

Classroom Management as Human Relations:  
An Action Research Study

Final Report

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

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During the 2005-06 school year, the Center of Excellence sponsored a collaborative action research study with a focus on identifying and solving classroom management problems. Eleven classroom teachers from four school districts in the Pee Dee region of South Carolina participated in the study. Six undergraduate students from Francis Marion University conducted systematic observations in these teachers' classrooms as well as in classrooms taught by "similar teachers" (that is, teachers teaching the same subjects to the same age students). One of the major findings of the study was that a small minority of students, as few as two or three in a classroom, caused the vast majority of classroom management problems (Anderson *et al.* 2006). Using terminology developed by Vitto (2003), these students were labeled "difficult and resistant students" (p. 168). During the 2006-07, the Center of Excellence sponsored a follow-up study of "difficult and resistant" students.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study was to gain a more complete understanding of "difficult and resistant" students and, based on this understanding, find ways of working more effectively with these students in schools and classrooms.

### **Samples for the Study**

Twenty-two teachers, representing ten school districts in the Pee Dee region of South Carolina, participated in this study. Based on their experiences with their class or classes of students during the first two weeks of school, each teacher was asked to identify two students whom he or she perceived as being "difficult and resistant," based on Vitto's (2003) definition. In addition, teachers were asked to give one or more reasons for "nominating" each student. Initially, 44 students, ranging in ages from 4

through 15, were identified. One teacher could identify only one student that met the definition, while another teacher identified three students. For each identified student, the teacher was asked to provide information about the student (e.g., home background, previous academic performance, social-emotional traits, and classroom behaviors) based on the student's permanent record, discussions with other teachers, and the teacher's impressions of the student during the first two weeks of school.

### **Research Methods**

During the Fall semester, each teacher held a private conversation with each identified student. During the conversation, teachers asked students about their hopes, dreams, aspirations, and fears. Following the conversation, teachers wrote brief summaries of the conversation. At the end of each summary, teachers were to write two (or three) changes they would make in the way they interacted with and responded to the student. A sample of three summaries and intended changes is shown in Appendix A.

Shortly after the conversations, but before the intended changes could be implemented, an FMU student shadowed each of the identified students for the better part of one school day. During the shadows, the FMU student focused on the experiences of the targeted student as he or she moved through the school day – from activity to activity, from subject to subject, and in the case of middle and high school students, from teacher to teacher. Each shadow lasted at least three hours, but no more than five hours.

During the observations, the FMU students wrote notes describing how the students behaved in the classroom, how they reacted to various events that occurred within the classroom, and how well they were performing academically. Based on the notes, each identified student was assigned a rating for each of four variables:

cooperation, participation, misbehavior, and disruption. The four rating categories were high, moderate, low, or non-existent. The ratings were based on student behavior for the entire shadow period.

Cooperation was defined as the extent to which students complied with teacher requests; that is, they did what they were told to do. If the teacher told students to take out their books and the student did so, he or she was said to be cooperating. Participation was defined as the extent to which students participated in the lesson (e.g., responded to questions, completed the work). If students were singing a song and the student was singing along, he or she was participating. Misbehavior was defined as students' disobeying classroom rules or behaving outside the norms of the classroom, BUT not doing so in a way that disrupts other students. Disruption was defined as student verbal or physical behavior which has a "ripple effect" on other students and/or forces the teacher to stop teaching and deal with the behavior.

Sometime after the student shadows had been completed, the teachers began to implement their intended changes. In general, implementation began in early October, 2006, and continued through March, 2007. In late March and April, 2007, the shadowing of students was repeated. The purpose of this second shadowing was to determine the extent to which the behavior of the shadowed students had changed.

Two final notes are needed before presenting and discussing the results of the study. First, during the year, four of the teachers were lost to the study for a variety of reasons, reducing the sample from 22 to 18. Second, although 44 students were identified initially, the sample sizes for various data sets are different. Some students left or were removed from the school; other students remained in the school but were absent

during the second observation period. In addition, some teachers were able to identify a replacement or an additional student who met the definition of a “difficult and resistant” student.

