



Beyond the Class - Class Management

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During this educational visit to elementary schools in New Jersey and New York, we had the privilege to observe class instruction and watch the students as they learned math, language arts or other subjects in an effective and exciting way. In a free country like the US, I would expect an elementary classroom as well as a high school classroom to be a place open for robust conversations and discussions, which can sometimes be too loud. Surprisingly, I found all the classes we visited to be very quiet, well-managed and most important of all, highly engaged in learning. In this essay, I will share my personal observation on how teachers of these schools manage their classroom and how we can bring these strategies into our daily teaching.

Introduction

The term “classroom management” is often used to refer to behavior modification or discipline only. But as Jere Brophy (1988) points out, good classroom management implies not only that the teacher has elicited the cooperation of the students in minimizing misconduct and can intervene effectively when misconduct occurs, but also that worthwhile academic activities are occurring more or less continuously and that the classroom management system as a whole is designed to maximize student engagement in those activities, not merely to minimize misconduct. Teachers are not interested in good behavior just for behavior’s sake. The reason that good behavior is important is because it can create an environment where student learning takes place—which is the ultimate goal of classroom management.

Thus, classroom management goes much beyond the class itself and involves everything that a teacher must do to carry out his/her teaching objectives. It includes preparation of plans and materials, structuring of activities into time blocks, direct teaching of skills and subject matter, grouping of students to provide for the most efficient use of teacher and pupil time, and plans for transition periods—changing from one activity to another or from one place to another. The following discussion will be focused on four areas of classroom management strategies used by teachers we’ve observed throughout this trip.

1. Classroom Organization

Warm, well-run classrooms begin with the room's physical layout—the arrangement of desks and working space, and even the attractiveness and appeal of bulletin boards, the storage of materials and supplies. Plus, the classroom organization reflects each teacher’s teaching style.

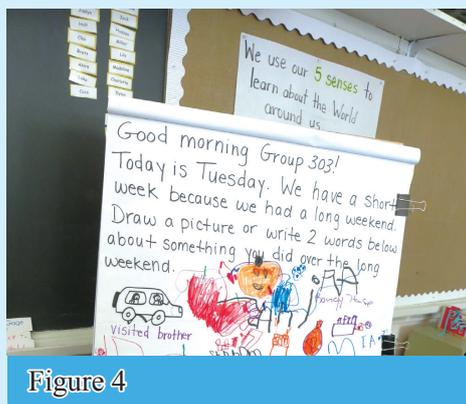
1.1 Desk Placement

In many classrooms we visited, most space is devoted to the arrangement of individual student desks. Although the seating arrangements vary greatly, in general, teachers arrange desks in cooperative groups of four or six, while some others prefer a U-shaped configuration, where everyone has a front row seat. (See Figure 1-3)

Figure1. Different Seating Arrangements in Class (from Harmer (1998) *How to Teach English*)



In lower grade classrooms, it's common to see a carpet in the front. (See Figure 4-5) Many teachers use it for the morning circle area. Oval and round shaped carpets allow for easy communication during shared discussions or story time. In some classrooms, we found that teachers incorporate carpet squares into organizing the classroom learning centers by using the squares for small games or building activities as a class. When students need to do independent work, they will be asked to go back to their individual seats.



1.2 Informal furniture arrangements

In the classroom we visited, usually there is some place where students can sit on soft chairs or pillows, or lounge on the carpet. Teachers create these soft seating areas for causal reading and socialized learning. Students do not need to sit up straight in hard chairs because teachers here support the research-based notion that students pay better attention and achieve higher grades in more comfortable settings. So when students do independent or peer reading, they can sit on a pillow alone or with a partner and really enjoy learning. (See Figure6-7)

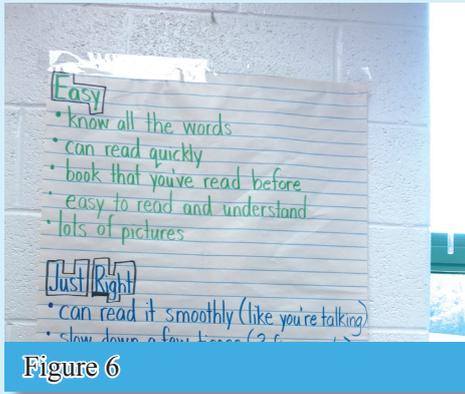


Figure 6



Figure 7

2. Interaction Patterns

2.1 Common interaction patterns and teaching designs of mixed interaction patterns

There are five main types of groupings common in the ESL (English as a Second Language) classrooms we have observed:

- the whole class working together with the teacher
- the whole class mixing together as individuals
- small groups
- pair work
- individual work

Most of the teachers we observed used pairs and small groups to increase opportunities for students to speak. Also, they tend to encourage interaction between students rather than only between student and teacher or teacher and student. Many teachers would include activities that involve a number of these different arrangements in one lesson. Varying grouping is one way to guarantee a variety of experiences for young children. Examples of teaching designs that use mixed interaction patterns to maximize learning used by the teachers we observed include:

1) Learning stations

Learning centers are usually designed to offer a variety of materials, designs, and media through which students can work by themselves or with others to use the information learned in the classroom. Many teachers here also use learning centers to add more variety to classroom interaction.

