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Positive Discipline as a Part of Effective Classroom Management

Honors Thesis

Lee Honors College

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Abstract

This study was driven by the researcher's interest in learning more about classroom management, and in particular, how experienced teachers thought about positive discipline as part of a management system. The researcher was a teaching intern in an elementary suburban school, where she interviewed 5 teachers and the building principal about classroom management and positive discipline. Interviews were transcribed, and patterns across responses were sought. Findings revealed common pieces of effective classroom management: 1) setting clear expectations and rules, 2) consistency in applying rules and expectations, and 3) having good parent communication. All teachers used tangible extrinsic rewards to motivate students, and saw this as positive discipline. The subjects' responses are compared and contrasted to recent research on classroom management and positive discipline.

Introduction

I have always been amazed by the teachers who seem to control their class effortlessly; the ones who can silence a room with one quick signal and who can keep the students engaged and on task for long periods of time. These are the teachers that have mastered classroom management. The first time I stood in front of a classroom full of students, trying to gain their attention was far from effortless. Keeping all the students quiet and on task during the lesson seemed impossible. Once I had the attention of one student, another would get off task; it was an endless cycle. This experience made me even more intrigued. What were these teachers who make classroom management look so simple doing? What did I have to change to be as effective?

While interning in the classroom a large part of my focus was classroom management. Although we have discussed different management techniques in my education courses, it is not the same as being in a room of twenty plus children trying to direct their learning. This was something I knew I needed to learn more about in order to become an effective teacher. I have had the opportunity to work with and observe a variety of teachers in a few school districts and have found that each teacher manages their classroom differently. Some rely on strict punishments for misbehavior, others rely on rewarding students for good behavior, and the rest fall somewhere in between. I wanted to explore the different techniques used to manage a classroom and find a good fit for me. While researching classroom management techniques I came across positive discipline and was fascinated. I had never wanted to be the teacher all the students were afraid of; I wanted to be the one they felt they could talk to, but still respect. Using a form of positive discipline to manage a classroom seemed to fit my goal and was something I wanted to investigate further.

Literature Review

Classroom Management

Classroom management has two purposes, to establish a quiet and calm environment to promote meaningful learning and to help support children's social, moral, and academic development (Doyle, 1986). Because teachers have a large impact on student learning, researchers Stronge, Ward, and Grant (2011) examined what makes up a "good" teacher. They found that how the teacher manages the classroom, their personal qualities, and their relationship with their students have the biggest impact on the success of the student. Teachers' management plays a critical role in a student's success.

Wubbels (2011) examined research on classroom management and found that successful classroom managers focus their attention more on the students' learning and less on creating a noiseless atmosphere. Teachers with good classroom management skills introduce their procedures at the beginning of the school year while making sure not to overload the students. Throughout the year they continue to model appropriate behavior while stopping unwanted behavior before it escalates (Wubbels, 2011).

Researchers van Tartwijk, den Brok, Veldman, and Wubbels (2009) observed twelve teachers who were considered good classroom managers. Each teacher was videotaped while teaching and was interviewed about the choices he/she made during the lesson. During the interview, all teachers talked about monitoring and managing the students' behavior. A majority of the teachers discussed having clear rules and procedures in the classroom in order to create an orderly work environment. The research findings indicate that it is important to consistently apply these rules, remind students of these rules, warn students when they are breaking a rule or procedure, and to impose punishment when rules or procedures are broken (van Tartwijk et al, 2009). Because punishing a child can lead to a negative classroom environment and a situation

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being escalated, many of the teachers mentioned using a small correction for unwanted behavior, and to just ignore small misbehaviors. Doing this helps create a more positive classroom environment for all students. Many of the teachers also specified the importance of having a good relationship with their students and how this can make classroom management easier (van Tartwijk et al, 2009). Along with having a good relationship with students, it is important to keep them attentive and engaged during lessons to help with classroom management. Students who are engaged in the lesson are easy to keep on task and focused, which can eliminate behavior problems.

Even though teachers have a big influence on their students' behavior, some teachers may not be aware of the amount of influence they have (Roache & Lewis, 2011). Because of this, teachers often resort to using punishment and aggressive behavior to correct student behavior. Riley, Lewis, and Brew (2010) found that teachers justify their aggressive behavior by talking about the students' unacceptable behavior. Because teachers want students to be focused during class, they claim their aggressive behavior is to fix the child's behavior to help them concentrate. Riley et al, (2010) also found that many of the teachers who use punishment and aggressive behavior do not connect their actions to any classroom management theory and seem to lack knowledge of any management theories.