### **Results of the Study**

The results of the study are organized into four sections. The first section describes the home background, academic performance, social-emotional traits, and behaviors of the identified students. The data presented in this section were provided by the participating teachers. The second section summarizes the first round of observational data in terms of cooperation, participation, misbehavior, and disruption. Comparisons with the results of the previous action research study are made. The third section describes five categories of “difficult and resistant” students. The data presented in this section come from both rounds of observations (shadows), research on “at-risk” students (e.g., Kahttri, Riley, & Kane, 1997; Levin, 2004; Sagar & Cox, 2004), and discussions with participating teachers. The four sections discuss “things that seem to work” for the identified “difficult and resistant” students. This summary is based on data provided by teachers and FMU observers, filtered through current research.

#### **Home Background, Academic Performance, Social-emotional Traits, and Behaviors**

Table 1 summarizes the target students’ home backgrounds, academic performance, social-emotional traits, and behaviors. The columns of the table represent four grade groups of students: PreK – Grade 2; Grades 3-5; Grades 6-8; and Grades 9-12. This disaggregation of the sample permits an examination of differences across the four grade groups. Because the sample sizes are relatively small, the data must be interpreted cautiously. Nonetheless, some important trends are notable.

**Table 1**

Summary of Target Student Home Backgrounds, Social-Emotional Characteristics, Academic Performance, & Behavioral Tendencies.

Variable	PreK – 2 (n = 11)	Grade 3-5 (n = 14)	Grade 6-8 (n = 11)	Grade 9-12 (n = 6)
<b>Home Background</b>				
Lives with both parents (23%)	18%	28%	18%	33%
Father is absent (71%)	82%	56%	82%	67%
<b>Academic</b>				
Poor language understanding and skills (22%)	<b><u>45%</u></b>	28%	9%	0%
Low test scores (29%)	<b><u>36%</u></b>	14%	<b><u>45%</u></b>	0%
Repeated prior grade(s) (29%)	0%	14%	18%	<b><u>50%</u></b>
<b>Social-Emotional</b>				
Lacks respect for others (26%)	9%	14%	<b><u>45%</u></b>	<b><u>33%</u></b>
Easily distracted (17%)	18%	0%	<b><u>36%</u></b>	0%
Angry & defiant (17%)	<b><u>36%</u></b>	<b><u>56%</u></b>	0%	0%
Easily frustrated (11%)	18%	14%	9%	0%
<b>Behavioral</b>				
Constantly talking & noisy (40%)	45%	28%	36%	33%
Tardiness (23%)	0%	28%	27%	33%
Doesn't follow directions/ uncooperative (20%)	<b><u>27%</u></b>	0%	9%	<b><u>50%</u></b>
Aggressive (17%)	18%	14%	18%	17%
Lacks Effort (14%)	0%	14%	9%	<b><u>50%</u></b>

*Note. These data were provided by the teachers, not the observers. They are summaries of the information provided by teachers on the form they completed about each identified or “targeted” student.*

The numbers in the cells represent the percent of students in each grade group who conform to the description in the respective row. For example, 18% of the PreK – Grade 2 students live with both parents. The percents for the total sample of students (n = 42) are shown in parentheses after the variable description. For example, 23% of the total sample lives with both parents. Only variables which applied to at least 10% of the total sample of students are included in the table.

**Home Background.** Less than one-fourth of the identified students live with both parents. This percent is fairly similar across the four grade groups. In addition, almost three-fourths of the identified students live in homes where the father is absent.

**Academic Performance.** In general, the identified students possessed poor language understanding and skills, scored poorly on tests, and repeated one or more grade levels. Interestingly, the PreK – Grade 2 students were characterized primarily by poor language development, the Grade 6 – 8 students were characterized primarily by poor test scores, and the Grade 9 – 12 students were characterized primarily by having been retained at an earlier grade level, thereby being “overage for grade” (Roderick, 1993).

**Social-Emotional Traits.** In general, the identified students were easily distracted and easily frustrated. They lacked respect for others and, perhaps as a consequence, were angry and defiant. When examined in terms of the four grade groups, we see that the younger children – primary and elementary – were characterized primarily by being angry and defiant. The middle school age students were characterized primarily by being easy distractible and disrespectful. Finally, the high school students were, like the middle school students, characterized by a lack of respect for others.

