The Role of the Teacher in a Challenging Classroom Environment. Discovering the Duty of the Teacher When Order Gets out of Hand

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Abstract: This article tackles the problem of classroom management and the role of the teacher in situations that seem too difficult to handle. Disruptive behavior is a common issue for teachers, and it can range from minor misbehavior to potentially unmanageable one. The article explores the challenges teachers might face when managing the class and offers potential solutions. Yet, when none of the classroom management strategies proves effective, it becomes necessary to question the role of the teacher beyond the conventional duty of being an 'information conveyor'. Ultimately, it is suggested that the teachers' soft skills and their role as a positive role model should prevail.

Introduction

Conveying information constitutes a pivotal aspect of a teacher's responsibilities, yet it is often inaccurately perceived as their sole role. The pedagogical relationship extends beyond the mere dissemination of subject-specific knowledge; teaching takes part in each interaction between the teacher and the student and it may even transcend the confines of the school environment. Regardless of the subject taught, teachers collectively shape the environment within which a student undergoes formative experiences during the early stages of development, spanning a substantial portion of their formative 13 year educational path. Notably, the educational environment influences the cultivation of a student's character, socialization skills, and integration within the broader community. Given the amount of time students spend during their formative years at school, the significant impact that teachers have on shaping student's character begs the question of what responsibilities lie beyond the transmission of information. During a child's

impressionable years, adults emerge as primary models, the ones from whom a child learns how to behave. Thus, teachers have substantial influence over student's development not solely in an intellectual capacity, but also shaping their personal characteristics. It is during these years that a child will see and mimic the way teachers tackle disruptive behaviors, handle challenges, cope with despair, and respond to provocations.

Within the confines of the school, a micro-community manifests itself, replete with all the struggles, challenges, joys, or disappointments one might encounter further in life, this is why the school serves as a preparatory arena for students, equipping them with skills and insights essential further in life. Now, imagine the transformative impact teachers could exert on this environment if each one of them were to focus not only on the subject one teaches, but also on the environment s/he facilitates. Imagine, if teachers could provide a different model of dealing with difficult situations based on empathy, understanding and communication and provide a safe space in which aggression, in whatever form, is absent even in the most out of hand situations. This imaginative exercise is not meant to suggest that such a utopian situation might be fully reached, but rather to raise awareness regarding the responsibility a teacher bears in his/ her interactions with students. This challenges the teacher to avoid replicating an inadequate societal system and determine the student to become "just another brick in the wall" (Waters 0:59).

However, trapped in the duty of information dissemination, teachers often find themselves inadvertently perpetuating a more or less aggressive behavior in order to pursue the goal of enhancing student's academic performances. This usually occurs when classroom management is inefficient. Contrary to what might be assumed, this inefficiency should not always be attributed to the teacher's lack of experience, knowledge, or interest. Rather, it often stems from the overpowering influence external factors have over the students' behavior, consequently it becomes impossible for teachers to surpass these external influences. Therefore, this raises the question of how can one improve classroom management, how soft skills 'come in handy' when dealing with misbehaving classroom environments, and whether a teacher should sacrifice his or her role as behavioral model for the sake of academic performance.

Challenges of misbehavior

Let us first delve into the challenges misbehavior causes in a classroom. The disruptive attitude is such a prevalent issue that the results of the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS; OECD 2014) revealed that one in four teachers waste a minimum of 30% of lesson time because of disruptions and administrative tasks. Consequently, seeking to understand the root causes of misbehavior should be the first step in our inquiry. It has been suggested that the four main reasons which explain why students misbehave are "they lack awareness, they believe they are stupid or hopeless, they want to look good in front of their friends, or they are seeking attention" (Mendler 42). However, as pointed out, the list is definitely not exhaustive, since many other aspects " immaturity or moral challenge [...] peer pressure, poor nutrition, lack of sleep, problems at home, or problems with friends, other teachers, coaches, or an after school job" (Korb 17) could determine an inappropriate attitude in class. Furthermore, one must also consider that the cerebral cortex is still developing during the adolescent years (Strauch 12). This leads to situations in which not even the students themselves can give a definitive answer to explain the choices they make.

