

Student/Teacher Interaction Behaviours

Miranda Weenusk

Abstract

How teachers interact with students can have damaging effects on students' self-esteem, which is quite often the antecedent to students' disruptive behaviours in the classroom. The purpose of this article is to encourage teachers to take the initiative step toward improving their classroom climate by identifying their response styles and types of classrooms. The types of misbehaviour of students and teachers are identified. Specific classroom management strategies and leading authors in behavioural theories are closely examined. The premise is that teachers need to monitor their behaviours when interacting with students during instructional activities, and students need to be taught how to behave.

For teachers and school administrators, the most problematic issue in schools today is the increasing levels of school violence. However, school violence has already begun to make its way into elementary schools, and the increasing number of incident reports for students' misbehaviours in the classroom has been the main topic for discussion between teachers and parents as well as school administrators. To remedy this problem of students' misbehaviours in the classroom, school administrators need to support teachers by giving them more opportunities to attend professional development workshops in classroom management strategies.

The Myth of the Good Teacher

Teachers with problem behaviour students tend to be manipulated into feeling guilty whenever they seek assistance from school administrators and parents. The general belief is that teachers should have all the necessary skills to handle problem behaviour students, when in reality they are well-trained to teach only certain school subjects. This belief has often misguided parents into thinking that teachers are accountable for their children's problem behaviours in school. It is not uncommon for school administrators and principals to share this belief, but they too have their own interpretations of teachers' roles and responsibilities in the classroom. Their expectations of teachers are reflected in Canter and Canter's (1976) "Myth of the Good Teacher" (as cited in Cangelosi, 2004). Cangelosi (2004) described the "Myth of the Good Teacher" as follows:

"A good teacher should be able to handle all behavior problems on her own, and within the confines of the classroom." This means if you are competent, you should never need to go to your principal or the child's parents for assistance. (p. 300)

This myth often prevents novice and experienced teachers from seeking assistance from parents, principals, and school administrators. Without adequate assistance and support from parents, principals, and school administrators, eventually teachers burn out and leave the teaching profession because of having to deal with disruptive students on their own too many times.

Types of Classrooms and Teachers' Response Styles

To help teachers regain control of their classrooms, Hardin (2008) recommended that teachers identify which of Coloroso's (2005) Three Types of Classrooms they might have: the jellyfish classroom, the brick-wall classroom, and the backbone classroom. The jellyfish classroom is without adequate structure. Teachers' expectations and punishments are inconsistent. The rules are often vague and leave students guessing what is expected of them. In the brick-wall classroom, teachers and students are ruled by dictatorship. The rules and punishments are unyielding. Students are manipulated and controlled by physical threats, humiliation, and bribes. Basically, students are told what to think and the teacher has all the power and control. The backbone classroom offers consistency and flexibility in discipline. Students are listened to and given second chances whenever mistakes are made. Students are taught how to problem-solve and to think before they react. After the teachers identify the type of classroom they have and decide which type they wish to have, the next step is to shift their attention to how they respond to students with disruptive behaviours in the classroom.

When teachers interact with students, Hardin (2008) advised using Canter and Canter's (1976) Teachers' Response Styles when setting the tone of the classroom. The three basic response styles of teachers are nonassertive, hostile, and assertive. Nonassertive teachers fail to make their needs and wants known; they allow students to take advantage of them. These teachers often threaten students, but students know there will be no follow-through so aggressive students tend to take over the class. These teachers become easily frustrated and secretly have inner hostility toward disruptive students. Hostile teachers respond in a negative, condescending, sarcastic, or hostile way that violates the students' rights, and disregards the feelings and needs of their students. They usually make unprofessional comments in front of the disruptive student, the student's peers, and other teachers. Punishments are often severe and physical. Assertive teachers clearly and firmly express their needs and the expectations of students. In other words, they say what they mean and mean what they say. Therefore, students know their limits in the classroom.

