The Kelvin Effect

By Michael Gordon, Ph.D.

Countless books and professional journals are filled with suggestions for the proper classroom management of disruptive children. That advice typically revolves around the systematic injection of adequate incentives dispensed in such a way that the youngster retains some dignity and desire to comply. In my capacity as director of a clinic for pathologically impulsive children, I heartily concur with these suggestions, especially if they are commingled with common-sensical efforts to accommodate to the child's own particular learning and personality style.

My impression, though, is that discussion of classroom management issues often leaves out an important if not critical component of the process that I have dubbed the Kelvin Effect. Rather than launch into a scholarly discussion of this phenomenon, I will instead describe the circumstances that lead to its discovery.

My first job, like the first jobs of so many of my profession, was as a staff psychologist in a mental health clinic. I had a variety of duties, one of which was to consult with a program that provided educational and mental health services to youngsters who could not be maintained for a full day in their home school setting. After attending their morning academic classes, they would come to this afternoon program for additional tutoring and therapy. The group was comprised mainly of children who would nowadays be labeled as having attention deficit disorder. Some youngsters with more serious emotional problems also joined the fray.

The program was designed and run by two highly competent women, one a psychiatric nurse by training and the other a social worker. The program became

popular with schools because it took these extremely difficult children off their hands for many hours. It also offered an array of psychiatric interventions unavailable within school systems.

Part of my responsibilities to this program involved responding when one or more of the program's participants decided at some level that compliant behavior wasn't all it was cracked up to be. I would get a call on the intercom, fly down three sets of stairs, and find one child in the corner launching wood blocks and perhaps another on a table threatening world destruction. Finding none of the skills I learned in graduate school highly relevant to these situations, I would somehow manage to be sufficiently cajoling, threatening, or physically deft to restore the room to some semblance of order. Actually, many of the tempests would simply run their course given sufficient time and the appearance of the afternoon snack of cookies and juice.

Because my emergency response functions came to occupy all too much of my time, the powers that were decided to hire an extra staff member whose responsibility it was to keep the peace. By routes I can't recall, we happened upon the services of a fellow by the name of Kelvin.

Now Kelvin was an absolutely lovely individual who was gentle, soft-spoken, bright, and charming. He was also the largest human being I have ever met. His enormous head rested directly on two massive shoulders that connected with bulging arms larger than most compact cars. His body could easily have been mistaken for a small mountain or at least a sizable hill. Standing next to him you could not help but feel dwarfed by his extraordinary bulk. Let me put it this way: If you were in the unfortunate position of being tied to railway tracks, you would feel perfectly safe as long as Kelvin was facing all oncoming trains.

Kelvin's classroom management techniques were quite straightforward. He would sit on the edge of a quivering table with his arms folded and legs splayed. If a child started to become aggressive or agitated, he would turn his head Jabba-the-Hutt style, raise his right eyebrow, and emit a low rumbling grunt. This would almost invariably lead to an immediate and complete cessation of all disruptive activity.

The day Kelvin entered the employ of this classroom program was the last time I ever had to respond to a call for action, that is unless Kelvin was on vacation or ill. There was a dramatic decrease in aggressive behavior and a marked improvement in the effectiveness of other programming – as long as Kelvin was in the room. The children, especially those of anxious dispositions, also commented that the program seemed safer and more comfortable while Kelvin maintained his watch.

Now you're probably thinking that the causality I'm ascribing to Kelvin's sheer bulk might be misplaced. After all, it could have just been the presence of another adult, regardless of body proportions. And maybe it was just his maleness or personal qualities not associated with his physical presence.

While I cannot offer hard data in support, I can tell you that cries for help from staff were frequent (although not as frequent) when Kelvin's substitute, always males or females of more normal dimensions, took his place. According to other staff, Kelvin never said all that much. He might wink at a youngster passing by or grin when someone joked, but that was about the level of his communication.

I also should emphasize that Kelvin's presence had a salutary effect on the behavior of all the children, regardless of their diagnostic status. His heft diminished not only disruptive behavior, but also symptomatic outcroppings of severe anxiety and

psychosis.

A month or two into Kelvin's tenure I met privately with one of the more impulsive youngsters for a therapy appointment. I commented to this boy I'll call Ron that his behavior in the program had been downright stellar over the past weeks. I wondered aloud what had changed in his life that had led to such a turnaround. Ron hesitated not a second and simply asked, "Have you met Kelvin?" He then went on to comment, "Dr. Gordon, I may be hyperactive and very messed up but I'm not stupid. Kelvin could kill me with one finger on his right hand."

The Kelvin Effect took hold for more than a year until, sadly, Kelvin died from a massive coronary. So profound had been his impact on the program that the administrator asked that his position be filled immediately and that I write the job description. My first draft read: "Wanted: Giant of a man with an intimidating look who's a teddy bear at heart. Anyone under 275 pounds need not apply."

Ever since this initial experience with the Kelvin effect, I've wondered how rates of referrals for school misbehaviors would be affected if Kelvin clones were strategically placed in educational settings across America. Given what we know about the essence and realities associated with disruptive behaviors, I can't imagine that a higher Kelvin density wouldn't sharply reduce the impact of these symptoms on classroom climate. Dare I say that referrals for child psychiatric disorders might be reduced if we followed this plan?

And it wouldn't be all that hard to establish a program designed to take advantage of the Kelvin Effect. It would just take a bit of energy and innovation. We simply need to develop a system whereby retired NFL linemen, NBA forwards and centers, sumo wrestlers, and those strongmen who pull planes and tip over trucks are positioned in

high risk areas within our schools. Given the rates of injury among professional athletes, you would think that the supply of high-volume individuals is ample. And I suppose it doesn't have to be former professional athletes. Why not college level individuals of large body mass?

Now I'm not sure that prior research would help us much with decisions surrounding the actual deployment of our Kelvins. But any educator I've ever talked with indicates that the classroom is typically the least likely setting to generate an office referral for misbehavior. Far more likely a venue is the bus, cafeteria, or hallway.

To answer these kinds of questions and to explore the Kelvin Effect thoroughly, I hereby call for an international effort on the order of the Genome Project or the NASA Space Station endeavor. Surely, if we can put a man on the moon we can put a Kelvin in the cafeteria.