

Supporting the attainment of disadvantaged pupils



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Introduction

This paper describes approaches to teaching and learning and leading learning in educationally disadvantaged school through the Behaviour for Learning programme. The Behaviour for Learning Programme promotes positive behaviour and learning throughout the school by focusing on developing Behaviour for Learning Skills, Social and Emotional Literacy Skills, Academic Literacy and Learning Skills. Firstly, I will introduce the teacher briefly and the social context of teaching in the school. Secondly, I will outline the teacher's approach to teaching using Fenstermacher and Soltis's 2004 MAKER model of approaches to learning. Thirdly, I will discuss insights on leading learning drawing on work of Senge (1996), Fulham and Black et al (2004).

The assignment focuses on a 'Behaviour for Learning' teacher in an inner city DEIS school. The teacher works with identified students, individually or in small groups on Behaviour for Learning Programmes that are designed to meet their social, emotional, wellbeing and behavioural and academic needs. There are currently only 28 Behaviour for Learning Programme Teachers in primary and post-primary schools throughout the country. The 'Behaviour for Learning' teacher has a background in art and design education, a master's in art therapy and a post graduate degree in psychology as well as up to date training with the NCSE (National Council for Special Education).

The school is based in an educationally disadvantaged area and has a DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) school status. The school forms part of the Department of Education and Skills social inclusion strategy

to help children and young people who are at risk of or who are experiencing educational disadvantage. The Education Act 1998 defines educational disadvantage as “ the impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools’ (Citizens Information, n. d). Educational disadvantage presents itself in the school and the school community in many ways, most often in poor levels of participation and achievement in the formal education system and involvement in anti-social behaviour. There are other ways in which children may be disadvantaged, for example disability, literacy difficulties, poverty etc. The National Anti-Poverty Strategy considers educational disadvantage as ‘ discontinuities between the school and non-school experiences of children’.

Approaches to teaching using Fenstermacher and Soltis’s 2004 MAKER model

Fenstermacher and Soltis’s 2004 MAKER model of approaches to learning is a guide to analysing the behaviour for learning teachers’ approach to teaching. The BFL teacher demonstrates many attributes of the nurturer/facilitator approach in her teaching methods. The BFL teacher plans her lessons in relation to the needs of these students that have been referred to her for challenging behaviour. The BFL teacher identified with Nancy O’Flaherty belief ‘ that the most important thing an education can give to youngsters is some perspective on themselves, on who and what they are and what they will become’ (Fenstermacher and Soltis, 2004). The BFL teacher plans her lesson based on the NBSS model of support. This model is based on Positive Behavioural Interventions, Supports, and

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Response to Intervention frameworks as recommended by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE). The integration of these frameworks offers opportunities to address the behavioural and social, emotional and academic needs of students effectively with interventions at different levels of intensity and support. The lessons are planned by using the three-tiered approach recommended by the NBSS:

- Level 1- School-wide support for all students.
- Level 2- Targeted Intervention for some Students
- Level 3- Intensive Individualised support for a Few students

The BFL teacher in conjunction with Positive Strategy Team offer whole school support by facilitating programmes in areas of Academic Literacy, Language and Learning and Social & Emotional Literacy and Wellbeing Support. The BFL teacher plans and implements support programmes such as Catch Up Literacy, Catch Up Numeracy, Rapid Plus to level 1 and 2 students. The BFL teacher highlighted the importance of recognising the research that indicates links between behaviour and academic problems and the need for coordinating systems for prevention and intervention in both areas. The NBSS research has also pointed to the association between failure with reading and behaviour difficulties as referenced by the NCSE.

The facilitator approach of the BFL teacher places the emphasis on the student above the curriculum. The BFL teacher addresses the students' social and emotional and wellbeing needs as well as the academic aspect. In our school, the BFL teacher implements wellbeing programmes such as Belonging Plus and ' Friends for Life', that helps students to develop effective strategies to deal with worry, stress and change in a bid to reduce anxiety.

