Teachers’ perceptions of challenging student behaviours in model inner city schools

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Elementary teachers often cite challenging student behaviours and classroom management as areas of concern and therefore priorities for professional development. In this paper, the authors discuss the findings from a two-year research project, Sociocultural Perspectives on Behaviour and Classroom Management (SPBCM). SPBCM examined the social and cultural context of challenging student behaviours in four model inner city schools in Toronto, Canada. The purpose of SPBCM was to gain a better understanding of elementary teachers’ perceptions of challenging student behaviours and the strategies they use to address those behaviours. Fifty teachers in total participated in individual and group interviews. Results were interpreted using Ronald Heifetz’s concept of technical versus adaptive problems of leadership. Extending this theory to the realm of classroom management, the authors aimed to gain a better understanding of whether or not the interventions described were premised on the notion of challenging behaviours as either technical or adaptive problems. According to Heifetz, experts can solve technical problems, whereas the solutions to adaptive problems reside in teachers themselves. Analysis of interview transcripts revealed that most challenging behaviours were adaptive in nature, as were teachers’ strategies for intervening through building trusting relationships with students. In conclusion, the authors suggest that teachers and administrators who seek to address challenging student behaviours should consider professional development in which experts facilitate teachers’ development of context-specific strategies for classroom management, rather than offer solutions.

Keywords: challenging behaviours; discipline gap; professional development; teacher leadership
The ‘Model Schools’ context

Data for this paper were collected at four Model Schools in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Model Schools is a Toronto District School Board (TDSB) program in which elementary schools from the most economically marginalized and under-serviced communities in Toronto were invited to apply for a Learning Opportunities Grant of one million dollars for three years, to create academic and social/support programs to foster student success (see http://www.tdsb.on.ca/modelschools). On the basis of this process, TDSB identified seven Model Schools, three at the beginning of the 2006–2007 academic year and four at the beginning of the 2007–2008 academic year.

One of the tenets of the Model Schools program is to participate in school–university collaborative research to improve school practices. The Centre for Urban Schooling (CUS) at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT) has been a strong supporter of Model Schools from its inception and was therefore a natural collaborator for the project. CUS is dedicated to improving the quality of the teaching and learning experiences available to children and youth living in underserved urban communities. CUS activities include academic and contracted research, offering educational programs and professional development opportunities and supporting students, teachers, schools, parents and district boards to develop school reform initiatives that have a clear focus on equity for all students (http://cus.oise.utoronto.ca/). CUS staff and affiliates have been providing professional development to teachers in Model Schools since the beginning of the program. The principal investigator (PI) and first author, Lance T. McCready, is an associate faculty member of CUS. The second author, Geoff Soloway, was a graduate research assistant (GA) for CUS during the 2007–2008 academic year, when the bulk of interview data were collected.

Interpretive framework: Leadership without easy answers

The interpretive framework used to analyze teachers’ perceptions of challenging behaviours is drawn not from the extensive psychologically based literature on discipline and classroom management but rather from the literature on leadership. We first got the idea of extending the literature on leadership to teachers’ discipline and classroom management work in 2007, when Pedro Noguera spoke to a group of educators at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education about building activist urban school leaders. In this presentation Dr. Noguera pointed out that sometimes leadership entails finding ways to enable people to face up to frustrating realities. Sometimes, Noguera suggested, quoting from the title of Ronald Heifetz’s book: ‘We have to think about leadership without easy answers’ (Heifetz 1996). For example, a group of Black parents attending the meeting voiced their concerns that too many Black male students were being referred to special education classes. Some teachers also attending the meeting countered this accusation by standing behind their patterns of referring. These teachers argued that students, rather than being further marginalized in special education, were getting the resources they needed in these classes. Noguera raised the point to teachers that if they wanted to be viewed as valued leaders in the communities where Black families lived, they would have to face the reality that to most Black parents, referring a Black male student to special education does not suggest an equitable approach to education, regardless of the teacher’s good intentions. Here Noguera suggested that activist teachers who espouse values of ‘equity’ and social justice acknowledge that the decision about whether or not to refer a student to special education is bigger and more complicated than what the results of psychometric tests administered by psychological experts say.
We view some of the problems associated with discipline and classroom management in a similar vein. In most North American urban schools, large gaps in suspensions and expulsions — called ‘discipline gaps’ — exist between Black male students and their non-White peers (Monroe 2006). This is also the case in Model Schools. The teachers in Model Schools, many of whom identify as advocates for equity and social justice for all students, tended to be disturbed and ultimately embarrassed by this racially defined gap in discipline because it went against their values. The teachers approached CUS hoping the PI could provide some technical expertise on what to say and what to do with the unruly Black boys in their schools. At first the collaborative inquiry process we suggested did not seem to be what teachers had in mind. Staff warmed up to the idea, however, after the PI explained that he did not think the discipline gap in their school was a technical problem that could be solved by an expert.