In a third-grade math class, the teacher solved math problems with the whole class only for the first 20 minutes and then assigned students to learning centers, where students can play math games on computers, complete math journal, do independent practice or review with others. (See Figure 8)

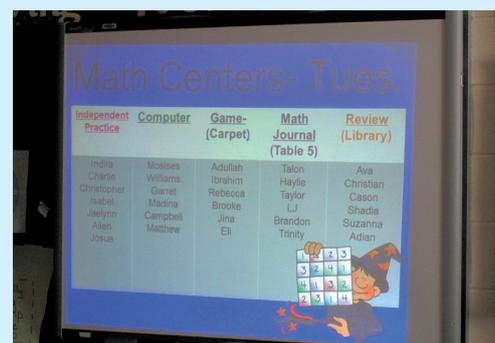


Figure 8

In a fourth grade social studies class, the teacher assigned each of the four groups a different task, including completing three different worksheets and watching computer slide show or animation. After 10 minutes, students in the same group stood up and moved to the next table to finish another task. (See Figure 9)



Figure 9

Using learning centers is a highly effective ways to facilitate learning through individualized, self-paced curriculum. Students not only benefit from the differentiated activities or materials, but also have opportunities to interact with others. Also, I was very amazed at how students moved around different stations in order, and it didn't seem that they only did it because there're visitors.

2) Rotations

In Greenbriar East Elementary School, the teachers adopt a school-wide initiative to enhance literacy—Daily 5. (See Figure 10-11) Its components are:

- Read to self
- Read to someone
- Listen to reading
- Work on writing
- Word work

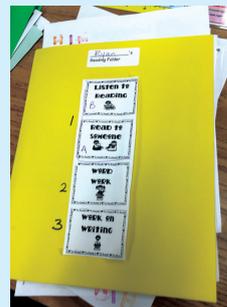


Figure 10

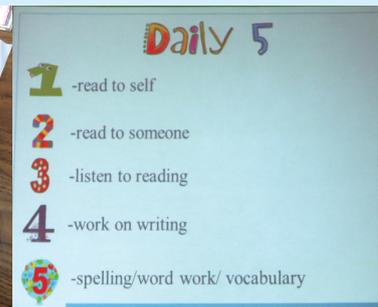


Figure 11

The Daily Five is a series of literacy tasks which students complete daily while the teacher meets with small groups or works with individual students. It is a structure that helps students develop the daily habits of reading, writing and working independently for a lifetime of independence.

At the same time, you can also find that this routine rotation involves both group and independent work. Students can work one-on-one with the teacher, with a partner, or with a group, which gives students abundant time for practicing reading and writing.

Learning stations or daily rotations are not commonly seen in the classrooms in Taiwan, probably because teachers fear that students may be out of control, which, to a certain extent, shows our lack of trust of our students. After seeing these rotation and station strategies in action so effectively, I believe such methods help improve students' learning independence and reading stamina and should be encouraged in our classrooms.

3. Behavioral Management

Classroom control and behavioral management have a major effect on the classroom environment and the amount of effective learning that occurs. However, behavior issues can be some of the most frustrating concerns for teachers. Surprisingly, nearly all of the

classrooms we have observed during this visit showed no or little behavioral disruptions. Teachers of those classes employ various strategies to create a well-disciplined and effective classroom:

3.1 Setting clear and reasonable expectations for behavior

Students work, learn and behave best within clear and known boundaries that clearly describe acceptable and unacceptable behavior. So, teachers of course need to establish general rules of conduct for the classroom. But rules won't be automatically followed simply because they're there! We found most classroom rules in the classes we visited to be a combined effort by both the teachers and students (See Figure 12-13). The teachers select only a few rules—those that contribute to successful learning and an orderly environment. Those rules are clear and specific, such as raising a hand to speak or waiting patiently for a turn at a task. Then through thoughtful discussion, they decide with their students to create a set of rules expressed in their language and what the consequences will be for breaking those rules. One teacher shared with us that the idea is not to control students but to exert influence upon the class. She thinks it's important to let kids know that they need to behave appropriately because they understand that there are rewards for everyone in a civil, well-managed school.



Figure 12

3.2 Building a responsive classroom

Carol-Anne Kaye, the ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) teacher from Cub Run Elementary School talked about the importance to create a responsive classroom during a discussion. She said the idea is that if we teach children how to behave socially, they learn to solve problems themselves, they feel safe and are willing to take academic risks. Teachers lead the class, not rule them. And they do so by modeling, not by being a tyrant. She particularly opposes using causes and consequences approach to deal with students' behavioral and other problems. She believes that carrots and sticks are temporary nudges toward desirable behavior at best, but ultimately destructive.

