

Rethink Your Classroom Management Practices to Improve Your School (and Why Some of Your Favorite Practices are Holding You Back)

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Teacher A: *We just have to do something at this school to make things better.*

Teacher B: *Actually, we have been doing something, - all day, every day.*

Teacher A: *I mean – you know – something to improve the school*

Teacher B: *Maybe if we want to get different results, we should consider changing some of the things we do every day.*

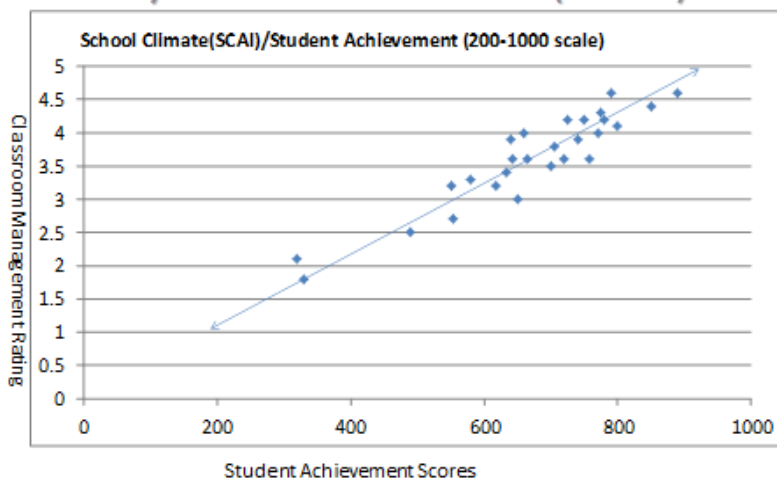
Abstract

There is a common assumption in most schools that what the adults in the building are trying to do will be effective or are at least necessary. But often what we are trying to do can ultimately contribute to what we experience as our problems. Using data from over 300 schools, student achievement scores were compared to the classroom management climate scores at each school. The result was an almost perfect correlation. The data showed that certain guiding values and assumptions translated into a predictable set of choices of classroom management practices, and correspondingly, the choice of practices used accurately predicted the outcomes demonstrated at the school including levels of student achievement, school climate, and referral rates for different groups. The paper examines the kinds of guiding values and practices that were found at the lower, middle and higher performing schools in the study. Finally the paper recommends re-thinking the use of seven common classroom management practices that are often recommended to teachers, but the study data found to be a limiting factor in a school's ability to improve its level of climate and/or achievement.

There is a common assumption in most schools that what the adults in the building are trying to do will be effective or are at least necessary. But often what we are trying to do can ultimately contribute to what we experience as our problems. To a large extent school improvement is the process of replacing ineffective practices with those that are more effective. And what we have found in our research is that classrooms improve more quickly as a result of eliminating certain limiting practices than from adding new effective practices (Shindler, Jones, Williams, 2016). This article will explore some of those practices that tend to contribute to the poor function within a classroom, or at least limit its growth potential. If we want to experience school improvement, a great first step is to systematically reduce these practices.

We have collected climate survey and student achievement data from over 300 schools. What we have found was that the kinds of teaching practices that were common at any school predicted with great accuracy the levels of climate and student achievement at that school (Shindler, Jones, Williams, 2016). Put very simply, what those in the school were trying to do defined what they ultimately did in practice, and what they did produced results that were quite predictable. When we compared student achievement scores to the classroom management climate scores at each school (using the ASSC School Climate Assessment Instrument – Scale 5 – Discipline and Management, see example item in Appendix A), the result was an almost perfect correlation as show in the scatter plot distribution diagram below.

Classroom Management Rating (SCAI-D-5) by Student Achievement (CA API)



We often hear teachers ask questions such as, “Don’t people just have to do what works for them?”, Our answer would be, yes, we all have to find our style and work from our areas of strength. But what our findings show is that in most cases, the use of a classroom management practice itself will predict the effect that is produced from using it. For instance, some practices will tend to create more intrinsic motivation, while others will decrease it, and some practices will lead to more student self-responsibility over time, while others tend to lead to more dependency (Rennie, 1991). So we need to examine more closely what we mean by doing what “works.” What is the choice of practice working to produce?

