Classroom Discipline Essay, Research Paper

Classroom Discipline

At least 180 days a year, children of this country attend school to receive the quality of education our Constitution says that they deserve. These schools are institutions, responsible for organizing and instilling into our children the knowledge and skills necessary to survive in our society. As do all institutions, schools need rules to accomplish their goals (Ban, 258). Similar to the hierarchical structure of our contemporary society, school rules are enforced by all offices, from boards of education to superintendents to principals to teachers (McDaniel, 254), to ensure orderly processes, promote common good, protect the rights of everyone, and assign the responsibilities of all parties (Ban, 258). Each office must exercise its power and authority to reflect the values of the larger society. An orderly society is dependent upon students who have learned the rule of law, one of the major values of a democratic society (McDaniel, 254).

By necessity and definition, teachers are the authoritarians in their classrooms. The term itself, authoritarian , has a negative connotation implying the manipulation of people as objects for power. However, teachers are expected to be mature responsible leaders. They need to develop values of respect, order, and discipline if they are to effectively educate their children. There are standards of behavior and performance that need to be enforced if students are to benefit from instruction (McDaniel, 254).

Today, more than ever, students are coming to school unprepared to learn. There is an increase in family instability, poverty and misfortune. Perhaps in correlation, there is also a decrease in moral and ethical values (Lewis, 62). With such dysfunction in their home and private lives, it is more difficult for children to focus on scholastics. Yet, all children require a variety of basic internal needs, including love, acceptance, security, belonging, and control. Effective educators recognize these needs and can identify children who are lacking any of them. It is these students, who do not have their basic needs fulfilled, that have a tendency to misbehave. They are missing something in their lives and they will do whatever it takes to fill that void (Lewis, 62), even if they know they are behaving improperly. And it only takes one or two students involved in a discipline problem to ruin an entire day s worth of instruction (Varner, 18). Once teachers are accepted by their students as leaders who establish clear rules and reasonable structure then a basis for learning exists. (McDaniel, 257).

There seems to be a cyclic relationship between classroom management and effective instruction. Poor behavior of the students can destroy any chance of a successful lesson but good instruction deters mischievous behavior. In the article Make Discipline Problems Improve Instruction , Edna Varner claims that [discipline] is merely a symptom of problems teachers have with instruction (18). She further suggests that improving instruction will dramatically decrease what they [faculty] consider students chronic misbehavior (18). Other researchers imply that it is the ability to predict and prevent such problems that is a major difference between novice and experienced educators (Noland, 521). The biggest weakness of beginning teachers is their failure to design discipline strategies prior to the occurrence of behavioral distractions (Ban, 259).

Frederic H. Jones, author of Positive Classroom Discipline and Positive Classroom Instruction, defines classroom discipline as the business of enforcing classroom standards and building patterns of cooperation to maximize learning and minimize distractions (Chemlynski, 42). He is among many researchers who study when, how, and why children misbehave and the most effective means of correction. There are two types of discipline: reactive and proactive (Ban, 257). Reactive discipline occurs spontaneously, when the teacher does not anticipate misbehavior and, therefore, does not plan a response. When using this improvisational method, the teacher is in survival mode. He/she simply shifts from one problem to the next, reacting along the way (Petterle, 28). This results in inconsistent structure and it undermines the teacher s authority and credibility (Ban, 257).

Proactive discipline, which as far more effective and favorable, involves, forethought, anticipation, preparation, and consistency (Ban, 257). Professor John R. Ban, of Indiana University, recommends a lesson plan approach to this type of discipline. Since all educators should be familiar with lesson plans, Ban suggests making behavior the object of study during the first week of school, focusing on conduct and consequences in the lesson. The school s student conduct manual could be used as a resource, allowing the students to study the rules, explore the reasons, and express their opinions. Students should understand the role of rules in the school and society. Then they could be involved in designing the code of conduct for the classroom. Substantial research indicates that people are more inclined to obey rules when they have had a significant part in determining them (Ban, 260). The class input will also ensure compliance via the power of peer pressure. A lesson on temper management can be include in the week s unit on conduct, allowing the children opportunities to explore aspects of themselves and learn methods of control (Ban, 261).