Punishment vs. Reward

The behavioral perspective looks at learning as the influence that causes change in the knowledge or behavior of an individual (Postholm, 2013). This perspective focuses on the external events that cause a change in the individual. Consequences, such as reward or punishment, play a large part in determining if an individual will repeat the behavior. The

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motivation behind a behavior is connected to the reward or punishment. This perspective also claims that students are not interested in learning itself; they are more focused on the external motivation (such as praise or a good grade) that they will receive (Postholm, 2013). Behaviorists believe that the learner is a passive recipient and that they learn based on external motivations, such as rewards and punishments (Postholm, 2013).

Punishment, as defined by Kohn (1996), “must be deliberately chosen to be unpleasant, such as by forcing the student to do something he would rather not do or preventing him from doing something he wants to do; and it must be intended to change the student’s future behavior” (p. 24). Punishing a child stands in the way of a child’s ethical development because it forces him or her to think about what will happen when doing something wrong. Instead, we want children to think about, and be motivated by, how their choices help develop good values and affect other people (Kohn, 1996).

In order to motivate students, some teachers use rewards as incentives; these rewards can be either intrinsic or extrinsic. These incentives and rewards can help build a positive classroom environment because they add interest and excitement while still encouraging positive behavior and discouraging negative behavior (Evertson, Emmer, & Worsham, 2003). An example of an intrinsic reward is something intangible, such as time with the teacher to build a positive relationship (Rothstein-Fisch & Trumbull, 2008). Extrinsic rewards are tangible items, such as stickers, candy or a party, that influence the students’ behavior (Kohn, 1996). Evertson, Emmer, and Worsham (2003) state that using extrinsic rewards could diminish a child’s intrinsic motivation. If a student is completing a task to receive the reward at the end, his/her motivation and incentive to complete the task if the reward is no longer in place is reduced. Kohn (1996)

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supports this in stating, "...what the rewarded child has learned is that if he is generous he will get something. When the goodies are gone, so is the inclination to help" (p. 34).

Just like with rewards, motivation can be both intrinsic and extrinsic. Researchers Corpus and Wormington (2014) conducted a study of 507 third, fourth, and fifth grade students throughout seven schools in Portland, Oregon to see the extrinsic and intrinsic motivations that naturally occur, how they change throughout the year, and how the kinds of motivation affect the students' academic achievement. Students took a survey at the beginning and end of the school year that ranked them from highly extrinsically motivated to highly intrinsically motivated. The study found that those who are "primarily intrinsic" were more academically successful. They also found that those who were "high-quantity" motivation (meaning all intrinsically motivated) performed around the same as those who were "primarily extrinsic". This pattern is distinctly related to younger students. Corpus and Wormington note that in older students the "high-quantity" motivation resulted in more academic success.

Lemos and Verissimo (2014) also examined the connection between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in elementary age children and academic performance. They found that intrinsic motivation enhances a student's performance. They also noticed that the older the elementary aged student became, the more extrinsic motivation resulted in less academic success, even if the student did have some intrinsic motivation.

Positive Discipline

There are many components that make up positive discipline. Teaching children how to problem solve, giving students choices, using natural and logical consequences to teach, and teaching positive life skills through the use of follow-through are some of the major components

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of positive discipline (Eaton, 1997). When a student comes to a teacher with a problem, it is easy for the teacher to solve the problem for that student. Positive discipline centers around students feeling empowered to solve their own problems and using them as a learning opportunity (Eaton, 1997). Students need positive guidance from adults to help learn acceptable behavior in a variety of circumstances, and to help build their independence and decision-making skills. Having this independence and frequent opportunities to make good decisions helps build a child's self-esteem. When an adult shames a child by not making their expectations clear or punishing them, the child may fail to develop good self-esteem. Lower self-esteem can result in more behavior problems (Eaton, 1997).

