

Learning to Understand: One Teacher's Journey toward the Development of Effective Classroom Management Practices

Ashley M. Anderson, MEd
Elementary School Teacher
Mississippi State, Mississippi

Nicole L. Thompson, PhD
Assistant Professor
**Coordinator of American Indian/Alaska Native Initiative of the
Center for Rural Early Childhood Learning Initiatives**
Department of Curriculum, Instruction, and Special Education
Mississippi State University
Mississippi State, Mississippi

Dana Pomykal Franz, PhD
Associate Professor
Coordinator of the Secondary Mathematics Education Program
Department of Curriculum, Instruction, and Special Education
Mississippi State University
Mississippi State, Mississippi

ABSTRACT

Gaining an understanding of students, their diverse issues, classroom expectations, and management theory can be challenging for the most seasoned teacher; it can be particularly difficult for a beginner. Classroom management, as an essential component of teacher preparation, is often hindered by preservice teachers own beliefs about teaching and student behavior. This article tells the story of one teacher's journey as she began to understand more intricate elements of classroom management, student behavior or misbehavior, and her role in the process. Beginning as a naïve, preservice teacher, Ashley describes the transformation experienced as she interacts with students, works in classrooms and earns her Master's degree. She highlights key educational steps that enabled her to grapple with the shortcomings of her own beliefs about classroom management, and essentially the students who were markedly different from her. This article outlines the classroom management framework that is ultimately adopted and explains why.

As a child, I always dreamed of becoming a teacher. I expected my teaching to extend beyond the basic subjects to include morals, values, and discipline. I thought I would be reinforcing values already taught in the home and would help mold my students into well-behaved people and productive citizens. I was raised in a traditional southern household. As defined by my parents, I understood their parameter of right and wrong, the socially prescribed “proper way” to behave in public, and I knew to always use my southernly accepted manners and not disgrace my parents. Living in a small Mississippi town and attending a private school, all of the students and people I associated with looked and acted just like me. We were white, upper-middle class families.

Undergraduate Education

My choice of university did not take me far from home. During my junior year at a land-grant university in the Southeast, I was admitted to the teacher education program. Even though I completed 28 hours of professional elementary education coursework, received training in classroom management instructional methods, and was exposed to issues related to student diversity, I still held firmly to the idea that students would behave in the same southern genteel manner that I did.

My Elementary Education program was sequenced to give teacher candidates, like me, opportunities to experience varied aged students in multiple classrooms in both semesters of their junior and senior year. Each field experience was structured to have specific learning outcomes. I engaged in observation, tutoring, one-on-one work, or small group instruction with students. We were placed in a lower elementary, an upper level elementary, and a middle school classroom at least twice during our field experiences. Further, we were purposefully placed in diverse field experiences, meaning that we interacted with students in different geographic and socioeconomic settings. The intent of these field experiences was to provide us with a variety of educational experiences with a variety of students—to better prepare us for the “real world”.

While completing my field experiences in elementary and middle school classrooms, I realized not all students are raised or behaved in a manner consistent with my understood code of behavior; the one exhibited at my private school. I would often leave my assigned schools wondering why the teacher had so much difficulty controlling the classroom. I was baffled. I had never witnessed students misbehave in such overt ways and I had never seen teachers’ reactions garner such minimal student responses. As I progressed through student teaching, I began to realize there was a disconnected relationship between me, the teacher, and the students in my classroom. As I concluded my undergraduate education, I felt confident with the subject matter I would be expected to teach, but I knew I needed to have a better understanding of students and their diverse issues, classroom expectations, and management theory. I knew I would be an acceptable teacher after completion of my undergraduate degree, but my desire was to be a superior teacher—to be the absolute best for all of my students. Therefore, I decided to enroll in graduate school to further my education and enhance my skill set.

Graduate School

I applied to and was accepted in the Elementary Education Master's Degree program at the same university where I completed my undergraduate degree. Being established in the local community, comfortable with the university, and close to my parents were primary considerations for me in selecting a graduate program. Additionally, I believed that the 36 hours of graduate course work, 12 of which were electives, would allow me to craft a graduate program specific to my needs. Entering the program, I was well aware of my educational shortcomings and knew exactly what I wanted to learn more about so that I could enhance my practice. Also, having built relationships with many of the elementary education faculty during my undergraduate program, I had already established relationships essential to my educational development, and I could move right into the content that I needed.

