BEHAVIOURAL PROBLEMS IN COLLEGE*

AN INTERVENTION MODEL AS A PATH TO A SOLUTION

College teachers sometimes face a variety of situations relating to class management. One of the major problems they encounter has to do with indiscipline and behavioural problems. These types of problems can become a source of much anxiety, particularly for beginning teachers who sometimes lack the knowledge and tools they need to deal effectively with these situations. As beginning teachers ourselves, we addressed this question by concentrating on the following aspects: a variety of definitions relating to this theme, causes of behavioural problems, a classification system, basic interventions and an analysis of an intervention model.

BEHAVIOURAL PROBLEM

Defining what counts as a behavioural problem is not an easy task since there does not seem to be a consensus on the subject in the literature. Also, little has been published on behavioural problems at the college level. However we do find one expression that recurs in the literature, that of 'indiscipline', a phenomenon that seems to be strongly linked to behavioural problems. Elsewhere, Romano (1993), a psychology teacher who was among the first to have initiated reflection on discipline at the college level, provides a precise definition of 'indiscipline':

> [...] we can define 'indiscipline' as any student behaviour that has the effect of disrupting the order and security of the pedagogical environment or that interferes with the learning process.

Likewise, Legault (2001) also looked into this problem. He defines 'indiscipline' as:

> [...] behaviour which, potentially or actually, interferes with the act of teaching, or disrupts student learning, or poses a threat to the personal, physical or psychological security of individuals or destroys property.

These two conceptions of 'indiscipline' are very similar, but Legault provides a particularly interesting nuance: he incorporates the phrase "potentially or actually". To us the term 'potentially' suggests anticipation, while the term 'actually'

signifies tangible behaviour. A teacher who can anticipate behaviour can help to prevent it. This aspect will be covered in greater detail later in the article.

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In the current context, we are using Legault's definition because he does not consider behavioural problems to be elements that can hinder only the act of teaching, but also that of learning. Thus, any behaviour which hinders learning evokes the notion of indiscipline and requires some form of remedial action. In this way a direct link can be established with class management since it is class management that contributes to establishing an educational environment that is well-organized and fosters learning. For example, students who send text messages on their cell phones during class can obstruct their own learning, and this behaviour therefore becomes problematic. On the other hand, such behaviour can be seen to be less disturbing than that of a student who is disrupting a whole class. Therefore some forms of behaviour can involve only one student while in other situations they may involve many. In addition, what is interesting about this definition is that the student is not always the only one considered to be at fault. It is possible that the teacher too could be partly responsible. For example, a teacher being late for a class can lead to students talking among themselves thereby disrupting the learning environment. In order to make the definition more explicit, we have added that the behaviour is measurable, observable and time-limited. This way we can classify behaviours into a variety of categories which will be addressed in the section of our article that deals with this question. Let us begin by looking at the possible causes of behavioural problems as identified by various authors.

CAUSES OF BEHAVIOURAL PROBLEMS

The causes that underlie the appearance of behavioural problems provide meaningful information in the search for ways to intervene: by becoming aware of what can provoke a behavioural problem, we can more easily take appropriate action. Problems of indiscipline can arise from different situations and for various reasons. Rolland and Langevin (2005) list 11 causes which are all interrelated:

- learning disabilities and weak motivation

- the age of the students

- values crises and confused social cues

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- difficult life conditions, lack of moral, affective and financial support

- mental health problems and isolation

- rejection of authority

- success talk

- laxity and gaps in education

- importance of gainful employment;

- expectations with regard to teachers

- failure to meet admission requirements

For his part, Legault (2001) states that behavioural problems are attributable to three factors.

First, there are factors pertaining to individuals, such as poor student performance and low self-esteem. Then there are environmental and cultural factors, such as the excessive number of students in a class. Finally, there are psychosocial factors, such as the standards imposed by the milieu.

CLASSIFICATIONS OF BEHAVIOURAL PROBLEMS

Several authors have attempted to classify behavioural problems in order to help teachers decide on how to intervene in a given situation. Since there is a wide range of possible behavioural problems that can arise in class, a classification system allows such problems to be categorized according to different criteria in order to allow the teacher to intervene in ways that are adequate and proportional to the magnitude of the situation at hand.

