CHANGING CHRONIC PROBLEM BEHAVIOR IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS: A CLIENT-CENTERED ECOSYSTEMIC APPROACH FOR TEACHERS¹

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ABSTRACT. In the ecosystemic approach, if something changes in the interpersonal system, the problem behavior will change. The importance of using the core conditions in implementing the ecosystemic approach was demonstrated for two types of interventions, the first based on “positive attribution;” the second based on empathic response. Ecosystemics incorporated with the person-centered approach offers a range of techniques for addressing problem behaviors in schools.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is divided into four main sections. The first presents an introduction to the ecosystemic approach itself and covers our work with primary teachers in the past. This will be a fairly detailed presentation in order to familiarize readers with the main features of the approach.

The paper continues with some theoretical issues, by considering the process of change from the point of view of ecosystemic theory as outlined by Molnar and Lindquist (1989).

The third section considers the practical importance of Rogers’ (1957) conditions for personality and behavior change, which emerged in our work with primary teachers. It became clear that, for our teachers, the core conditions were the key to making successful ecosystemic interventions in the classroom.

Finally, I will consider the implications of these ideas for further research into ecosystemics, with particular reference to Rogerian perspectives.

THE ECOSYSTEMIC APPROACH

This section presents an account of the ecosystemic technique itself and incorporates the findings from two studies in which primary teachers were asked to try ecosystemic

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interventions in their own classrooms (Tyler & Jones, 1998, 1999). However, this is not as straightforward as it may appear, as the method is counter-intuitive, and the vast majority of teachers who hear about it are very sceptical or even cynical about its use and effectiveness in the classroom. Those who would like a more detailed account are referred to the literature (especially Cooper and Upton, 1990, and Molnar and Lindquist, 1989).

Chronic problem behavior

First of all, it should be pointed out that ecosystems is specifically concerned with changing chronic problem behavior, i.e., problem behavior that has become established over time and has become part of a stable, self-perpetuating cycle of events. For this reason, it is designed to be used alongside other approaches for managing problem behavior, and is designed to help teachers deal with those problems that have not responded to other strategies.

Stages one and two-- clarifying the problem behavior and teacher responses

The main ecosystemic techniques, which are based upon the process of reframing the problem behavior, can be broken down into five discrete stages. The first stage is to think about a particular problem situation and to reflect on exactly what happens. It is important to focus on quite specific chronic situations, i.e., those which are predictable and occur with some regularity. The second stage is for the teacher to consider his or her normal responses to the problem situation. What exactly does the teacher do or say and what are the results of the interventions? It must be stressed at this stage that we need to consider the teacher’s normal, everyday, unreflective responses to the situation. We found that in very many cases the teacher’s response had become established through the long-term interactions with the pupil, and was often something that the teacher was not consciously aware of.

Stage three-- establishing current explanations

So, after considering the behavioral aspects of the situation, the teacher now considers his or her current explanations for the problem situation. From this stage on, ecosystems moves away from the approach of many behavioral interventions; the focus now becomes the teacher’s own perceptions, evaluations, and explanations of the situation. This makes the process reflexive in the sense that the teacher’s own responses to the problem behavior are considered to be part of the stable ecosystem, and are also the subject of observation and reflection.

Teachers’ explanations for chronic behavior typically, and understandably, tend to be based on negative evaluations of the problem behavior. It is perfectly natural for chronic problem behavior to be construed negatively, as these situations often prevent teachers from fulfilling one or more of their many roles in the classroom. In addition, because teachers feel that they need to be effective managers of problem behavior, they often find chronic situations particularly stressful.

Common explanations

There are many ways in which teachers explain chronic problem behavior, each one based on particular questions they may ask themselves in order to help them understand the situation. We will consider the main ones here. The first type of question focuses on particular attributes of the child concerned: “What is it about this child that makes him or her behave in this way?” There are a range of responses. For example, the child may be
Reframing

The meaning of different explanations concerned (stage five).

The second type of question asks, “Why does this child do this? What are his or her motives?” Common responses include attention-seeking, needing to withdraw, or seeking power or revenge in some way.

The third question considers the outcome of the behavior: “What is the payoff for the child?” The most common responses from teachers were: making other children laugh, getting attention or approval from other pupils, getting other children or the teacher annoyed, and providing a distraction from work.