Students should also experience the natural and logical consequences to their actions (Eaton, 1997), even within the existing classroom rules. When they experience what happens when they make a choice, they are able to use this information to learn from their mistakes. Being able to predict consequences is a necessary life skill, and can only happen if students have the opportunity to do so. Children also need to see that the adult follows through. It is important, as a teacher, to mean what you say to help students develop these decision-making skills.

Summary

In my position as a pre-service teacher, examining this research has helped me refine my understanding of how positive discipline, punishment, and reward are integral parts of classroom management. Students thrive in a positive classroom environment, so reducing the punishment in the classroom and instead focusing on the positive behavior helps students learn. It is also important for students to develop intrinsic motivation rather than relying on extrinsic motivators. Corpus and Wormington (2014) as well as Lemos and Verissimo (2014) found that the more

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intrinsic motivation a person has, the more academic success they will have. In addition to helping children develop intrinsic motivation by not centering a classroom around extrinsic motivators such as candy and parties, it is important to give students an opportunity to make their own choices, see the consequences to their choices, and learn problem solving techniques. These are important tools to develop as a child because they will need these skills as they age.

After reading about what makes up classroom management, I gathered my own practical knowledge to understand positive discipline. I decided to ask how teachers used positive discipline, punishments, and rewards in their classroom. Along with this, I explored how the principal of the school viewed using positive discipline, punishment, and rewards in the classroom. With this information I came to my own conclusions about the role positive discipline plays in the classroom.

Research Questions and Methods

The Student Investigator has studied relevant literature on classroom management and positive discipline and has designed a series of interview questions. Elementary educators and the school principal were contacted in November 2017, and an interview date and time were scheduled for January 2018 with those willing to participate. The researchers recruited five elementary educators and one principal. The one-time interview lasted about 20-30 minutes and was conducted at a local elementary school located in a suburban setting.

During the interview, each teacher participant was provided a copy of the questions and the Student Investigator typed notes and quotes. The interview consisted of questions asking personal demographics, opinions on effective classroom management, and use of positive discipline in their classroom. The research questions were as follows:

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- 1) From your own experience, what are the pieces of effective classroom management?
- 2) How have you learned about classroom management?
- 3) How does your discipline system work?
- 4) Where did you complete your schooling and what degrees do you hold?
- 5) How many years of experience do you have at this school and others?
- 6) What are your current teaching and non-teaching responsibilities?

During the principal interview the procedure was identical. Questions were modified to include their experience as principal and information about the school setting. The research questions were as follows:

- 1) How long have you been a principal? Were you a classroom teacher?
- 2) From your own experience, what are the pieces of effective classroom management?
- 3) How have you learned about classroom management?
- 4) How does a good discipline system work?

After the interview was complete, the Student Investigator emailed the participants a copy of the transcript for them to complete a member check. A member check involves the participant reviewing the researcher's transcript of the interview to ensure accuracy and completeness. Suggestions or changes from the participants were incorporated into the transcript prior to analysis. Once transcripts were complete, teacher names were removed and each transcript was assigned a number, such as "Teacher 1" and "Teacher 2".

Together, the Principal Investigator and Student Investigator analyzed participant responses. The researchers looked for patterns, as well as unique approaches, in responses. A research summary has been developed and shared with participants who have indicated interest.

Findings and Discussion

The findings are organized by research question.

From your own experiences, what are the pieces of effective classroom management?

After examining what teachers feel are the pieces of effective classroom management, there were many similarities between the responses. Setting clear expectations and rules at the beginning of the school year, having consistency with the rules and expectations, as well as having good parent communication are all pieces that were commonly mentioned. Four out of the five teachers mentioned all three in their responses, while only one (Teacher 5) mentioned setting clear expectations and rules at the beginning of the school year.

Only one out of the five teachers, Teacher 5, included more than just these three pieces. While she included details about setting clear expectations, consistency, and parent communication like the other teachers, she was the only one to mention a seating chart and positive relationships as pieces of effective classroom management. The responses from the other teachers did not include anything in relation to how the students felt about the teacher or their relationship with the teacher. Having a solid relationship with their teacher helps students feel more accepted in the classroom which, in turn, causes better behavior and higher academic achievement.

Do you implement a reward system in your classroom?

When reviewing the reward system the teachers use in their classrooms, I found that all five teachers use some form of a tangible, extrinsic, reward (candy, pencil, etc.). Even Teacher 4, who does not frequently use a reward system, uses tangible rewards on occasion. Other

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common rewards stated during the interview are extra free choice and Chromebook time. While these are not tangible rewards, they are still extrinsic rewards.

