

## **Dealing With Students Who Have Severe dysfunctioning Behaviours**

The presence of students with severe behaviours is a significant problem in schools. Although this fact is rarely denied education leaders have fallen very short in dealing with the problem. The result is a system wide adjustment that has seen the emergence of private or selective schools that eliminate the problem by eliminating the students. In the recent past the British system through their Ofsted inspection system started to close down 'failing' schools and transferring their students to the neighboring school. They soon found that the new school fell behind their 'standard' and so they should have been closed.

The move to charter schools that originated in the US is finding traction across the world. These schools are based on the premise that school boards selecting the teachers they want and the students they want. Little wonder they are successful in isolation but for a community they are failing their needy students. It has been reported that in New Orleans where all schools became charter schools difficult kids are excluded from all schools.

The current policies and reviews into the problem of meeting the needs of young people with high-level disruptive behaviours reveals little or no philosophical or structured approach to dealing with these students. Schools have to work it out for themselves and when the behaviours become extreme the student is removed.

The issue becomes stressful when schools have to deal with the parents of both the victim and the perpetrator. So how should we deal with this issue? There are three things to consider when searching for a solution. These are:

### **1. The Victim**

The victim of the actions of the dysfunctional child is left hurt. The normal reaction, the quick solution is to somehow hurt, punish the perpetrator in return. Punishment of some form is part of virtually every society. In the modern world punishment is largely retribution-based. That is, wrongdoers deserve to be penalized. This approach is intuitively satisfying and very often both the parents and the victim expect severe punishment at a level beyond a school's capacity to deliver.

What makes a certain form of punishment appropriate depends on who did what. For instance, according to retributivism, the question "should this person be punished" is answered by determining whether the person is guilty of some 'bad action'. If they are guilty they have to, or are made to pay for that action.

Schools are not into the business of 'punishment' and so there is a conflict between parents who subscribe to the idea of retribution and the school. The problem for the school is there is no concrete statement, no set of government sanctioned punishments that can be referred to and so schools are left to defend whatever position they have taken after a dispute based on their 'experience'. The victim and the parents feel betrayed.

## **2. The Perpetrator**

Schools are in the business of getting good effects into the future. Dealing with students with high-levels of disruptive behaviours is an area of extreme complexity. Just dealing with the presenting pathology displayed by the individual that contributes to the dysfunctional behaviour requires understanding that is well beyond the skills of most teachers. Yet when arbitrating we are required to ensure equity for students with mental health issues that drive the behaviour. It is easy to imagine a child's outburst being motivated by a range of conditions, from autism to the pathology of a psychopath. There are no institutional guidelines that support best practice for dealing with this and still the principal is charged with the responsibility without appropriate training or guidance.

## **3. Tactics**

The only tactic available for the principal to deal with the consequences of high-level disruptive behaviour is 'time out'. The ability to graduate the level of 'time out' punishment only ranges from in school detentions up to expulsion. This tactic is a form of quarantine where the 'infected' student is separated from the rest of the school. Just as we are morally justified in quarantining people who have dangerous viruses, so we are morally justified in quarantining people who we anticipate will pose a danger to the school. This approach does not sit well with teachers; it is well established that ours is the 'caring' profession but what else can we do?

### **The Problem.**

Schools are at the front line when dealing with the impact of disruptive behaviour. It is well documented that the effectiveness of our core business, teaching and learning is significantly impeded by the presence of these students. The pressure to achieve learning outcomes in spite of the disadvantage these students bring is just one stress imposed on principals.

Other stressors are:

- The need to be seen as providing just consequences for the victims of 'attacks'.
- The need to provide appropriate interventions for students with behavioural disabilities.
- The availability of appropriate alternate settings for students who need to be quarantined from the school.

School leadership has long been held accountable for the deflated learning outcomes that result from the presence of students with severe behaviours. This responsibility is not supported with real authority or the resources to address the issues surrounding this situation. The resulting stress this responsibility generates without support or authority has been identified in recent principal surveys. These results highlight a threat to the health of principals. It is a major issue that must be addressed by Government. What schools need are:

- A policy statement that outlines the philosophy that underpins consequences those schools can implement to address the needs of both perpetrators and victims of disruptive and destructive behaviour. This must deal with:
  - The health and safety considerations of all members of the school.
  - An acknowledgement of the negative impact disruptive students has on the school's learning performance.
- The production of a policy that defines levels of consequences for behaviours that satisfies the schools requirements to provide a guaranteed safe environment. This must also satisfy the community legal requirements.
- Access to suitable facilities for students to attend while their behaviour provides a real threat.
- The provision of adequate numbers of professional health workers to deal with the mental health of the disruptive child.
- The provision of adequate professional development for all staff so they can deal with lower levels of disturbance and/or to be able to evaluate conditions that indicate a student requires professional support.

Without these conditions the problem around the impact severe disruptive behaviours have on the victims, the perpetrators and the school will be significant and unfair. Unfortunately there is little evidence that governments are interested in addressing the problem.