

What We Know About Managing Classrooms

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Effective classroom management must move beyond the control of behaviors. Future research needs to describe how to create supportive learning environments in schools that face complex and changing needs.

For the last 15 years Gallup polls have reported the public's belief that the answer to many school problems is improved discipline. Among practitioners, particularly new teachers, classroom management and discipline remain their number one concerns.

Not surprisingly, the response in education research has been to expand our knowledge of what effective classroom managers do and how they do it. As a result of broadened definition of classroom management, today's research moves away from a focus on controlling students' behavior and looks instead at teacher actions to create, implement, and maintain a classroom environment that supports learning.

Our purpose is to review the evolution in research on classroom management, to investigate how this knowledge translates into real experiences for teachers, and to suggest directions for further exploration.

REVIEWS OF RESEARCH

Studies about time. "The association of learning with time is among the most consistent that education research reveals".

- The amount of time students spend learning the curriculum varies from school to school.
- Even under the best of circumstances, half or less of the school day is used for instruction.
- The amount of instructional time spent is often associated with student achievement.

Although policymakers use these findings to support extending the school day, Walberg (1988) suggests that increases in productive time must accompany increases in allocated time.

While the amount of time imposes limits on what can be accomplished, the key issue is how the time is used.

Effective classroom management conserves instruction time by planning activities and tasks to fit the learning materials; by setting and conveying both procedural and academic expectations (constructing and teaching lessons on "going-to-school skills"); and by appropriately sequencing, pacing, monitoring, and providing feedback for student work.

Research indicates however, that teachers must be aware of and make visible what students are actually learning because students may seem involved in tasks without engaging in the content. Bloome, Puro, and Theodorou (1989) refer to this as "procedural display" and "mock participation" when students and teachers engage in activities without being involved in the content substance.

Group management strategies. Kounin (1970), reaffirmed by Gump (1982), identified several strategies that teachers use to elicit high levels of work involvement and low levels of misbehavior.

- Withitness: communicating awareness of student behavior;
- Overlapping: doing more than one thing at once;
- Smoothness and momentum: moving in and out of activities smoothly with appropriately paced and sequenced instruction; and
- Group alerting: keeping all students attentive in a whole-group focus.

Lessons that engage students. Certain class activities also elicit varying degrees of student engagement. For example, Kounin found highest student engagement (85%) during recitation and lowest (65%) during seatwork. Other studies emphasize these findings, adding that:

- Frequent seatwork results in lower on-task behavior;
- Alternating cycles of two shorter segments each of content development and seatwork maintain higher student involvement than single longer sequences ; and
- Student engaged rates during seatwork differ among teachers, while engaged rates during recitation are similar.

Recitation remains the dominant equivalent to learning. Also, transitions required in more complex formats can result in lost time.

Teachers must recognize both academic and social dimensions of classroom tasks. For example, students have to interpret not only what they are to learn, but how they are to participate. Teachers need to make clear their expectations and procedures for student participation, for example, how to answer questions or bid for a turn.

Assignments with varying cognitive and procedural complexity have consequences for classroom management. Generally, more intellectually demanding academic work and activities in which students create products or encounter novel problems require complex management decisions which demonstrates the interrelated nature of classroom management and the curriculum.

Classroom communication.

Studies about classroom communication — verbal and nonverbal ways that norms, rules, and expectations are

signaled — show how both students and teachers effectively mediate and construct the learning environment. Studies identify what students need to understand and to participate in lessons and how teachers orchestrate that participation. Some ritualistic activities, such as passing out papers, require little understanding. However, nonritualistic activities require students to “read” the requirements correctly or risk negative evaluations of their behavior and abilities. A close look at how class activities evolve reveals the need for classroom management that is visible, established, monitored, modified, refined, and reestablished.

Teachers’ management decisions. Expert teachers are influenced by a rich store of information that allows them to judge what are typical and nontypical classroom scenes. They see classrooms as “moving systems” and make managerial decisions based on their perceptions of how well students are working within those systems. These teachers interpret and act on cues from students that signal students’ involvement — or lack of it — in academic tasks.

