

Rethinking Classroom Management

Teaching and Learning with Students

Devon Metzger

CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT IS BIG BUSINESS. Entire schools or school districts are known to have subscribed to one management system or another. Teachers must, of course, make thoughtful and very careful decisions about how they will approach the learning environment, and, as might be expected, a voluminous amount of reading exists to inform and to persuade teachers to adopt one management approach over another. The stakes are high. Decisions about how teachers decide to approach classroom management have everything to do with the social and intellectual growth of the child, the quality of life and learning in the classroom and, by extension, with the school, the parents, the community and the larger society in which we live. As new teachers enter the teaching profession and as experienced teachers examine or reflect on how they approach classroom management, it is useful to know that there are educators who judge the popular term “management” as a misleading goal for students living and learning in a democratic society. Critics argue that the term management implies a perspective and practice that places the emphasis on training and control, rather than on working with students to learn, through experience, what it means to be a young democratic citizen.

Control or Self-Determination?

Should a teacher control students or work with students? Should the classroom be a share community or a place where teachers lead and students follow? Should students learn how to become self-disciplined and self-directed, or are students to learn how to solely rely on obedience and the voice of authority? While any reasonable person would agree that teachers must be in charge of their students, critics suggest that the use of the word management tends to favor control over sharing or collaboration. “Control not only is unnecessary for fostering academic motivation; it undermines its development, substituting reluctant compliance for the excitement that comes from the experience of self-determination.”¹

In simple terms, management, in the control context, is deemed to be more applicable for the training of animals than for educating young citizens living and learning in a democratic society. After all, one of the primary purposes of public schools, if not the primary purpose, is to prepare students to live within our chosen democratic society. Therefore, it is useful, when considering classroom management choices, to examine such questions as: What does education for democracy mean? How does learning to live in a democracy translate into classroom practice? Is the traditional concept of classroom



Inspiration, not Rewards

What matters about the idea of carrot-and-stick control is how it feels to the people to whom it's done ... It's particularly interesting to ask folks who have worked at organizations that don't use rewards at all, those that pay people a decent salary and then help them create interesting tasks, a sense of community, and an opportunity to participate in making important decisions. These people, in my experience, rarely choose to return to a place in which employees receive patronizing pats on the head or other goodies for pleasing the boss. They want to be paid, not “incentivized”; encouraged, not praised; offered respect, not reinforcements.

Alfie Kohn, “Another Look at Workplace Incentives,” www.alfiekohn.org/managing/incentives2002.htm

“management” consistent with learning to become a democratic citizen? What message do the needs of a democratic society send to teachers about the ideal nature of interaction between students and teachers? The following descriptions represent positions about how teachers who subscribe to a traditional management approach tend to view students: Institutional schooling teaches that children need to conform in order to learn; they need to sit still, to listen, to obey, and to follow directions. Children are not to wiggle, not to talk, not to disturb, and not to interrupt the planned curriculum. These patterns of behavior are restrictive and controlling, particularly if students do not see the relevance and purpose.²

Punishment and Reward

As one survey after another has confirmed, students are rarely invited to become active participants in their own education. Schooling is typically about doing things to children, not working with them. An array of punishments and rewards is used to enforce compliance with an agenda that students rarely have any opportunity to influence. Much of what is disturbing about students’ attitudes and behavior may be a function of the fact that they have little to say about what happens to them all day. They are compelled to follow someone else’s rules, study someone else’s curriculum, and submit continually to someone else’s evaluation. The mystery, really, is not that so many students are indifferent about what they have to do in school but that any of them are not.

The above descriptions raise serious questions about traditional classroom management practices, but these descriptions need not be restricted to the school classroom. Not surprisingly, when the above descriptions are applied to adult learning, many adults, like children, often resent and resist being told both what to do and how to do it. There are certainly dysfunctional school faculties and other work groups where adults are unable to work together because of their negative reaction to an administrator or boss who wants to dictate all decisions. Avoidance, apathy and anger are natural reactions to relentlessly being told what to do and how to do it. (Ironically, teachers sometimes depart a faculty meeting feeling very powerless and frustrated, yet return to school the following day to impose the same offensive treatment upon their students.) The point is that just as healthy adults want to be in charge of their own lives, so too do students want to have a say in their own lives. “All else being equal, emotional adjustment is better over time for people who experience a sense of self-determination: by contrast, few things lead more reliably to depression and other forms of psychological distress than a feeling of helplessness.”³ Teachers may sometime assume they are allowing students to participate, but the participation may be artificial. Participation without power is an empty, unfair and unhealthy bargain which we too often expect students to accept. Helping students play a role in deciding what kind of classroom they want to create is one way to authentically involve students. A shared commitment to creating and sustaining a positive classroom learning environment is the better and longer lasting agreement to make with students. Students, for their part, are quite enthusiastic about the opportunity to manage the classroom. Furthermore, participating in a positive learning environment helps students learn to live in a democracy.

How Do Teachers View Students?

