Hello, thank you for downloading this podcast from Teacher magazine – I’m Rebecca Vukovic.

My guest for this episode in our Behaviour Management podcast series is Dr David Armstrong, a researcher from the School of Education at Flinders University. We’re here to talk about his recent paper, Addressing the wicked problem of behaviour in schools (https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13603116.2017.1413732), which explores how certain behaviour management models are simply ineffective, particularly for students with learning or mental health difficulties. The model he focuses on in particular is the manage-and-discipline model, which Armstrong claims is based on several core assumptions about children. I start off by asking him to outline what these assumptions are.

David Armstrong: It’s that we can … behaviour is a phenomena, children’s behaviour that we can quantify and control and that we can reduce kids’ behaviour to variables which we can manage and manipulate. And given the right skills and training, that teachers can have complete technical control over children’s behaviour in the classroom. It’s simply a matter of applying these skills and knowledge and … this doesn’t work for kids who don’t fit in or have disabilities or whatever, whose behaviour we decide is unmanageable, they are moved out of the classroom so there’s exclusion built into the manage-and-discipline model of behaviour.

Rebecca Vukovic: For students with disabilities affecting their behavioural development or those who have mental health difficulties, how does the manage-and-discipline model affect their learning in the classroom?

DA: Well often they’re not in the classroom, precisely because of the application of the model. So what typically happens is we apply – and this is obviously a stereotype – we apply a rigid set of parameters about what is and isn’t acceptable and then those don’t work in practice, then behaviour escalates, and then the child ends up
being out of the classroom of course. In America, the US, they had legislation they brought in in 2004 exactly to deal with this issue because they were having lots of children in American schools who were being excluded and who had disabilities, and that broke the law. The contradiction is, what they did was they encouraged schools and put in some cash there as well, so that schools had to adopt evidence-based practices before they excluded children. So they had to show and demonstrate that they’d used some evidence-based interventions and hadn’t merely responded by pushing kids out of the school. That was the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 2004 that mandated that all US schools had to use evidence-based practices, and they put after that period, there’s been money put into rolling those out through a program that is US $700 million … being spent on set programs to try and help make that happen in schools.

The other thing Rebecca is if we think about … obviously that’s the end result, children being either suspended or excluded because the manage-and-discipline model doesn’t work for them and they are moved out of the school, or pushed out of the school I some cases after their behaviour escalates. There’s another population of kids who are simply demotivated by it, so their needs are not being met usually and then this results in them becoming more and more disengaged from education, and they then end up not learning really and not learning very well.

We know for kids with disabilities who are obviously disadvantaged to start with, that these kinds of risks are there and inappropriately applied behavioural models like the manage-and-discipline model can make things much worse for them and it means that it speeds up their process of being either suspended or excluded from school.

RV: And given all of this, how do you suggest teachers respond to negative conduct in the classroom in an ethical, but effective way?

DA: Okay first of all, we need to avoid thinking about how we can manage children. Children are not cans of beans on a shelf, or the contents of our car or our finances. They are a human being. So by thinking about managing a child, we are dehumanising that child instantly. And also that’s not helpful in terms of practical efforts to try and change their behaviours for the better that we want to do. So that needs to be the starting point, forget managing children, children are not physical objects, they are not inventory in our stockroom. They are complex human beings like all of us.

And then we need to think about how we can adopt an authoritative but not authoritarian professional practice, which expects positive behaviours from all
students and as a default expects those, so we are expecting positive behaviours, rather than the opposite where we’re having to pause a system that deals with negative behaviours, we should the other way expect them.

And we need to work together with schools to have school-wide applications of these positive behavioural policies and cultures really. We also need to recognise as a teacher that we’re the one there responsible for setting up the behavioural environment in our classroom. We can’t disengage ourselves and project it onto kids and say, ‘it’s the kids’ fault for X, Y or Z’ reasons …

And we also need to do things like we need to think about kids’ needs being met. Motivation is often forgotten – a huge ingredient here in the kinds of behaviours that we see as problematic. So we need to think about, are we setting the right work that motivates children? Are we giving children space to follow things they’re interested in, obviously with an eye that we can then map them to the curriculum so we can meet our learning objectives, we need to get out as well. So thinking about how we’re motivating kids is a crucial bit there. One of the first things I’d ask when I go into schools and I’m supporting children with disabilities and the teacher is: are their needs being met? What evidence do we have to know that their needs are being met? And how is this present in planning? And what’s been implemented in the planning of content for that child?

One of the other things that comes across, Rebecca is, in the research by Paul Cooper and others that done reviews of the evidence base, in 2011 Paul Cooper did one (https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/08856257.2011.543547) (a really good one) and he looked at how the evidence or emerging evidence that we need children, our students, to understand that we have a positive regard for them, an unconditional positive regard. If they comprehend that we like them in some way, this doesn’t mean being their friend, it simply means that they know that we are on their side, we’re there to help them learn, we’re there to support them, and we’re there to give them a calm and positive environment to grow in. So they need to see that we’re the helpful adult. We’re not another person telling them what to do. This is particularly important for kids that are disengaged. So I think many disadvantaged students may never have had this at home, they may never have had an adult who shows I am with you, I am behind you, I am here for you. They may not have had that. So if we offer that, that is instantly a positive basis for helping them change their behaviour and keeping good, positive behaviours. So that’s really important, our relationship with them as another adult.

RV: And David I understand that you’re a lecturer in teacher education, so I was wondering, is behaviour management, in particular for students with disabilities,
something that the pre-service teachers are concerned about?

