Connectedness in the Classroom: Classroom Management in the Middle School

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Abstract: As documented by research and assertions from middle school instructors, teaching adolescent students can be a challenging experience for many. Specific challenges include mediocre student engagement, lack of motivation, substandard academic performance, and disengaged teacher-pupil relationships. This article addresses these challenges by offering research-based options for teachers to consider when designing a classroom management system that will improve the aforementioned challenges. The techniques and strategies presented focus on developing relationships and building upon them to make teaching and learning experiences positive, engaging, relevant, and impactful.

Keywords: classroom management, adolescent learner, teaching, supportive relationships, student behavior, expectations, procedures, research-based

Introduction

Teaching today's adolescent learner can be a daunting task, but it can also be an equally rewarding experience. Middle school teachers are expected to know content and pedagogy, develop engaging lessons that meet the needs of diverse learners, and use a variety of instructional strategies that will boost student achievement. To become effective teachers and continuously improve our craft, we are further expected to connect with the students we teach by establishing and maintaining strong and trusting relationships. According to Beaty-O'Ferrall et al. (2010), it is imperative that teachers "win their students' hearts while getting inside their heads" (p. 4). They assert that connecting with students will result in fewer classroom behavior problems and better academic performance (Beaty-O'Ferrall et al., 2010).

Classroom management is critically important in the middle grades years when students are more likely to experience declines in academic motivation and self-esteem (Beaty-O'Ferrall et al., 2010). Research indicates that these declines can be linked to the classroom and particularly to teacher-student relationships (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). Being cognizant of such research findings and incorporating strategies from the fields of counseling and psychology into classroom management systems could assist in reversing these declines.

An engaging learning environment and positive classroom climate in which students are encouraged to excel academically is a recipe for student success. This is especially true if students feel a sense of belonging. An environment where teachers can effectively plan and engage students in learning experiences that meet their diverse needs creates a rewarding and fulfilling experience for teachers and students alike.

South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education

Classroom management with a focus on building relationships relates directly to the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE)'s position statement, in which Bishop & Harrison (2021) describe essential attributes of a successful middle school including:

- Policies and practices are student-centered, unbiased, and fairly implemented.
- Educators respect and value young adolescents.
- The school environment is welcoming, inclusive, and affirming for all.

Creating an engaging learning environment and a positive classroom climate are admirable and desirable goals. But how can these goals be accomplished? Incorporating specific strategies from the field of education coupled with strategies from the fields of counseling and psychotherapy will assist teachers in designing a strong classroom management system. This system must establish and build upon a foundation of trusting relationships with their students.

The purpose of this article is to provide research-based options to consider when designing a classroom management system. These techniques focus on developing relationships and building upon them to make teaching and learning experiences positive, engaging, and impactful.

Procedures and Expectations

The first days of school for teachers and adolescent youth are filled with the excitement of a new year and the anxiety that accompanies it. It involves meeting new friends and reuniting with the old, acting confident - even though you may not feel that way - and a host of other thoughts and feelings. To prepare for the first day of school and all the days that follow, it is important for teachers to establish procedures and expectations for his or her students. Procedures to consider include but are not limited to the following categories: procedures for entering and exiting the classroom, procedures for completing and submitting individual and group work, procedures for teacher-led activities, technology use, emergency drills and other general procedures.

Establishing, discussing, and practicing procedures for all major activities in which students will engage during the first days of school will help your management system run

smoothly and help to avoid chaos. Teachers should provide students with specific feedback to confirm that they are following procedures as expected or if corrections are necessary. Although it is important to establish procedures and expectations during the first days of school, it is equally important to revisit them throughout the school year.

During the same timeframe, planning and reviewing specific expectations with student involvement is necessary. It is customary for teachers to enforce a set of school rules. These rules are often presented to the students and their parents, who are asked to review them together and sign a document indicating that both parents and students understand the rules and consequences students will face should they decide not to follow them. Expectations for student behaviors should be based on these rules but framed in positive terms by the teacher with input from the students. Expectations could include high standards for engaging in classroom activities, the quality of work submitted, and being prepared, responsible, respectful, and reliable. Students should be invited to provide specific examples of each expectation. When students are involved in developing classroom expectations, they are more likely to follow them.

