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Behaviour Management in Schools: Using Logical Consequences from A Duty-of-Care Perspective



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Opinion

The use of *behaviour management* in schools is quite complex (as with most things in education), because it must allow for the exigencies of differing situations that call for diverse and flexible management decisions. Thus, while we want to manage as much as possible from the perspective of *pedagogy* (using behaviour management as another way to teach students, often referred to as a *teachable moment*), we also need to be aware that some situations will require the application of more punitive consequences, in order to address the situation in a way that maintains equity for all students. In such circumstances, many schools use *logical consequences*, as associated with Dreikurs' model of democratic management [1], as a *classroom management* strategy for dealing with negative behaviour. This is a very particular behaviour management approach, however, with both strengths and limitations that need to be clearly understood for the approach to be effective. As such, it is important that teachers (and other educators) know how to apply logical consequences in ways that connect students to their learning, as opposed to ways that can disconnect students from their learning. To do this, it is imperative that educators appreciate the underlying relationship that exists between logical consequences and the duty-of-care principle that drives education more generally.

Logical consequences posit 'misbehaviour' in schools as occurring due to four basic reasons: That students are misbehaving as a way of seeking attention, seeking power, seeking 'revenge' of some sort (looking to 'get even') or because they are feeling inadequate [1]. At its core, the idea of logical consequences is that students will learn from their mistakes, progressively over

time, as they encounter negative consequences as the logical outcome of behaving in ways that are deemed inappropriate. The underlying assumption for logical consequences is that children will come to progressively understand their own behavioural motives, and consequently phase out inappropriate behaviour, as the application of logical consequences by teachers helps them understand the relationship between how they behave and the kinds of consequences they receive. This notion seems to link well with how we learn overall, because it supports the idea that learning is progressive and incremental, and thus a behaviour management approach that provides clear predictability of this sort will benefit all students equally. From this perspective, logical consequences as a management strategy have a legitimate place in the overall repertoire of management strategies that schools need to use from time to time. However, in terms of student motivation to learn, it is also important to notice that this approach is premised on the belief that how we behave is entirely controlled by rational thinking and reasoning, that is, that once we are able to make a logical connection between an inappropriate behaviour and a negative consequence, we will change the behaviour on the basis of that rational insight. Unfortunately, inappropriate behaviour is often driven by motives that do not fall into one of Dreikurs' four categories, as well as by irrational, emotion-driven impulses that neither conform nor respond to rationality on their own. This suggests a more complex relationship between rationality and emotionality than is commonly provided in pre-service teacher training, but the complexities of this relationship nonetheless need to be acknowledged, in order to position logical consequences within a more realistic management framework.

Importantly, this more complex understanding also supports the need to move beyond the power of logic and reasoning as the basis for behaviour-related learning, underscoring the need to further examine the premise of logical consequences as a specific classroom management strategy.

In this respect it is important to note that the behaviours of many children, including quite young children, are driven by an emotional impulse or reaction [1-3], with roughly 15 percent of preschool children having moderate to severe behaviour problems that involve irrational impulses [4]. When we move into the area of primary and secondary schooling, it seems that anywhere from twenty to twenty-five percent of students (depending on the individual school) may display behaviour problems that do not respond to rational corrective approaches [5,6]. Thus, although the use of logical consequences may be required to some degree in schools and classrooms, we also need to realise that a substantial number of students will not respond to a logical consequences approach, and will, in fact, be effectively penalised by its use unless teachers are especially careful in the way they apply the consequences. If you wish to test these claims, go into any primary or secondary school and take note of who is being placed on detention, clean-up duty, sent to the Assistant Principal's office, etc. – generally receiving punitive consequences for behaviour they have performed at the school as a “corrective” management strategy. Do this over time, and you will find that it tends to be the same students and student groups that get recycled through this process, seemingly not “learning” from the consequences they receive. In this respect the use of logical consequences can represent a marginalisation process for many students, and because of this may contravene the overarching duty-of-care principle that schools and teachers are expected to hold toward their students.

The first important point to make about the use of logical consequences in schools is, therefore, that we make use of logical consequences only when it is truly required, such as in a situation involving high risk or aggressive behaviour. Otherwise, we may find we have inadvertently contributed to student dis-engagement, and this would not be reflective of our “best” purpose as a teacher; that is, of our duty-of-care purpose toward students. This also means that how we apply logical consequences is important, and thus, if you do find that you need to apply this strategy, be aware that the application of the consequence should follow certain guidelines and principles, to which we now turn as a second point of interest for this discussion.

How to apply logical consequences

The idea of logical consequences is that they result from the choices students make about their behaviour; that is, children are able to control the consequence they experience via the choices they make. Thus, when a logical consequence is required,

remember that it must be closely related to how the child or student behaved initially. When we do need to apply a consequence in this manner, it is best to use the following steps, as these will support the child's ability to learn from the consequence:

Identify the reasons for the undesirable behaviour:

Identify the situational drivers around the undesired behaviour. Does the child seem to be behaving in an inappropriate manner because they want your attention, to get power, to get even (with you, or perhaps a peer), or because they feel inadequate? This will help guide the type of consequence that might be required.

