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Introduction

While working with a large group of primary teachers at a daylong session on school culture, I asked the kindergarten teachers to share with the group how early in the school year they could detect the difference between a reader and a nonreader. Most responded that the difference was evident within the first week, and the longest anyone suggested was the first month. With that information, I followed up with a question regarding what happens with the reader and the nonreader at the end of kindergarten. The answers were predictable and reflected what generally happens in most jurisdictions—both students are sent on to grade 1 with the hope that the grade 1 teacher can work some magic to close the gap. This practice continues through the subsequent grades with the same hope. Researcher Hedy N. Chang and senior research associate Mariajosé Romero (2008) point out the folly of this action, also noting the link between academic learning and behavioral learning:

During the early elementary years, children are gaining basic social and academic skills critical to ongoing academic success. Unless students attain these essential skills by third grade, they require extra help to catch up and are at grave risk for eventually dropping out of school. (p. 3)

This is *not* a kindergarten or early years problem; it's a systemic one. Left unchecked, the gap grows, frustration sets in as students enter secondary school, apathy enters the picture, and some students believe that all hope is lost. Also, these students seek other ways that they can seem successful in their peers' eyes, and negative behavior becomes part of their arsenal. Flagrant behaviors, such as calling out or pushing back on reasonable teacher requests, give these students a certain cachet as the class clown. There is a "cool" factor to this behavior their peers often perceive that sets these students apart. Oftentimes what educators perceive as a lack of will to complete a task or attain proficiency is a cover for a lack of skill in the desired outcomes. When students lack these skills, educators must apply behavior management approaches to support the desired student behaviors and create a positive learning

environment. *Behavior management* includes any action educators take to enhance the likelihood that students will choose behaviors that are productive and socially acceptable. Teachers must effectively manage their classrooms to establish and sustain a positive culture and learning environment. To respond to unwanted behaviors effectively, it's critical that teachers reflect on what is maintaining a student's challenging behavior. Recognizing that behavior is a form of communication, and that it is difficult to change because it serves a purpose or function for the student, compels educators to work proactively to reinforce the desired behaviors in their classrooms.

Researchers Joy Lesnick, Robert M. Goerge, Cheryl Smithgall, and Julia Gwynne (2010) offer their insight on the importance of getting students on track early:

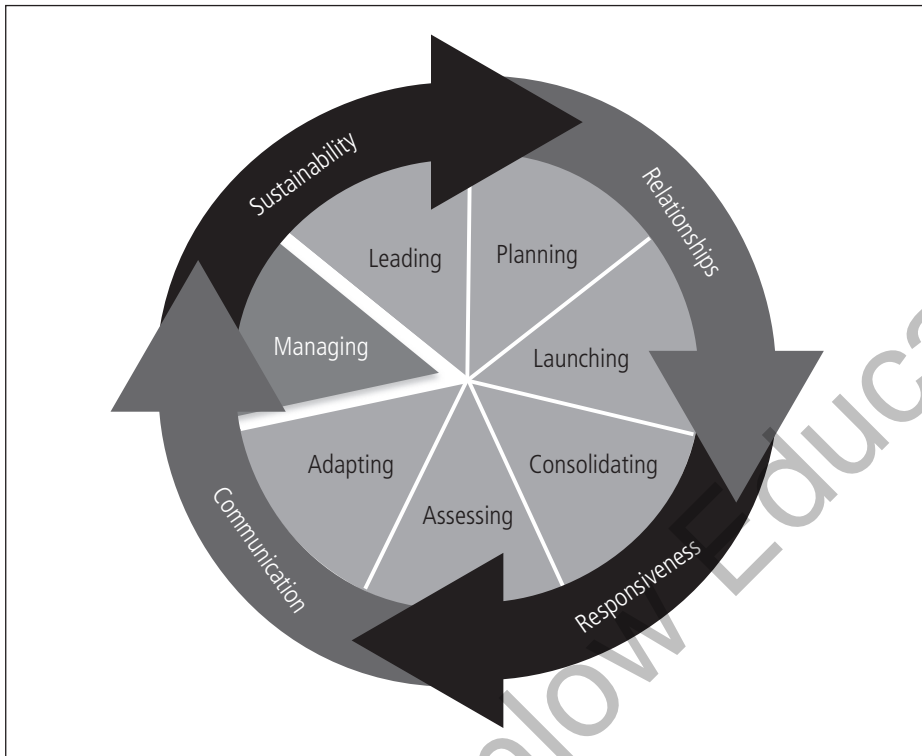
Students who are not reading at grade level by third grade begin having difficulty comprehending the written material that is a central part of the educational process in the grades that follow. Meeting increased educational demands becomes more difficult for students who struggle to read. (p. 1)