Whether the instructor uses Ban s method of involving the class or not, rules need to be established. When a teacher designs classroom rules, he/she should first understand the difference between rules and procedures. While rules should be created to control the breach of expected behavior, basic classroom management procedures will suffice for minor distractions. The educator needs to also weigh criticality and frequency of inappropriate behavior (Petterle, 30). It is not necessary to over-enforce a rule concerning an infraction which is nearly tolerable or occurs seldom.

Rules should be specific, clearly and firmly communicating behavior standards. Rules should be positive, beginning with what to do (Stay in your seat) instead of what not to do (Do not get out of your seat). Rules should be enforced following the infraction. If a rule is not going to be enforced, it should be eliminated as not to undermine credibility (McDaniel, 255). Rules should always include the reason for the rule. Stay in your seat may challenge the child, while Stay in your seat because wandering around the room disrupts the class supplies the child with concrete rationale (Petterle, 30).

When consequences are designated, it is important to remember that discipline is meant to teach, not punish (Chemlynski, 42). The primary purpose of a consequence is to assist in the continuation of the lesson as soon as possible, placing value on instruction and good behavior. The secondary purpose is to give the student a negative experience to serve as a deterrent for future behavior problems. In reality, there is only one real consequence: the denial of a good classroom experience to the child (Petterle, 29). Rewarding appropriate behavior and academic success is more effective than punishing inappropriate behavior (Lewis, 63). However, if punishment is necessary, it should be used sparingly. The more often it is used, the less effective it is. Punishment should never be used as retaliation on a child. Teachers are supposed to be mature role models; bitterness will only result in the loss of respect. Punishment should not include school work. That would send a message that the material is not important enough to be learned for its own sake. Punishment should be connected to the infraction. This will assist in an appreciation for the rule. Punishment should never include the mass. Students will not respect a teacher who punishes all for the behavior of a few. Punishment should not be corporal, suggesting that there is no more that could be done (Chemlynski, 44).

Classroom management and discipline has been an increasingly studied topic in the education arena. There have been many discipline systems developed, including Canter s Assertive Discipline, Glass Reality Therapy, and Duke s Systematic Plan but most of these require a change in school organization. While it is true that a school-wide format would be the most consistent and, therefore, successful, it is unreasonable to request individual teachers to conform their classroom rules. Many operational standards may be inflicted school-wide but discipline procedures risk effecting the personal relationship between the teacher and student (Ban, 258). Instead, faculty should assist and support procedures that work for each individual teacher. The could organize faculty study groups to observe one another and help to identify practices that do or do not work. Principals could also participate in these groups, especially in classrooms where students are frequently sent to the office (Varner, 19).

While rules and consequences need to be firmly established, there are many ways to prevent most behavior problems from occurring at all. Jim Noland, of Pennsylvania State University, wrote an article explaining how proper planning is the strongest offense against behavioral problems. He stated the importance for a teacher to consider student reactions, anticipate possibilities, and create alternative activities prior to the application of any lesson. Noland introduced the vulnerability index, a planning tool, to assist in designing lessons not susceptible to misbehavior. It is a means for instructors to predict potential distractions and prevent their occurrence. Basically, the vulnerability index is a standard by which teachers can evaluate their lessons to predict how vulnerable the lesson is to behavioral distractions. It requires the teacher to analyze their lessons with attention to student characteristics, teacher characteristics, teaching and learning activities, and environmental factors (Noland, 521). See attached outline for further detail of these componants.

