Classroom Management: Modifying Behavior in the Secondary Classroom

At its most basic level, a teacher’s job is to maximize learning. Distractions in the classroom environment disrupt the learning process and make for a challenging context in which to master material. “Teachers can influence the classroom social climate through their behavior management skills and can directly affect students’ behavioral adjustments,” making for a less distracted, more focused classroom (Farmer, Goforth, Hives, & Aaron, 2006). There are seven concepts a teacher can employ to minimize or control behavior problems in the classroom as well as encourage a prosocial, supportive classroom environment: consistency, modeling, engagement, communication, awareness, control, and encouragement.

**Consistency**

Those who have studied early childhood development or were trained for elementary instruction know the importance of consistency in the classroom. It adds stability and comfort to the public world of education. Though students in the secondary schools are older, their need for order and routine is still prevalent. One student suggests, “put an agenda on the board” (Diana, p.38). When a teacher keeps him or herself on track and makes students aware of the day’s plan, the students are more likely to stay on track as well.

Consistency applies to more than just classroom routine, however. It is important to be consistent in the managing of classroom behavior as well. In relation to a student reading a magazine in class, Daryl says, “the first time it happened [the teacher] should have addressed it right away. Instead he waited a couple of days” (Daryl, p. 38). Most parents know that if they punish a child long after the offense, the child won’t know what he or she is being punished for. What most teachers should know is if a behavior isn’t addressed during or immediately after an offense, the student will take advantage, increasing the severity and frequency of the behavior. Students also notice whether or not you follow-through on the consequences for disrupting the classroom environment. Mika reminds us, “make sure that everything you do, you *can* do. If you’re sending kids to the principal, make sure it really happens” (Mika, p. 39).

**Modeling**

Children model the behavior of adults, and though adolescence is a time of distrust, especially toward authority figures, our students still look to us to show them what is acceptable and what is not. If we as teachers come into our classrooms uninterested in our subject matter, our students will lose interest as well. If we do not command their attention, our students will disengage. “What teachers expect from students in the way of classroom behavior will come across in what a teacher says and does from the start” (Cushman, 2003).

“It is a teacher’s responsibility as well as a student’s to speak and act in ways that show mutual respect” (Cushman, 2003). If you handle behavior issues with anger or frustration, your classroom will become a hostile, violent place. Though it becomes increasingly more difficult when punishing repeat offenders, we must remember to punish a behavior, not a student. Our behavior carries consequences as well, and when that consequence affects the environment of the classroom as a whole, everyone suffers. Simply put, “you must model the behavior that you expect from your students” (Pedota, 2007).

**Engagement**

As mentioned above, if we do not command the attention of our students, they will disengage in learning. We must draw them in, encourage “students to be active participants in learning rather than passive listeners” (Pedota, 2007). The more attention they devote to the lesson, the less they have in reserve for disruption.

One way to get students engaged in the classroom is to build classroom expectations around their input. “Invite students to add their own needs to the list” (Cushman, 2003). Asking for and enforcing student input in behavior expectations not only offers the teacher an opportunity to hear what students look for in a classroom but provides them with a sort of ownership over their own behavior. They become a student with a voice that affects the environment around them rather than a pawn in the hands of a teacher. Vance suggests, “ have something strong at the start that leads down the road to what you’re teaching. We were prepared to get on my teacher by giving him trouble, but he grabbed our attention from the start, and we were with him for the rest of the class” (Vance, p. 40).

**Communication**

When behavior interruptions do occur in the classroom, it is important to find out why. “Students are often trying to make a point when they disrupt a high school classroom” (Cushman, 2003). Vance reminds us, “most teenagers are insecure about something, and we’ll take it out in different ways” (Vance, p. 41). Some students will choose to simply put their heads down and give up on the lesson. Left unaddressed, a teacher will soon find him or herself with a classroom full of sleeping students. Other students act out in more disruptive ways, such as shouting out offensive comments when they don’t know the answers. Each behavior, regardless of how outward, occurs for an individual reason. One student claims, “as a teenager I go through stuff that I don’t think I should be going through – stuff I should be going through when I am an adult. Personal and school stuff. I don’t work well under pressure” (Montoya, p. 43).

According to the same student, in addressing a change in behavior “the teacher should ask how is my day, am I okay, if he or she can help with the problem” (Montoya, p. 43). Communicating with your students is the best way to determine the cause of a behavior problem. If the cause can be addressed, the deviation in behavior will cease. “Effective teachers use a variety of interventions to manage behavior and individualize interventions based on student needs” (Stewart, Evans, & Kaczynski, 2009).

With communication comes the issue of trust. Many students are not secure enough to disclose personal information to a public figure. In order to help your students, you must respect them. With the exception of physical harm, the goings-on in your students’ lives must not be broadcasted, even to their own parents. Most students consider speaking with a parent about a personal issue without their permission a serious breach of trust that will hinder the modification of their behavior.

Students benefit greatly from effective teacher-student communication. Even those without behavior problems benefit from the changes in the classroom environment caused by the decrease of disruptions. Adolescence is a time of many changes and it takes an element of sympathy on the teacher’s part in order to modify how they affect a classroom. “Students who believe that you really care about them as individuals, that is, academically, socially, and emotionally, will gain status and recognition and a sense of self-worth and belonging (Pedota, 2007).

**Awareness**

Awareness ties in closely with communication in the monitoring of potential behavior issues. Diana observes, “teachers pay attention to the loud kids, but often it’s the quiet kids that they should watch out for” (Diana, p. 55). Just because a student doesn’t express distress outwardly doesn’t mean it isn’t there. Just like the example from above of the student who gives up and puts his or her head down, many students withdraw when they’re having problems. Not only does this affect their learning but it sends the message to other students that it’s okay to give up when things get difficult. We need to be aware of the silent problems lurking in our students.

It’s also important to be aware of the atmosphere in the classroom. Play to your students’ needs. If there is constant movement and talking during a lecture, transition into an activity. “Recognize that there’s a time for quiet and other times when students need to talk together” (Cushman, 2003). Fighting against a nonexistent attention span is frustrating for a teacher and does nothing to benefit our students. Instead, work with your students and adapt your lesson plan to suit a style of learning they are capable of and willing to devote their attention to.

**Control**

Control is especially important in addressing behavior issues. Every teacher wants to be liked, but liking that inhibits learning is ineffective. Leniency in behavior modification creates a chaotic classroom that distracts from learning. Teachers must remember that no behavior issue is too large to handle if they follow the seven guidelines. Veronica says, “if a teacher shows that they’re scared of the students, the students are going to try to take control” (Veronica, p.36).

If you don’t control your classroom, your students will. “When you let your student(s) walk all over you, they’re not learning the essentials of respect, of how to interact properly” (Alexis, p.54). Taking command of your students’ behavior and working with them toward modification shows them their place in the prosocial classroom environment. We are leaders in learning and we can’t allow our students to forget that.

**Encouragement**

The coverage of behavior management is not complete without the mention of encouragement. Punishment and consequences must be coupled with encouragement in order to increase positive behavior. If you only communicate with your students in regard to problems, they’ll come to associate you with negative feelings. It’s important to a student’s self-worth to communicate positives as well, especially when you’re going out of your way to do so. Encouragement creates confidence and inspires engagement. It helps students recognize the value of learning. “To establish a positive classroom environment, students must feel that you recognize their accomplishments” (Pedota, 2007).

These seven concepts will help maintain a classroom environment that respects student needs and encourages social interaction. Managing, monitoring, and modifying behavior problems will be a constant part of every teacher’s job but doing so will create the type of environment most conducive to learning.

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