

Let's rethink 'behaviour problems' and 'failing' students

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Humans are amazing teachers. The average parent is presented with a person with just the instinct to cry when hungry, distressed or in discomfort, but in a few short years has that individual walking, talking, dressing themselves, feeding themselves and even carrying out basic food preparation, cooperating with others, sharing, drawing and perhaps reading, writing and understanding numbers. This is then extended over the next decades where in just 1200 hours per year at school the student extends these basic skills into a range of areas that provide the skills to operate in a highly technological society.

However, we know that this does not always occur without difficulty. Some children do not pick up some of the foundation skills due to learning difficulties, disrupted home life or other factors. Similarly, we know from national and international data that around 30% of students enter high school unable to read to the level required to understand textbooks. These and other students may fall far behind their peers or express a range of behaviours that are disruptive to the environments they occupy. These students tend to pick up the labels of 'learning disabled', 'special needs', 'behaviour problem' and similar terms. The focus then goes on to remediating or 'fixing' the behaviour problem or learning failures, often by segregation with others similarly labelled and subjected to specialised procedures aimed at remediation.

If we reflect on what is happening here, we can see that we have 'medicalised' a failure to learn into a 'problem' inherent in the individual that needs to be fixed. The aim of this approach is to *minimise the difference* (i.e. reduce the level of failure) to the 'normal' over time. As the 'normal' level is always changing with the peer group continuing to develop, the goal posts are continually shifting so real gains may not be seen as 'the gap' remains or grows. The interventions are usually specialised and 'non-normal' and if they are not successful the solution is normally long term or even life-long marginalisation, or segregation from the mainstream in group homes, prisons or other institutionalised arrangements.

An alternative way of looking at the same information is to say that in the environments the individual has experienced, the rate of learning was less than desired. Our question is 'What could be changed in those environments so that the individuals could learn and grow at a faster rate than is currently being experienced?' That is, the focus is on what we can do as teachers to adapt the environment and our approach so that the learning of all can be enhanced. The 'problem' of lack of success is not in the student but rather in our capacity to modify the environment or our strategies to achieve powerful learning. This does not mean that we will always be successful, but it does mean that we can't blame failure on the person being taught. We just need to work out how to do it better.

A second aspect is to look at why our teaching has been so successful with the majority of individuals over many millennia and apply many of those same strategies to individuals who do not learn at the same rate as others.

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What are some of these aspects that are consistent over generations?

- A strong personal relationship between the teacher and learner.
- A very specific knowledge of the current level of the individual so that the learning is always **building** from where the individual is currently at.
- The teacher ensures that the student's basic needs are met within the teaching environment or if necessary, in addition to this – for example if the individual is hungry, thirsty or feeling stressed.
- There is a considerable amount of knowledge about the material to be taught and the steps involved in completion so that they can be taught systematically.
- The level of challenge is appropriate to the individual – not too easy so that interest is lost, nor too hard so that the person gives up. The 'Goldilocks zone!'
- The use of appropriate models is well known as a powerful way to teach and maximise motivation. The use of peer grouping where the impact of a majority being more competent being the most powerful way of assisting the less competent group members is known and utilised.
- Peer tutoring is seen as a natural and highly effective way of teaching individuals that benefits both parties as 'to teach, you have to know'.
- The teacher knows to consistently adapt the teaching to ensure that there is a high level of engagement as the motivation of the student varies with the normal patterns of tiredness, stress, mood, weather etc.
- The learning is relevant to the individual so that they can see the benefits in their world to have the skill.
- Learning experiences are regular with limited time between 'lessons' so that the information is more likely to be fixed in long term memory.
- Learning is rewarding and 'fun' in most cases.
- Expectations are high and without limitation on the 'potential' of the learner.

If we look at this closely, we can see there are several major differences to the 'remedial' model of education.