Connecting Relationships and Classroom Management Systems

It is crucial for teachers to know the students they teach. When teachers learn who their students are, they can begin building trusting relationships with them. Once authentic relationships have been established, teachers can design lessons and effectively engage students in activities that are relevant and have lasting impact throughout their students' educational journey. To facilitate this process, I offer the following recommendations: 1) demonstrate empathy, 2) maintain your composure, 3) redirect negative behaviors, 4) honor students' culture and identity, and 5) build a strong community.

Demonstrate Empathy

Researchers agree that probably the most important aspect of a positive relationship is empathy (Beaty-O'Ferrall et al., 2010). A teacher displaying empathy results in the students feeling understood. This is crucial to reaching and relating to young adolescents (Beaty-O'Ferrall et al., 2010). Empathetic relationships are especially important for difficult adolescents (Beaty-O'Ferrall et al., 2010). As we discuss empathy, it is important to examine the meaning of this term. Adler (1956) explains that empathy is "seeing with the eyes of another, hearing with the ears of another, and feeling with the heart of another" (p. 135).

Some students may initially feel comfortable sharing their problems and dilemmas with teachers who indicate their understanding in a manner that unintentionally creates distance. For example, during the initial stages of the pandemic, a female middle school student once emailed her teacher and explained that she was experiencing difficulties

submitting her electronic assignments from home during the pandemic. The teacher responded by saying, "You did not have any problems submitting your assignments from home up to this point in the school year. The district has provided laptops for you and your peers, and you are required to complete all assignments whether you are at school or at home. I expect you to continue submitting your assignments as you have been doing up to this point in the school year."

Feeling discouraged by her teacher's unempathetic response, the student had no indication that her teacher understood her situation and did not feel comfortable explaining her dilemma any further. Had the teacher taken the time to discuss the student's situation further, she would have learned that the only way her student was able to complete the homework assignments in the past was by going to the library while attending an after-school program. In her home, the student did not have reliable internet connection nor an appropriate space to study. She was able to use her friend's computer to send the email, but after the pandemic worsened, she could no longer visit her friend's home or submit virtual assignments on a consistent basis.

The teacher could have encouraged the student with an empathetic response such as, "It must be difficult trying to study while being distracted by your siblings and being concerned that your internet connection could go out at a moment's notice." This empathetic response would have demonstrated the teacher's understanding which she would have appreciated. It would also elevate the level of respect that she had for her teacher. Moreover, it would have encouraged the student to further communicate with the teacher so they could discuss alternative ways to keep the student engaged during the pandemic.

Maintain Your Composure

An important component of building relationships includes the ability for educators to control the impulse to display negative reactions to students' inappropriate behavior. Adolescents have the uncanny ability to accurately pinpoint the things that make teachers feel tense, irritated, aggravated, and anxious. The "ability to manage one's own issues as they arise is one of the counselor's most demanding skills" (Beaty-O'Ferrall et al., 2010, p. 7). It marks the difference between the effective and the ineffective counselor (Van Wagoner et al., 1991). This aptly applies to teachers of adolescent students as well. Once a professional gives in to emotions such as anger, exasperation, or displeasure, his or her emotions to function becomes impaired to a degree (Beaty-O'Ferrall et al., 2010).

It is not uncommon for adolescent students to make disrespectful comments and attempt to manipulate his or her teacher. Taking the comments and inappropriate behaviors personally will likely result in conflict and relational strife. To prevent conflicts such as this, Beaty-O'Ferrall et al. (2010) advise teachers to "suspend his or her issues as they arise - to 'place them on the shelf,' so to speak, to be addressed later." It is certainly difficult to demonstrate empathy if teachers are unable to momentarily set their emotions aside. Students are

extremely observant, and they monitor teachers' reactions in challenging situations. The manner in which teachers react will have a definitive impact on the relationship that ensues. Adolescents will analyze the situation and determine if the teacher practices what he or she preaches. As an example, Alexa, a seventh-grade student yells out in class because a group of her peers are "talking about her." The teacher quietly speaks with Alexa outside the classroom door and advises her to ignore what others have to say about her. Later, the teacher reacts angrily when she is disrespected by a group of students. Observing her teacher's reaction to a similar situation, Alexa will have little respect for the teacher's hypocritical display. Teachers can demand respect or earn it. However, earning respect is much more effective, and a teacher's demeanor has a great impact on how he or she is viewed and respected by students.