The need to change ineffective explanations

It is important to make something clear at this stage of the process. Ecosystemics does not take a critical view of negative interpretations. In fact, such interpretations of chronic problem behavior are quite natural and understandable, and sometimes they can help the teacher to deal effectively with problem situations. For example, by understanding something about the child or the relevant background factors, teachers often gain an insight into the child’s world which can help them to manage the situation more effectively.

Obviously, however, in the case of chronic problem behavior, these explanations, no matter how true or well-founded they may be, are simply not helping the teacher to change the situation. In cases where existing (and usually negative) explanations are not facilitating change, ecosystemics can be used. Ecosystemics helps teachers see the whole problem and how the stable behavior patterns are often linked to their (usually stable) explanations of the situation. Ecosystemics asks teachers to change only those explanations which are not proving effective in changing the problem behavior.

Reframing

The three stages described above prepare the way for the reframing stage itself. Unlike many other approaches to managing problem behavior in schools, ecosystemics does not depend on reward or punishment, apportioning blame, enforcing sanctions, or seeking to take control of the situation in some other way. Rather, it is informed by a trust in the child’s actualizing tendency, which is the “foundation block of Client-Centred Therapy” (Bozarth, 1996, p. 45), together with a belief that the child’s behavior is valid and meaningful to the child given his or her own interpretation of the situation. The teacher has to reframe his or her perceptions of the chronic problem situation in a positive and cooperative way (stage four), and then communicate the reframing to the individual concerned (stage five).

In order to reframe the situation, the teacher needs to ask the question, “What positive alternative explanations might there be for this behavior?” (Molnar and Lindquist, 1989, p. 173). An important idea here is that a child’s own interpretation of a situation may be quite different from a teacher’s, and that long-term established behavior may be positive and meaningful in some way for the child. The teacher needs to entertain the possibility that
different but equally valid interpretations exist, and that positive interpretations of the problem behavior can be found.

A child often interprets a situation in a very different way from the teacher, as for example when the child thinks a teacher’s response to a question in class is a reprimand, when the teacher intended it as guidance. Both interpretations may be “correct,” in the sense that the child genuinely felt shown up and emotionally bruised in front of the rest of the class, while the teacher genuinely intended to be helpful (Fontana, 1994, p. 94).

The difficulty of finding positive interpretations

By finding a new frame of reference and by changing our interpretation to a more positive one, we can find a solution to the problem by substituting co-operation for conflict. This, however, is not easy to do. Generally, teachers find the first three stages of the technique quite straightforward. When teachers are new to the technique, they usually need to spend several days looking at the situation from different points of view in order to be able to reframe the behavior positively. As was discussed earlier, teachers’ usual explanations of problem behavior are negative. However, in chronic situations, these negative views also become entrenched and stable themselves. It is these entrenched views about problem behavior which become the obstacles to implementing the reframing technique. After such a long time, the very idea of finding a positive interpretation for the problem behavior may seem quite absurd. The difficulty that teachers experience in using this technique is the difficulty we all experience in trying to change stable aspects of ourselves, the difficulty of trying to reinterpret our entrenched experiences in a new light.

However, once a positive interpretation has been found, the teacher can go onto the last stage of the process. Based on the alternative explanation, the teacher finds a new way of responding to the problem behavior. This can vary from case to case, but generally involves the teacher’s communicating the new interpretation to the child in some way and changing his or her own behavior accordingly.

In summary, the gist of the technique is that the teacher changes the stable problem situation by;

- finding a positive interpretation;
- communicating the new interpretation to the child;
- changing his or her behavior according to the new interpretation.

Previously, the teacher’s responses were part of the stable problem situation and were helping to maintain it. By changing his or her behavior in an accepting and positive way, the teacher changes conflict into co-operation. The impact of such interventions is often quite striking, as many of the case examples produced by primary teachers show (see Tyler and Jones, 1998, 1999). There is not space in the present paper to present detailed cases, but a short discussion of one example may help to illustrate the main stages outlined above.

