



OUTCOME DETERMINES PRACTICE

By Wilson McCaskill

I often sit in staff rooms listening to educators talking about the attributes they are trying to foster in their students. There is always something uplifting in the words used and one can't help but feel that the very process of describing these attributes is both ennobling and reassuring.

In fact, words and phrases like: *independent learners, self-motivated, critical thinkers, life long learners, considerate, caring, good citizens, confident, optimistic, self-regulating* are deceptively comforting and their mere use can easily dupe any of us into thinking that because we have used them we must be employing the practice that will turn them into the defining attributes of our students.

Too often though, I see glaring contradictions in the desired outcome and the practice being employed to achieve it.

Independent, self-motivated, self-managing learners describes in significant part what most schools are trying to achieve. Yet, closer inspection of their practice often reveals they are, in fact, developing *authority dependent* students whose behaviour is primarily motivated by the lure of praise and rewards or by the fear of punishment..... students who are not self-regulating but controlled by an authority figure who has the power to make their day better or worse depending on how they behave, their attitude, the quality of their work or lack thereof.

A tell tale sign of a school developing authority dependent students is the frequent adjustment of its behaviour management policy and the constant search for, or improvement of classroom rewards and consequences. It is not uncommon to hear staff complaining of a lack of admin support with difficult students, and admin complaining of staff failing to adequately manage students and expecting far too much from admin. Invariably in such schools, there is a fairly constant flow of students to the deputy or principal's office to either be rewarded or punished by the highest authority available.

Another sign is the proliferation of charts and tables, for all to see, on which the names of students who have either pleased or displeased those in authority are placed. A usual extension of this manipulative strategy is the large number of rewards and prizes handed out at school assemblies for anything from tidiest classroom to best walkers from one place in the school to another, to this weeks friendliest classroom with the biggest smiles.

Considerable creative energy is invested in finding or devising ways that effectively entice children to do the right thing and fearfully avoid the wrong thing. The fact that everyone of these inventive, manipulative/coercive strategies will eventually lose their



effect on the masses they are meant to control, does not diminish the commitment of those who truly believe in the power of carrots and sticks to make children do as they are told. Quite the reverse. As each strategy reaches its use by date, gratification is gained and power enjoyed in the finding of yet another disguise for the same old carrot and stick that will successfully dupe children into compliance and dependence.

This pursuit of developing authority dependent children has much to do, in my opinion, with the belief that students should be compliant, obedient individuals who do as teacher tells them. The more student compliance is seen as the measure of an ordered and functioning school community the greater the need to find strategies that create the pleasure or pain that make compliance the behaviour of supposed choice. It reveals a somewhat cynical view of children and casts them as the inevitable perpetrators of wrong unless someone is making sure they do right.

Besides; if, in their assessment of a given event or situation, they can and want to do what is right and best, are we not robbed of the one thing we waited so long to acquire as adults? Are we not robbed of power? The power that we as children had always seen as the defining quality of adulthood and resented the lack of. And can we not remember our great want to get older because it meant we had more power. The power to be more self-determining and the delicious power of being able to, at last, tell those younger than us what to do. From our childlike perspective big people had it all. They had real power. They could tell you to do things and not do it themselves. They decided if you were guilty or innocent and there were a whole raft of things they could do that you couldn't.....not because you weren't capable but because you weren't allowed. Having power became the main reason we wanted to be adults.

Growing up wasn't about the constant acquiring of knowledge that would lead to contentment, fulfillment and a deep understanding of self and others. It was about eventually being able to do what you wanted, when you wanted and however you wanted, and the more you could do that the more powerful you were. Eventually, no matter what anybody said or whether or not they thought you were ready, you had done the time and the prize was yours. You were an adult and you weren't about to let anyone take that power away from you.

There is something gratifying about being in charge of people and things. As much as it may be annoying that some people constantly need our approval, permission, advice and support it can also be seductively pleasing. We all like to be needed and though we may not like to admit it there is pleasure in being feared as well. If we can construct our world to give us the sensation of both, with any diminishment in one amplified in the other, there is every likelihood that the pleasure of power is ours to enjoy.

A small amount of time spent listening to the language centered on behaviour leaves little doubt as to the main objective of teacher, student relationships in many schools. Teachers are meant to have *control* of their classrooms. Students must ask for *permission*, they must be *quiet and listen*. Being able to *walk in lines* is seen as a skill, *putting your hand up* is essential. *School rules* are unbreakable and no *excuses are tolerated*. Students *receive detentions, suspensions and expulsions*. They are also



benched, isolated, removed or reprimanded. Schools talk about behaviour or student management policies and consequences for bullying and zero tolerance for racism.

