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Given the emphasis on school reform and improved student performance, it is imperative that classroom teacher provide a positive learning environment. It is in the classroom that teachers have the greatest control over conditions that affect learning and behavior. Efficient management of resources significantly enhances student performance. The first step in reaching this goal is an understanding of the current classroom conditions. Assessment of the classroom environment can best be conducted by the teacher who is truly concerned about improving student performance. Knowing where to focus efforts is essential for meaningful change.

We examine four major factors that define the classroom environment: (1) physical environment, (2) time/instructional management, (3) behavior management, and (4) teacher effectiveness. We present short vignettes to illustrate classroom problems and suggest management solutions. A checklist is provided for teachers to use in identifying instructional methods and conditions that positively affect learning and behavior.

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Creating an orderly setting is the first step in establishing an environment conducive to learning and preventing behavior problems. Weinstein (1996, p. 27) noted the importance of recognizing "that the physical environment can influence the way teachers and students feel, think, and behave." Evans et al. (1991) stated that an orderly and attractive environment can have a positive effect on behavior by improving the level and quality of student interactions, so teachers and students carry out activities efficiently without excessive noise or disruption.

It is important to plan the physical layout of the classroom. This involves designating areas for specific activities, selecting and arranging furniture, arranging seating to facilitate learning, decorating areas for various purposes, and organizing materials and areas for easy access.

Depending on the size and type of class (grade level, subject area, etc.), areas may be designated for specific activities, such as large-group instruction, small-group instruction, individual student areas, teacher area(s), recreation, audiovisual/technology area, and others (time-out, learning centers, self-correction stations, classroom library). Areas may be defined with movable partitions such as chalkboards, bulletin boards, bookshelves, and so forth, that can be changed. Comfortable and durable furniture should be arranged in relation to student needs and daily activities. High-traffic areas should be carefully designed to avoid congestion and distraction. Traffic patterns should be studied when locating materials that will be used frequently (pencil sharpener, self-correcting stations, computer area, teacher's desk).

Seating arrangements must be carefully considered. The teacher's desk should allow a broad view of the classroom and all students. Young students may be seated in small clusters to promote language interaction, whereas older students may require flexibility in seating to accommodate instructional style and specific class activities. Seating position can also affect learning. Because students seated in the center and front often have more interaction with the teacher, the seating arrangement should occasionally be changed to give all students an opportunity to sit with different peers and in different locations, always ensuring a clear view of presentations.

An aesthetically pleasing environment can influence behavior. Many areas may be used to display work or materials, post class rules, provide schedules and feedback charts, list daily assignments, and highlight new skills. Bulletin boards and walls should be visually appealing, uncluttered, and changed frequently. When possible, students should be involved in designing the various areas. At the elementary level especially, students should have a place to store personal materials and to sit during activities.

Vignette 1. Ms. Smith's sixth-grade science classroom looked like a natural disaster. Science equipment was scattered about the room, components needed for experiments were arranged haphazardly, an assortment of outdated announcements were stapled to bulletin boards, and chairs and tables were in disarray. Even the casual observer noted the general state of confusion and lack of posted classroom rules—both fatal flaws in a middle school classroom.

Ms. Smith spent at least a third of each class period trying to organize lab supplies and a significant amount of time getting students in their seats and managing inappropriate behavior. What started as a 60-minute instructional class period was reduced to 35-40 minutes of instruction; this was too short, and students were not progressing through required content and lab activities. Ms. Smith, her students, and their parents were all concerned and frustrated and were starting to become openly antagonistic.

Recommendation. It will be difficult to implement an effective curriculum or appropriate instructional procedures until Ms. Smith can effectively manage the classroom physical environment. Physical space, appropriate furniture, designated areas, traffic patterns, seating arrangement, and visual appeal are among the most critical issues to be addressed.

TIME/INSTRUCTIONAL MANAGEMENT

The daily schedule should reflect the maximum time for instruction in the content areas (Evans et al., 1991). The time students are engaged in relevant academic tasks is a predictor of achievement and academic success. At the elementary level, the most important activities of the day—language arts and math—are generally scheduled in the morning when students are at their peak levels of functioning. At the secondary level, a variety of instructional activities may be planned for a classtime block. Highly preferred tasks may be alternated with less preferred tasks. Flexibility may be built into any schedule to allow for variations in learning. It is helpful to plan a routine to open each day or period so that students know exactly what to do and a closing routine to tie together the school day or period in a pleasant, orderly manner. It is also important to manage noninstructional time, minimizing factors that compete with instruction. Daily schedules should be posted and followed as closely as possible.