We have privileged two classifications: that of Meloche and also that of Archambault and Chouinard.

Meloche (2006) proposes a method for classifying disruptive behaviour based on various aspects of the triple role of the teacher: the role of managing the relationships between people in a single location, of teaching and transmitting knowledge, and of verifying the acquisition of knowledge. These aspects are therefore relational, pedagogical and evaluative.

CLASSIFICATION ACCORDING TO MELOCHE

The relational aspect

Under this aspect are grouped inappropriate behaviours involving relationships between people who find themselves in the same room for a certain number of hours.

Examples: recurring lateness, bringing an iPod to class, having an arrogant or denigrating attitude towards an opinion or a question, challenging the authority of the teacher.

Pedagogical aspect

Under this aspect are grouped inappropriate behaviours relating to activities that unfold in class during the teaching of various content and during pedagogical activities designed to facilitate integration.

Examples: arriving late and making a loud entrance, refusing to complete the required assignments or to follow instructions, having an attitude or expression that conveys the desire that class should end more quickly.

Evaluative aspect

Under this aspect are grouped inappropriate behaviours relating to activities that unfold in class during the verification of the acquisition of knowledge using a variety of evaluation means.

Examples: being late with assignments or required readings for the program, not respecting the presentation standards for work, negotiating delays for handing in work, contesting the number of assignments and exams.

In short, this classification allows for a quick determination of which aspect of the role of the teacher is being disrupted. But then, a behavioural problem does not always impact a single aspect. Indeed, a student who is talking with another student is hindering the relational aspect, but this may also hinder the pedagogical aspect. If, for instance, a conversation is taking place while the teacher is explaining a pedagogical activity, it is disrupting the flow of the class.

For their part, Archambault and Chouinard (2003) classify behavioural problems in four categories, based on their severity or their recurrence (their scope). In other words, this classification is based on the importance of the behavioural problem and how frequently it occurs.

The first category involves inappropriate behaviours that pose no real problems. The second relates to minor behavioural problems. As for the two final categories, they include respectively major behavioural problems that have limited impact and scope and those that are escalating or very wide-ranging.

Archambault and Chouinard make an important distinction by underlining the fact that inappropriate behaviour does not always pose a problem and does not necessarily require an intervention. They further draw a direct link between whether or not the behaviour disrupts the learning of the offending students and their peers, an aspect which lends support to our conception of behavioural problems. However, this classification is more general than that of Meloche.

▶ **BASIC INTERVENTIONS**

Behavioural problem classifications are crucial in helping teachers make decisions as to which interventions to carry out when a behavioural problem arises. They serve as guides for teachers' interventions and in so doing, can often influence teachers' classroom management. However, even with these classifications, interpreting the nature of a behavioural problem remains a subjective matter that fluctuates depending on individual teachers' levels of tolerance, educational values and also their specific expectations and requirements.

Before presenting our intervention model, it is important to shed light on the main means of intervention which are available to teachers when responding to behavioural problems they may encounter in class.

CLASSIFICATION ACCORDING TO ARCHAMBAULT & CHOUINARD
Inappropriate behaviour that does not pose problems
This category groups short-term behavioural problems that do not disturb the teacher.
Examples: whispering during a transition period, not paying attention for a few seconds, daydreaming for a short period.
Minor problems
This category includes failures to follow class or school regulations, infrequently, without disrupting the class and without hindering the student's learning very much.
Examples: leaving one's seat when it is not permitted to do so, calling out to someone, chewing gum, reading or doing something else while the teacher is explaining an activity.
Major problems with limited impact and scope
This category groups behaviours that disrupt the class and interfere with learning, behaviours that are limited to one or only a few students.
Examples: refusing to do or complete an assignment, not following the rules.
Escalating or wide-ranging problems
This category groups any minor problem that becomes regular and which threatens order in the classroom as well as the learning environment, or any behaviour which poses a danger for the student or for others.
Examples: constantly making inappropriate or derogatory comments, always talking back to or defying the teacher, often refusing to cooperate.

