

Widening the Circle

Celebrating Neurodiversity in Faith-based Schools

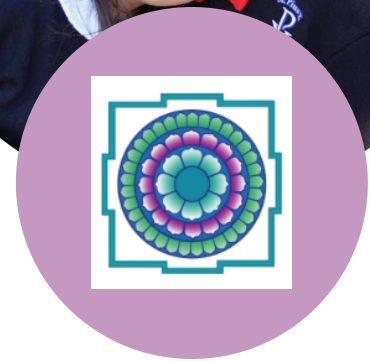
FOCUS

STRATEGY:

Working with Challenging Behaviors

Nothing is more trying to a classroom teacher than to work with a student with challenging behaviors. Other learning problems, like learning disabilities and speech issues, are easier for a teacher to engender a helping and caring response. The same is not true for students with behavioral issues. It is difficult to feel helpful and want to remediate behavioral difficulties when these behaviors are making the teacher's life miserable. In many cases, the teacher just wants the "behavior problem" and, most often, the child to disappear. Who can blame them? However, this is not the response that is consistent with our Catholic faith. In fact, we are reassured that God continues to love us, even when we are the most unlovable. It is this kind of response that we should emulate and to paraphrase scripture - continue to love the student and hate the behavioral issue.

There is no doubt in anyone's mind that the behavioral needs of students have changed significantly over the past years. There are many hypotheses for these changes. However, they tend to focus on systems. issues like the changing structures of families, the formative impact of media and the role of technology. Whereas these are all interesting and speculative, focus on the cause tends to get staff to externalize blame and minimize the control that a school can assert. Individually, we might not be able to change the societal factors that may have an impact on behavioral challenges. However, we can assert the control that we do have in an effort to provide the structure and support that students crave in order to increase their success in school.



RESOURCES

Boyle, M. (2017) Ensuring a Place at the Table: Serving Students with Disabilities in Catholic Schools. Arlington, VA: National Catholic Education Association

Boyle, M (2010) Response to intervention: A blueprint for Catholic schools. Arlington, VA: National Catholic Education Association.

Brooks, C. and McCoy-Cejka, C. (2019) Setting the Table. Arlington, VA: National Catholic Education Association



Developing a preventative lens

Robert March suggested that we need to move schools' cultures from systems "that are set up to catch kids breaking the rules (punitive approaches)" to cultures "that are set up to catch kids in positive behaviors." Here are several factors to consider to shift from dealing with misbehavior in reactive and punitive methods to a more prevention oriented approach:

Direct instruction of desired behaviors

Pro-social behavior, like academics, has to be taught. It is no longer safe to assume that everyone knows behavioral expectations in a school setting. For example, a typical expectation is "respect." There can be numerous interpretations of that concept and thus, it can be evidenced in a wide variety of ways. How an adult views a behavioral expectation may vary greatly from how a student understands it. It is important to define the behavioral expectations in ways that are concrete and observable. Once these expectations are defined, they have to be explicitly taught to students so that there is an understanding of what is meant by a particular behavioral expectation. For more information on this area, there are a number of resources available at the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports website (pbis.org)

Acknowledgement of positive behaviors

Any behavior that is reinforced will occur with greater frequency and intensity -- this means all behavior, both positive and negative. This doesn't mean that all positive behavior has to be acknowledged with extrinsic reinforcers, like stickers. However periodic acknowledgment increases the likelihood that they will occur with greater frequency. Likewise, how are negative behaviors being reinforced? This is a question that we don't like to delve into. However, there are times when the staff can be part of the behavioral issue. For example, a student can act up to get attention. If a certain teacher is known to be overly- demonstrative when he is angry, this can serve inadvertently to reinforce the student's desire for attention. It's not the kind of attention that many people crave; however, for the student who has a strong desire for attention, it may be exactly what she is looking for. A critical issue here is to determine how the adult responses to misbehavior may be inadvertently reinforcing the negative behavior.



*I am not capable of doing big things,
but I want to do everything, even the
smallest things, for the greater glory
of God.*

-St. Dominic Savio

Assessing correct instructional level

Many behavioral issues that are observed in class can be traced to a mismatch between the student's academic skills and the instructional level. Often, this is overlooked because staff members are responding to the overt behaviors that are being demonstrated. For some students, it is better to act out and get sent out of a class (or receive any other imaginable punishment) than to suffer the embarrassment of being perceived as academically incapable in front of peers.

When a student is exhibiting challenging behaviors, it is always important to ask if the student possesses the requisite skills to be successful in the given task. Reviewing pre-assessments and other formative evaluations are great places to find the answers to this question.

A corollary to this idea is to assess the academic rigor of the tasks that are being asked of students. For a variety of reasons, some students will act out if the task doesn't have a sufficient level of rigor. Tasks requiring low level of cognitive complexity (i.e. word searches and other worksheets) particularly frustrate students who are very bright.

Final word

Let us always be open to the Miracle of the Second Chance. Our faith constantly reminds us of this idea. We are reminded that, even with past transgressions, we are still loved. We also know that when we ask for forgiveness that we are granted it.

As Catholic educators, we need to reflect this same kind of love to our students. However, I've seen cases where a student "made a poor decision" in the beginning of the school year and this is held against him for the rest of the year, until he exits to the next grade. It's worse when these past transgressions are vividly re-lived in the teacher workroom and follow the student year to year. It can truly become the self-fulfilling prophesy.

When we expect bad behavior from a student, we usually get it! The concern is that this is not pastoral response that should be emulated within a Catholic school setting. This is not about releasing students from facing the consequences of their behavior. More so, it is about holding students accountable for their behavioral choices in ways that can be instructive and in ways that they can grow from those experiences.