Stages one and two-- clarifying the problem behavior and teacher responses
Mark was a nine-year-old boy who was always calling out in class discussions, constantly interrupting the teacher as well as other children. Sue, his teacher, had tried a range of strategies. She would remind Mark that he should raise his hand rather than call out. She told him that she would not consider his response if he called out. She told the group that it was good to see children raising their hands to answer questions. She had also tried ignoring the interruptions as far as possible. At times she would explain that this was a class rule which everyone needed to follow because she wouldn’t be able to hear anyone if everyone called out. The situation had become chronic and had escalated to the extent that his interruptions became so frequent that she often had to remove Mark from the group during discussion times.

**Stage three-- establishing current explanations**

When Sue reflected on the situation, she realized that she had a range of explanations for Mark’s behavior. In the past she had felt that he was immature and attention-seeking, and had a very short concentration span. As the situation had become persistent and predictable, she saw him as a very annoying child who seemed to be intent on being a disruptive influence during class discussions. She had almost come to expect the disruptions and believed that Mark was simply a disruptive boy who could not control his impulsive behavior.

**Stage four-- finding positive interpretations**

Sue found it difficult at first to find positive interpretations of Mark’s behavior, but knew that this was a sign that her views had become entrenched. After observing Mark closely at other times of the day she was eventually able to formulate more positive interpretations of his behavior. She noticed that Mark was always helping other children in the class and was also happy to do things for her. His written work showed that he had lots of interesting ideas. Based on further reflection, Sue’s new interpretation was that Mark was in fact very enthusiastic in discussions and wanted to contribute his ideas.

**Stage five-- communicating the new interpretation to the child**

Sue had a conversation with Mark at lunch time as they were due to have a class discussion session first thing in the afternoon. Sue explained that she had been thinking about the situation and realized that Mark was keen to take part and to make suggestions during discussion times. She explained that she would call on Mark for his ideas during discussions, and that if he called out she would listen to what he had to say. Mark seemed pleased with this, and during the session his interruptions were far less frequent. Sue started the discussion by asking Mark directly for his ideas and then periodically asked him to contribute more to the discussion. Mark still calls out occasionally, but Sue makes a point of listening carefully and giving him feedback on his contribution. Sue was amazed at how effective this approach was and felt relieved that such a long-standing problem could be resolved in such a positive way.

Having described the reframing technique, I now go on to consider this process of change from the point of view of ecosystemic theory as outlined by Molnar and Lindquist (1989).

**THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

*The stable interpersonal system*
One of the main theoretical ideas in ecosystems is that chronic problem behavior is not seen as the result of one person’s deficiencies or inadequacies. Instead, such problems are seen as part of a stable system of interpretations, beliefs, and interpersonal interactions. Ecosystemics stresses the interpersonal nature of chronic problem behavior, as it is often not the situation itself that causes the problem, but the interaction between the teacher and the child which arises from it. In ecosystemic terms, as long as something changes in this stable interpersonal system, then the problem behavior will change. The thing that distinguishes ecosystems from all other approaches to changing problem behavior in schools is that the teacher changes the system (and hence the problem) by changing his or her own perceptions and behavior, and by substituting co-operation for conflict. The key to producing constructive changes is to find positive interpretations of the problem behavior and to replace the negative or hostile relationship with a positive and understanding one. This corresponds with the concern that person-centered counsellors have for providing a particular type of relationship for the client (Rogers, 1957), particularly in relation to empathy and unconditional positive regard. The teacher needs to be able to trust in the child’s actualizing tendency, rather than try to manipulate or control the situation in some way.

However, ecosystemic theorists stress that it is not important to find out why a child is interpreting a situation differently, or to find out what that interpretation is. As long as the positive alternatives are plausible or possible, then they can be used to change the situation. In addition, it does not matter if the new interpretations are the same as those held by the child. Obviously, this is different from the person-centered approach, and it was a major difficulty for the teachers we worked with. As we shall see later, teachers felt comfortable only with attempts to be genuinely empathic.

Our interpretations affect our interpersonal relationships

In the example discussed above, of a child who consistently disrupted the class, the teacher’s new and positive interpretation was that she no longer saw calling out as deliberately deviant behavior, but saw it instead as an expression of enthusiasm and a desire to take part. We saw that by communicating this new interpretation to the child, the problem behavior changed. It is worth looking at this example a little more closely in order to develop some important theoretical perspectives. Basically we have the teacher’s old and new interpretations of the problem behavior as follows:

TEACHER’S OLD INTERPRETATION
(negative)
Child is being deviant by engaging in deliberately disruptive behavior.