Several teachers had been disappointed by the professional development workshops led a year earlier by Ronald Morrish, the author of *With all due respect* (Morrish 2000). In his book, Morrish (2000, x) suggests that ‘one of the great ironies about the discipline debate is that there are teachers who know, and have always known, how to solve the problem. They do it every day in their classrooms’. According to Morrish, there are two reasons why teachers have difficulty learning from these ‘masters’ of discipline: (1) good discipline is invisible when it’s done well; and (2) great teachers are the worst people for explaining to anyone else how they discipline their students. These two premises form the basis of Morrish’s strategy for professional development workshops: make visible foolproof techniques of discipline in ways that are understandable and accessible to teachers. For example, Morrish claims that good teachers ‘decide, in advance, how their students will behave’ (79). Many teachers fail at this, from Morrish’s perspective, because they do not have a clear picture of how they want their students to behave. He suggests, rather obviously, that teachers clarify their thinking about behavioural expectations by answering a series of questions related to how they want their students to behave. For example, Morrish asks: ‘How will your students behave for substitute teachers?’ ‘How will your students speak to you? What tone of voice will they use?’ ‘How will your students behave when they are upset?’ (81).

Several teachers reported that the workshops were practical but had little impact on the discipline gap between Black male students and their non-Black counterparts. In other words, disproportionate numbers of Black boys continued to be sent to the principal’s office and/or expelled following the Morrish-led professional development sessions. One of the Model Schools’ lead teachers who expressed a commitment to closing the discipline gap was only too happy to unload her copy of the book on the PI because, in her words, ‘[i]t didn’t work’. There are multiple reasons why Morrish’s workshops may not have produced the results teachers desired, including the fact that teachers were not accompanied in the modification of their practice following the workshops. The reason we focus on is that professional development workshops like the ones led by Ronald Morrish are less likely to have an impact on educational problems like discipline gaps because the nature of these problems are beyond the knowledge of experts or senior authorities.

In *Leadership without easy answers* (Heifetz 1996) and *When leadership spells danger* (Heifetz and Linsky 2004), Ronald Heifetz makes a compelling argument that one of the things good leaders have to be able to do is make the distinction between technical and adaptive problems. Technical problems are ones that we can solve through the knowledge of experts or senior authorities. The problems may be complex, but experts know exactly how to fix them. A common technical problem that teachers encounter in their daily work
involves correcting students’ grammar in written assignments. Students sometimes come up with some unorthodox ways of structuring sentences, but teachers with technical knowledge of English grammar know how to ‘fix’ or correct these mistakes. In contrast, adaptive problems are ones that cannot be solved by experts. The solutions lie not in technical answers but rather in people themselves. And here is some difficult news for teachers: according to Heifetz, most social problems, like discipline gaps, are adaptive. To solve them, Heifetz argues we have to change people’s values, beliefs, habits, ways of working or ways of life. Heifetz and Linsky argue that:

For teachers to learn a new set of competencies to help them leave fewer children behind in their classrooms, they may have to endure a temporary loss of confidence as they face the gap between the demands for performance and their current practices. And developing this competence will probably require the school to make adaptive changes as well, adopting new norms of supervision, experimentation, and collaboration. (2004, 35)

In the following section we describe the methodology we used to gather information about teachers’ perceptions of challenging behaviours, with the ultimate goal of making a distinction between challenging behaviours that are technical versus challenging behaviours that are adaptive. Making this distinction would help teachers determine the kind of professional development they needed to address the problem of discipline gaps.