DA: They are, and it’s often intuitively. And I can see that yeah they are. The research I’ve done and lots of colleagues here in Australia and elsewhere have done in this area often describes behaviour management practices that they’ve seen in their own education when they were a student and that they will copy or use intuitively. Now, some of these are very good and some are not so good. Many of them are really not helpful. For example, one big one that’s used by many students is people think behaviourist kind of approaches would work. So this is about giving kids incentives to make them comply and it can work, it can make children comply, if we want to have disabled children comply all the time. Maybe we want to give them some space to make their own choices as well, that’s what I’d suggest. But it can work, but often it’s misapplied, so for example the wrong incentives are used, so the incentives are used which can reinforce negative behaviours. So for example, the whole behavioural system is applied to all kids, regardless of whether they have positive behaviour or behaviour that needs improving. So a one-size-fits-all approach can be used by teachers. What I try and do with teachers is get them to think through the pitfalls of these approaches and try and think more critically for themselves about what would work. So to look at things like differentiation, so are they setting work at the right level for child?

One of the really effective tools that a teacher can use is to look at functional behaviour assessment (FBA) which looks at what are the motivators for a child’s behaviour in what we see. So is it revenge? Is it control or power? Is it escape? Some of these basic motivators for children’s behaviour. And once we have that working hypothesis about what might be generating the behaviour we observe, then we can start to measure it and form a hypothesis, a best guess about what we think it is. And then we can start to plan what it is next we do about this.

Again one of the things I talk to my undergraduates about is how important it is that they look after themselves, that they work collegially with others because one of the things that comes out of research is that isolated teachers often are the ones that are vulnerable to, either being ineffective as practitioners or becoming stressed and demotivated. So I encourage my undergraduates to think critically about what they do and to think about how they can work with other teachers, work together to apply fair and effective models around behaviour. I think it’s really important that teachers are not isolated. Teacher welfare is really important and often not given enough credence. It’s part of that thing that projecting behaviour onto kids or students but we don’t think about the teacher and the relationship there. And developmental psychology would say that that’s the wrong approach, the wrong
way.

...So we have a predisposition to failure, this is the one where we think of a child and we see a child and we're expecting them to behave poorly. We're expecting them to have to apply sanctions in this behaviour model, so that's not good. That instantly sets up a negative reaction between us and them. The other one is the humpty dumpty approach, I describe it as which is a belief that we can cure children who have problematic behaviours and/or disabilities, that we can normalise them and bring them back into the fold ... that we can put the child back together again. Even though it might be that the things that are generating the poor behaviours are within their home environment as they often are. This is not going to work and this is going to make the teacher feel demotivated of course.

The other one is a fear and uncertainty one which is where teachers are just, not paralysed it's the wrong term, but just don't know what to do. And often timely action isn't taken, so a child’s behaviour gets more and more severe and can even be a mental health issue but action is not being taken. So to avoid some of these problems, when working with others if we support each other, our colleagues, we can avoid some of these issues by giving each other support which reduces our fear and uncertainty, by sharing ideas to do with situations, by asking someone else for their view if they have observed the child behaving in a certain way. So working together and avoiding being isolated can mitigate some of these risks and myths that are there.

RV: So finally, if teachers were to abandon the manage-and-discipline model entirely, what impact could this potentially have on their own welfare?

DA: Major, I’d say. And as I alluded to earlier, the manage-and-discipline model sets up this unrealisable, perfect classroom. Quite often, again I’m just in a myth here, this is an idealised myth. Teachers listening might recognise little bits of this in their own school but not all of it, this is an example for us to think about.

So one of the things we'd get is we'd have, there would be less stress for teachers. There would be a more realistic understanding of kids' behaviour. And we need to understand kids' behaviour rather than react to it, as in the manage-and-discipline model is a reactive model so we need to understand it and then we can respond effectively. So by throwing out the manage-and-discipline model, it frees us up to do those things, to be more effective and to be more precise in what we do. But also that involves some ethical issues because if we're being more effective, that avoids sanctions, and then that escalation where the child ends up out of the classroom. You know, the kind of escalation that happens, argument gets worse and worse, a
teacher asks a child to comply, the child replies back. Teacher replies back louder – that escalation. So by not doing that, by stopping and thinking what is happening with this child, rather than responding emotionally, then that gives us space to help us, helps the teacher but of course that also helps the child, by giving them some space to think about okay what’s happening here? Step back, what’s happening? What’s generating this behaviour? How should I respond here? And what should I do next?

One thing I think about of course is for many children, difficulties with behaviour start early on in their life and we might want think about early intervention for those children who need more intensive support and think about how we help them learn the right behaviours to have and look at some of the other needs that are generating those behaviours. I’m thinking here about pre-school children, children might need that extra support and intervention to help them learn how to behave and how to behave appropriately. Some kids do need that early on and that should also be a priority of course.

That’s all for this episode, to keep listening or to download any of our podcasts in our archive – just visit acer.ac/teacheritunes (http://acer.ac/teacheritunes) or soundcloud.com/teacher-ACER (https://soundcloud.com/teacher-acer). The full transcript of this podcast and further information is available at teacher magazine.com.au (http://www.teachermagazine.com.au). That’s where you’ll also find the latest articles, videos and infographics for free.

References:


Dr Armstrong says it’s important that students understand that their teachers are on their side. Think about your own classroom: do you students know that you like them and you are there to support them? In what ways do you demonstrate this to them?

He also says that teachers must think about how they can adopt an authoritative but not authoritarian professional practice. With a colleague,
brainstorm different ways you could go about doing this in your own school setting. What impact could this have on student behaviour?