At the heart of the “control” versus “working with students” issue, is the question of how teachers view students. How a teacher views students is central to his or her decisions about the teaching/learning process. Furthermore, how a teacher views students strongly influences how a teacher organizes his or her classroom. There are dramatic contrasts between how teachers view students. At one extreme are teachers who view students as children incapable of acting or thinking without direction from the teacher. The students, in turn, learn to accept such a teacher/student relationship as law. They soon give up their individuality, independence and initiative, and rely on the teacher to determine their educational profiles, and to a greater extent their personal identities. The unsurprising results are students who are unable or unwilling to act independently, take initiative, or pursue original ideas. The center of control is external, not internal.

The implications for learning and life in general are obvious and are certainly not consistent with a democratic society, which requires authentic participation and responsible decision-making. At the other extreme are teachers who willingly or unwittingly abdicate their responsibility in the teacher-student partnership. Although sometimes well meant, it is these teachers who forget that as adult instructional leaders they are in charge, and must offer students the guidance, structure and safety that students expect. In response to this extreme approach, some students become frustrated, even frantic, as they attempt to discover some direction or purpose in their schooling hours, while other students respond by withdrawing in the face of chaos and frustration. Without structure and guidance, this kind of ownership becomes a confusing and unwanted burden to students. Clearly what is needed is to strike a balance between these two extremes, giving attention to guidance and structure, but also focusing on the development of independent learners and young citizens. Rethinking classroom management, within the context of developing young democratic citizens, leads to the important role of instructional decision-making.

Instructional Decision Making

While there are many basic influential factors that determine student behavior, there is one primary factor that is most responsible for creating and/or solving classroom problems and challenges—classroom instruction. Classroom instruction is the overwhelming key to determining student classroom behavior and, therefore, is a major contributor to an effective and successful classroom learning community. The good news for teachers is that instruction is the one influential factor over which teachers have the most discretion. Teachers too often have little or no influence over what the students bring through the schoolhouse door. However, decisions about how teachers choose to view students, which translates into how much or how little students are involved in their own learning experiences, really are the teacher’s choice. With the recognition that teachers have everything to do with influencing the lives of children through instructional decision-making, it therefore becomes critical for teachers to take advantage of this opportunity to create a classroom learning community that is compatible with education

for democracy. Connecting instruction to the needs of the students is foremost in developing a classroom community compatible with education for democracy.


Being Included

All students need a classroom identity. Students need to be included, to experience success, and to be influential. Students need to know they count and need to be recognized as respected and equal members of the classroom community. Students are quick to detect teacher bias or favoritism. Individual status must be assigned equally and equitably. A student, who feels that she or he has lesser status in the eyes of the teacher or classroom peers, will respond accordingly. Withdrawal or misbehavior is often the result of not feeling respected or liked. Groups, like individual students, have their own unique needs. If groups are a regular part of classroom instruction, it is important for the teacher to treat all groups equally, and diffuse group status. Treating groups unequally, giving more attention or status to one group over other groups, will also contribute to disruptive group behavior.

Perhaps most important is the necessity of making the content relevant to the students' lives. While state frameworks and content standards are developed to guide instructional decisions, it is the teacher's primary challenge and responsibility to make the learning come alive. One of the most effective ways to involve students is to frame topics in natural questions that both pique student interest and invite students to solve problems. Beginning units and lessons with the larger questions presents a genuine opportunity to include students as co-learners, thus respecting and challenging their intellectual abilities and sharing with students the exciting journey of discovery. Having high but realistic learning expectations is also important and sends a clear message that the teacher respects students. Learning should be fun, lively, engaging and meaningful. One need only to reflect on his or her own schooling experience to remember that not

to present learning in such an engaging approach is to invite student disinterest and boredom, with classroom behavior problems soon to follow. Place yourself in the role of your students, and then begin to plan. Planning learning experiences can become an enjoyable and exciting challenge, as you experience students eagerly joining you in the teaching and learning process.

Conclusion

As instructional leaders, teachers have the opportunity to prevent most classroom behavior problems. Essentially, the profound equation, "inspired instruction = positive and productive student behavior," is at the center of an effective teaching/learning process. Well-planned lessons that include engaging, relevant, and active student involvement greatly influence positive student behavior. Poorly planned lessons, dull learning activities, irrelevant content and passive student involvement are excellent predictors of student misbehavior. Perhaps most important, teachers have an opportunity, even obligation, through instructional leadership, to work with their students to develop learning experiences that will help young citizens become confident participants in our democratic society.⁴ 

Notes

1. Alfie Kohn, "Choices for Children: Why and How to Let Students Decide," *Phi Delta Kappan* 75 (1993): 18.
2. J. Wink and M. Almanzo, "Critical Pedagogy: A Lens Through Which We See," in J. Frederickson, ed., *Reclaiming Our Voices: Bilingual Education Critical Pedagogy and Praxis*. (California Association for Bilingual Education, 1995): 214.
3. Kohn, 11.
4. This article appeared originally in the *Social Studies Review*, the journal of the California Council for the Social Studies, 41, no. 1 (Fall/Winter 2001): 65-67.

Devon Metzger is a professor of Education at California State University, Chico.