

# Elementary School Classroom Management

Learning how to “manage” their classrooms is one of the most difficult aspects of the job for many teachers. It involves creating and maintaining a delicate balance of control, while not stifling students’ energy and creativity. An effective classroom manager plays an integral role in fostering student achievement, as studies have found that the degree to which students are actively engaged in learning has a strong impact on how well they perform in the classroom and on standardized tests (see, for example, Center on English Learning and Achievement 2000; Haberman 1995).

While becoming an effective classroom manager requires experience, some hints can help teachers improve their skills related to classroom management.

## What is Classroom Management?

The “old” view of classroom management focused primarily on discipline, but most educators now agree that “Authoritarian approaches may get students to comply, but they don’t help students develop self-discipline and responsibility” (Willis 1996, 1). Effective teacher-managers understand that when you employ effective approaches, you:

- *Recognize that management and instruction* are not entirely separate tasks.
- *Promote student self-management*, rather than an entirely teacher-managed classroom.
- *Use tactics to prevent student misbehavior from occurring*, rather than relying on strategies to deal with it once it arises.
- *Keep discipline positive* (reinforcing good behavior, communicating high expectations and the belief that students can improve their behavior) instead of presenting discipline solely as a reaction to misbehavior.
- *Develop an eclectic approach* to suit a diverse classroom, rather than simply adhering to one strategy in all situations (Wilson 1996, 1-2).

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The job of a teacher is first and foremost to instruct, not to manage. Yet management and instruction are inherently interdependent—in order for the learning environment to be its best, both elements must be present, and working side by side, all the time. Effective classroom management also is proactive by nature; it not only addresses current discipline problems but keeps future problems from occurring.

Good management facilitates good instruction, as any teacher can confirm. If students are aware of rules and procedures, if materials and equipment are organized, and if the teacher deals with disruption quickly, instruction will flow more smoothly and students can focus on the lesson at hand. Just as important, good instruction facilitates an orderly classroom. When lessons are well planned, objectives are clear, and learning is meaningful, discipline problems occur less frequently. Students are on-task and interested in what they are learning, and they have less reason to be disruptive.

Research identifies several characteristics of effective teachers that contribute to an understanding of why classroom management is a critical component of these teachers' skill base.

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For example, the skill of “with-it-ness” was detailed in a study conducted by Morrow et al. designed to answer the question: “What is the nature of exemplary early literacy instruction?” They found that exemplary teachers:

. . . were extremely aware of what was happening in their rooms. They were virtually always in a position where they could see everyone in the room . . . [they] seemed extremely attuned to intervening before a problem escalated in the classroom. Like good parents, these teachers seemed to possess a sixth-sense for when things became too noisy, or even too quiet, in an area of the classroom.

The high level of with-it-ness was a prominent element of the exemplary teachers' classroom management style (1999, 470).

Morrow et al. also described other characteristics of effective classroom management leading to high student achievement:

Teachers were consistent in their management techniques, so children knew what was expected of them and consequently carried out work that needed to be done. The day flowed smoothly from one activity to another, and routines were regular. The activities were varied to keep the children engaged. Furthermore, the affective quality in the rooms was exemplary; teachers were warm and caring. . . . In such an atmosphere, children learned to respect the teacher and one another (1999, 474).

Taylor, et al. observed 104 kindergarten through third-grade teachers and then categorized them as “most accomplished,” “moderately accomplished,” and “least accomplished” based on the degree to which they demonstrated elements of effective instruction. The “most accomplished” teachers:

were experts at classroom management. . . . In general, they had well-established classroom routines and procedures for handling behavior problems, quick transitions between activities, and a rapid pace of instruction, thus allowing for high instructional density. [They] managed, on average, to engage virtually all (96%) of their students in the work of the classroom (1999, 44).

In contrast, the on-task rate for moderately accomplished teachers was 84 percent, and the rate for the least accomplished teachers was 61 percent.

