classroom habits, influencing our facial expressions, body language, tone of voice and commonly used phrases and words. Here are mine.

1 Thank you, it has been a pleasure

I want you to imagine that you are walking into a training session with teachers from a range of other schools, being delivered by the 'expert' at some picturesque venue far away from your usual day-to-day existence. How quickly do you make up your mind about how effective and useful the next few hours are going to be for you? Is it as soon as you go into the venue and see the quality of the refreshments or the range of sweets on the table? Is it when you get your first glance at the presenter – their age, their clothes, their confidence or facial expression? Maybe it is nothing to do with the presenter, but is linked to whether you spot a fellow delegate who you recognise? Or does it take longer for you to decide? Will you give it the first 15 minutes before predicting how much you will learn?

The question I would ask, while you are capturing your mood in this scenario, is **how important is it to you that the presenter seems to be enjoying delivering their training**, as opposed to it coming across as a chore?

In front of a challenging group of students, it is hard to hide your anxiety, lack of confidence, annoyance or even dread. In fact, it is natural to act disappointed if you are indeed disappointed, and it seems false to smile in a fit of overwhelming positivity when things are not going as planned.

How you appear in front of your students is important. I cannot stress this enough.

A great way of developing a positive frame of mind is to ensure that you deliver simple but effective and uplifting messages throughout your lesson. *'Good morning, it is great to see you all', 'I'm really looking forward to our lesson together', 'Thank you', 'Really well done for today's lesson. I enjoyed it and felt we achieved so much'*. OK, so some of you might be contemplating how well you will be able to convincingly and genuinely deliver those lines to classes where the battle just to get them quiet has not yet been won. Positive feedback can be disarming and benefit both your and your students' wellbeing, especially if it is not the norm for you to say, or for them to hear. It can also make you more resilient in the mental combat of the classroom.

Do you really want to come across as someone who does not enjoy teaching the group and as someone who would rather criticise than praise?

2 Let the good kids win

Our schools and classrooms function on a set of rules and expectations that often form the background of the difficulties that teachers will face, especially in the first few years. It is easy, as a teacher, to become obsessive about instances when students fail to meet the most basic of requirements. As a result, much of our time is spent reminding and reprimanding the perpetrators while unfortunately ignoring the victims. They are victims because their learning is being disrupted but more so because their engagement and compliance is going unnoticed and is being taken for granted.

An interesting thought, which can challenge schools and teachers (because, if true, it would throw into confusion the idea of establishing order via rules) is that the students whom you are regularly telling off continue to behave the same lesson after lesson and therefore the arsenal of punishments at your disposal is practically useless. Maybe something else is going on here. Students who thrive on, and are hungry for, attention – both from you and their peers – can quickly learn that the simplest way to achieve their desired outcome is to misbehave or to keep jumping over the line you have drawn in the sand. This can make you more determined to up the ante and face off one-on-one in a battle where you think you have the upper hand but, unfortunately, most of the time you will lose. I personally have never been a fan of the strategy that some teachers deploy, and some schools recommend – writing students' names 'on the board' when anyone steps out of line – three strikes and you're out. This not only further emphasises the negatives in your classroom but also dishes out much sought-after attention to those who display poor behaviour, telling the rest of the class that it is this small group of students who will dictate the direction of the lesson. We will return to this idea when I share my teacher fails.

Remember the victims, the 'good kids'? There are many examples of educational research which suggest that the optimal ratio for positive to negative feedback from a teacher is about 6:1. I would suggest

that this is a minimum, as there should not be a ceiling on positive reinforcement, if it is deserved. So, rather than telling off students for not following a rule or direct instruction, shift your focus to the 'good kids' who you can praise, praise and praise some more for doing what you have asked, in the face of tempting distractions.

Simple changes to your language can move the emphasis on who is getting your attention, for example *'Really well done to those of you who have settled'* rather than *'I'm still waiting for some of you to be quiet and listen. Harry, Rachel ... will you please stop talking?'*

Build regular systems of reward for those students, including feeding back to parents, and you will slowly see more students wanting to be a part of the group who has your attention. Not all of them, of course – you will still have the few who will challenge and seek to disrupt. If teaching was that easy then it would not be so fulfilling, would it?

3 Really make them think at the start of the lesson

What happens in the first few minutes will often set the tone and thus dictate the success of a lesson. If we are unable to establish calm and purpose, it is likely that we will lose the battle before it has really begun. Yet, if you can demonstrate that this is 'our' classroom, centred around our rules and expectations that students will adhere to, then you have firm foundations from which you can build.

However, do not think that you need to start each lesson with a lecture on what behaviour you expect from the students. You would have done this the first few times you saw the class and if you then need to repeat your ground rules at length then you are sending the message that they have the upper hand. A quick, short *'A reminder that I expect X'*, as part of your dialogue, is more effective. Calm and purpose can be effectively established through engaging their brains, reminding them unconsciously that your classroom is a place where enjoyable learning takes place.

We all know the numerous benefits to behaviour and learning of an effective starter activity, but vary your approach so that it does not become too predictable or monotonous. Students can enter