Efforts in finding the reason which lies behind a certain behavior may contribute to a more empathetic approach to the situation and expedite the resolution. Swiftly addressing challenging situations is imperative as misbehavior has a great impact on the learning environment. Given the importance of academic engagement, the disruptive behavior "has adverse effects on educational outcomes for all students in the classroom (Kelsey 1). That is because "high rates of disruptive behavior in the classroom are associated with less on task student behavior and less instructional time for the teacher" (idem). Furthermore, misbehavior doesn't only affect students, but also teachers, who are prone to burnout due to emotional exhaustion caused by consistent and repeated misbehavior during lessons (Brouwers 9). For these reasons, it becomes evident why classroom management plays a crucial role in facilitating an effective lesson.

Classroom management

1. First thing first

We will highlight what we consider important to focus on when trying to implement efficient classroom management. To begin with, it is crucial to establish a clear set of rules and routines from the very first day that will guide activities throughout the year. By seizing the vulnerability students undergo when encountering a new teacher, the latter can set the tone for the class. It is well known that the first impression students form about a teacher significantly influences the teacher-student relationship. As James Cangelosi pointed out "because students are uncertain about you at the beginning of a new school session, they will be watching your reactions, evaluating your attitudes, predicting what the relationships among you and the students will be, assessing their individual places in the social order of the classroom community, and determining how they will conduct themselves" (60). Thus, routines and rituals should be established from the beginning and should be constantly reinforced, even at the expense of teaching time, as they may prevent common behavioral issues during class. A report published by the U.S Department of Education revealed that teachers experienced fewer disruptions when they established clear expectation regarding the following events:

"1. Arriving and leaving the classroom.

2. Distributing materials and turning in assignments.

3. Requesting help from the teacher.

4. Transitioning to new activities or settings.

5. Experiencing interruptions in routines, such as fire drills or substitute teachers.

6. Working independently and in groups.

7. Returning from recess or another class (art, music, or physical education)." (24).

Another important aspect is to create a classroom climate that supports engagement. From this perspective, it is essential to discern whether or not the classroom has a learning oriented or work oriented focus. As detailed by Brophy "The teachers who promoted a learning orientation introduced activities with emphasis on what students would learn from them, encouraged students to work collaboratively and help one another, and treated errors as natural parts of the learning process and stimulants for

follow-up instruction. In contrast, the teacher who promoted a work orientation spoke primarily in terms of task completion rather than learning. She stressed completing the work within stated time limits when introducing activities, emphasized competition rather than cooperation among students, and gave the correct answers following errors but did not use the errors as occasions for helping students to overcome their difficulties in learning." (Brophy in Heather 74).

This learning oriented approach is what James Cangelosi refers to as 'businesslike classroom' (p 58); where engagement to achieve specific learning goals is prioritized. This relatively new approach makes the learning process more akin to real life situations, rendering it more meaningful for students. It moves away from the traditional knowledge oriented approach in which individual work, along with a great information stocking capacity was esteemed. This method encourages students to collaborate among themselves and with the teacher, to find solutions and to discover the information. Moreover, in such a climate, students are encouraged to participate without the fear of embarrassment, harassment, or failure.

2. Relationship student-teacher

However, above all, what we consider to be the key element in successful class management is undoubtedly the teacher-student relationship. In this sense, teachers must "win their students` hearts while getting inside their heads (Wolk in Beaty-O'Ferrall 2). Studies show that teachers who develop such relationships are less likely to encounter classroom behavior problems and have better academic performances (idem). This is why it doesn't come as a surprise to see that "students rated class-teacher lessons significantly more positively than subject-teacher lessons in terms of classroom management and the teacher–student relationship, and they reported fewer methodological-didactic setting disruptions during instruction by the class teacher" (Scherzinger 11). In order to deepen the relationship, one must spend time, manifest interest and understanding, get to know the other and not be afraid of being vulnerable. Teachers don't teach from their ivory tower anymore, nor should they look down on students from a pedestal. On the contrary, as we said before, the climate should be businesslike, which means that each one in the class knows his/ her role, each one,

whether we talk about the teacher or the student, must achieve certain objectives by the end of the lesson. In order to do so, there must be an efficient and civilized collaboration.

