

Action Research Project on
Classroom Management and Student Behavior

Final Report

Center of Excellence to Prepare Teachers of Children of Poverty
Francis Marion University

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Purpose of the Study

There were two primary purposes for conducting study. The first was to examine the extent and nature of student misbehavior and disruptive behavior in selected classrooms in the Pee Dee area. The second was to investigate the extent to which participation in an action research project could influence teachers' classroom management practices and, as a result, minimize the amount of student misbehavior and disruptive behavior.

Sample for the Study

The sample consisted of eleven teachers who voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. The teachers were employed in eight schools located in four school districts. Two of the teachers taught first grade, one taught second grade, three taught fourth grade, three taught fifth grade, one taught eighth grade, and one taught in high school. Nine of the teachers were female; two were male. Five of the teachers were African-American; six were White. The range of teaching experience was from 3 years to 28 years, with a median of 11.

Research Methods

The study was conducted in three phases. Each phase is described briefly below.

Phase I: Book Study and Goal Setting

On August 2, 2005, all eleven teachers participated in an all day meeting. At this meeting, each teacher was given a copy of the book, *Relationship-Driven Classroom Management: Strategies that Promote Student Motivation*, by John M. Vitto. They were also given a two-page summary of the importance of the first two weeks of school (see Appendix A). After reading the summary, they participated in a discussion of how they

could incorporate the ideas contained in it into the way in which they began school later that month. Next, the teachers read the first four chapters of the book (about 75 pages) and a general discussion of the book material took place.

During the last 30 minutes of the meeting, each teacher came up with a list of four or five goals for their classroom management efforts during the upcoming school year. Each goal had to (1) be based on the readings and (2) require some type of change on the teacher's part in order to achieve. Finally, teachers were asked to read the remaining chapters of the book (Chapters 5 through 10) prior to the December meeting.

Phase II: Fall Implementation, Observations, and December Meeting

During the Fall Semester, teachers were expected to work toward the achievement of their goals. In late September, eleven Francis Marion University (FMU) students received training on conducting behavioral observations in classrooms. Each FMU student was paired with a participating teacher. The training materials are included as Appendix B.

In October all participating teachers were observed by an FMU student as they taught two different subjects. For the elementary teachers, the subjects were English language arts and mathematics. For the middle and high school teachers, the subjects were appropriate to their teaching responsibilities (e.g., World History, U. S. Government). Each observation lasted 30 minutes and all observations took place on a single day.

In addition, each FMU student conducted observations in another teacher's classroom in the same building. These "comparison" teachers taught at the same grade level and were observed teaching the same subjects. Each "comparison" teacher had

been contacted in advance by the appropriate participating teacher and had agreed to have observers spend time in his or her classroom.

All observation records were taken to the Center of Excellence office. The data on the records were entered into an SPSS database. The data were analyzed and summaries of the data in terms of the major observation categories (e.g., misbehavior, disruptive behavior) were prepared.

On December 8, 2005, a second meeting of the eleven participating teachers was held. Most of the morning was spent examining and discussing the observational data summaries. Most of the afternoon was spent discussing Chapters 5 through 10 of the book. Near the end of the meeting participants were given an opportunity to revise their goals based on their Fall Semester experiences and material they had encountered in the book. Five of the teachers made no changes at all, three made minor changes, and three deleted one of their original goals (while also making minor changes in the others).

Phase III: Spring Implementation, Observations, and April Meeting

During the Spring Semester participating teachers continued to work toward their goals. In early April, 2006, the FMU students conducted a second set of observations. Because several of the FMU students were engaged in student teaching during the Spring Semester, the remaining FMU students conducted observations of multiple teachers in multiple schools. Approximately one-half of the “comparison” teachers were the same as the teachers who were observed during the Fall Semester; the other one-half were “new.” Once again, the completed observation records were taken to the Center of Excellence office, data were entered into the SPSS database, data were analyzed, and data summaries were prepared.

On April 26, the final meeting of the participating teachers was held. At this meeting, four of the FMU student observers were also present. Most of the morning was spent discussing the Spring Semester observational data summaries, with a focus on the similarities and differences between the Fall and Spring summaries.

In the afternoon, participating teachers were asked to complete the form shown in Appendix C. In essence, the form in Appendix C asks teachers to summarize their activities relative to goal accomplishment (Column 2), indicate the extent to which they accomplished the goal (Column 3), and discuss the extent to which they believed their classroom management had improved over the school year.

Results of the Study

The results of the study are presented in four sections: goal setting, observational data, goal accomplishment (self-report), and reflections.

Goal Setting

Table 1 contains the goals established by the eleven participating teachers. These goals represent the original goals as modified by the teachers after the Fall Semester. A total of 52 goals are included in the table, three of the original goals having been eliminated by the teachers. In every one of these cases, the goals were combined with, or subsumed under, another already established goal.