More intellectually demanding academic work and activities in which students create products or encounter novel problems require more complex management.

Beginning the year. Kounin suggested that it is not so much what teachers do to stop misbehavior that characterizes effective group management, but how they prevent problems in the first place. In response, several studies investigated how effective managers began their school year and discovered that in both elementary and secondary classrooms the start of school is crucial to effective management. Teachers whose students

demonstrated high on-task rates and academic achievement implemented a systematic approach toward classroom management at the beginning of the school year. **The success of intervention depends on orderly structures being in place.**

They began the year by:

- preparing and planning classroom rules and procedures in advance;
- communicating their expectations clearly;
- establishing routines and procedures, and teaching them along with expectations for appropriate performance;
- systematically monitoring student academic work and behavior; and
- providing feedback about academic performance and behavior.

In classrooms with this sort of system, there are improved student task engagement, less inappropriate behavior, smoother transitions between activities, and generally higher academic performance.

Handling misbehavior. Of course, a carefully planned management system will not, by itself, stop all misbehavior, but teachers can usually handle it unobtrusively with techniques such as physical proximity or eye contact. More serious misbehavior may require more direct intervention. Because punishment neither teaches desirable behavior nor instills a desire to behave, it is perhaps best used as part of a planned response to repeated misbehavior. However, the success of intervention depends on orderly structures being in place. Well-understood norms and expectations for behavior must have previously existed.

Teacher effectiveness training and discipline programs provide methods but often do not adequately address the complex preventative and support-

ive functions necessary for effective management and discipline. Often these systems fail to address the day-to-day classroom management skills needed to engage students in productive activities and to prevent minor problems from becoming major ones.

Educating teachers in classroom management

While early studies provided generic information about classroom characteristics and teacher actions that produce order and student involvement, conceptual frames were needed to help teachers orchestrate these principles in the fast pace of the classroom.

Subsequent field studies supported the concept of establishing a classroom management system at the beginning of the school year. Teachers in the experimental groups not only used significantly more management strategies and procedures than comparison groups, but also their students exhibited higher academic success.

These findings provide evidence that research findings can and do influence teacher decisions about management practices.

However, this is not the whole story. Learning to teach is a complex enterprise that requires practice in problem-solving more than acquisition of rote skills.

Future inquiry

As recent research indicates, three topics should be central to the future study of classroom management and discipline: school level discipline and classroom management; quality of academic tasks, and classroom management in different contexts.

School discipline and classroom management. Although not included in this review, abundant literature

documents how school-level discipline influences classroom management. The view presented is that the school and community cultures affect the values and decisions teachers make in their management systems. In other words, teachers' management decisions that are not supported at the school and community levels lose credibility with students.

Quality of academic tasks. Good management and organization must focus more on the content and substance of what is being managed and less on the look of engagement. Whereas good classroom management is necessary for learning, it does not stand alone. Recent research has identified classrooms with high levels of student engagement, but meager academic content, resulting in low levels of learning.

Classroom management in different contexts. The current climate of school reform clearly calls for teaching problem-solving and higher order thinking skills, integrating learning experiences within and across subject areas, and implementing multiple tasks. Enacting these changes requires new methods of organization and management. Future research needs to address: How can classroom management and organization support students' substantive learning? And what is the nature and quality of the learning that is being supported?

Highlights of research on classroom management

Teachers who are effective managers:

- Use time as effectively as possible
- Implement group strategies with high levels of involvement and low levels of misbehavior
- Choose lesson formats and academic tasks conducive to high student engagement

- Communicate clearly rules of participation
- Prevent problems by implementing a system at the beginning of the school year Future research needs to:
- Define the impact of the school and community cultures on teacher efforts
- Ensure that the substance of what is being taught is adequate
- Define effective management techniques to fit the need for classroom management that encourages more problem solving and less routinized academic tasks