Changing behaviour

Behaviour expert Tom Bennett tells **Alex Tomlin** how change needs to happen to improve behaviour management in education

THE CURRENT SYSTEM for preparing teachers for behaviour management is woefully bad, says the man tasked with reviewing it, Tom Bennett.

Glasgow-born Bennett has become a prominent figure in education. He is a regular *TES* contributor, has written books on behaviour and founded researchED, which encourages teachers to engage more with relevant education research. All of which has led to the Department for Education asking him to be the chair of a working party looking into the reformation of initial teacher training with regard to behaviour, or the catchier 'behaviour tsar' as he has been dubbed.

He acknowledges that there are excellent providers of behaviour management training at universities, School Direct and Teach First, but overall the provision is patchy and many trainee teachers are being given little more than a lecture and then being told they will pick it up as they go along.

This reflects Bennett's own experience of teacher training. "When I started to teach, I didn't pick it up at all," he says. "I was dreadful at behaviour management. I made so many awful mistakes; I did everything wrong.

"The very first mistake was believing the children would behave because I loved my subject and working with children," he explains. "That is a very common error. It's a beautiful sentiment but untrue. Children aren't receptacles for your enthusiasm."

Bennett's next mistake was thinking he could dominate students by force of will. Having run a nightclub in London's Soho for several years he felt fairly confident when he entered the classroom, but had a rude awakening. "I tried to dominate the class, be the toughest dog in the room, but you can only get so far by being cross and shouty," he says. "If I raised my voice at some kids, they were like, 'so what?'. They got a lot worse than that at home."

> "I WAS DREADFUL AT BEHAVIOUR MANAGEMENT. THE VERY FIRST MISTAKE WAS BELIEVING THE CHILDREN WOULD BEHAVE BECAUSE I LOVED MY SUBJECT AND WORKING WITH CHILDREN"

The most upsetting experience was being ignored by a class in his first year of teaching. "There are few things worse than being ignored," he says. "Even a reaction affirms you're alive, but when children ignore you, that's awful."

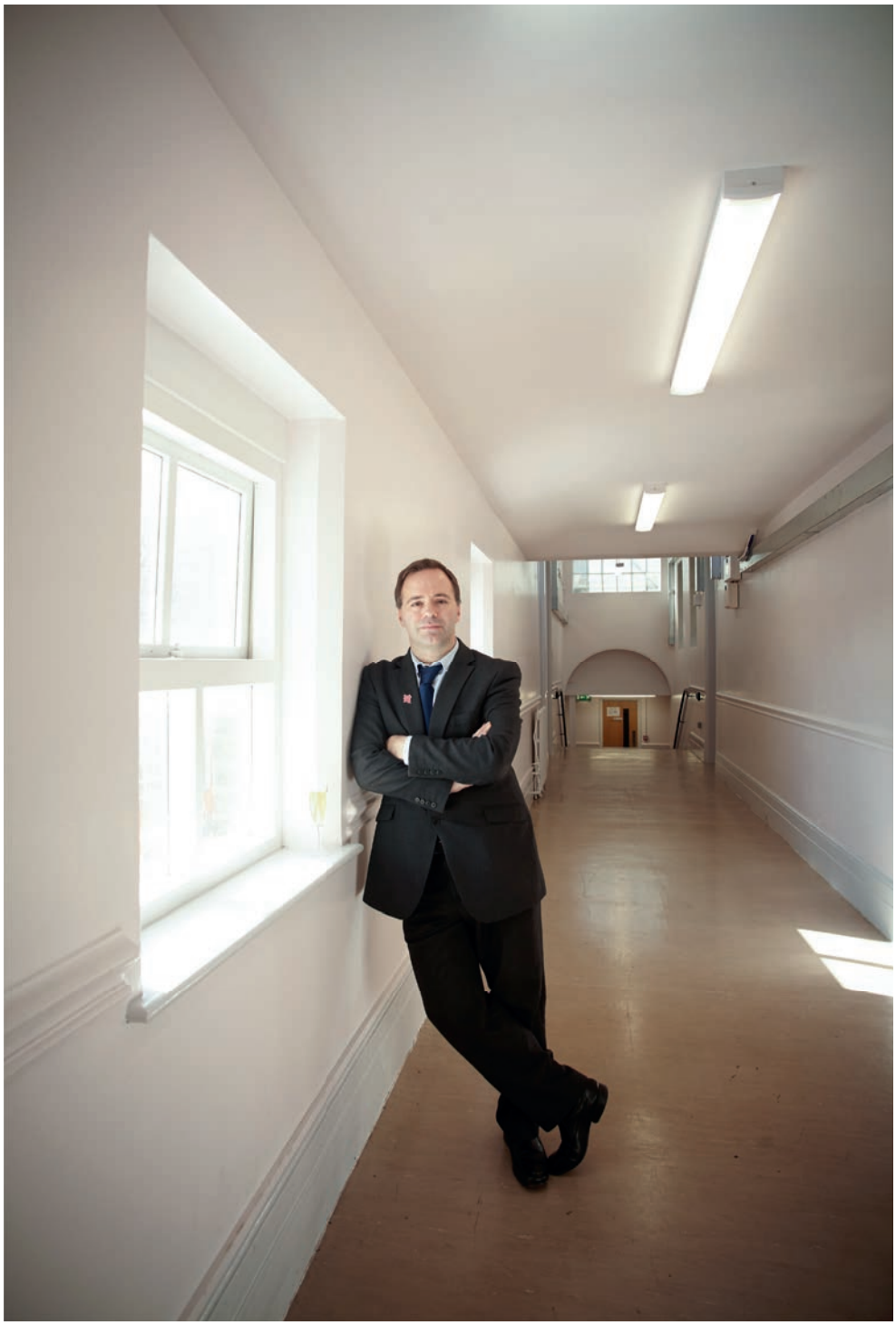
Bennett took five years to be able to run a classroom properly, but then another five to understand how he did it. "I made it my job to work out why I was so bad. I went on every course, read every book I could on behaviour management. I studied my own classroom, other people's classrooms in my school and the literature around it."

