

# Detectives in the Classroom

by Dr. Donna Riter

## WHY ME?

Ever ask yourself that question when you seem to be getting the brunt of a student's anger and you have only been with the child for about 15 minutes of the school day? You try to focus your thinking in a positive direction as the child uses you as a verbal punching bag and refuses what you consider to be "reasonable requests". Your inner voice starts to react with such comments and questions as:

- "I didn't do anything to deserve this."
- "What's eating him?"
- "Who does she think she is talking to me that way?"
- "Nobody told me teaching was going to be like this."
- "After all I do for this kid; this is the thanks I get."

Keep in mind that when a student shifts strong emotions to staff when he/she may really feel that emotion toward a totally different event or person, we call this shifting "displacement" (mad at one person or thing and taking it out on another). The children know exactly what to expect from them, event at their worst. However, when these students displace their feelings on you, it is very difficult not to take their actions personally, unless you can analyze the behavior more closely.

According to C.M. Charles in *Building Classroom Discipline (2004)* the behavior may be the result of:

- Not being able to do something.
- Feeling that they do not belong or are not needed.
- Feeling no control over what they say or what happens to them.
- Inability to communicate, cooperate or work with others.
- Inability to adapt, flex or respond.
- Poor judgment.

In order to figure these questions out, you have to become more of a detective than an instructor. For example, you begin by learning how to ask questions that get more than a "yes/no" response (i.e. Who were you with? Where did this happen? How often does this happen? Who is usually in the room when this happens? When was the last time you spoke to someone about this? How did you feel when she said this? What do you usually do when you are mad? Who have you told about the way you feel when she said this?). The more accurate your questioning is of the student; the more detail will be derived from the event. This detail gives staff a better picture as to what is really going on for this student. In order to get more proficient at doing this type of

questioning, it is important to practice. Everyday life offers a lot of opportunity to become more skilled in the area of de-escalation and/or problem solving through carefully considered inquiry. You don't have to wait for the "right classroom moment" to see how this works. Everyday interactions between family, friends and even the checkout person at the local market offer endless opportunity to see how this skill can change reactions of people to perceived stress and crisis.

As you become better at recognizing signs of stress and through that, ways of avoiding the conflict cycle with students, you will have more time to concentrate on how to determine if what is happening at any given time is really a problem or just a symptom. This is where your "Colombo Approach" to questioning comes in handy (a television detective who could ask questions in a way that subtly drew information from even the most resistant subjects). Investigating a situation in the classroom setting can sometimes seem like an impossible task. Time never seems to be on the giving side in education. There never seems to be enough to go around to get everything done that is required, let alone added complications of inappropriate behaviors. When you are making decisions within your classroom or school as to what needs your attention and what may not, the key is to include in your decision making the following four steps:

#### 1. **DEFINE THE PROBLEM**

Check your understanding of this by thinking of something that you consider a problem either at work or in your personal life. How do you know that it is a problem? What is the difference between a problem (obstacle, trouble, hindrance, setback, puzzle, crisis, dilemma), and a symptom (indication, warning sign)?

Think for a minute when a doctor talks to someone about what to look for if they are having a heart attack. The heart attack itself is the problem but numbness on the left side, chest heaviness, sweating, denial and pain are all symptoms that help determine the problem. Let's take a classroom example:

- Jill **never hands her math homework into the teacher**, she is **often late** for math class and she **comes unprepared**. These are all **Symptoms**. The **Problem** is that she's **having trouble with the content and doesn't have the prosocial skill of asking for help**.

Students will look to staff for guidance, direction and models on how to handle the problems that come along for them in their current situations both in and outside of school. It will be important for you as a staff member to be able to distinguish a real problem as presented from just a symptom. This is where your questioning skills I spoke about at the beginning of this article will come in handy (Who? What? Where? When? How?). For example, "Who was there when this happened, what did you do, where were you when this happened, when has

this happened before, how have you handled this in the past”)? These are types of questions that can help you weed out the symptoms from the true problems.

### **ONCE THE PROBLEM IS IDENTIFIED, THEN WHAT?**

#### 2. **IDENTIFY THE OPTIONS**

Give yourself at least **four** options (don't just stick with plan A, you may need plans B, C or D) as to how you might handle the problem.

#### 3. **EVALUATE THE OPTIONS**

Remember this is about better decision making and problem solving. Look at your options and figure out if you have the time required to implement your ideas. What is your focus for the student and what do you want the end result to be? What action in your option will provide for this focus and result? What are the costs involved for the student and for the staff if you follow this option?

#### 4. **CHOOSE CAREFULLY**

Before you choose an option there are a few steps you may want to consider (the basic “do’s and don’ts”):

- Don't feel that you have to decide everything on the spot. Even when the behavior or the problem is not predictable, you can use your skills of decoding to **demonstrate your caring** (“I never had what you experienced happen to me but I do know what it is like to feel angry and sad at the same time”). **This empathetic approach will give you more time to think where you want to go with the dilemma.** (“You sound very upset. If you don't want to talk to me now, take some time. When you are ready to talk, I will listen”). **It also helps to guide the person in stress towards better ways of helping you with the decision process** (“You feel like I'm judging you. How can I show you or make you feel that I am listening to you?”). **You not only gain more perspective but you make a much needed connection with the student when they are least likely to be able to see clearly the consequences or impact of their actions.**
- Don't feel you have to decide alone. Get help to make a decision (remember you are always part of a larger team) so you are sure that you still have the situation in perspective. Discover who you can share questions with and what resources that person or persons can provide for you.

- Decide if this is really a crisis situation. Is your reaction making it one when it isn't? You have to be honest with yourself about this step keeping in mind that one person's stressful event is not necessarily someone else's. If other classroom or school staff do not see things the same as you do, how they view the event may be the reason why.
- Don't worry about always being right. It is impossible to force a bad decision into being a good one. Everybody makes mistakes and we learn from those "opportunities". If so much time is spent being angry, hurt or embarrassed (to name a few emotions) with yourself or someone else because things didn't work out the way we expected, then the focus is lost and the chance to improve the situation for the student goes by the wayside.
- Figure this is probably not the first time someone has encountered just such a dilemma as the one you are facing. Maybe it's just the first time it has come up in your career. Share the issue with others you are comfortable with who are good listeners and only give solid, unbiased (as possible) advice and only when asked for it. Sometimes just talking a situation out opens up avenues of new insight. This is a skill that should be worked on with all those who are part of your classroom/school team.

Understanding the investigative nature of interpreting a situation (symptom vs. problem) is a giant step toward keeping yourself out of the conflict cycle with students and ahead of the issues. If symptoms can be identified as the "clues" to the problems but not the problems themselves, the true challenges and benefits of being a "detective in the classroom" will speak for themselves through the responses and reactions of your students.

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