Redirect Negative Behaviors

When addressing students' negative behaviors, rather than reacting negatively, an approach for connecting with students is to "admire" their negative attitudes and behaviors. Just the phrase, "admiring their negative behaviors" may cause one to scratch their head and read it again. However, this approach is based on a well-established area of research called positive psychology (Seligman, 1999). This approach looks upon negative student behavior as a skill he or she has been practicing and refining for many years. In the case of a manipulative female teen, for example, being manipulative might have been the only or best way of getting her needs met in her family. It is to be entirely expected that she would bring these same skills to school in an effort to meet her needs there as well.

Beaty-O'Ferrall et al. (2010) advise: "Rather than engage in a power struggle with such a student, a teacher should acknowledge the skill that the student has worked so hard to develop - and then redirect it. It is important that this skill is applied with sincerity. Any hint of sarcasm could lead to further alienation between the student and the teacher" (p. 6).

So how might one admire manipulative behavior and redirect it? Consider the following example of a manipulative adolescent girl as offered by Beaty-O'Ferrall et al. (2010).

> Rather than address the girl's manipulations as such, mention to her, "I have noticed that you have the ability to influence people. Is that true?" She will probably reply with something like, "What do you mean?" The teacher can respond by saying, "Well, I have noticed that you can get people to do what you want them to do. Am I wrong?" At this point, the student will likely look at the teacher somewhat suspiciously and smile saying, "Well that's true sometimes, I guess." The teacher can then respond, saying, "You have a valuable skill there. If you use it in other ways, you may find more successful ways of getting your needs met. This skill could be valuable in certain careers, such as corporate management, sales, or even counseling." The young adolescent is usually quite surprised to hear something she has previously been

criticized for now being admired and looked upon as something potentially valuable (Beaty-O'Ferrall et al., 2010, p. 7).

Although adolescent behavior can be quite disconcerting at times, this example provides an opportunity for a new perspective in terms of how teachers could react in a way that helps build trusting relationships. It is common for teachers to feel exasperated when students appear to display pleasure in creating situations that cause teachers to respond in a negative way. Responding to such situations by admiring and then guiding students to redirect inappropriate behaviors is an approach that teachers should consider as they build relationships with their students.

The examples of student misbehavior can cause a great amount of consternation. In many cases, exercising the ability to keep one's composure - consider silently counting to ten - and address the concern in a positive and productive way will help to diffuse the situation. Moreover, though a teacher may become disappointed with a student's negative behavior, students should know that it is the inappropriate actions - not the student - that is the source of disappointment. The statement below supports this premise.

> It is important for the teacher to show that although the student's behavior is disapproved of, she or he still values the individual. The inappropriate behavior must be corrected without rejecting or attacking the learner's self (Marciniak, 2015, p. 117).

Honor Students' Culture and Identity

Developing relationships with students who come from culturally different backgrounds can be challenging and requires specific skills from new and experienced teachers alike (Nieto, 2008). As indicated earlier, it is crucial for teachers to know the students they teach. When teachers learn who their students are, they can begin building trusting relationships with students.

When attempting to build relationships with adolescent students from diverse cultures, additional challenges must be acknowledged and addressed. Such challenges include overcoming barriers that prevent teachers from being empathetic with students from diverse cultures. As asserted by Beaty-O'Ferrall et al. (2010) "these barriers are due to a fear of the culturally different, a lack of knowledge about the differences and similarities between cultures, persistent negative stereotyping and general intolerance" (p. 8).

The process of learning who *all* our students are involves overcoming the fears mentioned above. Creating opportunities to engage students in activities that help them gain a better understanding of their peers would greatly benefit them as they prepare to join college and the world of work. They must prepare to work with peers, colleagues, clients, community members and students from diverse backgrounds.

