10 steps to effective evidence-based practices in your school

Michael Tunks discusses the importance of collecting accurate and timely data on which to base strategies. This is the first of a two-part article

Rod Stewart sang it right, "Every picture tells a story, don't it?" Or to put it another way, "A picture is worth a thousand words." In an evidence-based environment, data provides the picture we need to better understand our situation. An effective behaviour management program has three main supporting pillars if successful outcomes are to be attained. These are *Systems*, *Practices* and *Data*.

Some typical questions asked in any school might be:

◆ Which year/grade is causing the most behaviour problems?
◆ What are they doing?
◆ When do most of these behaviours occur?
◆ Where do most of these behaviours occur?
◆ Why are they doing it? (motivation)
◆ What evidence/data do you have to support this?

It is easy to have an opinion about each of these questions but to be able to back up your opinion with incontrovertible evidence leads to better informed strategies and achieved outcomes.

So, how does a school go about designing a sound data collection system that can reliably inform behaviour management decisions? The following 10 points are an attempt to provide a step-by-step approach to designing and implementing an effective evidence-based behaviour management system in your school.

1 Agreed criteria for naming and categorising problem behaviours

The initial step is to have an agreed nomenclature. All locations within your school need to be identified and clearly named so that everyone is clear on locations being discussed. Minor and major problem behaviours need to be listed, categorised and clarified. For example, is smoking a minor or major behaviour infraction?

Appropriate 'Actions to Take' should be agreed for each problem behaviour to enable consistency amongst staff.
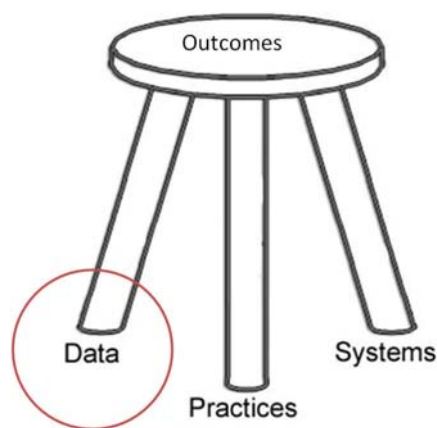

Fig. 1: Constituent parts of an effective behaviour management system

Agreement is essential in this step as consistency and transparency are key in the application of behaviour management.

2 Data collection process

Effective data collection and collation systems (Point 3 below) are critical. Many schools will already have a paper based data collection format but the subsequent collation of data and then being able to extract required information eludes most school-based systems.

◆ What data should be collected?
◆ Who should collect it?
◆ Who should enter the data?
◆ Who should have access to the data?.

The Positive Behaviour movement has addressed these questions and proposes specific criteria for data collection. These include:

◆ Student name, class and grade
◆ Location of incident
◆ Date and time
◆ Time Block e.g before school, recess, lunch
◆ Motivation – what was the student trying to achieve?
◆ Action taken

◆ Staff time expended
◆ Student time out of class
◆ Problem behavior
◆ Name of referring teacher
◆ Teacher notes.

Investing time in designing a simple to use data collection form (on one page!) will encourage staff to use it. Appropriate checkboxes can speed completion of the form.

A well-designed data collection tool will also enhance the next step in the process:

3 Data collation

There are a number of data collation systems in use in schools. These range from manual tallies and spreadsheets, locally developed Access or Filemaker databases (which are heavily dependent on the continued presence of the database developer) or commercially produced systems. The most important feature to look for in your chosen system is its ability to collate or 'crunch' the entered data *and* give it back to you in formats appropriate for identifying problems and aiding in decision-making and strategy formulation. It would also be very handy to be able to compare your school data with other schools to give some relative perspective on your performance and some observable goals to achieve.

My company has developed STARS (*Student Tracking and Reporting System)* in conjunction with a number of schools. It is not the only commercial system available but it is in the forefront of data collection and collation of student data.

4 Using data to identify problems

Once you have an effective data repository and reporting system in place you will be able to move beyond opinion and assumptions to empirical evidence-based observations.

One school had their thinking changed after reliable data had been effectively collated and reported.

"Our staff believed that Year 10 were causing

the most problems and that the worst time was the last period of the day.

"The data from STARS showed us that it was actually Year 8 with the most behaviour referrals and the period after lunch was the worst period.

"This has caused a complete re-thinking of behaviour management strategies amongst our staff."

The right data collation system will provide data in the formats you need to easily identify problem areas, classes and students.

Fig. 2 shows collated data presented in a dashboard format collated by Location and Year Groups. The graphs highlight problem locations and student groups and will lead to targeted, evidence-based discussions and strategy formulation.

Fig. 3 shows ranked table data, which also pinpoints problem areas. STARS enables 'drill down' on each table item to discover the students and groups contributing to these totals.
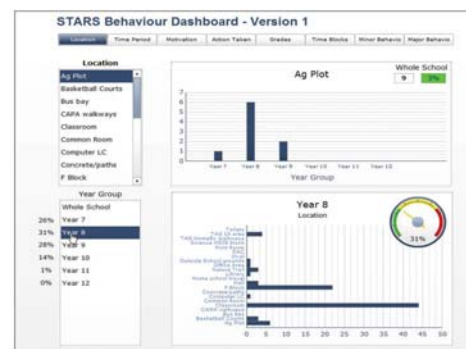
5 Precision statements about identified problems

"Houston, we have a problem" – a dramatic statement but conveying little useful information. Similarly, a shared staff belief that "We have a problem in the playground" conveys a problem of seemingly insurmountable proportions. A more precise description of a perceived problem, based on collated data, offers a clearer view of a situation and its constituent parts and has within it the seeds of its solution.

Which of the following two statements do you find most helpful?

Location	Count
Classroom	143 (49%)
F Block	68 (23%)
Hall	25 (9%)
Basketball Courts	11 (4%)
Ag Plot	9 (3%)
Outside School grounds	8 (3%)
TAS IA area	7 (2%)
Library	7 (2%)
Nature Trail	3 (1%)
Oval	3 (1%)
Science HSIE block	2 (1%)
PAC	2 (1%)
Office Area	1 (0%)
Computer LC	1 (0%)
Common Room	1 (0%)
Print Room	0
Bus bay	0
Toilets	0
Concrete/paths	0

Fig. 2

"We have a problem in the playground."
Versus
"Year 3 boys are playing aggressively in the grass area at lunchtime."

I hope you will agree that the second statement provides a much clearer picture of the situation as well as clues for who, what and where we need to target remedial strategies. Such a clear and precise statement can only be formulated from effectively collated data.

The second part of this article will discuss the final five steps to an effective evidence-based behaviour management system for your school.
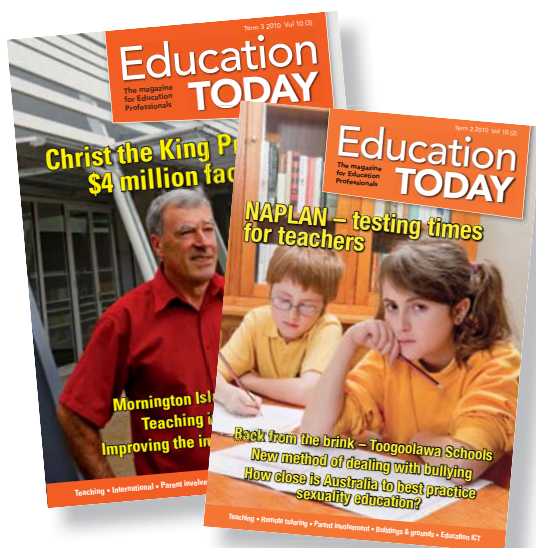

Fig. 3

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