TEACHER’S NEW INTERPRETATION
(positive)
Child is actually being enthusiastic and showing that he wants to take part.

Ecosystemics takes the view that both of these interpretations are hypothetical, and that “it is not possible to know if the [interpretations], either positive or negative, attributed to the student’s behavior were accurate” (Molnar and Lindquist, 1989, p. 67). Ecosystemics is not concerned with accuracy or objective truth, but with the beliefs of the people involved in this stable interpersonal system. So, ecosystemically, it is not important to know whether the negative interpretation of the behavior was true or not. What is important is that the teacher’s interpretation has been communicated to the child by the teacher’s behavior. For example, in this case the teacher continually reprimanded the child for being disruptive.
Consequently, the child constructed a belief about what the teacher’s interpretation was, and acted on the basis of that knowledge.

So, in a chronic problem situation in the classroom, we cannot be sure whether our interpretations are correct; all we can know is that they have affected the interpersonal relationships which are part of the problem dynamic. So, in this way, we can see that our interpretations affect our interpersonal relationships, and that if we change our interpretations we will also change the nature of the interpersonal relationships which surround the problem situation.

Changing our interpretations will change our interpersonal relationships

In this particular example, let us consider two possible scenarios. First, take the view that the teacher’s old interpretations were correct, and second, take the other view that the teacher’s new interpretations were correct. In each case we need to consider what happens to the stable interpersonal system when the teacher changes her interpretation and communicates the new interpretation to the child.

In the first case, the child is deliberately trying to be disruptive. As long as the teacher communicates that the behavior is disruptive, for example, by reprimanding the child and trying to get the behavior to change, then the system remains stable. However, as soon as the child believes that his disruptive behavior is in fact considered to be positive and is accepted by the teacher, the whole interpersonal dynamic changes. The important point here is that the child must believe that the teacher’s new interpretation is genuine. Consequently, the child can no longer be disruptive by behaving in that way, so the behavior tends to cease. If the problem behavior does not cease, then the teacher will remind the child that the behavior is acceptable by repeating the new positive interpretation in order to further decrease its usefulness as a deviant act and to further redefine it as a co-operative one. (This is known as the “Handling a relapse technique,” Molnar and Lindquist, 1989, p. 144.)

In the second case, the child is in fact being enthusiastic and really wants to contribute. However, as long as the teacher communicates that the behavior is disruptive, the child will increase his attempts to demonstrate his enthusiasm. This, in turn, increases the teacher’s determination to stop the disruptive behavior. The child then becomes more “disruptive” because his contributions are not being heard and appreciated because the teacher is consistently reprimanding him. In this way the situation escalates until a stable system develops. In addition, the child will feel frustrated at having his contributions ignored and his behavior consistently misconstrued in a negative way, and the teacher will feel frustrated because she is unable to stop the disruptive behavior. This frustration, and other secondary feelings associated with the conflict, will also become part of the stable ecosystem. However, as soon as the teacher communicates acceptance through the new positive interpretation, the child will feel that he is being understood at last and is having his enthusiasm recognized and appreciated. As his responses are now acknowledged and accepted by the teacher, this makes it less necessary for him to keep trying to show his enthusiasm, and the exaggeration and escalation of his behavior that became part of the chronic situation are no longer necessary. Molnar and Lindquist (1989, p. 108) also became aware of this in their own work, noting that when a child’s behavior is interpreted in a positive way, the child “reacts by indicating that for the first time she or he feels understood. Interestingly, people often
change when it is no longer necessary to convince others of the validity of their behavior in the problem situation."

Summary: If you want something to change, change something

So we can see that in each case, even if the new interpretation is not correct, the intervention produces a change in the problem behavior and conflict is replaced with cooperation. However, this does not mean that there are not important differences between these two situations. Although not always entirely reliable, the child’s immediate response to the intervention is a guide and can help us decide which type of change has occurred.

If we consider the case where the teacher’s new interpretation was in fact correct and the child was being enthusiastic and wanting to contribute all along, we find that the child’s response is one of relief, or feeling pleased and accepted by the teacher. There is often a discussion which confirms for the teacher that her new interpretation was accurate and that her own negative interpretation in the past had probably contributed to maintaining the problem situation.