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From the research literature conducted by the NCSE there is evidence that working on emotional and social competence and wellbeing has a wide range of educational and social benefits, including greater educational and work success, improved behaviour, increased inclusion, improved learning and improvements to mental health. These programmes align with the cognitive perspective of learning in creating 'interactive environments for knowledge construction and understanding'. (Conway, 2002)

The most challenging students the BFL teacher works with are level 3 students. The level 3 student support is distinctive in that it is tailored to the specific needs of the individual student that continue to experience difficulty upon receiving whole school support and level 2 interventions. The severity of their behaviour hinders the teaching and learning in the classroom environment. The BFL teacher implements an individual Student Behaviour Plan (Appendix 1) that develops targets for each student in receipt of this support. The BFL teacher also implements programmes to help students address their behaviour in an aim to promote positive behaviour. The BFL teacher highlighted the importance of the 'Why Try?' programme in teaching students social and emotional skills and strategies that extends beyond the school environment such as anger management, dealing with peer pressure and living by a safe society's laws.

The approach the BFL teacher uses is solution focused thinking. The BFL teacher uses strategies to help students focus on what they are doing well rather than what is going wrong. An example of this is through the 'Pink Sheets' (Appendix 2), the pink sheets are a weekly monitoring sheet to monitor student's behaviour on a class-by-class basis. The monitoring sheet

outlines three targets that the student needs to meet. The student needs to achieve 70% percent in order to have been successful in achieving their targets. The BFL teacher communicates formal feedback on what they did well and how they might improve on areas that they find challenging. The BFL teachers nurturing approach is evident in the teacher's goal for the student to achieve his/her greatest level of self-worth possible, and that more important than what is taught, is what is learned. By focusing on the positive rather than the negative the solution focused approach, can enhance the educational and workplace experience for all members of the school community.

The BFL teacher highlighted the single most important factor in educational disadvantage in the students' home, community and family background and the affect it can have on student behaviours. The school is located in an area of disadvantage and has a high rate of crime, poverty and addiction. The most challenging behavioural students as noted by the BFL teacher were due to the absenteeism of one or both parents, lack of attention at home, alcohol and drug addiction. The BFL teacher similar to Nancy O'Flaherty works with ' adolescents who are beginning to discover who they are as persons.'

(Fenstermacher & Soltis, 2004). The BFL teachers' methods draw on sociocultural theories of how society contributes to individual development and how social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition(Conway, 2002). The socio-cultural theories as Conway (2002) refers to ' learning itself is socially and culturally rooted in communities of practice, encompassing the artefacts and relationships.' The BFL teacher highlighted the fact that school can make a difference and that through

continued support and positive reinforcement students can choose a better path for themselves.

The BFL teacher highlighted the importance of her role as being ‘One Good Adult’ and being there for her students in a nurturing and facilitative capacity. The BFL teacher identified with Fenstermacher and Soltis’s (2004) depiction of Nancy as a caring and nurturing individual and recognised similar traits in her own teaching. The students view the BFL teacher similar to Nancy (Fenstermacher & Soltis, 2004) in ‘they see her as sympathetic, understanding, encouraging adult, unlike most of the other adults in their lives’. The BFL teacher has a very close relationship with her students and similar to Nancy (Fenstermacher & Soltis, 2004) she shares her own perspectives and values with them. The students feel comfortable in his presence and they are aware that she respects each one of them equally (Fenstermacher & Soltis, 2004).

Insights on leading learning

In this section, I will discuss the BFL teacher’s role in leading learning. I will draw on Senge (1996) ideas on types of leaders. I will address Black et al (2004) theories on the importance of formative assessment on students learning. I will also draw on Fullan’s ideas of the role of leaders and highlight the importance of the BFL teacher in implementing the system player approach in addressing issues outside the classroom.

The role of the Behaviour support teacher is to help students develop skills, which improve their behaviour, social and emotional literacy and mental health. The BFL teacher aims to put in place both preventative and

restorative interventions to support students in their learning endeavours. The BFL teacher has the responsibility for the development of a school 'Behaviour for Learning Programme' specifically targeted at students in need of intensive, individualised support (Level 3) and some targeted interventions at Level 2. The BFL teacher works with the principal, vice principal, Home School Liaison Officer, senior management, staff and the NCSE (National Council for Special Education) to promote positive behaviour in the classroom and school environment. The BFL leadership role is to implement interventions to students who present with challenging behaviour and design strategies for teachers in coping with challenging behaviour in the classroom.

