

Managing challenging behaviour in the classroom: Positive Teaching and Function-Based approaches

It is a constant challenge for teachers to develop their own skills in managing difficult behaviour in the classroom. **Micaela Rafferty** and **Jill Hellemans** are new members of the MultiLit team, and are currently designing a set of workshops based on a positive behaviour support approach to classroom behaviour management. For this article Micaela and Jill explain the theoretical context of their work, and provide a set of very constructive explicit suggestions about how teachers can monitor their own patterns of responding, taking care to understand the reasons for the behaviour and teaching replacement behaviours – hopefully humming “accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative” quietly to themselves as they work ...

Introduction

Managing challenging behaviour in the classroom remains one of the biggest struggles for teachers. As classrooms become more inclusive, the learning and behavioural needs of the classroom become more diverse. Now, more than ever, teachers need to be equipped with effective, practical and evidence-based practices for classroom behaviour management. The key to developing schools as effective learning environments is strongly linked to school cultures that promote positive social behaviour and academic engagement (Sugai & Horner, 2008). For students with learning difficulties, the implementation of positive and proactive supports is critical to help them succeed both academically and behaviourally.

Children with learning difficulties can present with additional and significant social, emotional and behavioural concerns (Allday, 2018). It is important to consider not only the academic struggles that students with learning difficulties face but also the potential adaptive skill deficits that may contribute to their learning and behavioural profile. They may engage in challenging behaviour, unintentionally or purposefully, in order to disguise or mask their difficulties, to avoid tasks that they find challenging, or simply because they don't possess the more appropriate, alternative behaviour required for that situation. A school environment that is rich with Positive Teaching practices and incorporates a school-wide commitment to function-based approaches ensures the focus is on figuring out why a student is behaving in a certain way and aims



to teach the student alternative skills as a positive and proactive approach to behaviour change.

It is important to note that Positive Teaching and function-based approaches take a non-categorical stance. That is, the science of behaviour and learning applies to all students and does not denote a special set of principles based on diagnoses. This article, however, aims to provide context around the importance of these approaches for students with learning difficulties in order to create classrooms with clear expectations in which they can be successful.

Behaviour support practices within the school context

When supporting students' behaviour within a school context a school-wide, Positive Behaviour Support (PBS) model is often considered best practice (Dunlap et al., 2008). PBS is a practical approach for decreasing challenging behaviour and improving quality of life. The approach involves data-based assessment and empirically validated strategies. It is worth noting that PBS is derived primarily from the science of Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA). ABA is a systematic

approach to the assessment and evaluation of behaviours and offers robust principles of behaviour and learning. ABA is the conceptual foundation that provides the fundamental framework for PBS. PBS adopts a *systems* approach and supports a school-wide roll out of these empirically validated principles and procedures. It focuses on the implementation of evidence-based practices within a unique social context. Contemporary applications of PBS in schools incorporate integrated, schoolwide efforts to prevent problems and improve all students' behaviour and learning.

It is important to consider not only the academic struggles that students with learning difficulties face but also the potential adaptive skill deficits that may contribute to their learning and behavioural profile.

Response to Intervention (RtI) is an additional, contemporary framework used in schools for identifying those students who may need additional support, both academically and behaviourally. RtI provides a multi-tiered model of intervention that focuses on screening and early detection, progress monitoring, intervention delivery, and data-driven decision-making across 3 tiers. When Tier 1 universal, preventative procedures (such as Positive Teaching, effective instruction and proactive classroom management) are implemented effectively, the resources and capacity of teachers to provide more specialised interventions to individual students are improved (Sugai & Horner, 2008).

There is emerging recognition in the education sector that a function-based approach to behaviour change is recommended. Functional behaviour assessment (FBA) is a systematic, evidence-based process that involves gathering data to identify and define target behaviour, the purpose (or function) of the behaviour in a given context, and what factors maintain the behaviour that is interfering with learning. Furthermore, and possibly most critically, this process enables the design of interventions that are functionally related to the challenging behaviour (i.e. an intervention that

targets specifically why the behaviour is occurring).

Teacher training tends to focus on how to assess academic difficulties but fails to provide training on how to systematically assess challenging behaviour (Young et al., 2018). Lack of training in a function-based approach to behaviour management often leads teachers down a slippery path toward the overuse of reactive and aversive strategies. In addition, without understanding or identifying the function of the problem behaviour, teachers are more likely to inadvertently reinforce and strengthen problem behaviour. FBA is a method that can help all teachers avoid this problematic cycle and instead develop and implement appropriate interventions (Moreno & Bullock, 2011).

Positive Teaching

Our first port of call when it comes to implementing school-wide, function-based interventions at the Tier 1 whole class level, is Positive Teaching (Wheldall & Merrett, 1984; Wheldall et al., 2020.). By Positive Teaching we are referring to the behavioural approach to teaching based on applied behaviour analysis.