Only Teacher 3 mentioned using verbal praise as a reward for good behavior. This was the only mention of using a form of an intangible, intrinsic reward in the classroom. During the interview with the principal she mentioned that she was not in full support of using extrinsic rewards, which was in contrast to all five teacher responses. She believed that rewards should be intrinsic based and centered around building relationships. A suggested reward was eating lunch with the teacher, where the student and the teacher had extra time to build their relationship. The principal did mention that certain students thrive on extrinsic rewards, but she would prefer that intrinsic rewards be used.

How does your discipline system work?

When the researcher asked about their discipline system, common teacher responses involved parent communication, loss of privileges for the student, and holding a mini-conference with the student. Many of the teachers only mentioned one or two of these common features in their responses. The most popular response involved loss of privileges, which three out of the five teachers interviewed mentioned. When asked what role discipline plays in the classroom, the principal stated that it is important for expectations to be clear and the response to behavior be consistent. She also discussed the importance of not yelling at students and keeping communication with the parents. While the principal did mention communicating with the parents, nothing was mentioned about loss of privileges, which was the most common teacher response. The principal stressed the importance of expectations and responses to behavior being consistent.

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Teacher 1 was the only teacher to mention all three features (parent communication, loss of privileges for the student, and holding a mini-conference) during her interview. This was unanticipated because she started her response by stating that she is not discipline oriented, and she tries to catch the students being good by focusing less on the negative behavior. She says that she will correct issues when necessary.

Only one of the five teachers, Teacher 4, mentioned that disciplining a child can potentially embarrass the child and distract other students. This reduces focus from the rest of the class. To keep from calling out specific students and embarrassing them, she stated that she taps the student on the shoulder or hovers around them to bring awareness to their behavior. She will also give students the opportunity to choose to move to a separate table if she feels that would benefit them. Teacher 5 also takes students into consideration in her discipline system because she gives them the opportunity to be involved in creating classroom rules. While she uses the school rules as her main focus, she allows the class to create and vote on specific classroom rules at the beginning of the year. She states that this gives the students ownership over classroom rules because they played a part in creating them.

Do you incorporate positive discipline techniques into your classroom?

When asked about the positive discipline techniques they use in the classroom, all five teachers only mentioned the rewards they give their students. Teacher 4 does not claim to use positive discipline techniques because she rarely uses a reward system with her students; she only follows the school wide monthly reward, and she does not have a system of her own. She commented that students are supposed to behave so they do not always need to be rewarded for doing what they are supposed to do. It was surprising that all five teachers only related rewards

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to positive discipline. There was no mention of giving students choices, compliments, or any other aspect of positive discipline.

When the principal was asked about how a good discipline system works, she mentioned that it is important to stay positive. There are certain times when behavior needs to have consequences, but she states that it is important to always have a conversation that goes along with the consequence; students need to be able to explain their thinking and for an adult to teach them what was wrong with their behavior. She also feels that parent communication should not be a consequence. There should be a consequence and the communication is there to make parents aware. The principal mentioned nothing about a reward system.

What are the consequences of negative behavior?

Teacher responses related to negative behavior in the classroom included warnings, loss of privileges/free choice, a clip chart or card system, and parent communication. Four out of the five teachers use loss of privileges/free choice as a consequence for negative behavior. All of the teachers mentioned giving students a warning first before imposing a consequence.

It was intriguing that all five teachers mentioned communication home via phone call, email, or communicator (school wide paper-based communication system) as consequences. When the principal was asked how a good discipline system works, she specified that communication with the parents is not a consequence for misbehavior, it is just there to alert the parents. Even though the principal does not feel it should be a consequence, all five of the interviewed teachers use it as one.

Implications and Limitations

Doyle (1986) states that the purposes of classroom management include 1) establishing a quiet and calm environment for meaningful learning to take place and, 2) helping support a child's social, moral, and academic development. These are supported when teachers introduce the procedures at the beginning of the year and continue to model this good behavior while addressing unwanted behavior before it escalates (Wubbels, 2011). In this study interview responses were consistent with Wubbels (2011) and Doyle (1986). Among the teachers the common responses were setting clear rules and expectations at the beginning of the year, and maintaining consistency with the rules and expectations throughout the year. The principal also discussed the importance of teachers having clear expectations and being consistent with their responses to student misbehavior.