The BFL teacher identified with Peter Senge's project/line leader. The BFL teacher is a leader of an organisational unit (Senge, 1996) which is the Behaviour for Learning programme. The BFL programme is a huge part of the school community and has a large number of students who avail of support from the BFL teacher as Senge (1996) outlines that 'They head organizational units that are large enough to be meaningful microcosms of the larger organization'. This idea draws on Senge (1996) ideas of subcultures that differ from the mainstream setting. The BFL teacher acts like a line manager in working with students that present with challenging behaviour and aims to equip the students with the necessary skills and mind-set to cope within the school environment. The SET (Special Education Team) is the network by which the BFL teacher can offer support in terms of a whole-school approach, which includes year heads, home-school liaison officer. The BFL teacher measures the students results through many

different collections of data such as pre and post learning behaviour checklists, student behaviour plan reviews, 'Pink Sheets', feedback from staff, management and parents. The BFL teacher aligns with Senge (1996) idea of a local line leader 'participating in serious experiments requires a significant commitment of time and energy.'

Black et al (2004) discusses how improving formative assessment raises student achievement. The BFL teacher uses formative assessment to promote students learning and is adapted to meet the students learning needs. The behaviour for learning teacher sets the level 2 and 3 students' specific targets to meet in every class. An example of this is through the 'Pink Sheets', the pink sheets monitor student's behaviour on a class by class basis. The monitoring process acts as a motivational tool for level 2 and 3 students that outline 3 specific targets (see Appendix 2). The students are aware of and understands the goals they have to achieve, Black et al (2004) highlights the importance of students understanding the goals 'if they can understand the goal and can access what they need to do to achieve it.' The monitoring sheet is filled in by the class teacher for every class the student attends. The BFL teacher communicates individual student feedback that is evident on the 'Pink Sheets'. The BFL teacher also uses peer assessment in smaller group were students discuss the agreed targets and assess their engagement with them. The benefit of peer assessment Black et al (2004) is that students may accept criticism of their work from other students more easily than from an adult. The most important factor in making feedback formative is if feedback given is used by the learner in improving his/her performance' (Black et al, 2004). The interventions that the BFL teacher

implements are designed for the learner to recognise why they are behaving in such a way for example a student being disruptive in English can often be a diversion from doing a task as they may have more literacy skills. By the BFL teacher implementing Literacy programmes such as Catch Up Literacy this can often help the learner self-esteem in a specific subject. The use of summative assessment can often have a negative impact on behaviour for learning students as they can see it as a way to compare themselves to others (Black et al, 2004).

Michael Fullan ideas on leadership and maximising impact resonate in the BFL teachers' leadership role as system leader, which takes into account the bigger picture. The students that present with challenging behaviours in school are students that are coming from educationally disadvantaged areas. The issue with educational disadvantage and its link to challenging behaviour extends outside the boundaries of the school. While in school, the students receive the support of staff and in school support such as the behaviour for learning programme, the Home School Liaison officer etc. The BFL teacher takes into account the bigger picture such as home and community and works with parents, local guards, community projects and the NCSE. Anti-social behaviour is a major factor in the local community and many of the students who are availing of the behaviour programme are involved in anti-social behaviour in the locality. The BFL works with outside agencies such as the Ball Project, which is a Garda diversion programme. The BFL teacher also works with parents through interventions such as Parents Plus and Working Things Out. The BFL teacher strives to implement interventions that will allow students to see the bigger picture and recognise

their positive strengths and to also identify consequences of their behaviour i. e. getting in trouble with guards, prison etc.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the role of the 'Behaviour for Learning' teacher is to work with students who are presenting with behavioural difficulties in order to improve their behaviour and enable them to learn more effectively. Factors that can contribute to student's behaviour include biophysical factors, such as medical conditions or disabilities. Psychological factors, including emotional trauma or lack of social skills. Behavioural/social factors, including where a student's problem behaviour is learned through reinforcement, consequences or adaptation to social practices. The BFL teacher has the responsibility for the development of a school 'Behaviour for Learning Programme' specifically targeted at students in need of intensive, individualised support (Level 3) and some targeted interventions at Level 2 as well as a whole-school approach (Level 1). The aim of the BFL programme is to create an inclusive environment for all.