It is equally important for teachers to engage in these activities as well. By doing so, the teacher will also learn more about

cultural similarities and differences, address negative stereotypes, become more tolerant and less fearful of those who are culturally different. Once these fears have been addressed, the teacher and students will be better equipped to show empathy for each other and build stronger relationships.

To assist with the development of multicultural classroom activities and connecting with multicultural students, it would benefit teachers to take advantage of professional development opportunities that focus on multicultural competence. Multicultural competence includes centering one's awareness of cultural attitudes, beliefs, knowledge and skills (Beaty-O'Ferrall et al., 2010).

Teachers and students benefit from developing multicultural competence. Further, teachers can develop relationships by using the curriculum in ways that are relevant to their students' experiences inside and outside of school. Discussions and activities should allow teachers and students to share experiences about success, failure, struggles, and achievements. Such opportunities promote inclusivity, relevance, active engagement, mutual respect, and trusting relationships.

Build a Strong Community

Overcoming barriers that prevent teachers from demonstrating empathy for their students is indeed necessary and abundantly valuable. Rejecting these barriers provides opportunities for teachers to continue moving in a positive direction - making it possible for trusting relationships to evolve into relationships that are also supportive. For students to feel supported, it is important to provide a safe environment in which they feel comfortable asking questions, sharing ideas, being creative, making mistakes and taking risks. Teachers should encourage students to engage in activities and provide constructive feedback about their accomplishments on a consistent basis. Providing individual feedback demonstrates care for each student and encourages them to meet the high expectations that teachers have for their students.

Teachers can further support their students by providing a variety of interesting activities that encourage a joy for learning. Inviting students to complete a survey about topics that interest them or ideas they would enjoy exploring is an intentional method for generating valuable ideas when designing inclusive lessons. Alternatively, teachers are encouraged to ask students to share topics in which they are interested. Typically, young adolescents are eager to learn about topics they find interesting and useful ones that are personally relevant (Brinegar & Caskey, 2022). They also favor active over passive learning experiences and prefer interactions with peers during educational activities (Brinegar & Caskey, 2022).

Teachers need to plan curricula around real-life concepts (Brinegar & Caskey, 2022) and supply authentic educative activities (e.g., experimentation, analysis and synthesis of data) that are meaningful for young adolescents (Brinegar & Caskey, 2022).

Providing an environment that invites students to become part of a community in which they will participate, have a role and a voice that will be heard will cultivate a sense of belonging as well as a forum to interact with their peers. Students can be invited to participate in a variety of ways. Teachers could seek students' input on upcoming projects, issues or concerns that may interest them. Students could also be invited to engage in community projects. Brinegar & Caskey (2022) explain that "because young adolescents' interests are evolving, they require opportunities for exploration throughout their educational program" (n.p.). Involving students in the planning of projects, eliciting, and incorporating their ideas, gives them a sense of ownership in their learning. Seizing opportunities to interact with and provide positive feedback for students after they complete their tasks help teachers to strengthen supportive relationships that have already been established.

> *For students to feel supported, it is important to provide a safe environment in which they feel comfortable asking questions, sharing ideas, being creative, making mistakes and taking risks.*

Conclusion

In sum, teachers should be guided by research conducted by Furrer & Skinner (2003), which suggests that a priority for schools should be building the quality of children's relationships. Expanding on this advice, it is imperative for teachers to incorporate these behaviors in their behavior management system to make teaching and learning experiences positive, engaging, relevant, and impactful. When teachers connect with students, the result will be fewer classroom behavior problems.

Further, teachers must be mindful of the importance of knowing the students they teach. When teachers learn who their students are, they can begin building trusting relationships with *all* their students, including those from diverse backgrounds. For these relationships to evolve, teachers should use the curriculum in ways that are relevant to their students' experiences inside and outside of school. Providing a safe environment in which students feel comfortable asking questions, sharing ideas, being creative, making mistakes and taking risks demonstrates the support that students need to feel supported.

Demonstrating empathy within a safe environment helps students to feel that they are understood. Including these techniques and strategies into the classroom management system will chart a definitive path to connectedness in the classroom.

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