Behavioural Classroom Management Strategies

Marshall's (2001) Raise Responsibility System promotes responsibility in students. For this system to take effect, Charels (2008) advised teachers to do the following: "(1) Teach students about the four levels of social development and relate the levels to behavior and learning, (2) *check for understanding* of the four levels when students behave inappropriately, and (3) *provide guided choices* for acceptable behavior when disruptions continue" (p. 149). Rather than teachers, students suggest ways to conduct themselves more responsibly.

The fundamental ideas of Marshall's (2001) Hierarchy of Social Development are that "(1) students will cooperate willingly in the educational program if they see a clear reason for doing so and find the experiences enjoyable, and (2) good discipline occurs as students are influenced to conduct themselves more responsibly" (Charles, 2008, p. 73). The four levels of the Hierarchy of Social Development are Level A (Anarchy), Level B (Bossing/Bullying/ Bothering), Level C (Cooperation/Conformity), and Level D (Democracy and taking the initiative to do the right thing). Students who function at Level A are at the lowest level and they hardly accomplish anything worthwhile. At Level B, these students like to boss, bully and/or bother other students without any regard for their safety and well-being. The only time that these students are willing to comply with teachers' requests and/or instructional tasks is when authority is used. In Level C, students are willing to cooperate with teachers and others. They conform to the expectations set by the teacher and their motivation comes from the teacher and peer pressure. Most teachers would like to see their students function at Level D. In this level, students do not need to be told or reminded what to do. They have the desire to do the right thing and they take responsibility for their actions whenever they have done something wrong.

They live up to their expectations and achieve the goals that they set for themselves. Before implementing the Hierarchy of Social Development into the classroom and using it on students, teachers should first observe their students then identify the level each student is at. From then on, teachers can determine which students need the behavioural intervention the most.

The first part of Marshall's (1998) instructional model of the Social Development Program is to teach the vocabulary and concepts to students, and the second part consists of checking for understanding. At this stage, when a disruption occurs in the classroom, the teacher simply moves into a guidance mode and asks the student to identify the level of the behaviour. The main purpose of checking for understanding is to have the disruptive student acknowledge the level of social development, rather than punishing the student being asked. At this point, the teacher's only interest is helping the student to develop self-control and social responsibility in the classroom. It is very important that questioning students about their behaviours is not done in a coercive and negative way. However, if a student continues with the disruptive behaviour after acknowledging disrupting the lesson, then the teacher moves on to guided choices. At this stage, authority is used, but without being confrontational and without punishment. Students are not asked questions about their behaviour by the teacher. Instead, on a sheet of paper, the teacher gives the student predetermined choices that are listed as questions. This way, the person who asks the questions controls the situation and the student makes the final decision whether to complete the form. Three questions are asked: (1) What did I do? (2) What can I do to prevent it from happening again? and (3) What will I do? When the form is handed over to the student, one of the following questions is asked, depending on the current situation: (1) Would you rather complete the activity in your seat or in the rear of the room? (2) Would you rather complete the activity by yourself or would you prefer to have someone help you? (3) Would you rather complete the activity in the classroom or in the office? Again, the student is given the choice and responsibility for his or her actions.

Marshall (2006) advised teachers to modify his Raise Responsibility System when working with adolescent students who are disaffected with school (as cited in Charles, 2008). Disaffected teenage students have concluded that school has nothing to offer them. Quite often, these students have little interest in completing assignments, especially when it comes to complying with teachers' instructions, requests, and/or commands. They will attend school only when threatened by their parent(s). When speaking to disaffected students in the classroom, teachers should avoid doing the "seven deadly habits": "criticism, blaming, complaining, nagging, threatening, punishing, or rewarding/bribing to control" (Charles, 2008, p. 85). Marshall thus cautioned teachers that they, too, should keep their behaviours in check. Most importantly, those teachers should remain calm and unaffected, such as when students start cursing in the classroom, especially when foul language is directed toward the teacher or other students.