We also hear teachers say things such as, “Well the students in this school are _____, so we need to do _____, because that is the only things that works with them.” Of course, students are different and bring their backgrounds and educational history into our classrooms. But, that does not change the nature of the cause and effect relationship in which certain practices will encourage certain outcomes. And that result is a rather predicable and calculable effect on everything from student achievement levels to school climate levels and from motivation to tardy rates (Klein & Keller, 1990). In too many cases, defending what we “need to do with these students” tends to be a rationalization for under-serving under-served populations (Anyon, 1980). Students may be used to being treated or managed in certain ways, but if we want certain results we need to use practices that would manifest those results. If we want student to exhibit different behavior than what they have historically, we need to employ practices that would logically lead to the new behaviors that we desire.

So to respond to Teacher A in the opening dialogue, we *are* doing something all the time. Every teacher action influences the overall effect on the class and the experiences of the students in the class. And as Teacher B encouraged us to do, let’s look at what we do every day with a critical lens.

In general we could classify practices into three general levels – low, middle and high. For each level of practice there are a predictable set of assumptions that guide them as well as a predicable set of results that are produced (See Table A below).

Table A: Three Levels of Guiding Assumptions and Common Classroom Management Practices and the Predicable Guiding Results of Each.

	Low Level	Middle Level	High Level
Guiding School Assumptions	We need to keep on the Students and seeking their compliance. Students are encouraged to stay out of trouble and follow the rules.	We need to be consistent and ensure students are on-task. Students are encouraged to be respectful and responsible.	We need to aim toward more student self-direction and community over time. Students are encouraged to speak out, meet their potentials and serve the collective.
Common Classroom Practices	Regular use of punishment High rate of parent phone calls Use of public shaming and personal challenges Focus on negative recognitions Public praise of “good” students Reward system Names on the board or color cards Absence of faith and consistency in attention cues and other collective expectations	Most classes have expectations for being on task and attentive. Consistently applied strategies for maintaining order. Some encouragement for students to reflect upon their behavior No excessive use of negativity. Teachers use many strategies for the purpose of positive reinforcement.	Teachers encourage self-reflection with questions and discussions. Policies encourage a sense of fairness. Negative recognitions are rare. Students learn skills to solve their own problems Students are taught to work collectively to solve problems. Students are given as much freedom as they demonstrate they are ready for.
Predicted Results for Each Level	0-30%tile achievement 1.5-2.9 SCAI (climate rating) High rate of discipline referrals 5-9x referral rate for boys of color	30-70%tile achievement 3.0-4.0 SCAI (climate rating) Moderate rate of discipline referrals 2-4x referral rate for boys of color	70-100%tile achievement 4.1-5.0 SCAI (climate rating) Low rate of discipline referrals Little or no difference in referrals by ethnicity

Based on ASSC SCAI survey ratings from teachers, students and parents, and in person classroom observations and meetings with school leaders, and available school records, as well as corresponding research.

Moving Up from the Lower Level

One factor that tends to define the kinds of intentions and actions at a school is how people talk about the school and its students. At the lower level school, typically the narratives that define things commonly lack much faith in the students or their ability to grow (Dembrowsky, 1990). What one often finds in the lower level function school is a focus on the negative, what is not going right and which students are being disruptive. And then consistent with that focus is the use of practices that are intended to respond to the negative condition in the form of shaming, punishments, and threatening or bribing students into being on-task. While this makes sense on one level, on a deeper level this type of reaction mostly just keeps the unwanted condition in place. We need to accept that negativity breeds more negativity, and pain breeds more pain, and bribes are a losing bargain in the long term.

Instead, if we seek to raise the performance level of the currently lower function classroom or school, we need to build a new picture of what it means to be an effective/successful student and a corresponding new set of habits within our students. Instead of placing our attention on the bottom, we need to seek ways to build the top. Which students can be leaders in the form of peer mediators, classroom leaders, goal-driven role models, etc.? We also need to make “a good student” a very concrete, attainable and desirable reality. We recommend using a system for assessing high quality process, participation, cooperation, or effort in the classroom. However, an intentional system for assessing process, using well-designed rubrics and a systematic process for helping students internalize the highest levels of performance, should not be confused with the superficial practice of giving participation points at the end of a term, or the shame based practice of using a color card chart for behavior.

