

The Teacher as Therapist

By Ray Petty & David Nazro — October 11, 1995  7 min read

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The growing recognition of students with special needs is a double-edged sword for schools. It has permitted us to identify and assist these students, but at the same time it has created a group of education specialists who often leave the regular classroom teacher feeling ill-prepared for that task.

This is especially true when inclusion involves students with severe emotional or behavioral needs. Mention the word “therapy” and the regular classroom teacher quickly retreats: “Therapy is for the specialists; I teach math.”

Nothing could be further from the truth. Teachers can be, and often are, very effective therapists. Yet, most of them resist that role or are threatened by it. They imagine therapy as a task performed with an office couch by a Freud-like presence with psychological degrees and a highly specialized body of knowledge. If the mystique of the term were stripped away, most teachers would understand that, in its broadest sense, therapy for the behaviorally disordered student simply does this: It sets limits, helps the student internalize behavioral controls, and instills a positive self-image and confidence.

Dr. William Glasser, a psychiatrist familiar to educators as the author of *The Quality School*, believes that people need first to belong and to be involved. He suggests that we live in an “identity society” in which the emphasis is placed on relationships and interactions between individuals. The late behaviorist B.F. Skinner, too, reminded us that psychotherapy “formerly was left to friends, parents, or acquaintances, or to representatives of controlling agencies (such as schools).” Much of this was simple “good advice,” Skinner wrote, adding that “a great deal of casual therapy is prescribed in proverbs, folklore, and other forms of lay wisdom.”

Approached in this light, therapy looks a whole lot like what classroom teachers have been doing since the days of the frontier schoolmarm. Structured and consistent discipline, found in every effective classroom, instills a sense of control and a feeling of responsibility in children. And this classroom therapy--the teacher’s discipline-and-control technique--just might be the most effective in a child’s life. Likewise, a teacher’s positive attitude--treating all students as important members of the class, instilling a sense of acceptance--would do credit to any psychotherapy session.

Once teachers realize that therapy is going on all the time in a classroom, they can begin to focus on ways to improve it.

An appropriate classroom-management plan is critical. Such a plan has three important components: a set of positive expectations for students' behavior (both for academics and for conduct); a system of recognition for students as they reach those expectations; and a consistent imposition of consequences for negative behaviors.

Jaime Escalante, the high school mathematics teacher whose story was the basis of the motion picture "Stand and Deliver," provides us with an example of the positive effects that high expectations can have. Eighty-seven of his students in South Central Los Angeles' Garfield High School were able, when challenged to do so, to rise above their particular disadvantages and previous poor performance in math to pass the 1987 Advanced Placement calculus test.

In setting expectations, it is important to stress the positive. Rather than listing all the things students can't do ("Don't get out of your seat without permission." "Don't talk without first raising your hand." "Don't copy." "Don't forget your homework."), teachers need to say what is expected of students. The list can be inclusive, but it needs to be brief. Here is an example:

Welcome to our classroom.

We are very proud of our classroom and welcome you.

While you are with us you will find:

1. We behave ourselves as ladies and gentlemen.
2. We respect school property.
3. We respect each other.
4. We work very hard on our assignments.

Note that these expectations are positive, short, and cover all possible areas of academic and behavioral conduct. In addition, they are introduced within the positive context of "Welcome" We get a good feeling on entering this classroom.

A system to recognize students as they reach these expectations needs to be broader than handing out material rewards. Teachers, with good reason, are critical of a system that, for example, gives M&Ms for

every correct math problem. A smile, on the other hand, a “Good job!,” or a pat on the back may be effective and all that is necessary. Smiling faces on papers (even at the high school level), with special recognition at the end of the week for the students with the most faces, or those with the most improvement, can be powerful.

But even this minimal recognition requires planning and systematic delivery. Without that, the exercise becomes haphazard and occasional, losing its optimal effectiveness. Moreover, for students who need attention, the lack of a built-in system for getting positive recognition can sometimes lead to the negative behaviors that, in all too many classrooms, are the only sure way to get the teacher’s attention.

A plan for recognition does not require constant rewards. Skinner’s work demonstrated that occasional reinforcement is stronger than continual reinforcement: A selective reward now and then is more effective than a cascade of rewards all the time.

But the realities of the classroom also require a third component to deal with negative behaviors. Those who think that if teachers ignore negative behavior it will go away have not worked in a classroom. Each teacher has to design a system of consequences (punishments, if you will) for students who fall seriously short of expectations or who exhibit a continual pattern of negative behavior. While the number of such punishments should be fewer than the number of rewards, they are necessary.

Punishments, like rewards, should be delivered in a way that is planned, fair, and consistent. And just as rewards should be perceived by the student as something good, punishments should be perceived as something bad. A stern look, a firm “John!,” or writing a student’s name on the board may be all that is necessary. But the plan should allow for more significant consequences when they are required.

This kind of consistency in managing a classroom environment provides important structure for all students. It also gives students whose behavior requires change the therapy they need. By setting appropriate expectations within a system of positive recognition and negative consequences, teachers become therapists.

Yet, this ordinary brand of classroom therapy goes further. We often lose sight of the fact that children need to feel secure and cared for. Listening to a child instills in him or her a sense of importance and power. Accepting the child’s right to be human allows that child to feel legitimate and fosters a positive self-image. Often, this can be accomplished in a few minutes each day over the course of a year.

The ways teachers can provide “therapy” are infinite. They include, for example:

- *Allowing students to express themselves and their feelings.* A tragic fire in a nearby town becomes the basis for a general classroom discussion on the value of life and the inevitability of death; a discussion of family pets focuses on the need to care and the role of the “provider” in a dependency

relationship; a discussion of tuna-netting explores the conflict between our need for food and respect for other creatures with whom we share the earth.

- *Observing the student's mood.* What kind of a day is the student having? Should we push him a bit more or take a step back?
- *Using encouragement in a variety of situations to foster trust and a feeling of security and self-acceptance.* The student learns that “the teacher hasn’t given up on me.” We help the student to realize that “it’s OK to be myself, even if I’m different from everyone else.” Individual differences should be celebrated, not minimized or ridiculed. The teacher must encourage the class to look at the many sides of issues--allowing them to share opinions and information. When the student sees his or her thoughts count, it engenders a feeling of importance and power. Both of these are vital for human growth and development.
- *Responding appropriately under duress.* A teacher who is in control of his or her feelings and behavior provides an example to be imitated. Children emulate significant adults in their lives (of which teachers are one of the most important examples). Teachers who are respectful, organized, and accepting of individual differences and opinions foster similar feelings and behavior in their students.

Caring, concern, humility, and responsibility are often more effective in the therapeutic process than theories, degrees, and formal training in psychology. There is no magic with children. They need to feel in control and positive about themselves. Teachers, in their everyday interaction with students, are able to empower them. When teachers display calm and control, they provide children with a feeling of safety. When the children feel safe, they can accept interventions that change their perceptions, feelings, and subsequent behavior.

Each day we, as teachers, shape the lives of our students. It’s time we understood better our expanded role as educator/therapist and felt more positive about it.