A starting point when thinking about the issue is to define what is meant by behaviour. "You have to go back and ask what education is for," he says. "My aim is to impart or transmit the best that people have ever thought or known. Number two is keeping students safe; number three is to develop them as people. Good behaviour is anything that facilitates those three things; poor behaviour is anything that impedes them.

"Whenever I start any class the first thing I say is 'I really care about you; I really want the best for you.' Because of that, anyone who stops me doing my job, that's when I'll intervene. If you do anything that stops people from learning, if you muck about, if you make me stop the class to speak to you, you hurt someone else's education."

Bennett has some simple rules: for example, don't shout out over him or your colleague, always bring your homework, always work hard, ask permission before leaving the room. "I'll tell all my classes what the rules are and why we have them. I won't ask them what they think. I know what they need because I'm an adult. This isn't a democracy."

There needs to be a rule of law, says Bennett, to demonstrate fairness, but a teacher also needs to interpret those rules to apply context and nuance. "For example, educating in a PRU, if you set a detention every time



PHOTOGRAPHY: JULIAN ANDERSON

↑ **Tom Bennett wants to see more behaviour management training based on practical classroom experience**

someone swears, you're going to be setting a lot of detentions," he says. "Getting a wild class sat down and paying attention is a huge win. However, once they are paying attention, your next step is to tighten it up gradually. You must never give up and say they can never be good otherwise you've given up on them as a teacher."

Knowing when and how to apply sanctions in different contexts is a key part of behaviour management, he says. He advocates a more subtle intervention for chatting: simply a look, a tap on the shoulder, or telling the whole class to focus on work.

"However, if someone has got a chair in their hand ready to throw it through a window then the situation requires you to be more Rambo than horse whisperer," he adds. "You would have to grab the chair or restrain the pupil. Fortunately, situations like that are fairly rare.

"While you can't condone a child throwing a chair and they have to receive some sort of consequences for their action, everything has to be taken in context. That child might have finally snapped because for the hundredth time that day someone has joked about their dead mum. Children can be horrible sometimes. I could understand that reaction. That's why as a teacher you have to be a rule-giver but you also have to be a judge."

One common sanction he is not keen on is teachers sending students out of the classroom. "Teachers do that a lot because it gets a kid out of their hair for five minutes, although that five minutes can become 10, then 15, then the whole lesson. That's not dealing with the situation; that's brushing it under the carpet. It will still need to be dealt with later on, plus the child's lost education."

Sometimes, Bennett says, a child will be sent to the headteacher for misbehaving and then be sent back into the lesson with nothing resolved. "The thing that makes me really angry is that the people sending them back into the classroom are not usually the people who have to deal with them in the classroom," he says. "You may have a child coming back into the class who has sworn at you or hit another child, but they're back in your classroom because they had a chat and a biscuit with the headteacher. This is very common. It's very easy to be the nice guy; it's very difficult to be professional and support your teaching staff." →

Strong leadership is crucial in managing behaviour. "If there is no leadership from the top then behaviour will be poor in the school," Bennett says. "It's not enough to rely on hero teachers. I am appalled that there are people who have been promoted into senior leadership positions but are not able to handle the toughest class in the school. That's like having a head of department who can't run an A-level."

