

CHAPTER 3 THE POWER STRUGGLE



Thirty versus one is a battle you simply cannot win if all things are even and both sides play by the same rules – but, remember, you are the teacher and own the conditions of play. However, we know it is anything but straightforward, as students will not just follow a set of imposed demands without questioning and testing the strength of your convictions. This provides the colourful scenery in the background of the classroom picture. Having too many rules and methods to establish control will undoubtedly backfire as you struggle with consistency and students suffer from confusion. Therefore you need to place your strategies in order and decide on the five or six which you will place at the centre of your classroom, and ensure students can remember and adhere to them with relative ease. The power struggle never disappears, however experienced you become, but do not worry – there are many factors in your favour.

23 Your classroom, your rules – seating plan

Schools will have different views on seating plans, ranging from a directive that all classes must have one to, at the other extreme, it being totally at the discretion of the teacher. The *'You can sit where you want'* approach is definitely not one that I would recommend after having fallen foul to it myself when I started teaching and thinking that this would help to build positive relationships. Unfortunately, following this up with *'But if there is a problem then I might have to move you'* is too late and will lead to confrontation about the definition or extent of a 'problem'. When you hear the carefully chosen, innocent student phrase *'I promise I will be good from now on if you don't move me'*; you have already conceded power in an important mini battle.

Putting students in a seating plan is not a negative strategy aimed at destroying friendships. It is a key part of establishing a calm, collaborative and purposeful learning environment. It is important that young people learn to work with their peers. If you do not know your class well enough, seek advice from colleagues about which students with particular needs may benefit from sitting on their own or with selected others. You are in control of changing the dynamic later if you wish, but that is your choice and certainly not something to blackmail students with, as this will lead to the commencement of another game which will end either with you losing or in the role of the unfair villain. You may decide that some classes, for example at sixth form age or in smaller groups, can learn well without the requirement of a seating plan, but let that be your choice. There is also a danger of moving individual students too quickly where random seating has created issues, so plan to reconfigure the whole room at regular intervals. I aim to rearrange seating for each class about once every half term, which allows me to improve or simply vary the dynamic without singling anyone out.

24 A look to say it all

Are you one of those people who can raise one or both eyebrows in a mysterious way or naturally deliver a piercing stare that can cut through an invisible forcefield? No? Me neither, so the ability to get

students on task without speaking has become a skill that I have had to work at to reach even a basic level. It is something that I have found far more effective than making regular short speeches to students about a variety of things, as those invariably end up as mini lectures, slowing the pace of learning. The more you use your voice for the same issue, in a short space of time, the less impact it tends to have in the classroom.

I am not suggesting that 'the look' is foolproof but it does require less effort and is less disruptive to the class. For teachers, the classroom can sometimes feel like playing a game of Whac-A-Mole, as one student after another requires your attention to refocus or for reassurance. Imagine the difference if a stare did the job and you did not need a hammer. Watch experienced teachers deliver looks to praise, to comfort, to motivate, to discourage, to remind or to show disappointment – simple yet magically effective.

As you start experimenting in your classroom, if you do not get the required response then you may need more time to perfect your look. You could be coming across as if you have had too much coffee, are auditioning for the Joker or want to initiate a staring contest. I have lost more than a few such battles to students in my time, just as my eyes start watering!