Little things which create warmth for all students really matter. Children usually really appreciate thoughtful gestures from teachers, whether that is a greeting card, a 'good job' sticker or just a welcoming smile. But one way we can start our daily interaction is by greeting each student individually. Maybe some of us have seen those videos in which certain teachers have a different handshake for each student when they get into the classroom. That definitely would be time consuming and too difficult to put into effect for most teachers, but it is a great example of how teachers tried to establish a personal connection with students right from the moment they entered the classroom. Moreover, it is advisable to know the name of your students as soon as possible and call them by name. Addressing students by name when you want to warn them about their behavior is "much more effective than just asking them to stop" (Mendler 70).

Furthermore, it is important for the student to see that s/he is perceived by the teacher as an individual and not just part of a collective. In order to convey the feeling that each of the students is equally important, the teacher should try to get to know them personally, to find out about their interests, likes or dislikes, fears, important moments from their lives, or any other aspect which for them is an important constitutive part of their personality. In exchange, the teachers should, to a certain extent, divulge aspects of their personal life within the classroom activities, thus facilitating a deeper connection with the students. For instance, during a listening lesson centered on various songs, I shared with them that the selected songs were drawn from my personal favorites. Similarly, in a vocabulary lesson focused on the theme of cooking, I used visual materials depicting myself engaged in cooking and I also used my recipes as content for diverse classroom exercises. In the same way, during a writing lesson wherein students were instructed on diary composition, I shared excerpts from my own diary (ensuring the content was carefully selected) and asked the students to reconstruct the narrative. Thus, the teacher should take advantage of the topics of the lesson and integrate personal information.

Another aspect to consider when aiming to improve classroom management is to set aside one's 'ego' during classroom interactions. This entails the capacity "to suspense the

flaring up of his or her own impulses, issues, and negative reactions" (Beaty-O'Ferrall 7). It is imperative to maintain flexibility and avoid taking the lesson or oneself overly 'seriously'. What I mean by this is that in moments of disruption, trying to go along with the disruptive element could be more effective than trying to eliminate that disturbance right away. For example, when confronted with a student's mocking remark, rather than scolding him/ her, a more constructive approach might involve appreciating the wit of the comment or expressing genuine interest in finding out more about what the student has to say. This is important especially when dealing with disruptive students. That is because as counterintuitive as it may seem, harsher disciplinary measures often encourage disdainful behavior, as students are prepared for a confrontational response from the teacher. Yet, if the teacher can restrain from any personal involvement, it is more likely to deescalate the situation and gain respect from the student, who is less prone to further 'attack' when met with a non-combative reaction.

A particularly effective 'tool' for addressing minor disturbances is the use of humor. Humor possesses the ability to transform ill-intended remarks, defiant attitudes, or provocations into moments of comic relief. What starts as provocation can evolve into a much-needed source of joy for the entire class. Deescalating conflictual attitudes using the sense of humor stands out in effective classroom management. In fact, this method is usually displayed in all the movies which tackle the problem of classroom management such as *Stand and Deliver*, *Dead Poets Society*, *Entre les mures*, *To Sir with Love*, or *Detachment*. In all these movies one can see that an aspect which makes the teacher a pleasant figure for students is the ability to deescalate conflictual situations through humor.

Last but not least, maybe one of the most popular soft-skills among scholars when talking about a productive relationship in class is empathy. It is a skill that every teacher should possess, because, as previously expounded, teaching is not a solitary endeavor, it is a collaborative process involving communication and mutual understanding. Consequently, empathy should be nurtured among students and also manifested by teachers.

