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Behavioral Supports for Secondary Education Classrooms

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Behavioral Supports for Secondary Education Classrooms

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Creating an effective classroom environment for secondary education classrooms is as essential to student success as it is for primary education classrooms. Furthermore, many of the behavioral supports that apply to primary education classrooms apply also to secondary education classrooms—though the supports may take on a different appearance to accommodate adolescent populations. Here, the focus is on a behavioral approach that identifies several core supports of classroom management for middle school and high school students—supports that also apply to primary education classrooms but that take on new meaning in the older grades. From a behavioral perspective, classroom settings that engage students successfully typically offer the following from teachers:

- assessing the purpose of student behavior
- teaching desired behavior expectations
- acknowledging appropriate behaviors
- having a continuum of responses to inappropriate behavior

Assessing the Purpose of Behavior

By the time students reach middle school, they have experienced a number of successes and failures. Among these experiences include social and academic interactions with adults and students. These interactions have shaped their current behavior patterns. Many students who have experienced early academic or social problems have developed responses that work for them in their current settings. For example, some students who cannot read have learned to escape or avoid instructional settings that would highlight their deficits by engaging in problem behavior. Others have learned that although they may lack social skills to develop meaningful relationships they have a range of behaviors that work effectively to get access to objects (e.g., stealing) or attention (good or bad) from others. Finally, some students are at times over- or understimulated. This could be due to problems they experience on the way to school (e.g., fear of being bullied, fear of gangs) or lack of connection with the classroom content or teaching method.

Effective secondary classroom teachers usually are reflective about their students' behavior. They ask the right questions before looking for the correct intervention. For example, teachers should consider when and under what conditions students engage in appropriate or inappropriate behaviors. Also, they should consider whether the problem is that the student cannot do—or will not do—the desired behavior. The response to these questions would mean different interventions. A quick test is the Coke test. If a student will not complete a task in class, a teacher can ask the student to complete the task one-on-one with the reward of obtaining a Coke (or any preferred object). If the student can do the task, then the problem behavior is more likely a *won't do* problem. Conversely, if the student still does not complete the task when offered a reward, then the problem is more likely a *can't do* problem. Teacher responses to students who engage in *won't do* behaviors (e.g., attention-related, access to preferred activities) could include providing noncontingent attention to the student (e.g., finding 2 minutes to just connect, personal greetings at the door upon entry). For students who *can't do* the activity, teachers should consider modifying the curriculum through interspersing tasks (e.g., easy, hard) or incorporating preferred activities. Many of these strategies can be built directly into classwide instruction through universally designed, function-based teaching.

Teaching Expected Behaviors

The importance of teaching expected behaviors in middle school and high school settings is often a difficult point to get across to instructors. Many teachers expect that students should be aware of social norms and that teaching social norms is too elementary. A related concern is that some secondary teachers do not feel prepared to address social, emotional, or behavioral issues within their own classroom. Such teachers may feel that their responsibility is to teach “science (math, music, etc.), not behavior.” Interestingly, the Latin root of the word discipline is to *teach*. Secondary teachers should be encouraged to understand that addressing problem behavior before it occurs can provide them with the best return on their investment of time. Further, as they address literacy as it relates to the Common Core, they will find that teaching norms and skills related to speaking and listening (generally associated with respect) is expected as a part of the general curriculum.

Directly teaching norms usually follows a consistent format and series of steps. These steps include connecting with a schoolwide (or classwide) expectation (e.g., respect, responsibility), identifying an objective (e.g., students will be able to demonstrate respectful behavior in the classroom), a rationale for the norm or expectation, counterexamples of the norm or expectation, examples of the norm or expectation, some sort of practice, and providing feedback to the students. These can also include video models.

Providing counterexamples and positive examples may be important in that it provides a construct for students to understand the dimensions of the appropriate behavior. It also makes it easier to redirect students later, because the teacher knows the students are aware of the appropriate behavior (e.g., “was that being respectful or disrespectful?”). It also encourages engagement in the lesson through behavioral momentum. By having the students participate in some level of problem behavior (i.e., a highly probable response) under certain limits (e.g., “Do not hit anyone; stop the behavior when I raise my hand.”), students may be more likely to engage in demonstrations of appropriate behavior (i.e., less probable response). Finally, teachers should remember to provide brief precorrections before activities where students are more likely to engage in problem behavior (e.g., “Remember, we need to work quietly in the library today while we are doing our online searches for our projects”).

