

The Behavior Management Dilemma With Student Teachers A Practical Perspective from the Field

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Abstract

A significant contributor to student misbehavior is unskilled teacher behaviors. This article identifies some of these counterproductive teaching behaviors that unintentionally create a learning environment vulnerable to student misbehavior. Student teachers are in the process of developing their skills and if they are not equipped with a functional behavior management plan and the accompanying application skills, their students may become victims of inappropriate consequences. Skill in managing student behavior is an essential teacher tool. The author recommends a practical approach to behavior management for student teachers that gives proper focus and emphasis to this important and sensitive subject.

Should punishment be administered to misbehaving students when student "monkey business" is the teacher's fault? A common criticism of student teachers is their lack of skills in the area of behavior management. But, should a supervisor pressure a student teacher into applying consequences for student misconduct when the real problem lies in unskilled teaching behaviors? Amateur lesson plans combined with an unpolished delivery establish an environment ripe for student misconduct. Lessons presented in an insecure manner that drag along at a slow pace and require little from students are fuel for student misconduct. Before blaming their students, student teachers should check to see if the following list of questionable teacher behaviors gives the teacher ownership of the problem behavior.

Student teacher behaviors that "invite" student misbehavior:

- Teacher presentations that lack vitality (i.e., not motivating, boring).
- Lack of attention signals or careless use of attention signals (i.e., a "false attention alarm." This occurs when the teacher's request for attention is not followed immediately with meaningful instruction).
- Confusing directions for an activity (e.g., directions not concise, poor choice of wording, elements left out and added later, no visual list of directions posted for students' reference).
- Unchallenging learning tasks (e.g., low-level worksheets, limited new "key vocabulary," lack of high-level writing tasks, no differentiation of tasks for gifted or at-risk students, little opportunity for student creativity).
- Long pauses while the teacher is focused on board writing, deciding what to do next, assisting one student, handing out papers, etc.
- Teacher's lack of awareness of all students all of the time (i.e., the inability to monitor all students while multi-tasking which includes delivering instruction,

checking for understanding, managing materials, operating technology, evaluating student work, assisting individual students, adapting lesson plans, and monitoring all students' behavior).

- Limited use of universal student response strategies (e.g., excessive use of the "raise-your-hand/teacher-calls-on-one-student" policy where total student participation is extremely limited).

On one occasion I was observing a student teacher where the collective class behavior was disruptive to the point of negating any significant learning. Afterward I asked the student teacher to describe his behavior management plan. He responded, "I just hoped they would like me enough to do what I asked." His answer was naïve and explained the trouble he was having. Student teachers who neglect planning for behavior management may resort to some of the following irrational practices.

Ineffective student teacher behavior management practices:

- Warning, warning, warning, threat, blowup! (One warning is appropriate. Consequences must follow if behavior does not change.)
- Ignore, ignore, ignore, etc. (One "ignore" may be okay but not two.)
- Idle threat, idle threat, idle threat, etc. (A threat of dire consequences is self-destructive. It does not improve behavior or enhance learning. Students quickly realize nothing is likely to happen and are unmotivated to change their behavior.)
- "This is the worst class . . ." (Futile attempt at embarrassing the mischief-makers while casting the good students in with the bad. A teacher should praise the whole class often but never castigate the whole class.)
- "Due to Ben's poor behavior, the whole class will have to miss five minutes of recess." (Punishing the innocent with the guilty negates any positive rapport previously established with good students.)
- "Come on guys . . ." (Futile attempt at gaining sympathy.)
- "I'm going to wait until . . ." (Did you really want to put the culprits in charge of the lesson start time?)

