



SEL The Backbone Of Education

By Wilson McCaskill

It is a rare school that values SEL (Social & Emotional Learning) enough to stand firm against the bureaucratic dictate that all students must constantly worship at the high altar of literacy, numeracy, science and technology. Even more rare, is finding a teacher whose classroom is filled with fervent, happy disciples of learning who, to a person, feel so deeply fulfilled by the experience that respect for their teacher and love of school makes a teacher's life the envy of the communities they serve.

Today's reality is that teachers are screaming about the damage to their students, themselves and the educational system. Damage caused by an overcrowded curriculum that prioritises outcomes and endless data collection above and beyond the constant, everyday social and emotional needs of children who *must* attend school while their teachers, who stand at the precipice of fatigue and emotional burnout, try desperately to keep caring.

Ask any teacher what saps their energy more than anything else and they are very likely to answer, *behaviour* and the endless paperwork devised by people too far removed from classrooms to understand the demoralising weight of the millstone they recklessly place around the necks of teachers.

Curriculum requires the development of personal and social capabilities, while departments and ministries insist that teachers pour their professionalism, knowledge and energy into topping the tables of internationally recognised quality education. Bureaucratic generals stand atop lofty mountains directing the actions of emotionally exhausted troops whose daily battles with behaviour make falling national standards inevitable.

The public screams for a return to the basics not realising that too many students only have a rudimentary, less than basic understanding of acceptable and appropriate behaviour. Politicians shout for more skilled teachers, ignorant of the fact that a toolbox of ways to teach long division is no match for a child who wants to divide a class. Teachers demand more support as they send difficult Jack and Jackie to see the principal, only to find that both soon return refreshed and ready to repeat the havoc. Parents who care, moan about the loss of learning time in their child's classroom because there's no discipline, while being ever ready to attack the teacher if it's their child who is disciplined. Students act up and act out, refusing to respect a system and its servants too similar to the one that repressed their parents, while insisting their rights are being refused and their entitlements ignored.

Disengagement is common. The educational system appears disengaged from the community and businesses it serves. Teachers appear disengaged from the authority that governs them. Bureaucrats and politicians appear disengaged from the real world of schooling. Parents, for their own sanity, disengage from whatever they just can't



cope with right now and kids disengage just to get a break from all the talk about engagement.

No children in mainstream schooling miss out on learning because they aren't intelligent enough. They only miss out when their behaviour becomes a problem. Any teacher will gladly work beyond the call of duty with students who want to learn, no matter how poor they may be at learning. That's just what teachers do.

No student is sent to a principal, given a detention or subjected to any form of punishment for not being intelligent enough in a given subject or in all subjects. No student is punished for having an inadequate IQ. However, too many children are punished for an inadequate EQ (emotional intelligence). Yet, a great number of schools, irrespective of the requirement of curriculum to teach personal and social capabilities (behaviour), do not shift from hackneyed punish and reward systems of behaviour management to tackle the challenges and complexities of behaviour education.

Their fallback position, when students are too difficult to manage, is suspension or expulsion. This suits Jack and Jackie to the ground because they know when the system plays tough it traps itself. As schooling is compulsory, it is only a matter of days before the system insists they return and behave (which they won't) or find another school to abuse; something both these youngsters are happy to do. Sadly, as everyone keeps saying, deep down they're good kids.

As for Jack and Jackie's parents? Well if the big and tough system filled with experts can't do anything to change their kids, what hope have they got?

This blind faith in behaviour management has dominated education for more than a fistful of decades and still our standards fall, our students disengage, our teachers burn out and our country panics that our international neighbours are destined for economic and academic superiority.

Behaviour management lures teachers into the belief that you can teach behaviour incidentally; that by the application of operant conditioning techniques, the highly complex human mind will develop long-term compliancy and willingly subject itself to the demands of he or she who holds the big stick and the juicy carrot.

We can no more incidentally teach children how to behave than we can teach literacy or numeracy incidentally. If this delusional belief carried over to the teaching of core subjects, thousands of children would be kicked out of classrooms daily for getting the wrong answer in things they should know by a certain age.

The adult assumption that children do know better and choose to deliberately behave badly, conveniently overrides the fact that knowing only leads to doing if you can control the emotions propelling you to do otherwise. Consequently, thousands of students do sit outside classrooms daily for doing the wrong thing.

Unlike going wrong in maths, where errors are given the support of extra tuition; wrong behaviour receives no tuition at all, only the threat of a bigger stick.



The national uproar about failing academic standards and the teaching industry's rage about the crowded curriculum is the white noise teachers must block out to deeply consider the position of SEL (social and emotional learning - behaviour education - development of personal and social capabilities) in their teaching practice.

Considering that position raises quite a few questions that prove revealing to answer.

- How much of your teaching day, week, year is made more difficult because of poor student behaviour?
- How emotionally fatigued are you from the challenges of your classroom?
- Do you finish each term close to burn out and are the holidays barely enough to recover?
- Are you under more or less stress in the year just past than the year before? Do you expect to be under more stress next year?
- How disillusioned with the profession have you become in the past three years? How long do you think you will stay in the profession?
- Is teaching children who are eager to learn your joyous everyday experience?
- Did you think the preceding question was absurd?
- What does the teaching of SEL mean to you? Do you value it?
- Can you see value in the deliberate and methodical teaching of behaviour?
- In your school is there the commitment, drive and support needed to embed behaviour education? Is your school entrenched in systems of behaviour management?
- Do you see behaviour education as part of the core business of school?
- Do you value behaviour education sufficiently to give it space and time on your class timetable?

In the long run, which subject if taught, will make the greatest beneficial difference in every sphere of a person's life and learning? The answer is obvious.

***“What you do makes a difference, and
you have to decide what kind of
difference you want to make.”***

Jane Goodall