Effective teachers determine clear, short- and long-term academic and behavior goals for individual students and the whole class. These goals increase the probability of student success by considering learning styles and rates and matching instructional needs to curricula. Implementation should reflect a variety of instructional arrangements to maintain student involvement and attention. Mercer and Mercer (1993) note five basic instructional arrangements: large-group instruction, small-group instruction, one student with teacher, students teaching students, and independent work. Effective teachers use relevant, purposeful, and motivating teaching methods, activities, resources, and technology. A variety of tasks that require active responding should be emphasized. Continuous evaluation of skills and constructive feedback are important. Paine and colleagues (1983, pp. 8-9) stated that

in success-oriented programs the teacher (1) often teaches in a small-group instructional format; (2) keeps up a rapid pace during instruction to maintain all students' involvement in the lesson; (3) uses procedures to ensure that all students receive a maximum number of learning opportunities each lesson without being preempted by faster students; (4) corrects student errors immediately and brings students up to criterion on missed items; and (5) maintains student performance at high levels by reinforcing behaviors associated with success.

Vignette 2. Mr. Wilson never seemed to have enough hours in the day. He knew he should carefully plan the instructional activities to be accomplished each day by his high school world history students, but planning had never been his strong suit; his approach to instruction was haphazard. He rarely had a coherent lesson plan, made limited attempts to use motivating methods and activities, and paid no attention to time constraints. He believed instruction should be unstructured and students should learn through discovery.

Unfortunately his students seemed to be spending more time wandering than discovering. Few were moving systematically through the curriculum. There was little instruction, and Mr. Wilson's day seemed to consist of running from student to student answering questions, getting them back on task, or breaking up fights. At the end of each day, he realized that he had failed to cover most of the planned material. The worst part was that this pattern had become routine. The students were bored and were missing increasing amounts of critical material. Mr. Wilson had charted a course that was creating rather than solving problems.

Recommendation. Time and instructional management are critical. Mr. Wilson's lack of time/instructional management will be the genesis of numerous behavior and learning problems. Effective instruction is almost impossible unless it is carefully planned. It is important to analyze the use of academic and nonacademic time in the classroom and compare the results to an "ideal" schedule that allows for maximum efficiency. This analysis should incorporate a variety of instructional groupings and procedures and provide the foundation for effective use of independent practice and homework. Teachers should prepare a tentative year-long plan for the orderly long-term delivery of the instructional program. This reduces the risk of trying to force too much material in too short a time.

BEHAVIOR MANAGEMENT

Behavior management and classroom control are central to stimulating learning. Research has shown that teachers who are effective in managing classroom behavior are also effective in improving achievement (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 1987).

One of the best ways to communicate expectations for student behavior is a system of classroom rules. Three to five well-defined rules should be stated concisely and positively, posted, and reviewed frequently. Consequences may be established for violations based on the magnitude of the infraction, that is, its duration and intrusiveness. Evans et al. (1991) noted that positive strategies are recommended, but when necessary, judicious use of punishment (timeouts, reprimands, response cost) can be an effective component of a sound discipline plan. Sprick

(1985) reported that learning is greater and behavior is more appropriate when teachers attend more to positive events than to negative events. A ratio of 3 to 1 of positive over negative events is desirable.

Evertson et al. (1984) noted "children's interests vary widely, school work is not always intrinsically exciting, and thirty children confined in a classroom for six or seven hours at a time will test the limits of any set of rules and procedures" (p. 53). Effective teachers use a variety of interventions to manage behavior and individualize interventions based on student needs. They design and implement a number of incentive plans or rewards for appropriate behavior, and offer individual, frequent, specific, and corrective feedback about performance. Many teachers attest to the usefulness of classroom scripts, step-by-step records of routines for dealing with events that occur regularly. Behavior rehearsal is another effective technique, which follows instruction and uses the structured practice of a specific social behavior. One of the best techniques for ensuring the maintainance of behavior change is self-management or monitoring of behavior (Stokes & Baer, 1977).

Vignette 3. Ms. Darling, excited about her first year of teaching fourth grade, was becoming anxious by the end of the second week of school. She had not expected so many different abilities in her class of 30. She was surprised at how unmotivated and poorly behaved several of the students were. In 10 days, she had become a "yeller" and was going home each night tired and upset. A month later, when she reflected on her teaching, the only events she could recall were negative. Ms. Darling did not know where to turn for help and felt that her first year could turn into her last year of teaching. If only she could last until June.

Recommendation. After Ms. Darling determines some general goals she hopes to accomplish during the school year, she needs to establish classroom rules. It is important to use a variety of interventions and reinforcers to manage behavior and individualize interventions based on student needs. Ms. Darling must reflect upon her own behavior and establish a professional support network for assistance. With the help of another teacher at her school, a former university teacher, or a trained parent volunteer, Ms. Darling should record positive and negative classroom events over a period of several days. This self-study will provide valuable insight and open communication with supportive professionals. Based on the findings, Ms. Darling can improve her awareness of positive classroom events and take steps to adjust her behavior to increase her positive responses to students and parents.