**Methodology**

**Participants**

Demographic profiles of each participating Model School appear in Appendix A. Some interesting demographic information to take note of is that three of the four schools are junior kindergarten to grade six. Only one school went to grade eight. In addition, a large percentage of students from all four schools spoke a primary language other than English at home. All of the schools are located in ‘priority neighbourhoods’ as defined by the Strong Neighbourhood Task Force of United Way Toronto. These neighbourhoods have been designated by the city’s community safety plan as areas that require focused investment to strengthen neighbourhood supports.

Fifty teachers in total, 12–13 from each school, participated in individual and group interviews. The participants were 70% female and 80% White. From the authors’ perspectives that regard the social and cultural context of teaching and learning as crucial, it is not surprising that dealing with challenging student behaviours is often mentioned as one of the most difficult issues facing teachers in urban schools. The student population in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) is culturally diverse and the teaching force, on the whole, does not share the cultural backgrounds of its students (Falconer, Edwards, and Mackinnon 2008). In other words, most elementary teachers are middle-class White females, and in the GTA most elementary-aged students are likely to be from lower income, non-White, English language learner families from outside North America. Given the social and cultural differences between teachers and students in the GTA, it makes sense that understanding and dealing with challenging behaviours is an ongoing issue (Irvine 2003).

**Collaborative process**

The collaborative process for this project occurred in two phases. During the first ‘needs assessment’ phase, the authors met with small groups of administrators and teachers at
each of the four participating schools to develop a data-collection strategy. From these meetings we determined that the best way to collect data was through interviews and focus groups, so that we could capture ‘teacher voice’ (Kirk and MacDonald 2001).

During the second phase, the authors and the same small groups of administrators and teachers developed the following four-question, semi-structured interview protocol that could be completed in 30–45 minutes, the standard duration of teachers’ planning and lunch periods:

1. What types of behaviour and classroom management situations are the most challenging for you to deal with? Please explain why they are challenging.
2. Which actions or consequences seem to help your students improve their behaviour and discipline in your classroom?
3. Do you think that students from different cultural groups and/or backgrounds (such as race, ethnicity, gender, religion, language, class) have different needs?
4. How do you build trusting relationships with your students, especially those whose life experiences are different from yours? Could you give me some examples?

Teachers chose to be interviewed alone or in a group, depending on their preference and availability. The same protocol was used for both types of interviews. Individual interviews were scheduled during teachers’ planning periods while group interviews were organized by grade level and scheduled after school and/or during a common planning period. No more than six teachers participated in each focus group.

The authors conducted all of the interviews. Group interviews were conducted in teams, with one of the authors serving as lead facilitator while the other author took notes. All of the interviews were audio-taped for a total of 10 hours. The second author and an undergraduate work-study student transcribed the audiotapes.

**Analysis**

Both authors analyzed the transcripts of individual and group interviews. The first level of analysis involved categorizing the challenging behaviours by type, which produced the typology of challenging behaviours shown in Table 1. The second level of analysis involved coding teachers’ responses to questions two and four of the interview protocol. These questions asked teachers to describe actions that seem to help improve students’ behaviour and strategies they used to build trusting relationships with students. The typology of strategies that build trusting relationships appears in Table 2. We interpreted the responses through Ronald Heifetz’s concept of technical versus adaptive problems of leadership. Extending this theory, we attempted to gain a better understanding of whether