- Instead of aiming to reduce the level of failure to achieve the 'expected' standard, the approach is to **start from where the individual is** at and systematically build skills. All progress is positive as the reference point is where the person was 'yesterday', rather than how far they still have to catch up.
- The **detailed knowledge of the individual** is fundamental to the process. The environment is adapted and modified as necessary to provide the closest to the ideal learning environment that is possible for that individual. For example, if the individual is easily distracted, distractions are minimised. If the individual is unable to remain in one situation for extended periods, the requirement to remain in one place is systematically increased but in a zone that is manageable so that they are almost always successful.
- **Expectations** are high. Rather than starting with the negative expectations inherent in 'special' or 'learning disabled', 'slow learner', 'autistic', 'adhd' etc., the expectation is set that if the instruction is well done, the person can progress systematically, *often at faster than 'normal' rates.*

- **Grouping** is used as a powerful positive strategy to maximise learning. Grouping on the basis of putting the least capable together so all the models are incompetent is avoided.
- **Potential** is seen as unlimited or at least unknown. No individual is seen as 'having reached their potential' as the impact on expectations and future learning is obvious.
- Meeting of the **needs** of the individual is seen as an obvious part of the structuring of the learning environment. This is rarely considered separately as the detailed knowledge of the individual means that it is an accepted precondition of successful teaching. In comparison, under the alternative approach of deficit reduction, key human needs such as the need for power, choice and control or the need for fun and enjoyment are frequently not attended to. If an individual's behaviour is related to a need to gain control in a life where this is minimal, putting greater external controls to stop the difficult behaviour is unlikely to be effective in the long term.

Implications

It is easy to see this analysis as 'splitting hairs' and unfairly characterising the approach of many committed and highly competent teachers and other professionals. However, we are all aware that there are many individuals in low expectation environments, surrounded by incompetent peer models with their life totally controlled by others and little if any fun or appropriate challenge. We also know, if we are honest, where that approach leads. After all, when people leave segregated education, do they go on to a life in the community with a job, their own home and other expected outcomes -- or is the more likely outcome a segregated life of group homes and sheltered work at best?

Putting it into practice

A critical point in the above analysis is the need to individualise if we are to achieve the best outcomes, so there will be no 'magic bullet' that will apply to everyone. However, from the millennia of experience and decades of research on powerful teaching, the following guidelines are likely to be useful.

- **Spend some extra time getting to really know the student.** Parents are normally a huge resource as they are the world expert on the student, having shared almost every waking hour with them. Just setting some time to ensure that there is regular positive interaction with the student can gradually break down resistance and allow you to gain a window into who this person is. We are all products of our upbringing and life experiences, so the more that we know about this, the more likely that we will be able to connect and really make a life difference to the student. If we know that the student has had a history of regular medical consultations and assessments, little or no experience of playgroups and shared sandpits and interactions almost totally confined to near family and limited experiences in the community, then this will have had an impact. Similarly, traumatic experiences at home can come out in school. If we can really make a difference despite this, it can be life changing. There is nothing more powerful for a teacher than to make a life changing difference to a student.
- **Start from where the student is at.** If the student is operating at a beginning level, that is where we start. If the student has no concept of what is required, ***we do it***

for the student and repeat this, gradually reducing the amount of assistance until the student is doing it independently. If the student does not know the answer to a question, give the answer and then ask the student to repeat it back to us. This means that the student has heard the answer twice and it has benefitted others who also may not have known the answer. If a student cannot sit at a desk for more than 10 seconds before trying to get up and move around, we use lots of encouragement with the aim of getting her to sit for 15 seconds, then 20 seconds..... We would also use any assistive devices such as a modified pencil or an iPad to achieve a better learning outcome, or rearrange the teaching environment to make success more likely. Note that this all occurring in the regular class lesson which is adapted so all students can engage.