The authors go on to suggest that third-grade reading level is a significant predictor of eighth-grade reading level and ninth-grade course performance, even after accounting for demographic characteristics (Lesnick et al., 2010). They further state that students who are above grade level for reading in grade 3 graduate from high school and enroll in college at higher rates than students who are at or below grade level in grade 3 (Lesnick et al., 2010). If the goal is reaching the bar (high school graduation and further pursuits driven by a student's passions or interests) or better for every student, educators must work collectively to close the learning gaps and teach appropriate behaviors with an eye toward intervening early. In order for students' learning to become unstoppable, we must address these issues early. This requires a collective commitment to changing an organization's culture.

Systems Thinking

Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey (2015), authors of *Unstoppable Learning: Seven Essential Elements to Unleash Student Potential*, offer systems thinking as the structure to accomplish this type of undertaking. They explain, "Systems thinking is the ability to see the big picture, observe how the elements within a system influence one another, identify emerging patterns, and act on them in ways that fortify the structures within" (Fisher & Frey, 2015, p. 2).

Fisher and Frey (2015) also remind us, "As part of a systems thinking classroom, teachers know how to respond to problematic behavior to renormalize the classroom and make learning the focus once again" (p. 13). Systems thinking involves seven specific elements and four principles (see figure I.1). The following sections will clarify these major elements and principles that compose systems thinking.



Source: Fisher & Frey, 2015.

Figure I.1: Unstoppable Learning components.

Seven Elements of Systems Thinking

Fisher and Frey (2015) identify seven essential elements for both the systems thinking classroom and the systems thinker in order to drive home the importance of (1) planning, (2) launching, (3) consolidating, (4) assessing, (5) adapting, (6) managing, and (7) leading learning in each classroom in a systematic way. All the elements constitute effective practice and are interdependent.

This book will examine the element of managing learning. While the phrasing *managing learning* may sound ominous and conjure up images of control, Fisher and Frey (2015) explain, “That doesn’t mean that teachers have to exert tremendous control, exercising their power over students” (p. 13). Managing learning is about setting up the structures that lead to the desired outcomes. It involves achieving consistency as a committed team of educators in order to minimize the impact of negative behaviors and maximize the potential of each student.

Let’s make this clear from the outset—we should leave very little about the work in schools to a single individual to address, resolve, or create. In fact, Fisher and Frey (2015) explain, “Every adult in the school has a role in building proactive, healthy

relationships with students. These efforts are much more likely to succeed, and quickly, when schoolwide efforts are employed” (p. 151). The growth and development of all students must be the prime objective and the domain of all who interact with those students. My travels as a consultant and author have revealed that educators often find themselves in systems that are not as effective and efficient as they could be. In the absence of a consistent, intentional, and aligned approach—a *we* approach—to creating positive student behaviors, teachers default to a *me* approach, whereby they give their absolute best but rarely achieve consistency—at either the personal or the schoolwide level. However, teachers and principals can establish consistency by using an interdependent approach to managing learning and by recognizing that the end result is the domain of the team, not the individual. Doing so requires *systems thinking*.

Four Principles of Systems Thinking

Fisher and Frey (2015) outline the following four principles that should simultaneously guide educators’ work to improve learning systems and ensure unstoppable learning for their students: (1) relationships, (2) communication, (3) responsiveness, and (4) sustainability. It’s fair to say that I have encountered many educators whom I would describe as forward thinkers—they employ and nurture these principles daily in their practice—but many work in a system or structure that isn’t designed to support them or their efforts to bring these practices into play. As an oft-quoted adage from Albert Einstein suggests, we can’t solve today’s problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them. If a school’s end goal is to improve its current results, then its actions will need to change to achieve that end. Education authors Tom Hierck and Angela Freese (2018) suggest, “This means aligning in unity around a singular focus of *learning* instead of perpetuating the cycles of organizational chaos that cause forward thinkers to become overwhelmed and debilitated in their work” (p. 4). This also reminds me of a scene from one of my favorite Christmas stories, *A Christmas Carol*, where Ebenezer Scrooge suggests, “If the courses be departed from, the ends will change” (Dickens, 1843, p. 115). If we change the inputs, then surely the outputs will also change.