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of challenging behaviours</th>
<th>Physicality with peers</th>
<th>Verbal</th>
<th>Miscellaneous non-compliance</th>
<th>Academic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Examples</td>
<td>Pushing</td>
<td>Yelling</td>
<td>Being oppositional</td>
<td>Disinterest in reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kicking</td>
<td>Swearing</td>
<td>Defiance</td>
<td>Inability to complete tasks in the allotted time</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Cheating on tests</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hitting</td>
<td>Inappropriate tone</td>
<td>Stubbornness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fleeing</td>
<td>Underdeveloped communication skills</td>
<td>Testing boundaries</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Typology of challenging behaviours with examples.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of strategies</th>
<th>Giving students leadership responsibilities</th>
<th>Developing cultural awareness</th>
<th>Engaging parents beyond traditional parent-teacher conferences</th>
<th>Developing empathy and mindfulness</th>
<th>Making time to connect with students in and out of class</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Examples</td>
<td>Creating a leadership skills class that helps students enhance their capacity for leadership</td>
<td>Talk about all religions and religious celebrations as a way of being inclusive</td>
<td>Invite parents in beyond parent–teacher conferences</td>
<td>Developing the capacity to be flexible and understanding</td>
<td>Send personalized notes/postcards home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Offering students an active role in creating, planning and organizing school events</td>
<td>Know and recognize all kinds of cultural celebrations – names, cultural foods, clothes</td>
<td>Find out information about students from parents</td>
<td>Highlight shared lived experiences</td>
<td>Spend one-on-one time with students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Encouraging students to support monthly social responsibility themes and school service</td>
<td>Incorporate cultural lessons into curriculum expectations</td>
<td></td>
<td>Recognizing students’ unique situations</td>
<td>Volunteer to coach a sport or supervise an extracurricular activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Identify ways to bridge cultural gaps</td>
<td></td>
<td>Talk to students in ways you want to be talked to</td>
<td>Play with them at recess</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
or not the interventions described by teachers were premised on the challenging behaviours being understood as either technical or adaptive problems.

**Challenging behaviours**

The following are the four top categories of challenging behaviours that emerged from the first level of analysis of the transcripts:

1. Physical behaviours (temper tantrums, kicking, pushing, hitting, running away).
2. Verbal behaviours (screaming, yelling, swearing, lying).
3. Academic disengagement (time management, setting priorities).
4. Miscellaneous non-compliance (opposition, social conflicts, stubbornness).

Although teacher participants from all of the participating Model Schools mentioned each category of challenging behaviours, the data collection methods did not allow us to determine which category, if any, was mentioned more frequently than the others.

At first glance, there is nothing particularly surprising about the categories of challenging behaviours. Temper tantrums, swearing, academic disengagement and non-compliance or stubbornness are common behaviours that may lead to students being reprimanded, disciplined or ‘consequenced’ as many teachers in our study said. More interesting are the reasons why teachers thought the behaviours identified were challenging. How might Heifetz’s framework of technical versus adaptive problems help us gain a better understanding of what behaviours teachers find challenging?

If technical problems are ones that can be solved through the knowledge of experts or senior authorities, and adaptive problems are those that the experts cannot solve, one of the things that will make certain student behaviours seem challenging is that they are not readily addressed by experts. For instance, a third-grade teacher said: ‘It’s the walking by someone and just shoving them for no reason. Hitting them upside the head. Just, their way of being with each other, and socializing with each other is very physical and I find in a negative way’. Although this teacher had participated in the professional development session on discipline and classroom management offered by Ronald Morrish, she did not feel Morrish addressed the question of why students seemed to like ‘being with each other, and socializing with each other’ in a ‘very physical’ and ‘negative’ way.

It seems this teacher is seeking to understand the social and cultural patterns of communication her students use. Since Morrish’s approach to discipline and classroom management is premised on his own expert knowledge, he cannot answer this teacher’s question. The only way this teacher can gain a better understanding of her students’ ways of socializing is by becoming more familiar with the social and cultural context of her students’ lives. This is not a service that classroom management experts provide; rather, it is a call for teachers to become better observers of the everyday lives of their students and re-examine their own values, beliefs, habits or ways of working with students.

Another example of challenging behaviours that may be difficult for experts to address without intimate knowledge of the social and cultural context of students’ lives is the various forms of student resistance. Why are certain students non-compliant, oppositional or seemingly disrespectful? Can a classroom management expert from outside the school community explain these kinds of challenging student behaviours, especially when students’ resistance occurs in a field of social relations where teachers and students may have vastly different social and cultural backgrounds? A fourth-grade teacher had the following to say about her experience of student resistance: ‘I would say that the biggest problem that I have
experienced since coming to this school is being treated like I am absolutely nobody . . . by students. And I’m talking about serious name-calling and disrespect’. From this teacher’s perspective, she has done nothing to warrant being treated as a ‘nobody’. Does an expert on discipline and classroom management have the knowledge to address this problem?

