

School Behaviour Management: Building Partnerships.

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Professional development in behaviour management for teachers in public schools in Australia can best be described as *ad hoc*. While some schools access professional expertise on a regular basis, other schools rarely utilise these resources. Teachers as a result, tend to feel powerless, less confident and stressed if not equipped with effective behaviour management strategies to exercise in their classrooms (Richmond, 2002).

The value of the delivery of any professional development session can be gauged by the relevance it has to a particular context. A key feature of many Behaviour Management professional development activities is the passive involvement of schools in determining the focus of these sessions. Whilst it is important that schools and teachers are kept abreast of contemporary innovation and emerging trends in the education sector, it is equally important that teachers are provided with the opportunity to provide input into the content of their own professional development.

This paper will report on a ‘work-in-progress’ Action Research project developed by the University of New England. The project involved the design, implementation, delivery and evaluation of a behaviour management seminar / workshop series to a NSW public schools. The project had a phased delivery and review structure aimed at presenting teachers and administrators with practical and strategic guidance to achieve positive behavioural outcomes for their students.

The package was developed to offer teachers and school administrators an opportunity to:

1. increase self-awareness of current teaching practises and perspectives, and
2. access the expertise of others in the field of behaviour management to assist in addressing the issues specific to their context.

The general aim of the project was to determine the most effective and contextually relevant approach for practitioners to managing challenging behaviour. A key function of

the project included identification with teachers the skills they perceived they needed to better employ effective behaviour management strategies.

Literature review

A focus on teacher research is not new (Bassey, 1980; Bolster, 1989; Bruner, 1985; Denscombe, 1995) and teacher research is frequently advocated as a form of professional development. It is a way for teachers to learn to examine their own contexts and their own practices more critically. Teacher research is also advocated as a way to improve the larger body of literature on teaching, mainly due of the failure of some academic researchers to consider teachers' point of view. This failure from academic researchers has led to a gap between what researchers claim to know and the practices that appear in our schools (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990). Teacher research is more likely to address the practical problems that teachers actually have (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1994), and because teachers' voices have been excluded from the research process and from the literature on education, they have experienced a sense of marginalisation. Involving teachers in the research process is a way of recognising their unique professional knowledge, of learning from them, and of rectifying the extant power imbalance.

Bolster (1983) noted that teachers' knowledge is verified through a continual process of testing actions by observing their consequences, whereas research knowledge is verified through use of particular methods and through peer review. One result of this process is that the meanings of particular events are overlooked. Bolster (1983, p. 303) continued:

I believe the fundamental requirement of any inquiry which hopes to be consonant with the teachers' perspective on teaching is that it must view human behaviour as reflexive ... Significant knowledge of any social situation therefore, consists of an awareness of the emerging meanings that participants are developing, and the specific ways these meanings are functioning to shape their endeavours, and thus the characteristics of the situation itself.

Bolster (1983, p. 304) concluded that the genre of choice for educational research should be ethnography, "thick, critical descriptions of what is naturally and characteristically occurring as teacher and students go about their daily business in a specific classroom".

Teachers' practices lend themselves to examination because they are modifiable and obviously have a direct influence on student behaviour. A major weakness in the research on teachers' use of classroom management strategies is the over reliance on self report data e.g. questionnaires, rather than direct observation or student surveys. It is obvious that accurate data is needed that evaluates which classroom management strategies are used how they are used, and how often they are used by teachers of children with challenging behaviours. However, research recognizes that teachers have difficulty articulating what they do.

Gunter and Denny (1996) noted an abundance of research examining teacher strategies for managing classroom behaviours and the effects of such strategies. Studies of teachers of students with severe behaviour problems indicate clear deficiencies related to behaviour management techniques learned in pre-service programs (George, Gersten & Grosenick 1995, Leyser and Abrams, 1986). Martin (1999) suggests that there is a direct correlation between teachers' confidence and their use of effective behaviour management techniques. Less confident teachers were more likely to become angered and threatened by misbehaviour; use inappropriate management techniques and frequently refer students to other school personnel. In contrast, confident teachers believed difficult students were teachable, offered more support and used proactive approaches to behaviour management (Giallo, 2004, p. 4). These findings would indicate that those teachers who are effective with dealing with misbehaviour are also highly confident in their ability to teach difficult students (Giallo, 2004, p. 4).

In light of the pressure that the misbehaviour of students places on teachers, it is not surprising that studies examining teacher attitudes have found that they are apprehensive, reluctant and less tolerant of students with behaviour difficulties in their classroom (Brochner & Peitense, 1989). Teachers reported feeling poorly equipped to deal with such misbehaviour, often pointing to their lack of experience and pre-service preparation in designing and implementing behaviour modification strategies (Martin 1999). Choosing appropriate interventions for behaviour problems of students is a complex issue that has become increasingly important as the frequency of school-based behaviour problems continues to rise. Teacher training, beliefs, attitudes, self perception, level of confidence,

tenure and personal behaviour combine to play an integral part in determining which intervention strategies are chosen (Alderman 1997, p. 87).

