Classroom Management Theory
A Reflective Piece

One of the most important components of effective teaching is classroom management. It is expected of the preservice teachers in my department to have demonstrated competence in addressing principles of group behavior and to using those principles to effect positive change for individual students and for the classroom as a whole. As such, they must: 1) demonstrate their ability to establish environments for learning by using appropriate management and disciplinary techniques to ensure a safe and orderly environment which promotes teaching and learning; 2) create inclusive environments for students with exceptional needs and abilities; 3) establish expectations for optimal achievement; 4) foster an attitude of excellence in all students; 5) manage, monitor, and motivate student learning, 6) create an environment which produces critical and higher orders of thinking; 7) create a classroom climate that is suitable to instructional activity; and 8) accentuate positive student behavior in order to eliminate negative behavior.

This is not an easy task. Content knowledge and pedagogical skills alone cannot prepare a teacher adequately for this important endeavor. An effective teacher with skills in instructional management to accommodate individual variability must have a clear vision of his philosophy of classroom management. He cannot establish that philosophy until he first understands a broad perspective of management theories ranging from the controlling end to the influencing end of the spectrum. Once he has established articulated that philosophy he must develop a management plan and put it into practice. This plan must be thought out carefully and implemented consistently, otherwise, he
will have management problems throughout his career. There are plenty enough former teacher who have “thrown in the towel” because they have not been able to management their classrooms effectively.

There are a number of classroom management models available for teachers. On one end of the spectrum you have the “control” theorists such as B.F. Skinner, Lee Canter, James Dobson, and Fredric Jones. These theorists have been described as “Behaviorists.” On the other end of the spectrum you have the “influence” theorists like Glasser and Kounin. These theorists have been described as “Humanists.”

Behaviorism has several presuppositions. They believe that humans are born with no predisposition toward positive or negative behaviors. In other words they are neither good nor bad. They believe that human beings become what they are as a result of their environment. They say that humans are a product of all positive and negative environmental influences that shape them.

Behaviorist educators, therefore, see their primary tasks as controlling, shaping, and directing students to go in a particular desired direction. These teachers feel that they have to direct all of the student learning. So, they will tell students exactly what to do in every activity. Students do not have the option to give their suggestions. They may not negotiate with the teacher. The behaviorist educator provides solutions to problems with peers on the playground, in the hallways, on the bus, and in every other aspect of the school program. Yes, they even tell students when to go to the rest room, when to get a drink, and when to sharpen their pencils. (Froyen, pp. 11, 12)

Humanists also have their presuppositions. They believe that humans are born “good,” or at least they have a natural inclination toward positive behaviors. They also believe that humans must learn
to acquire negative behaviors in order to exhibit those negative behaviors. They would say that in positive, supportive, nurturing environments, humans are able to realize their own positive potential. They say that humans do not need someone to help them grow optimally. They will accomplish this feat on their own as long as the environment in which they find themselves is supportive. In other words, if their environment provides freedom to explore and if it has adequate materials, they will take advantage of that and grow.

Humanist educators see their primary task as creating an optimally positive environment in which they do not interfere with or intrude in students’ academic or social growth and development. They allow students to unfold, search, explore, grow, and develop according to their own inner directedness. They focus on constructivist education and whole language curriculum approaches. Their discipline focuses on relationship building, listening, and giving students freedom to solve their own problems. (Froyen, pp. 10, 11)

Where then, are some of the leading theorists on this broad spectrum of approaches to individual and classroom management. Lee Canter is a leading theorist and is probably the most widely used theorist in education circles today. He has developed an approach to classroom management which he has labeled “Assertive Discipline.” On the Behaviorist end of the spectrum, Canter perceives the teacher to be an assertive activist. The students are basically unruly in the school which he sees as a society. The role of the teacher would be establish rules and procedures and to exercise the rights of all in the classroom. Students are to respect those rights. Canter people use words such as “assertive,” “rights,” and “reinforcer.”