We argue that when teachers view challenging student behaviours as technical problems that can be solved through professional development led by experts who are unfamiliar with the social and cultural context of the school community, they are setting themselves up to be disappointed. Alternatively, teachers rely on experts not to solve challenging behaviour problems but instead facilitate a process to conduct inquiry into students’ lives and the social and cultural context of the school community. We suspect this kind of professional development is more likely to generate context-specific solutions to challenging behaviours. This approach is evident in the promising ways teachers sought to intervene through building trusting relationships with students.

**Intervening through building trusting relationships**

Research on effective interventions that address challenging student behaviours suggests that positive teacher–student relationships are key (Watson and Ecken 2003). Again, guided by our interpretive framework that identifies technical and adaptive skills of teacher leadership, the question emerges of whether or not building positive student relationships is a technical or adaptive skill. Are teachers’ strategies for building positive relationships guided by the knowledge of experts, school policies or a more complex set of experiences that go beyond what they think they already know about students? To address this question we thematically grouped teachers’ responses to the fourth question of the protocol into the following five categories:

1. Giving students leadership responsibilities.
2. Developing mindfulness and empathy.
4. Making time to connect with students in and out of class.
5. Developing cultural awareness.

What these strategies seem to have in common is that they are decidedly less technical and noticeably more adaptive. ‘Experts’ could lead the process of developing caring, empathy and cultural awareness. However, teachers tended not to look to professionals to develop their capacities for relationship building. Rather, they found alternative ways to move out of their cultural comfort zones and engage with students beyond the formal academic, teacher–student relationship.

With regards to developing caring and empathy, a third-grade teacher remarked: ‘If you expect the child to understand, have some concept of empathy you have to start yourself modelling it and it’s not something that comes in a two hour professional development session’. A teacher of a combined grade three/four class described the following strategies for engaging parents beyond traditional parent–teacher conferences: ‘I’ve actually invited some parents in to look at the child’s work, and it’s not during report card time. Just a few weeks before or after, getting to know the student and knowing how they are – I would invite the parents in to show them so and so’s doing good, and they may want to look over his or her work’.

Another strategy teachers used to move out of their cultural comfort zones is developing cultural awareness. Cultural awareness has been cited as important for teachers to develop trusting relationships with students whose social and cultural backgrounds differ markedly.
from their own (Irvine 2003). The teachers we interviewed had a variety of strategies for doing this, and noticeably most of these strategies did not involve a cultural expert leading a professional development session. This is surprising, since in my own experience a common professional development strategy is to invite a racial minority professional to speak to staff about the problems of Black boys or some other group of ethno-racial minority youth who are overrepresented in the school’s discipline system. But the teachers who participated in our study sought to recognize all kinds of cultural celebrations and become knowledgeable of popular culture. They discussed incorporating cultural lessons into curriculum expectations and bringing community activities into school. One teacher admitted she had no knowledge of these strategies when she began teaching: ‘Because I grew up in a very white community and I just don’t know about it, and so when I first started teaching here and I started to see the culture and stuff, it was OK for me to say “You know what, I don’t know much about hip hop why don’t you (students) teach me? Tell me what I can listen to?” and to be really open about it and to see that it’s sort of a reciprocal relationship’. Although this strategy reproduces the false belief that non-White students have culture and White teachers do not, it is noteworthy because the teacher recognizes she needs to conduct inquiry into the everyday lives of her students in order for her to be able to develop trusting relationships with them. Another teacher spoke of the cultural awareness she had to build in order to develop trust with parents and community: ‘There are times when my first year, I had a lot of hostility, you know a lot of caregivers thinking . . . “Who are you? Why are you teaching within our community? What do you know about us?”’.

We (the authors) cannot underestimate the power of making time to connect with students in and out of class through sharing time, get-to-know-you activities, coaching, playing with them at recess and sending personalized notes/postcards home. A grade three/four teacher said: ‘Another thing I do with the kids in class is we try as much as possible to have sharing time where the kids and I share about their weekend or their personal life, something that you share. You learn a lot from just sharing’. A French teacher used a more informal strategy: ‘I go and you know I walk, and then there is one group who asks me if I want to play tag, so I go and play tag with them, or just walk around with them and play basketball. So there’s also a way for them to see me from a different angle . . . just getting to know them while playing the [card] game because they start talking and you can springboard off of what they say and sharing stuff about yourself as well is a really great way to build trust’.