Ford's Responsible Thinking Process (2006) was adapted from Powers' Perceptual Control Theory, which theorizes that our behaviour is controlled by our perceptions of the environment and we act accordingly in order to get what we want (Charles, 2008). In the Responsible Thinking Process, teachers teach students to acquire the necessary (cognitive) skills to get what they want in life without violating the rights of others. We determine our understanding of the world through the three highest levels of perceptions: the systems concepts level, the principles level, and the program level. At the systems concepts level, our beliefs and values help us to determine what we want to be as a person and how we should treat others. At the same time, we make an effort to achieve the goals that we set out for ourselves. At the principles level, we determine how we want to live by setting our priorities and guidelines in accordance with our beliefs and values. At the program level, in order to have structure and order in our lives, we develop a plan that assists us to live a harmonious and satisfactory life. Our behaviours are therefore not entirely influenced by the environment, but rather how our perceptions interpret the environment predetermines our behaviours.

Many of the behaviours that teachers find disrupting can be controlled by simply controlling the teachers' own responses (Thomas et al., 1968). Gable et al. (1983) compared teacher

approval and disapproval statements across classrooms of different exceptionalities and found that approval statements (praise) occurred at a rate of only 16 per minute (as cited in Shores et al., 1993). Strain et al. (1983) found that 82% of the students who had low social development ratings never received positive social behaviour from the teacher, even when they complied with the teacher's request (as cited in Shores et al., 1993). Shores et al. (1993) emphasized that teacher praise is an essential component of positive interactions between teachers and students.

Teacher/student proximity is an effective classroom management strategy that ensures minimal classroom disruptions because it increases teacher interactions with students (Gunter et al., 1994). Gunter et al. (1995) found that "elementary students spend 70% of their time assigned to independent seat work and 91.7% of the time, paraprofessionals remained seated in their assigned work areas while monitoring (targeted) students" (pp. 12-13). For effective proximity control while monitoring independent seat work, teachers should stand within three feet of the student and they should briefly interact with every student while circulating the classroom. Students' disruptive behaviours can also be greatly reduced if students' desks are appropriately distanced from one another. To implement these simple strategies, teachers need to develop ways to monitor their own movement patterns in the classroom.

Types of Teachers' and Students' Misbehaviours

Charles (2008) identified five types of teacher misbehaviour that teachers need to avoid whenever they discipline and interact with students: "inducing fearfulness, denigrating students, being demanding and abrasive, presenting poor models of behavior, and not making classes interesting and worthwhile" (p. 28). The ten most likely causes for teachers to misbehave in the classroom while interacting with students are the following:

Poor habits, unfamiliarity with better techniques, presenting poor models of behavior, showing little interest in or appreciation for students, succumbing to personal frustration, succumbing to provocation, providing ineffective guidance and feedback, using ineffective personal communication, failure to plan proactively, and using coercion, threat, and punishment. (Charles, 2008, pp. 25-28)

It is very important for teachers to know what the real reason behind their anger is and to think of positive ways to improve their behaviour without having the students feel the heat of their anger.

Charles (2008) also listed thirteen types of students' misbehaviours that commonly occur in the classroom and on school grounds: "inattention, apathy, needless talk, moving about in the room, annoying others, disruption, lying, stealing, cheating, sexual harassment, aggression and fighting, malicious mischief, and defiance of authority" (pp. 19-20). Identifying the reasons behind students' disruptive behaviours not only nurtures a safe learning environment for students, but also helps to repair deteriorating student-teacher relationships. The ten antecedents of students' misbehaviours are attributed to the following: "unmet needs, thwarted desires, expediency, urge to transgress, temptation, inappropriate habits, poor behavior choices, avoidance, egocentric personality, and neurological-based behavior" (Charles, pp. 21-23).

