

## Behaviour Management

### The Social-Focus Approach to Behaviour Management

#### The Rationale

When I was working as a classroom coach in one of the more disadvantaged schools in the Bronx, I noted that in many classes there was a handful of kids, usually girls, who would sit together at the front of the class and try to learn, while the rest of the class hardly engaged with the lesson at all, but, instead, behaved in a way that demanded most of the teacher's attention, time and energy. As a result, the handful had little chance to learn. For the previous few years, that school's pass rate on the major test at the end of Year 8 had been around 2%.

#### The Approach

I suggested that the handful of kids from each class who wanted to learn should be put together in classes free from the distraction of the uninterested kids. This would result in a lot more learning on the part of the interested kids and really no less learning on the part of the others. This suggestion was contrary, however, to the school's philosophy of equal opportunity by which all students should have the same experience.

The problem in most schools is not as severe as that in the school I described above, but it is still the case in many classrooms around the world that uninterested students prevent the interested students from maximal learning and achievement of their full potential. And this same strategy would help in the same way.

If those students who are prepared to learn without causing disruption are placed into a 'focus' class and those who are inclined to disrupt are placed into a 'social' class, then those in the focus classes would achieve a lot more and those in the social classes probably wouldn't achieve significantly less.

Those in the focus classes would forfeit their place if their behaviour ceased to be up to scratch and those in the social classes could be promoted to a focus class if they demonstrated an improved approach to learning.

Most students would likely prefer to be in a focus class and would be prepared to behave accordingly. Admittedly, in some schools there might be quite a number who are happy to be in a social class. However, the vast majority of parents would want their children to be in a focus class and would put pressure on them to improve their behaviour and to maintain it once promoted.

Eventually, it might be expected that the vast majority of students would adjust their behaviour so as to be in a focus class.

In the focus classes, the maths would be taught and learnt in an environment free from disruption. The teachers in the social classes would concentrate more on encouraging improved behaviour, though it would still be in the context of learning maths.

Apart from the benefits to the majority of students in the focus classes, those in the social classes would benefit from being helped to modify their behaviour and approach to learning, something more urgently important for those kids than academic achievement.

There would be a lot less stress on teachers. Those teaching the focus classes wouldn't have to deal with the disruptive and antagonistic behaviour that is presently a part of so many classrooms. Those in the social classes would not be held responsible for the students' academic progress. Some teachers have a gift for the kind of pastoral care that would be needed in the social classes and might be happy to take them.

Implementing this approach could be a school-wide thing, though it might be worth trialling it in say one year level. It would be essential to make sure that the system is thoroughly understood by students and parents prior to implementation. Also, having a grace period before implementation in which students could prove themselves ready for a focus class would be important.

Any parent who objects to their child being in a social class would need to realise that they are not learning optimally in a traditional mixed class anyway, and that the opportunity is always there to move to a focus class. The school would be helping them to improve their approach to learning and this would pay dividends across the board as well as later in employment.

All students would have equal opportunity to be in a focus or social class and they would all have an equal right to choose either way.