Decide whose “problem” the misbehaviour represents:

Does the child's behaviour seem to be spontaneous, or does it seem to be in response to something you (or someone else) have said or done? If the behavioural exchange began with you, acknowledge this and seek to resolve the issue from your own perspective in the first instance. If from the student, then move on to step three.

Provide Alternatives to the Child

Be sure to clarify for the student that they have options in terms of how they behave, and clearly state what these options are. This is where a specific “consequence” needs to be clearly articulated to the student.

Remain Steadfast if the Child Chooses Not to Accept the Positive Alternative

A child used to getting her or his own way through “misbehaving” may try to do the same when faced with choosing a logical consequence, and there can be a bit of “I dare you!” about this at times. It is therefore important, if the student refuses to comply or change their behaviour appropriately, that you follow through with the designated consequence at this point. Do not re-negotiate on the basis of future promises or giving the child an opportunity to forego the consequence. Caving-in at this point would only undermine your ability to deal with this person effectively. It would, in effect, provide a form of negative reinforcement to the behaviour, encouraging the student to perform the behaviour again in similar situations.

Provide positive reinforcement when the child chooses to accept the positive alternative (no matter how difficult the process of getting the student to this point may have been)

Connecting Logical Consequences to the Duty-of-Care Principle

The use of logical consequences is appropriate when you are faced with situations involving student defiance, aggression, or blatant non-compliance, but be aware that even in such situations you should always seek to uncover the child's perceived reasons and emotional drivers in the first instance, before applying a

punitive consequence. Otherwise, you may find that you have inadvertently exacerbated the situation by operating from a more reactive approach, and this will actually undermine your ability to successfully resolve the situation. The reasons for this lie within the way our brains work, as shown by neuroscience research in the areas of coaching and feedback. In this respect, the work of Boyatzis and Jack [7] shows that criticism coupled to punitive consequences activates the sympathetic nervous system (which controls the “fight-or-flight” response), narrowing our thinking ability and impairing learning. In contrast to this, providing proactive alternatives and positive feedback catalyses learning by activating the parasympathetic nervous system [8], which then stimulates the growth of new synaptic connections. This opens our thinking and makes new learning far more likely. Thus, when a student does correct their behaviour (and even if it has taken a very long, and perhaps frustrating, time to get to that point), it is important that you acknowledge this and praise them for making this choice. This will support being able to connect with the student in a way that fosters a positive teacher/student relationship and opens the student to new learning. The guiding principle involved is that all of us respond better to praise than to criticism, and sometimes it’s the only way a child or student knows they’ve met our expectations. When working within a logical consequences system, it is therefore imperative that the teacher be aware of these various caveats, in order to align logical consequences to the overarching duty-of-care principle that is meant to govern all things educational. This will allow the application of consequences in a manner more able to support behavioural learning, and therefore also more able to support positive connection and relationship-building as key management outcomes.

Summary

We have discussed logical consequences in this article because it is widespread as a mainstay behaviour management approach in schools and classrooms globally. In this respect understanding how to apply logical consequences in a duty-of-care manner is important for modern schooling, because in more traditional approaches students have not been viewed as ‘owning’ their education or having agency in guiding their education [9-10]. Instead, their responsibility has been viewed largely in terms of compliance only: Listening to the teacher, doing the assigned work without complaint (and to expectations), and conforming to all school authority requirements [11]. B.F. Skinner described the effects of this approach as compelling students to behave “...primarily to escape from the threat of a series of minor aversive events” [12]. For this reason, many students are only passively engaged in their school learning, with many doing as little as possible to simply ‘get by’ without drawing attention to themselves [13,14].

Understanding that the pedagogical intent of logical consequences does not always match the ability of students to

learn and modify their behaviour is thus an important insight for educators. This is not simply because logical consequences won’t necessarily fit well with a school’s overall behaviour management approach. Rather, it is because the concept of logical consequences is not able to allow for a duty-of-care approach toward management for a significant percentage of learners at every stage of education. This highlights a limitation of logical consequences that underscores the concept of behavioural differentiation, and requires teachers, school leaders and other educators to intentionally apply this particular strategy in ways that underpin the duty-of-care principle, in order to ensure that the opportunity to learn is as inclusive as possible for all students. In this sense, duty-of-care can be seen as a foundational principle for 21st century behaviour management across all levels of school-based teaching and learning.

Logical consequences does have its place, but we need to question where this place lies within the context of a modern, student-centred approach to teaching and learning, and thus how we are using it as part of an overall school-wide or system-wide behaviour management approach. To address such a question, teachers and school leaders can reflect on whether or not their use of logical consequences is aimed more at controlling student behaviour, or more at connecting with their students, as an initial point of analysis for any situation where the use of logical consequences seems warranted. If its intended use is to connect students to their learning, how is this intention designed into the use of this strategy? If not, why is this intention not necessary? Reflecting on how we are applying logical consequences from this particular perspective will help us to appreciate some of the more nuanced complexities involved in classroom and behaviour management, especially when we endeavour to manage from a genuine duty-of-care approach. It is also the basis upon which we can transform behaviour management beyond the management process itself, using it to create a teachable moment learning experience.

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