Student teachers are often told, "You cannot teach students until you have their attention." It is my premise that "You cannot get students' attention until you are really prepared to teach." By far, the most significant factor in managing student behavior is planning and delivering an engaging, fast-paced lesson. Without doubt, student behavior must constantly be monitored and addressed, but lessons that devote inordinate time to behavior demands (e.g. quiet, no talking, voices off, raise your hand before speaking) set a negative "doom and gloom" tone in the classroom and consequently divert lesson focus away from mastery of content. The unintended outcome or "collateral learning" that results from a negative learning environment is students concluding that school is not fun (a tragedy, because learning should be fun, but that topic is for another article). For some unsuccessful student teachers, this negative focus on behavior starts a downward spiral that they cannot halt.

While a student teacher is mastering lesson planning and delivery skills, the following tips will help prevent their students from becoming "victims" of the aspiring teacher's growing pains.

(a) Skilled delivery of lesson content takes priority over demands for perfect behavior. Most of what a teacher says during a lesson (95%) should be related to subject content. A minimal amount of time (5%) should include carefully worded behavior expectations. Keep the focus on subject content.

(b) Effective behavior management plans include both a clear statement of desired behavior and a corresponding list of consequences for infractions. Behavior guidelines should be carefully composed as an integral part of lesson plans and relayed to students in oral and/or written forms. For students who do not comply, a brief reminder or warning is appropriate; however, the lesson focus should not shift away from content.

(c) Student teachers need to develop and master a repertoire of 15 to 20 behavior management responses. From this list of progressively mild to severe responses, they can judiciously apply the intervention that is least obtrusive to the lesson. Student teachers should practice perfecting skill in administering "mild" and "moderate" consequences (see following list). Most inappropriate student behavior can be corrected using mild interventions (e.g., eye contact ["the look"], proximity, hand signal, gentle shoulder touch, integration of the offending student's name into the flow of instruction, direct verbal warning). These mild interventions can be used without interrupting the flow of instruction and should be the main behavior management tools used by student teachers.

(d) Moderate consequences must be applied to repeat violators; however, the consequence does not need to "fit" or equal the "crime." The consequence can, and in most cases should, be less severe than the student offense. Students nearly always accept consequences that they deem fair but balk at consequences that seem punitive, thus exacerbating the problem. In most cases, a minor consequence is all that is needed to extinguish undesirable behavior. Other students in the class observe that the teacher appropriately addresses misbehavior. These normally cooperative students are then less likely to join a recalcitrant group and actually appreciate the sense of order and security established by the teacher. Some moderate consequences require that materials be prepared beforehand and are readily available so that they can be administered with little to no disruption to instruction (e.g., student roster with a grid for recording date and nature of misbehaviors, list of room rules and lined form for copying a rule, form for offending student to write about misbehavior or write an apology). (Note: I do not agree with the theory that having a student write as a consequence for misbehavior will discourage them from writing in general. Such faulty logic could be extended to claim that "talking" to a student about misbehavior would stunt their oral growth. Actually, writing an apology is a valid purpose for writing that should be taught to all students. However, mindless repetitive writing of a rule an excessive number of times only teaches the student to dislike the teacher.)

(e) Use of severe consequences should be rarely used and only in consultation with the cooperating teacher. Severe consequences might include keeping a student in at lunch or after school, sending a student to in-house suspension, calling parents, or referring a student to a school administrator or counselor. (Note: I am not in favor of student

teachers calling parents as a standard practice to manage student behavior since, as stated previously, most misbehavior can be attributed to the student teacher's inexperience.)

(f) Giving a misbehaving student a choice of consequences is a key strategy in managing his or her behavior. The teacher says, "Do this, or this will happen." Then the student chooses. If the student chooses not to correct their misbehavior or accept the given consequence, then the student is given the choice between the previous assigned consequence and one more severe. The teacher should sincerely encourage the student to make the right choice and then apply the consequence in a calm, non-emotional manner. Students will not generally "choose" to go too far in the wrong direction. However in rare cases of absolute defiance, the student teacher should consult with the cooperating teacher before applying any severe consequences.

