

Stage fright does not equal lack of involvement



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On a recent school trip to the theatre, it became apparent that “volunteers” were going to be needed from the audience. I was sitting in my usual position at the end of a row – a kind gesture, I thought, to halve the number of unfortunate pupils who “have to sit next to a teacher” but also putting me right in the firing line. I was quickly pounced on by a member of the cast, but it really isn’t my thing, so I politely declined. I used to get a bit guilty about ducking out in situations like this, feeling I was letting the pupils down when it would contribute to their fun when they’re all shouting, “Go on, sir!” But I think it’s important at times for pupils to see adults being firm but polite, smiling and saying, “No thanks” and withstanding peer pressure. The message is: “It’s ok sometimes to disappoint people and say no. You don’t have to do something just because other people want you to.”

Being put in this position got me thinking about pupil participation in lessons. It’s much

harder for a pupil to decline to take part in class when invited to do so by the teacher, yet they may feel much as I did at the theatre. I was enjoying the experience and very glad I was there, but I didn’t want to be up front. Teachers, like actors, are generally fairly confident people who are mostly comfortable with (or at least used to) being centre stage. But what about pupils who are not like that and may never be? How effectively do we accommodate them in our classrooms?

Shortly after we returned, a Year 7 pupil thanked me for her report. I didn’t know what she meant – I couldn’t remember writing anything particularly unusual. “You didn’t say it!” Nearly every other teacher, it seemed to her, had commented on her reluctance to contribute orally in class. She is very hard-working, naturally academic and making excellent progress. Yet the many positive comments in her reports were overshadowed for her by this relentless nagging to contribute more in lessons. Why does she have

to do that? “I’ve got to be less shy,” she told me. I told her that I think being a bit shy can be a very nice quality and that she shouldn’t be ashamed of it or feel that she has to be more like anyone else unless she wants to. She replied that no-one had ever said anything like that to her before.

Being involved in a lesson is much subtler than the total number of words spoken. What about the quality rather than quantity of contributions? What about the much-neglected skill of careful listening? We are not all made the same way, and different amounts and styles of involvement will be appropriate for different pupils at different times. Dragging an unwilling pupil onto the stage is unlikely to achieve anything other than embarrassment and a distaste for the subject.

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