Acknowledging Appropriate Behaviors

Acknowledgment is related to the previous section involving purposes of behavior. Typically, teachers need to understand that most human beings do not engage in behaviors unless these behaviors work at some level. Teachers do come to work because they are being paid. However, what helps these teachers to stay in the field and not find other work that might be more rewarding is the payoff from watching their students develop under their care. They have the ability to be creative with instruction and to engage other adults in meaningful and collegial relationships. Many corporations (e.g., Zappos, Southwest Airlines) understand that acknowledging employees for their *on mission* behavior is a great way to encourage their effectiveness at work. Two principles of acknowledgment also apply for students: They require a basic level of acknowledgment for engaging in appropriate behavior (e.g., desired behavior should work to obtain recognition and attention), and their academic experience should also provide meaningful payoff through highly engaging content, instruction, and social

Many schools and classrooms have developed token economies (e.g., stickers, tickets) to encourage appropriate behavior. For example, students might receive a token from a teacher for engaging in respectful behavior, which can be used to purchase items in a school store. Part of the effectiveness of these systems is that they serve as a prompt for the adult to look for and recognize appropriate behavior. Regardless of the system, classroom teachers should consider their interactions with students as a kind of behavioral banking exchange. If there are too many withdrawals (i.e., corrections) and not enough deposits (i.e., praise), teachers are likely to find their accounts overdrawn with the students when they attempt to correct their behavior.

Key components of making appropriate behavior work include keeping high rates of positive-to-negative interactions (e.g., 4:1); providing specific and genuine praise for behaviors and immediately after the appropriate behavior (e.g., “Thank you for starting our bell ringer when you came in to class”); and looking for opportunities to provide vicarious reinforcement for off-task behavior by praising students who are engaging in desired behavior (e.g., “I appreciate the way group one is working on their lab together quietly, that’s very respectful”). Teachers should be encouraged to try self-management strategies such as tallying on paper or using counters to track their positive-to-negative statement ratios.

Additionally, the curriculum should include content that is relevant to the student (e.g., connecting a lesson about parts of the body with a local professional basketball player who has experienced an injury). Further, it should include functional outcomes such as opportunities for students to engage each other in socially appropriate ways (e.g., allowing students to engage in a debate rather than write a report). The pace of the instruction should be appropriate to the students’ academic levels and responses. Finally it should provide students with multiple opportunities to respond to and engage with the instruction (e.g., “Give me a thumbs-up if you agree with this statement, or a thumbs-down if you disagree”).

Continuum of Responses to Inappropriate Behavior

Although teaching and acknowledging behaviors are critical to preventing problem behavior, there will be times when students will not respond to these supports alone. Teachers should be prepared in advance with a range of responses to address problem behavior when it occurs. The overall goals for these responses are to

- redirect the student back to the appropriate behaviors,
- decrease the problem behavior’s level of disruption to the environment,
- provide time to reflect on how to prevent the problem from occurring in the future (e.g., analyzing the triggers and outcomes of the interaction),
- model appropriate responses to inappropriate behavior, and
- generally prevent an escalation of the problem without becoming a part of the problem (e.g., not escalating with the student).

These goals are dependent on the teachers’ ability to be clear that problem behavior will occur and that they must have systems in place to provide effective responses for students and themselves.

Some of the key components of having a continuum of responses to problem behavior

include ensuring that teachers are aware of their own internal feelings and bodily conditions (e.g., lack of sleep, anxiety, hunger) and antecedents that are likely to stir up negative feelings (e.g., student talking back, student–student confrontations) that typically trigger suboptimal responses to student problem behavior (e.g., yelling, shouting, blocking pathways of students). Teachers should be aware that by taking care of their own personal feelings and physical needs (e.g., getting appropriate sleep, managing personal stress) they can decrease the likelihood that they will have more problematic responses to student behavior (e.g., they will be less likely to take behavior personally).