Overall, when it comes to developing trusting relationships, the teachers who participated in our study described the importance of developing a more open frame of mind and learning to listen to students’ interests, hopes and dreams, whether or not these aspirations are popularly influenced. These strategies and skills are not mandated through school policies and are unlikely to be taught by relationship building ‘experts’. Rather, each teacher has to cultivate a set of practices that tap into her/his personal preferences, capacities and dispositions to build trusting relationships.

Discussion: culturally responsive classroom management and mindfulness-based training

The findings described in this paper suggest that many challenging student behaviours are not technical problems that can be solved by calling upon an ‘expert’. Rather, in order to address challenging student behaviours we think teachers need the tools to delve more deeply into the complexities of relationships and social dynamics that occur in classrooms daily. In going beyond a technical approach in addressing challenging student behaviours to mobilize teachers’ adaptability, we believe that two underutilized frameworks, one
drawn from the literature on culturally responsive teaching and the other from holistic education, are *culturally responsive classroom management (CRCM)* and *mindfulness*.

CRCM is derived from the notion of culturally responsive teaching which views effective teaching as drawing from students’ social and cultural identities to foster student engagement and academic achievement (Gay 2000). In creating a conception of CRCM, Weinstein and her colleagues (2003, 2004) ask educators to consider five important agents. First, teachers must acknowledge the salience of their own cultural socialization rather than overlook and dismiss such forces as normative. Interrogating oneself as a cultural being can facilitate meaningful questions about how educators’ beliefs and decisions create and sustain forms of inequity. Second, educators’ knowledge of students’ cultural backgrounds must be informed by measured and deliberate collection of information regarding the young people in their class. Awareness of the broader social, economic and political context is the third branch of CRCM. Here, school discrimination is a logical extension of inequities found throughout society. The ability and willingness to use culturally appropriate management strategies serves as the fourth leg of CRCM. Finally, educators must always acknowledge that students shape classrooms in conjunction with their teachers, in an effort toward building caring classroom communities.

This final basis of CRCM has strong relevance for African–Canadian communities in Toronto. The School Safety Committee of the Toronto District School Board recently reported that African–Canadian students in two high schools felt alienated from their teachers because they (the teachers) avoided discussing tough issues relevant to their lives, such as sexual harassment, racism and gun violence (Falconer et al. 2008). Making space in the curriculum to discuss issues relevant to students’ everyday lives is one way teachers can demonstrate they care for their students. Alternatively, an absence of care can invite alienation, disconnection and resistance. Weinstein et al.’s (2004, 27) emphasis that CRCM ‘is a frame of mind, more than a set of strategies or practices’ provides a way of thinking about culture and student behaviour that recognizes fluidity, agency and dynamic interaction while avoiding impulses to essentialize culture.

Mindfulness-based trainings have an intervention research base premised on the notion that it is important to widen one’s perspective on self and others through mindfulness (Baer 2003; Grossman 2004). Drawing from holistic education, the cultivation of mindfulness brings forth the qualities of presence, patience and compassion (Miller 2001) – all of which are necessary components toward building relationships in the classroom. Mindfulness is a practice that implies both the regulation of attention and the cultivation of openness and curiosity (Kabat-Zinn 2003; Bishop et al. 2004). Mindfulness is developed and supported with a variety of formal and informal practices that foster the ability to sustain non-judgmental present-moment awareness. Mindfulness-based trainings do not claim to immediately change circumstances in the external world – the power of mindfulness is how it enables the practitioner to change the way they respond to their circumstances.

Teachers are often caught up in habitual patterns of reacting to challenging behaviours in the classroom. Mindfulness practice enables teachers to perceive students and the classroom in the present moment without constructs and labels that typically lead to habitual reactivity. For example, employing mindfulness during a challenging classroom circumstance helps the teacher to pause and gain a wider perspective of the social and cultural context that is contributing to the situation. This pause may enable the teacher to respond compassionately instead of simply reacting in a knee-jerk fashion to the stress of the situation. Teacher mindfulness supports the health, wellbeing and efficacy of the teacher (Poulin et al. 2008; Poulin 2009) and is related to CRCM by means of building trusting relationships through heightening self and student awareness. Challenging student behaviours, like
most social problems, are not common sense. Rather, they reflect complex social and cultural dynamics related to teachers’ and students’ social identities, classroom context, socialization and the organizational structure of schools, to name a few issues.