In the case where the child was being deliberately disruptive, the new interpretation was not correct but still produced a change in the problem situation by attributing positive reasons to the behavior. As long as the child believes the teacher’s new interpretation, the disruptive potential of the behavior is dramatically attenuated. However, because chronic problems are so long-standing, children in this situation often forget the new interpretation and revert to old patterns of behavior through force of habit. In such cases, the teacher needs to repeat the intervention as mentioned above. In addition, the response of children in this situation is often one of surprise, shock, or complete disbelief at the intervention. As we can see the child’s response to the intervention and whether or not the intervention needs repeating both give us clues about the change process that is occurring.

THE CORE CONDITIONS

Having outlined the stages of ecosystemic interventions and considered the theoretical ideas, we now move on to the importance of the core conditions in implementing the approach which emerged in our work with primary teachers.

Genuineness

Molnar and Lindquist (1989) refer to the need to be honest and sincere when using the techniques, and point out that ecosystemics is not a form of “reverse psychology” (saying one thing and thinking something else in order to trick another person into doing what you want):

If, in any problem situation, you find that you cannot honestly describe the behavior or the situation in a new way, then you should not attempt to use ecosystemic techniques. These techniques are not mind games used for saying one thing while thinking another. Reverse psychology is best left to Tom Sawyer (p. 44).
**Ecosystemic Approach for Teachers**

This factor was born out in our own research and is discussed in full elsewhere. (See case example 4 in Tyler and Jones, 1998.) However, we also found that genuineness was very closely linked to empathy for most of the teachers we worked with. Basically, teachers found that they could not be genuine unless their new, positive interpretation of the behavior was also based on empathy.

**Empathy**

The place of empathy as an important factor emerged only gradually over the period of the research. It became clear that teachers found some of the case examples presented by Molnar and Lindquist very hard to believe. There are far too many to consider here, but the following discussion may help to illustrate this point more fully. The first extract is from a discussion of a problem situation where a student repeatedly does not complete his homework:

> The student’s not doing homework can be characterised as communicating to the teacher that the work is too hard or too easy. Or, looking at the larger ecosystem of the classroom, the student’s not doing homework can be characterised as a sacrifice he is making that helps to demonstrate to classmates the problems that not doing homework can create for students (Molnar and Lindquist, 1989, p. 24; emphasis added).

For most teachers, the first alternative relating to the difficulty of the work seemed quite plausible and likely to be based on empathy. However, the second alternative, that the student was demonstrating to others what happens when homework is not completed, seemed hardly plausible at all and very unlikely to be based on empathy.

Another example concerned a child who was always talking to other children. The teacher formulated her positive alternatives as follows:

> First, I would let Betzadia know how much I admire the great emphasis she places on friendship (as evidenced by her willingness to risk poor grades in order to nurture her friendship by talking). Second, I would help her classmates understand that, even though at times her talking disturbs them, she is also helping us all learn how to cope in a world filled with distractions (Molnar and Lindquist, 1989, p. 36; emphasis added).

Although the teachers we worked with could believe that friendship was important to Betzadia, they found that the other comments (“her willingness to risk poor grades” and “she is helping us learn how to cope with distractions”) were examples of the mind games that Molnar and Lindquist warn against.

**Two types of ecosystemic intervention**

A close reading of these and other cases showed that two main types of ecosystemic intervention are presented in their book:
1) The first type of intervention may be described as "positive attribution," where the positive interpretation of the problem behavior has to be "plausible" to the teacher and the child concerned. As long as it is "a possible truth" (1989, p. 40) the new interpretation does not need to be based on the child's own experience of the situation.

2) The second type of intervention is based on an empathic response, where the teacher's new interpretation of the problem behavior is based on a genuine attempt to understand the child's point of view.

The key to the ecosystemic techniques is being co-operative rather than empathic (Molnar and Lindquist, 1989, p. 24), as we saw in the earlier discussion. In fact, Molnar and Lindquist do not refer to empathy in their book, even though some of their cases are very good examples of using an empathic response. (See, for example, the cases on pages 47, 49, and 55.) In such examples, the positive interpretation is clearly based on looking at the situation from the child's point of view and, in some cases, on talking to the child in order to understand his or her frame of reference.