Second, as teachers become aware of the types of problem behaviors that are likely to set off their own negative responses, they can—as much as possible—avoid the problem for a short time and then prearrange the environment for success. For example, if certain problem behaviors (e.g., teasing other students) or specific students are triggers for teachers, they can ask for a buddy teacher to support them by requesting the student to go to a colleague’s class for a short time (while they cool down). Second, teachers also can engage in replacement behaviors, such as using tallies or counters to track the number of times they could have reacted problematically (e.g., engaged in a power struggle), and yet did not. Simply looking at data and having other responses in between the problem behavior and their reaction can be one solution for avoiding escalation themselves.

Other key components of responding include being aware of what they (and school administrators) define as classroom versus office management behaviors. This list of behaviors should be made clear to all teachers and students. Teachers should not spend time in problem-solving issues that are better managed by the office (e.g., cursing directed at the teacher). This also decreases the likelihood that teachers will be overreacting (e.g., sending students to the office) on the first occurrence of low-level behaviors (e.g., not having a pencil for class). Other key strategies have been developed to support a continuum of responses.

When correcting students, teachers should remember to use proximity (e.g., move within about three feet of the student, but not closer), make eye contact (but do not force it on the part of the student), and to be private (e.g., whisper, use low tone of voice). For example, a teacher can use sticky notes for positive praise and correction. As the teacher walks around the room and places sticky notes on students’ desks, the other students in the classroom do not know if others are being corrected or praised. This is an example of using all three approaches as once.

Other suggestions include using novelty by assuming the student did not know the expectation when correcting in order to diffuse his or her reaction when corrected. For example, when a teacher sees students marking on their arms with pens in class (on the first occurrence), the teacher can say privately, “I am really sorry that no one told you it is not OK to mark on your arms in class, we let you down there.” Another strategy to diffuse student responses is to use humor (not to be confused with sarcasm). An example would be that two students in a class are engaging in low-level pushing. The teacher can respond by saying, “Are you guys OK? You know, since childhood my arms randomly flop like that sometimes, not really sure why that happens either, but was that really being safe?” In this example, the teacher is changing the prompt in terms of his interaction with the students. The goal is to provide a prompt (e.g., joke) that will diffuse the problem and allow for error correction (e.g., was that really being safe?). Also,

starting with specific praise before correction can serve the same purpose. If a student is tapping her pencil at her desk and yet is in uniform, a teacher can say, "Sarah, great job today of being in uniform," and the moment Sarah stops tapping (which often happens), the teacher can praise the student by saying, "and thank you for correcting the tapping, that is really good self-control." Vicarious reinforcement also can be applied in this situation by praising other students who are working quietly and then immediately praising Sarah for being responsible (perhaps privately).

Two other key suggestions include staying out of the content when a student becomes defiant or defensive and ending with a teachable moment when possible. For example, a student is asked to sit down in class and responds by saying, "Why should I listen to you? You are not my mother." The teacher should be encouraged to wait and repeat the direction without making comment or defending his or her authority. In this example, the student is providing a stimulus for the teacher to begin to engage in a conversation that will delay carrying out the request (e.g., sitting down). By waiting and repeating the question, the teacher is choosing to not respond to the stimulus and therefore not reinforcing further exchange. Finally, when possible, as in the examples above, the interaction should end with some sort of practice or at least discussion of the appropriate behavior. With the reminder that discipline really means to teach, instructors can have a disciplinary interaction (e.g., redirecting the problem behavior and reteaching the appropriate behavior) without ever having to send the student to the office.

Conclusion

For teachers in secondary schools, behavioral supports for effective classroom management include understanding the purpose of students' behavior, teaching desired behavior expectations, acknowledging appropriate behavior, and having a continuum of responses to disruption. Although these supports may not serve as a *cure-all* to prevent or eliminate all challenging, unwanted behavior, they have been shown to reduce that behavior considerably and contribute to a classroom becoming a better learning environment.

Hank Bohanon

See also Beginning Teachers and Classroom Management; Behavioral Approaches, Foundations of; Functional Analysis; Praise and Encouragement; Reinforcement; Schoolwide Positive Behavior Supports

Further Readings

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