TEN STRATEGIES FOR REDUCING PROBLEM BEHAVIOURS WITH GOOD ACADEMIC MANAGEMENT

Students who are confrontational or non-compliant frequently have poor academic skills, a low sense of self-efficacy as learners, and a very negative attitude toward school *(Sprick, et al., 2002*).

Misbehaviour often stems from academic deficits. Educators who work with these behaviourally challenging learners, however, often make the mistake of overlooking simple academic strategies that have been shown to shape student behaviour in powerful and positive ways *(Penno et al., 2000).*

Here are ten research-based ideas on academic management that no teacher of difficult-to-manage students should be without!

1. Be sure that assigned work is not too easy and not too difficult (at least 80% success rate).

It is surprising how often classroom behaviour problems occur simply because students find the assigned work too difficult or too easy *(Gettinger & Seibert, 2002).* When assignments are too simple, the student may become bored and distracted. When work is too hard, the student is likely to feel frustrated and upset because he or she cannot complete the assignment. As a significant mismatch between the assigned task and the student's abilities can trigger misbehaviour, teachers should have a clear knowledge of each student's academic skills and adjust assignments as needed to ensure that the student is appropriately challenged but not overwhelmed by the work.

2. Offer frequent opportunities for choice.

Teachers who allow students a degree of choice in structuring their learning activities typically have fewer behaviour problems in their classrooms than teachers who do not. *(Kern et al. 2002).* Providing choices gives students a sense of autonomy and voice in their learning. It should also be remembered that no teacher could possibly anticipate each student's idiosyncratic learning needs in every situation. If students are offered choice in structuring their academic activities, however, they will frequently select those options that make their learning easier and more manageable. Therefore, students who exercise academic choice are more likely to be active, motivated managers of their own learning and less likely to simply act out due to frustration or boredom.

As an example of choice for a class, the teacher may let the entire class vote on which of two lessons they would prefer to have presented that day. Choice can be incorporated into individual assignments too. In independent class work, for example, a student might be allowed to choose which of several short assignments to do first, the books or other research materials to be used, the response format (e.g. Writing a short essay, preparing an oral report), etc.

One efficient way to promote choice in the classroom is for the teacher to create a master menu of options that students can select from in various learning situations. The teacher, for example, may teach the class that during any independent assignment, students will always have a chance to:

- Choose from at least two assignment options,
- Sit where they want in the classroom
- Choose a peer-buddy to check their work.

Student choice then becomes integrated seamlessly into the classroom routine.

3. Select high-interest or functional learning activities.

Students are more motivated to learn when their instructional activities are linked to a topic of high interest *(Kern et al., 2002).* A teacher who discovers that her Year 7 maths class loves cricket, for example, may be able to create engaging math problems based on cricket statistics.

Students may also be energised to participate in academic activities if they believe that these activities will give them functional skills that they value *(Miller et al., 2003).* One teacher assigned to work with a classroom of high school boys with serious behaviour and learning problems related that she had great difficulty managing the class – until she realised that each of them wanted to learn to drive.

So the teacher brought in copies of the learner driver's manual and that became the instructional text. The students were much better behaved because they were now motivated learners working toward the pragmatic real world goal of learning to drive *(R Sarsfield, personal communication).*

4. Instruct students at a brisk pace.

A myth of special education is that students with learning difficulties must be taught at a slower, less demanding pace than their same age peers *(Heward, 2003).*

In fact, a slow pace of instruction can actually cause significant behaviour problems, because students become bored and distracted. Teacher-led instruction should be delivered at a sufficiently brisk pace to hold student attention. An important additional benefit of a brisk instructional pace is that students cover more academic material more quickly, accelerating their learning *(Heward, 2003).*

5. Structure lessons to require active student involvement.

Here is as powerful concept in behaviour management: it is very difficult for students to be actively engaged in academics and to misbehave at the same time!

When teachers require that students participate in lessons rather than sit as passive listeners, they increase the odds that these students will become caught up in the flow of the activity and not drift off into misbehaviour *(Heward, 2003).*

Students can be encouraged to be active learning participants in many ways. A teacher, for example, may:

- Call out questions and have the class give the answer in unison ('choral responding');
- Pose a question, give the class 'think time', and then draw a name from a hat to select a student to give the answer;
- Ask students working independently on a practice problem to 'think aloud' as they work through the steps of the problem.

Students who have lots of opportunities to actively respond and receive teacher feedback also demonstrate substantial learning gains *(Heward, 1994)*.