**Implications for professional development and research**

We suggest that teachers and administrators who endeavour to foster teacher leadership that addresses challenging student behaviours should consider professional development that draws on professional literatures and practices grounded in CRCM and mindfulness-based training. These frameworks view challenging student behaviours as adaptive problems that require learning a new set of competencies, as well as new norms of experimentation and collaboration. Far too often, teachers work in isolation, and far too often they are individually facing similar problems that could benefit from collaborative discussion and problem-solving.

The teachers we spoke with are already doing some of this collaborative work through the TRIBES professional development training they received (Gibbs 2006). They felt strongly that TRIBES training has the potential to facilitate teachers building a network and better relationships with parents. They also felt that TRIBES could help them accommodate students’ academic needs through student-centered curricula, and foster equity through building an inclusive classroom environment.

While TRIBES encourages a more holistic approach to classroom management, teacher participants were less enthusiastic about the board’s progressive discipline (PD) policy. Progressive discipline takes an individualistic stance, suggesting that challenging behaviours are the responsibility of the student/family and does not recognize the role of the educational system, school environment or classroom culture in the development or perpetuation of the behaviours. The academic challenges that are often intertwined with other behavioural challenges are remiss from the progressive discipline.

Overall, it seems that teachers in Model Schools are experiencing a set of competing policies and professional development workshops that are both technical and adaptive. The Morrish-led classroom management workshops and the district’s progressive discipline policy are individualistic and expert-driven, while the TRIBES training is more holistic, collaborative and adaptive. When we returned to the participating Model Schools to report the results of the interviews and focus groups, our primary recommendation was to focus more professional development energies on adaptive approaches to classroom management. Teachers seemed more excited about these opportunities because they hoped it would help them build trusting relationships with students, which was the foundation of any effective approach to classroom management.

In terms of research we suggest that research on classroom management moves in a more adaptive direction, assessing teachers’ capacity to delve into the social and cultural context of students’ lives, problem-solve beyond school policies and form better relationships with parents and community. Doing so will require classroom management researchers to draw from a more interdisciplinary theoretical terrain that includes non-behavioural psychology, sociology and cultural studies. In other words, we suggest classroom management researchers adapt to the ever-changing cultural landscape around them.

We view the notion of the ‘prosocial’ classroom as a promising framework for this kind of research. Jennings and Greenberg (2009) propose a model of the prosocial classroom that highlights the importance of teachers’ social and emotional competence (SEC) and wellbeing in the development and maintenance of supportive teacher–student relationships, effective classroom management and successful social and emotional learning program implementation. This model proposes that these factors contribute to creating a classroom
climate that is more conducive to learning and that promotes positive developmental outcomes among students. It is worth noting that Jennings and Greenberg (2009) go on to outline a mindfulness-based training program in development of teachers’ SEC and well-being, which is currently being investigated.

Cultivating the competencies of adaptive teaching include being culturally responsive, authentic and having relational awareness. These skills go beyond the scope of traditional professional development lead by ‘experts’ providing universal solutions to challenging behaviours. Embracing the cultural complexity of urban schools requires fine-tuning one’s experience in and of the world, a process that can be lead by experts who turn teachers’ attention back within themselves. It is teachers who become experts within their own inner domain that then embody the relational presence to meet and greet the ever-changing demands of the urban communities, schools and classrooms.

References
Appendix A: Demographic profiles of participating Model Schools (as of spring 2008)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Name</th>
<th>Total number of students</th>
<th>Grade 4–Grade 6</th>
<th>Grade 4–Grade 8</th>
<th>Grade 7–Grade 8</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Primary language other than English</th>
<th>Students born outside Canada</th>
<th>Students living in Canada for 2 years or less</th>
<th>Students living in Canada for 3–5 years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Willow Park Junior Public School</td>
<td>468</td>
<td>147</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Students living in Canada for 2 years or less</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>31</td>
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Note: *Calculation does not include students for whom language information is missing.