

Theory of Constraints (TOC) Thinking for a Change

Linda Trapnell examines the impact of TOC on playground behaviour.

It's a question that most teachers and heads ponder at some stage in any school year: *'How can I get very young pupils to take responsibility for their own behaviour?'*

My own problem centred on a Year 2 class that contained a group of bright, mischievous and potentially disruptive pupils. Just telling them not to do something was an invitation to further mayhem, both in and outside the classroom.

I'd read some of Dr Eli Goldratt's work on conflict resolution and problem solving in the workplace, but would it work with pupils? Why not? The root problems were probably the same; only the age of the protagonists was different. I made contact with Dr Goldratt during one of his trips to England

and he offered us free training to learn the techniques. His techniques, based on the Theory of Constraints, are recommended study in most MBA courses and degree studies for Business Studies, Production, Management, etc. The business novel "The Goal" was written to show how the techniques could be used in solving industrial, management and personal dilemmas.

We agreed to commit some of the school budget to pay for release time, but we considered it

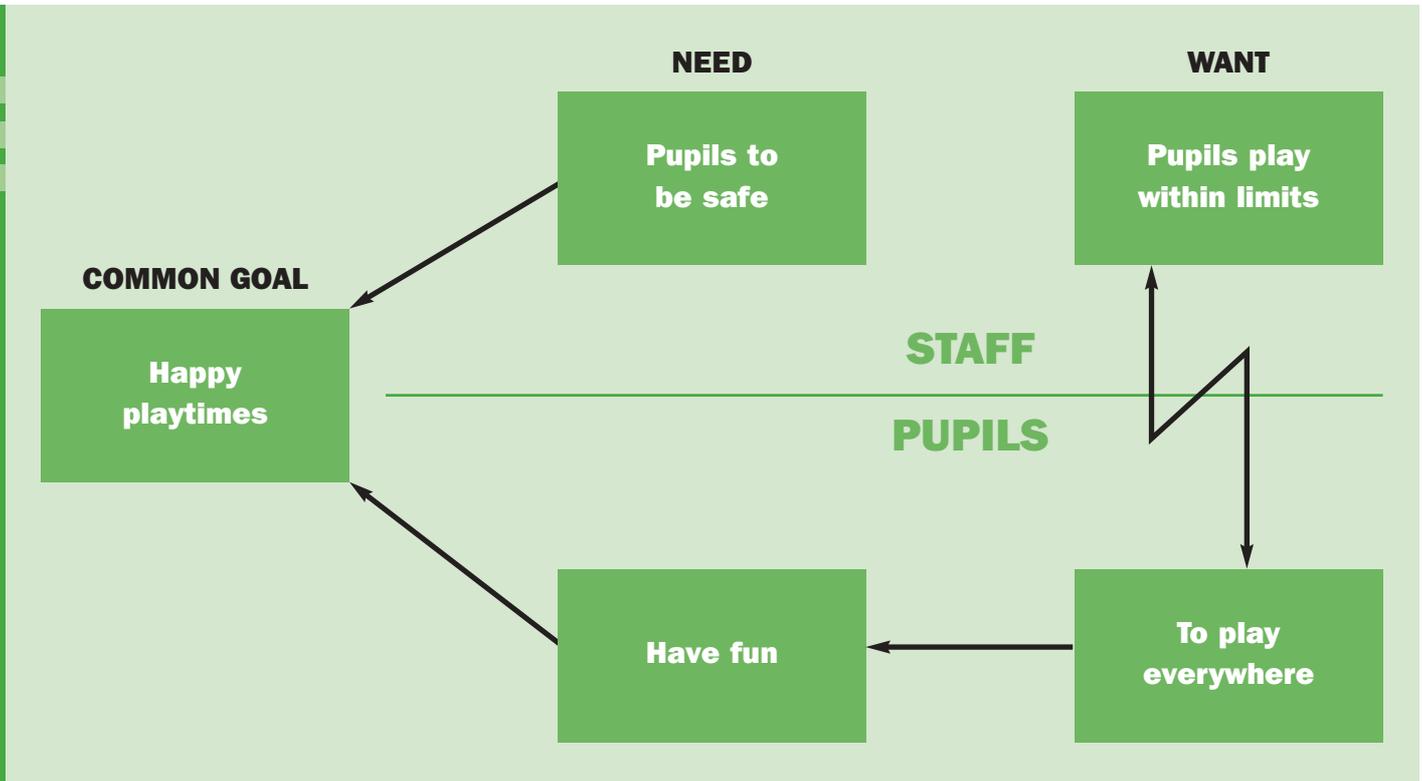
justified if it went halfway to resolving our problems.

