

Teaching, Learning and Relationships

I reckon that the more we talk about behaviour the less we understand what goes on in classrooms and staffrooms. This from a writer who has at least two publications with 'behaviour' in the title. So, what's the problem with referring to 'behaviour'?

First, it tends to lead professionals to talk about behaviour as if it is separated out from teaching and learning.

Second, it usually refers to childrens' behaviour, or the behaviour of an individual child – as opposed to including adults' behaviour too.

Third, invariably the behaviour in question is aggressive, noisy, in-the-face disruption and less about co-operative, withdrawn, appropriate and compliant behaviours.

If school managers are really interested in developing policy and approach considering the relational aspects of teaching and learning a useful starting point. For the past few years I have been working in schools and LEAs around the country exploring how ideas about relationships, communication and learning can impact on the daily classroom experience of adults and children. Most of the material is drawn from transactional analysis (TA), a psychological framework which has been around for forty years. TA has been used extensively in psychotherapy and counseling. Although there have always been TA educators, most recently there has been an increased interest in using the ideas in schools.

Readers will be well aware of the impact of problem behaviour in schools; staff mis-communicating with one another, parents becoming aggressive, outside agency staff working to specific agendas, individual staff members resistant to legitimate change, staffroom cliques. All this before we get into the classroom! Surveys over the past twenty years cite teachers' sustained frustration about childrens' behaviour and successive governments have launched a thousand initiatives to reduce difficult behaviour. How about we drop the dead donkey and talk about something more important instead; relationships.

The most effective relationships tend to be built on a mutual understanding about the bigger things in life, like a common sense of values, an agreed purpose, shared principles and insights. Translated into the school context we might want to start out by asking staff; Why do they think they are there? What is learning for? Why do people behave? I am occasionally invited to deliver training by headteachers who want their staff to be more consistent in rewarding and sanctioning childrens' behaviour. I'm getting better at avoiding that kind of work and instead encouraging staff to establish consensus around values, insights and principles, rather than launch straight into discussions about technique. Technique comes later – if we make it our starting point our practice is sure to be less sustainable.

The question about what staff believe is the purpose of learning is an interesting and significant one. Individual's responses have consequences in terms of understanding and responding to different pupil behaviour.

For example, if I envisage that learning is essentially a process through which the role of the pupil is to become full of learning; that the purpose of schooling is to generate savvy consumers; that teachers hold a responsibility for assessing individual competency, my responses to off-task behaviour is likely to be censoring. I will be suspicious of children (and parents) that question authority and, whilst weary of ever increasing paperwork regarding standardised testing, will generally support the notion that it important for teachers to measure learning.

At the other extreme, a member of staff may have a contrasting belief system that maintains that teaching and learning are essentially verbs, as opposed to ascribed roles. They believe that new insights are generated by teachers and pupils working together and that the purpose of education is to promote – even provoke – change at individual and community levels. Given this perspective the responses to the same pupil behaviour may be quite different; questioning is encouraged and helpful; challenging norms is regarded as a pre-requisite for instigating development and the concept of measuring learning (rather than valuing insight) is an anathema.

For an article on behaviour some readers may be losing patience at this point; Where are the top tips? How about what to do when you can't get kids to be quiet and listen etc, etc.? I make no apology for spending time discussing values. In my view we don't do enough of it in schools and certainly not in connection with behaviour, and we need to, especially in the contemporary climate. Besides, there's plenty of materials, books and ICT resources giving advice on techniques to promote positive behaviour. It's much more interesting exploring the relatively new territory of relationships.

A few years ago I would do work with groups of students. I'd get caught up in discussions about how individual teachers had a bad attitude and should not have been allowed to teach. I'd have a parallel experience when working with staff groups who would tell me about how awful some of the youngsters could be and that quite frankly they should be allowed in mainstream classrooms. For my part remaining stuck in these discussions wasn't good enough, and I have spent the past four years introducing ideas, approaches *and* techniques that can be taught with groups of staff *and* pupils and frequently at the same time.