As shown in Table 1, each goal was placed in one of seven categories: (1) classroom organization and climate, (2) classroom practices, (3) modeling, (4) reflection and self-assessment/evaluation, (5) relationships with students, (6) relationships with home, and (5) student empowerment. The first two categories were consistent with the

importance of the first two weeks of school (and beyond); the last five categories were consistent with the implementation of relationship-driven classroom management.

The far right-hand column of the table, labeled “Total Goals,” indicates the number and percent of goals that fell in each of the categories. Slightly more than 50% of the goals fell into the first two categories. Goals related to modeling, reflection and self-assessment/evaluation, relationships with students, and student empowerment were relatively rare.

Observational Data

Table 2 contains a summary of the observational data for all observed teachers, both participating teachers and “comparison” teachers. The top number in each cell is for the Fall Semester; the bottom number is for the Spring Semester. The median, given in the second column, was used as the measure of central tendency because of the relatively small sample size as well as the negative skewness of the distributions of the data.

What leaps out from Table 2 is the very small percent of “problem behavior” (the sum of misbehavior and disruptive behavior) that was observed. Remember that these data summaries are based on 42 hours of classroom observation. During that time frame, less than 1.5% of the observed behaviors were classified as “problem behaviors.” In contrast, the percent of on-task behavior was very high (almost 85% in the Fall and almost 90% in the Spring).

Based on the Fall Semester data, participating teachers came to realize that the so-called “classroom management problem” was not a problem in managing an entire classroom of students; rather, the problem could be redefined as finding ways of “managing” two or three students in almost every classroom who accounted for 80 to 90

percent of the “problem behavior.” In other words, “rule- and routine-driven” classroom management approaches work very well for the vast majority of students. “Relationship-driven” classroom management strategies provide a useful supplement to “rule- and routine-driven” classrooms, emphasizing as they do the need to establish personal relationships with individual students.

Table 3 presents a comparison of the participating teachers (i.e., Action Research Participants) with the “comparison” teachers (i.e., Other Teachers) on two variables: mean percent problem behavior and mean percent on-task behavior. Once again, the top number in each cell refers to the Fall Semester, whereas the bottom number refers to the Spring Semester. With respect to problem behavior, there was a slight decrease for the participating teachers (from 2.0% to 1.5%); while there was a slight increase for the “comparison” teachers (from 2.5% to 2.8%). Although the trend is noteworthy, these differences are not statistically significant. With respect to on-task behavior, both groups of teachers increased somewhat between Fall and Spring, although the increase for the participating teachers was approximately twice as large. Once again, although the trend is interesting, the differences are not statistically significant.

Goal Accomplishment (Self-Report)

Table 4 summarizes the teachers’ self-reports of their goal accomplishment. The summary is presented in terms of the seven goal areas mentioned in Table 1. Based on the teachers’ self-reports, they were most effective accomplishing goals dealing with relationship with students (100% of the five goals established), reflection and self-assessment/evaluation (80% of the 5 goals established) and classroom organization and management (75% of the 12 goals established). They reported being the least effective

accomplishing goals dealing with modeling (only one of the three goals established), relationships with home (two of the six goals established), and student empowerment (two of the five goals established). In summary, then, teachers were able to change the culture and climate of the classroom, establish more positive relationships with students, and engage in reflective assessment and evaluation on their own behavior in relation to student behavior.

Teacher Reflections

Table 5 summarizes the qualitative data taken from the last section of the Action Research Summary Form (see Appendix C). What is interesting about these data is the number of times that words such as “modeling,” “community,” and “relationships” appear. The concepts underlying these terms are central to establishing and operating a relationship-driven approach to classroom management.

Conclusions

We learned several things from this action research study. Two of the most important “learnings” will be discussed in this closing section.

First, we learned that a rule- and routine-based approach to classroom management and a relationship-driven approach to classroom management go hand in glove. Establishing (and practicing) classroom behavioral norms at the start of school remain important components of classroom management. These components alone, in fact, may be sufficient for the vast majority of students in the classroom. At the same time, however, this approach is not sufficient for a few students in most classrooms. For whatever reason or reasons, these students are unable or unwilling to conform to the rules and participate in the routines. In many instances, the problems confronted by these

students go well beyond walls of the classroom and the school; that is, they bring them with them into the school and classroom environments.

Second, we learned that a book study/book discussion format is a viable way for helping teachers understand their own behavior and develop a set of goals based on this understanding. Action research based on book study/book discussion, goal setting, data collection, and reflection seems to hold great promise as a professional development strategy. Finally, action research, in general, provides rather unique opportunities for pre-service and in-service teachers to work collaboratively toward a common goal. By bringing both groups “to the table” during the last session, a dialogue was established that benefited both groups. The pre-service teachers were able to make the “hard data” come alive by providing specific, concrete examples of student behavior, misbehavior, and disruptive behavior. The in-service teachers were able to reflect on these data to help the pre-service teachers make better sense of them by looking at them through the eyes of more experienced teachers.

Reference

Vitto, J. M. (2003). *Relationship-driven classroom management*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.