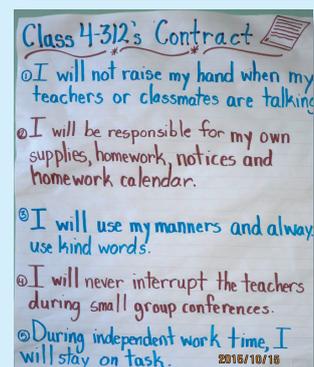


Figure 13

Her inspirational talk prompted me to think if I use the reward and punishment strategy too much and do not allow my students to look more closely at their behaviors and consider the results of their choices. The goal of building a responsive classroom is to create an environment in which students behave appropriately from a sense of personal responsibility, not from a fear of punishment or desire for a reward. This notion seems to be widely accepted by most elementary and middle schools in the US. Therefore, throughout the visit, we didn't see any teacher yell or curse at a student. When students make mistakes, the teachers would calmly ask them to reflect upon the choices they have made or to think of a way to correct such mistake.

3.3 Using various and effective ways to achieve silence

Attention plays a crucial role in students' success in the classroom. It allows students to move away from unrelated information, background noise, visual distractions, and even their own thoughts. By doing this, students are able to concentrate on the important information being given by teachers. In the classroom we have visited, instead of shouting "Silence!", the teachers have demonstrated a wide variety of attention techniques:

1) Verbal signals

Some teachers use certain lines from a song, a poem or commercial as class attention getter. In Cub Run Elementary, we even see a list of attention-getting phrases, such as "All set? You bet!" "Ready to rock? Ready to roll!", on the wall behind a teacher's seat (See Figure 14).



Figure 14

2) Non-verbal signals and cues

Younger learners are very kinesthetic and think in actions. Instead of raising their voices, many teachers have come up with special actions to obtain students attention. Some teachers clap out a rhythm, and the students repeat the rhythm. Some teachers simply put their hands up without saying anything, and students compete to be the first to see the signal, and they spread the silence.

3) Sounding out tunes or rhymes

In Greenbriar East Elementary School, a first-grade teacher was helping students get ready for the next class when we entered her classroom. When she noticed that the students' energy was rising with growing noise and movement, she started humming a short tune, and all in a sudden, every student started humming along and the whole class became quite and calmed. While humming the tune, students quickly took their books, found their seat on the rug, and became ready for the next class. (See Figure 15)



Figure 15

4) Musical Instruments

Some teachers would tinkle a little bell or a small gong, or hit a tambourine to gain attention or send out a signal so that students know it's time to move on to the next stage in an activity.

4. Teacher-Student relationship

4.1 Using positive adult language

Positive adult language is the professional use of words and tone of voice to enable

students to learn in an engaged, active way. It can be used to transform a student's image, uplift the entire class, and reinforce the values we seek to promote in our classroom. To guide children toward choosing and maintaining positive behaviors, teachers need to be positive and carefully choose the words and tone of voice when speaking to them.

Almost without exception, in the classrooms we visited, the teachers all used soft-spoken tone and positive language. They also took every opportunity to praise students. In a fifth-grade social studies class, a teacher was doing multiple choice questions with students. When some students chose the obviously wrong answer, rather than directly correcting them, he gave positive comments such as “I like your thinking but is it possible...”, “You're certainly on the right track. But we should also consider the fact that...” This allows students more opportunities to think, and also helps build a better relationship between students and teacher, because students know they would not be embarrassed by harsh comments from their teacher. They can feel safe to make mistakes and ask questions, and can thus better explore their potential.

4.2 Building rapport

Building rapport with students can make a huge difference in teaching. It can also be a remarkably effective way to improve classroom management. Developing rapport can not only help to better understand the background of students but can also help with classroom management and instruction. When students like and trust the teacher, and when the teacher in turn like and believe in them, the teacher will form a bond that makes classroom management a lot easier.

We found that many teachers we visited take every opportunity to build rapport with their students. In Centreville Elementary School, teachers greet, hug or shake hands with students before they come into the classroom. During daily teaching, teachers also encourage a friendly, relaxed learning environment. When I was in the classroom, I could always feel a trusting, positive, supportive rapport among the learners and between learners and teacher. In this way, of course, there is a much better chance of a useful interaction happening.

Conclusion

Managing a classroom is never an easy task. There are so many things to consider in order to achieve a well-managed classroom. The list may be overwhelming—the child's development level, the learning and physical environment, rules and procedure, classroom activities, student's cooperation and classroom management style. So sometimes teachers may choose to ignore classroom management and only focus on the lesson they want to deliver. Unfortunately, this never works because a beautiful lesson without effective classroom management is still a crisis. However, the teachers we have observed during this visit have demonstrated great management skills and high enthusiasm to help students achieve success. We can certainly learn from them and use similar or adapted strategies to create a positive climate in our classroom, and thus facilitate effective teaching and learning, and help develop independent, autonomous learning, an ultimate goal of education in modern era.