Explicit teaching is inclusive

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If you do a Google image search for Response to Intervention (RtI) or Multi-tiered System of Supports (MTSS) you will return variations on the below diagram.

It is a model for teaching and student support in which all students receive the most effective possible Tier 1 instruction, and then a series of screens is used to determine if they need further interventions. A good example would be to teach early reading using structured literacy and administering a phonics check as a screen. However, RtI/MTSS is not limited to reading instruction and can be used for any area where students may face difficulties, including with classroom behaviour. Notice that I have used RtI and MTSS interchangeably – this is my understanding of the terms.

As I have written previously, I was fascinated to see Dr Kate de Bruin present this model at researchED in Perth. However, I remain sceptical of de Bruin's attempts to draw a distinction between RtI (bad and old-fashioned) and MTSS (good and effective) when both can be summarised with the same diagram.

Once we cut through the discussion about terms, an interesting question arises: If structured literacy is the best Tier 1 approach for teaching reading, then what is the best Tier 1 approach for managing classroom behaviour?

One answer is … structured literacy. Clearly, being able to read is a prerequisite for much of school life and an inability to read is likely to cause students to become frustrated and disengaged. This may explain why there appears to be a connection between poor behaviour and poor literacy skills.

Another consideration is motivation. If students lack motivation, they are less likely to pay attention and complete tasks and more likely to mess around. However, most theories of motivation are wrong. They place the cart before the horse and assume motivation is a cause when often it's an effect.

Sure, we can choose interesting tasks to do in class. My favourite activity as a science teacher has always been creating explosions. However, such activities are likely to cause only 'situational' interest. A student who attends a cool science lecture may enjoy the lecture but may still

5% Tier 3 – Individual

15% Tier 2 – Small group

80% Tier 1 – Whole class
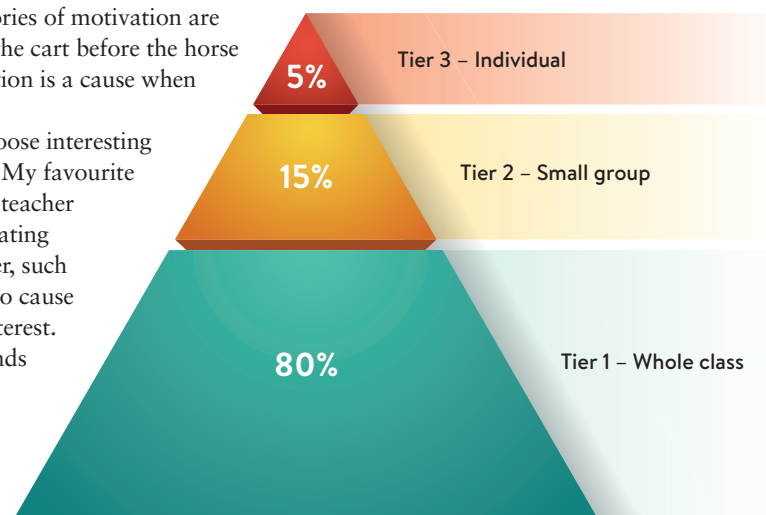
not identify as a science student. What we really want to develop is 'personal' interest in a subject. The evidence suggests that such personal interest is linked to a sense of achievement. If so, to develop motivation, we need to use effective teaching methods that give students that sense of achievement.

When discussing Rosenshine's Principles of Instruction, a model of explicit teaching, people sometimes raise an eyebrow at the idea that teachers should obtain a high success rate. Surely, they suggest, the success rate will depend on the tasks we ask students to do. It is not in the teacher's control.

Except the choice of task, how much scaffolding we give, how many examples we demonstrate, how much we break the task down into separate steps and so on is entirely within the teacher's control. And we need to control it such that the student feels they are mastering the content. The idea that there is anything particularly productive about intentionally causing students to struggle is misconceived. Frustration is not motivating for all but the most advanced students with the strongest identification with the subject matter.

Rosenshine's principles include suggestions such as, "Present new material in small steps with student practice after each step." Is it a coincidence that a set of principles associated with effective teaching of content would also have a connection to motivation and, through that, to classroom behaviour?

No. It is not a coincidence, and there are other examples we can point to.

Although not strictly a facet of explicit teaching, many of those who use the approach seat students in rows facing the teacher. It makes it hard to check the responses from all students – one of Rosenshine's principles – if they are facing each other and away from the teacher. Unsurprisingly, such seating arrangements also increase the amount of 'on task' learning behaviour.

Seating arrangements are an example of an antecedent – a factor we control to reduce the likelihood of challenging behaviour occurring. Another example may be a classroom routine such as when entering the room, students collect a booklet from the front and complete a starter activity in that booklet. Setting

tasks of the appropriate level of difficulty could also be considered an antecedent and so could giving opportunities to respond. These two approaches are features of explicit teaching, but they are also suggested as classroom management strategies, along with predictability, the use of praise, an appropriate pace and having clear rules and expectations.

Following Rosenshine's principles and building routines will increase the level of predictability in a lesson.

There is no incoherence. Strategies for managing behaviour either reiterate principles of explicit teaching or can be adopted without compromising these principles.

However, what about students who are neurodivergent? They often struggle in classrooms. Do they need something else?

Well, at Tier 1, perhaps not.

For instance, students with attention deficit / hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) benefit from praise, being seated in rows, having clear classroom expectations which are taught to them and the use of classroom routines. Students with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) also benefit from a similar approach:

> *"The very structure of high school poses several challenges for many students with ASD… Being able to anticipate and understand activities, schedules, and expectations improves students' ability to appropriately participate and respond to classroom demands. Establishing routines and creating written schedules will support executive functioning difficulties that may impede students' ability to plan and organise their schedules …*
>
> *Individuals with ASD require explicit instruction to learn new skills, including academic skills. Generally, the instruction individuals with ASD receive around academic content should include clear explanations of the skill or task*

> *sequence, modeling, guided practice, and multiple opportunities to independently practice and apply the learned knowledge."* [References removed]

Need I point out that clear explanations and guided practice are key features of explicit teaching, at least if we use Rosenshine's principles as a map?

Will following an explicit teaching approach that incorporates best practice in classroom management solve all behaviour problems? I am a realist and so I am clear that it will not. By definition, Response to Intervention (MTSS) assumes that some students will need additional supports. Students with ADHD and ASD may, as part of a Tier 2 intervention, benefit from having some limited choice over which tasks they complete. And ultimately, I am under no illusions that all students, whatever their needs, can be incorporated into mainstream classrooms at all times. Otherwise, Response to Intervention would not need three tiers.

Instead, explicit teaching represents a good start – a best bet. It is not at odds with motivating students. It is not exclusionary of those with disabilities and disorders. Despite these charges often being laid against explicit teaching, it is the advocates of alternative methods who need to provide evidence these methods are inclusive.

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This article originally appeared on the author's blog, Filling the Pail.

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