The Well-Managed Classroom: Methods to Reduce Teacher Frustration & Engage Students

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Observing a 2:00 p.m. eighth-grade Literature class was *not* what I had anticipated, going into the classroom for the first time. Students were boisterous and reluctant to begin the lesson. A steady stream of students kept getting out of their seats to sharpen pencils or use the restroom. Idle chatting blatantly continued during class. I realized most students were probably tired, but didn’t expect this level of chaos.

The teacher’s frustration level surprised me most. She frequently snapped (for example, loudly proclaiming “Jesus!”), made angry faces, and otherwise communicated obvious disgust. I would have felt my observation wasn’t a worthwhile experience, save for two important factors: 1) I recognized the situation as a classic case of the behaviorally mismanaged classroom, and 2) her lesson plans were very good; it was her *inability to deal with her frustration* stemming from negative student behaviors that needed addressing.

It’s a fact -- teachers are often frustrated. Fatigue and stress leads to frustration, which often leads to negative reinforcement of minor student misbehaviors. Misbehavior is therefore inadvertently promoted, and an endless cycle is created. Teachers give up their efforts to manage behavior, or “retreat”, and learning suffers. The mismanaged classroom serves no one.

One important truth gets lost in the classroom hubbub: at the end of the day, we *all* want to feel cared for and respected by the people in our world. Students are the same -- when they feel valued and cared for as individuals, they are more willing to comply with teacher requests.

Research suggests children are more likely to be respectful when important adults in their lives respect them. Marzano (2003) asserts that students will resist rules along with the consequent disciplinary actions if the foundation of a good relationship is lacking. In fact, students will never trust their teachers unless they feel valued and respected (Boynton, 2005). It goes without saying that strategies to develop positive teacher-student relations should be the most significant part of a teacher’s classroom management plan.

In the classroom I observed, students were constantly sharpening pencils, talking with friends, asking to use the restroom, roaming about the classroom, playing with phones, gadgets and other materials, and arguing with the teacher. Typically, the mismanaged classroom is characterized by 1) student misbehavior; 2) the teacher's attempt to control misbehavior; 3) continued student misbehavior; 4) the teacher retreating; and 5) an overall increase in student misbehavior. Teachers spend more time *managing behavior* and less time *teaching*, a cycle of behavior that can lead to high levels of frustration and burnout (Ratcliff, Jones, Costner, Davis, & Hunt, 2011).

Teachers in in the well-managed classroom, interact more frequently with their students, ask more questions and create a more engaging climate. Well-managed classrooms are productive; instruction and learning are the primary focus, with fewer instances of student misbehavior (Ratcliff et all.).

Therefore, teachers ought to model their practice on methods which research indicates strong teachers practice: being alert and redirecting off-task behaviors; avoidance of retreating; using appropriate praise and rewards; and keeping children engaged (Ratcliff et all.).

Minor misbehavior often serves as the catalyst for escalating into confrontation between student and teacher. This confrontation can be caused by teacher *overreaction* to a minor misbehavior, like chatting to a neighbor. But when teachers take the initiative and predetermine their response to student misbehavior, they reduce and possibly eliminate minor misbehaviors.

For teachers to create a management system that is responsive vs. reactive, several key elements must be established: 1) behavioral expectations should be clearly defined, taught, and acknowledged; and 2) they must create a classroom environment that encourages positive behavior, thereby increasing the likelihood of academic and behavioral success, and decreasing the likelihood of failure (Allday, 2011).

Of course, minor student misbehavior will always occur. It is impossible to avert all misbehavior, but teachers can predetermine their responses, which allow them to respond to misbehavior as opposed to reacting to it. Self-explanatory methods such as frequent and regular classroom rule reminders, teacher/student eye contact and providing a temporary escape can promote a positive classroom environment. Teachers must also communicate their positive student expectations and continually remind students they have the ability to do well. The expectations teacher communicates to their students often become self-fulfilling prophecies, so educators should communicate appropriately high behavioral and academic expectations to *all* students (Allday).

I cannot stress the importance of habitually reminding your students that they have the ability to perform well. When you express confidence in them -- whether academically or behaviorally -- you impart an incredibly powerful message. Students will work to prove your confidence in them is justified.

Every child needs to have at least one significant adult in his or her life who believes that he or she can do well. We tend to think that children hear this from their parents, but the sad truth is that this does not always occur. Teachers have the privilege to communicate to students that they believe in them, a positive classroom relations strategy as well as an instructional strategy (Allday).

Another powerful way to foster positive relationships with your students is by demonstrating that you sincerely care. When your actions and words communicate that you care, students are more likely to want to perform well. Strategies to demonstrate caring include inquiring about aspects of students' lives outside the classroom, greeting students at the door and listening intently to students. Simple, sincere caring helps build strong positive relationships that prevent future discipline problems.

Frustration and stress are unavoidable in the teaching profession. Difficult students, irate parents, and collegial backbiting can all have a devastating effect on teacher-student relationships, causing educators to make less than wise decisions (Boynton). Usually an individual can sense when he or she is frustrated and can identify the signs and symptoms. As a teacher, the question then becomes *how* to manage that stress (Boynton).

Symptoms of frustration or stress include anxiety, shortness of breath, and a tendency to make irrational decisions. Recognize your own personal symptoms so that you may quickly de-escalate them. You should also have personal go-to methods to reduce frustration when it occurs. Listening to music, incorporating a daily meditation practice, and sharing frustration strategies with colleagues (Boynton) are a few techniques that can effectively to reduce stress. Different stress-reduction techniques work for different individuals, so have an awareness of what works for you, whether it is taking a few deep breaths or gazing at a favorite photo.

Reflecting upon my own negative reaction to the reactions of the teacher I observed, I clearly recognize that managing frustration is a work in process and a goal always to be improved upon. I am embarrassed to admit that some of her reactions mirror my own reactions as a mother to my young daughter – when I am very tired, patience is elusive. The next day, I tend to feel guilty over my overly emotional reaction to some incredibly minor behavioral infraction.

By practicing positive classroom management tips – showing students you care, listening to them, intimately knowing your personal tolerance levels and ignoring minor attention getting strategies, you can spend more time teaching and engaging students, and less time attempting to control annoying misbehaviors.

# References

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