Next we need to become consistent school-wide with our effort to teach and practice high quality behavior. The goal should be 100% attention and a culture of listening and respect that refrains from incorporating teacher use of negative recognitions (i.e., “Johnny I told you to stop talking, that is your warning.”). Systems for creating an “easy” classroom climate defined by listening that does not require gimmicks or negativity exist and have been used effectively to raise lower function classrooms to higher levels of function (Shindler, 2009).

Safety is a useful and often necessary goal in the school currently operating at this lower level. However, achieving the goal of safety should be accomplished in a manner that is consistent with the big picture for what it will take to improve. We find that the goal of safety is best accomplished as a byproduct of creating an environment characterized by classroom student success, cultivating school pride, a commitment to maintaining personal dignity, and an increased reliance on students learning the skills to solve their own conflicts.

Moving Up from the Middle Level

Most of those in schools that function in the middle range tend to be relatively confident that what they are doing is what will get the best results. In many cases, the classroom management practices that are most common in middle function school have come from a book, professional development or advice from an experienced colleague. But quite often in these schools we find that too many have become enamored with clever strategies and gimmicks. Many of these clever strategies tend to have some desired effect, but in the long-term actually limit the goals of the teacher to produce order and the educational and socio-emotional development of the students (See Table B below). In one such example, many teachers become habituated to the use of the technique in which the teacher points out a student who is doing something that they “like” in an effort to modify the behavior of the students who are not demonstrating the desired behavior. In this example, the teacher might say, “I like the way that Maria is sitting quietly,” with the intention of sending an indirect message to those who are not sitting quietly. Using this strategy over time the teacher has likely seen instances in which in the short-term it has gotten something approximating the result that they were seeking. But what they may have failed to recognize as clearly is that what has also been happening in a larger perspective has actually been much more complicated and less helpful, and probably includes students becoming less interested in the indirect message over time, feeling increasingly resentful about being compared, and ultimately realizing that there is no meaningful consequence for not performing the expectation. We find that the teachers who produced more long-term and lasting results, instead of using this kind of indirect strategy, spoke more directly, honestly and congruently, and kept the personal and the performance/behavioral distinct. A more effective teacher might instead have stated, “We are all sitting quietly right now and getting ready to learn. And I’ll wait until I see us all showing that we are ready.” Teachers with the highest levels of success said what they wanted, took constructive action and avoided negativity.

Too often clever practices work just well enough to keep the user hooked on them. So instead of asking whether a practice is “working,” we need to ask whether it is promoting the kinds of long term skills, and psychological dispositions, and other outcomes that we want to encourage in our class.

We encourage schools to use at least one staff meeting and engage the teachers in an activity in which they classify all teacher practices into those that either promote or undermine the factors of what we term a “psychology of success.” These factors are:

- Internal vs External locus of control
- Acceptance and Belonging vs Isolation and Anxiety
- Growth vs Fixed Ability orientation (Dweck, 2000)

And when they have completed the exercise (using a graffiti model is best), have the faculty examine the list of practices on the “promoting” sheet, and then contrastingly those on the “undermining” sheets. First, reflect on the fact that the contents of each set of practices are the result of choices and are never inherently necessary. Second, have the teachers envision a classroom where they only engage in those practices that promote a psychology of success and refrain from those that undermine it.

Sometime Limiting Practices are Recommended by Trusted Sources

Discussed below in Table B are seven classroom strategies that are frequently encouraged by well-intentioned teacher trainers and/or administrators and are assumed to be useful. They are especially common in middle function schools. On the surface they seem like useful and clever ideas, but when examined more closely what one sees is that they are actually somewhat ineffective and tend to encourage negative side effects on the classroom climate, students’ psychology and level of function and order in the class in the long term. Alongside each of these practices in Table B is a more positive alternative practice.