Positive Teaching is defined by five principles as follows:

- 1 Teaching is concerned with the observable
- 2 Almost all classroom behaviour is learned
- 3 Learning involves change in behaviour
- 4 Behaviour changes as a result of its consequences
- 5 Behaviours are influenced by classroom contexts

Essentially, Positive Teaching subscribes to the old maxim and song "accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative." While not totally eliminating the negative, Positive Teaching advocates that teachers should drastically reduce their use of reprimands and other punishments and, instead, strive to increase the use of praise statements and other rewards, *contingently*.

Positive Teaching encourages teachers to monitor their own behaviour and recognises that for student behaviour to change, teachers must first change their own behaviour. It focuses on implementation of the following:

- Recognising and reinforcing appropriate behaviour through the

effective use of explicit, positive praise

- Improving the quality and frequency of praise
- Using reprimands sparingly and making them more effective
- Careful arrangement of the classroom (e.g. layout & seating arrangements)
- Establishing clear and effective classroom rules
- Pairing reinforcement with following classroom rules

Positive Teaching provides a vehicle for teachers to implement universal, effective support benefiting the majority of students in the class. Only once consistent and effective implementation of these Tier 1 strategies are in place will teachers have the time and capacity to delve into more focused assessment and intervention of behaviour as described below in this article (Merrett & Wheldall, 1993; O'Neil & Stephenson, 2013; Wheldall et al., 2020.)

Function-based thinking

Function-based thinking is a model of **thinking** about behaviour that incorporates a systematic process for defining challenging behaviour, determining behavioural function and selecting interventions to match the function of the behaviour (Hershfeldt et al., 2020). Function-based thinking takes into consideration the setting demands on educators and simplifies the comprehensive functional behaviour assessment process. Of course, the ideal is that teachers get training in functional behaviour assessment, but this takes time, resources and training in the complexities of such a technical process. Function-based thinking does not replace functional behaviour assessment, however. It is meant to enhance teacher knowledge about functions and designing effective interventions.

... the science of behaviour and learning applies to all students and does not denote a special set of principles based on diagnoses.

Allday (2018) acknowledges that teachers supporting children with challenging behaviour are often

uncertain of where to start. Teachers may feel unqualified to manage all of the potential variables involved when a child displays challenging behaviour. This uncertainty can often lead to inaction, and inaction leads to maintenance and often increases in behaviour. Given the complexities and many variables that can be associated with students with learning difficulties, function-based approaches move teachers away from diagnosis, blaming, and getting bogged down in what they can't control. Instead, it creates a shift in perspective leading teachers to look for simpler explanations as to why a behaviour is occurring, assist them to look to the environment that they can control (i.e. the classroom) and apply a more systematic approach to problem solving why a student might be behaving in a certain way (Hershfeldt, et al., 2010).

Allday (2018) breaks the functional thinking approach into three broad levels:

Thinking Level 1: Maintaining Function

This initial level of functional thinking helps teachers to look at 'the why' behind a student's behaviour. It encourages teachers to observe, take data, and look for patterns. Ultimately, this level of thinking results in teachers being able to determine if the student's behaviour is being maintained by positive reinforcement (i.e. gaining access to something desirable such as peer or teacher attention, preferred activities or preferred locations) or by negative reinforcement (i.e. avoiding or escaping something undesirable such as reading aloud, completing a maths worksheet or waiting in line).

Thinking Level 2: Deficits

The second level of functional thinking has teachers assess the potential skill or behavioural deficits that may be contributing to the challenging behaviour. Students engaging in challenging behaviour may lack academic skills to complete certain tasks successfully but may also lack the functional everyday skills, or adaptive behaviours, required to be successful. For example, a student that rips up the maths worksheet may do this to avoid a difficult or less-preferred task (function) but may also lack an appropriate way to ask for help (skill deficit). Furthermore, teachers are also taught to assess if this 'missing' skill is due to a performance deficit (i.e. the student does not have a more appropriate skill in their repertoire

but chooses not to use it), or a skill deficit (i.e. the student does not possess this skill at all and needs to learn it).

Thinking Level 3: Intervention

Once teachers have determined the potential function of the student's challenging behaviour and any skill or behavioural deficits at play, then the third level of functional thinking can be implemented. This involves selecting an intervention that matches the function of the behaviour and takes into account any skill deficits. This step is crucial, as interventions that are designed with the function in mind have been shown to be more effective at improving challenging behaviour (Ingram et al., 2005). In addition, teachers can match the teaching procedures more effectively once they have determined the type of deficit involved. For performance deficits, the student requires motivation and specially designed reinforcement contingencies to perform the desired behaviour. However, a skill deficit requires explicit and direct instruction to teach the new skill and increased opportunities for the student to respond and practice.