The overtones of control and compliance within this language are self-evident, and implicit in its use is the role of authority in enforcing the required codes of conduct and effectively dealing with those who transgress. I have listened to many a school leader take perverse pleasure in detailing the high number of detentions and suspensions at their school as a sign of their crack down on unacceptable behaviour and proof that compliance is being achieved and respect for the teaching staff is being reinstated.

Invariably, such leaders are held in high esteem by their staff because they are seen as protecting them. And, as anyone who can protect you has, by definition, more power than you, it is prudent to publicly display your admiration and support. Failure to do so may see the power that has been used to effectively protect you, turned against you.

Developing authority dependent students ensures that teachers constantly experience the immediate gratification of being either needed or feared. The younger the students the easier it is to create this dependency and the easier to maintain it.

There is a catch however. Those students who are motivated by rewards seek significance by endlessly trying to please the teacher and those who aren't, seek equal significance by trying to upset the teacher. Either way, they believe the teacher is always trying to control them. From their point-of-view, control means making things harder for them by making things easier for the teacher and regardless of the fact that they are under-educated in the management and motivation of their own behaviour, they resent the teacher for the power they have.

Frequently, in those seeking to please the teacher, this resentment will manifest in avoiding failure, playing it safe and much complaining about other less compliant members of the class. Those who seek to upset the teacher, frequently intimidate, attack, put down or ostracise those they deem to be the weaker members of the class. A common strategy for teachers in this type of divided classroom is to appoint a host of leadership roles in the hope that those given the reward of such a position, with the implied power that it carries, will be enticed to conform with the dictates of the supreme leader.

Rarely do school leaders and teachers aim to develop authority dependent students. Yet, in so many instances that is exactly what they are doing. They point to the short term gains of rewards and punishments to validate their practice and seem to conveniently avoid the compelling research and evidence that discredits such practice. They will openly state that the educational aim is to develop intrinsic motivation for learning while using blatantly extrinsic means to maintain engagement and compliance. They will accept that children should do the right thing because they know what makes it right (and having the courage of their convictions, follow through and do it) but then tempt children to do right for the wrong reasons. Namely, for the lowest level of moral reasoning.....because they will get a reward if they do, or punished if they don't.



Bribed to do right, children soon learn that the price is negotiable and what earns "X" today can earn "2X" tomorrow. And those who do wrong soon learn that the only thing wrong with doing wrong is getting caught. So begins a long lasting and damaging game of, "Beat The System" where the real winners are those who learn to get more for doing less, and those who do what they want for as few consequences as possible.

Parents love this game because if their children are working "with authority" they will receive the rewards and accolades for doing so, thereby allowing Mum and Dad the opportunity to bask in the reflected glory. If their children are working "against authority" it takes little pressure to make sure those in power demonstrate no negative bias by ensuring that mad Michael and destructive Danielle receive their "fair" share of praise, stickers and rewards.....just like the other kids.

After all, if the strategies and techniques sitting under the broad banner of "Positive Reinforcement" are effective in habituating personal and social capabilities then Michael and Danielle have the right to an equal, if not greater, share of the reinforcement on offer whether or not they deserve it. And, if punishment is equally powerful in habituating positive behaviour then they should not be saved from its beneficial effects. And in so many instances, bouncing between rewards and punishments will characterise the primary school journey of Michael, Danielle and countless others.

It really does matter that schools have an accurate and well articulated description of the behavioural attributes they are aiming to develop in their students. It doesn't need to be complex or convoluted but it should take into account the requirements of the personal and social capabilities domain of the national curriculum.

In the Australian curriculum the personal and social capability learning continuum is organised into four interrelated elements.

- Self-awareness
- Self-management
- Social awareness
- Social management

Being aware of the well constructed detail of each of these elements my recommendation is that a description something like, "an independent, self-motivated, self-managing individual who is reasoned, responsible, empathetic and engaged with life and learning," would more than adequately characterise a student with the personal and social capabilities sought by the curriculum.

That being the desired outcome, the struggle will be to ensure that the practice achieves it. This will call for rigorous investigation of current practice and the willingness to challenge ideas and beliefs that are in conflict with the required outcome. Further, it will call for the courage to abandon well-embedded techniques of student manipulation, control and management for the more challenging demands of an educational process that empowers students to exemplify the personal and social capabilities of the curriculum.



To know what is required and then employ practices that are in contradiction and conflict with the outcome is nothing short of hypocrisy. Avoiding hypocrisy (walking the talk) is never easy and one cannot underestimate the discomfort created in the development of best practice driven by the pursuit of a clear and necessary outcome.

However, once the outcome has been well articulated and the reasons for the outcome fully understood and accepted by all charged to achieve it, the practice becomes easier to determine, implement and adhere to.

Outcome should and must determine practice.