

Are They Really Problem Students?
Bridging Differences through Understanding

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Chances are, you've heard complaints about students who:

- Blurt, squirm, poke, or pester
- Ask too many questions
- Refuse to work, claiming that a teacher doesn't like them
- Constantly miss homework deadlines

Often, the next statement is, "What's wrong with this kid?" But there may not be anything wrong—the problem may be a personality clash. As one teacher put it, "What I thought were student deficiencies were a matter of my style. Often I can change something small in my classroom that makes a big difference in helping them be successful."

Currently, we are introducing personality type concepts at an urban middle school where nearly two-thirds of the students receive reduced or free lunches. Approximately 70% are students of color, mostly African American and Hmong. In this climate, looking at preferences for learning points to ways in which diverse people are actually similar, building pathways for understanding.

While many personality frameworks offer insights into differences among people, one of the most well-researched is Jungian type theory, best known through the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® tool (MBTI). This theory holds that people take in information and make decisions differently, two key processes in education. Further, these variations in behavior are quite orderly and consistent.

Often, educators say that they have “done” the MBTI before, but there is a difference between “doing” type and actually “experiencing” how people with different preferences view classroom dynamics, assignments, relationships and other areas that are as vital to education as what is actually taught. We provide hands’-on exercises and lesson plans that allow teachers to experience the different preferences in their classrooms.

At Dr. Russell’s previous school, weekly staff development meetings were available to introduce personality type preferences to the entire staff at once. Teachers reported that using the concepts improved student motivation and work quality. Because of limited staff development time at Dr. Russell’s current school, we decided to use a pilot program approach. One team of four 6th grade teachers volunteered to learn about personality type, incorporate it into their classroom management and lesson planning techniques, and introduce their students to the concepts.

After a semester, the attendance rates for the students assigned to the pilot team were better than for the other 6th grade team. Further, when asked to identify which of their 130 students the teachers knew well, the pilot team listed only four with whom none of them had a significant relationship, while the other team listed 25 students. Thus the training seems to be helping teachers build relationships with their students, a crucial step in the learning process.

As the year continued, the teachers worked to adapt lesson plans, assignments and assessments for the learning styles of students with different personalities. Teachers saw significant increases in student engagement and performance with the new lesson plans. The following chart compares results on two projects in language arts:

| | Project <i>not</i> designed using type concepts | Project designed using type concepts |
|-----------------------------------|---|--------------------------------------|
| % of students who received an “F” | 26% | 8% |
| % of students who received >75% | 58% | 70% |
| % of students who received >85% | 32% | 55% |
| % of students who received >95% | 9% | 36% |

Furthermore, the Language Arts teacher reported that there were close to no behavior problems in her classroom while students worked on the project she created using type concepts that took into account the students’ personalities and learning styles.

The Importance of Personality Preferences

Think of these personality preferences as similar to the inclination you have for writing with your left or right hand. Writing with your preferred hand is more natural and comfortable, and it takes less energy and thought. With practice, though, you could write well with the other hand.

Similarly, students are most comfortable when they can use their learning preferences. Even though they can learn to operate outside of their preferences, it takes more effort, which can hamper their learning. Without an understanding of the differences, Lamphere (1985) showed that teachers tend to rate more favorably students with learning styles similar to their own.

When the teachers start to understand the behavior of students with different personalities, they can adjust the structure and flow of their classrooms to allow for success for more students. This shift in teacher attitude toward students of color is crucial, given the prevalence among educators of the “deficit model” for children of

color, where their cultural differences are viewed as problems to be overcome rather than diversity that can be drawn upon. (Lipman, 1998)

In staff workshops, we give teachers new to the MBTI tool a chance to take the instrument, but they are also allowed to self-select the preferences that fit them best through interactive exercises. The MBTI is only an “indicator”; ethically, those who take it need to experience an interactive interpretation.

In working with students, we emphasize self-discovery and understanding the differences between the preferences. Students are allowed to stay undecided as to which preferences describe them best. The eight preferences and their implications for learning are discussed below.

Extraversion and Introversion

Type theory holds that people gain energy through either Extraversion or Introversion. At school, students with a preference for Extraversion need action and interaction to learn. Students with a preference for Introversion learn best when they have time for reflection.

When asked to design an ideal classroom, Extraverts draw moveable walls, chairs on wheels, a table big enough to accommodate chairs for up to 50 students, areas for playing games, and music. Further, the noise level of the group increases as they work together on the design.

Introverts draw classrooms with seven to ten students. Their designs often show individual desks with laptop computers and comfortable places for reading. The introverted students (or teachers) often quietly huddle together as they work on this

project, giving a few words of direction to the designated drawer. They say, “It’s nice to work in this group. Usually the others blurt things out so fast that we don’t get a chance.”

With the concrete evidence of these drawings in front of them, both teachers and students begin to understand the differing needs of Extraverts and Introverts. At a basic level, silent reading and writing activities favor the Introverted students; to gain energy for those tasks, Extraverts need breaks to talk or move.

To understand the difference in “think time” required by Extraverts and Introverts, one teacher asked her 8th grade social studies class to place a green card on their desk when they were ready to discuss the topic at hand. She said, “I was very surprised that it took some students as long as 10 minutes to process the information. But then, everyone contributed to the discussion. I could call on anyone! I heard from students who don’t normally say a word.”

Sensing and Intuition

Our preference for Sensing or Intuition describes how we take in information. Students with a preference for Sensing like to start with factual information before moving to broader concepts. Students with a preference for Intuition often start with a hunch or a glimpse of how two ideas connect, later searching for facts to support their ideas.