Numerous other studies also have identified aspects of good classroom management as being strongly linked to higher levels of student learning. These aspects include:

- The classroom management system emphasizes curriculum-related activities and maintaining student engagement in those activities (Brophy n.d., 10). The teacher does not see discipline as a separate issue or as a “set of controls.” Faced with a problem, such

teachers “find something the student is interested in, find something else the student can do, find something else the student can share.” In other words, these teachers “view discipline primarily as a natural consequence of their ability to interest and involve learners” (Haberman 1995, 5-6).

- The teacher is consistently well prepared and follows predictable, although not rigid, patterns of behavior and activities. Students know what is expected of them (Wharton-McDonald, Pressley, and Hampston 1998).
- The teacher minimizes disruptive behavior by redirecting students in a positive way before the problem becomes overt (Wharton-McDonald, Pressley, and Hampston 1998).

## The Classroom Environment

The physical environment of the classroom is an important factor in preventing behavior problems. To minimize distractions, you might designate places in the classroom for specific activities—such as large-group instruction or individual student work—or redesign high-traffic areas to minimize congestion. Classroom materials should be plentiful to help avoid student conflicts, and the room should be organized and visually appealing (Stewart, Evans, and Kaczynski 1997).

You also might try seating your young students in small clusters to promote language interaction (Stewart, Evans, and Kaczynski 1997), and scatter typically engaged students throughout the room to serve as models for other students (Smith and Misra 1992). Finally, warmly greeting each child every day can help young children feel wanted and therefore less likely to misbehave merely to get attention.

## Classroom Rules

Classroom rules can promote children’s good behavior if they are positive statements that encourage problem solving related to issues that often arise at school. Rules for young children might include “Take care of friends and materials” and “Be a good listener and use your words to solve problems” (Horsch, Chen, and Nelson 1999, 224). In addition, involving students in developing classroom rules with you will help them feel

ownership of the rules and so be more likely to abide by them (Palardy 1993).

## State rules in positive terms and focus on observable behavior.

Researchers Rademacher, Callahan, and Pederson-Seelye offer the following suggestions for establishing classroom rules:

- *Make them acceptable to both teacher and students.* Rules should be reasonable, and should be changed when conditions change.
- *Begin each rule with an action word,* and state it in positive terms. For example, “Walk in the halls” is more effective than “Don’t run in the halls.”
- *Focus the rule on observable behaviors* (i.e., you can see the behavior associated with the rule). “Raise your hand to be recognized” is observable, while “Think before you speak” is not.
- *Have only eight or fewer rules.*
- *Post rules so that you and your students can easily see them.* The visual reminder can help students comply (1998, 286-287).

Effective teachers also know that simply developing a system of rules and consequences is not enough; students need to be instructed on classroom rules and procedures through modeling and practice. In Cotton’s view:

Effective managers socialize their students to the student role through instruction and modeling. It is important that these teachers be consistent in articulating demands and monitoring compliance, but the most important thing is to make sure that students know what to do in the first place (2001, online).

## Effective Classroom Routines

Establishing clear expectations for student behavior is the primary purpose for setting up classroom routines. If students are familiar with the processes necessary to get a particular job done, they are more likely to complete it in an orderly manner.

Develop plans for these activities that work for your physical space and your management style. If a routine is not effective, you can involve your students in redesigning the routine.

- **Movement.** Develop plans for entering and exiting the classroom and changing class configurations, such as moving from whole class to small-group instruction. Also, plan for movement of individual students to meet needs such as pencil sharpening and getting supplies.
- **Non-instructional tasks.** This includes activities such as taking attendance, collecting permission slips, making participation counts (snacks, extracurricular activities), and keeping the classroom neat. Students can assist with some of these tasks; some of these tasks also can be used as instructional activities.
- **Materials management.** If routines are developed for the distribution, collection and storage of instructional materials, student helpers will be able to complete them quickly.
- **Transitions.** If instructional materials are prepared and organized, transitions between activities will be smooth and take little time. Necessary materials might be listed on the daily schedule so students know what they will need and can prepare for an activity as materials for the previous activity are stored or collected.
- **Group work.** Each team member within a group should have a job, and over time each student should have an opportunity to do each job. Develop job descriptions and routines for assigning the jobs. Jobs might be facilitator, time-keeper, reporter, recorder, encourager, questioner, materials manager, taskmaster. Make up your own or use one of the many plans that have been developed and are available on the web or in journals (Collaborative for Excellence in Teacher Preparation n.d., online).