So which problem should we start with?

The first issue I tackled was the inability of pupils to play within safe limits in the playground. We had a sloping field at the back of the school and two small playgrounds surrounded by flowerbeds. For most of the year the field area is out of bounds as it is wet and muddy. With the onset of fine weather in the spring the

Dr. Goldratt's Theory of Constraints is an overall framework for helping businesses determine:

- **What to change – what is the leverage point?**
- **What to change to – what are the simple, practical solutions?**
- **How to cause the change – overcoming the inherent resistance to change.**



pupils were allowed onto the field and the mayhem began!

The pupils discovered every dangerous aspect of our outside area and drove the playground supervisors dizzy. There were more minor injuries than most A & E departments normally deal with. I was faced with demands to ‘do something’.

Was this the moment to test TOC?

I had no other great ideas so this was it. I gathered all the pupils in the school hall. They obviously did not consider themselves to have a problem. So what did they think was my problem? We talked of the events the day before and I asked the pupils how they felt playtime had gone. Battle scars were shown and tales of great misdeeds were told (complete with full names of miscreants – 6 year olds will always tell).

Together (head + 200 pupils) we began to construct a cloud, one of the basic TOC tools used to resolve (internal and external) conflicts and to solve problems.

So where did we go from here? We had to look at the assumptions. A child said that you didn’t have to play everywhere to have fun.

Another said that the rules didn’t have to be made by the teachers – children could do that.

I asked the pupils what rules they would make and we wrote (and illustrated) all suggestions on a flip chart. The pupils came up with more rules than I would have suggested – even rules to prevent events that I didn’t know were taking place!