6. Incorporate cooperative-learning opportunities into instruction.

The traditional teacher oral exposition (lecture) is frequently associated with high rates of student misbehaviour. When misbehaviour occurs in a large group format, it also can have a large negative impact; one acting-out student who gets into a power-struggle with the lecturing teacher will interrupt learning for the entire class.

There is evidence, though, that when students are given well-structured assignments and placed into work-pairs or cooperative learning groups, behaviour problems typically diminish (Beyda et al., 2002). Furthermore, if a behaviour problem should occur while cooperative groups are working together, the teacher is often able to approach and privately redirect the misbehaving student without disrupting learning in the other groups *(Beyda et al., 2002)*.

Even positive teacher practices can be more effective when used in cooperative-learning settings. If teachers use the lecture format and take the time to give extended feedback and provide coaching to individuals, other students can become disengaged and off-task.

If students are working in pairs or small groups, though, teacher feedback given to one group or individual does not interrupt learning for the other groups.

7. Give frequent teacher feedback and encouragement.

Praise and other positive interactions between teacher and student serve an important instructional function, because these exchanges regularly remind the student of the classroom behavioural and academic expectations and give the student clear evidence that he or she is capable of achieving those expectations *(Mayer, 2000)*.

Unfortunately, in most classrooms, teachers tend to deliver many more reprimands than they do praise statements. This imbalance is understandable; after all, teachers are under pressure to devote most of their class time to deliver high-quality instruction and tend to interrupt that instruction only when forced to deal with disruptive behaviour.

A high rate of reprimands and low rate of praise, however, can have several negative effects. First, if teachers do not regularly praise and encourage students who act appropriately, those positive student behaviours may wither away through lack of recognition. Second, students will probably find a steady diet of reprimands to be punishing and might eventually respond by withdrawing from participation or even avoiding the class altogether.

A goal for teachers should be to engage in at least 3 to 4 positive interactions with the student for each reprimand given (4:1 praise to reprimand) *(Sprick, et al., 2002)*. Positive interactions might include focused, specific praise, non-verbal exchanges (e.g. smile or 'thumbs-up' from across the room), or even an encouraging note written on the student's homework assignment. These positive interactions are brief and can often be delivered in the midst of instruction.

8. Provide correct models during independent work.

In virtually every classroom, students are expected to work independently on assignments. Independent class work can be a prime trigger, though, for serious student misbehaviour *(DuPaul & Stoner, 2002)*.

One modest instructional adjustment that can significantly reduce problem behaviours is to supply students with several correctly completed models (work examples) to use as a reference *(Miller et al., 2003).*

A maths teacher teaching quadratic equations, for example, might provide 4 models in which all steps in solving the equation are solved. Students could refer to these models as needed when completing their own worksheets of similar algebra problems. Or an English teacher who assigns his class to compose a letter to a friend might allow them to refer to three 'model' letters while they write.

9. Be consistent in managing the classroom setting.

Consistent messages about classroom behaviours are vital.

For example a teacher complains that students routinely yell out answers without following the classroom rule of first raising their hand to speak. When an observer comes into the classroom to offer her some ideas for reducing the number of errors, the observer quickly discovers that the teacher often ignores students who have raised their hand to speak and instead accepts answers that are blurted out. *Because she is inconsistent in enforcing her classroom rules, the teacher is actually contributing to student misbehaviour!*

As a group, students with challenging behaviours are more likely than their peers to become confused by inconsistent classroom routines. Teachers can hold down the level of problem behaviours by teaching clear expectations for classroom behaviours and then consistently following through in enforcing those expectations *(Sprick et al., 2002).*

Classrooms run more smoothly when students are first taught routines for common learning activities – such as participating in class discussion, handing in class work, breaking into cooperative learning groups, and handing out lesson materials and also when the teacher consistently enforces those same routines by praising and rewarding students who follow them. It is also necessary to review those routines periodically, and reteach them as needed.

10. Target interventions to coincide closely with 'point of performance'.

Skilled teachers employ many strategies to shape or manage challenging student behaviours. For instance, a teacher may give a 'pre-correction' (reminder about appropriate behaviours) to a student who is about to leave the room to attend a school assembly, award a 'good behaviour' raffle-ticket to a student who displayed exemplary behaviour in the corridors, or allow a student to collect a reward that she had earned for being on time to class for the whole week.

It is generally a good idea for teachers who work with challenging students to target their behavioural and academic intervention strategies to coincide as closely as possible with that student's 'point of performance' (the time that the student engages in the behaviour that the teacher is attempting to influence) (*DuPaul & Stoner, 2002).* A teacher is likely to be more successful in getting a student to walk to the library appropriately if they remind the student about what is expected just prior to moving to the library.

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