However, those cases which were not empathic were based on looking at the larger ecosystem of the classroom rather than the stable interpersonal system, and were therefore much more abstract. The teachers we worked with found this type of intervention to be artificial. To simply find a "plausible" interpretation seemed, indeed, to be playing mind games and being manipulative. They also felt that they could only be genuine if they believed that their reformulation of the problem situation was based on empathy. The successful refraamings they carried out in their own classrooms were all based on empathy.

Trying to be empathic is what is important

In formulating interventions, Molnar and Lindquist suggest finding a "new perceptual frame for problem behavior" (1989, p. 46). As outlined above, this is accomplished by reflecting on the situation almost as an intellectual exercise, by using informed guesswork, and by asking the question, "What positive alternative explanations might there be for this behavior?" (1989, p. 173; emphasis added). As one of the teachers using this technique said, "Why all the guesswork? Trying to see things from the child's point of view is at the heart of the technique, so why not use counselling skills and listen to the child's experience? This should make it easier for us to change our negative perceptions of the behavior. Trying to be empathic is what is important."

Other teachers found it useful to combine these approaches by first of all reflecting on the situation as suggested by Molnar and Lindquist, but then checking out the new interpretations with the child rather than imposing them on him or her. Of course, there is no guarantee that the teachers were being accurately empathic in formulating their interventions; but as we saw earlier, the method does not depend on this aspect. What is important, however, is that the teacher believes that the new interpretation is genuinely based on the child's own frame of reference. In addition, teachers also need to believe that the child's frame of reference is valid and meaningful for the child. In other words, teachers need to be able to accept the child's perception of the situation, which leads us on to consider the third core condition.

Unconditional Positive Regard
When we analysed case examples produced by teachers that were only partially successful, it became apparent that interventions need to be unconditional. (See case example 4 from Tyler and Jones, 1999, for a full discussion.)

In all cases where conditions were part of the intervention, the changes to the problem situation were not as effective. By being conditional, teachers were not communicating acceptance of the child’s point of view. Not only do we need to be empathic to understand the child’s frame of reference, but we also need to accept that frame as valid. Our interventions need to implicitly, or even explicitly, “acknowledge that the person has good reasons for behaving the way he or she does” (Molnar and Lindquist, 1989, p. 103).

It is interesting to note that many other techniques for changing problem behavior in school depend on being conditional. For example, positive reinforcement, a technique with which all our teachers were familiar, can be seen as offering conditional positive regard. In other words, behaviors which are “required” or “acceptable” are rewarded with positive interactions, whereas problem or other unwanted behaviors are not.

Many teachers had used conditions as part of their repertoire of behavior management techniques in the past and continued to do so when using ecosystemsics, even though they were often not aware of this. It emerged that teachers need to stop being conditional if ecosystemic interventions are to be more effective.

**IMPLICATIONS**

A **person-centered slant**

It will be clear from the above discussions that the teachers we worked with had given ecosystemsics a person-centered slant. This may have been partly due to the bias of their trainers, who both subscribed to the importance of humanistic and person-centered perspectives in education, or partly due to the strong child-centered tradition in English primary schools. However, whatever the reason, it is clear that the changes were produced by the teachers as they tried to make sense of the ecosystemic techniques by putting them into practice in their own classrooms. The importance of being unconditional became clear when it was noted that so many partially successful interventions had in fact been conditional. More importantly, teachers found that they could only be congruent if they were also genuinely trying to be empathic.

This work raises a number of questions for further research into this area:

- Would other groups of teachers working with other trainers also give ecosystemsics a person-centered slant? Would such groups also find that the core conditions are the key to ecosystemic interventions?
- Does the person-centered emphasis change ecosystemsics in an important way, or is this just a slight variation? Does the focus on the relationship aspect of the ecosystem change any of the underlying theoretical ideas?
- Can the ideas developed by Rogers on personality change be applied to ecosystemic interventions? How do these ideas compare to ecosystemic theory?
- One aspect which was not included in the studies was the child’s view of ecosystemsics. How did the children involved think and feel about the ecosystemic interventions? How did they perceive the changed practices upon their own behavior?
Even though these questions will need addressing in a number of diverse settings, it is clear that ecosystemics offers a range of techniques for changing chronic problem behavior in schools, techniques which can easily be adapted to incorporate important aspects of the person-centered approach.

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REFERENCES


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