

Vanessa Steck

Goddard College

General Education PTSP

Competencies Addressed: 3b There is evidence that the candidate has knowledge and understanding of theories and approaches to classroom and learning management with respect to learning differences.

Greene, R. W. (2008). *Lost at school: why our kids with behavioral challenges are falling through the cracks and how we can help them*. New York: Scribner.

Several years ago I read the book *The Explosive Child*, by Ross Greene, which talks about a framework for dealing with children who are behaviorally challenged. Greene's book *Lost At School* is essentially an expansion of that program, tailored to children in academic settings. I chose it to help me address my special education competencies because in much of what I read the behavior part was not addressed, and one of Greene's primary ideas is that children who are challenging are suffering from a sort of learning disorder.

Greene uses an engaging style rife with examples—including one ongoing story of a young boy, his mother, his teachers, and his administrators—to demonstrate his primary thesis. He talks briefly about the many diagnoses a child might accumulate: ODD, ADD, ADHD, CD, bipolar...and how those are typically dealt with in schools. The issue, Greene believes, is the framing: we need to go from “a child will do well if he wants to” to “a child will do well *if he can*.”

There is a world of difference in those two perspectives. One presupposes that the child needs to be better motivated: this is the impetus behind sticker charts, Functional Behavior Assessments, basically any system of rewards and punishments. Greene posits that this is not the issue, that for most children the consequences of ill behavior are already clear and not desirable.

What Greene suggests, presenting research to back him up, is that these children are lacking *specific skills*. He includes a checklist—no education book is complete without a checklist—that he calls the Assessment of Lagging Skills and Unsolved Problems; these include, to name just a few, cognitive distortions, poor sense of time, difficulty empathizing with others, concrete and literal thinking, and many others (Greene 2008 p. 283). Greene’s theory is that many of these skills can be taught using Collaborative Problem Solving.

In brief, CPS is a series of three Plans. Plan A is to be used sparingly and mostly in cases when safety is involved; it basically means that the teacher puts her foot down and forces her will onto the child. This is, of course, the way that discipline is usually handled in schools at all times. It does not present much of a problem, though it may not be ideal, for many students but for others it makes things worse and does not provide any scaffolding to prevent further meltdowns.

Plan C is the “letting it go for now” plan: behaviors that the teacher is choosing not to deal with right at this moment. This is basically the pick your battles plan. If a child is constantly sharpening his pencil and this is distracting but asking him not to results in a disruptive meltdown, that would be a good Plan C issue. The teacher knows that she has more to worry about with this child and would rather save both their energy for more pressing issues, like his habit of throwing desks. She can always return later to the pencil sharpening issue.

Plan B is where the real work is. This tactic, which has things in common with Nonviolent Communication, Positive Behavioral Supports, Developmental Discipline (which I now want to learn more about, since I love attachment theory!) Restorative Justice and even Love and Logic, but it differs from each. As Greene explains it, there are three important steps to CPS. The first is empathy. In this step, the teacher would tell the child what she’s noticed in a calm, non judgmental manner: “I have noticed that you haven’t handed in your book report yet. What’s going on?” What the teacher wants in this interaction is a *clear understanding of the child’s perspective*; she knows what hers

is and now must learn what his is. The most important part of this is neutrality. The teacher will also want to gather more information: if the child merely says “it’s too hard” then the teacher must dig deeper, asking genuine questions. Because this sets the stage for the entire process it is quite important: teachers have to be careful to listen to their students and to really hear what they are saying—even if their concern seems silly, or out of proportion to their response.

The next step is to define the problem. This is where, Greene explains, many people get stuck: they may assume that since they have stated their version of the problem everyone is now aware of the issue. But the child must also state *his* version of the problem. So the child might have said “it’s too hard for me.” The teacher will ask more questions, seeking further clarification, until they both understand that the child’s position is: “this report is too hard because I did not understand some of the words in the book and I don’t know how to use the dictionary to look them up.” The teacher’s position now is: “I need you to hand in your book report and it is important that you practice looking words up by yourself.” Once both people have laid out their problem, it is time to issue the invitation.

The invitation might go something like this: “well, as I see it, you didn’t understand some of the words and you aren’t sure how to look them up. Of course that makes it much more confusing to understand the book and to finish your report. The problem is that I need you to turn in the report, and I also need you to get some practice looking up words so that you can do it by yourself later on. Can you think of some ideas that might help us solve this problem?”

Some children may be full of ideas. Many others will hesitate, or will suggest things that won't work. In that case, the teacher must continue helping the student to problem solve. For instance, if the student says that someone could just tell him what the words mean, the teacher could remind him that she needs him to start learning about how to use a dictionary. The most important component of this process is that the child have a true voice in it; although it is good

strategy for the teacher to go in with a few ideas of her own, she must first listen to the child and his ideas. In this example, the teacher and student might together decide that a buddy will help the student look up the words, that he will take some Post It flags home to mark words he doesn't understand and that the teacher will accept the report late. In this case the idea of getting work in on time is regulated to Plan C—for now—but the student learning to use the dictionary, and problem solving for future book reports, is dealt with. More importantly, the student is beginning to acquire tools to address any lagging skills or unsolved problems he may have.

Greene is up front about the fact that Plan B is not a smooth process. He offers a wide variety of examples of children who have reacted in multiple ways. He also gives the reader a framework: in addition to the list of lagging skills he presents advice on prioritizing skills to learn and a template for drawing out a plan, as well as ideas for incorporating Plan B with the whole class, parents, other teachers and administrators.

I found Greene's ideas fascinating. Parts of it certainly felt a bit hokey—like it can't possibly be this easy--but I am also aware that children, like most people, like to be heard and consulted. With many things, in and out of school, context and framing are everything.

I have a cousin with a variety of learning and behavioral difficulties. I think of him often when I read things like this. I especially think of the day he told me that he was staying in for recess because he had been rambunctious in class. It is a completely absurd punishment; he isn't going to stop being rambunctious in class because he was denied the opportunity to run around. He just doesn't have the skills he needs.

I have another cousin—several other cousins—who are typical learners with upper middle class parents who support them in every way. These cousins never really had trouble at school. They came in with the skills they needed to fit right in. They would have done fine anywhere. For those

cousins, Plan B would have been useful but not necessary: they had the skills and knew how to use them. But for my younger cousin, he of no recess, Plan B is tremendously helpful. It not only works better, it teaches him skills that he needs to learn. I am not suggesting, and neither is Greene, that teachers turn into pushovers or never say the word “no.” But *Lost at School* provides an incredibly useful paradigm for kids who are challenging for whatever reason, whether or not they have an official Special Ed diagnoses.