

Getting the Balance Right: The Challenge of Balancing Acknowledgement & Correction in Positive Behaviour Support

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Abstract

Despite continuing concerns about disruptive behaviour in schools and how best to manage it, it is comforting to note that progress is being made on many fronts. In recent years, policy makers and educators have come closer to agreement about what constitutes 'best practice' in behaviour management at the system and school level. There is a growing recognition that whole school and whole school community responses to student behaviour are the most efficient and effective ways of both encouraging good behaviour and responding to unacceptable behaviour. One model of whole school behaviour management and support, namely Positive Behaviour Support (PBS) is rapidly becoming the preferred approach in Australian schools.

PBS in its various designations, for example, School Wide Positive Behaviour Support (SWPBS) and Positive Behaviour for Learning (PBSL) is now being widely trialed and/or adopted in states such as Queensland and New South Wales. Central to PBS is the shift in emphasis from attending to and correcting problem behaviour, to one of increased attention given to good behaviour, both its recognition and its reward. The celebration of good behaviour is now a feature of the operations of many schools, both PBS and non PBS and this change in focus appears to be unproblematic. Less is known about what is happening at the classroom level. The literature on PBS calls for a high ratio of positive to negative teacher-student interactions, as high as five to one (Sugai, Horner & Todd, 2000). Decades of research on classroom interaction would suggest that such a ratio is unusual and to achieve it would require a significant change in teacher behaviour.

This paper explores the challenges teachers working within a PBS environment face as they strive to meet recommended targets for the acknowledgement of positive student behaviour. The particular focus of the paper is on the ratio of positive to negative interactions for students whose behaviour in the classroom is often problematic. More often than not the ratio of positive to negative interactions for these students is the reverse of that for cooperating students and far less than what might be hoped for in a PBS classroom. Behaviour correction is a necessary part of what teachers do in the classroom, but getting the balance between acknowledgement and correction right is important to ensure that attention to good behaviour is what characterises individual student and overall classroom interactions. This paper looks at ways teachers can more readily achieve the balance even when working with difficult and challenging students. The paper addresses what can best be described as 'missed opportunities' for acknowledgement, those occasions, more numerous than teachers often believe, when problem behaviour students are on task and well behaved.

Introduction

Student behaviour continues to be a concern for schools and school systems in Australia and elsewhere around the world (Australian Education Union, 2007; Lewis, 2006; McDonald, 2010; Levin & Nolan, 2010, 2; Steer, 2009). More recently in Australia it has become a priority for politicians, policy makers and school administrators. School discipline

is seen as a major social issue, and for better or worse, is viewed in concert with growing community concern about youth alienation and antisocial behaviour (Weatherburn & Indermauer, 2004). In this environment it is not surprising then that media coverage and public angst have led policy makers to seek answers and politicians to call for action (Fields, 2005). Of particular concern for educators has been (1) the negative impact of disruptive behaviour on the learning of well behaved students (Ministerial Advisory Committee for Educational Renewal (MACER), 2005; Steer, 2005) (2) evidence of widespread bullying in schools (ABC News, 2008; Rigby & Slee, 2008) and (3) the damage to teacher efficacy and wellbeing caused by the demands of managing uncooperative and unruly students (Barker, Yeung, Dobia & Mooney, 2009).

Meeting the Challenge of Disruptive Behaviour: Signs of Progress

Following decades of inertia, it is reassuring to note that progress is being made on many fronts, but most notably in respect of efforts to prevent violence and bullying in schools. Bullying is being tackled at a national level (Department of Education Training & the Arts, 2009; Department of Education, Employment & Workplace Relations, 2010) and state education systems have acted quickly in response to public concern by acknowledging that the problem is real, by formulating clear policies and guidelines for how it should be managed and by making available a rich array of professional development resources to teachers and school communities (Department of Education & Training, 2010; Rigby, 2010).

It is now possible to say that governments and school authorities have a clear idea of what constitutes 'best practice', certainly at a system level, on the subject of behaviour management and support (De Jong, 2005; Steer, 2008). This understanding has arisen as report after report on behaviour in schools delivers a common set of findings and a similar set of recommendations for how to deal with the problem (Ministerial Advisory Committee for Educational Renewal, 2005)

A key understanding from recent reports is that a coordinated response at the system level is needed to provide a consistency of approach to behaviour expectations and how schools should go about the business of encouraging acceptable behaviour and responding to unacceptable behaviour. This has been backed by the understanding that a whole school and whole school community approach to behaviour management and support is also needed if significant and sustainable improvements in student behaviour are to be achieved.