As evidence of this, one particular course that I took required me to select an educational "hot topic" to research. The only requirement of the instructor was that the "hot topic" mean something to me and that it would facilitate change or enhance my practice. I immediately selected classroom management as my "hot topic". While not a new topic to the literature, it was something that I needed to know more about and it was personal. Nicole and Dana are faculty in my department. Nicole was my professor in this course and our expert in pre-adolescent and early adolescent development. Dana served as a resource to me because of her expertise in the area of management of at-risk students. Together, they supported my learning in such a way that by the end of the semester I felt like I was the classroom management expert. Completing the course requirements forced me to engage in a lot of self-reflection. I realized that in many of my undergraduate field experiences, I was the problem. I expected students to conform to my code of behavior—my genteel southern manners. I expected students to behave just like me. I did not expect to have to adjust my thinking or behavior to meet my students' diverse needs. Following is a summary of the material that I researched about classroom management, in a broad sense, that helped to transform my beliefs, and essentially my interactions with students who are different from me. It is my hope that other up and coming teachers or their instructors will read this and learn from it. It has been well documented in the literature that the majority of preservice teachers are Caucasian females from a middle class background (Sleeter, 2001). It is also well documented that the student population is vastly different (Cochran-Smith, 2001). Both facts are true in Mississippi. I needed a different attitude to interact effectively with my students and wonder how many other teachers, in Mississippi and beyond, do as well.

Knowledge Transformation

As I concluded my graduate education, I realized that my understanding of students and student conduct had been completely altered. Student behavior will always be an issue for every teacher and can interfere with teaching and learning. Given that behavior problems are a precursor to school dropout and negative social outcomes, teachers must find ways to build rapport, conduct teacher self evaluations, create a caring classroom climate, and plan a curriculum that interests students all while promoting

positive administrator-teacher-student relationships.

Building rapport with students can be difficult for some teachers, especially if their students are vastly different from them. Differences in background and world view can make it hard for teachers to bridge the gap and get to know their students. Knowing and understanding the importance of building rapport with students has changed my thinking. I have come to realize that my students want me to care about them first and teach them second, much like Comer (1980) noted—students care about what will be taught, once they know that the teacher cares for them—their is an emotional connection that needs to be in place for teaching to be meaningful. Effective teaching and learning will not occur in my classroom or any classroom, for that matter, until the students know that they are genuinely cared about and know the teacher. I now challenge myself to get to know each of my students-- it is not only in their best interest, but mine too. Further, I now understand that despite different backgrounds, students are very observant people. They are aware of false pretenses—this made me recognize that previous students with whom I had interacted probably realized that I was uncomfortable and this most likely hindered the development of a real relationship between us. In my future classroom, I am going to be my natural self, not something I am not; any attempt to fool my students will create problems. I hope that my students and I will accept the fact that we are different from each other, but also learn to respect our differences and learn from them.

Self-evaluations of teachers' actions are an important component in creating a classroom environment that focuses on learning and not classroom misbehavior (Brown & Kritsonis, 1992). Hood and Hood (2001) acknowledged teachers may be the problem when management issues exist in their classrooms. Through required research assignments and reflective activities, I realized that the completion of self-evaluations enabled me to articulate my teaching strategies and approaches to classroom management (Fields, Groth, & Spangler, 2008). I found the following ideas helpful when completing my self-evaluations. First, teachers should be organized. I found indecision and scrambling for assignments serves as an entry point for classroom misbehavior. Second, teachers need to assess their teaching styles and student learning styles. Teachers should be aware of the different cognitive needs of their students and accept the fact that teachers need to adapt to students, not the other way around. After all, I cannot force my way of learning on the students and I should not force my way of teaching on them either. If teachers do, students can become frustrated and act out as a coping mechanism due to being uncomfortable with their teacher's instructional approach (Brophy, 1988). Related to that, teachers and students may have personality problems that interfere with the teacher-learner situation. I did! Every person in the classroom is going to have a different personality. I now realize that I must adapt my behavior plan to meet my students' needs each year, each month, each day, each minute... now I better understand the need for differentiated instruction and individualized management strategies. I accept that a "one-size fits all" approach to management will not work. I also know that the more organized and prepared I am, the lesser the chance for student misbehavior.

When teachers engage in self evaluations about issues related to their management styles and interaction patterns, and make changes based on the evaluation results, positive things can happen. I realized I was the biggest problem in my classroom and I was the only person who could fix this problem. For the remainder of my teaching

career, I will engage in self-evaluation processes because they improve my practice and in turn, improve my interaction with students. I hope others who read this will do the same.

