

Management Styles in the Classroom

Glenn Latham

Over the years I have observed students and teachers in hundreds of classrooms. One thing I've noticed is that there is a tremendous range in the general demeanor of students. In some classrooms the students are well mannered, cheerful, and hard working; in others, students from the same socioeconomic background are rude, sullen, and lazy. What causes this difference? There may be many contributing factors, but I believe the major one may be the ratio of positive to negative interactions between the teacher and student: The higher this "P/N" ratio, the better the atmosphere of the classroom, the better the students behave, and the more they learn.

Some teachers typically interact with students in negative ways: criticizing a student's poor posture, pointing out mistakes, making sarcastic remarks about inappropriate social behavior, frowning to show disapproval, and so on. Often these teachers consider it their job to point out where the students have gone wrong. "You learn from your mistakes," seems to be their mantra. Other teachers typically interact with students in positive ways: complimenting a student's good posture, pointing out successes, making flattering remarks about appropriate social behavior, smiling to show approval, and so on. These teachers take the view that "Success is the best teacher."

I have found that these two classroom "management styles" consistently correlate with differences in student behavior. My research revealed that in classrooms where students were on task, attending, following instructions, and participating appropriately, the ratio of positive to negative interactions between teachers and students was eight to one. These teachers were saying pleasant, positive, encouraging things to their students or they were smiling, touching, and gesturing in pleasant ways eight times for every one time that they criticized, frowned, or the like.

This ratio of positive to negative interactions is similar to the ratio reported by Betty Hart and Todd Risley in their marvelous book, *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children*. They studied the comments of parents toward their preschool children and found that in homes that produced the most successful children, the parents gave their children positive feedback every other minute. On average, children in these families experienced a ratio of six positive comments for every one negative comment. Hart and Risley note that the ratio of positive to negative verbal interactions between parents and their children have life-long implications that go well beyond anything conventional wisdom would predict. I believe the same thing may be said about teacher-student interactions.

A few years ago I was asked to help a school district reduce the alarming referral of “high risk” students from regular education to special education. The community being served was in an area heavily populated by working class homes with an inordinate amount of substance abuse, child and spouse abuse, and other social problems. Hence, the children from these homes came to school carrying a lot of emotional baggage. Perhaps partly as a result of these conditions, 80% of the children were in special education and had labels such as behaviorally disturbed, ADD/ADHD, learning disabled, and emotionally maladjusted.

During my observations in the regular education classrooms, I found that the average P/N ratio was one to four. In other words, teachers typically interacted with students in negative ways four times as often as they interacted in positive ways. During the summer, I taught these teachers to be more positive (to smile, make pleasant comments, touch gently, make kind gestures) and to avoid scolding, criticizing, and making sarcastic remarks. The results were dramatic: The following school year, teachers and their aides were averaging 167 positive interactions per class period and only four negative interactions— a P/N ratio of 42 to one! Increasing the P/N ratio had a marked effect on the emotional tone of the classrooms and greatly improved the success rates of the students. During that year, only 11% of these “high risk” students were placed in special education. When the P/N ratio was low, 80% of

students were thought to need special education classes; when the P/N ratio was high, only 11% were thought to need these classes.

I recently completed two days of in-service training for teachers during which special emphasis was placed on increasing the ratio of positive to negative interactions to at least eight to one. After the workshop, an appreciative teacher left me a note. It read, "What a superb suggestion! I work in a toxic school climate where the main discipline technique, as mandated by our principal, is to 'hammer the students.' I find your suggestion to be extremely critical, and validating of how to manage my classroom! Amen."

Indeed, Amen!

References

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