Hardin (2008) identified four main goals of students' misbehaviour in the classroom: (1) to seek attention, (2) to gain power, (3) to seek revenge for some perceived injustice, and (4) to avoid failure. However, Cipani (1995) argued that students' disruptive behaviour in the classroom is intended not only to seek teachers' attention, but also to escape or avoid an instructional task or assignment. Escape behaviour functions to terminate an existing event, and avoidance behaviour occurs in anticipation of an aversive event. These kinds of behaviours are

negatively reinforced when teachers continuously give students aversive instructional tasks and assignments.

Positive and Negative Reinforcement

Despite the evidence that positive reinforcement techniques can change students' challenging behaviours, many teachers continue to use punishment instead, because it is still widely accepted in school discipline and teachers find it easier to administer than positive reinforcement. Of the various strategies in behaviour modification, positive reinforcement in the form of teacher praise is the most effective strategy in modifying students' behaviours.

Negative reinforcement is the contingent removal of an aversive stimulus, which results in increased behaviour production to escape or avoid the aversive stimulus (Cipani, 1995). Students' off-task behaviours were most likely reinforced by escape or avoidance of teacher instruction.

Once the teacher determines that negative reinforcement is indeed a key factor in maintaining the student's disruptive behaviour in the classroom, Cipani (1995) recommended that teachers try altering their instructional approaches during instructional activities and instead implement positive reinforcement strategies to modify students' behaviours. "Axelrod (1996) believed that techniques based on positive reinforcement lack popular and professional acceptability because they are time-intensive, offer little compensation for educators, contradict popular views of developmental psychology, threaten special interest groups, are socially unacceptable, and demean humans" (Maag, 2001, p. 174).

Generally, educators agree that there is no single cause for students' problem behaviours. Gable et al. (1998) found that even when students' behaviour topography (what the behaviour looks like or sounds like) is similar, the causes of the behaviours can be very different. Sanson et al. (1993) found that early behaviour patterns during infancy and preschool years can explain behaviour problems in school-age children (as cited in Stormont, 2002). In Sanson et al.'s longitudinal study,

Children who were rated as having externalizing problems when they were 7 years old were rated by their mothers as having more difficult temperaments as early as when they were infants... Thus, for preschool children with difficult behavior, certain temperamental characteristics in infancy, such as colic and excessive crying, may be important to consider. (Stormont, 2002, pp. 127-128)

It is unreasonable to expect parents and teachers to know all of the risk factors of externalizing behaviour problems in children, but it is not unreasonable to expect parents and teachers to closely work together to find possible risk factors for individual children.

To assist in the prevention and intervention of problem behaviours in schools, Hester (2002) recommended that teachers implement the following strategies: (1) Redefine the culture of the school. (2) Increase predictability in daily routines. (3) Give clear instructions, consistent, and follow through. (4) Teach students appropriate replacement behaviours that serve the same function as the misbehaviour; and (5) Affirm positive behaviour.

Once children with conduct problems enter school, whether preschool or grade school, negative school and social experiences further increase their adjustment difficulties (Webster-Stratton, 1993). Aggressive children with noncompliant disruptive behaviour also develop poor relations with teachers, and they typically receive less support and nurturing in school.

Behavioural Assessments and Intervention Plans

A functional behavioural assessment is an effective tool to use when identifying the cause or causes of students' problem behaviours, but behavioural intervention plans are also effective

in terms of preventing students from interfering with academic instruction (Gable et al., 1998). Discipline referral forms are also handy when used in conjunction with functional behavioural assessments and behavioural intervention plans. In schools, all of these three forms help teachers and school administrators deal with students who have problem behaviours. Tobin et al. (2000) found that certain patterns in individual students' discipline referrals predicted school failure in high school, delinquency, referral for special education and placement in alternative settings, and future incidents of violence at school. Discipline referrals forms not only predict possible school and student failures, but they can also provide a clear picture of the most troublesome grades and months of the school year. Thus, the next school year, school administrators and teachers will be more informed and prepared to deal with problematic grades and disruptive students.

