

Beyond Behavior Strategies: Using Reflection to Manage Youth in Crisis

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In most teacher education programs, preservice teachers are exposed to numerous strategies for managing students' behavior. Why is it then that classroom management prevails as the number one problem for schoolteachers? In fact, classroom management and discipline continue to be the most challenging aspects of the teaching enterprise for beginning teachers (Dollard 1992, Gordon 1991).

General strategies for managing student behavior are critical. In addition, programs such as the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (RCCP) (Lantieri and Patti 1996), in which children are taught to help one another solve problems, now have excellent research to support their effectiveness (Abner, Brown, and Henrich 1999). In our work, we provide preservice teachers with a method of thinking about behavior. In addition to teaching teacher candidates specific methods of classroom and behavior management, we also prepare them to think critically about reasons why students react in troubling ways to teachers and peers.

The purpose of this article is to share a method of reflecting on behavioral incidents that arise in classroom settings to improve teachers' responses to troubling student behavior. Through the process of critical reflection, novice and experienced teachers alike can learn to make a positive difference in the lives of troubled and troubling students. The process begins with an understanding of how conflict arises and escalates in the classroom setting.

The Conflict Cycle

Heck and Williams (1984) note, "Many times, a student's response to a teacher is a direct reflection of the

teacher's response to self" (2). The Conflict Cycle paradigm exemplifies this observation. The Conflict Cycle (Long 1979, 1986, 1995, 1996, 2000; Wood and Long 1991) is a model that helps teachers understand how conflict develops and escalates. In developing this model, Long and his associates gathered and analyzed over 2,000 hours of videotapes that recorded various interactions of troubled students with their teachers and/or staff members. In an analysis of these videotapes, Long discovered some interesting attributes associated with conflict.

According to the model, a stressful incident occurs, which activates a student's belief system. The incident and student beliefs combine to generate negative thoughts and feelings within the student. The student then has the choice to (a) act out based upon these feelings, (b) bury the feelings inside, or (c) accept and own them (Long 1996). This choice is based on the kinds of beliefs the student holds about him- or herself and the world. If the student's beliefs are irrational, as is true for many troubled students, the student acts out, and the subsequent behavior is often self-defeating. When this situation arises, adults perceive this behavior along a continuum that ranges from disruptive to aggressive, many times taking the behavior personally. The teacher often reacts on impulse to reprimand the student, give the student a detention, or send him or her from class to the office.

Long (2000) recently reported that in "100 percent of [crises that he and his staff studied], staff members did not initiate the crisis, but in approximately 60 percent they reinforced it" (96). It is typically the adult who escalates the conflict, not the student (Long 1996).

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Although the student initiated the troubling behavior, based upon an irrational belief and a triggering event, the adult could have prevented escalation into a power struggle, or worse, a violent act. Long's comprehensive analysis of conflict revealed that when a student is involved in a stressful situation he or she creates identical feelings in teachers. That is, teachers naturally simulate the feelings that their students are experiencing. The result is that aggressive students incite teachers' aggression, while withdrawn students cause them to feel helpless. Long, Fescer, and Brendtro (1998) support Long's conclusion by stating, "Adults who act out on these feelings . . . inadvertently mirror the students' behavior and make a crisis worse" (9). The conclusion drawn from Long's work is that it is the seemingly small, nonreflective interactions between teachers and students that build over time to create crises, and that may be the precursors of violence in our schools.

The Importance of Reflection

To stem the increasing incidences of troubling behavior in our nation's schools, teachers need to understand how conflict occurs and implement a process of critical reflection to change their own behavior. As noted earlier, teacher candidates are typically exposed to many different strategies and theories of classroom and behavior management in their teacher education programs; however, this knowledge does not easily translate into the beginning teacher's classroom. Each behavioral incident is unique and therefore requires in-depth reflection so that the teachers can work to change their own reactions to the behavior of troubled students.

The literature suggests that the reflective thinking process can be nurtured in both novice and experienced teachers (Hatton and Smith 1995; Langer and Colton 1994; Pultorak 1996; Reagan 1993; Schon 1987; Van Manen 1977; Yost, Sentner, and Forlenza-Bailey 2000). One way to promote critical thinking is to teach the individual how to think and problem-solve (Dieker and Monda-Amaya 1997).

The process of thinking through troubling events prevents teachers from relying solely on instincts to guide their behavior. Current research supports this notion. In an extensive review of the research, Korhagen and Kessels (1999) conclude that teachers' actions are largely governed by routine, with decision making playing only a minor role. During the act of managing behavior, a teacher may find it almost impossible to separate an entire behavioral episode into discrete units, necessary for analysis. It seems plausible to conclude that when conflict arises in the classroom, teachers react based on prior beliefs or experiences rather than engaging in a thoughtful, in-depth analysis of their own reactions to troubling behavior.

According to Dewey (1910, 1933) reflective thought

encompasses the following: (a) experiencing a dilemma or problem, (b) observing its location and definition, (c) suggesting a possible solution based on evidence, (d) developing a hypothesis based on reasoning and (e) engaging in further observation and experiment, which leads to acceptance or rejection of the initial conclusion. We have incorporated this procedure into our teacher preparation program by first teaching about the nature of conflict and critical reflection, and then having student teachers practice using journaling, seminar discussions, and action research projects. This process can be modified for use by practicing educators.