### Teaching About and Supporting Appropriate Student Behavior in the Classroom

Cotton summarizes research about specific attitudes and behaviors of teachers that support the development of acceptable student behavior. These include:

- **Holding and communicating high expectations for student learning and behavior.** Through the personal warmth and encouragement they express to students and the classroom requirements they establish, effective teachers make sure that students know they are expected to learn well and behave appropriately.
- **Establishing and clearly teaching classroom rules and procedures.** Effective teachers teach behavioral rules and classroom routines in much the same way as they teach instructional content, and they review these frequently at the beginning of the school year and periodically thereafter. Classroom rules are posted in classrooms.
- **Specifying consequences and their relation to student behavior.** Effective teachers are careful to explain the connection between students' misbehavior and teacher-imposed sanctions. This connection, too, is taught and reviewed as needed.
- **Enforcing classroom rules promptly, consistently, and equitably.** Effective teachers respond quickly to misbehavior, respond in the same way at different times, and impose consistent sanctions regardless of the gender, race, or other personal characteristics of misbehaving students.
- **Sharing with students the responsibility for classroom management.** Effective teachers work to inculcate in students a sense of belonging and self-discipline, rather than viewing discipline as something imposed from the outside.
- **Maintaining a brisk pace for instruction and making smooth transitions between activities.** Effective teachers keep things moving in their classrooms, which increases learning as well as reduces the likelihood of misbehavior (excerpted from Cotton 2001, online).

## Classroom Management through Instruction

“Busy children are usually good children,” notes Polly Greenberg (1992, 13). Instructional strategies can help prevent behavior problems if:

- *They’re interesting.* Students can become indifferent or rebellious with monotonous routines, old content, and tedious presentations and so be more likely to misbehave (Palardy 1993).
- *They’re matched with your pupils’ abilities.* Greenberg recommends channeling young students’ inappropriate classroom behavior into positive classroom contributions by incorporating each child’s special abilities—such as an aptitude for comedy, art, story telling, and helping—into something from which the whole class can learn (1992).
- *They’re matched with your pupils’ interests.* Alber and Heward suggest that teachers turn “inappropriate” interests into positive learning experiences by, for example, allowing a student to sometimes read a comic book rather than literature because it helps her acquire skills needed to read classroom assignments (1996).

### Some Tips for Reacting to Misbehavior

- Be selective in punishing students for misbehavior. Sometimes a student is bored or simply wants attention. Try to involve the student in another activity or ask the student to explain an idea or concept.
- Decide what is really “bad” behavior. Don’t punish students for everything!
- Keep a sense of humor. Sometimes students are trying to be funny, not bad.
- React calmly to disruptive behavior. Students like to “push buttons.”
- Make the consequences for misbehavior consistent.
- Let students know they are responsible for their behavior (Tanner, Bottoms, Feagin, and Bearman 1999, 37).

## Learn to use nonverbal cues effectively to recognize good behaviors and manage problem behavior.

Instruction also can be used to teach children basic conflict resolution strategies and how to make good choices. Burnett identifies four steps to conflict resolution for young children:

- 1) *Identify the problem without blame.* Focus on the conflict without placing blame on one person for the situation. For example, “William says that you called him a put-down name, Juanita. Is it ever okay to call someone a bad name?”
- 2) *Brainstorm alternatives together.* You might ask, “William, what do you think is a good amount of time to be on a swing?” or “Juanita, what do you think should happen if one student has been on the swing a long time and another student has been waiting for a turn?”
- 3) *Agree on a solution.* Ask students to state which possible solution they think would most likely work for all concerned. For example, “William, what would be a fair way to share the swings?” or “Juanita, do you agree that five minutes is a long-enough time?”
- 4) *Evaluate the result.* Schedule a follow-up meeting for the next day, when everyone reviews whether the suggested behaviors were followed (2000, 20-22).