System and School Level Responses to Behaviour Management & Support

As the thinking of school education policy makers and administrators moves in the direction of coordinated and whole of school focused responses to student behaviour, the search for how this might best be achieved in Australian jurisdictions has begun. The Queensland state school system has been a frontrunner in this respect, first with the promulgation of its 'Code of School Behaviour' (Department of Education & Training, 2006a) and secondly with its requirement that all state schools develop, in consultation with the broader school community, a whole of school behaviour plan, called the 'Responsible Behaviour Plan for Students' (Department of Education & Training, 2006b). The RBPS is a detailed blueprint, using a standard format, for (1) how the school intends to encourage

behaviour that maximises student learning and (2) how disruptive behaviour, that which interferes with learning and teaching, can be minimised .

Queensland's 'Code' and RBPS have been further reinforced by the trialling and now promotion of the School Wide Positive Behaviour Support (SWPBS) program as a means of enhancing the 'whole of school' focus of its behaviour management initiatives (Department of Education & Training, 2008). Currently one in six Queensland state schools are trialling or have adopted the program and this number is steadily increasing (O'Loan, 2008). The SWPBS program mirrors the Positive Behaviour Support (PBS) model developed in the United States over a decade ago (Lewis & Sugai, 1999). Its key features include:

- A coordinated whole school approach to student behaviour.
- School wide expectations for student behaviour (rules).
- The three-tiered approach (behaviour pyramid) to prevention, with increasing levels of support provided the more serious the behaviour is.
- Use of behaviour incident and related data on behaviour to inform decision making and to evaluate program effectiveness.
- Emphasis on teaching behaviour expectations and the skills necessary to behave in an acceptable manner.
- Focus on recognising and rewarding good behaviour.

In New South Wales, trials of PBS, under the labels of Positive Behaviour for Learning and Positive Behaviour for Success are now underway in many school regions (Mooney, Yeung, Dobia, Barker, Power & Watson 2008; Barker, Yeung, Dobia & Mooney 2009). There is the likelihood that the approach, in one form or another, will become a feature of state and private school systems right across Australia in a very short time.

A major challenge for PBS initiatives is getting everyone in the school community on side and supportive of its philosophy and practices. For some teachers, this can be an uncomfortable and difficult process, as many well established views about behaviour and how it should be managed are literally turned upside down with the introduction of the approach. In PBS teachers must look at the school environment, the curriculum, teaching practices and teacher-student relations as possible contributing factors to misbehaviour; rather than focusing primarily on external factors such as the home environment and organic conditions such as ADHD and ASD, over which they have little capacity to control. In addition, PBS calls for a significant shift in emphasis from a focus on misbehaviour and how to correct it, to a focus on positive behaviour and how to encourage more of it. While it is difficult to single out anyone one feature of PBS as the most crucial to its successful implementation, it is the expected attention to encouraging positive behaviour that really is the key distinguishing practice in the approach and the one that must be present for the initiative to achieve its promised improvement in student behaviour. Just how successful classroom teachers in PBS schools are in this regard is the subject of the study reported here. The investigation represents an initial exploratory study of acknowledgement and correction in PBS schools with a particular focus on students who exhibit difficult and challenging behaviour.

Methodology

Subjects

Observations were made in 25 Year 3 - 6 primary classrooms where PBS was adopted by the school as its strategy for behaviour management and support. A further 25 Year 3 - 6 primary classrooms where PBS had not been adopted by the school were also observed as a comparison. The observational data were collected as part of a larger study of pre-service teachers and their capacity to carrying out an observation and data recording task where the focus was on a student who exhibited oppositional-defiant behaviour (Fields, 2010). The target oppositional-defiant students were identified by the class teachers guided by the DSM-IV-TR definition of Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) (American Psychiatric Association (2000). It was not expected that the students were diagnosed ODD but that they regularly displayed opposition and defiant behaviour, i.e. a pattern of negativistic, defiant, disobedient and hostile behaviour towards teachers.

Procedure

The targeted oppositional-defiant student was observed for a period of 60 minutes and in most cases the observation period spanned some two and in some cases three consecutive lessons. The student's behaviour during this time was recorded at 30 second intervals. The pre-service teachers were asked to record at each interval (1) whether the student was on task or off task and (2) whether the student was at these times displaying disruptive behaviour. A record was also made of any interaction between the teacher and the student during the 60 minute period. From these observations and records it was possible to determine (1) the percentage of time on and off task for the target student, (2) the number of incidents and time spent exhibiting disruptive behaviour and when during the sixty minute period this behaviour occurred and (3) the nature of the interaction between the target student and the teacher. The observation protocol called for the observer to record whether the teacher-student interaction was either of a positive nature (acknowledgement of good behaviour) or corrective (responses by the teacher aimed at redirecting off task and/or unacceptable behaviour).

Results

On Task Behaviour

A key finding from the observation data was that the students targeted for observation were on task for a substantial amount of lesson time. Looking at all 50 classrooms, across the 60 minute observation period, on task behaviour ranged from 22.7 percent to 93.9 percent, with a mean of 47.83 percent. Bearing in mind that few students, even well behaved students, are on task 100 percent of the time, these figures are even more noteworthy.

