5-6-2016

Beyond Behavior

Craig C. Laupheimer

Dominican University of California, craig.laupheimer@students.dominican.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholar.dominican.edu/seed

Part of the Accessibility Commons, Adult and Continuing Education Administration Commons, Adult and Continuing Education and Teaching Commons, Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education Commons, Community College Education Administration Commons, Community College Leadership Commons, Curriculum and Instruction Commons, Curriculum and Social Inquiry Commons, Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons, Educational Methods Commons, Education Economics Commons, Elementary and Middle and Secondary Education Administration Commons, Elementary Education and Teaching Commons, Gifted Education Commons, Higher Education Administration Commons, Higher Education and Teaching Commons, Humane Education Commons, Junior High, Intermediate, Middle School Education and Teaching Commons, Liberal Studies Commons, Online and Distance Education Commons, Other Educational Administration and Supervision Commons, Other Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons, Pre-Elementary, Early Childhood, Kindergarten Teacher Education Commons, Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Commons, Science and Mathematics Education Commons, Secondary Education and Teaching Commons, Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education Commons, Special Education Administration Commons, Student Counseling and Personnel Services Commons, and the Urban Education Commons

Recommended Citation

For students with special needs, navigating the channels of conventional education can be a daunting challenge, especially when their specific mode of learning occurs as incompatible or non-compliant with the predominant instructional modalities at play in classrooms. This is especially true for students with Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) as reported in (Hallahan, Kauffman & Pullen, 2013) in general education classrooms, particularly because their behaviors can challenge classroom expectations making it easy for teachers to mistake these atypical tendencies for evidence of a student's general attitude or motivation around school and learning.

In order for teachers to avoid an overly simplistic analysis of our students' abilities, it becomes integral to our work to look beyond behaviors and our own assumptions to help students master the art of learning itself. Content, through this lens must necessarily take on a secondary role.

Given their tendency to lose focus, their lack of organizational skills and unconventional thinking, students with ADHD offer educators an opportunity to teach content in new ways that engage and empower uniqueness which in turn benefits the whole class, looking for making the classroom a playground of the intellect, a window to the heart of our humanity. When we teach to inspire, everyone wins- we become better educators and human beings. When we join the learning process with our students, they respect us, and learn how to respect themselves.

In the absence of a uniform mandate for teachers to acquire and demonstrate skills for identifying and interacting with students with special needs, it is no wonder then that educators can end up treating problem behaviors rather than retrofitting their classroom toolkit with strategies for making learning more accessible. But given the system wide inequities facing students and teachers alike, we must face the fact that we cannot wait for the "system" to change. The one thing teachers can control, however, irrespective of circumstance probably offers the best hope for educational empowerment system wide.

This consideration is the cultivation of self-awareness and mindfulness in the classroom. Internal mental states and a teacher's own unique position has perhaps the greatest influence on classroom dynamics and educational outcomes. When teachers take this on as a daily measure of personal accountability in action, it can transform and empower learning, especially for exceptional students. Takacs (2006), a long-time educator, writes:

> Because of the power I hold in the classroom, my assumptions are less likely to be challenged. Things I believe are true—about the world beyond the classroom, the subject matters I teach, the students with whom I interact—may or may not be a reflection of my own identity and experiences. It's only by keeping an attitude of mindfulness, a willingness to be vulnerable, and a constantly

engaged critical consciousness that I can move and change (p.36-37).

As Takacs points out, because of the power teachers hold as classroom facilitators, there is a strong need to model the same self-examination and critical consciousness we ask of our students.

Given the realities teachers face of overcrowded classrooms, busy schedules and a milieu of student differences, it is understandable that many atypical behaviors are misunderstood misdiagnosed or overlooked. According to Guerra and Brown (2012), "Children with ADHD are at an increased risk of academic failure due to the troublesome characteristics, yet many teachers lack the information, time, and resources needed for these children to succeed in the classroom" (p. 5). The symptoms of ADHD are unique because many of the behaviors can resemble or mirror the mannerisms of other students without the condition normally progressing cognitively and socially. Although it is normal for many students to experience some of these characteristics in the course of their growth and development, students with ADHD often experience a slew of challenges to their learning at the same time.

In other words, while it is perfectly ordinary to observe a middle-schooler lose focus during a lesson, demonstrate a lack of organization, or struggle socially from time to time, a student with ADHD might be scribbling in notebook, whispering to a fellow student, and fidgeting in his or her seat simultaneously. But again, given the challenging context of under-budgeted schools and busy classrooms, it is difficult for teachers to retain the level of attention needed to differentiate between students who need extra support and those who do not. However, even when teachers are well-informed about observable learning differences among students in their classes, this does not mean they know how to teach effectively to these students, particularly in the case of those experiencing ADHD. In their study of the Sharyland School District in South Texas, Guerra and Brown (2012) found that sixty-six percent of the respondents "had no previous coursework in their teacher preparation college courses dealing with learning disabilities, in particular ADHD" (p.4).