**Behaviors.** The behavioral “problem” shared by identified students, regardless of grade level, was constant talking and making noise. Overall, 40% of the identified students were characterized in this way by their teachers. Interestingly, the percent of students who were characterized as uncooperative or failing to follow directions was reasonably high for both the youngest students and oldest students. In the context of the other data, however, the reason for this behavioral manifestation might be quite different for the two groups. It is conceivable that the younger students fail to follow directions (and are thus seen as uncooperative) because they do not understand the directions. In contrast, for the older students, failing to follow directions might be an act of defiance, given their lack of respect for others. Finally, the identified high school students were characterized as lacking effort. This suggests that they might have simply “given up.”

### **Cooperation, Participation, Misbehavior, and Disruption**

Table 2 summarizes the first round of observation data in terms of four categories: cooperation, participation, misbehavior, and disruption. The data are presented separately for elementary school students and secondary school students (i.e., middle and high school). Basically, the data in Table 2 supports the findings of the 2005-06 action research study (Anderson *et al.*, 2006). Most of these “difficult and resistant” students were cooperative (from 84 – 90%) and participated in class activities (75%) most of the school day. However, when they were not cooperative or when they were not participating in class activities, they were likely to be misbehaving (46% of elementary students and 30% of secondary students).

**Table 2**  
**Summary of Observational Data**

**Elementary School Students (n = 24)**

	High	Moderate	Low	Non-Existent
Cooperation	42%	42%	16%	0%
Participation	33%	42%	21%	4%
Misbehavior	13%	33%	50%	4%
Disruption	4%	25%	13%	58%

**Middle and High School Students (n = 20)**

	High	Moderate	Low	Non-Existent
Cooperation	30%	60%	10%	0%
Participation	25%	50%	25%	0%
Misbehavior	5%	25%	60%	10%
Disruption	5%	5%	30%	60%

Interestingly and importantly, these students were more likely to engage in misbehavior when not much was happening instructionally. Apparently, when these students are not engaged in learning, they are quite likely to be engaged in something else. Unfortunately, this “something else” is often against classroom rules and norms, and often spills over to other students in the classroom. In this regard, approximately 60% of the identified students engaged in some form of disruptive behavior during the first round of observation.

### **Categories of “Difficult and Resistant” Students**

Based primarily on the observational data, five categories of students were formed. These categories, along with quotations from the observers that illustrate each category, are shown in Table 3. Also shown in Table 3 are possible causes of the behaviors in each category. These possible causes were derived from discussions with participating teachers and FMU observers who based their inferences on anecdotal and observational data, respectfully. It is important to emphasize that these are possible, rather than actual, causes. However, attempts to identify causes of student behaviors are important if we are to stop treating symptoms (i.e., the behaviors) and start treating the causes (i.e., the reasons for the behaviors).

The first category consists of students who are “easily distractible.” These are students who can’t stay on task. They listen for awhile and then their mind wanders. They work for awhile and then move around the room. They appear susceptible to minor happenings in their environment (e.g., car noises in the parking lot, two students whispering). Three possible causes of distractibility were identified: distractibility as a

**Table 3**  
**Five Categories of “Difficult and Resistant Students”**

Category	Quote(s)	Possible Causes
Easily Distractible	<p>“It is very easy for this student to lose focus. Often he sits in his chair rocking from side to side to keep moving.”</p> <p>“During class his attention fluctuates. He focuses on a task for a few minutes, then looks around speaks to other students.”</p>	<p>Personality trait; Bored;            Lack of relevance</p>
Constantly Confused	<p>“The student struggles mightily with reading skills and vocabulary.”</p> <p>“She tends not to care what she make on her tests or quizzes and says she doesn’t do home work.”</p>	<p>Lack of readiness for meeting academic demands;            Overly rapid pace of lesson</p>
Angry & Aggressive	<p>“When the teacher commented on his behavior, he denied doing anything. After the third time this happened, he shouted, “Why are you always picking on me?”</p> <p>“The student does not seem to distinguish between girls and boys when it comes to hitting, pushing, and shoving.”</p>	<p>Lack of self-control; lack of more positive conflict resolution strategies</p>
Attention Seekers	<p>“The (female) student likes attention, especially from boys. Uses a lot of profanity.”</p> <p>“He has a comment for everything. He’s the class clown, but he makes good grades. It’s amazing how the littlest person in class could cause so much attention.”</p>	<p>Need for acceptance; Fear of abandonment</p>
Unpredictable	<p>“The teacher told me that he is talkative sometimes, but can work very hard when he wants to do so.”</p> <p>“I noticed a bit difference in his behavior under different teachers.”</p> <p>“This student behaved totally opposite from my last observation. He was jumpy -- hard to focus – talkative and a little out of control a couple of times.”</p>	<p>Traumatic personal events (e.g., mother dying of cancer, father died recently, parents recently divorced);            Lack of stability at home</p>

