

Problem? No problem!

Lisa Ashes

Teacher, Author & Associate, Independent Thinking

Irritation was creeping like a venomous spider up Jo's spine. Jaw tight and eye twitching, the 'new' lesson planning policy being introduced was almost enough to induce chair flipping. No chairs were flipped. This may be the fourth 'new' initiative being introduced this week but Jo knew to keep quiet and add it to the never ending to do list. With so many Assistant Heads determined to prove their 'value', Jo had no choice but to crank up the work and crank down the family life.

Jo's situation sounds hopeless, doesn't it? Jo can see the problems mounting but does nothing to stop the nonsense. Jo is not powerless! Jo experiences the problems but avoids responsibility. The comfort of victim is tempting when faced with a problem. If you are a victim to the system, a cog in its chaotic wheel, you are not to blame.. Actually, as a cog, you are allowing the chaos to continue unchallenged. You are always responsible for your actions, even if that action is inaction. You know that the marking, lesson planning or whole school behaviour policies are not working but you do them anyway, using your energy bitching about them in the staffroom or to your ever-neglected family.

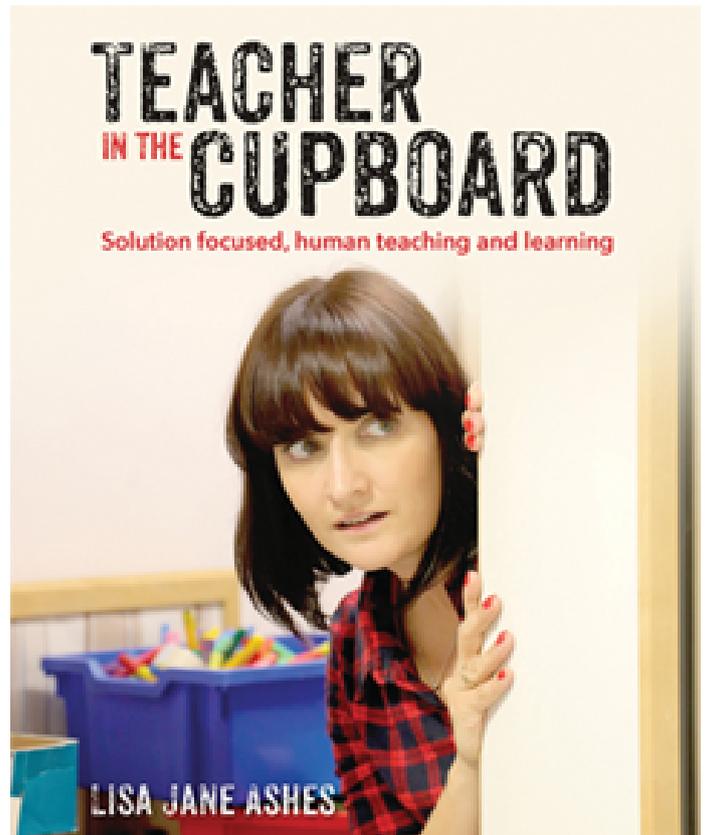
Problems are a part of the struggle of life. If you dream of serenity in your situation, walking around in a state of Nirvana as the marking pile magically decreases, the initiatives slip seamlessly into your routines and every child succeeds without struggle, you will end your days in disappointment. Problems exist and, as you solve one problem, another will appear in its place. Accepting this truth is the first step towards finding comfort in your reality and becoming active in solution driven (not deluded) practice.

Being comfortable with the existence of problems does not mean passive acceptance. The struggle involved in the solutions of problems is richly rewarding.. if we see it through to the end. The struggle can lead to success and success breeds confidence in tackling the next problem that arises. To face the struggle, you will need to turn on your inner creativity. You must get rid of creativity blockers such as, "I can't," or "It's not my place" or "I have already tried and failed." There is always another way. You must look again with fresh eyes and question, "How can I solve this to improve the current situation?"

Classroom Based Problem – The little things that might drive us crazy in our own rooms

The problem: There were many persistent absentees in class A. When they returned, the teacher's time was taken up with re-teaching sections of work. The pupils always needed extra support because of gaps in their knowledge and they were showing a distinct lack of independence.

Potential get out clause: It is their own fault for not turning up to school..



Solution: The super stuck wall was designed to provide information already taught. Essentially, it was folders stuck to a wall with commonly asked questions about previous learning linked to each folder. When pupils asked questions, instead of taking up the teacher's time in re-explanation, the pupils would be pointed to the wall and asked to find out the information for themselves.

Review: It took no time at all for the class to get used to the stuck wall. Preparing the information in hindsight added to the workload of the teacher. However, once it was established that this was a successful way to avoid repeating lessons and create independent attitudes to learning, the teacher began to have this strategy in the initial plans rather than after the fact.

Wider School – The bigger issues that we could work together to solve

Problem: The 'stage not age' class misbehave for everyone. Observing their attitudes, the teachers found that they had poor attitudes to learning. Phrases such as "what's the point." and "I can't read." were common excuses to get out of learning. They had experienced failure for so long that to protect themselves, they hid behind their past attainment as an excuse never to try.

Potential get out clause: Don't worry. They are like this for everyone.

Solution: The cross curricular PLTS (personal learning and thinking skills) log was created and used by several willing teachers. The pupils were each given a log and the teachers were on the lookout for positive learning behaviours. When a positive learning behaviour was observed, the pupil was quietly rewarded with a sticker in the appropriate section. For example, if a pupil came equipped with a pen, they were rewarded with acknowledgement in the 'self-manager' section. The log was carried around from class to class and, after a week, the person with the most achievements won a small prize. The following week, the most improved student won and so on.

Review: Pupils felt the reward that came with the effort of learning how to learn. Once pupils noticed their peers being rewarded for something as simple as listening to a partner (team worker) they saw how easy the rewards were to gain and began to copy the good learning behaviours. As this approach was consistent from class to class, their behaviour began to improve across the curriculum. This became an excellent case study to demonstrate to the remaining teachers the benefits of getting on board with the initiative.

Beyond School – Parents, community and the world beyond

The problem: Pupils are not engaged in reading because there is not a culture of reading in their home. Parents often pretend to have read with their children but there is no engagement in reading once pupils leave the school.

Potential get out clause: There is nothing I can do to reach them once they have left school.

Solution: Using a closed app, already being used to communicate with parents, teachers began to video the children reading to them. Instead of simply reading the book with their child, parents were invited to view their child reading online. The child would have the book with them and alongside the parent, would answer pre-set questions to recall their story, characters and ideas. Parents would then be invited to share their discussions via the app too.

Review: Most parents want to see photographs or videos of their child in school. Thanks to digital technology, this is very simple to achieve and can be done at a time that suits them. Using a parent's love of seeing their child online and the focus of a good book, we can make the steps towards engaging the parent in their child's reading.

Summary

No two contexts are alike. The above solutions may not work for you if copied verbatim. What each solution has in common is that a teacher or a group of teachers decided to take responsibility in seeking the solution to learning barriers.

A teacher like Jo may feel an avalanche of problems has left them so buried that they will never again see light. Choosing one problem at a time will get you out from under the weight.. or you can always choose to remain buried and blame your problems for the early exit from a job you love. That is also your choice.

With every solution you find, another problem will arise. The more problems you solve, the more your confidence in finding a solution will soar. Take responsibility. Start small and feel the euphoria and release that getting creative with the small stuff can bring. From the small successes will come bigger successes and who knows where your problem-solving capabilities could take you .

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