

A Control Theory Approach to Student Management

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The staff of a K-8 public school in Saskatoon felt they needed to come up with better ways to address student behaviours that were affecting teaching and learning in the classroom. The teachers recognized that their school was experiencing many of the same issues as an inner-city school, although its students were drawn from an area on the perimeter of the inner city. The diverse population of approximately 300 students demanded a relatively high level of formalized social services and drew heavily on the human resources of the school. The effort made by classroom teachers and school administrators to meet student needs was not without cost both to individuals and the school.

After some preliminary investigation, the staff came to believe that a collective, formalized approach to student management based on Applied Choice Theory would be helpful and workable in their school. In 1996-97, they initiated a school-based research project aimed

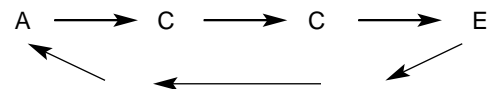
at exploring this new approach to managing student behaviour. Their journey began...

Applied Choice Theory

Applied Choice Theory assumes that all behaviour is purposeful and represents the individual's constant attempt to satisfy one or more of five basic needs:

1. physical survival (primary)
2. love and belonging
3. power and recognition/competence
4. freedom
5. fun!

At the core of Choice Theory is the idea that behaviour is not caused by external factors. Acceptance of this idea frequently involves a change in mindset for those who tend to view behaviour from a stimulus-response perspective. It requires us to see behaviour as a choice to do what most satisfies our needs at the time. Even quick actions are chosen and not automatic, although not all actions are responsible or effective. Choice Theory teaches that when people have effective behaviours available to them that satisfy their needs, they will give up less responsible, less effective behaviours.



Awareness leads to Choices which can lead to Change that leads to Evaluation which inevitably creates a new Awareness.

The goal of the research project, then, was to apply these ideas and determine whether or not Choice Theory assisted students in making appropriate behaviour choices.

Classroom Application and Community Outreach

Fourteen of twenty-four school personnel received basic training in Choice Theory over the summer, and in addition, all staff participated in two formalized training sessions. Formal

teaching of Choice Theory to students was carried out throughout the year in kindergarten to grade eight. Bi-monthly staff meetings were held after school to share ideas, successes, and frustrations and to clarify personal understanding of the theory. A comprehensive list of resources and strategies was developed. By the end of November, comments from feedback sheets and journals showed that students were becoming familiar with the terminology of Choice Theory. Both students and staff were working towards the shift from external to internal control.

In March, parents and community members were invited to attend a meeting that introduced them to Choice Theory and provided a basic overview of the concepts that students were learning. Handouts, reading materials and hands-on activities provided parents with skills and ideas to use at home.

Since there is no measure of internal acceptance of Choice Theory and its effect on behaviour, success was recognized through observation and dialogue. Staff collected data using journals, which were used at meetings throughout the year, along with mini-presentations and role plays, to enhance understanding and illustrate the use of Choice Theory. At the end of the school year, personal journals were collected, teachers completed an evaluation form, and interviews were conducted with both staff and students to determine their perceptions of the value of learning Choice Theory.

Research Results

Staff, students and community members did indeed perceive an increase in responsible behaviour choices by students. Some students began to internalize Choice Theory. These students were observed actively involved in solving problems for themselves, which reduced the need for discipline interventions in the classroom and allowed more time for effective teaching and learning. There were noticeably fewer disruptions during class as a result of the teachers using Applied Choice Theory. Students remarked:

- *(CT) helps us to calm down and not get mad at our teachers or friends.*
- *I'm not getting mad over teeny little things as much as before.*

However, it became clear that to sustain change over time, a core group had to provide ongoing leadership. Some staff did not perceive a need to continue learning and practising Choice Theory outside formal staff development activities. When significant staff changes occurred, the momentum to continue learning as a group dropped. Although it had been a staff decision to become a Choice Theory school, the initiative became an individual project for a few staff members who recognized that they could not control either the perceptions or the actions of their colleagues. Nevertheless, people were invited at every opportunity to increase their awareness of the benefits of Choice Theory.

Choice Theory teaches us that behaviour is not caused by external factors.

The internalization of Choice Theory is not an overnight process.

One success of the project was greater staff cohesiveness and improved teacher-student relationships. School-wide application of Choice Theory provided the staff with a consistent approach to discipline problems, a shared goal and a focus for staff discussions. Learning Choice Theory was an enjoyable activity and, as a result, there was a lot of fun over the year. The staff was happy.