Leadership would be particularly crucial where behaviour has got out of hand across a school. "I believe every school can be turned around," he says. "I'm not saying it's easy. A signal has to be sent that this is over. Boundaries will be set, consequences will be set, there will be a culture and an ethos that reflects this. And every teacher has to buy into it.

"It's not just about the punishment; it's also about rewarding children and creating a positive learning culture where young people know that the right thing to do is to be good and kind to each other because staff are modelling that. It needs to be in every assembly, on all the walls, in everything you do. That is not negotiable.

"You have to have steel poles, some non-negotiables," he adds. "I'm not mad keen on uniform but if you're going to have one, then it's got to be properly worn otherwise there's no point having it. Pull the kids up for not having their shirts tucked in. A uniform shows the kids we're part of a community, we mean something to each other and we have standards that need to be upheld."

Have standards of behaviour got worse over the last few years, as many claim? Bennett believes they have not got better or worse and adds that official data is unreliable. "One of my biggest bugbears in education is schools that want to appear externally good make sure the figures don't reflect the behaviour," he says. "I'm not saying every school is lying about it, but that every school is under extraordinary pressure due to external accountability measures not to declare great swathes of poor behaviour. I've seen a lot of sleight of hand going on."

Part of that accountability is about presenting a positive image to parents, who Bennett believes are crucial in how schools run behaviour systems. "If a parent supports the school and the teachers, their strength is multiplied by 10," he says. "If parents undermine what the school is doing you're fighting a hundred more people than you were before.

"See parents as potential allies; don't see them as nuisances. I often advise new teachers to call parents at home as soon as possible, even when there's no need, to start to build up that relationship, just to introduce yourself."

However, there may also be times when a school needs to stand up against parents who are defending a child who the teacher knows did something very wrong. "I have seen the nicest children in school do the most horrible things, and the loveliest children lie because it's really important for them not to get into trouble with their parents," Bennett says.

One issue in behaviour that ATL members often raise is that of students 'knowing their rights'. Bennett disputes whether they really do. "Students with no knowledge of the law whatsoever will believe all sorts of things," he says. "They'll believe, for example, that you're not allowed to touch them; you are allowed to touch them. Shoulders and elbows are all safe stuff.

"Children who overreact to that, I will tell them they're overreacting. Children who go on about their rights will often have no idea of their responsibilities. You can't have one without the other. Don't get drawn into a legal argument that neither of you is qualified to have."

Returning to Bennett's current focus, while he is keen to hear views from education staff across all settings, sectors and training providers, he has his own ideas about what should change in initial teacher training (ITT).

"I want teachers to be able to walk into a classroom knowing consciously what they can do that will work usefully in most situations. Training providers should offer a lot more experiential training."

Behaviour lectures, as his own experience shows, can only take a new teacher so far. Bennett wants new teachers to be shown how to speak and act in response to children through videos, role-playing, watching themselves back on video, watching other teachers and discussing what they have observed.

"If you have 40 principles in your head, it's difficult to apply that in a crisis situation," he says. "If you have actually worked through it before, you're much more likely to respond appropriately."

The review does not stop with ITT and a second working group will look at behaviour management more widely, including ongoing training. "One of the biggest criticisms I have of ITT is that we have a fire and forget policy," Bennett says. "All your training at the beginning and then good luck for the rest of your career. That's a very bad place to be and not worthy of a 21st century profession.

"ITT and CPD should be on the same track. Currently, CPD is very ad hoc and haphazard, about what the headteacher likes, rather than your identified training needs. You don't see that in any other professional body. Teaching is not a mature profession, it's a semi-profession."

This is why Bennett is so excited about this opportunity for education professionals to shape behaviour management. "This is an extraordinarily powerful moment, a really rare and interesting opportunity to make reformations that will hopefully help teachers in the future," he says. "For the first time teachers have been asked what we think. I want this review to focus on what we know professionally and try to re-professionalise ourselves from the inside out. This is teacher power in evidence." ■

"CPD IS VERY AD HOC AND HAPHAZARD, ABOUT WHAT THE HEADTEACHER LIKES, RATHER THAN YOUR TRAINING NEEDS. YOU DON'T SEE THAT IN ANY OTHER PROFESSIONAL BODY. TEACHING IS NOT A MATURE PROFESSION, IT'S A SEMI-PROFESSION"