Constructive Behavior Management: Connecting teaching practice experience with educational theory.

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With input from the third year Education students at Abu Dhabi Women’s College (graduating class of June 2008)
Introduction

This chapter arose from an in-class activity requiring third year Bachelor of Education students to respond to some open-ended statements. They were asked for specific examples from their teaching practicum experience of contextual factors and teacher actions that resulted in optimal on-task behavior of pupils. The resulting lists were then examined and categorized to deductively construct a theory of behavior management which could be used explicitly to provide guidance for beginning teachers. This theory was then validated with reference to established and accepted theory after some research by the student teachers. This chapter is my subsequent attempt to record and elaborate on the results of this collaborative intellectual activity which focused on using practical experience to inform theory which, in turn, can be used to inform further practice.

“They won’t listen, I have to shout!” “They are so naughty, they won’t do what I tell them!” “Help! What else can I do to get them to concentrate on their work?”

These comments are not unusual for teachers at any stage of their career, but student teachers in particular often request assistance in dealing with the off-task and intrusive behaviors of individuals or larger groups. For beginning and pre-service teachers, student misbehavior is typically the most threatening aspect of their new profession (Powell, McLaughlin, Savage & Zehm, 2001) causing many to question their developing skills as learning becomes of secondary consideration to simple control.

To investigate whether there are effective measures that can be taken to stop disruptive behavior and ensure the full attention of every student in a classroom, a cohort of third year education students were asked to respond to the question ‘When do students behave well?’ The responses, summarized in Appendix A, clearly highlight a single, significant attribute of effective behavior management – positivity. Teacher encouragement, praise, consistency, kindness, respect, delegation, and varied use of methodologies are just some of the examples of positivity given by the students. Appendix B contains more specific examples of techniques, all positive, that worked in classrooms – stickers, videos, body language, whispering rather than shouting, well-rehearsed routines, oral feedback, and explicit discussions about behavioral expectations were all referred to several times.

Further examination reveals three essential strands of this positivity: positive beliefs and attitudes, a positive approach to lesson planning and delivery, and positive reinforcement. Exploring each of these in detail, it becomes apparent that an answer to managing disruptive behavior is neither easy nor simple, but certainly does exist.

Positivity is such a powerful attribute in teaching that the very first tip in a book designed to provide new teachers and their mentors with “101 Answers for new teachers and their mentors’ is actually called ‘Off to a positive start’” (Breaux, 2003, p. 3) – a strong reflection in the literature of a principle implicitly understood by the student teachers involved in the survey.

Positive Beliefs and Attitudes

The self-perception of children is influenced by, and may be largely a reflection of, the perception of others (Moon, 1999) so it is essential that the teacher exhibits a strong belief in the abilities, aptitudes, and motivation of her students (Kyriacou, 1998). Both effort and performance will improve when a student feels the approval, support, and high expectations of the person directing her learning. These positive attitudes can be signaled by an enthusiastic, encouraging, animated, and involved teacher whose personality ‘tools’ – voice, expression, non-verbal gestures – generate warmth, positivity, and support. If teachers believe students are willing and able to learn, their actions will convey this message, and responsive students will
endeavor to stay on task to meet the challenge. The self-fulfilling prophecy is, as always, alive and well in education and this necessitates that all teachers have positive expectations for all students all the time (Breaux, 2003).

In calling self-esteem and self-concept the “basis of a positive classroom climate”, Rogers (1998, p.220) highlights the significance of building and sustaining positive self-belief in students, not only as affective objectives in their own right, but as a means of achieving the type of classroom environment most conducive to effective learning. Respect, affirmative language, expectations, encouragement, and praise are all tools teachers must wield to inculcate the strong feeling of self-worth students require to succeed (Rogers, 1998). Charles’ (1991) list of ways teachers can strengthen students’ self-concept includes providing personal attention, genuine success, a sense of togetherness, purposeful class activities, and public recognition. Like Rogers, the emphasis is on positive interpersonal relationships and beliefs. Negativity of any kind can only be destructive to a student’s sense of self and has no place in constructive behavior management.

The rapport built through making connections with students establishes positive relationships that have been called “the absolute bedrock of classroom management” (Fisher, 2003, p.62). Behavior modeling, openness, high expectations, control sharing, providing choices, negotiating, effective communication, and explicit teaching of social skills (McLeod et al., 2003) all contribute to creating and maintaining positive teacher-student relationships that constructively, unobtrusively, and positively manage the behavior of a class.

