Every principal has one, the student whose behaviour terrifies teachers and classmates alike, who spends more time in the office than the playground, and who, at this time of year, is the subject of many a request letter from other parents. All children misbehave. From dropping a piece of litter in the playground to telling a fib to avoid getting in trouble, exploring the boundaries of acceptable behaviour is a normal part of growing up. But for some children, staying within the confines of socially acceptable boundaries is much harder than for others. Whether it is the result of a recognised disorder or disability or due to another cause, extreme behaviour can present major challenges to classroom teachers and to schools as a whole.

Both state and federal governments have a swathe of papers and policies that relate to children with disabilities and disorders, and student wellbeing practices. The emphasis in these documents is on maximising educational outcomes for the children having difficulties, a necessary and just component of educational policy. For students with physical or learning difficulties, the guidelines ensure that they receive equitable access to quality education, and students with behavioural issues deserve those same opportunities. However what is often ignored is the impact that having a violent or disruptive classmate can have on the rest of the students and indeed the teacher.

Anne is an experienced primary educator who has spent her career in suburban Melbourne in a variety of roles including classroom teacher, teacher librarian and information technology administrator. Her experience with children with behavioural problems in the average classroom have been “Varied, but in most cases it has not been a good experience for the individual child, for the other children in the class or for me.” Her statement reflects frustrations expressed in staffrooms across the country, and is the result of one crucial shortcoming: funding.

Like the problems with our mental health system, the government has advocated a policy of inclusion in our schools without building appropriate infrastructure and support mechanisms to implement it successfully. The case is a hard one to argue though. The Victorian state government, for example, has a comprehensive framework for student support services in schools. It includes primary intervention, early intervention, intervention and postvention strategies and examples of good practice, all of which certainly have merit. What it fails to address is the day-to-day reality of being in a classroom.

Anne recounts the story of a particular student who “Showed off to the class by burping each time I spoke and the other children thought he was funny and sometimes mimicked him. Many hours of planning were wasted in some cases when lessons were not able to progress the way they should.”

Although in theory being around ‘normal’ kids should act as a role model for students having difficulties, sometimes the result is the other way around. Anne found that, “those children easily distracted did not complete their activities and developed time wasting behaviours while I was occupied with the difficult child.”

Many teachers find balancing the time they spend with students with behavioural problems and the needs of their other students demanding. A young Year 5/6 teacher in a government primary school in Melbourne’s northeast describes how on the one hand “It’s been fantastic for [my students] to see that in society there are people that are different from them and not everyone works the same way. Yet, the flip side of this is that when the child with the behavioural problem does encounter a ‘problem’ the class almost comes to a complete standstill until the child’s issue has been resolved.” This teacher has found the difficulties have eased as her students have become accustomed to their classmate and are more able to ignore the outbursts. She does, however, contend that this

Behave yourself

Annie Facchinetti

Education Today – Term 4 2010
might not be the case with every class.

The Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) states that “students are better prepared for learning when they are healthy, safe and happy, therefore, student welfare is the responsibility of all staff working in a whole school context. Student learning cannot be separated from wellbeing.”

The implications of this assertion are interesting. Ideally, all students would feel safe and happy all the time, but this is an unlikely outcome for students who are in a class with a particularly aggressive student. Anne says she has, “seen a child with violent behaviour who has endangered other children when he has lashed out and has hit and bitten another child.” While the child who did the biting may have received counselling, what of the recipient? He or she had to face being in the same room with the aggressor for the rest of the year.

The DEECD advocates a wide range of programs and approaches for schools to use to manage behaviour. These include peer mediation, respectful relationships education and social skills programs that develop resilience. There seems, however, to be a huge disparity between what the government suggests and what teachers believe they need.

One fundamental area of disagreement appears to be aide or school support officer (SSO) time. Many teachers, and for that matter parents, lament the lack of funding for SSOs. The young Year 5/6 teacher I spoke to said “I think having an aide makes a huge difference to these children and the severity of the disorder will impact on the need/amount of time the child requires of an aide.” She goes on to say that she finds it “really frustrating to think that government funding is being cut for these children and the standards needed to achieve funding are being raised. I have children in my classroom that have aides at the moment but when re-assessed at the end of Grade 6 they may not qualify for funding. This will only make high school even more difficult for them.”