Vulnerability Index

I. Student characteristics

A. ability and willingness to control behavior

B. interest and motivation in the subject

1. interest in material

2. relation to short terms goals

3. previous success or failures

C. ability in subject

1. difficulty level

2. possession of prerequisite knowledge

3. preferred learning style

D. attention span

II. Teacher characteristics

A. level of preparation

1. knowledge of content

2. level of organization

3. planing for flow

4. ability to anticipate problems

B. energy level

C. relationship with students

1. ability to interact positively

2. level of friendliness or hostility

D. confidence

III. Teaching-learning activities

A. ability to monitor each student simultaneously

1. teacher s position in room

2. desk arrangement

B. Student s accountability to accomplish task

1. specifics of assignment

2. time frame

3. standards

4. evaluation

C. duration, sequence, variety

IV. Environmental factors

A. time of day

1. morning/afternoon

2. relation to recess/lunch

B. time of year

1. relation to vacations/holidays

C. external events

1. holidays/weather

D. school events

1. assemblies/special days

E. physical classroom assignment

1. size/temperature/design/decor

As many factors are beyond control, teachers must manipulate their own characteristics to maintain order within the walls of their classroom. Many simple habits can be adopted to foster good behavior such as smiling, praising , and other social rewards (Chemlynski, 43). Continuous and consistent supervision alsodeters misbehavior. Teachers invite misbehavior when they leave the students unsupervised, ignore the students, spend a lot of time at their desks, or demonstrate a disrespect for the rules themselves (Lewis, 62). Teachers should not expect more effort from their students than they are willing to administer themselves. Maintaining the respect of the children is extremely important in promoting appropriate behavior.

Effective teachers should provide structure in their classrooms. There should be well organized routines that the students can follow. A good routine to develop would provide the students with a settling task prior to every lesson (Varner, 19). This way, the students begin their mental exercises immediately, keeping them from the opportunity for their behavior to stray. In addition, the children should be informed of daily plans, everyday. They should be able to follow whatever structure the teacher has implemented (McDaniel, 256).

If a teacher does need to deal with a discipline problem, his/her demeanor must represent action, not anger. He/she should be assertive and employ body language (McDaniel, 256). A teacher should never get into a confrontation with a student; the teacher never wins in a confrontation with a student. He/she would have already demonstrated a bitter attitude, revealed a vulnerability, and sacrificed rationality (Petterle, 32). Instead of raising his/her voice, the teacher should walk over and quietly request a conference with the child, away from the presence of peers, without disturbing the class. If a private conference is not possible, a soft reprimand in a lowered voice with a personal, direct command will avail (McDaniel, 256). These simple habits can make a big difference in classroom management.

It is possible for an instructor to actually lose control of the class. The students could get accustomed to a lack of order and the teacher would have to focus his/her energy on disciplining the children, having little time left for effective instruction. It is also possible to rehabilitate a classroom with such problems. Joe Petterle, author of Reclaim the Classroom , explains how to accomplish this in nine steps. The first, and largest step, is for the teacher to decide that there is a problem that needs to be corrected. Once he/she has committed himself/herself to this decision, there is no turning back. Second, he/she needs to set a target date to begin the new strategies. The third step, planning, is the most difficult. The teacher needs to write down the new rules he/she wishes to enforce and the accompanying consequences. This will require him/her to carefully analyzewhich behaviors require altering and which behaviors he/she expects. Next, he/she needs to acquire support form the principal. It is very important that the principal understands what and why the teacher is making these adjustments so that he/she may accompany the teacher on this trying journey. He/she also needs to contact the parents by direct mail and telephone. They are entitled to know what is going on in their child s classroom, especially since the children may respond negatively. Step six is to teach the children about the new rules. Acceptable and unacceptable behavior should be acted out and reasons should be emphasized. Quizzes could be administered to check that the children understand the new structure. To implement, there should be a one week trial period where the children receive citations instead of the actual punishment, to accustom them to the rules. But when the second week begins, the new rules will be affective fully. Enforcement, which is step eight, is the most critical. It is during this time that the teacher either succeeds in reclaiming the classroom or sacrifices it for the remainder of the year. In step nine, he/she can evaluate and make adjustments. Each adjustment should repeat these steps. With commitment, focus, and understanding, a classroom can be reclaimed, a teacher revived, and students productively engaged in as little as six weeks (Petterle, 32).

Ultimately, the greatest means of discouraging poor behavior is to provide good experiences for the students. Offering them structure, challenge, and respect will result in students who value their education and would not jeopardize the experience. Students, teachers, and experts will agree that they do not misbehave when the work is challenging and interesting, there is a routine everyone follows, when resources are available and accessible, and when they know teachers will grade their papers and provide feedback (Varner, 20). Of course rules do need to be established and enforced but the best deterrent of misbehavior is effective instruction, including careful planning, intricate activities, and positive attitudes. It requires teacher to have good students.