Rudolf Dreikurs would be to the right of Canter if Canter was on the extreme left end of the
spectrum. Dreikurs model could be described in terms of redirection, praise, and confronting mistaken goals. Dreikurs sees the teacher as a social worker while the student is a client. And of course the perception of the school would be one of Child Protection Services. The actions of the teacher would be to analyze student feelings, interview them, and administer consequences. Students, in turn, would also analyze their feelings and the situation so the problem could be solved. An important buzz word in the Dreikurs camp is “Logical Consequences.”

William Glasser would be farther to the right of Dreikurs. This model looks for positive interaction between student and teacher and student and student in order to meet basic needs without coercion. Glasser then, would see the teacher as a therapist and the student as a (mental) patient. The school would be perceived as a clinic. The role of the teacher is to facilitate a discussion of solutions. Students are to problem solve, think, plan, and commit to act. The two important terms that are associated with Glasser are “Reality Therapy” and “Control Theory.”

Jacob Kounin would be even farther to the right of Glasser and be considered on the extreme end of these examples for Humanism. Kounin describes different dynamics in classroom management with terms such as the “Ripple Effect,” “With-it-ness,” “Overlapping,” “Alerting,” and “Group Management.” As such, Kounin sees the teacher as a choreographer or a stage director. The students are either dancers or actors and the school is a theater on which they perform. The actions of the teacher are to direct the stage, props, sound, show, and actors while the students cooperate with the other members of the cast and the choreographer.

I think it would be safe to say that all of these theorists would agree that classroom management is a vital key to success. The difference, of course, is in the approach. How, then should one decide
which of these, or others, they should “buy into”? This question illustrates the importance for developing a personal philosophy of classroom management. What, exactly, is management? I believe that it is three things: 1) discipline; 2) instruction; and 3) motivation. I have heard some say that if only we use the right instructional approach management will take care of itself. I disagree. I say that management comes first and the way in which we teach is one part of the management plan. It does not stand out there on its own. It must take work in concert with motivation (why should I) and discipline (this is not punishment in my book!).

It is probably important to remember what philosophy is before talking about a philosophy of management. My philosophy textbooks remind me that philosophy deals with the love of knowledge. It is a search for truth through logical reasoning. It is an analysis of the foundation of one’s fundamental beliefs and attitudes. It is the theory which underlies an activity or thought.

What then, is a philosophy of management? I think it must include one’s knowledge of management strategies. It is the teacher’s fundamental beliefs about management. From this philosophy the teacher can look at models in order to create his own strategies to put into practice. A philosophy of management is what one believes about the nature of children and youth, of how and when children and youth develop, and how and when children and youth learn. A teacher’s beliefs on these issues provide guidance to the teacher in making those every important every day decisions.

In developing a philosophy of management a teacher examines several questions. How do I understand and respect cultural, racial, and ethnic diversity, gender equity and humankind’s shared heritage and environment? How do I understand and respect varying points of view, other’s ethics and values and the influence of one’s own ethics and values? How do I manage, monitor and motivate
student learning? How do I involve and work effectively with all support personnel to maximize opportunities for student achievement and success at school, home and in the community? How do I involve and work effectively with parents and/or guardians to maximize opportunities for student achievement and success? How do I create an environment which promotes critical and higher orders of thinking? How do I help students access and use information, technology and other resources in order to become independent learners and problem solvers? How do I establish expectations for optimal achievement and foster an attitude of excellence in all students? How do I plan instruction to accommodate cultural, racial, and social diversity? How do I create an inclusionary environment for students with exceptional needs and abilities? And how do I decide on classroom procedures and how to implement them?

Once these questions, and others are answered a teacher can develop his own personal philosophy of management. He then will be able to adopt, adapt, or create a model from which to implement successful strategies in individual and classroom discipline, instruction, and motivation.

There are several areas a teacher has to cover when developing a management plan. The first step is to identify the characteristics of the school because these characteristics will determine what a teacher can and cannot do. Characteristics of schools include: type of school; socio-economic and ethnic traits; grade/department structure; grade level; and number of students.

The teacher then needs to plan for the establishment of a learning environment that is conducive to learning. This includes preparing for pre-first days of school activities, creating seating arrangements, assigning student chores, making students feel welcome, preparing activities for building relationships, planning for the first few minutes of school, contacting parents prior to or at the beginning of the school
year, communicating year-long or term-long goals, communicating the grading system, and establishing rules and routines that might be unique to the subject area.