The BFL teacher offers nurturing support to students that present with challenging behaviour which stem from both the intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Conway's (2002) report on 'Rethinking teaching and learning in disadvantaged context' outlines how teaching and learning is deeply rooted in the behaviourist tradition with less focus on cognitive principles. The BFL teacher draws on the cognitive tradition that 'learning is change in thinking' (Conway, 2002). The BFL teacher implements programmes such as 'Why Try?' to offer students support in terms of teaching them skills to cope with

anger, stress and anxiety that extends beyond the classroom environment. The aim of such programmes is to get the student to 'engage in general skills such as reasoning and problem-solving' (Conway, 2002). The BFL teacher uses solution focused thinking in a bid to focus on the positives rather than the negatives, which raises their self-esteem and motivates them to achieve their targets/goals.

The power of the BFL teacher as a project/line leader is evident in her role as a support network in the school community. The BFL teacher has not only implemented a support network for students but also for teachers and management in acquiring the skills to deal with challenging behaviour. The BFL teacher has been successful in creating an organizational unit that is 'large enough to be meaningful of microcosms of the larger organisation' (Senge, 1996). The BFL teacher has invested her commitment of time and energy into delivering a support network that enables students to function within the school environment. The BFL programme is embedded into the practice of the school, and embodies the school ethos of achieving 'their full potential in all aspects of their educational and personal development'. (St. Pauls Community College, n. d).

Formative assessment is a contributing factor in the achievements of the BFL students. The BFL teacher monitors student learning to provide ongoing feedback that can be used by students in taking responsibility for and managing their own learning as outlined by Black et al (1996). The students are developing their metacognition level through self-assessment by identifying why they achieved or did not achieve their assigned targets (Black et al, 2004). Formative assessment acts as a collaboration tool for

teachers and students to work together to produce a supportive environment (Black et al, 2004) in which students can hear alternative ideas and evaluate them.

Michael Fullan's ideas on being a 'system player' resonate with the BFL teacher in her role as viewing the bigger picture. The issue with educational disadvantage and its link to challenging behaviour extends outside the boundaries of the school. Students not only present challenging behaviour in school but also often can be very difficult in terms of home life. The BFL teacher works with outside agencies such as the local guards and parents and partner school in trying to implement measures to deter students/adolescents from associations with anti-social behaviour that might potentially harm themselves or others.


Educational disadvantage is a prominent factor in students that attend the BFL classroom and the BFL teacher highlighted the challenge for disadvantaged students in the lack of support and guidance from adults in their lives. As Conway (2002) refers to how knowledge can be helped or hindered by previous knowledge and experiences. Socio-cultural theories draw on the ideas that 'learning itself is socially and culturally rooted in communities of practice, encompassing the artifacts and relationships' (Conway, 2002). The most important aspect as Conway (2002) asks us to consider is 'that social is not just another variable, nor is it only the interpersonal, rather it encompasses both artifacts and relationships as they are situated historically' (Conway, 2002).

Conway (2002) highlights the lack of support from the education system in the area of disadvantage ' while the education system has in many respects been an effective agent of social change in Irish society it has been considerably less effective in combating long standing societal inequalities'. The learning approach of the BFL classroom is rooted in the cognitive tradition of ' extended performance assessments and crediting varieties of excellences.' (Conway, 2002). This is in considerable contrast to in depth studies that analyse the changes in the system with ' the focus was primarily on the system level issues such as certification, selection, assessment (examinations mainly) rather than classroom practices' (Conway, 2002). Conway (2002) highlights how our current classrooms ' pay insufficient attention to social context in a manner that can guide our understanding of learning and educational practices in terms of home-school discontinuities'. Therefore, the BFL classroom is left to implement interventions in order to meet the needs of these students. The question is ' is our education system adequately equipped to meet the needs of all students?'

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