A Positive Approach to Lesson Planning and Delivery

Skilful teaching can do much to minimize the occurrence of pupil misbehavior in the first place, and can usefully redirect incidents that were developing before they need be regarded as misbehavior (Kyriacou, 1998, pp.85-86).

It is the author’s belief that disciplinary problems can be largely prevented through teaching. ‘At the heart of a disciplinary problem is an educational failure by the school’ is a hard model for teachers but one which has been demonstrated over and over. A great many disciplinary problems arise because instruction and management are deficient, causing pupils to lose interest and turn their attention to troublesome behaviors (Balson, 1996, p.177).

A good lesson is adaptable and flexible; is a back-up system; has clear objectives; has a variety of activities, skills, interaction, materials; caters for individual learning styles; has interesting, enjoyable content; has an appropriate level of challenge and is well prepared, well planned and well timed (Brewster & Ellis, 2002, p.231).

Learning-focused lessons requiring active, involved students and a variety of methodologies are intrinsically more engaging and appropriate, and focus student attention on the task at hand (Brewster & Ellis, 2002). Conversely, teacher-centered activities rarely hold student attention for more than a few minutes at a time and seldom engage more than the most able, vocal minority in the class. Others are often able to ‘hide’ in a whole class activity, at best passively withdrawing from the learning exercise, at worst misbehaving in an attempt to alleviate boredom, stress, or feelings of inadequacy (Kyriacou, 1998). Tasks exploiting the cognitive, physical, and social interests of the students, and requiring individual effort in either solo or pair work are thus more conducive to eliciting appropriate student behavior than whole class, teacher-focused sessions. If, indeed, “all children need stimulating experiences to make them enthusiastic about learning” (Brewster & Ellis, 2002, p.29), it is the teacher’s responsibility to engage each child in classroom activity in ways that suit their varied learning styles and intelligences.
When the teacher does have to direct student activity, it is important that she do so in an animated, interested, enthusiastic fashion to engage and motivate students (Kyriacou, 1998). Deadpan, lifeless, or slow-paced delivery rarely results in high task commitment, achievement, or performance. It is hard to overstate the importance of a well-placed smile, joke, conspiratorial whisper, or quizzical expression in creating a communal sense of effort, competitiveness, and good humor.

**Positive Reinforcement of Behavior**

While behavior management obviously has two distinct strands – reward and punishment – it is arguably the second that practicing teachers most frequently, and reactively, reach for. Proactive behavior management requires the firm, fair, and consistent application of classroom rules and the steady use of positive reinforcement – consistently acknowledging and praising individual students for appropriate behavior establishes and maintains behavioral standards and targets for the whole class to aspire to, if not achieve (Kyriacou, 1998). Conversely, filling the air with repeated threats, admonishments, and instructions creates negative and irritating environmental noise that quickly becomes meaningless and is ignored by the very students it targets. In short, if you don’t mean it, don’t say it!

When negative reinforcement is required, there are many options available to the teacher before direct, intrusive, verbal intervention becomes necessary – proximity, humor, facial expressions, non-verbal gestures, or pre-arranged signals and reminders (Kyriacou, 1998) are all viable alternatives that allow the lesson to proceed smoothly when simply overlooking minor infractions (Breaux, 2003) no longer works.

When more direct and immediate intervention is required, it is imperative to remember that the application of natural, formal, and established consequences (Kyriacou, 1998) is the most effective technique, and that shouting is never an option except in the prevention of immediate danger. The “unfortunate pattern of events” (Rogers, 1998, p.58) generated by frequent shouting in a classroom is counter-productive to the task of managing the behavior of the student group. A group of students will automatically generate a higher level of noise than the single ‘entertainer’ in the centre of the room – if the bar is kept low by the teacher’s use of whispers rather than shouts, the ultimate decibel level also remains low. Whispering is also an excellent tactical tool for those notoriously difficult-to-manage activities of drilling, choral work, and whole class responses. Rogers (1998) even argues the necessity of explicitly teaching students about workable noise levels using such tools as a noise meter or other visual aids.

A classroom that runs smoothly and relatively peacefully is itself positively reinforcing to most students. To achieve such a self-sustaining environment requires “procedures for almost everything” (Breaux, 2003, p.5) that are universally understood, modeled, practiced, and reinforced. Although a cautionary note is provided by the position taken by McLeod, Fisher and Hoover (2003) who state that “a standard, rule, or procedure is unreasonable if you don’t need it” (p.79) and will only serve to draw attention to a previously ignored possibility. Procedures that are reasonable, easily enforceable, clear, aligned with human nature, and have involved students in their construction, and are explicitly taught (McLeod et al., 2003) ensure that they are positive, achievable, instructive, and constructive.