- **Look to meet the needs of students.** We are all aware that if we do not feel safe, are very hungry, feel powerless or bored, ... learning is much less likely. Some students have a high level of anxiety due to difficulty in coping with the high level of stimulation in a regular classroom; others may come from homes where they do not feel safe; others may have experienced continual failure and have found the only area where they can succeed is being the class clown – and so on. A theory looking at needs that many teachers have found useful for getting an understanding of students is Choice Theory by William Glasser¹. He suggests that there are 5 fundamental needs of humans:
 - *Survival needs:* The need for sustenance is recognised by most schools with breakfast programs or similar approaches to assist students who are hungry for whatever reason. The need to feel safe is obvious, but for many students with autism, this is not present if the environment has excessive stimulation as they may not be able to filter out the incoming stimuli. If we were in the crowd of a rock concert with the huge levels of sound, light and human contact and were expected to follow instructions given at low volume, we might get some understanding of the stress that might occur. Similarly, if a student is being bullied, physical and emotional stress is likely to have a major impact on learning. Unless we address these needs, or worse, punish students for failing to meet expectations when in this situation, then learning is likely to be minimal or behaviour is likely to deteriorate. Deep knowledge of the individual student is critical.
 - *Love and belonging.* A lack of a strong loving home life or more commonly, rejection at school are commonly associated with students who have difficulty learning or are presenting with behavioural issues. Humans have a fundamental need to belong and to be accepted as part of the group. If a student is continually exceptionalised by being always with a teacher aide, always doing something different to the rest of the class, not engaged with others in the playground and commonly omitted from group activities, then a little reflection will indicate the likely impact on one's motivation and learning. A core purpose of education is to socialise students into the culture – to make them 'little ozzies' or whatever society they are from. If any student is left out of this process, then the impacts are likely to be both immediate and possibly life-long. Social belonging is often a key to engaging and bringing students along.

- *Power.* Consider for a moment if all decision making was removed from you. You could not control any part of your life from what you wear and eat to what you do from minute to minute. Many see this as a description of life in prison or equivalent. For many students with learning difficulties or behaviour problems, their lack of power might well resemble this. Almost every decision is controlled by adults around them with choices minimal or non-existent. If a student is exhibiting difficult behaviour, one possibility is that their behaviour is the only way that they can achieve some power and control in their life. The common reaction of placing further restrictions on the student is unlikely to be effective, and certainly is not likely to increase their engagement. Alternatively, if we can look to maximising the control of individual students in a graduated way so that they learn the implications and consequences of decisions, engagement is more likely. For students with behavioural issues, starting from where the student is at and negotiating a compromise where the student gains some control within negotiated boundaries can start a process of re-engagement that might just have life-long implications.
- *Freedom.* In many ways similar to power, students with learning difficulties or behavioural issues often find themselves in situations of minimal freedom. Detentions or extra homework, increased boundaries to enforce compliance or similar restrictions all have the effect of decreasing freedom and possibly exacerbating the need in the student to be free to express themselves and feel enthusiastic about engagement with learning. A good question to ask is 'What freedom does this student have?' The answer in many cases is quite confronting with many students with learning difficulties having effectively no freedom as someone is always requiring them to do something or limiting their chance to be free.
- *Fun.* Take fun out of your life and things do not look very good. To be in a situation where almost every waking minute is taken up with the need to learn and follow a set routine under the control of others is not a life that most of us would choose. If we think of the times at school that we enjoyed learning the most they almost always involved fun. We are much more likely to be engaged if there is some serious thought to time allocated for just relaxing and having fun. If learning can be structured so that it is fun and enjoyable, it is much more likely to be powerful. Some learning is hard work, but that is best taken on if there has also been time for fun and enjoyment.

Other parts of Choice Theory may not have the same resonance for all teachers, but most would agree that these five areas are basic human needs that would be worth looking at in individual students.

- **Set high expectations.** A good (and accurate) expectation to keep in mind is that if physically capable, anyone can learn anything, but the number of 'lessons' required will vary from individual to individual. We all have experienced this in our own time as a student where some grasp a concept or learn a fact almost instantly, most of us get it after a while and some did not get it by the end of the class, but could if more time was spent with them. We do not have infinite time to spend on everyone, so it

means that we have to increase the efficiency of our teaching and sometimes prioritise what is taught if we are to achieve desired outcomes. However, if we do not have the expectation that everyone can achieve success, it is guaranteed that they will not.