(g) Allow a student who has accepted a consequence a reasonable amount of venting in order to save face. Once a student has accepted a consequence, the teacher may wisely decide to ignore subdued grumbling (e.g., "I hate this class!" "Stupid teacher!"). Of course an overt outburst of profanity would not be tolerated, but minor grouching is best ignored. Once the student has completed the consequence, a pleasant "thank you" from the teacher signals a fresh new start. Avoid ending with an irritating comment (i.e., "I hope you've learned your lesson," or "I hope we won't have anymore trouble out of you."). A teacher's expectations for student behavior tend to be self-fulfilling; thus, concluding on a positive note is crucial.

(h) The teacher is the "chief executive" of the classroom and may "pardon" whom they please. Every teacher at some point will have a student whose poor behavior charted on a bell curve would be considered an "outlier." Normal application of the rules automatically condemns such a student to failure. A wise teacher will recognize and reward every step such a child makes in the right direction rather than bury him in hardnosed rules and consequences. Isolated cases of misbehavior by normally compliant students also require prudent teacher judgments that may not adhere to standard policy. Teacher judgments should be guided by sound reasoning (i.e., what is best for the child?).

Three tiers of consequences for misbehavior:

Mild:

- Eye contact ("The look"). A look of disapproval is often all that is necessary to extinguish misbehavior.
- Teacher proximity to the student
- Visual signal (finger snap or hand sign - often accompanied by "the look.")
- Integrate the offending student's name into the flow of the instructional dialogue thus refocusing their attention.
- Give the offending student a direct verbal warning.

Moderate:

- Record misbehavior in a handy discipline record book. When multiple offenses are noted, apply a more severe consequence. This management strategy is powerful because students typically dislike written documentation of misbehavior. Make sure the offending student knows that misbehavior has been recorded; however, defer discussing the problem until a later more convenient time. Keep teaching.

- Send the offending student to brief timeout (i.e., 5 to 10 minutes, nothing excessive).
- Reseat the offending student. Separate students with a propensity for disruptive talking.
- Keep the offending student in for a couple of minutes from recess or lunch (or passing time for a secondary student) to discuss problem behavior and future expectations.
- Have the offending student write an explanation and/or an apology. Copying the broken rule is also a possibility but not in excess (e.g., "Write rule #1 three times." Adapt writing consequences to grade level and individual student ability.).

- **Severe:**

- Keep the offending student in at lunch or after school (elementary) or send the offending student to in-house suspension (secondary).
- Call the parent or guardian.
- Refer the offending student to the office.

Student teachers' responses to misbehavior should predominately involve mild consequences (70%). Severe consequences should only be used sparingly if at all (less than 5%) and always in consultation with the cooperating teacher.

Summary of effective behavior management practices:

- Prepare and deliver an engaging and fast-paced lesson.
- Use the behavior management intervention that is least obtrusive to the lesson. Keep teaching.
- Be constantly alert to inappropriate behavior but conceal management techniques as much as possible in order to keep the classroom focus on instruction.
- Apply behavior consequences in a tone of voice free of anger or frustration. The teacher should be the "dispassionate dispenser of discipline" determined by student choice.

Conclusion: Which comes first: firm behavior management or a challenging and engaging lesson? This question is not as tough as the chicken versus the egg conundrum. A well-conceived lesson skillfully presented is the most effective means of regulating student behavior. Student behavior is primarily managed by focusing on lesson design and delivery. At the same time, student teachers must be prepared to judiciously apply a modicum of consequences that keeps the learning environment positively focused on lesson content.

Methods in effectively managing student behavior should be an integral component of every university teacher education program. While behavior management skills take time (years) to develop, it is important that student teachers receive a solid foundation in management theories, rationale, and practices. Supervisors also need training in how to coach their student teachers while they are developing these skills keeping the focus on effective teaching, clear expectations, and "mild consequences" so that students do not become inadvertent victims of unskilled teacher behaviors.

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Additional information on behavior management and other topics related to student teaching are available in *Student Teaching Tips: A Guide to Teaching Success* (2009), Dr. Robert Wolfersberger. Available online at:
http://coe.ksu.edu/ss/handbook/download/Student_Teaching_Tips.pdf