Focusing on positive behaviors and attending to them frequently and consistently while negative behaviors are addressed discreetly and with respect (Breaux, 2003) allows students to thrive in an atmosphere that maintains their dignity and encourages consistently positive behavior in response. Effective reinforcement is a function of teacher objectivity and empathy (McLeod et al., 2003) – unemotionally deciding on the most appropriate reinforcer for an individual student is essential whether the reinforcer is positive or negative, verbal or non-verbal, tangible or social.
A behavior management plan is an effective, positive, systematic, and proactive method of bringing order to a classroom. It establishes the principles that will allow all participants to work productively and without hindrance, and sets out the consequences of actions long before they occur so the teacher is not provoked into arbitrary and often ill-advised decisions. Rationality thus overrides emotionalism as the initiator of action, usually resulting in a calmer, more stable, and supportive environment. A useful behavior management plan would identify characteristics of an ideal classroom, levels of intrusive behavior that interfere with achieving the target environment, appropriate consequences for misbehavior, and even the language and non-verbal cues to be used when addressing instances of disruption (Rogers, 1998). Utilizing Powell et al.'s (2001) hierarchy of intervention strategies would be a useful aid in designing such a plan.

The plan would need to be jointly constructed with students, general agreement reached, and the final document published and disseminated to all stakeholders. Transparency and preparation to this level of detail ensures that nothing is left to chance, that consistency and fairness are maintained regardless of the circumstances, and that student focus can shift to contributing to a positive learning environment that allows each and every class member to fully participate and develop.

Behavior management plans and an emphasis on positive reinforcement are essential elements of an approach which is effective because it reflects both the development of teacher attitudes as they progress through their careers (Powell, et al., 2001) and current societal values:

> Discipline in the 21st century should be proactive – focused on preventing conflicts and disruptions rather than on punishing misbehavior. We need to teach students responsibility, self-management, problem solving, and decision-making. The goal of discipline for today’s students should be self-control; external control and compliance are not congruent with 21st-century values (Fisher, 2003, p.61).

**Conclusion**

Proactive, positive behavior management as outlined above requires more planning and energy than simply responding to inappropriate behavior. The results, however, are outstandingly effective, efficient, sustainable, socially just, and, most importantly, educative. The learning community operating in such a positive classroom environment (Kyriacou, 1998) is strong, cohesive, and focused on learning outcomes rather than having to divert valuable energy to essentially non-productive, reactive behavior management tasks. The observations of the trainee teachers reflected Breaux’s contention that “children work much harder and behave much better in the classrooms of proactive teachers” (2003, p. 13).

The shift from reactivity to proactivity is a significant intellectual and pragmatic leap for student teachers, especially when this model was possibly not available in their own school years. The skill, persistence and commitment required to embrace a relatively unknown paradigm must, in this context, be matched by an extraordinary level of faith in its ultimate superiority. The responses of the student teachers who undertook this survey investigating the positive aspects of behavior management show they are ready to embrace this paradigm as Appendices A and B indicate they have already discerned the practical techniques and situational factors that work. All they need now is to embed this pragmatic knowledge in a systematic theoretical framework. The aim is to transform these student teachers into what Charles (1991) calls ‘Master Teachers’ who are competent, flexible, efficient, well-liked, caring, stimulating, good communicators, organized, and in whose classrooms “good behavior occurs because of the teacher’s reasonable standards and personal concern for the students, which makes students want to please them in return” (p.141).

Successful behavior management for such teachers, then, is a product of their positive and
proactive beliefs, attitudes, and approach to lessons and the classroom environment.

Successful development of the trainee teachers involved in this particular classroom experience, however, was a product of integrating educational theory with practice – a process often used for optimal effect in the Higher Colleges of Technology’s Bachelor of Education programs.

References


Appendix A

A class of 12 students in the third year of their Education program at Abu Dhabi Women’s College were asked to reflect on their teaching practice experiences to complete the sentence ‘Students behave well when …’ The following is a complete listing of their responses.

Students behave well when ...