When dealing with off-task students daily, Cangelosi (2004) recommended that teachers use the Teaching Cycles Model, which assists teachers in redirecting students' off-task behaviours into on-task behaviours. The six stages of the Teaching Cycles Model are (1) identifying the students' needs, (2) determining the learning objective, (3) planning a learning activity, (4) preparing for the learning activity, (5) conducting the learning activity, and (6) evaluating how well the learning objective was achieved. These stages look simple, but they take more time to implement and prepare when dealing with more complicated student problem behaviours in the classroom.

When dealing with students who have disruptive behaviours, Charles (2008) recommended that teachers ask these students the following six questions from Ford's Responsible Thinking Process: (1) What are you doing? (2) What are the rules? (3) What happens when you break the rules? (4) Is this what you want to happen? (5) Where do you want to be? or What do you want to do now? And (6) What will happen if you disrupt again? These questions teach students how to look within themselves and decide how they want to be in the classroom. In order to achieve the desired outcome, it is important that teachers not ask these questions in an angry tone. Students who are approached in anger become angry themselves, especially once they feel threatened.

Teachers' behavioural expectations of students determine the climate in the classroom. Classroom rules are "general behavioral standards or expectations that are to be followed in the classroom. They constitute a code of conduct intended to regulate individual behavior in an attempt to avoid disruptive behavior" (Burden, 1995, p. 93). Students should also have input in establishing appropriate rules in the classroom, but the rules that they establish must be fair, realistic, and reasonable. When selecting rules, teachers need to consider their teaching styles, the age and maturity of their students, and the type of classroom climate they would like to have – and to make sure that the rules are in conjunction with the school rules and expectations.

However, Rhode et al. (1992) disagreed with Burden's (2000) recommendation that students be allowed to select their own rules in the classroom. Students tend to make up too many nonspecific rules, and some students feel that they do not have to follow rules that have been created by other students. Therefore, Rhode et al. argued that the teacher should establish appropriate classroom rules that apply to all students without exceptions – even for special needs students. It is also very important for students to understand the rules and the consequences for obeying and breaking the classroom rules. Otherwise, the rules were made in vain and are worthless in maintaining students' disruptive behaviours in the classroom.

Student-Teacher Interaction Behaviours

Jack et al. (1996) defined interaction as a social exchange between a target subject and another person (adult or peer), and interaction sequence as the sequential scoring of events from one stop code to the next stop code. In their research study of classroom interactions, Jack et al. (1996) organized their sequences of interactions into four types:

Positive interactions were sequences in which the teacher and/or student emitted a positive social behavior (e.g., praise statements) and no negative behaviors. Negative interactions were interaction sequences in which the teacher and/or student emitted a negative behavior (e.g., disruptions, protests, aggression, or negative verbalization) without a positive behavior being recorded before the stop code. Mixed interactions were interaction sequences in which sequences in which both positive and negative behaviors were emitted by the teacher and/or student. Neutral interactions sequences were defined as those interactions in which no positive or negative behaviors were emitted. (pp. 68-70)

The results of their research study indicated that most of the interactions across the 20 classrooms were negative. Students and teachers were engaged in negative interactions over 20% of the observed time and less than 5% of the time, students and teachers were engaged in positive interactions, which is very low. However, there were no significant statistical differences between the high group and low group on the rate or duration of negative, neutral, or mixed interactions.

Gunter et al. (1995) reported,

Negative interactions—i.e., interactions involving disruptive, aggressive, negative verbal/gestural, or negative consequences but no positive behaviors – between teachers and students occurred 22% of the time spent in the classroom. In contrast, positive interactions—i.e., interactions involving praise or positive consequences and no negative behaviors—occurred only 3% of the time. When the sequence of negative interactions was broken down, negative interactions were typically started by the students engaging in a disruptive act, which was followed by the teacher telling the students to do an academic task or “talking” to the students. Negative interactions often ended in students engaging in additional disruptive behaviors. (pp. 13-14).