The importance of teaching replacement behaviour

As described above, designing interventions often involves teaching the student more appropriate and functionally equivalent behaviours to replace the behaviour of concern. This is a critical element to achieve effective and lasting behaviour change (McKenna et al., 2016). Within the school context, the selection of these skills may be a combination of specific academic skills, broad learning behaviours (such as task completion, following instructions, and staying seated during desk work), functional communication skills (such as requesting help or a break) and social skills (including waiting for a turn, working in a group and initiating interactions appropriately). In order to achieve effective behaviour change, curriculum modification, systematic teaching of discrete skills and creating increased opportunities for practice are required. For students with learning difficulties, a collaborative approach involving allied health professionals and specifically programming for generalisation of these skills into a group or class context are recommended

additional supports. It is critically important to support and develop the adaptive behaviour of students displaying challenging behaviour, just as much as supporting academic skills, in order to achieve effective and lasting behaviour change.

Conclusion

Strong classroom behaviour management skills are essential to creating positive, safe and productive learning environments. Teachers can become agents for meaningful and lasting behaviour change in their classrooms by adopting the principles of Positive Teaching and looking into the function behind a student's challenging behaviour. For students with learning difficulties, who can present with considerable learning and behavioural needs, a function-informed approach to behaviour management that emphasises teaching new, more appropriate skills is the most effective way to help them succeed in the classroom.

References

- Allday, R.A., (2018). Functional thinking for managing challenging behavior. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 53(4), 245-251.
- Christ, T.J., Burns, M.K., & Ysseldyke, J.E. (2005). Conceptual confusion within response-to-intervention vernacular: Clarifying meaningful differences. *NASP Communiqué*, 34(3), 1-8.
- Dunlap, G., Carr, E.G., Homer, R.H., Sarcone, J.R. & Schwartz, I. (2008). Positive behaviour support (PBS) and applied behaviour analysis (ABA): A familial alliance. *Behaviour Modification*, 32(5), 682-698. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0145445508317132>
- Gresham, F. (2015). Evidence-based social skills interventions for students at risk for EBD. *Remedial and Special Education*, 36, 100-104.
- Grey, I., Honan, R., McClean, B., & Daly, M. (2005). Evaluating the effectiveness of teacher training in applied behaviour analysis. *Journal of Intellectual Disabilities*, 9(3), 209-227.
- Hershfeldt, P.A., Rosenberg, M.S., & Bradshaw, C.P. (2010). Function-based thinking: a systematic way of thinking about function and its role in changing student behavior problems. *Beyond Behavior*, 19(3), 12-21.
- Merrett, F., & Wheldall, K. (1993). How do teachers learn to manage classroom behaviour? A study of teachers' opinions about their initial

training with special reference to classroom behaviour management. *Educational Studies*, 19, 91-106. doi:10.1080/0305569930190106

McKenna, J.W., Flower, A., & Adamson, R. (2016). A systematic review of function-based replacement behaviour interventions for students with and at risk for emotional and behavioural disorders. *Behaviour Modification*, 40(5), 678-712.

Moreno, G., & Bullock, L.M. (2011). Principles of positive behaviour supports: Using the FBA as a problem-solving approach to address challenging behaviours beyond special populations, *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 16(2), 117-127.

O'Neill, S., & Stephenson, J. (2013). One year on: first-year primary teacher perceptions of preparedness to manage misbehaviour and their confidence in strategies they use. *Australasian Journal of Special Education*, 37(2), 125-146.

Sugai, G., & Horner, R. (2008). What we know and need to know about preventing problem behavior in schools, *Exceptionality*, 16 (2), 67-77.

Wheldall, K., & Merrett, F. (1984, reprinted 2018). *Positive Teaching: The behavioural approach*. Routledge.

Wheldall, K., Wheldall, R., & Merrett, F. (2020). *Positive Teaching for Australian primary schools*. MultiLit Positive Teaching and Learning.

Young, A., Andrews, C., Hayes, C., & Valdez, C. (2018) Should teachers learn how to formally assess behavior? Educators' Perspectives. *International Journal of Special Education*, 33(2), 416-426.

Micaela Rafferty and Jill Hellemans are both Board Certified Behaviour Analysts and Special Educators, each with over 16 years' experience in early intervention and school-aged intervention. Together they have extensive experience in the assessment and treatment of challenging behaviour, development and monitoring of behaviour intervention plans, curriculum modification, literacy assessment and intervention, functional communication training and social skills instruction. They have both spent many years working in partnership with schools and teachers to implement school-wide behaviour management practices as well as individualised support plans. Micaela and Jill have joined MultiLit to further develop professional development workshops for teachers

and expand services under its Positive Teaching and Learning Initiative.

Disclosure

Micaela Rafferty and Jill Hellemans are employees of MultiLit Pty Ltd. They are directly involved in the creation, delivery and promotion of MultiLit's suite of professional development products available to teachers for classroom behaviour management, including the approaches outlined in this article.