There is the perception that students who present challenging behaviour in the classroom, particularly oppositional-defiant behaviour are constantly off task and misbehaving. It is not hard to understand why teachers see things this way. Oppositional-defiant behaviour is a magnet for teacher attention and teacher-student exchanges are often emotionally charged and stressful. These students are constantly on teachers minds both in terms of lesson planning and classroom teaching.

Behaviour Incidents

During the 60 minute observation period, a record was made of the number of times the target student exhibited disruptive behaviour and the nature of this behaviour. From this data it was possible to determine whether the behaviour incidents consisted of low level disruption or were more serious and challenging events. The number of behaviour incidents, those occasions where the teacher was required to redirect or correct unacceptable behaviour, across all 50 classrooms, ranged from 2.10 to 10.45, with a mean of 4.32. A total of 300 incidents were recorded, of which 241 consisted of low level disruption. The typical pattern was for more serious behaviour incidents to be preceded by one or more corrections for minor misbehaviour. There were just nine incidents where serious misbehaviour erupted without the occurrence of preceding milder forms of misbehaviour.

When behaviour incidents occur is of interest to teachers in terms of assisting in the prediction and prevention of the reoccurrence of those behaviours. In the 50 primary classrooms where observations were recorded, most behaviour incidents occurred in the first five to ten minutes of the lesson and in the second half of the lesson period. This pattern was evident regardless of whether there were one, two or even three distinct types of lessons e.g., a lesson on mathematics followed by a lesson on science. There was some evidence that disruptive behaviour (not necessarily serious disruption) occurred during lesson transitions i.e., from one lesson to another during the 60 minute period and from one task or activity to another in the same lesson period.

Behaviour Corrections

The student observers were asked to record the type of corrections issued to the targeted oppositional-defiant students. All the observers were well versed in an expanded version of Levin & Nolan's (2010) hierarchy of basic corrective management strategies and it was this framework that was used in assessing the type of correction used. This expanded version consisted of over 30 strategies ranging from those low in intrusion and confrontation e.g., tactical ignoring; to high in intrusion and confrontation e.g., choice option and removal from the classroom.

Tactical ignoring was used in response to low level disruptive behaviour as were nonverbal signals (e.g. finger to the lips to signal 'quiet'), proximity (moving close to the student, name dropping, rhetorical questions (e.g. "Should you be out of your seat now Jordan?") and an abbreviated version of Glasser's Triplets (e.g. "What are you doing? What should you be doing?"). Above all, verbal 'desists' and explicit directions (e.g. "Turn around now and get on with your work'), dominated corrective responses. When behaviour escalated to more serious and more challenging forms of opposition and defiance, explicit directions were quickly followed by warnings of consequences for repeated misbehaviour. While the number of strategies for managing low level disruption and for preventing behaviour from escalating to open defiance and hostility are now many and varied, the findings from this investigation create a strong impression of teachers having a limited behaviour management repertoire.

Acknowledgement for Appropriate Behaviour

Of particular interest in this paper was the level of acknowledge for appropriate behaviour provided to the targeted oppositional-defiant students. Bearing in mind that the target

students were, on average, on task and behaving for close to 50 percent of lesson time, the opportunities for praising and/or otherwise rewarding 'good' behaviour were quite high.

Across the 50 classrooms, the number of positive acknowledgements directed at the target students during the 60 minute observation period was low, ranging from zero to 2.10 with a mean of .87. At those times when the student was off task and/or misbehaving, positive interactions were virtually non-existent (mean .08). These figures need to be viewed in the light of the teachers overall rate of acknowledgements. It is entirely possible that recognition of cooperative and task focused behaviour was high for normally well behaved students who, in many if not most classrooms, make up the majority of students. This feature of pedagogy and behaviour management is entirely consistent with the focus of Positive Behaviour Support which aims to give greater attention and recognition to cooperating students as a means of maintaining their good behaviour and as a means of keeping the momentum of the class as a whole moving towards working with rather than against the teacher. Unfortunately the collection of this more complete information on teacher acknowledgement behaviour was not part of the observation task in this study. What is clear though is that students who display oppositional-defiant behaviour are rarely in receipt of teacher praise and reinforcement at those times when they are on task and displaying acceptable behaviour. This feature of the interaction between teachers and students' who exhibit oppositional and other forms of challenging behaviour, is even more revealing, given that when the students are displaying this type of misbehaviour, the nature of the interaction can and usually is negative and confronting.

