

Understanding the “Why”: Going Beyond the Diagnosis – Achieve Holistic Understanding of the Child

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When we see a child, the first thing we often talk about is his / her behaviour. Example: He walks around in class. She sleeps during Math lesson. She screams nonstop when she doesn't get what she wants. The question we then ask is: How do I get him/ her to stop? In order to determine this next step, we must first take a step back and understand the behaviour. We need to ask the “WHY”. Why is the behaviour happening?

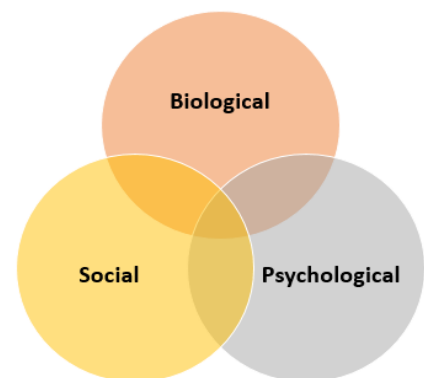


Children are diverse, with varying strengths and needs. Sometimes because the child may be known to have a diagnosis or have additional needs, educators may feel disempowered or inadequate on providing care and support. However, regardless of the additional need, what is more critical is to have a **holistic understanding of the child** to better support him/her in the class or at home.

A holistic understanding entails us to see the child as a whole individual, taking into account the:

- *Biological factors* (e.g. age, gender, physical health and yes – diagnosis is one of the many factors to consider),
- *Psychological factors* (e.g. beliefs, self-esteem), and
- *Social factors* (e.g. socioeconomic status, home living condition, peers relationships).

These factors play a part in how a child behaves and how he/she learns.



Biopsychosocial Model (Engel, 1977)

Below is an example of how biological, psychological and social factors can be facilitators or barriers to the child's learning and development.

Example:

Ana is a P2 student. Teacher S and Teacher Y observe that Ana does not submit her homework or submits them a week late.

As a result, Teacher Y often scolds Ana and asks her to stay back in class, making her have lesser time for recess to eat her snack and interact with her peers.

Teacher S speaks to Ana's mother and finds out that during weeknights, Ana stays at her grandparents' house as it is nearer the school. Her parents help with school work when she goes back to their house during the weekends.

With the additional information that Teacher S found out while talking to Ana's mother, Teacher S speaks to Teacher Y. Both teachers discussed and have recommended Ana to attend the school's "After School Care Program" to support Ana with her school work during the weekdays.

The observable behavior is that Ana's homework is not done or submitted late. When Teacher S asked the "why" and investigated further, it was found out that Ana's routine and support resources during weeknights differ [social factor]. With having a holistic understanding of Ana, the teachers were able to plan and implement how to better support Ana in school.

Here are some questions to help guide you have a holistic understanding of the child:

- Does the child have sensitivity to sound, light or a regulation need to be moving?
- Have there been any changes to the child's health?
- Has the child started taking any new medications?

Biological Factors



- How did the child feel? Is the behaviour indication of child's fight, flight or freeze response?
- Is the child aware of the consequences, or how does the behaviour serve the child e.g. avoid task, gain attention?

Psychological Factors



- Is the behaviour an accepted family/ cultural practice?
- Have there been any changes to the child's schooling arrangements?
- Has the child attended any new therapy interventions?

Social Factors



Think about it!

Can you think of other questions that you can ask to have a holistic understanding of the child? Do they relate to the biological, psychological or social factors?

Are there co-teachers, Special Educational Needs officers, or caregivers who could provide you with more understanding?

The next time you observe a child's behaviours, pause and take a step back. Understand the why and see the child holistically. Why not consider the child's strengths and interests too? It just might make the difference.

References:

- Engel, George L. (1977). The need for a new medical model: a challenge for biomedicine. *Science*, 196 (4286): 129-136.
- Black JM, Hoefft F. Utilizing biopsychosocial and strengths-based approaches within the field of child health: what we know and where we can grow. *New Dir Child Adolesc Dev*. 2015 Spring; 2015(147):13-20. doi: 10.1002/cad.20089. PMID: 25732011; PMCID: PMC4367185.