personality trait (that is, they're "just that way"), boredom, and a lack of relevance of the topic, objective, or work.

The second category consists of students who are "constantly confused." They tend to be "over their heads" in terms of the material being taught and the work being assigned. They often appear to be bewildered and during the study several of these students commented to the observers that they just didn't understand. Two possible causes of constant confusion were identified: a lack of readiness for reading the academic demands and an overly rapid pace of instruction.

The third category consists of students who are "angry and aggressive." Verbally, these students shout a great deal. Physically, these students tend to maintain an aggressive posture. Their anger and aggression is directed toward anyone who happens to be "in the way." Two possible causes of anger and aggression were identified: a lack of self-control and a lack of more positive conflict resolution strategies.

The fourth category consists of students who are "attention seekers." They want to be noticed, sometimes by the teacher, often by peers (particularly with older students). They may use profanity to get attention or they may use humor and silliness (e.g., the class clown). Two possible causes of seeking attention were identified: a need for acceptance and a fear of abandonment.

The fifth and final category consists of students whose behavior was unpredictable from hour to hour, from day to day, from class to class, and/or from teacher to teacher. These students did not fit into any of the other four categories in that sometimes they were focused and other times easily distracted. Sometimes they responded angrily and other times they responded calmly. Two possible causes of the

unpredictability were identified, both of which were viewed as “out-of-school” issues. Three of the students placed in this category had experienced traumatic personal events (e.g., death, divorce). Other students placed in this category lacked stability at home (e.g., foster children, a change of “boyfriends”).

### **What Works with “Difficult and Resistant” Students**

Table 4 summarizes “things that seem to work” with “difficult and resistant” students. The lists included in the table are organized around the five categories shown in Table 3. They were based on teachers’ reflections on the impact of the changes they had made in their interactions with and responses to their identified students as well as changes in students’ behaviors that were observed by the FMU “shadows.” Because the suggestions are fairly self-explanatory, no further discussion of them is provided here.

### **Lessons Learned**

Many lessons were learned from this action research study. Two of the most important lessons are summarized in this closing section.

First, “difficult and resistant” students are not difficult and resistant all the time. For a variety of reasons they may have a tendency or propensity toward misbehavior and/or disruptive behavior. However, in most cases, there is an environment “trigger” that activates this tendency or propensity. This “trigger” may be a student who bumps up against an angry and aggressive student accidentally or intentionally. The “trigger” may be a teacher whose presentation style can only be characterized as boring. The “trigger” may be hopelessness associated with an assignment that is perceived to be well beyond the student’s current knowledge or ability. When working with such students, then, it is