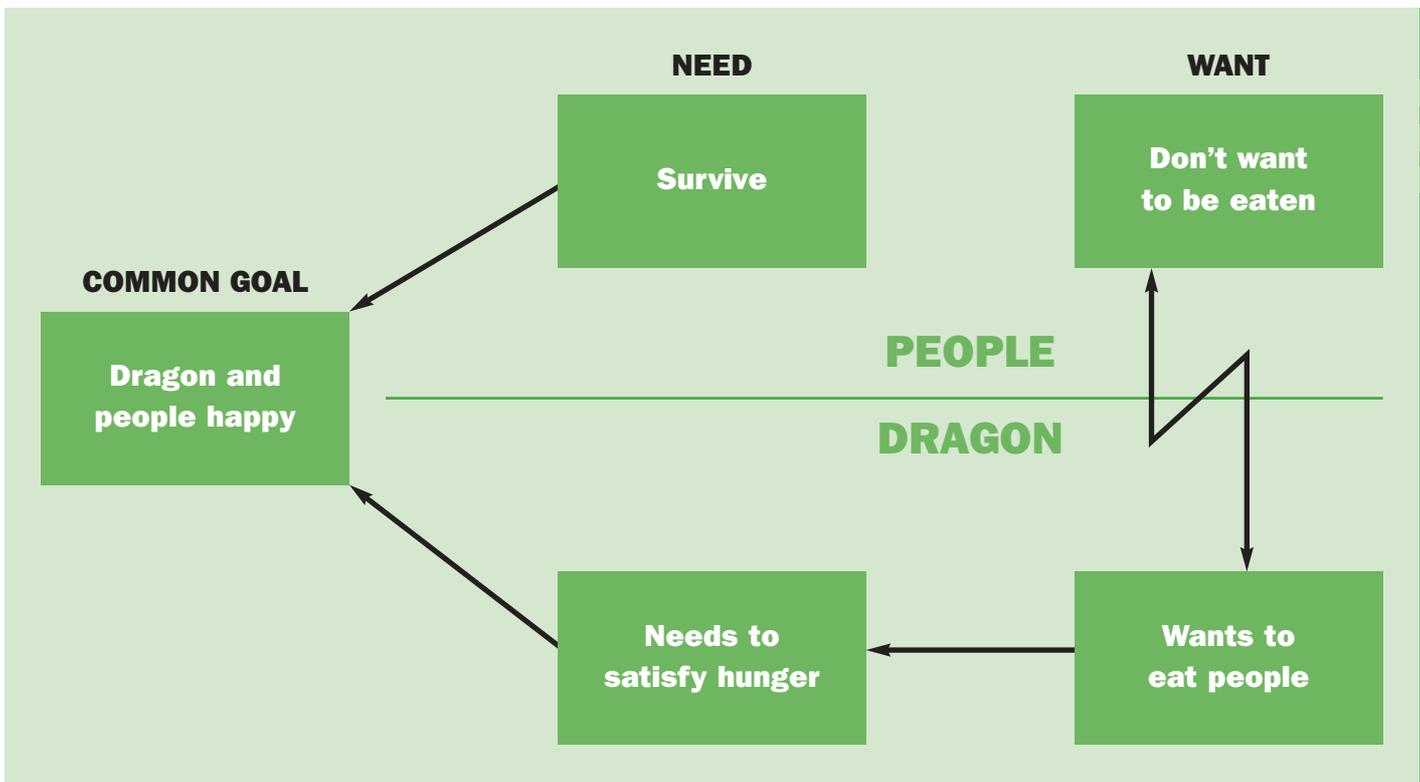


Having decided on a short list of rules, e.g. no swinging on the trees, to protect the flowers etc., we came to sanctions. What should happen if somebody broke the rules?

The general consensus was that in the first instance they would point out to each other any contravention of the rules (no hitting, was my only interjection). If this was ignored then tell a teacher. What then I enquired? The child should be sent to me. And what would I do with them? “Tie them up” said a voice from the back – why do the dissidents always sit at the back? I pointed out the limits of my authority and visualised the headlines in the national press. We agreed that a more appropriate action might be for me to write to the child’s parents detailing their misbehaviour (a few wary looks).

Crunch time was approaching – would it make any difference to the behaviour in the playground? I began to send the pupils out of the hall. The usual little band stopped to show me grazed knees, tell me of new babies, expose gaps in teeth and share details of birthday parties. But would they carry through what we had discussed?

The answer was a resounding yes! Playtime behaviour improved enormously. We learnt with time that to maintain this behaviour we have to go through this process on a



termly basis and the nuances of change in playground layout and the latest crazes in games need to be included into the rules to keep them alive, fresh and relevant.

Are there other implications?

The pupils now were aware of the cloud and how it could be used to resolve a conflict. Could we extend its use into other areas? We looked at using the cloud in solving dilemmas in stories (in preparation for solving real-life dilemmas). The pupils were given the problem of the hungry dragon. We told them the story:

Every week the dragon comes to the gates of the town and demands that the people hand over a person as his ration of food for the week. If the people refuse to do this then the dragon will eat them all! Every week the people hold a raffle and draw a name from a hat. This is the person who is handed over to the dragon. The people, however, decide that there must be a way to avoid losing all their friends and agree to draw a cloud to solve their problem.

Many suggestions were made for how to keep the dragon and the people happy. Killing the dragon was not an option as the dragon would not be very happy!

Converting the dragon to vegetarianism or moving him on to the next village was also discounted.

The most popular solution was to get some old clothes and stuff them with meat and chicken. A mask was then to be put on the 'dummy' and it was to be left outside the town gates. The needs of both parties were being met. The assumption that was being challenged was that the dragon could only eat people.

We used the cloud – along with other TOC tools – with pupils as young as five with great success in many areas of the curriculum. One significant benefit is that these are the tools being used in business and industry.

*How's that for transferable skills? **TEX***

Further information and details of training packages available to schools and other organisations can be obtained from:

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Linda Trapnell has been a teacher for over 30 years across all phases of education, with 10 years as Head Teacher at Alderman Pounder Infant School and Nursery in Nottingham. Currently she is operating as an Independent Consultant

involved in many national training initiatives (NPQH, New Visions and Leading from the Middle) for NCSL. She has become a recognised expert in Thinking Skills and is regularly asked to speak at international conferences. She has spoken over the last three years to education and business conferences in London, LA, Detroit, Mexico and Singapore.

She has recently developed materials to support work in the classroom, including a video of work with primary children. The role of Midday Supervisors is an area of increasing interest and Linda has developed a training package to increase the effectiveness of Lunchtime supervision.

For more information read
 Goldratt E & Cox J, *The Goal*,
 Gower Press ISBN 0-566-07418-4
 (1990) *Theory of Constraints*
 North River Press, Massachusetts.