- **Use powerful grouping strategies.** Often teachers will see the only way that a student far behind can be included in the class is if that student works 1-1 with an aide. While teacher aides can be an invaluable resource in the classroom, if they are put with a student on a 1-1 basis it is not only not inclusive (would you feel included if you were the student?) but it has also been shown to produce a *worse* outcome academically and socially *than no teacher aide* at all². The reason is that it builds dependency on the teacher aide and the aide becomes a barrier to the other students interacting. Humans are inherently social beings and tend to naturally conform to others in a group. This means that if we see the class members as all being the helpers and support to each other, then we can use our knowledge of grouping to maximise the effect. A series of small groups with the majority of members being more competent with a small minority of less competent is likely to have the effect of increasing the expectations on the less capable students and given good preparation by the teacher, group members can assist each other. Cooperative learning through groups has been shown to be a powerful strategy to use in the classroom.³
- **Peer tutoring.** Peer tutoring has been shown to be one of the most powerful strategies to use in a classroom to enhance learning for both the tutor and the student being tutored⁴. The learning of both increases. Students have always helped each other out as a natural part of school life and with the relationship and intimate knowledge of the learner, the learning is almost always powerful. In a class situation it is particularly effective if it is class-wide so at different times a student will be being assisted and at other times assisting another depending on the topic and particular skills of each. Giving some help to a mate is image enhancing for both which might be compared to the image and self-esteem impact of being withdrawn for a special class. If the student with learning difficulties also gets to the opportunity to be a tutor to another by careful structuring, this can boost self-esteem considerably. Peer tutoring has the benefit of increasing belonging as well, with students who are working together before a break more likely to continue the interaction into the playground.
- **Analysing the task.** In any class, the information covered will contain core information in the form of concepts or key facts, general expansion of this information with examples and application, and some opportunities for detailed extension. If the lesson is prepared with this in mind, it is likely that all students will be able to be engaged in the same lesson material, even though their baseline knowledge, depth of knowledge and capacity to extend and generalise will vary. In preparation, we can ask three questions:
 - What do I want EVERY student to know and understand at the end of this lesson?

- What do I want MOST students to know and understand at the end of the lesson?
- What do I want SOME students to know and understand at the end of the lesson?⁵

The first question relates to the core information or concepts, and if we are realistic, it involves 1 or 2 items or concepts. This information can be taught to even the most disabled student using the approaches described above.

The second question relates to the information aimed at capturing most students with examples, applications and opportunities to relate to other learning. The extent of engagement and development will vary across the class.

The third question relates to those students who are far ahead of the rest of the class and who easily become bored and distracted if not challenged appropriately. Of course, being in a peer tutor role is one way that they can be challenged appropriately.

- **Universal Design for Learning.** This is a concept increasingly discussed in relation to teaching to diversity that incorporates the majority of the approaches that have been used successfully for millennia but describes them in a structured way based on both educational and neurological research. It suggests that to include the full diversity of students in the regular classroom and challenge them at their level, we need to ask 3 questions:
 - What are the alternative ways that the material to be taught could be **presented** to the students? That is, there are multiple alternatives apart from standing at the blackboard and lecturing, with different alternatives opening up the learning to students who otherwise could not gain access.
 - What are the alternative ways that I could **engage** the students in the lesson/material? Again, multiple ways are possible, many described in some detail above. Of course, if the material is presented in a way that it is accessible and challenging at the right level, this is likely to also be engaging.
 - What are the alternative ways that I could **assess** the outcomes of the learning? Multiple ways are possible so that every student can be assessed fairly at their level and given feedback that is accurate but acknowledges their progress in a positive and rewarding way.

Using this approach in the preparation of all lessons can bring creative ways to engage and challenge all students while ensuring that each student is both part of the lesson and being challenged and assessed appropriately.

What is being considered here is a fundamental rethinking of education and school and class organisation. It has a series of key assumptions that underpin all arrangements such as:

- All students have both similarities and differences as a normal part of the human family.
- Students learn best together.
- Students want to 'belong' with their peers.
- Students want to behave well as this is related to belonging.
- A key component of education is socialising all students into the culture and learning core information shared by all citizens.

- Any removal from full participation in the shared lesson is likely to have negative outcomes academically and socially.
- Segregating students on the basis of negatively valued human difference highlights the difference and makes social acceptance and social inclusion less likely.
- Students are less safe in segregated environments as there are likely to be no believable witnesses if abuse or maltreatment occurs. In the mainstream classroom, peers are credible witnesses.

¹ Glasser, W. 1985. *Choice theory in the classroom*. Harper, NY.

² Sharples, J., Webster, R. & Blatchford, P. 2015. *Making best use of teaching assistants: Guidance report*. Education Endowment Federation, UK.

³ Cooperative learning: Hattie, J. 2009. *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. Routledge.Lond. 212-214.

⁴ Peer tutoring: Hattie, J. 2009. *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. Routledge.Lond. 186-187.

⁵ Swartz, P. 2013. *From possibility to success*. Heinemann. NH.