

eLearning

Positive Relationships foster Positive Discipline

Education practice often finds itself at the point of scrutiny and criticism. Proving its effectiveness is often required in classroom practice, writes Neville Goliath, Coordinator of the Western Cape Education Department's Positive Behaviour Programme.

Discipline remains the challenge for many educators. Although corporal punishment is a non-issue it remains the recurring theme when educators seek desperate measures to ensure control in the classroom. The constant reference to corporal punishment as a "comeback" solution appears to continue in spite of the overwhelming evidence about its ineffectiveness. The word punishment is derived from the latin word poena, which means pain. To punish is to inflict pain in reaction to unwanted behaviour. All societies have penalties for serious transgressions, but punishment does not necessarily eliminate the problem.

PAIN SIMPLY CREATES PAIN-BASED BEHAVIOUR THAT CAUSES CHILDREN TO BECOME SNEAKIER, FIGHTING ADULTS, OR ALLOWING THEM TO LURCH IN SELF-BLAME - HENCE THE SEARCH FOR ALTERNATIVE METHODS TO PUNISHMENT.

The term 'positive discipline' gained prominence over the past decade. The Western Cape Education Department's strategy for encouraging positive behaviour and responding to challenging behaviour in public schools sets the premise for engagement in positive discipline practices.

Schools across the WCED have had variable exposure to these strategies. Did punitive measures shape people into the good people they are today? These are testimonies of many adults that find themselves in good standing today. It is true however; those punitive measures only have an impact in situations where good relationships are in place. Good relationships are the golden thread that runs through all the behaviour interventions and strategies. This aspect of the strategy requires educators and parents alike, to forge and foster positive relationships with learners in order to affect the authority that adults need, to guide young people at risk.

Modern day society does not invest in good relationships. Modern youth culture does not attach the same meaning and value to relationships. Relationship and its meaning are often lost in translation between the generational divide. Schools are micro societies, communities of relationships influenced by modern values that have a different discourse to the adult systemic discourse schools would want to have. It requires schools to develop a better understanding of modern values in order to accommodate the understanding required to make sense of the private logic of the children in our school communities. Traditional values that harness good relationships often find itself in battle with modern values. These two approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive approaches, but rather struggling to find its fit - a fit that happens in the effort to renew relationships of understanding.

Research has shown that the quality of human relationships in schools may be more influential than any specific technique or intervention employed. Teachers have an inclination to build positive

relationships with the children they teach. They subscribe to the view that children perform better academically in the classes of the teachers they like and respect. They further are perceived to be less disruptive and more productive. Children will also favour the teacher with whom they have a good relationship. Albert Trieschman said: "The most important observation you can make is when you become a glimmer in the child's eyes and he becomes a glimmer in yours."

Relationship-reluctant children are products of "insecure attachment" that is caused by childhood neglect, abuse and inadequate bonding by primary caregivers. According to Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern (2002), relationship-reluctant children need "corrective relationships" to mend their insecure attachments. A child requires only one adult that is irrationally crazy about them. The helping adult, and in this case the teacher, must be able to offer "warm, consistent, stable, and non-hostile attachments." Children are much more responsive to encouragement or from an



adult whose opinion is valued. The essence of discipline is captured in the child becoming a "disciple" by adopting the values and behaviour of the teacher. Establishing a classroom of positive relationships require of the teacher to create a "classroom of courage." This concept is born from the idea of the circle of courage that has become the premise of the positive behaviour strategy of the Western Cape Education Department.

Courage in the classroom flows from the teacher that sets the tone for the attitude and engagement in how learning is to be conducted.

Belonging is a concept born out of the rich cultures of traditional communities that is the premise

for the identity and humanity of the group. The classroom as a community sets the same expectation that is essential for the successful engagement and functioning of its members. The members of the group require strong leadership that demonstrates the rules of engagement. The teacher is the force that sets the tone.

Mastery is the second proponent that constitutes the courage that enables success. All learners have the innate desire to be successful. Failure, as a seed of discouragement is an aspect that followed the learner into the classroom. The teacher is the source that can prevent the attitudes



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of futility to prevail by creating enabling practices that flows from encouragement and hope.