Based on the sense of marginalisation most teachers reported on their role in teacher research, the manner in which this sense of marginalisation manifested itself in different teachers took a variety of different forms. Some may be willing to participate, engage and be open to strategies of student management, others may not be. A challenge to this research was to identify and accept the teachers' difference in attitude *inclusively*, so that we could provide a broad learning scope for *all* teachers.

Project parameters

Prior to the project's implementation, UNE researchers made a number of assumptions regarding their professional expectation of the process.

1. As behaviour management specialists at UNE, we could share theoretical and practical skills that would enhance the daily teaching practices of teachers.
2. By adopting a 'whole school' approach in the project planning, data gathering, instruction and implementation, whole school success would be achieved.
3. The needs of individual teachers would present as a micro example of the wider needs of the school.
4. The school executive would corroborate specific issues identified by individual teachers.
5. Through the adoption of a linear approach to the project (Figure 1), including all participants equally throughout the project, would be the most effective way to bring about 'whole' school success.

Figure 1



The project was conducted within an action research framework. Action research can be described as a collaborative research methodology of self-reflective enquiry, which pursues rationality, and the understanding of social or educational practice (Kemmis, 1998). It does this by using a cyclic or spiral process that alternates between action and critical reflection continuously refining methods, data and interpretation. A more comprehensive understanding of what happens in a system takes shape as reflective practices are used. In community based action research, the role of the researcher is not that of an expert who does research, but that of a resource person. He or she becomes a facilitator or consultant who acts as a catalyst to assist stakeholders in defining their problems clearly and to support them as they work toward effective solutions to the issues that concern them (Stringer, 1996).

Through collaborative skill development between the school community and university over a 1-year time frame, the key objective was to develop an effective program relevant to the specific context in tandem with a program *transferable* to other school settings. The project had two aims specific to the context;

1. Achieve positive behavioural outcomes for teachers across the *whole school*
2. Identify a 'best practice' model of professional development to achieve positive behavioural outcomes.

Within the project, two key challenges were identified. Firstly, it was important to identify and understand the various attitudes to behaviour management that were present within the school team. By embracing the differing perspectives *inclusively*, we could better provide a broad learning scope for *all* teachers. Secondly, by including all participants in the planning, data collection and implementation, it was anticipated that the level of commitment to the project was likely to be greater. We endeavoured in all of our practices to be as inclusive as possible using a collaborative consultative approach.

The project was conducted using a phased approach. Within Phase 1 a series of planning meetings with School executive team were held. These were followed by meetings between UNE staff and teaching staff as well as UNE participation in 'whole school' development activities. The aim of these meeting and activities was to familiarise with all personnel involved in the project and canvas participant perceptions of localised issues

affecting their teaching practices. Data collection processes included the use of survey, interview and observation. All participants were surveyed and then observed teaching in class. A thematic analysis was conducted comparing the teachers' survey responses and the recorded observations of their teaching. The data collected at these sites formed the basis of a one-day workshop/seminar package.

The completion of the survey provided 'baseline' data that could be compared with data gathered after the observations and training sessions. Most teachers filled in the pre-training form diligently and honestly. This immediately provided an understanding of how the teachers viewed their own teaching competence and highlighted areas they identified as needing assistance.

Richmond (2002) acknowledges the centrality of communication in behaviour management. The three 'languages' that constitute management-focused language (MFL), expectation, acknowledgement, and correction are useful in providing a framework for evaluating teacher student interactions.

The observation forms and training session were crafted around the information provided by the teachers. However, despite being part of the process leading up to the classroom observations, it was evident during that many teachers felt some unease by the observers' presence, with some becoming flustered and offering excuses for aspects of the lesson.

Phase 2 of the project focused on maintenance strategies to enhance teacher confidence in the application of behaviour management strategies. Upon the completion of data collection and analysis, a presentation of results to all staff in a whole school training session was made. This session involved the identification of key activities to target specific behaviour management issues. The staff appeared to be open to suggestions regarding how to manage behaviour in their classes. They participated actively in the staff training and reported that the session was useful.

Results

Teacher languages

A number of key issues were identified in the survey data, observations and workshop sessions. The dominant issue that emerged from the process was the varying levels of

communication used by teachers. Teacher language that provided students with a clear understanding of teacher expectations represented less than 25% of all communication. However, language that involved correction constituted greater than 60% of communication. A feature of this imbalance was the ineffective nature of the teacher's language. Students were often given ineffective instruction such as "hurry up". The limited scaffolding for students in relation to both behavioural and curriculum expectations, resulted in increased levels of antagonism between students and teachers. Another key observation was the lack of acknowledgement given to students. While acknowledgement was often given when a student would return to on-task behaviour, there was however, little acknowledgement of those not being disruptive.

Student engagement

Student engagement ranged from fully attentive through to complete off-task behaviours. In many cases, students would display a high engagement at the beginning of classes although interest tended to fade significantly as the class went on. Students successfully used distracting conversations as a time wasting technique with teachers. They were often out of seats and displayed inattention during board work. As there was often no defined beginning or end of class, the student's would often arrive late to class and rush out of the room at the bell.