SOME BASIC INTERVENTIONS
Taken from Archambault & Chouinard (2003) and Charles (1997)
1. Non-verbal cues
2. Verbal reminder
3. Repeating the reminder
4. Taking an interest in changed behaviours
5. Distributing attention selectively
6. Assigning a responsibility or task (overcorrection)
7. Defusing the situation with humour
8. Giving a formal reprimand
9. Giving formal permission
10. Providing timely assistance
11. Restructuring
12. Regrouping
13. Sending an email
14. Meeting privately with the student
15. Removing the situation

These interventions may vary in intensity and be more or less limited based on the degree of involvement or effort required. In this regard, we consider the first seven interventions above

to be limited interventions whereas the eight remaining ones are seen rather to be more serious interventions. It is up to the teachers to select one means over another, based on the situation and their individual personalities.

Indeed, it is possible that a particular means may not be useful in a certain situation, but that it could however prove to be a very effective intervention in a very different situation. In the same way, it is possible that a teacher may not feel comfortable enough to use a particular intervention for a number of reasons. For example, a teacher who has limited computer skills will certainly not choose to send an email as an intervention, just as teachers will not try to use humour to diffuse a situation if they feel awkward when they try to make others laugh. Therefore, the means to be used remain at the teacher's discretion.

▶ **PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF A MODEL OF INTERVENTION**

When teachers encounter behavioural problems, they must react immediately. Nevertheless, the intervention must remain controlled, respectful and discreet. Indeed, the idea is to create and maintain a good learning environment. However, it is sometimes very difficult, in the heat of the moment, for teachers to react appropriately even when they are well aware of the basic interventions. This is why we are proposing an intervention method that allows for a quick analysis of any behavioural problem. This method was inspired by three classifications: those of Rolland and Langevin (2005), Meloche (2006), and Archambault and Chouinard (2003).

Following research conducted with teachers in a department of *Techniques de travail social*, Rolland and Langevin (2005) identified three types of "critical incidents": current situations of class management, personality problems, and situations of distress. To simplify the teacher's decision-making process, here we combine the first two categories into problems that the teacher can handle alone (current situations and personality problems) and problems the teacher cannot handle alone (situations of distress).

By "problems where the teacher can act" we are referring to all problems that can be resolved by the teacher, alone or with the help of a colleague or a college specialist. Thus a teacher may intervene with the support of a coordinator or a teacher for students with learning disabilities. For example, the problems in question may be brought on by learning difficulties or a lack of motivation, the student's age or personality. As for problems where the teacher cannot act, these occur in all

situations of distress originating outside the school context. For instance, suicide, anxiety, depression, as well as conjugal, family or financial problems. In these cases, the teacher follows the intervention protocol of the CEGEP, if there is one, and refers the student to the appropriate resource person (social worker, psychologist or lawyer).

In a problem case where a teacher can intervene, the goal is to put an end to the inappropriate behaviour. To ensure that the intervention is effective, we suggest that, using the above classification provided by Meloche (2006), the teacher should distinguish the teaching aspect that is affected by the behavioural problem. Thus the teacher should target the problem in relation to the teacher's own role, that is of transmitting knowledge and developing competencies (pedagogical sphere), of confirming knowledge acquisition and competency development (evaluative sphere) and of managing interpersonal relationships (relational sphere).

For any problems relating to the evaluative sphere, we recommend an applying the procedures found in the institution's policy regarding the evaluation of learning (*Politique institutionnelle d'évaluation des apprentissages, PIEA*) that is in effect in the college, if it covers these matters. We think that rigour and fairness are the important principles to consider when it comes time to evaluate students. Also, teachers must be severe when they observe *PIEA* violations (for example, not respecting the dates for handing in assignments, presentation standards or plagiarism), because it is up to the teachers to apply the rules that are their responsibility, to instil a certain rigour, to show fairness towards the other students and to be consistent with regard to themselves and other teachers in the college.