Independence is probably the aspect of courage that attaches itself to childhood behaviour like play is part of learning. Taking control of your environment with or without the required skills determines the nature of how behaviour is experienced in the classroom community. The positive power and independence of the teacher gives the learner the courage to risk despite his/her fears.

GENEROSITY IS THE SPIRIT OF RELATIONSHIP IN THE CLASSROOM. THE CARING CLASSROOM BECOMES THE FIRST BUILDING BLOCK OF A CHILD'S UNDERSTANDING OF CITIZENSHIP. THE ESSENCE OF BUILDING A CARING COMMUNITY IS IN THE SHARING OF ONE'S SELF WITH OTHERS AND IT STARTS WITH THE TEACHER.

George Thomas, author and practitioner in child and youth care, refers to relationship building as relationship technology.



1 Relationship is an action, not a feeling

Positive and trusting relationships are not "touchy-feely" truisms, but researched based and experiential knowledge gained through active involvement in education and the child care systems. Psychology and education were the pioneering disciplines before science to prove the "power of relationship."

2 Crisis is opportunity

In moments where learners find themselves in crises and demonstrate meltdown behaviour they would have the inclination to draw closer to the adult if the adult is "available" to recognize their distress and present with an inviting stance. They would be ready for engagement and the guidance that the teacher could give.

3 Loving the unlovable

Often children with a strong need for attachment demonstrate behaviour that makes them "unlovable." Adults fear to approach and could often discard all intentions to approach. These are the children that crave for attachment.

4 Disengaging the conflict cycle

One of the most valuable skills all teachers must acquire is to avoid counter-aggressive responses with confrontational youngsters. Adults are lured into negative interactions to "confirm" a self-fulfilling prophecy that adults are not good people to connect with. Here the teacher must acquire the ability to stay out of the conflict cycle with the youth.

5 Earning the trust of youth

Trust is the essence in building positive relationships. Children grow up with the belief that most adults can be trusted. Many do however make the opposite assumption. The teacher needs to re-educate the learner to build new kinds of relationships that gives support, understanding and affection.

6 Relationship building is an endurance event

Relationship building is a slow and intensive process. The negative relationship and behaviour patterns laid down over a lifetime requires a persistent and patient engagement of the youth by the teacher.

7 Conducting therapy on the hoof

Connecting with kids in conflict requires a teacher that put the psychological needs of the learner first. Teachers can be educated to acquire the skill to change the child's reality by forging relationships that cares. Such relationships can teach the learner to acquire new skills to manage the relationships in his life.

8 Respect begets respect

Respect can never be demanded from the troubled child. The teacher sets the tone for respect in the classroom. Respect should never be confused with obedience. Obedience is the compliance to do what you want to have done. Respect is granting the child the opportunity to honour the relationship.

9 Teaching joy

Fritz Redl (renowned psycho-educationalist) uses the example of "a house that smiles". These inviting words set the tone for engagement. The anxiety of the child in the classroom is often not apparent in the common expression of anxiety, but rather observed in the disrupted and unruly nature of classroom behaviour. The classroom 'that smiles' creates the space for children to experience joy.

10 The invitation to belong

Schools and classrooms present as opportunities for belonging. Learners that present with challenging behaviour usually require a space that would include them - a place of existence and recognition.

> Conclusion

Positive discipline grows from positive relationships. Discipline is never a set of rules, but rather the bond that exist between people and the meaning that exists between teacher and learner. It's never about what a teacher can do, but who a teacher can be. The WCED presents various training courses to capacitate teachers to manage learner behaviour in a positive discipline approach.

Useful literature that teachers could consult:

1. Brendtro, L. K., Brokenleg, M., & Van Bockern, S., (2002). RECLAIMING YOUTH AT RISK: Our hope for the future. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree
2. Brendtro, L. K., & Du Toit, L., (2005). RESPONSE ABILITY PATHWAYS: Restoring bonds of respect. Cape Town, Pretex.
3. Learner discipline and school management: a practical guide to understanding and managing learner behaviour within the school context. (2007). WCED