Name, Reflect, Act

Whether our students are journaling, discussing events, or completing action research projects, we have them use the same general process; that is to name, reflect critically, and arrive at a plan of action (Wink 2000). This simplified process helps professionals deal more easily with complex problems that arise in the classroom. Our student teachers are often trying to process so much during a day in the classroom that descriptions of events bleed into one another. Everything seems to be related to everything else. To reflect on a critical level about these issues, novice teachers must begin by identifying, or naming, one issue. This is a difficult process that we find needs to be defined and practiced using case studies. Later, we encourage the novice teachers to use real examples of conflict in their classrooms. For example, we might use a case study in which a student has just engaged in a variety of disruptive behaviors. We stop and have the student teacher identify or name the specific issue. Then we add background information about the case. As we add information it becomes clear that the real issue to be identified is not the behavior that was just witnessed, but the underlying social and/or disability issue with which the student is dealing.

Naming

John, an eighth grader, is constantly out of his seat during instructional times. He often shouts out answers in class without being called upon. It was discovered that John's parents tend to scream and hit John when he engages in disruptive behavior at home, which is often. They spend little time with him after work. Although John has not been classified as a special education student, he has a history of impulsive and disruptive classroom behavior.

The lesson is twofold. First, naming a single issue is both difficult and a necessary first step if one is to reach the stage of critical reflection. Second, one might name an issue, learn more, and have to rename the issue. Once an issue is named the process of critical reflection can begin.

Critical reflection encompasses a variety of sub-themes that revolve around viewing a situation from

multiple perspectives. Novice teachers are asked to view an event or situation from the perspective of the student, parents, teachers, and other possible stakeholders. This facilitates the development of empathy, which will provide a firm, nonemotional grounding for appropriate interventions later on. During this phase the teacher gathers background information on the student by talking to the student, prior teachers, family members, and other professionals such as guidance counselors or school psychologists.

Investigating Multiple Perspectives

From John's point of view, he has encountered nothing but negative feedback from others in response to his inappropriate behaviors. He most likely feels that he has failed his parents and himself with regard to achieving success in school. John has also developed quite a reputation for his challenging behavior and spends a lot of time in the assistant principal's office or at in-school suspension. John's parents are frustrated with him because they are at a loss about how to control him. Consultation with the school psychologist and other professionals revealed that John has a history of disruptive classroom behavior. Behavior modification strategies have been used by prior teachers with limited success. John responds best to subjects in which he has some mastery and interest, for example social studies and science. He struggles with language arts (mainly written expression) and mathematics.

Next a series of formal and informal observations of the student are made in situations in which the troubling behavior is likely to surface. The intent here is to search for patterns of the behavior, similar to a functional behavioral assessment or an ABC (Antecedent/Behavior/Consequence) analysis.

Searching for Patterns of the Behavior

Observations of John's disruptive classroom behaviors reveal that he is most impulsive and off task during language arts and mathematics. He appears to need constant attention from his teachers, regardless of whether it is negative or positive attention. John also appears to enjoy the attention he receives from peers.

During the third phase, we use the phrase "gaining a bird's eye view" to encourage deeper thinking regarding the larger social, economic, historical, and ethical dimensions of the problem. This assists the teacher in looking beyond the problem to what is bringing it about.

"Gaining a Bird's Eye View"

Although John has not been formally classified as being a student with special needs, he may be living up to the negative image that has been with him since elementary school. Negative image of self can encourage a student to continue with a pattern of behavior that appears to be self-defeating. This student is also dealing with low self-esteem from many years of subpar performance in school. John is struggling with the "identity vs. role con-

fusion" stage of psycho-social development, in which John is searching for a sense of self.

Once all of the data have been gathered and carefully reviewed, the teacher is ready to put forth a conjecture as to why the behavior is occurring. The hypothesis should include the probable reasons why the student is behaving in this way and offer a tentative solution to the problem. Typically, several strategies are planned to prevent the troubling behavior from recurring and to promote positive behavior.

Hypothesis

John suffers from poor self-esteem due to years of being perceived as a failure by his parents and teachers. He has a strong need for attention, regardless of whether it is negative or positive. He seems to enjoy the attention from his peers when he engages in disruptive behaviors in the classroom. He will likely continue acting out in the classroom to cover an irrational fear that he has developed over time. He believes that if he puts forth effort in school, he will inevitably fail and look foolish.

Conducting research is an important aspect of the reflective process. Although the hypothesis generated does provide some insight as to which behavioral strategy might be most effective, the teacher should also look closely at the research literature so that a solid rationale for the plan of action is provided.

At this point, the teacher has thoroughly investigated all aspects of the student's background and irrational beliefs system and has devised a plan of action to help the student. However, critical reflection must continue to ensure careful monitoring of the student and the intervention.

Acting

John's teachers decided to meet with John to formulate a plan of action. The research literature revealed that cognitive strategies often help students such as John to stay focused and on task. Therefore, the teachers will introduce a self-monitoring procedure whereby John will be responsible for setting behavioral goals for himself and charting his progress. John's teachers and the school psychologist will monitor his performance and communicate with his parents. John will also receive after-school tutoring in written expression and mathematics to improve his performance in those areas.

Implications for Professional Practice

More and more teachers in our nation's schools are challenged by students who exhibit troubling behaviors. By combining the process of critical reflection with an understanding of how conflict develops and escalates we can improve the way that teachers react and respond.

For teacher education programs, this process can be nurtured over time in teacher candidates so that it becomes a natural way of coping with troubling behav-

ior. For teacher induction programs run by school districts, this method has the potential of enhancing the confidence of novice teachers as they experiment with classroom and behavior change strategies. Instead of offering full or half-day sessions discussing more strategies and techniques to manage behavior, we suggest creating small focus groups in which novice teachers can discuss critical incidents as they arise. They can then follow the technique we outlined above to achieve real success with real students. Small focus groups can also work for the professional development of experienced teachers. We believe that giving teachers the opportunity to become critical thinkers and proactive managers of behavior will empower them to think before they engage in counteraggressive reactions to troubling behavior.

Key words: behavior management, discipline, reflection, The Conflict Cycle, novice teachers

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