- They are interested in what they are doing.
- They are aware of the rules of the teacher and her expectations of them.
- The rules they follow have been prepared by the teacher and students together.
- The teacher sticks with her rules all the way through her lesson.
- They are praised by the teacher.
- The teacher uses different tones of voice.
- They are encouraged by the teacher.
- They are interested in the lesson and the activities or tasks.
- My voice disappeared because I was miming (silent lesson).
- The teacher uses different techniques in teaching the lessons, e.g. reading stories, playing games and using the computer.
- The teacher treats them kindly and friendly.
- The teacher gives them nice worksheets to work on like drawing, matching, pasting…… etc.
- They change their place to learn, for example sitting on the floor or going to the English club.
- They are treated respectfully and kindly.
- They are praised by giving them stars, for example.
- The teacher doesn’t shout at students and treats them as adults not as children.
- There are a range of different activities.
- The teacher sets up a student to be a group leader every week.
- The teacher praises the students for good behavior.
- The teacher is whispering and not shouting.
- The teacher motivates and helps the students while they are working on the activities.
- The teacher rewards the students if they are doing some good work or if they get high marks.
- I show trust and belief in them.
- I was getting angry but with no shouts, but I was using my body language like putting my finger on my mouth or by looking at them in a strict way or by drawing a sad face on the board.
- I was making sure that they understand what to do in any activity because if they don’t, they do other things. Ways of making sure they understand: model, ask them what to do after my explanation and translating the activities in Arabic as the last stage.
- Making competitions between students who well work and behave well in activities.
- Praising the students who are well-behaved and trying to do their best.
- The students like the teacher when she uses different types of strategies that help them to not feel bored and stay still.
- When the teacher praises the students they are more likely to continue behaving well.
- Are motivated.
- Are engaged in the lesson.
- They know what to do exactly, for example in a task or an exercise.
- I show them that I trust them and I think they are able to do things perfectly. This engages the students to challenge their teachers and themselves.
Appendix B

The same students were then asked to specify behavior management techniques that they had used successfully. The following is a complete listing of their responses.

Constructive behavior management techniques that worked for me

- “Well done” stickers which I gave to the students, who answer thoughtful answers, sit quietly…etc.
- Using the bell to transfer from one stage to another.
- Some TPR I used as warming up sometimes or to draw their attention.
- Well done cards: I was giving a small well done card for individual students depending on their behavior and asked them to collect them and the one who would collect most will have a gift (or could be Queen of the Week).
- Group chart: I was drawing a chart at the beginning of the class and named each group, so I was giving them points throughout the lessons, depending on their behavior. By the end of the lessons I was giving each member of the winning group a well done card and a pencil.
- Counting to five when they were causing noise.
- Whispering: this strategy was a very interesting one that I learned and used during this work placement and it worked well because the students responded very well and they liked it.
- Cards (each student had a card and she collected stars and happy faces on it when she did something good such as answering a question or doing an extra work).
- Giving feedback orally (good, excellent, well done, smiling for them when they do good work).
- Giving gifts at the end of the semester (I told them that the girl who collected the highest number of stars would take a gift at the end of my training time).
- Turning off the light and using the phrase ‘eyes up’ helped me a lot to manage the girls during the lessons and guide them in order to save time and effort.
- When students where noisy I used with them some techniques like “put everything away and show me your ten”.
- Pop corn and video to reward students
- A happy face and sad face stamp
- Facial expression
- Body language
- Whispering
- Giving students stickers (but I think it did not work well at the end, because they were doing all that for only the stickers. They could not understand the importance of being well-behaved)
- Using happy and sad face, to show students my pleasure.
- Not using the way of ordering but the way of asking politely, with using "please, can you, if you do not mind….thank you"
- Praising well-behaved students, so others will do like them so all students will behave well.
- Telling students the importance of being well-behaved and persuading them.
- Pictures of “do not talk”, “listen while the other is answering” and “put your hand up”.
- Show me ten was a helpful one for me that enable me to improve the classroom management.
- Star chart for group work.
- The crown of the queen that one of the students gets at the end of the week when she collects more well done cards than the other students in the class.
- Ending the lesson with a game.
- Using a whistle to monitor the activities, drawing Ss attention, and to ask students to be quiet.
- Numbering the groups and put the numbers on the board and put a √ tick to those who work cooperatively and effectively. This worked very well for group work.
- For the individual work I used to give students little stars for the special answers and then have one student at the end of the week to be The Queen of the Week and she is the one who collected the highest number of stars.
- The praising car cards (collect five, get a present).
- Using the bell to keep them quiet.
- Using my body part instead of my voice (this gets their attention).
- Using my body language, e.g. putting my finger in front of my mouth to calm them down.
- Using hand movements to quieten them.
- Clapping hands and asking them to face me in a calm voice.
- Counting 1, 2, 3 to settle them down.