Comparison of PBS and Non-PBS Classrooms

Comparisons between the PBS and non-PBS classrooms were possible on a number of factors. These included (1) time spent on task, (2) the number of behaviour incidents, (3) when the behaviour incidents occurred, (4) the level of acknowledgement for appropriate behaviour displayed by the targeted oppositional-defiant students and 5) the ratio of acknowledgement to correction for the target students. In PBS classrooms students spent slightly more time on task, praise and recognition for good behaviour was slightly higher and the number of serious behaviour incidents was slightly lower. On no comparisons however were the differences statistically or meaningfully different.

Discussion

The importance of achieving a balance between acknowledgement and correction is a feature of PBS and more broadly in the literature on behaviour management. Australian behaviour management authority Christine Richmond, for example, refers to teachers needing to achieve the right kind of balance between 'learning conversations' and 'managing conversations'. She outlines what she calls the 'Balance Model' where teachers (1) establish and communicate clear expectations for behaviour and then seek to bring about a balance or 'evenness' between (1) acknowledging good behaviour and (2) correcting unacceptable behaviour. Richmond goes on to say that as teachers establish their behaviour management, the balance can effectively shift to a greater emphasis on acknowledgement (Richmond, 2007).

In PBS the focus on acknowledging positive behaviour is far less measured. Acknowledgement is expected to far outstrip correction in teacher-student interactions in the classroom and around the school. Across the literature on PBS, the expected goal in ratio of positive acknowledgments to corrections for unacceptable behaviour is 5:1 (Sugai, Horner & Todd, 2000). Teachers and others who are very familiar with the day to day workings of primary classrooms will recognise that this is a very challenging goal. Even teachers who have good relations with their students would be stretched to achieve this

ratio of acknowledgement to correction. The challenge is greater when it comes to praising and rewarding students who often display inappropriate behaviour.

There is the perception that students who present challenging behaviour in the classroom, particularly oppositional-defiant behaviour, are constantly off task and misbehaving. It is not hard to understand why teachers see things this way. Oppositional-defiant behaviour is a magnet for teacher attention and teacher-student exchanges are often emotionally charged and stressful. These students are constantly on teachers minds both in terms of lesson planning and classroom teaching. In this respect it is not hard to understand why teachers might fail to recognise, fully appreciate and capitalise on those times when these students are on task and behaving.

Many decades ago authorities on behaviour management promoted the strategy of 'Catching Children Being Good' as a means of ensuring that appropriate behaviour received a frequency of reward capable of reinforcing (strengthening) the behaviour teachers wanted to see (Becker, Engelmann & Thomas, 1971). It was understood at the time that a conscious effort needed to be made to enact this strategy, meaning that focusing on good behaviour didn't come naturally. It may well be that four decades later teachers are still finding it difficult to make the shift to the positive.

In the acclaimed Teachers TV website and the 'Teaching With Bayley – Praise & Preparation' video from that site, an Australian teacher in the UK reflected on her high frequency use of both praise and reward in an inner London Year 7 Science class as a means of promoting good behaviour and motivating her students. She commented that in Australia, such a structured and overt form of acknowledgement was never part of her teaching. The implication was that her Australian colleagues held a similar view. Is it that high levels of praise and other forms rewarding behaviour are not part of the Australian psyche?

What we do know is that the use of praise and rewards as strategies in teaching and more specifically in behaviour management have not been without their critics and many of those critics have been quite influential in how behaviour and behaviour management are viewed in Australian schools (Glasser, 1992; Kohn, 1996). For these critics, praise and rewards are viewed as controlling mechanisms, used by adults to 'shape' children's behaviour. In so doing, it is argued, that they undermine the individual's capacity to self-manage and to take responsibility for their own behaviour. It is argued too, that a high frequency of extrinsic rewards for learning behaviour fosters an over reliance on such incentives, with an associated reduction in self-motivated learning. Is this how praise and reward are viewed by teachers today and if so might this be counterproductive to the goals of PBS?

The success of PBS is often gauged on broad school-level factors such as the number of office referrals and student suspensions and studies have indicated the approach is achieving some notable successes in this regard. In PBS schools there is a strong emphasis on the public recognition and rewarding of positive behaviour and the transition from shifting the focus of attention from negative to positive behaviour at this level seems to be also successful. There is far less information about changes in teacher behaviour at the classroom level and particularly in reference to how teachers are responding to students whose behaviour remains challenging and difficult to manage. Few would argue that the high ratio of negative to positive interactions experienced by students whose behaviour is challenging to teachers detracts from efforts to support these students to behave more cooperatively and pro-socially. It appears that there are ample opportunities for teachers to have positive interactions with such children but that teachers are not capitalising on such opportunities. Further, if teachers are not totally convinced of the value of acknowledging positive behaviour, at least through the use of praise and various types

of rewards, then the strategies available to them to recognise and encourage appropriate behaviour are significantly limited. Under these circumstances PBS may not realise its full potential as a whole of school approach to improve behaviour in the school.

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