

Middle/High 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).

The job of a teacher is first and foremost to instruct, but, as any teacher knows, good classroom management helps to make good instruction possible.

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.

A high level of with-it-ness was a prominent element of the exemplary teachers' classroom management style (Morrow et al.)

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 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.

Seating arrangements should allow for clear lines of sight so that teachers can easily monitor students in all parts of the room, and so that students can see presentation areas with minimal movement of chairs or desks. If feasible, students should face away from possible sources of distraction such as windows, hallways, and small-group work areas (Wilson 1996).

A secure emotional environment also promotes good behavior. Shockley and Sevier recommend that teachers strive to employ trust, humor, and dignity in the classroom, and to refrain from sarcasm (1991).

Classroom Rules

Classroom rules can serve to promote students’ good behavior and create a successful classroom community. Students need boundaries for their behavior so they can learn the importance of managing time, learn right from wrong, and learn how to achieve (Fuhr 1993). Students also should be taught that rights in a democracy must always be balanced with social responsibilities (Landau and Gathercoal 2000).

Adolescents have particular issues with rules: they want and need security and support, but they also

State rules in positive terms and focus on observable behavior.

want independence from adults (Reed 1991). To address this situation, genuinely involve students in making the classroom rules with you—they will feel ownership of the rules and will be more likely to abide by them (Palardy 1993).

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.

Student Self-Management

Students can't depend on extrinsic rewards once they're adults. Educators can teach students how to be responsible for their own behavior by:

- **Helping particular students gain control over specific behaviors.** This involves either targeting a specific behavior for improvement (such as raising one's hand before speaking), or targeting a behavior for elimination (such as losing one's temper).

- **Giving students a role in solving classroom conflicts.** Students might be selected for training in conflict resolution, or all classmates might help to resolve a problem.
- **Providing students with choices.** Students might be allowed to make choices about what, how, or when they will learn (Wilson 1996, 32).

Encouraging students to plan and work together can help them feel involved and provide greater opportunities for self-discipline. To help students feel ownership of their classroom, one high school teacher in Texas successfully enlists students in activities usually reserved for elementary school classrooms: students begin class by taking role, preparing attendance records, and arranging the room for their collaborative learning groups (Freiberg 1996).

Teaching Techniques

Certain teaching techniques can discourage behavior problems. For example, class participation should be managed consistently, and students should be

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).

expected to participate when called on, to provide reasons for their responses, and to demonstrate understanding of the concepts (Evertson and Weade 1989). In addition, your teaching methods should invoke interest in your subject, because students are more likely to become indifferent or rebellious with monotonous routines, old content, and tedious presentations (Palardy 1993).

Managing Misbehavior

Misbehavior will still 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.

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.

- *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).

Strategic Responses to Defiant Behavior

- *Ignore it.* If you ignore behavior that is insubordinate but does not endanger the physical or psychological safety of others, the behavior often stops because the student sees that you are not going to engage in an argument (Hewitt 1999).
- *Place the responsibility on the student.* Once a student who has misbehaved calms down, present the expected behavior and the negative consequences as a decision, and allow the student a few seconds to decide. This can help the student save face and behave better (Colvin, Ainge, and Nelson 1997).
- *Confront the student alone.* Refrain from major confrontations in front of the class (Shaughnessy, Coughlin, and Smith 1997).
- *Don't punish the entire class for the misbehavior of a few.* Doing so can sour students' attitudes toward a teacher (Palardy 1993).
- *Consider an alternative to detention.* Students can be required to spend time doing homework or discussing what they could have done differently and how they can avoid the problem the next time (Willis 1996).

As part of its “Ride the Wave” to success in the classroom series, the Florida Department of Instruction suggests the use of the following techniques to respond to minor classroom disruptions:

- *Scan the class frequently in order to notice and respond to potential problems.*
- *React calmly and quickly to a student’s disruptive behavior in order to create a positive ripple effect.*
- *Make positive initial contact with students by praising the positive behavior that competes with the negative behavior.*
- *Remind students of the classroom rule or procedure that they are not demonstrating.*
- *Make students clearly aware of the rules and procedures and the consequence for violations.*
- *Give students clear cues indicating that continuation of a behavior will evoke the specified consequences.*
- *Employ consistent consequences for misbehaviors.*
- *Inform students that they are choosing the consequence of their behavior.*
- *Use consequences that are educational in nature.*
- *When one or two students are being very disruptive, focus other students in the class on their task. Then find a time to talk quietly with the disruptive students (Office of Student Improvement, Florida Department of Education. n.d., online).*

Believe in your students’ ability to behave—and communicate that belief to them.

For dangerous behavior, Shockley and Sevier recommend that every school have a “squad” of adults who are always available to come to the aid of a teacher who needs help (1991).

“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).

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 prophesies: 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).

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Questions for Discussion and Reflection

- Review your classroom rules. Are they positive, action oriented, and not overly rigid?
- Brainstorm some potential consequences for infractions. How might you keep these consequences both behavior-specific and educational in nature?
- Practice reacting to potential student misbehavior. Ask a few colleagues to act as your students and as classroom management advisors. Use the techniques provided by the Florida Department of Education on page 6 as a “reaction checklist” and discuss your effectiveness.

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