5.5: Social cognitive theory

In chapter two, we examined behaviour theory in detail and how it forms the foundation of our ability to think functionally about challenging student behaviour. Behaviour theory, you will remember is associated with BF Skinner and focuses on behaviour being observable and measurable and influenced by the environment in which it occurs. Consequences maintain or reinforce the behaviour. While no apology is made for the behavioural perspective of the book being predicated on behaviourism, it is important to always consider other theories of learning from which we can draw to provide a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of learning (behaviour is learning too). Therefore, a brief introduction to social cognitive theory is presented here to promote critical thinking beyond behaviour theory alone, to inform our practice.
Social cognitive theory has developed from the work of Albert Bandura. Founded in behaviourism, the inclusion of the cognitive aspects of learning have seen a greater balance develop between the behaviourist perspective and cognitive psychology. This balance has also been reflected with the change of the name from its original title of social learning theory to social cognitive theory (Ormrod, 2014). The basic premise of social cognitive theory is that a person’s behaviour is the result of three reciprocal factors. These are behaviour, personal characteristics and the environment. Behaviour is about the social world and the influence of other people’s behaviour on our own behaviour. The focus is on shared experiences with others and the molding of a child’s behaviour through the modelling of that behaviour by others and subsequently the imitation of that behaviour. This requires the child to look, remember and do (Hoffnung, et al. 2019).

Modelling, observing and copying behaviour are key elements of social cognitive theory. Teacher behaviour has a very significant impact on student behaviour. What teachers do is closely scrutinised by students therefore it is critical that teachers demonstrate desired behaviours. Bandura (1986) noted that there were four key components needed for learning from modelling to be successful. These were attention, retention, motor reproduction and motivation. Let us look at how the basic assumptions of social cognitive theory may apply when teaching social emotional skills to students (Ormrod, 2014, p. 299-300).

**People can learn by observing others.** While it is important to make time to explicitly teach social emotional skills to students it is equally as important to provide them with opportunities to observe and watch these skills being modelled.

**Learning may or may not lead to behaviour change** that is learning is a mental change that may not be demonstrated in observable and measurable behaviours. While students may understand the importance and application of social emotional skills in a cognitive intellectual manner, the application of these skills in real life situations may require reteaching and scaffolding before these students can autonomously use these skills in their life.

**Cognitive processes influence motivation and learning.** Having goals and expectations are important for
motivation and self-efficacy (a person’s belief in their own ability) is instrumental in effort and persistence toward achieving goals. It is important to recognise that anti-social behaviours have served an important function in a student’s life in getting their needs met. Self-efficacy and trust in the ability of prosocial social emotional skills in getting their needs met requires setting up supports and situations that provide these students with small successes and feelings of accomplishment.

- **People and their environment influence each other.** Social cognitive theory posits people influence their environment and do so intentionally. It is important to remember that the use of prosocial behaviours may not be adaptive for students that continue to live in abusive and neglectful environments. Given this it may be that the student may require additional support in learning and using social emotional skills. It is also worth noting that some students may have already developed a bad reputation amongst their peer group which may disincentivise the use of social emotional skills. Supporting the development of safe relationships across the school community will help provide the student with the safety to learn academic and social emotional competencies.

- **Behaviour becomes more and more self-regulated.** As we grow from infancy, we take greater control of our own behaviour and thinking to achieve and learn, we learn to self-regulate. While these students may experience setbacks it is important to observe and document times when these students have demonstrated the ability to be self-regulated through the use of prosocial skills.

### References