Surprisingly, the actual percentages of negative and positive interactions between teachers and students are quite alarming, but this evidence proves that teachers need more training in classroom management, especially positive reinforcement strategies.

Conclusion

Student-teacher interaction behaviours are in a desperate need of a repair and makeover. Our children’s education and safety in school is being comprised when teachers do not upgrade their teaching and responsive styles, and especially when school administrators do not provide teachers with the necessary training in classroom management strategies. As a society, we are all educators and it is our responsibility to ensure that every child receives quality education, without fear and punishment.

References

- Burden, P. R. (2000). *Powerful classroom management strategies: Motivating students to learn*. Corwin Press.
- Cangelosi, J. S. (2004). *Classroom management strategies: Gaining and maintaining students’ cooperation* (5th ed.). John Wiley & Sons.
- Charles, C. M. (2008). *Today’s best classroom management strategies: Paths to positive discipline*. Pearson Education.
- Cipani, E. C. (1995). Beware of negative reinforcement. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 27(4), 36-42.

- Gable, R. A., Quinn, M. M., Rutherford, R. B., & Howell, K. (1998). Addressing problem behaviors in schools: Use of functional assessments and behavior intervention plans. *Preventing School Failure, 42*(3), 106-119.
- Gunter, P. L., Jack, S. L., DePaege, P., Reed, T. M., & Harrison, J. (1994). Effects of challenging behaviors of students with emotional and behavioral disorders on teacher instructional behavior. *Preventing School Failure, 38*(3), 35-39.
- Gunter, P. L., Stores, R. I., Jack, S. L., Rasmussen, S., & Flowers, J. (1995). On the move. Using teacher/student proximity to improve students' behavior. *Teaching Exceptional Children, 28*(1), 12-14.
- Hardin, C. J. (2008). *Effective classroom management: Models and strategies for today's classrooms* (2nd ed.). Pearson Education.
- Hester, P. (2002). What teachers can do to prevent behavior problems in schools. *Preventing School Failure, 47*(1), 33-38.
- Jack, S. L., Shores, R. E., Denny, R. K., Gunter, P. L., DeBriere T., & DePaepe, P. (1996). An analysis of the relationship of teachers' reported use of classroom management strategies on types of classroom interactions. *Journal of Behavioral Education, 6*(1), 67-87.
- Maag, J. W. (2001). Rewarded by punishment: Reflections on the disuse of positive reinforcement in schools. *Exceptional Children, 67*(2), 173-186.
- Marshall, M. (1998). Fostering social responsibility and handling disruptive classroom behavior. *NASSP Bulletin, 82*(596), 31-39.
- Rhode, G., Jenson, W. R., & Reavis, H. K. (1992). *The tough kid book: Practical classroom management strategies* (pp. 3-26). Sopris West.
- Shores, R. E., Gunter, P. L., & Jack, S. L. (1993). Classroom management strategies: Are they setting events for coercion? *Behavioral Disorders, 18*(2), 92-102.
- Stormont, M. (2002). Externalizing behavior problems in young children: Contributing factors and early intervention. *Psychology in the Schools, 32*(2), 127-138.
- Thomas, D. R., Becker, W. C., & Armstrong, M. (1968). Production and elimination of disruptive classroom behavior by systematically varying teacher's behavior. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, 1*(1), 35-45.
- Tobin, T., Sugai, G., & Colvin, G. (2000). Using discipline referrals to make decisions. *NASSP Bulletin, 84*(598), 106-117.
- Webster-Stratton, C. (1993). Strategies for helping early school-aged children with oppositional defiant and conduct disorders: The importance of home-school partnerships. *School Psychology Review, 22*(3), 437-457.