Table B: Seven Common but Problematic Classroom Management Practices and More Effective Alternatives for Each

Strategy	Why it Can Be Counter-productive	A Move Sound Alternative Practice
Negative Recognitions “Brian, I told you to put that away.”	When we remind a student to stop doing something that he/she already knows not to do (“Brian!” or “We are waiting for Brian”), we essentially train him/her to 1) keep doing it, and 2) wait for us to remind them to stop, and 3) assume that all he/she needs to do is to tolerate occasional reminders, yet is never required to actually change their behavior. These interventions also add a negative energy into the climate of the room and send the implicit message that the teacher is struggling to promote order in the class.	First, become an expert in technical management, and stop trying to be clever and tricky. Learn to use a clear cue for 100% attention, expect 100% attention, and stop whenever you don’t have it, until it is the norm. When a student or a few of them do not understand that expectation, you will likely need to work with them to help them see that they need to find a way to self-regulate asap. And when it is the whole class, such things as clarifying statements (i.e., “We are all giving Maria our 100% attention, and she will wait until she has it.”) are useful for bringing positive clarity for what needs to be happening. (See Ch. 4 and 5 of TCM).
“Proximity Control”	Much like negative recognitions, using our physical proximity to try to modify student	Being among our students is a great idea. Interact, and be involved, but not as a walking

<p>Standing nearer the Students who are off Task</p>	<p>behavior essentially trains students to assume they only need to be on task when we are standing near them and intimidating them with our presence. We make the implicit deal that we need to be close to them or we cannot assume or trust anything good will happen. It is a lose-lose for us and the students. Over time students remain irresponsible and we are never able to feel confident and trusting.</p>	<p>patroller, but a teacher. If students are off task, use expectation clarifiers, or purposeful individual interventions. We should be making constant comments related to what quality process investment should look like at any point (i.e., Ask yourself, are you executing your role in a way that is working to the benefit of your group?) If a group is off task, we need to help them self-evaluate and find solutions for being on task</p>
<p>Using Colored Card Chart Behavior Systems</p>	<p>Simply put, this is using public shame to try to coerce students into compliance. It does not deal with the real problems – either related to the student or what is happening in the classroom. So will not lead to real solutions. It focuses primarily on the negative, but in a global and non-specific way, so is not instructive in any way. And in the end it actually tends to encourage students to stay stuck and comfortable at their color level, especially those at the bottom levels.</p>	<p>It is wise to avoiding any public student-student comparisons in all areas but especially with behavior. It only makes everything else in the class worse. However, using an intentional well-constructed system for assessing quality student effort, investment, cooperation, and/or participation can be really effective. Done correctly, it can help clarify what “good” looks like for students in a concrete and specific manner. And it can be used by the teacher to help clarify tasks, process quality, and what high quality behavior looks like for those who need it. (See complete web-article at www.transformativeclassroom.com)</p>
<p>Saying “I like the way ___ is ___ing” to modify those who are not ___ing.</p>	<p>Manipulative strategies almost always back-fire. When we try to modify one students’ behavior by publicly praising another student, we are being insincere and deceptive. It leads to confused emotions in the students, and undermines the sense of acceptance and belonging in the class. When students hear us referring to one group and seeming to direct our attention to another they might ask themselves “Who were we talking to?” “Have they just been compared?” And if so, “Do they care?” Avoiding using the words “I like” unless you are talking about your sincere personal preferences.</p>	<p>The clean clear positive non-personal alternative is a positive recognition. Instead of making it personal, simply help the class see what the quality behavior that you want looks like. A phrase such as “I see groups who have all their equipment out and are determining ...” help everyone better see what good looks. Or we can use clarifying statements or questions (i.e., “I might be asking myself or those in my group Right now.”) to help make a quality task more clear (See Ch 4 in TCM)</p>
<p>Praising desired behavior with personal compliments</p>	<p>When we give personal praise we are giving the student something extrinsic (our approval and affection) for something they most likely see as part of who they are. This creates a shift away from their own sense of agency and intrinsic motivation, and over time makes them more dependent on external praise and promotes insecurity and a fear of failure.</p>	<p>Use positive recognitions, reflective questions or refrain from saying anything. Rule 1 is do nothing to rob them of their intrinsic motivation and sense of internal locus of control. So often just asking a question about how it is going, or finding something interesting about what they are doing shows that we are interested, without a thinly veiled agenda of giving our approval for what we want disguised as something positive.</p>
<p>Saying “thank you” as a way to reinforce wanted behavior</p>	<p>Why would we want to diminish the power of our sincere gratitude and the words “Thank You” by turning them into a knee jerk strategy given for compliance? If we are trying to create an authentic relationship with our students, we want to</p>	<p>Say “Thank You” “I like that” or give praise when you are speaking as one authentic human being to another. In the role of the teacher, you need to make it about them, and their growth and how we can all produce quality outcomes, and not about you. So a</p>