Within classrooms that demonstrated higher levels of engagement, the class presented with non-disruptive low-level discussions between students. Teachers were observed using a variety of games and "fun" activities. In these classes, the teacher tended to move around the classroom more often. There were examples of students helping each other, teachers effectively using ignoring as a strategy and an observed two way respect between teacher and students. Teachers would often take advantage of teachable moments but also missed many similar opportunities.

Student management

From the observations it was determined that the teachers held a strong range of effective management techniques but they were inconsistently used. The significant lack of positive communication and expectation presented a major barrier too effective management. These results were refined under three major themes, transition, language

and consistency. Further meetings with School executive team to establish in school skill development for staff. A number of immediate strategies were suggested including; the use of reward schedules (that are achievable for everyone), better class schedule/organisation and the use of frameworks and scaffolding in class.

Evaluation

Evaluation of the project included exploring the impact effective behaviour management intervention by teachers had on students. Early results of the project have found that more effective use of behaviour management strategies did affect the educational performance and engagement of students. Upon an interim review a number of key issues had emerged that further informed our practice. The perceptions of the school administration differed markedly to the teaching staff. Issues the school executive indicated were *minor*, the teachers identified as *major*. This perception demonstrated a greater need for communication across the school team so that all parties could better address issues of concern. Initially it appeared that teachers took little action to instigate any change. However, it became apparent that as the information presented was quite detailed, the participants needed time to reflect before attempting significant change. Subsequent reports have indicated that the majority of staff and the school executive found the training useful and have adopted strategies in their classes.

Our initial intent to act as facilitators was found to be inappropriate. The teachers needed a greater amount of support than initially thought. They were willing participants in the project but expressed a strong desire for a more individual, tailored approach. As a result it was determined that, we needed to be far more involved as *agents of change*, rather than mentors. The teachers were aware of the deficits in their skills, but lacked the confidence to implement any self-directed change. In this context the *Harrington-Sargeant* model, (Figure 2) accommodating individual teacher training needs emerged.

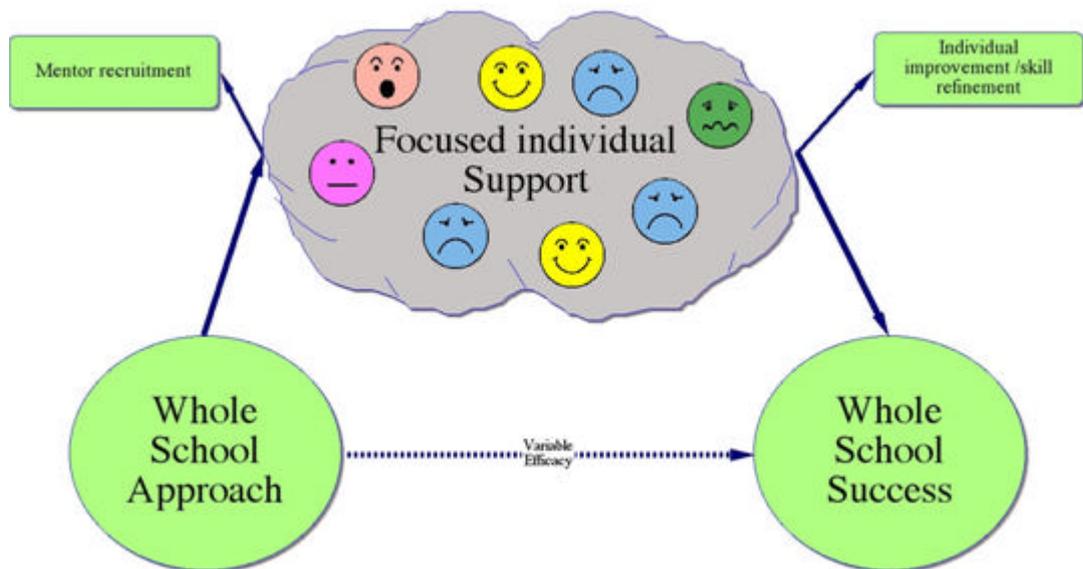


Figure 2 - Harrington-Sargeant model

This model illustrates a shift from the original research plan. The model reflects the need to recruit and support participants of varying skill level from within the school team to better effect strategic whole-school changes. By engaging in an active mentoring program, these early participants are better able to provide support and guidance throughout the whole school program. The model is instructive in highlighting how complex engaging in teacher research focussing on teacher practices are. It emphasises the effectiveness of action research as a development model as it supports researchers' need to deviate from their original plan.

Conclusion

A significant aspect of the project design was to afford the opportunity for teachers to provide input into the content of their own professional development. The action research project with the Central school was successful in that teachers were able to engage in reflexive practices of their own teaching performance. By engaging the teachers in the process and facilitating reflection that was specific to their own teaching practices, at a micro scale, the teachers were now better equipped to make positive changes to their individual behavioural management techniques. At a macro scale, the project continues to offer support for teachers in order to achieve positive behavioural outcomes for teachers across the *whole school*.

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