Providing for challenging behaviors within Catholic schools

The provision of special education services within Catholic schools can present a challenge but does not relieve the school of an obligation to try to serve students with differing learning needs. Resources are limited and the coordination of proportionate share plan (PSP) services can be daunting. However, serving students who may experience some marginalization within the school setting due to their unique learning needs is consistent with Catholic social teaching. It is part of our mission as Catholic educators.

Over the past year and continuing into next year, this series will describe some common learning disorders that may be seen in the classroom and outline a set of strategies designed to address these specific learning needs. Although these strategies are designed to address specific learning needs, many teachers will find them to be effective with a wide range of students. By using the kinds of strategies listed in these columns, teachers will be able to expand their repertoire of instructional approaches and stretch the continuum of students whom they can serve.

Focus on students 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.

This column is one of a three-part series that will focus on tools for addressing behavioral issues. It will explore the use of prevention as the first strategy. Additional columns will focus on a framework for analyzing misbehavior to develop appropriate strategies. The final installment will present a process for understanding the communicative intent of misbehavior.

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.”

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Over the past several years, this column has focused on exploring an instructional approach and providing practical strategies on how to implement them within Catholic schools. Past columns have focused on such strategies as Marzano’s High Yield Strategies, Tomlinson’s Framework for Differentiated Instruction and Costa’s Habits of Mind.

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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.

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.

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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. We should mirror the response that Jesus teaches us (Matthew 18:21-22):

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?” Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

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.

By focusing on some of these ideas, many behavioral issues can be prevented from occurring. Unfortunately, it will not completely eliminate all behavioral challenges. The next column will focus on using a system to analyze behavioral issues in order to match the appropriate strategy with the concern exhibited in the classroom.

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