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That's Just the Tip of the Iceberg

By Dr. Bev Nance

Most of us have heard the expression “That’s just the tip of the iceberg.” We often use it when the event we see is minimal compared to what’s beneath it, that is, the patterns and assumptions that caused the event in the first place. For example, consider the following story. Billy, a sixth grade middle school student, received good grades and was never in trouble. However, one day at school, out of the blue, Billy hit the boy standing next to him and knocked him down. When the teacher asked him why he hit the other boy, Billy refused to answer, causing the teacher to send him to the office for discipline.

As a former principal, I was not unfamiliar with this scenario. Well-behaved students did sometimes get into trouble, and after some investigation, there was often a good explanation. Billy hitting the other boy was what we could see. We just had to ask the right questions, using a “Going Beneath the Iceberg” strategy, to get to the bottom of what else had happened.

1. The first layer beneath the surface involved looking for patterns and trends over time. Were there other incidents or behaviors during the last few weeks or months that may have led to this event? That is, were there any observable patterns that may have helped us predict Billy’s behavior?
2. The second layer beneath the surface involved looking for what structures were in place that may have created opportunities for this behavior to happen. Had there been any changes at school that prompted changes in patterns of behavior? Had any of Billy’s classes changed or was he interacting with different students?
3. Finally, for the bottom iceberg layer, what were the underlying assumptions that we as teachers and parents made about student behavior? We assumed Billy was fine, since he was making good grades and not complaining. We did not see the other student bother Billy and Billy would not explain his actions, so we assumed Billy initiated the conflict.

In the story involving Billy, the answers to the above questions solved the mystery. After talking with teachers, Billy’s mother, and a few of Billy’s friends, some patterns did emerge. Billy had become exceptionally quiet and somewhat irritable over the last few weeks. He had begun to sit by himself at lunch and stayed on the sidelines on the playground.

Upon further investigation of structures that may have prompted Billy’s new patterns of irritability and isolation, I noticed his schedule had changed slightly. Three weeks earlier he had moved from *Vocal Music* to *Introduction to Team Sports*, as part of the exploratory curriculum.

When talking with the physical education teacher, she informed me that he did not seem comfortable with the group of boys on his team and often asked to sit on the bench. When quizzed further, she said there were several occasions when he had been accidentally knocked down. Red flags began to rise.

I began to think about the assumptions we had made regarding Billy's behavior. He never complained, so we thought he was happy. He was earning good grades, so we thought he was engaged. No adult ever noticed anything exceptionally unusual, so we also did not notice his quiet irritability or desire to stay on the sidelines.

At that point, I sat Billy down and told him I knew there must be a particular reason why he hit another student - that he was an excellent student with exemplary citizenship. I shared with him my "Tip of the Iceberg" theory, relating the subtle patterns we had finally noticed, the change in structures such as the schedule, and the false assumptions we, the adults, had all made. At that point he began to cry. The boy he hit had been calling him names and knocking him down in Team Sports class for three weeks, and Billy was trying to deal with it by himself. However, he finally lost his temper and hit him when the boy insulted his sister. Billy's bad behavior was just the "tip of the iceberg," and discovering that allowed me then to take appropriate actions.

This is just one small example of how we as adults can jump to conclusions about our kids' behaviors. Our days are busy and we often look for the expected, making quick assumptions based on familiar past experience. When the unexpected does happen, we might consider taking a little time to "look beneath the iceberg." What patterns did we overlook, what changes in structure or rules occurred, and what assumptions might we have made? The unexpected may have been predictable! There just might be a few icebergs floating by.

Dr. Bev Nance has been an educational consultant for over nine years. Her experiences as a public school teacher and administrator, Director of Leadership Development for CSD, and former co-director of the Leadership Academy for Character Education provide her with a wealth of knowledge and understanding on the issues that face education today. Creating opportunities for educators and community members to collaborate on best practices for student achievement is part of Bev's personal mission statement.

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