



CRITICAL MASS: A STRATEGY FOR THE CLASSROOM FROM HELL

By Wilson McCaskill

Towards the end of each year Julie and I scour the notes she has taken during workshops and mentoring sessions as well as my emailed response to the many questions received from teachers. Our aim is to find the most common concern raised by teachers and either address that in workshops in the coming year or write an article that we can send out as a newsletter and then place on the “Articles” section of our website.

For 2014 the stand out area of concern is trying to implement Play Is The Way® in classrooms that have high numbers of students who have little to no concept of how to behave appropriately or any capability to do so. In these classrooms holding games sessions can be a nightmare and merely an invitation to chaotic, aggressive, irrational and unacceptable behaviour. Teachers are hard pressed to get any amount of sustained learning done and the order of the day, as much as possible, is to contain the dysfunctional behaviour to levels where at least the personal safety of staff and students can be assured.

Threats and bribery, in the form of punishments and rewards, are the main techniques for crowd and individual control and the class is typically highly volatile with the greater percentage of students having short fuses that can be easily ignited by the words or actions of any other student. A mere look can trigger a disproportionately large and explosive reaction and derisive laughter along with the frequent use of put downs followed by angry and demeaning retorts form the usual soundscape of the classroom.

Teachers in such classrooms are frustrated, stressed, and anxious. They are often close to feeling overwhelmed by feelings of inadequacy and ineptness. Not only are they unable to manage the behaviour and create a safe and productive learning environment they are unable to enlist the support of parents and carers, who all too often become aggressive when the behaviour of their children comes into question.

Sadly and interestingly, from our experience, the teachers most likely to be working in this type of classroom are those in junior primary. It would appear that our littlest ones are all too frequently ill prepared for the requirements of school and are well versed in the emotional, aggressive and destructive behaviours that very easily reduce a classroom to chaos, confusion and conflict. And all too frequently, also reduce a teacher to tears in some hidden corner or in the arms of a compassionate colleague.



As ill prepared as our littlest ones are, our societal want for them is to be academically proficient as possible as quickly as possible and for their teachers to give us the comforting assurance that their learning is well and truly above our designated benchmarks. The fact that their socially and emotionally incompetent behaviour severely restricts their learning is not acceptable to education departments and ministries who wrongly believe teachers are trained to deal with difficult students and classrooms.

They are not.

Their training teaches them to teach children who want to learn. They are taught wonderful ways to assist children master the challenges of grammar or time, space and distance; children who sit when asked to, put up their hands before speaking and respect the positional authority of the teacher; children who have been prepared adequately for the structures and routines of school and who arrive with some idea of what it means to apply yourself to the acquiring of skills (whatever those skills may be; wiping your own bottom, tying your shoe laces, filling your own cup, putting rubbish in the bin, waiting your turn, finding your chair, pulling up your pants, not throwing things indoors or at people, leaving things on tables, not touching what's not yours and not crying or throwing a tantrum for everything and anything that doesn't go your way).

Part of the cost of this lack of training in how to deal with the behavioural issues of the young children of the 21st century is teachers who leave the profession in large numbers within the first 5 years of graduating and alarming numbers of students for whom carrot and stick methods of control and compliance do nothing more than turn them off learning for life. Being in a classroom and wanting to teach and feeling the pressure to achieve benchmarks in learning while being confronted by children who only want to do what they want, when they want to do it and having no training, experience or knowledge that effectively helps; hurts. It hurts a lot (irrespective of how long you have been teaching).

It can hurt so much that your health and wellbeing are adversely affected and your love of teaching eroded to the point that resentment and hostility, for the system that ill prepared you for such an ordeal, is revealed.

If you are caught in the classroom from hell I'd like to try and help.

Let me share my definition of the classroom from hell. If you label one third of the students in your class as having difficult to extremely difficult behaviour then you have the classroom from hell. What you need to be aware of is that no matter how skilled you are as an educator you are going to be doing little teaching and overwhelming amounts of crowd control. The numbers are simply against you and you are forever putting out spot fires that all too easily join up and become fully-fledged bush fires with a broad front and considerable ferocity. You may occasionally be able to dampen down the flames and buy yourself some respite,



but it only takes a little puff of wind and what appear to be dying embers suddenly burst into energetic and destructive life.

To survive this hazard and secure the life and learning potential of your students may I recommend in the strongest possible manner that you employ with vigour, commitment and fidelity our [*Critical Mass Strategy*](#). We know of many teachers who have found themselves thrashing around in the treacherous waters of the *class from hell* and been saved from going under by grasping on to the life boat named *Critical Mass*.

Critical Mass can be used by a singular teacher or by a whole school that finds itself dealing with unacceptable amounts of difficult behaviour across all year levels. If you are a school administrator who has a constant line of children at your office door waiting for you to *deal with them* then you certainly need *Critical Mass* to empower your teachers and help them keep students in their classroom and benefitting from the support and education of their peers.

Critical Mass starts with a core of students that the teacher brings on side and empowers as the catalyst for change. It is a process that shifts teachers from desperately trying to operate using positional authority to harnessing the power and skills of the peer group to create the win/win classroom. By employing the strategy teachers learn much about their students and build strong and mutually respectful relationships.

The strategy takes time, diligence and careful thought on the part of the teacher. It is not a quick fix. However, it is very effective if used as described and followed all the way through. I say this because some teachers have stopped the strategy when the classroom behaviour has stabilised only to see the apparent improvements in behaviour vaporise in a short period of time. This is simply because it takes time to embed and habituate behaviour and truncating the process makes any improvements temporary.

Teachers must be realistic when using the strategy and accept that the most extreme children will be the ones they want to improve or change the quickest. This is not going to be the case. It is only logical that those with the most entrenched difficult behaviour will take the longest to improve and this reality requires patience and perseverance on the part of teachers. Besides, *slow change is lasting change* and we should be wary of any change that happens quickly as it likely came about because some bribery or punishment was used to entice or coerce the student into temporary compliance.

Think of quick change as the sudden and rapid stretching of an elastic band. Bursting with potential energy it impatiently waits for the opportunity to snap back to its original shape releasing a resounding thwack of kinetic energy as it does so. The idea is to stretch the elastic band so slowly that over time it loses its elasticity and becomes so stretched that when let go; it has no potential energy and happily accepts its new form.



We have encountered teachers who have said that employing *Critical Mass* was impossible in their classroom because they simply did not have a single child who was *not* extremely difficult. I find this hard to believe but even if it is true then the teacher should start the strategy with one child (*the least extreme of all the extreme children*) and build from there. If that really is not possible, then either the class is doomed or the teacher has reached the point where they don't want help and would prefer to be the victim (at the expense of their students and themselves) than do the hard work that professionalism dictates and their students both require and deserve for no reason other than the fact that they are children.

We are approaching the end of the 2014 school year and you may have an indication of which class will be yours next year. If you know this class has been difficult all year with few signs of lasting and beneficial change then you can be fairly sure that whatever gains were made will be substantially lost over the extended Christmas break. It may be prudent to familiarise yourself with the [*Critical Mass Strategy*](#) over the holiday period so that you are comfortable with all that it requires and prepared to implement it if necessary.

Critical Mass is a powerful strategy but of little use when used poorly or without careful consideration and study. I recommend it for teachers who can persevere and work methodically and purposefully towards a desired outcome.