An Australian Education Union (AEU) report from March 2010 titled The Provision of Education for Students with Disabilities/Special Needs cites evidence that the number of students with diagnosed behavioural disorders is increasing dramatically.

According to the report, between 2001 and 2008 the number of students in Schools for Specific Purpose (SSP) programs with behaviour disorders increased by 254 per cent, while there was a 139 per cent increase in the number of students with a diagnosis of emotional disturbance in primary school support classes. This includes a 61 per cent increase in the number of children in the autism category. Secondary school support classes had a 585 per cent increase in the number of students with a behaviour disorder.

Extra support and training for teachers who do not feel equipped to cope with students with severe behavioural difficulties in a mainstream classroom is often overlooked. The AEU’s 2009 State of Our Schools Survey found in South Australia, for example, teachers’ roles are “Made even more complex and challenging by the increase of students with special needs such as autism, who have a rightful place in mainstream classes but require intensive early intervention and ongoing support.” The AEU report on students with disabilities also suggests that there is “An under-resourced assumption that with inclusion policies now broadly accepted, classroom teachers will develop skills in areas that were once the domain of specialists.”

Anne’s many years of experience have led her to draw the same conclusion. She asserts “I believe the only way a child with behavioural problems can be integrated into the classroom successfully for all concerned is if there is adequate staffing, funding and training allocated to the school for each child. At the moment this is not the case and therefore there are more problems associated with inclusiveness than there are success stories.”

Yet it is widely recognised that teachers need specialised skills to effectively manage the diverse needs of their students. Education Victoria’s Framework for Student Support Services states: “Schools need to provide staff with a variety of professional development opportunities to further enhance their student support skills. As teachers are often the first points of contact for young people experiencing emotional distress, the ability to recognise signs of distress and respond appropriately is essential.” Essential it may be, but with increasing demands in terms of assessment, reporting, individualised learning and accountability for test results, upskilling teachers in this way is one in a very long line of competing priorities.

Teachers aides are often seen as a viable solution because they provide one-on-one support in the classroom and can implement remedial programs in a withdrawal situation. However, even when SSO funding is available, it does not always result in a dramatic improvement. The young Year 5/6 teacher I spoke to believes that “At times we have it backwards and the teacher should be working with child with behavioural problems, as they are the more experienced person, rather than the aide, but how do you do this?”

It is a valid point and one the carries across to other areas of education. Shouldn’t highly skilled and experienced teachers be the ones working with the most difficult or disadvantaged students? In the experience of the Year 5/6 teacher “Many teachers aides are just kids straight out of school with no or little experience; this can also be said for some of the older aides. Much of the work is completed for the children instead of scaffolding it at their level of need. This may only be due to a lack of knowledge by the aide in how to work with children though.”

For children who do not fit into specific disability criteria or who do not have a recognised disorder there is even less support. Although the requirements vary from state to state, funding for teacher aides is only given when a student meets a set of very narrow criteria.

Of course, teacher aides are not the only option, and most schools use a variety of strategies and programs to address the needs of their students. Some even get creative, like the Gold Class program at Christ the King Primary School (Education Today 2010; 10 (2)) that pools the aide time allocated to 12 students so that they have one full-time teacher and one full-time teacher aide but still retain the benefits of interacting in a mainstream setting.

There are some schools, too, which are satisfied with the processes and funding that is in place for students with behavioural problems. A teacher from a large Catholic primary school in Melbourne’s northern suburbs, for example, describes the comprehensive approach used in her school in very positive
We have found that shared ownership of students at our school is effective. Working together to discuss strategies and resources has proved to be helpful. Establishing a forum during planning meetings where teachers can review and discuss the individual needs of students and offer strategies is also helpful. This process is time consuming, but the professional dialogue and collective ownership of our children is essential, where common language and expectations can be consistent.