In relation to classroom management, van Tartwijk, den Brok, Veldman, and Wubbels (2009) found that punishing a child can lead to a negative classroom environment and can cause the problem to escalate, so it is important to not focus on small misbehaviors and to make small corrections when needed. Teacher 4 spoke about this negative classroom environment when mentioning that calling out a child can cause embarrassment. She uses small corrections, such as standing near a student or tapping him or her on the shoulder to call attention to the behavior. This action does not disrupt the entire class and quickly and quietly corrects the small misbehavior.

One way to promote positive behavior is the use of rewards. These rewards can be either intrinsic or extrinsic. All five of the interviewed teachers claim to use some form of an extrinsic reward (candy, special tools, free choice, Chromebook time). Only Teacher 3 mentioned the use

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of positive verbal praise, which is an intrinsic reward. The principal also was not in support of using extrinsic rewards such as candy or free choice, and stressed the importance in using rewards to build relationships. Evertson, Emmer, and Worsham (2003) support this when stating that using extrinsic rewards can diminish a child's intrinsic motivation. When a child is focused on the reward he/she will receive when completing a task, his/her motivation to complete the task is reduced when the reward is removed.

In addition to completing this interview study, in my role as an intern I have had the opportunity to observe many of the teachers I interviewed and can see that the motivation to complete a task is based on the reward they will receive. I am regularly in a classroom with a teacher who primarily uses extrinsic rewards for students (candy, pencils, free choice) and can see the students' motivation is more to earn the reward than to help the teacher, complete the assignment, or behave appropriately. I have witnessed multiple times where students help clean the classroom without being asked, only to come up afterwards and ask for a treat for helping. The students have learned that when they are generous and help out, they will gain something in return. We want children who are motivated by the good that helping others does for the classroom or society, not the physical object they will gain from doing so.

Teaching children how to problem solve, giving students choices, using natural and logical consequences to teach, and teaching positive life skills through the use of follow-through are some of the major components of positive discipline (Eaton, 1997). When they were asked how they use positive discipline in their classrooms, all five teachers mentioned the rewards they use, or choose not to use, in their classroom. While there are many components of positive discipline, all five teachers only related rewards to positive discipline, rather than giving students choices, using consequences to teach, and teaching students how to problem solve.

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In contrast to this, the principal mentioned that a good discipline system should have teaching moments. When a student misbehaves, they should have the opportunity to explain themselves and for an adult to teach them why the behavior was wrong. She stressed that these are great teaching moments. Instead of focusing on the rewards or consequences of misbehavior, she focused on the teaching moments that can happen when a child misbehaves. These teaching moments are a major component of positive discipline and are what help children learn and grow from their mistakes. It also helps students learn to make better choices in the future.

Limitations

This was a very small study of five teacher and the principal in a well-resourced suburban school. This means that the results are not generalizable to other kinds of schools, such as urban or rural ones. Nor does it represent what researchers might find in researching schools of varying socio-economic makeup. Five teachers is not enough to get a robust picture of all the possible thinking and teacher practices related to classroom management and positive discipline. Thus, a responsible way to think about this study is as a “small snapshot” that reveals some teachers’ ideas about classroom management and positive discipline.

Another limitation was how the interview was recorded. In the interview of the first teacher, a pencil and paper were used to record the answers given. This was a slow process and I felt that I missed some valuable responses. When interviewing the remaining teachers and principal I typed the responses, which was quicker and more efficient. Given the difference in recording, the amount of data for Teacher 1 was less than the volume for the remaining teachers and principal.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions for Teachers

- 1) From your own experience, what are the pieces of effective classroom management?
- 2) How have you learned about classroom management?
- 3) How does your discipline system work?
- 4) Where did you complete your schooling and what degrees do you hold?
- 5) How many years of experience do you have at this school and others?
- 6) What are your current teaching and non-teaching responsibilities?

Appendix B

Interview Questions for School Principal

- 1) How long have you been a principal? Were you a classroom teacher?
- 2) From your own experience, what are the pieces of effective classroom management?
- 3) How have you learned about classroom management?
- 4) How does a good discipline system work?