

## BEHAVIOUR EDUCATION

By Wilson McCaskill

Ask teachers this question, “What, more than anything else, reduces the productivity of students and teachers?” and the great majority will answer, “*Behaviour!*”

Of course it’s *behaviour* that also improves productivity in schools. So, to be accurate and to put the answer in the language of schools, right *behaviour* increases productivity and wrong *behaviour* decreases it.

Although *behaviour* stands paramount it is not the only influencing factor and we all know that resources, facilities, professional learning, administrative support, home life, etc. all have an effect in one way or another. But it is generally agreed that these influences on scholastic productivity are greatly mitigated if students behave in the right way.

It can be argued that *behaviour* more than innate intelligence is the key factor in learning. If we accept that persistence, application, attitude and curiosity is *behaviour* that can be developed and learnt then there is no argument at all.

Terms like social and emotional learning, emotional intelligence and positive social behaviour are regularly used in educational discourse. There is an acceptance, grudgingly by some in these more enlightened times that learning doesn’t take place in isolation from children’s feelings. *Behaviour* and learning are not mutually exclusive, and their symbiotic relationship requires adequate guidance in both if acceptable standards in either are to be achieved.

Yet, with all we know about the importance and influence of *behaviour* in how children live and learn, few schools give *behaviour* its rightful standing as a subject in the curriculum.

In not being treated as a subject it lacks the importance and respect afforded maths, science, literacy, music, art and physical education.

Only a handful of schools, that I know of, require teachers to allocate time to the explicit teaching of *behaviour*, yet the productivity of all schools is inextricably linked to it.

*Behaviour* is incidentally taught and in being so is most likely to be taught when it's going wrong. With no rightful place in a classroom timetable, dealing with *behaviour* is seen as a wasteful intrusion into the "must learn" content of curriculum.

However, its lack of status as a subject does not spare it from assessment. Perhaps this is an inadvertent sign of its importance.

It is only logical that subjects explicitly taught require assessment and it's understandable that teachers must substantiate their assessments with well-documented evidence. This is crucial. After all, assessments will be noted in an official document - a report.

Reports are weighty documents with often far reaching consequences. They serve to inform parents, administrators, departments and other interested parties of a child's capacity, progress and achievements in any given learning area.

Accurate assessments lead to the understanding of needs and the improved supply of options, strategies and support to ensure improvement and the attainment of, at least, a minimum standard.

There in lies the beauty of the system. A teacher assesses, and with substantiating evidence in hand, is required to devise the support, the ways and means by which a child, struggling to acquire age appropriate levels of competency in one or more subjects, can be more effectively educated to help him or her do so.

This is not often the case with *behaviour*. Children assessed with substandard *behaviour* are not offered education, they are managed instead.

Indicative of this management approach to *behaviour* is the ubiquitous, "School Behaviour Management Policy" – usually a well-constructed document that carefully details a range of consequences and the justifications for their use, and a broad array of rewards with the encouragement to use them enthusiastically and often – a carrot and stick approach.

Rarely do schools have “Behaviour Education Policies.” Why would they? To have a *behaviour* education policy schools need to see *behaviour* as a subject that can be taught and free teachers to teach it by giving them the time, space and means to do so.

Given the status of a subject, teachers will be more inclined to teach *behaviour* using the ***principles of good teaching and learning*** and assist struggling students with further education. Without this status, teachers will too easily resort to control and management.

No teacher would punish a child struggling with a mathematical concept or the rules of grammar, no matter how many mistakes they made. The idiocy of such an approach, not to mention its cruelty, is all too apparent.

Educate, educate, educate by using all their ability, creativity and training, whilst adhering to tried and tested ***principles of good teaching and learning***, would be any professional’s reflexive approach to assisting a child in need.

Not so with *behaviour*.

Control, control, control is the default position of many teachers when inappropriate *behaviour* is the issue. Children are meant to know how to behave properly and any failure to do so is a conscious act of defiance or an inexcusable slip in standards requiring a consequence to teach them a lesson. If a child doesn’t know how to behave someone is to blame and someone’s got to pay.

Imagine if we took this approach with academic learning. We’d soon be back to using the cane to improve spelling.

Nowhere is the downside of the behaviour management model more apparent than in the frequent use of exclusions from the peer group and removal from the classroom. Because management models operate by creating a link between choices and consequences and the fear that generates, it’s only logical that an authority figure’s position in the hierarchy of power determines the degree of fear they project.

Hence, teachers looking for a quick solution or relief from the difficulty of educating a wayward child resort to sending children to the highest authority for punishment.

Principals in schools that rely heavily on consequences and rewards invariably have a steady flow of children through their office. Teachers sending students for punishment are often annoyed if the child is sent back too quickly or without suffering sufficiently to atone for their crimes.

It is worrying when teachers can make an adverse assessment of *behaviour* in a report without well documented evidence that describes the *behaviour* and points to possible causes and contributing factors.

Too often assessments of *behaviour* are merely opinions made worse by a clash of personalities. Where such assessments are acceptable for *behaviour*, they are not for a subject. That would be akin to advising parents their child's literacy skills were well below the required level and showing no evidence to substantiate the claim.

Not only would parents require evidence they would have the right to expect an educative intervention. I'm sure they would not be impressed if the intervention was to punish the child until they did better.

Sadly, I've witnessed too many teachers confidently inform parents of the punishments process being put in place to control the behaviour of their child and suggest that some hard discipline at home would also help. Even sadder, I know of children when punished at school, returned home with a note to be signed that ensured severe physical punishment from a parent.

I cannot think of any child whose *behaviour* remained blemish free after the severity of such a strategy. I can however, think of scores of children for whom life at school and home is a continual nightmare of consequences for *behaviour* they simply don't understand and cannot control no matter how often or how severely they are punished.

Consequences, almost by definition, are actions that inflict pain with the intention of creating behavioural change. In schools this pain must be emotional (something the student doesn't like) as it's unlawful to inflict physical pain.

It takes no educational expertise to inflict pain upon another and the belief that conditioning techniques, like consequences, work ethically or well with children is to see them more as rats than people.

When *children go wrong* they need adults to guide them not pain to change them. Rather than casting them away from us we must pull them towards us and work with them.

Errant children need to make amends. They need to repair broken relationships and rebuild lost trust. They need to more deeply understand themselves, be more empathetic and understand the impact of their actions on others. They need to reflect and accept responsibility for what they say and do. They must learn to self-regulate and do what is right.

And to learn all this they will need to work closely with an educator – a rational adult, proficient in assisting children make sense of things, especially when they go wrong. An adult who is a skilled communicator and exemplary role model - one who understands the importance of building strong, trusting relationships with children. A teacher with a deep desire to help children in their moment of need, not hurt them.