## Managing Misbehavior

Misbehavior will occur in spite of preventive classroom management strategies. Research has shown that the following methods of managing misbehavior can be effective.

### Nonverbal Cues

Effective nonverbal cues rarely call attention to the student or behavior, rarely reward the student with attention, and usually don’t embarrass anyone, according to Petrie et al. Some nonverbal techniques include:

- *Proxemics* is the teacher’s use of space to prevent student misbehavior. Techniques include standing

near the student and moving toward the student or around the room.

- *Kinesics* is the teacher's use of facial and body cues, including eye contact; smiling, frowning or a stern look; and arms crossed or hands on hips.
- *Prosody* relates to the teacher's voice. Teachers can vary voice tone, pitch, or rhythm.
- *Immediacy* is the degree of perceived or psychological closeness between people. [Teachers can generate this feeling through] open body postures and touching the student on the upper arm or shoulder (Petrie et al. 1998, 35-36).

### Time Out

As a behavior change strategy for preschool and elementary children, "time out" is most often practiced in three ways:

- Exclusion involves removing the child for a period of time from the reinforcing situation but not from the room or area of activity—for example, to a chair in the corner of the room where he can't view the activity.
- Nonexclusion is similar to exclusion, but the student can observe the activity. Ignoring the student is one component of this strategy.
- Isolation typically entails placing the student in another room for a specified amount of time. However, this strategy has specific legal guidelines for its use, and requires extra personnel (Turner and Watson 1999, 135-137).

Research suggests that time out should typically be no more than five minutes, and, once it is over, the student should quietly return to the rest of the class. In addition, be sure to praise the student when she displays appropriate behavior (Turner and Watson 1999). You also could ask the child in time out to come up with a plan for doing better in the future (Willis 1996).

### Other Misbehavior Management Practices

While teachers sometimes use practices such as punishing the entire class for the misbehavior of a few students or using subject matter to punish a student, such approaches are advised against due to the

damage they can cause to students' attitudes toward a teacher, an academic subject, and themselves (Palardy 1993). Refer young children who are repeatedly disruptive to a counselor or school psychologist (Willis 1996).

### Examine Your Attitudes

Finally, how you feel about yourself, your subject, and your students can help set the tone for good classroom behavior. For example:

- *Feel comfortable with yourself, your students, and what you are teaching.* Any uneasiness is quickly communicated to students and can cause bad behavior.
- *Believe in your students' ability to behave.* Beliefs are often self-fulfilling prophecies: students tend to misbehave if their teacher believes that they can't or won't act appropriately.
- *Remember that students are not adults.* Children should not be expected to control their behavior to the extent that adults can.
- *Show that you genuinely respect your students.* Earning your students' respect is probably the most important strategy of all in promoting positive behavior (Palardy 1993, 1-2).

"All discipline situations have three variables: the teacher, the problem student, and the rest of the class. Of these three variables, the one over which teachers have 100% control is themselves" (Tileston 2004, 20).

In an interview, the late Fred Rogers, of “Mr. Rogers” fame, spoke to the key role that teacher behavior plays:

An old Quaker adage says, “Attitudes are caught, not taught.” The teacher sets the attitude of the classroom—and that attitude is contagious. Children learn from their teacher’s example, from the way the teacher respects each child and from the way the teacher expects children to treat one another (2002, online).

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## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

- Review your current classroom rules. Are they positive, action oriented, and not overly rigid?
- Brainstorm some instructional ideas that could be matched with specific student abilities and interests. For example, think of assignments that incorporate an aptitude for comedy for the class clowns or artistic talent for the distracted doodlers.
- Practice reacting to student misbehavior with the conflict resolution techniques for young children discussed in the text. Ask a few colleagues to act as your students and as conflict resolution critics. Use the steps provided by Burnett on page 5 as a “conflict resolution checklist” and discuss ways you might increase your effectiveness.

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