

Research **for** Teachers

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"This article is one of a series intended to help ETFO members become more aware of current research findings directly relevant to teaching in elementary schools."

#8 MANAGING TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS: A MINIMALIST APPROACH

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Teachers can have two types of conversations with students in class. In the ideal situation the most potent conversation is focused on learning, with minor support from the managing conversation. However, when teachers experience lessons where conversation about managing dominates, the learning agenda can disappear and poor outcomes are much more likely (Richmond, 2007).

Literature concerning how best to manage for learning is huge and complex. It ranges from traditional, authoritarian styles articulated by Canter and Canter's (1976) *Assertive Discipline*, through the sophisticated version of behaviourism exemplified by Alberto and Troutman's (1995) *Applied Behaviour Analysis for Teachers*, to the democratic approach of Rogers (1993) and the more constructivist style of Glasser (1990). It includes material developed to support disenfranchised students such as the Restorative Justice movement (Macfarlane, Glynn, Cavanagh, & Bateman, 2007) and systems of school-wide support (Lewis and Sugai, 1999).

These multiple models are confusing to teachers. A Balance Model (Richmond, 2007) provides a more generic approach (see Figure 1) that avoids having to choose between a wide range of student management approaches while retaining the core message within each. Despite their individual styles, when teachers are effective they typically do three things within the management component of their work. These teachers clearly establish *expectations* with students, generously *acknowledge* pro-social and on-task behaviour, and discretely *correct* anti-social and disruptive behaviour.

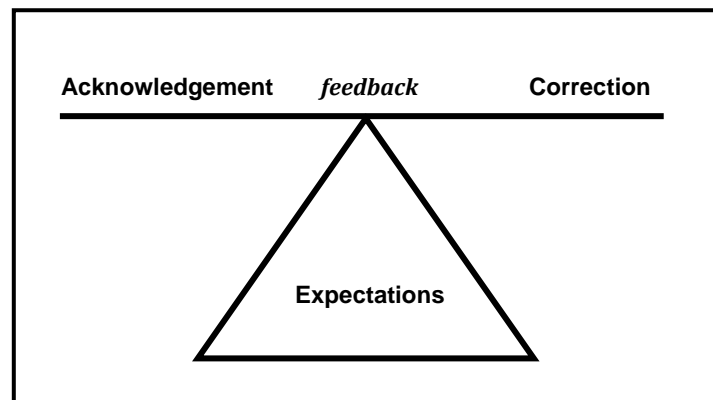


Figure 1: The Balance Model

Problematic imbalances easily occur in teachers' managing talk. Imbalances almost inevitably lead to an escalation in these managing conversations resulting in less time for learning and more frustration for everyone. The imbalance modelled in Figure 2 shows a teacher assuming that students know what to do and failing to be explicit about his or her expectations. Feedback is heavily weighted towards correction, while acknowledgement is parsimonious, particularly for those students who may deserve it least but need it most. This type of imbalance in management talk develops when teachers see the managing task as maintaining order through quashing disruption rather than as facilitating learning by communicating clearly with students.

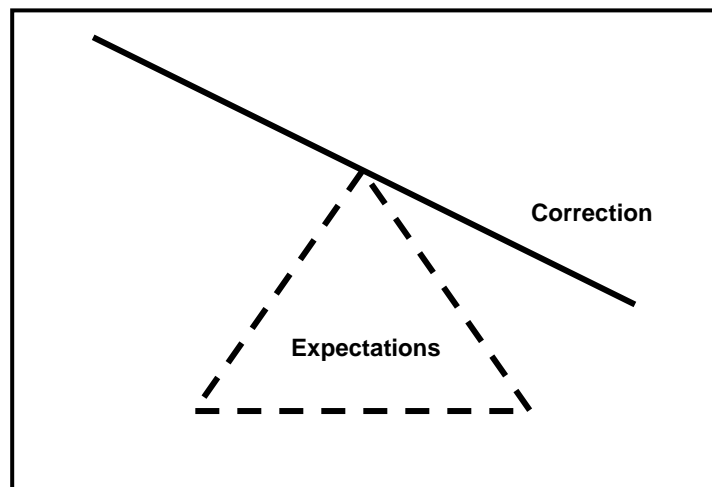


Figure 2: A problematic imbalance

In this scenario, students who have difficulty connecting with the curriculum tend to become increasingly despondent, and less engaged with learning over time as they attract more and more correction. Teachers who articulate this imbalance are at risk of sliding into a pattern of over-correcting as frustration escalates and relationships with fragile students deteriorate.

A way out of such a self-perpetuating, counter-productive communication cycle is for the teacher to resist the temptation of over-correcting the student who persistently challenges. To re-balance the management-focused conversation, the teacher should explicitly teach a small number of achievable expectations and generously acknowledge even the slightest improvement in pro-social and on-task behaviour.

The Balance Model can be used by teachers to reflect on the efficacy of their own management-focused interactions with students no matter what specific approach is used in the school. Teachers who achieve such a balance, maximising their opportunities to engage students in learning:

1. are organised and project an energetic, enthusiastic, professional demeanour (Wong & Wong, 2005);
2. directly instruct students in how to behave in class (Lewis & Sugai, 1999);
3. acknowledge students when they are on-task by saying the student's name, making eye-contact, smiling and moving into proximity. They frequently give positive verbal feedback and use concrete reinforcement strategies when appropriate (Alberto & Troutman, 1995);

4. discretely correct students by using hand and face signals, giving re-directions and rule-reminders, asking questions and gently applying consequences. They appreciate the metaphor of correction as salt ... more is not better (Richmond, 2007); and
5. follow through persistently evoking the principle of certainty not severity (Rogers, 1993).

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Further Reading

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Glasser, W. (1990). *The Quality School*. New York: Harper Collins.

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Richmond, C. (2007). *Teach More, Manage Less: A Minimalist Approach to Behaviour Management*. Australia: Scholastic.

Rogers, W. A. (1993). *The Language of Discipline: A practical approach to effective classroom discipline*. Plymouth, England: Northcoat House.

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