Providing for struggling learners within a Catholic school setting

Although the provision of special education services within Catholic school settings can present a challenge to many schools, this does not relieve the school of an obligation to try to serve students with differing learning needs. Yes, resources are limited and the school of an obligation to try to serve students with differing learning needs.

Over the past year and continuing into next year, this series of columns 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. Many teachers also will find these strategies to be effective with a wide range of students. By using these strategies, teachers will be able to expand their repertoire of instructional approaches and stretch the continuum of students that they can serve within their setting.

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, more readily evoke a helping and caring response. Often, behavior

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—St. John Bosco

problems can seem random or happen “out of the blue.” However, upon closer examination, behavior tends to take a predictable path; it is up to the adults to figure out the path. Once this path can be examined, then the appropriate interventions can be determined. This process also will increase the likelihood of success of the chosen strategies.

Behavior usually happens for a reason. It can be helpful to view behavior as a form of communication, whether it is to obtain attention from teacher or peers or to escape a frustrating situation. The hard part about dealing with the troublesome behavior of students is that the student often obtains what he is looking for. The student who is seeking attention — calling out in class and pushing classmates in the hallway — usually gets the attention of others, but not in a positive way. For the student who is seeking escape from frustrating situations, any avenue of escape will do. For example, a student experiencing academic difficulty might find it more satisfactory to get “kicked out of class” rather than persist in a frustrating situation. However, if a student needs attention or escape, any method to obtain this need will do—positive or negative.

Another compounding factor is the vocabulary capacity of children (and some adolescents). Students may lack affective vocabulary to label intense internal states, such as emotions like frustration, anxiety and need for love. Imagine having one of these intense affective states and not knowing how to name it and then also lacking the effective strategies to communicate it to adults in order for them to respond appropriately. As part of developing effective strategies for troublesome behaviors, it is beneficial to identify the communicative intent of the behavior. Without effectively identifying this, the probability of success for any chosen behavioral strategy is reduced.

First step: Look at the ABC's

To truly understand misbehavior, it is important to understand the ABC's — the antecedent, behavior and the consequence. Analyzing these different aspects of behavior (This process is part of a process called Functional Assessment of Behavior) will help to tailor the corresponding interventions to increase the likelihood of success in addressing the behavioral needs (see Part II available at luc.edu/ccse). In order to conduct an ABC analysis effectively, the process should be written out using a chart (see www.luc.edu/ccse to download a sample).

Using a structured process will help account for all of the elements in an episode of misbehavior. This can help to understand the sequence and
help to hypothesize about the communicative intent of the misbehavior.

**Communicative Intent of behavior**

These are several basic functions of behavior:

**Express a need for stimulation or sensory input.** Think of a boring meeting that you may have attended. Think of your own behavior. How many times did you get up to get a cup of coffee, or to use the facilities? Did you play with your pen or check your email on your phone? These are all examples of seeking sensory input. As adults, there are many "socially acceptable" ways to seek sensory input, which help to regulate attention. However, for students, there are limited avenues to gain this kind of needed input within a classroom setting. In the absence of socially appropriate ways to gain this sensory regulation, students may find other ways—such as roaming around the room, humming and balancing their chair on two legs.

**Express a need to escape a demand or avoid a frustrating situation.** Imagine the student who is having difficulty with reading and how painful it is to have her peers know this. Therefore, it can be perceived as more desirable to escape situations (at any cost) that require reading out loud. This could mean escaping the frustrating situations via being sent to time-out or the principal’s office.

**Express a need for attention or affiliation from adults and/or peers.** Once, there was a pre-schooler who was referred to the special services team because of aggressive behavior toward peers, especially during free time. Upon observation, any time this young man attempted to join others in a game, he would punch his peer in the arm. Now, of course, any pre-school teacher will tell you that this may not be unusual behavior.

In this case, the young man did not possess the necessary vocabulary to initiate the social contact appropriately. He had the intense need to be with others but didn’t possess the requisite skills to do so. One strategy could have been to punish the young man for this behavior (that is not to say that there should be no consequences to physical aggression). However, a more effective strategy was to practice the words to appropriately initiate social contact.

**Honoring the intent of the communication**

In analyzing episodes of misbehavior, it important to try to name the message that the student is trying to communicate. Is the student attempting to gain attention or to escape something? It can be a common mistake to view all misbehavior as attention seeking. Without having a clear understanding of the intent of the behavior, a wrong intervention may be chosen and could actually reinforce the behavior.

For example, look at the student who is acting up to avoid an academically frustrating situation. A typical strategy that a classroom teacher may use would be a time-out strategy—removing the student from the attention. However, in this case, this is getting the student exactly what she is looking for—removal from the academic frustration.

What will happen when the student encounters the next academically frustrating situation? Time-out is solid intervention that works best when the communicative intent is seeking attention or control. However, it is counter-productive in this case. With the current scenario, the student needs more appropriate ways to express frustration.

Several strategies could be attempted. First, give the student a private way to express frustration, such as a private cue to the teacher, indicating “I need help.” This is best established in a private conference between the teacher and student before the frustrating situation occurs. Also, prioritizing academic tasks and matching appropriate instructional levels will help to reduce the level of academic frustration and, thereby, reduce the misbehavior. The key here is that the student needs appropriate methods to express frustration.

The frustration and resulting attempt to escape is going to occur no matter what. The key is for the teaching staff to identify more effective and appropriate ways for the student to express the frustration. By identifying more appropriate strategies for the student, classroom functioning is improved.

**Next steps**

No one said that this was going to be easy. In fact, it takes a good deal of practice to make this shift in thinking. A suggestion is to work on this approach collaboratively with colleagues. Sometimes, the non-biased voice of those that are not directly involved in the behavioral issues of a student can bring clarity to the situation. Catholic educators are well positioned, as a result of the mission of the institutions that they serve, to utilize this kind of approach. To paraphrase a common admonishment: “Love the student—hate the misbehavior.” Dealing with the misbehavior of students is a tribulation on many levels. It is at these times that we, as Catholic educators, need to reflect the unconditional love that is also afforded to us!

In closing, a reminder from St. John Bosco, who taught some of the most difficult students from the most trying of situations: “[To the teachers] Never send negligent pupils out of the classroom. Be patient with their light-mindedness.”

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