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On the other hand, if the disruptive problem conflicts with the relational or pedagogical spheres, before taking action the teacher must determine the gravity of the problem. When the disruptive behaviour is without consequence, when it involves the relational sphere (a student who asks another student a short question) or the pedagogical sphere (a student who draws during a lecture), the teacher will not intervene. However, should an inconsequential problem become a minor problem (as when two students continue to chat when the class has just resumed), the teacher can make a limited intervention: for example, approach the students who are talking or stare at them for a few seconds (non-verbal cues). This minor problem becomes a major problem with limited

impact and scope if it gets worse and is more of a hindrance to the learning of the students in question or that of their peers. In this case the teacher's intervention will be more serious. Thus, to put an end to an on-going conversation between two students, the teacher may decide, for example, to remind them of the rule or have them change places (regrouping).
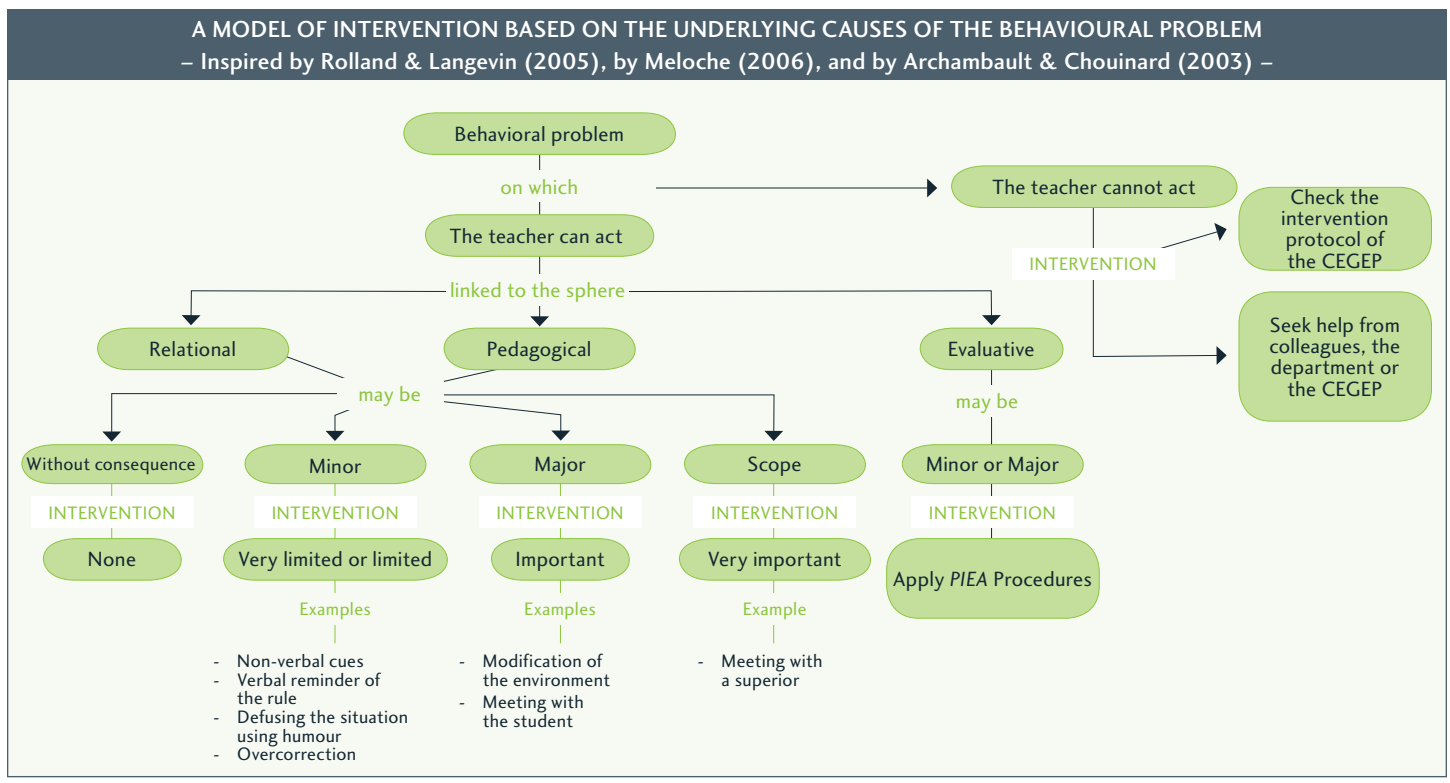
Finally, a minor problem becoming regular, in the sense that it happens during every class or is behaviour that threatens the safety of the student or that of peers, constitutes a widespread problem that requires an even more serious intervention. For example, when a student talks continuously during every class, a teacher may choose to meet with the student privately or to send the student an email. If these interventions do not provide the expected result, teachers can then call upon their superior or proceed to a withdrawal from the situation, that is, to removal of the student from the class.