Perhaps the most important thing a teacher has to do in terms of classroom management is to plan for the procedures that will be used during the year. This, of course, is dependent upon the information listed above, but it is all of the little things in the classroom that can either drive a teacher to exhaustion or frustration. The teacher needs to have a plan in place for how students will enter the classroom, how they will take attendance, what the proper procedure will be for using the restroom, sharpening pencils, lining up, dismissal, collecting and distributing papers, giving assignments, late work, make-up work, and gaining student attention. The teacher must establish the proper atmosphere in the room, care for transitions, and design a plan to form student groups and movement. Other important procedures a teacher must plan for include establishing procedures for what students are supposed to do when they complete their work, how students can obtain help when the teacher is busy with other students, and how to use supplies and learning centers properly.

Classroom structure is the most important element of the entire management plan, because whatever a teacher does not structure to his advantage, students will structure to their advantage. That is why it is important to have the classroom physically ready for students, for seating charts to be made, and for lesson plans on teaching procedures to be in place. If a teacher takes care of this very important element, most of potential classroom disruptions will be avoided. It is similar to the old television commercial that said, “pay me now, or pay me later.”

Even though it may be true that most of the potential problems will be taken care of by classroom structure, which is very cheap in terms of human resources, it will not care for everything.
That is why a teacher needs to have a management plan in place with will be effective, inexpensive, and above all, positive. That is why I have adopted Dr. Frederic Jones’ theory of Positive Classroom Management. It focuses on keeping students on task, it is inexpensive to operate, and it stresses positive behavior in order to eliminate negative behavior.

There are five basic components to the Jones’ model of Positive Classroom Management. The first step is structuring the classroom. One of the most critical elements a teacher must encounter when structuring the environment is to create spaces wide enough for the teacher to have the ability to “work the crowd.” Room arrangement and crowd control work hand in hand. The practice of management by proximity keeps the teacher in control of the learning environment because he is constantly roaming the room, not giving students much opportunity to get off task.

A second critical element of classroom structure is the use of board or bell work. Bell work simply means that a teacher has an assignment for a student as soon as the student enters the room. This practice conveys the message that the teacher is in control of the learning environment and that learning is the number one important activity in the classroom. Personally, I have heard expert teachers say that the introduction to board or bell work in their classrooms was the greatest innovation they had ever seen in all of their teaching careers. It is a powerful tool!

But, as mentioned before, classroom structure, by itself, will not solve all of the management and discipline issues a teacher will face. The teacher, therefore, needs to be ready and willing to put his plan into action every single time that there is an infringement. Consistency in implementing the plan will let students know that a teacher does mean business. Therefore, a teacher should make no rule that he is not willing to enforce every single time it is broken.
The art of meaning business includes setting limits on students. The key to remember in Limit Setting, a term coined by Dr. Jones, is that you discipline with your body not your mouth. Many teachers make the big mistake of opening their mouths when they see disruptive behavior. They do all kinds of things such as nagging, waving their arms, and snapping their fingers. These actions just throw a teacher into a fight or flight mode, which causes them to become upset, which causes them to become weak. Instead, teachers need to remain calm under pressure so they can maintain their strength. This takes us to a favorite “Fredism” of mine, “Calm is strength, upset is weakness.”

The first step in remaining calm is breathing. This is sort of like taking those piano lessons and having to perform in public. The piano teacher has the student take some relaxing breaths so the student can remain calm. The same is true with the teacher. If the teacher can take this first step and breath, then he will be read to mean business. After all, a teacher will never be able to control a student if he cannot first control himself.

Once this is taken care of the teacher can now move in take care of the problem. The message the teacher must convey is that discipline will come before instruction. Students will know when a teacher is committed to discipline also. It will be evident by body posture. Is the body committed to instruction or to the discipline issue? The body will not lie. The students will know if the teacher means business or not, even it means having to walk over and get into the student’s face, the student will know the teacher means business. Of course an important element to remember is that the teacher has to keep it private. If the teacher goes public with discipline, there will be a high price to pay. If a teacher has taken care of classroom structure by having a room arrangement with wide aisles and walkways and is in the habit of working the crowd, he will be able to easily camouflage his movements and the
rest of the class will not know that he has moved into discipline mode.