TEACHER EFFECTIVENESS

Much has been written on teacher effectiveness. The importance of the teacher's influence was eloquently stated in 1978 by Smith, Neisworth, and Greer.

The teacher's attitude toward children and education determines to a very real degree how children perceived school, themselves, and each other--and how much progress they actually make ... A teacher's personal style and approach, more than anything else, create the climate and mood which will characterize the classroom. (p. 84)

In *Structuring Your Classroom for Academic Success*, Paine et al. (1983) address the factors that contribute to teacher effectiveness. They note that teachers' expectations and tolerances contribute significantly to student levels of achievement and classroom behavior. Standards set by teachers seem to be self-fulfilling prophecies

for students (Good & Brophy, 1978; Paine et al., 1983). One of the most important teacher effectiveness factors is high expectations, a belief that all students can learn. Walker and Shea (1995) state that educators must maintain high but realistic expectations for students, adapt instruction to their learning styles, and accommodate diversity.

Teachers become models for the children they instruct. No other variable in the school has a greater potential impact on a student than the relationship between the student and teacher (Walker & Shea, 1995). As models, effective teachers like children, teaching, and learning and infuse time-tested values such as honesty and integrity into their classroom environment. They have a well-developed sense of humor, a realistic confidence in their capability to be effective and seek out solutions to problems, and an enthusiasm about teaching.

Vignette 4. At the end of the first week, Mr. Johnson informally evaluated the students in his ninth grade math class. Most of the students seemed to be bright learners who manifested the peculiarities of dress and demeanor associated with the age. One student, however, stood out as a potential problem. Louis was capable of the most difficult class work, but he looked so odd with his dyed hair and unconventional dress and speech patterns.

In Mr. Johnson's experience, student behavior followed attire. Therefore, he was expecting the worst from Louis. He found himself expecting Louis to misbehave and treated him almost in an antagonistic manner. In the second 6 weeks, Mr. Johnson realized that he had some behavior problems in the class but none were with Louis. Mr. Johnson realized that his initial impression was incorrect and that Louis was really not a bad kid. He was actually rather conventional in his view of the world and treated everyone in the class with consideration. Mr. Johnson recognized that his few problems with Louis were more reflective of his attitude than Louis's behavior.

ASSESSING THE INSTRUCTIONAL ENVIRONMENT CHECKLIST

Assessing the instructional environment enables the teacher to determine if the classroom environment is designed to promote student success. Self-assessment involves the ability to reflect upon the four general areas and make improvements. Self-assessment may be enhanced by building a school support network. Sykes (1996, p. 466) noted "that an invaluable resource for teachers is a professional community that can serve as a source of insight and wisdom about problems of practice." An open dialogue can be established with colleagues interested in providing support. Items on the checklist can be used to structure informal feedback (Table 1).

Effective educational environments are the result of careful planning and constant re-whole. Effective classrooms must be carefully pieced together with a larger view of

ADDED MATERIAL

Susan C. Stewart and William H. Evans are professors and Dan J. Kaczynski is an assistant professor of special education at the University of West Florida.

TABLE 1. Assessing the Instructional Environment Checklist

Assess these items: + (observed), - (not observed), ? (more attention needed)

A. Physical environment

- _____ 1. arranges physical space to include appropriate furniture and designated areas
- _____ 2. establishes appropriate traffic patterns; facilitates access to materials and areas
- _____ 3. arranges seating to facilitate learning
- _____ 4. makes the classroom visually appealing
- _____ 5. emphasizes a sense of ownership of the physical environment

B. Time/instructional management

- _____ 1. establishes and adheres to classroom/individual schedules
- _____ 2. establishes guidelines for management of daily routines
- _____ 3. monitors academic learning time carefully
- _____ 4. manages nonacademic time efficiently
- _____ 5. determines goals and responsibilities
- _____ 6. emphasizes individual achievement
- _____ 7. matches instructional needs to curricula
- _____ 8. implements a variety of instructional arrangements
- _____ 9. uses relevant, purposeful, and motivating teaching methods, activities, resources, and technology
- _____ 10. monitors progress and provides corrective feedback

C. Behavior management

- _____ 1. posts, teaches, and enforces rules (positive, concise, fair)
- _____ 2. administers clear and appropriate consequences
- _____ 3. provides specific feedback for behavior
- _____ 4. maintains a 3 to 1 ratio of attention to positive vs. negative events
- _____ 5. uses a variety of interventions and reinforcers
- _____ 6. individualizes interventions
- _____ 7. scripts out classroom routines
- _____ 8. uses behavioral rehearsal
- _____ 9. uses punishment sparingly
- _____ 10. includes self-management and monitoring techniques

D. Teacher effectiveness

- _____ 1. maintains high expectations
- _____ 2. knows students and accommodates diversity
- _____ 3. models and infuses time-tested values
- _____ 4. likes children and teaching and believes every student can learn
- _____ 5. has a sense of humor, confidence, enthusiasm

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