According to Kozanitis (2009), the need to judge the gravity of the problem is justified by principles of diligence and parsimony so that an intervention can be made as soon as possible and that it disrupts as little as possible. These two principles are combined with a third, that of sensitivity or being tuned in to everything that is going on during the class and then being able to make a discreet intervention while the problem is still a minor one. In addition, it would be harmful to the pedagogical relationship between the teacher and the students to use a serious intervention to resolve a minor or inconsequential problem while to use a limited intervention to resolve a major problem would risk being ineffective.

According to the model presented below, the three questions teachers should ask themselves when they notice a behavioural problem are the following: Can I deal with this problem on my own? What aspect of teaching is this behaviour affecting? How serious is the problem? This way, the teacher avoids making a hasty decision. Indeed, taking action while in an emotional state can have an undesirable impact on the learning environment and on the student-teacher relationship:

> A calm intervention will certainly be more beneficial for communication with the student, for the pedagogical relationship and also for maintaining your credibility (Prégent, Bernard and Kozanitis, 2009).

A MODEL OF INTERVENTION BASED ON THE UNDERLYING CAUSES OF THE BEHAVIOURAL PROBLEM
– Inspired by Rolland & Langevin (2005), by Meloche (2006), and by Archambault & Chouinard (2003) –

LIMITATIONS OF THE INTERVENTION MODEL

It is important to note that this analysis of the problem does not provide for a systematic selection of an appropriate intervention. Indeed, the purpose of this method is to enlighten teachers and not to compel them to act in one specific way. Furthermore, applying the model may pose problems that reveal one of its limitations: that it can sometimes be difficult to grasp the cause of a behavioural problem. For example, in a case where a student has not purchased a required book, we may wonder if the cause is external (lack of finances, perhaps) or internal (lack of motivation, perhaps). If the teacher is mistaken about the cause, his or her intervention may not be effective.

Furthermore, the scope of an intervention which is adapted to the gravity of a problem may not lead directly to an appropriate intervention because the same intervention will not necessarily have the same effect depending on the way it is used by the teacher, the type of students, the relationship between the students and the teacher, the context, and the moment it occurs. What is more, several basic interventions can serve just as well either as limited or as major interventions. For example, using humour to diffuse a situation can be used for minor behavioural problems as well as for major ones; it all depends on the context in which the intervention takes place and more particularly, the relationship between the students and the teacher. In this sense, this intervention model does not provide an absolute answer regarding action to be taken. It is a guide and, as such, it must allow for a spontaneous analysis of the situation.

CONCLUSION

As young teachers, we are very well positioned to know that behavioural problems in class are a major source of anxiety, particularly during the period of induction into the profession. In fact, finding yourself alone in front of a class of 30 or 40 students is intimidating and calls for adequate preparation. This is why we studied the question and why we are proposing a model to help teachers decide how to intervene when faced with difficult situations caused by behavioural problems. In the process we became aware of the importance for teachers to have well-defined concepts of class management, of indiscipline and of what they identify as being a behavioural problem.

However, these definitions remain subjective for they depend on individual teachers' levels of tolerance, on their educational values, as well as on their specific expectations and requirements. Furthermore these concepts come to change with time and experience. That is why our model amounts to a starting point for personal reflection rather than a very strict process to be followed.

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