The act of remaining calm and keeping the mouth shut extends to even the point of student back talk. The teacher would be wise to remember that it only takes one fool to back talk, but it take two to make a conversation out of the back talk. Teachers who learn the art of keeping their mouths shut, even through nasty backtalk, are the ones who are victorious because they have not fed into the student’s trap (remember that the student has twenty allies) and the teacher has not had to go public. One might be amazed how fast backtalk ends when there is nothing there to feed it. This is even true of nasty backtalk. A teacher should be able to handle a few insults or swear words. But the whole notion is to convey the message that there is nothing that a student can say that will make the teacher break. Once that happens, the students will take the teacher to the breaking point every time. This is not to say that the teacher is giving into the student without any consequences. The backup system is still there and it still can be used. But it does not have to be used in public. Should a student not be in class the next day, they others can pretty well guess why. They don’t have to be exposed to it in some public display of who’s the boss.

Setting limits will take care of another set up potential classroom problems, when it is used in conjunction with proper procedures in classroom structure such as room arrangement and working the crowd. This element of the management system will take work by itself, nor will it take care of all of the problems. How can a teacher get students to be in their seats when the bell rings, with all pencils sharpened, with all books, and with a good attitude? It almost sounds impossible, yet there are thousands of teachers who are able to get this type of cooperation from their students every day. These teachers rejoice because they know that any time a student decides to cooperate it is a gift. And they treasure that
These gifts, are not given, haphazardly by students, however. They are given because the students see value in cooperation. This is where responsibility training comes into play. The teacher can teach groups of people, not just individuals, to cooperate. Many teachers say that they demand respect from their students then they will give their students good things. This thinking is so incorrect. It is almost too plain to see that in order to get good things you have to give good things.

The point is that teachers must be willing to give to students if they want to receive in return. And the one thing that teachers have and students want and teachers control is time. So, a teacher can structure time to establish positive group behavior. Dr. Jones has labeled this as Preferred Activity Time or PAT. This is time that the teacher gives to students to engage in some learning activity in a “fun” way. Playing games is the most commonly used form of PAT, but not the only one. It absolutely how amazing it is that students all the way from kindergarten through college will work in order to receive this time. This extrinsic motivational technique sets the stage for future intrinsic motivation where the students will perform for the right reasons. Two things to remember about PAT are that it must be something the students enjoy and will work for and second it must be something the teacher can live with. PAT is not fun and games for fun’s sake. It is a structured learning tool, but done in a fun and unique way.

Yet there may be that one student who will refuse to join the crowd and try to be the one bad apple to spoil the whole barrel. This does not have to happen because the teacher can institute Omission Training where the negative behavior of one student does not bear weight on the entire class. Omission Training turns negative student behavior into a positive response that turns the student into a winner. Very few students need omission training, but when used properly it becomes a powerful tool.

It is obvious that responsibility training is more expensive than limit setting which is more expensive
than classroom structure. But there may come a time when this has to be applied. Even with responsibility training and omission training a teacher may still be faced with a student who still does not want to cooperate. This is where the teacher can step in and use the back up system, or in the words of most educational institutions, the school discipline code. This should be used as a last resort after all else has failed because this becomes the most expensive management intervention technique of all those previously mentioned. That is what it is called the backup system. The unfortunate reality of the backup system is that too many teachers for too many years have gone straight to the backup system before they have tried other things. This has caused a couple of effect. First teachers have let it be known to their students that there is a point in which they cannot handle them. This is dangerous because the students will then win the game. Secondly the backup system many times calls on the resources of several professionals - the teacher, the principal, the guidance counselor, etc. In addition when the backup system is used for “minor” infractions, when does the teacher and/or school have for recourse when a “major” infraction occurs?

All in all, positive classroom management means structuring the learning environment for optimal student learning, setting limits on student misbehavior, providing incentives for cooperation, and relying on backup only as a last resort. Teachers who have developed a philosophy of management and created a plan based on that philosophy will be able to put it into action so they can accommodate differences in students and run the class at the same time.

**Resources**


