

Managing Disruptive Behaviour

*Last week the Christchurch Press revealed that increased disruptive behaviour in primary schools was a veiled result of recently released figures. **Rod Galloway** suggests Character Education provides an answer.*

A class photo taken recently at our school captures the teacher with a rather strained look. Standing beside her was a six-year-old who wouldn't even look at the camera, let alone smile. Moments earlier a simple instruction to move into rows and face the camera had become the catalyst for a major confrontation. Without warning the six-year-old suddenly declared he was not taking part. An experienced and understanding teacher reasoned with the boy to join the class. This confrontation with a strong-willed and defiant child led to the teacher being physically struck. While she was trying to restrain and calm the boy, he spat in her face. Clearly not the photo opportunity we had been hoping for!

During the days that followed this incident a familiar pattern of events took place. When students cannot manage their behaviour they are often stood down from class, parents are spoken to about rights and responsibilities and children may even, as in this case, change schools. Sadly for this child, as with many, disruptive behaviour meant disrupted learning.

While the recently released Ministry of Education report, *Student Engagement 2007*, celebrates the overall reductions in the number of suspensions and stand-downs in recent years, there is little mention of a 37% increase in the number of primary school disciplinary actions since 2000.

According to the revised New Zealand Curriculum, the Key Competency *Managing Self* is associated with self-motivation, a "can-do" attitude and students seeing themselves as capable learners. But it's not just learning that needs to be self-managed. Increasing autonomy requires appropriate behavioural outcomes to ensure positive engagement. Co-operation and participation are essential in most successful learning environments.

The key findings of two sector group reports on student behaviour in New Zealand schools released over the past year provide background to the Ministries figures. These reports demonstrate why for some schools *Managing Self* should become a first priority as a way to improve student engagement.

A New Zealand Council for Educational Research report commissioned by NZEI found that one in seven primary teachers surveyed reported being physically assaulted in the previous year. Most of these assaults were from five, six and seven-year-old boys. Being shouted or sworn at were the most common forms of abuse.

Earlier this year the Hawke's Bay Primary Principals Association reported the extent of disruptive behaviour from 525 teachers working in 79 schools in their region. One in five of the students represented in these schools displayed behaviour that disrupted learning. The range of students displaying one or more negative outcomes each day in each class was from none to 29, with an average of 5.5.

If these Hawke's Bay results of difficult behaviour that disrupts learning are translated nationally, and there is no reason to think things are any different in any other region or at any other level of schooling, we begin to sense the significance of the problem. This is seven

times the number who face official sanction – potentially an alarming and unacceptable 145,000 students.

But successful outcomes at school depend on foundations laid in the home. Changes in parenting styles have left many modern families struggling with exhaustion, high expectations and financial stress.

With New Zealanders working the second longest hours in the OECD and 30 percent of our mothers with school-age children working full time, many parents are too busy or tired for effective parenting. Children who lack respect for their parents, shown by physical and verbal abuse and repeated disobedience, can bring this set of challenges to the classroom, especially upon entry to school.

It seems ironic that although the discipline required for *Managing Self* is fundamental to the notion of lifelong learning, some parents who want the best for their children are choosing parenting styles that are the greatest threat to this outcome.

Descriptions of these problems and the statistics that accompany them have been repeatedly documented by experts and the media. By contrast, few real answers are ever offered. But for an increasing number of New Zealand schools that have implemented Character Education, there have been positive results well documented by the Education Review Office. These results only occur when a whole school community agree to proactively teach, resource and model a greater sense of respect and responsibility.

Will this be enough to prevent children from spitting at their teachers and refusing to obey simple instructions? New Zealand principals claim that disruptive behaviour is the most common classroom barrier to learning that they have to deal with. *Managing Self* taught as responsibility and respect needs to find a more important place in every school as a context for building good character. For as long as children cannot make good choices, take responsibility for their actions and act appropriately, little else of substance will ever be achieved.

Rod Galloway is the Chairman of the New Zealand Foundation for Character Education and Principal George Street Normal School in Dunedin. He can be contacted at rod.galloway@cornerstonevalues.org

End of Copy (799 words)

For further information please contact

Rod Galloway
Chairman New Zealand Foundation for Character Education
Principal George Street Normal School
Phone work 03 474 0825
A/H 03 453 4324
Mobile 021 262 9919