**Table 4**  
**Things That Seem to Work with “Difficult and Resistant” Students**

Category	“Things to Seem to Work”
Easily Distractible	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reinforce on-task behavior</li> <li>• Allow students some choice in activities and projects, playing on their interests</li> <li>• Assign classroom duties as “helpers” (e.g., collect papers, hand out books)</li> <li>• Set specific short-term goals with clear deadlines</li> </ul>
Constantly Confused	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use differentiated instruction</li> <li>• Work to ensure early success</li> <li>• Provide tutoring</li> <li>• Find ways of building confidence (see, for example, <a href="http://www.salsa.net/peace/conv/8weekconv6-6.html">http://www.salsa.net/peace/conv/8weekconv6-6.html</a>).</li> </ul>
Angry & Aggressive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teach self-control and responsibility for ones actions; help students use the “language” of self-control</li> <li>• Use humor and kindness to defuse situation; avoid confrontation</li> <li>• Pair with peer role models/mentors from time to time</li> <li>• Work on anger management and positive conflict resolution strategies (see, for example, <a href="http://maxweber.hunter.cuny.edu/pub/eres/EDSPC715_MCINTYRE/SocialSkills.html">http://maxweber.hunter.cuny.edu/pub/eres/EDSPC715_MCINTYRE/SocialSkills.html</a>).</li> </ul>
Attention Seekers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish positive, personal relationships with students [Quote from teacher. “I told her that we would both make an effort to change. I think she thought I’d lost my mind and that she didn’t believe that I would make changes and not just tell her to change.”]</li> <li>• Use physical proximity/touch to communicate positive attention</li> <li>• Give students a 5 minute block of time per week to “perform” in class</li> <li>• DO NOT isolate them from other students. This only acerbates the problem.</li> </ul>
Unpredictable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide stability and consistency in your behavior with students</li> <li>• Use writing as an opportunity for students to express themselves</li> <li>• Refer to school counselor</li> </ul>

incumbent upon teachers not only to understand the causes of the student behavior (as mentioned earlier), but the events that trigger them.

Second, with “difficult and resistant” students, improved classroom management does not mean more rules with explicit consequences for violating them. In fact, most of the identified students in this study followed the classroom rules most of the time. They tended to be cooperative and participated in most classroom activities. Rather, improving classroom management with these students is best conceived of as solving a human relations problem. In the list of “things that seem to work with students” (see Table 4) are the following:

- Allow students some choice in activities and projects, playing on their interests.
- Find ways of building confidence.
- Use humor and kindness to defuse situations.
- Establish positive, personal relationships with students.
- Provide stability and consistency in your behavior with students.

Note that each of these suggestions requires an understanding of the students and the establishment of personal relationships with them based on this understanding. In the most extreme cases, it requires teachers to “love the unlovable.” Rules are necessary, but can only get you so far; respect and admiration are needed to go the rest of the way.

## Reference

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Appendix A  
Sample Conversation Summaries, Including Intended Changes

**Student 1.** E.M. is a second grader. He hopes to become a football player, get a job when he grows up, and get good grades. He really couldn't think of any hopes at first and then decided he hopes he gets good grades in school, become a football player, and get a good job. His only fear was getting a spanking from his parents. He wants to improve his behavior by being good, not hitting or kicking anyone, being nice to all people, and listening to the teacher and his parents. He wants me to help him by keeping him focused, keeping him "straight," and being kind to him. The two changes I will make for this student are (1) responding to him in a soft, kind voice even when he's not on task, not paying attention in class, or leaves his homework home, and (2) using humor and expressed concern rather than anger and punishment.

**Student 2.** F.J. is a second grader. He hopes to play basketball, get good grades, and stop talking so much in school and class. He dreams of playing basketball one day and to be in a rope jumping contest. His fears are monsters, sometimes the dark, and getting bad grades. His wants to listen more in school and in class, and to be quiet in class. He's all boy, but not rude or intentionally bad. He loves to talk and socialize. He stands up to do his work sometimes and likes to walk around the class at times. He wants to improve his behavior by listening to the teacher, sitting down, being good in school, and have me communicate with his Mom and grandparents. He wants me to help him improve by just correcting him. Two changes I will make with this student are (1) enhancing his motivation by keeping him engaged and experiencing success in class and (2) building a positive relationship with his Mom and grandparents.

**Student 3.** C.W. is a second grader. He hopes to grow up and live long enough to do the things he wants to do. Also, he hopes to become smart in school. His wants to improve his grades and become a firefighter. His fears are some animals, nightmares/bad dreams, and getting bad grades. He wants to improve his behavior by learning from his mistakes, listening to the teacher, following instructions, and not talking so much in class. He wants me to help him understand appropriate behavior and behave in school. Two changes I will make with this student are (1) helping him become more responsible (for example, his mother did a lot of things for him like writing his name on his homework) and (2) respond in unexpected ways to his behavior (e.g., smile rather than scold).