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Understanding student behaviour using the MEATS framework

What is a student's behaviour trying to communicate?

Behaviour comes in many forms: big, small, loud, quiet, internalising, externalising, disruptive, or withdrawn. While we often describe behaviour with these labels, the more important question is what each behaviour is communicating.



Behaviour is a type of communication. This is true across the lifespan but is especially significant for children and teenagers who are still developing their verbal and cognitive abilities. Behaviour expresses information about a student's internal state, emotions, and needs. Even nonverbal behaviours such as facial expressions, tone of voice, or body posture can communicate volumes about how a student is experiencing the classroom. Understanding the function and context of behaviour provides valuable insight into a student's psychological state and unmet needs.

In educational settings, this perspective is critical. When teachers understand the function of behaviour, they can design responses that support rather than escalate. For example, if a student is disruptive because they are seeking attention, punitive strategies can unintentionally reinforce that behaviour. By contrast, providing attention for appropriate behaviour and building meaningful teacher-student connections can shift patterns more effectively (Desautels, 2020). Similarly, when behaviour reflects avoidance due to anxiety, educators can scaffold support, making challenges more manageable rather than reinforcing escape.

The nervous system plays a central role here. Neuroscience research shows that behaviour is often a reflection of neurobiological states of arousal. Stress, fatigue, and unmet sensory needs activate the brain's threat detection systems, narrowing a student's capacity to think flexibly and engage in learning (Immordino-Yang et al., 2019; Porges, 2021). When teachers see behaviour as communication rather than defiance, they are better able to co-regulate, calm the nervous system, and restore conditions for learning.

The MEATS framework

One simple way to remember the functions of behaviour is with the acronym **M-E-A-T-S.**

M – Medical Cause
Sometimes behaviour reflects a medical or physiological factor. A student who is withdrawn, restless, or tearful may be tired, in pain, or recovering from illness. In these situations, behaviour change requires accommodation and care rather than discipline. Recognising medical influences protects against misinterpreting a genuine need as misbehaviour.

E – Escape
Students may use behaviour to escape or avoid tasks or environments they perceive as overwhelming. This is often linked with anxiety or learning difficulties. Escape behaviour brings immediate relief but strengthens avoidance in the long term. Supporting students to take small, supported steps toward the challenge helps them build confidence and self-efficacy. Providing safe spaces or sensory breaks can also reduce the need for disruptive escape attempts (Muris & Broeren, 2019).

A – Attention
Some behaviours are bids for connection. Importantly, all attention is attention – whether positive or negative. If a student receives a reprimand for disruption, the underlying drive for attention is still being reinforced. Effective strategies include planned ignoring of minor disruptive behaviours, combined with intentional recognition of positive behaviours. Acknowledging effort, persistence, and contribution, not just achievement, nurtures a student's sense of belonging and internal motivation (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012; Desautels, 2020).

T – Tangible
Students sometimes act out to gain access to something tangible: a grade, an object, or a privilege. While reward systems can motivate, overreliance on extrinsic rewards can undermine intrinsic motivation. Balancing tangible motivators with authentic acknowledgement of learning and growth is key (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

S – Sensory
For some students, behaviour reflects attempts to regulate sensory input. This might involve seeking sensory stimulation (such as fidgeting or movement) or avoiding overwhelming input (such as covering ears in a noisy room). This is especially relevant for neurodiverse learners, who may have heightened or reduced sensory thresholds. Supporting sensory regulation with tools like flexible seating, noise reduction options, or movement breaks can prevent escalation and increase learning readiness (Kinnealey et al., 2020).