TA is a psychological framework that offers a range of ideas that help us understand how people communicate, how we grow up and how people see the world. The language of TA is highly accessible and yet conveys the complexity of what it's like to be human. The concepts can be used as easily by children to think through what happened at lunchtime as teachers may use them to

negotiate more effectively with classroom assistants or educational psychologists.

TA ideas are underpinned by three beliefs;

- That people are essentially OK – hence the colloquial I'm OK – You're OK motif
- That everyone can think; in other words, make sense of information, consider options and make decisions
- That anyone can change, grow or learn

Top tip: next time you have some time as a staff group, have these three principles displayed and set up a discuss and feedback session on how they illuminate what goes on in school.

Notice the differences and consensus amongst the team. Ask: how might diverse perspectives impact on classroom practice? What can be done to establish coherent practice and approach?

Space doesn't allow for a comprehensive account of how TA ideas are used to develop effective learning relationships, but here are a couple of ideas to be going on with;

Windows on the World

I'm OK – You're Ok is just one perspective that an individual might have on the world. There will be occasions where they might feel quite intimidated and believe others are fine; I'm not OK – You are OK. At other times the person may have a clear sense that they are right and others are wrong; I'm OK – You're not OK. Finally there are those despairing times when nothing seems to be going right and no-one else is able to do anything either; I'm not Ok- You're not OK. These can be set out in quadrants [worth inserting a simple illustration] and are variously referred to as the OK Corral, Life Positions or Windows on the World.

Top tip: spend some time in the staffroom listening out for how individuals demonstrate through their behaviour and language which Window on the World they are using at different times. Encourage staff to check out how they shift from one perspective to another during the course of the day. Identify what are the factors that help sustain people in the healthy position (I'm Ok – You're Ok)

Using the model with children is straightforward; we can use it as a focus for discussion time (Circle Time, PSHE/Citizenship) and invite youngsters to talk through how they shift from one perspective to another. They can create a collage, cartoon demonstrating each 'window' with reference to their own experiences. The model can also be introduced via the core curriculum, for example by considering how characters in a story see their world.

Stroke Theory

This is an deceptively simple idea about how we seek and maintain a sense of recognition. We all need to be noticed and from an early age get the hang of how to get what we need from others to make sense of ourself. We achieve this through giving and receiving strokes – units of human recognition.

There are four types; positive and negative *conditional* strokes – which are recognition for what we do, eg. I like the way you tidied your desk; I don't like how you talked to that girl. And there are positive and negative *unconditional* strokes – which are recognition for just being ourselves, eg. I like you, you're great!/I hate you, go away! [would be worth inserting a second figure here to illustrate the stroke quadrants.

We don't set out consciously to give strokes, it happens all the time, both verbally and non-verbally. Initially people mistake stroke theory as a variation on the same theme of using praise, but this would be under-estimating the subtlety of the concept. A useful metaphor is a diet of food. We can become accustomed to a particular diet of strokes in the same way we may get used to a balance of food. Consequently we can be quite aware of any changes in our diet and in some instances resistant to new food, or type of stroke. Also, what I get used to in my diet is precisely what I look out for next meal time. I get what I stroke and I stroke what I get. In other words, stroke theory illuminates some of the interesting and sometimes puzzling dynamics that we come across in classrooms, for instance the child that seems to reject praise. Or the member of staff who struggles to give praise.

Top tip: Take a moment to reflect on what types of strokes are more prevalent in your staffroom. Think about what the implications may be for the stroke culture of individual classrooms. How might you want to change the culture? What might you do first to initiate change?

When using strokes with children, again we can introduce it directly in discussion times, but it can also be used indirectly in relation to stories, television programmes and to encourage pupils to talk about the culture of their friendship groups, classroom and school.

These are just a couple of ideas taken from TA. There is currently a growing interest in using the ideas in schools across the age range. A new professional institute has been established in the last couple of years to promote TA amongst educators (see IDTA below). Materials for use in classrooms are being developed and there is already a scheme of work for teaching children TA in Key Stages 2-3 (4). Finally, just this term the first group of children achieved their TA Proficiency Award, an introductory course for youngsters using TA in classrooms.