Next, teachers need to create a positive classroom environment—the main thing I had to learn to do was pick and choose my battles. Over-reacting to every misbehavior problem in the classroom takes too much time and gives the students a stressful classroom environment. I had to learn to let go—to both little infractions and the memories of them—but also, I had to recognize my students’ need for consistency and fairness, as stated by Brown and Kritsonis (1992), “Nothing arouses student resentment more than for a teacher to have pets” (¶ 3). Finally, teachers need to maintain a professional student-teacher relationship. During this research process, I began to understand the difference between “being friendly” and “being a buddy”. I had heard my undergraduate professors talk about this, but I did not fully understand the difference. At the time, I thought “I want my students to like me and I will do whatever I need to do so they will”, Now, I know that I can be their friend, but I cannot be a buddy. And, I also accept the fact that not all of my students are going to like me all of the time. Essentially, relationships that are too friendly allow the students to take advantage of the teacher leading to loss of control (Hood & Hood, 2001).

When I found Alfie Kohn’s work, I found the answer to the questions I had been asking. His ideas literally “rocked my world”. Alfie Kohn (1995) suggested that students cause disruptions as a means of passing time. Students misbehave out of sheer boredom! If teachers plan a curriculum and activities that interest and engage students, then they will not have time and be less likely to misbehave. Therefore, when problems arise in my classroom, I need to not immediately focus on the students who are not doing as I ask. I need to assess my requests and determine if they were reasonable and understandable by the students.

When students engage in inappropriate behaviors, teachers should evaluate the classroom climate that they have created (Lewis, 2001). Working with students to build a safe and caring community takes time, patience, and skill for the teacher, but is worth the effort. As Kohn (1995; 2006) suggested taking the time to create a positive, caring learning environment for the students provides the teacher a better opportunity to enhance learning and less chance for discipline issues. During my undergraduate field experiences, I often witnessed the doling out of mass punishment. I wondered how the non-misbehaving students felt, because I knew that *I* would be upset by it and the mass punishment would likely cause me to be more willing to misbehave. After all, no one wants to be punished for something that he or she has not done. I also witnessed teachers who threatened, but did not complete the threat. Teachers should never threaten punishment and then not follow through. Once punishment is required, it should be administered quickly and forgotten. As noted by Hood and Hood (2001), “The teacher who continually promises to punish a student without a follow through breeds a lack of respect by all students” (p. 171). Teachers need to understand the role that they play in creating the classroom climate. Teachers should realize that their attitude and behaviors will be mirrored by their students. It took me a while to understand this, but now that I do, I want my students to model the positive behavior I display so that we all enjoy being a member of the classroom community.

Overall, “restorative discipline”, a management philosophy based on Rawls’ theory of Social Justice is what I have chosen to adopt to guide my classroom decision making. Restorative discipline promotes appropriate consequences that encourage accountability (Amstutz & Mullet, 2005). It focuses on helping students take responsibility for their actions that leads to positive change. I was drawn to this philosophy because of the emphasis on values and principles. It acknowledges that relationships are central to building a community. To help students feel like they are a valuable part of the community, they play a major role in developing the values and principles adhered to within their classroom community. I am now comfortable with this process and able to develop this type of learning community given my new understandings.

Restorative discipline engages all stakeholders in collaborative problem-solving. Having families, students, and community members help teachers and school personnel identify students’ problems and solutions to those problem while meeting students’ needs is central to this philosophy. Restorative discipline empowers change and growth (Amstutz & Mullet, 2005).

I needed to experience classrooms to understand I needed to further my studies. I believe all teachers, parents, and administrators need to be aware of the causes and effects student misbehavior has in the classroom and community. Teachers need to realize that they could be the problem and then, they need to take steps to correct the problem. I did and I now know that I am much better prepared to enter the classroom. While I expect that I will still experience management problems, I know that I will no longer be the problem. Further, using research to guide my thinking about classroom issues has greatly enhanced my practice. I know I will continually engage in and use research based practices to decrease discipline problems in my classroom. I was fortunate that I recognized my own short-comings early in my educational career and subsequently made professional decisions to broaden my perspective. I am no longer worried about being an effective teacher. I know and understand why my students will be very different than me, but that is fine. Differences are good. I am ready to be a superior teacher!

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