	use our words to reinforce unconditional positive regard (love) and a sane and congruent message. Using caring messages to manipulate undermines that quality.	phrase like “We are getting there, cool” or just saying what is happening positive or negative is respectful. Let them know how they are doing relative to their goals and what is good for the collective. They need useful information, not your blessing.
Giving extrinsic rewards to bribe students into doing things	When we give students something extrinsic for doing something that we would want them to intrinsically value, we are killing their intrinsic motivation and training them to think that the primary reason they would want to do the task is because they are getting something non-educational for it in the end. If we set up this bargain in the form of a bribe, we are helping ensure that our students will do nothing without being given a bribe first. Study after study shows that giving rewards may get an initial response but eventually undermines motivational levels and decreases the likelihood that students display the desired behavior or performance level over time.	If we look into the top classrooms, we see engaging instruction and students who have a sense of internal locus of control and a growth orientation. Engaging learning is inherently motivational. Working with others and solving problems activates our intrinsic motivation. Sharing what we do gives us a sense of pride and self-efficacy. A sense of accomplishment that comes from reaching a goal and persisting through a challenge encourages an even greater level of motivation for the next task. Yet, when we introduce an extrinsic reward into the equation all those internal motivational instincts are suppressed to some degree.

Conclusion

Often classroom management strategies that are popular or have a short-term impact can seem like the answer to our problems. But if we want to move our schools forward, we need to be critical consumers. What are the effects of the practices that we choose to use day in and day out on our students’ levels of psychology of success, motivation, social and emotional health, and simply the ability to which they can function effectively in their work and interactions? Be wary of easy answers, short-term thinking and the tendency to become enamored with cleverness. If we want to improve our schools we need to first, determine a set of guiding values that we can feel good about and then find practices that encourage them, beginning with the systematic termination of those practices that are keeping us at a level that is beneath our potential.

References

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Appendix A: Example Items from the ASSC School Climate Assessment Instrument (SCAI) Scale 5 – Discipline and Management

5. Discipline Environment				
Level - 3		Level - 2		Level - 1
<i>High</i>	<i>high-middle</i>	<i>middle</i>	<i>middle-low</i>	<i>low</i>
5.a -----○-----○-----○-----○-----○-----○-----	School-wide discipline policy is consistently applied.	School-wide discipline policy is used by some staff.	School-wide discipline policy exists in writing only.	
5.b -----○-----○-----○-----○-----○-----○-----	It is evident from student behavior that there are clear expectations and consistency in the discipline policy.	In many classes there are clear expectations and most teachers are fair and unbiased.	Students have to determine what each teacher expects and behavioral interventions are defined by a high level of subjectivity.	
5.c -----○-----○-----○-----○-----○-----○-----	Most teachers use effective discipline strategies that are defined by logical consequences and refrain from punishments or shaming.	Most teachers use some form of positive or assertive discipline but accept the notion that punishment and shaming are necessary with some students.	Most teachers accept the notion that the only thing the students in the school understand is punishment and/or personal challenges.	
5.d -----○-----○-----○-----○-----○-----○-----	Classrooms are positive places, and teachers maintain a positive affect, and follow-through with consequences in a calm and non-personal manner.	Most teachers maintain a positive climate, but some days they just feel the need to complain about the class and/or get fed up with the “bad kids.”	Classrooms are places where teachers get easily angered by students and there is a sense of antagonism between the class and the teacher.	
5.e -----○-----○-----○-----○-----○-----○-----	Maximum use of student-generated ideas and input.	Occasional use of student-generated ideas.	Teachers make the rules and students should follow them.	