Isolating children with behavioural problems in a School for a Specific Purpose remains a contentious issue. In Anne's experience, SSPs are far better funded and equipped to handle extreme behaviour as "There are approximately eight children in the class, there is a full time teacher aide and there is a plan in place to deal with problem behaviour such as another teacher on call when needed. Because of the small class, individual learning goals and extra staffing each child has more opportunity to achieve to his full potential and not to have a bad impact on others."

The other side of this is that troubled students do not have the benefit of learning from peers how to behave appropriately. The Year 5/6 teacher I interviewed has seen the advantages of integrating students with behaviour problems, suggesting that "Many of these children require the modelling of other children to see how to interact and react to a variety of situations. They may not grasp the concepts, facial expressions, body language, voice alterations or sarcasm the first time but they learn from these repetitive experiences.

Most states also offer shorter programs to assist children with behavioural problems with a view to reintegrate them back into mainstream classes. Queensland's positive learning centres are an example of this. But as with any strategy, the success of these programs depends on many factors. Anne's experience of this has not been good. She says "I have seen a child who has spent time attending special classes at another location several days a week where he has had a small teacher to student ratio and has made progress academically and behaviourally while there, but when he has returned to the local school his behaviour has returned to what it was before."

Despite the challenges, there are obvious rewards for teachers when a difficult child makes progress. It is often the small steps that are hard won that mean the most. The young Year 5/6 teacher points out "Many of these students have a strength within their behavioural diagnosis. For example a young boy in my class with high functioning Autism has a maths strength especially with numbers; you could almost say it is his obsession." Being able to guide children to reach their potential despite the obstacles provides a strong motivation to persevere.

Like many of the key issues in education, there is no magic solution or one-size-fits-all answer. Children with behavioural problems have just as much right to a good education as anyone else. On the other hand, principals know all too well the effect that the most difficult students can have on staff and class morale. It is not unusual for schools to lose pupils whose parents no longer want them in the same class as a particularly difficult student, especially in smaller schools where there is less scope to reorganise groupings each year.

Increased funding will not solve anything unless it is directed in the right way, and a greater emphasis on training teachers in appropriate strategies and ensuring that teacher aides have the knowledge and skills to support these children is certainly a good start. It is clear, however, that the growing number of students with behavioural problems means that the issue is not going to go away anytime soon. It is a thin tightrope indeed for schools to walk to ensure that all students are always healthy, safe and happy.

---

**Teachers need specialised skills**

Salary packaging makes sense. You can lease a car with Smartleasing and put more in your pocket. Smartleasing's specialists will:

- Source your car
- Use our buying power for the best price
- Handle all the paperwork
- Arrange 30% discount on petrol, maintenance (parts & labour), and insurance

**Working for the Dept. means 30% off petrol**

Ask us how!

Only applies to employees from the Department of Education & Early Childhood Development, Education & Training NSW, and Education and Children's Services SA. Average savings of '30% off' is based on a salary between $37,001-$80,000, paying 30% income tax. Photo is indicative only.

---

**It’s that easy and that good!**

Call today for an obligation-free discussion.

Call us now on **1300 117 305**

Visit **www.smartleasing.com.au**

---

**Teachers need specialised skills**

Salary packaging makes sense. You can lease a car with Smartleasing and put more in your pocket. Smartleasing's specialists will:

- Source your car
- Use our buying power for the best price
- Handle all the paperwork
- Arrange 30% discount on petrol, maintenance (parts & labour), and insurance

**Working for the Dept. means 30% off petrol**

Ask us how!

Only applies to employees from the Department of Education & Early Childhood Development, Education & Training NSW, and Education and Children’s Services SA. Average savings of ‘30% off’ is based on a salary between $37,001-$80,000, paying 30% income tax. Photo is indicative only.

**It’s that easy and that good!**

Call today for an obligation-free discussion.

Call us now on **1300 117 305**

Visit **www.smartleasing.com.au**