I recently had the privilege of getting to know T, a fifth grade student with ADHD whose impulsive, often inappropriate classroom behavior often lands him in the principal's office. Within the last three months he has been suspended 4 times for cursing at teachers and hitting other children. Understandably such actions have definitive shock value and certain predictable consequences. I spoke with his aid that helps him with his Individualized Education Plan (IEP) as well as his mother and school principal. All of them expressed their concern about T's behavior and seem generally confused about the best way to help him. I met T as a student in my after school program where he immediately struck me as extremely intelligent, insightful and creative. At first his socially atypical

behaviors were frustrating and I resorted to similar strategies as those in his public school and unsurprisingly, he ended up in the office quite a bit.

I realized at some point that if authority figures in T's life were going to help him achieve different behavioral outcomes, we needed to take different actions. We needed to change how we were thinking about him if we were going to help him shift in a positive direction. We had been treating the behaviors and not the underlying issues causing them.

In the weeks that followed I connected with T about anything and everything in his life, listening to him and sharing my own feelings and experiences, creating relatedness with him. My goal was to stay positive and when he went to negative behaviors speak to him as if I expected him to make the right choice. I focused on empowering language and when he was not doing the right thing I placed the least emphasis on negative actions. We created hands on projects for him to write about in a journal and I gave him reading assignments in comic books. I related the stories of superheroes to actual behaviors talking about how Jedis and Wizards would behave when they might get angry or want to hurt or say mean things. I tried to get in his world, speak in his language and make learning fun for both of us.

Slowly, we are seeing the behavior change. He is having fewer problems in school and he is proud of his accomplishments sharing his victories over his "Darth Vader side" with teachers and friends who support him. Although change is slow coming it has been powerful to watch T becoming increasingly resilient and powerful in his daily experiences and choices.

Once I was able to honestly look at what was missing in my approach with him, I changed my mindset. Only when I looked beyond behavior was I able to see the fullness of who was and connect with him meaningfully. Yeager and Dweck's research (2012) speaks to the power of mindset as a chief influence on performance and agent of change. She asserts that when students believe in their value and the possibility of success they can transform behavior. "Students who believe (or are taught) that intellectual abilities are qualities that can be developed (as opposed to qualities that are fixed) tend to show higher achievement across challenging school transitions..." (Yeager & Dweck, 2012, p. 302). New research also shows that believing (or being taught) that social attributes can be developed can lower adolescents' aggression and stress in response to peer victimization or exclusion, and result in enhanced school performance.

For many educators, working with students everyday can be challenging, tiring and sometimes thankless. When students with learning challenges come through our doors and don't fit the rules and expectations of our classrooms it can occur as inconvenient, as more work or seem like another thing to manage on top of everything else. What we forget in these moments is how little it can take for many of these students to gain self confidence and the academic skills that help

them thrive. And while our efforts daily take much of our energy, when these students turn the corner and embrace learning and positive life choices it makes all our work worthwhile. I would argue that all students with and without special needs desire to feel acknowledged, seen and valued. If we work to create classrooms of respect where learning is expressive, exciting and accessible our interactions with students as well as teaching methods will likely align with best practices more often than not.

My journey as a student began when my mother was told I would never learn how to read when I was five years old. At the age of 10, my brain was mapped out with state of the art equipment in 1992 and labeled the textbook definition of ADHD by Dr. A. Learning in my life has always occurred for me as a movement from chaos to clarity, struggle to knowledge.

When students tell me they are "stupid" or when T said "I don't know how," I see it as my job to hold them accountable as the powerful authors of their own life story. Everyday we all get the gift of choosing how we will show up in the world for ourselves and others, each moment we can remind students of their limitations or we can be a stand for their power and possibility. As educators, we ought to step back and ask ourselves to look beyond labels, behaviors and limits, to raise the bar wherever possible, and create the process of learning as a shared experience.

References

Cimpian, A., Arce, H. M. C., Markman, E. M., & Dweck, C. S. (2007). Subtle linguistic cues affect children's motivation. *Psychological Science*, *18*(4), 314-316.

Guerra Jr, F. R., & Brown, M. S. (2012). Teacher knowledge of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder among middle school students in South Texas. *RMLE Online*, *36*(3), 1-7.

Hallahan, D. P., Kauffman, J. M., & Pullen, P. C. (2013). *Exceptional Learners: Pearson New International Edition: An Introduction to Special Education*. Pearson Higher Ed.

Mangels, J. A., Butterfield, B., Lamb, J., Good, C., & Dweck, C. S. (2006). Why do beliefs about intelligence influence learning success? A social cognitive neuroscience model. *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, *1*(2), 75-86.

Takacs, D. (2003). How does your positionality bias your epistemology. *Thought & Action*, *19*(1), 27-38.

Tournaki, N. (2003). Effect of student characteristics on teachers' predictions of student success. *The Journal of Educational Research*, *96*(5), 310-319.

Yeager, D. S., & Dweck, C. S. (2012). Mindsets that promote resilience: When students believe that personal characteristics can be developed. *Educational Psychologist*, *47*(4), 302-314.

Zajonc, A. (2006). Cognitive-affective connections in teaching and learning: The relationship between love and knowledge. *Journal of Cognitive Affective Learning*, *3*(1), 1-9.