

Challenging Behaviours - Something's Not Quite Right.

It has always been that students with challenging behaviours are the most frustrating obstacles facing classroom teachers. The disturbing and distracting behaviours they present impacts on the learning environment of the school. Dealing with the consequences of their dysfunctional behaviours provides a wearisome task for principals. The time taken in dealing with the student, the parents, and the other students and of course the teacher could be said to be proportional to the level of behaviour disability the student has. In other words these children suck the educational life out of their schools.

This loss of learning energy goes a long way in explaining the diminished learning outcomes that is observed in classes that have one or more challenging students. There are real implications for this. Obviously the student concerned is not achieving the level of knowledge he or she is capable. This should be enough of a concern however, it is obvious that the total energy budget of the teacher is divided between delivering the set curriculum and dealing with the inappropriate behaviour. In extreme cases the demands on the teacher's energy are such that they go beyond personal tolerance levels and the teacher is unable to carry on. There are legal implications based on WHS legislation in these cases.

More subtle yet more distressing is the loss of learning experienced by the classmates of the dysfunctional student. Given that the proportion of time spent by the teacher on the behaviour comes from a set period these students are taught less. Also the stress suffered by the other students limits their ability to learn even when the teacher is on task. This second issue has legal implications based on EEO principles but authorities ignore these. Both 'implications', the loss of learning of the dysfunctional student and that of the classmates expose education systems to litigation.

Over the years there have been many 'programs' that attempt to deal with these difficulties. These vary from the teacher adopting an authoritarian approach to a laissez-faire approach based on love and free expression and a continuum between these extremes. 'Veteran teachers' are familiar with the more commercial offerings; Canter's 'Assertive Discipline' and Glasser's 'Reality Therapy/Choice Theory' are two of the more recognized examples. There are countless other amongst which rocks and water feature. We would all experience 'authentic happiness' if any of these programs lived up to their promises.

Despite many schools enthusiastically adopting one or more of these types of programs, in some cases with almost missionary zeal, the problems dysfunctional behaviour presents to schools remains and it could be argued has increased markedly.

American psychiatrist Garbarino reports that evidence points to an increasing number of these children in our system. After examining data from Howell and Achenbach reports and through conversations with workers in this field he found "overwhelmingly they agree that more and more children are in greater and greater trouble".

The most recent manifestation of these training packages to hit our shores is the Effective (or Positive) Behaviour Support Program from Lewis and Sugai. This is by far

the most comprehensive and well-researched approach to date. Not only does it describe the conditions that create the challenges; they provide a variety of interventions that are seen to be effective in dealing with these challenges.

The interventions the program outlines include:

- Parent Training
- Social Skills Training
- Academic and Curricula Restructure
- Proactive Management
- Individual Behaviour Interventions

A critical analysis of this new approach reveals that in essence it is an accumulation and refinement of a whole range of theories and practices that have 'gone before'. In the main, psychological behaviourists have developed the approaches outlined above, not practicing teachers. Their techniques come from individualised interventions which can ignore or devalue the importance of the classroom environment.

It is an unfortunate feature of modern academic life that investigations are based on an existing paradigm. Thomas Kuhn explains a paradigm is schema that underpins the causal nature of an investigation. These paradigms are becoming more and more refined through academic research. The academics become more and more compartmentalized, more specialized.

Kuhn further states that if the paradigm is flawed eventually, attempts to keep it in place must give way to a new paradigm. This is a period of uncertainty for many academics that have invested their careers championing that paradigm.

This is a dramatic claim but the conditions surrounding behaviour management are becoming more and more refined yet the problem has not been addressed. Evidence indicates it is getting worse. There is a need for a new look at behaviour management in modern schools, behaviour settings and residential care settings and we need to take that look across a range of disciplines.

Educators have overlooked vital information from the disciplines of neuroscience and psychiatry that specialize in the workings of the brain. It may well be the information that now exists could underpin a new approach to behaviour management. That approach may also be required for all school based activities. As educators it seems critical that we understand the biology of the brain.

I first questioned the behaviourist approach in an article 'Limitations of Conventional Approaches to Dysfunctional Classroom Behaviour of Children Who Have Suffered Traumas at an Early Age'. This paper argued that functions within the brain control all behaviour including learning.

It is understandable that the processes of the brain had until this point, been ignored by educators. It is only in recent years; through the advent of technology such as MRI's and CAT scans the functions of the brain have been better understood. Now there is an ever-growing body of knowledge about the functions and processes of the brain and it is vital we access this rich vein of information. I contend that beyond the procedures that are traditional in

education there are basic neurological conditions that underpin the delivery of all educational programs. These practices are designed to control the levels of personal stress.

The thesis is that heightened levels of stress exclude higher order thinking. It follows that effective learning and teaching of abstract concepts cannot take place under these circumstances. This premise is underpinned by a philosophy that holds that:

- Behaviour is defined by the individual's primary need to integrate their sense of self with their community.
- Stress occurs when the individual is either threatened by the outside environment or rejected by that environment.
- Decisions on how to behave are learned at various developmental times.
- Neural pathways associated with specific behaviours are located in particular areas of the brain.
- Exposure to stress causes the decision making process to access lower levels of the brain.
- Decision on how to behave is made using strategies that have proved successful in the past.

The premise is that all behaviours that develop through childhood are functional for the environment in which they were learned. Students whose behaviours are successful at school are successful because the environment in which they developed reflects the environment of the school. Conversely students whose behaviour is dysfunctional at school behave that way because the behaviours they developed in early childhood were functional in that environment but that environment is disparate with the school.

A further supposition is that the value of cognitive restructuring of dysfunctional behaviours, that is learning new ways to behave, is located in the cerebral cortex. These new behaviours are only successful while the student has access to this area of the brain. When stressed, access to the cerebral cortex is dramatically reduced therefore new behaviours learned are 'not available'. The behaviour of the student will be guided by the repertoire that pre-exists in the area of the brain accessed. It can be argued that when the child is calm the teacher's wisdom and common sense is as effective as any packaged program.

Finally, children whose behaviour has developed in highly stressful environments will be subjected to significant brain damage. These children have the added burden of reduced intellectual capacity.

This brings us to the crux of the call for modern educational leaders to define their philosophy on dealing with challenging behaviours, to define just what a teacher is responsible for and what they are not. However, we should not back down from the complexity as teachers and principals are increasingly dealing with the problems caused by children with challenging behaviours.

A common response to calls for action to be taken about this problem is to refer the children to counsellors who will fix them. The problem is that counsellors generally work one on one and can manufacture a stress free environment. The child has access

to their frontal lobes and can think. Back in the classroom the one on one condition reverts back to a one on thirty scenario and the children can't cope.

The following clarifies the different roles of teacher and counsellor. The main point is that the teacher has to control the macro environment of the class and these students through no real fault of their own destroy that environment.

Teachers' Responsibility is:

- Control the personal macro-environment in the school.
- To teach designated curriculum
- Motivate students to engage in curriculum
- Provide an environment that allows the student to be safe and secure
- To cater for individual student's abilities

Counsellors' Responsibility Is:

- Deal with student's internal psychological world
- Diagnose mental issues and refer to suitable programs
- Teach students appropriate behaviours

Teachers' Responsibility is not:

- Deal with students' internal psychological environment
- Deal with students' social skills deficits.

Counsellors' Responsibility is not:

- Teach curriculum

More and more teachers and principals are made responsible for many of the problems in modern society. This is because of our failure to hold our political masters and other agencies responsible. If this is to remain the case then a change is needed in the skill set taught to teachers and a definition of school's rights and responsibilities.