In a classroom, the differences between Sensing and Intuition become clear in the way directions are given and received. An art teacher noted that her Sensing students enjoyed the realistic drawing unit, with its step-by-step processes, details, rules, and proportional logic. In contrast, many of the Intuitive students found the unit frustrating.

She said, “I reminded my classes of the difference between Sensing and Intuition, then described why and how to be less frustrated. The level of concentration went way up! It was a noticeable difference from their previous work habits.”

Sensing students ask questions to clarify assignments. They don’t want to waste time doing anything wrong. A teacher who doesn’t understand the drive behind the questions may feel that a student is stalling or refusing to take initiative. Sensing students describe their frustrations this way:

- “I didn’t understand the math homework. The teacher helped me with one problem, but I still didn’t get it and she passed me over. She could have showed more examples. How was I supposed to know?”
- “It’s frustrating because they label you. ‘You don’t get it? Sound it out, look it up!’ That’s intimidating.”

Intuitives often ask their questions five minutes after a teacher has finished giving directions—and the teachers often rightly say that the student would know the answer if he or she had been listening. One Intuitive student explained why he hadn’t heard this way, “When she said that we were going to write reports on someone who had influenced us, I started trying to think of someone that no one else would think of. I missed the rest of the directions.”

Providing written instructions saves frustration for the teacher. One teacher described another technique, “I now give directions in short ‘bursts,’ provide a checklist for large assignments, then clarify as the questions come in. The Intuitives are then free to start working, as I now understand they will do anyway!”

Intuitive teachers often struggle to give concise directions and admit that their last group of students benefit from clarifications the first groups asked for. One Intuitive teacher said, “I love coming up with the cool and creative thing that students will engage in most, but I have to realize that no matter how cool and creative it might be, it may be equally frustrating if my directions aren’t clear. I need to spend time clarifying the process.”

Thinking and Feeling

Our preference for Thinking or Feeling describes how we make decisions. People with a preference for Thinking look for logical explanations, cause-effect or if-then arguments, and universal rules or truths. People with a preference for Feeling consider the impact a decision might have on the people involved. Thinking students often seem to enjoy arguments, while Feeling students have trouble functioning in classrooms where putdowns and other forms of disharmony are common.

An understanding of the difference between Thinking and Feeling often helps resolve conflicts. For example, a parent requested a meeting with the school principal because her daughter, who had gotten A’s in 7th grade English and liked to write, was barely doing C work in 8th grade English. The girl had said, “The teacher doesn’t like me, so I’m not going to do the work.” In talking to the girl, the principal discovered that she had a preference for Feeling. The teacher had critiqued the girl’s writing without giving any specific praise, assuming that the student would interpret her comments as advice for making her excellent writing even better. When the principal reinterpreted the situation in terms of Thinking and Feeling, it gave the teacher and student a fresh start together.

Similarly, a Thinking teacher noted that a boy in her math class was visibly upset. When she asked what was wrong, he said, “I’ve had my hand up for 15 minutes and you haven’t called on me.” His hand had only been half-raised and she hadn’t seen it. Further, in her class, students regularly came to her desk for help.

The boy had tears in his eyes. She reminded him that she was a Thinker and he was a Feeler, then said, “Your feelings told you that I was ignoring you, but I wasn’t being mean, was I? This can’t get in the way of your math work.” As she was speaking, his face lit up. He understood.

Judging and Perceiving

This preference pair describes how we naturally approach life. Judging students seem to have built-in clocks and are able to plan out their work and work their plan. Perceiving students live more in the moment, taking a spontaneous approach to life. They are *not* lazy or irresponsible by nature. Instead, they understand that being flexible opens opportunities.

Our schools operate out of a Judging preference: think of schedules, due dates, quarterly grades, and class agendas. If Perceiving students aren’t introduced to planning methods that use their own strengths, they may begin to feel inadequate as deadline after deadline catches up with them.

Students with a preference for Judging often start working on assignments as soon as they receive them. They feel they can’t play until their work is done. Further, they seem to be able to estimate how long it will take them. If for some reason they have to

wait until the last minute, they feel stressed in ways that inhibits both their creativity and their accuracy.

However, in their rush to finish, some Judging students may not gather enough information or consider alternative ways to complete a project. They can learn from Perceivers the benefits of staying open longer to new ideas.

Students with a preference for Perceiving do their best work under pressure. If they try to start early, they struggle to find ideas. As the time pressure builds, so does the quality of their efforts. However, they often underestimate how long a project will take. A student described one such incident: “Once I had a month to make a board game. I had ideas in my head, but I didn’t start until two days before the deadline. I worked all afternoon on it, then prepared my speech the next night. I got a B+ on it. If I’d started earlier I could have gotten an A.”

Perceiving students need different time management tools than Judging students. One of the most successful is teaching them to plan backward, helping them identify the steps involved in a project and then develop realistic time estimates for each step. How long will it take to make a board game? To buy the supplies? To plan out the rules? To narrow down the design choices? Answers to these questions provide the “real” last minute when they must start.

A Climate of Understanding

In the schools where we’ve worked together, nearly 80% of the students that teachers had labeled “at risk” because of either academic or behavior problems had

preferences for Extraversion and Perceiving. We would suggest that perhaps school structures rather than these students are often the problem.

While students can learn to use their less-preferred personality preferences, it is easier for teachers to adjust their styles than for adolescents to adjust theirs! Our overarching goal in using type is to help students and teachers understand themselves and each other. As they develop a common vocabulary around their psychological preferences, one teacher observed that they seemed more tolerant of each other. Another said, “I was hesitant that kids would understand types, but they did and it was affirming—they weren’t defects. Now they say, ‘It’s not that I’m a bad student—I just need to work on certain skills.’”

References

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