Working out the function: Behaviour ABCs

To identify the function of behaviour - what part of the M-E-A-T-S framework is responsible, educators can use the ABC framework:

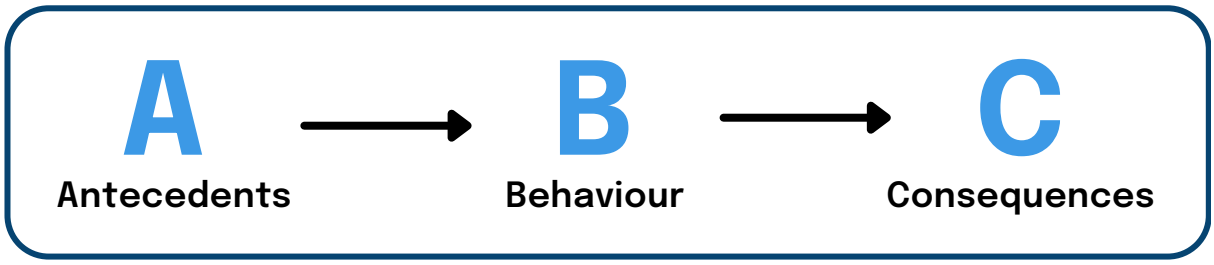
- Antecedent – What happens right before the behaviour?
- Behaviour – What exactly does the student do?
- Consequence – What happens immediately after the behaviour?

By mapping A-B-C patterns, teachers can ask: What purpose is this behaviour serving? Which MEATS category does it reflect? And how can I intervene in a way that addresses the underlying need rather than just the surface behaviour?

Bringing it together in the classroom

When educators understand behaviour as communication, they create more compassionate and effective interventions. Instead of simply reacting, teachers can step back, identify the function, and choose responses that de-escalate and support regulation.

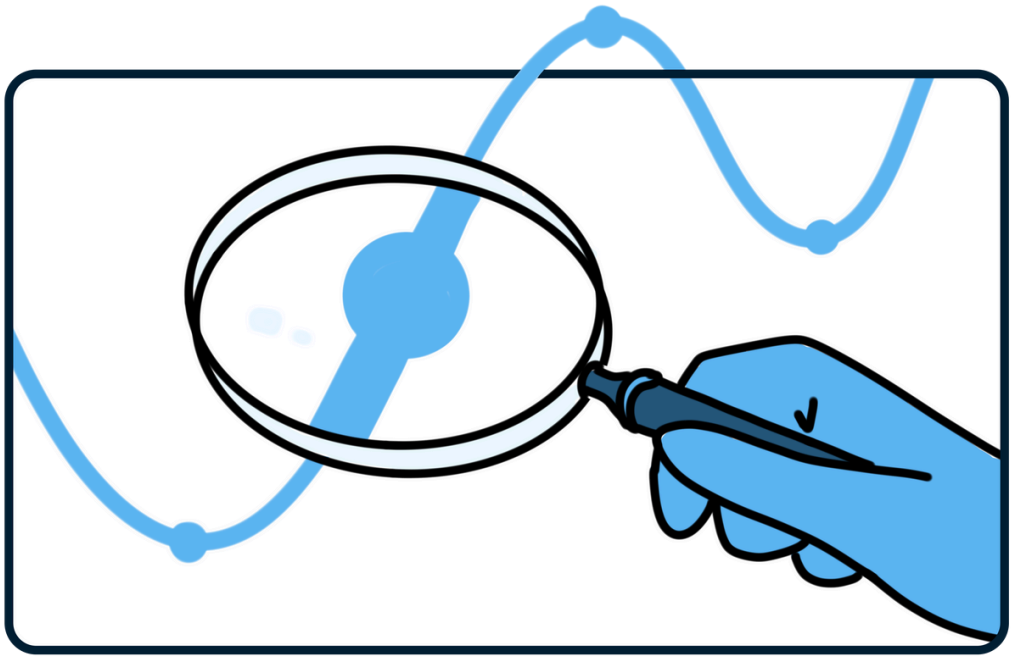
The MEATS framework and the ABCs give a practical structure to this process. They remind us that behind every behaviour is a student's nervous system working hard to cope, connect, or communicate. When we respond with curiosity and support, we not only address the immediate behaviour but also strengthen relationships and promote long-term resilience (Siegel, 2012; Porges, 2021).





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