I believe every educator starts his or her day with a belief that all students can learn. Sometimes events or circumstances undermine that belief, and the best way to alter that is through a collective, systematic approach to managing behavior and, by extension, learning. A systems thinking approach that all educators embrace is a necessary requirement to attain this goal. Consider how Fisher and Frey (2015) describe what systems thinkers do and how they behave: “The systems thinking classroom requires educators to consider the elements that impact student learning and design structures to leverage these elements” (p. 2). These structures owned by an entire school faculty allow for collaboration and collective efficacy. There are enough influencers of student

learning (for example, home life, socioeconomic status, and personal motivation) beyond the control of educators that educators must work to enhance the impact of those elements they can control.

Throughout this book, I attempt to link the four principles of systems thinking with the work of managing learning in order to best prepare this book's readers for the thinking work they will need to do as they seek, gather, discuss, and respond to students' reactions to their instructional delivery. Table I.1 illustrates the four principles of systems thinking and their alignment to managing learning.

Table I.1: Aligning Principles of Systems Thinking to Managing Learning

Principle of Systems Thinking	Alignment to Managing Learning
Relationships	When students believe the adults within the learning organization are both invested in their learning and view negative behaviors as temporary obstacles, students will more readily invest in their learning. Every student needs an adult champion at school. I have yet to meet a student who has this connection (a strong, positive relationship with at least one educator) who does not make the progress teachers expect in school.
Communication	How teachers communicate among themselves, and with students, about students' behavior can affect student progress toward their behavioral and academic goals. As teachers discuss students and their behavior, they should do so with an eye toward improving outcomes and consolidating beliefs.
Responsiveness	Teachers act responsively by ensuring all students have access to the behavioral supports they need to allow them to work toward performing the desired behaviors with proficiency. Teachers should be aware of, and know how to respond appropriately to, the student behaviors that can occur as a result of a variety of antecedents. They also must not escalate the behaviors through their personal responses to them.
Sustainability	Ensuring teachers and administrators have a common set of expectations and respond to student behaviors with consistency will ensure sustainable behavior management. When all adult stakeholders understand that consequence in isolation is not instruction, they can work together to create a plan that pairs consequence and instruction to create sustainable learning that every student can readily understand at his or her current level of demonstration.

After reading the descriptions in table I.1 (page 5) of how the four principles of systems thinking align with managing learning, reflect on your own strengths as an individual and as part of a team. Consider where you have opportunities for growth. I encourage you to jot down some initial thoughts before you begin your journey through the chapters that follow.

About This Book

I have designed this book for all audiences regardless of grade level, curricular area, or role in education. Individuals and collaborative teams alike can benefit from exposure to the ideas in this book. The greatest benefit, however, will transpire when all members of a school community share a collective commitment to the work.

Chapter 1 lays the foundation for the managing learning element of systems thinking, highlighting the need for a collective approach to behavior management initiatives. Chapters 2–5 guide you through the process of building a positive learning environment as the best approach to managing learning and responding to negative behaviors. Chapter 2 focuses on building teacher-student relationships. Chapter 3 then examines ways to productively support group and peer interactions. Chapter 4 focuses on building positivity and offers suggestions for behavior management tools and strategies that will help teachers create a positive learning environment. Chapter 5 centers on how to specifically assess and address problem behaviors in the classroom, in the event that the concepts offered in the preceding chapters have not eliminated undesirable behaviors. Each chapter ends with a list of takeaways that summarize key points and prompts that ask you to reflect on your next steps as you plan the days and weeks ahead.

The appendix offers a unique glimpse into a school implementing a pilot program to address behavioral gaps. This case study provides an example of what is possible for all schools to achieve when they have a collective commitment to create a positive culture for addressing student behavior. I intend for the sample model to support school teams in their understanding, developing, and implementing the notion of managing learning.

The following chapters may produce a variety of personal reflections and reactions. You will no doubt find some affirmations of current practices you and your team have in place. Readers may also occasionally identify connections in the text to their personal experiences, resulting in the need to tweak a practice to further enhance what they do for students. Engaging with the text may also raise additional questions for teams to discuss. My hope is that this book will feed your desire to take the next step in improving student outcomes through classroom management practices.

In chapter 6, “Managing Learning,” of *Unstoppable Learning: Seven Essential Elements to Unleash Student Potential*, Fisher and Frey (2015) offer three questions that speak to how the structure of a system generates the behavior for that system. Before moving on to chapter 1, consider these questions:

- What is the relationship between the structures of my classroom and the learning and social behaviors I see?
- What are the short- and long-term consequences of the actions I take or do not take in regard to student behavior and the learning environment?
- Are there unintended consequences to the actions I take or do not take? (p. 150)

Have these three questions on a note card or in another readily handy place as you dive deeper into the content throughout this book, and think about how you will create the necessary elements that will minimize the impact of negative behaviors on your engaging instruction.