On one hand, it is important for teachers to handle a disruptive situation empathically, addressing each situation individually and seeking to comprehend the perspectives, the challenges, and the emotions of the student. Simultaneously, students should also

develop awareness of their actions and the resulting consequences. Of course, the teacher must first display empathy before expecting a similar disposition from students. A practical strategy to determine students to become aware of their behavior was implemented by Mr. Aziz: "Each week, Mr. Aziz draws a full body self-portrait and pins it to his shirt. The words "My I" are written on the portrait to convey ownership as he lets his students know that words and deeds can either be supportive or disrespectful. When his students say or do things to him that he considers disrespectful, he takes a scissors and cuts off a body part to note injury. His original goal was to get through a week with at least one body part remaining. Four weeks into this practice, improvement was so dramatic that on average only two body parts each week were trimmed." (Mendler 71) The symbolism associated with the act of cutting a limb creates a compelling visual image and, in turn, stimulates awareness over one's actions. Quite often students inquired the reason behind cutting a body part, which underscores that they were not even aware of misbehaving. Another alternative strategy for promoting empathy has been devised by a teacher who wrote "the word P A T I E N C E on the chalkboard each day. She teaches the virtue of showing patience as well as the frustration we feel and the time we lose when we act in ways that upset people's patience. She explained that when things happened in class that challenged her patience, she would erase one letter. Letters left at the end of the day were traded for extra play activities as both a token of appreciation and consequence of thoughtfulness." (Idem) Carrying out this strategy, the teacher not only determines the students to become more aware of their attitude, but also shows appreciation by offering some form of incentive. For instance, during my classes, I often tell my students that maintaining focus on the lesson and accomplishing objectives in time will be rewarded with enjoyable activities at the end of the lesson, such as playing Kahoot or Activity.

Outstanding situations

Truth be told, outlining general rules for classroom management in an essay is fairly easy; however, putting them into practice proves to be a more difficult task. While rules and instructions, as discussed earlier, can be useful and satisfying when addressing mild behavioral issues, their effectiveness may diminish in classrooms where students

deliberately adopt a defiant attitude. Such situations become challenging for the teacher who may find it difficult to exert a greater influence over the problematic students than their peers.

Often, defiant students lack authoritative figures in their lives, making familial support elusive for the teacher. Moreover, quite often these students struggle to comprehend the tasks assigned to their peers during class because they did not learn in time the previous lessons. This discourages them even more to get involved. Although differentiated teaching methods should be employed, the extent of the knowledge disparity would require teaching an entirely different lesson, further complicating the possibility of maintaining order. Despite using learnt strategies, seeking parental support and investing effort in establishing a connection with the student, a point may be reached where the teacher's patience runs out, begging the question: what course of action should be pursued? In moments when the planned objectives of the lesson are not met, and the classroom dynamic is constantly impacted by disruptions, teachers may feel tempted to resort to more 'aggressive' responses. Threatening grades, public ridicule or raising one's voice might prove to work quite well sometimes, albeit to the expense of sacrificing the teacher's role as a positive role model. While such an approach may prove efficient for a short while, it perpetuates a model of aggression inconsistent with the ideals of empathic interpersonal relations. In these moments of perceived hopelessness, when reaching one's pedagogical objectives seems so distant, it is essential to recognize that the teacher has still fulfilled some of his/ her responsibilities by providing an alternative life model of behavior based on empathy. Despite not achieving the academic milestones, the teacher, by maintaining composure and responding empathically, displays a valuable lesson in dealing with interpersonal challenges. In evaluating the worthiness of academic achievements against perpetuating a toxic relational dynamic, teachers should reflect upon the lasting impact of their decision.

In conclusion, the teacher's role transcends the conventional notion of being a mere disseminator of information. Teachers also shape students' characters, socializing skills, and their ability to integrate into society. Therefore, the responsibility of providing a 'healthy' behavioral model should not be overlooked. However, such a responsibility is

challenged in classes where disruptions are encountered regularly. Knowing how to establish a productive climate during lessons is essential for every teacher, yet it sometimes falls short of expectations. This usually occurs when certain students can't be motivated to engage in the lesson or to refrain from disrupting the order for the sake of their classmates. It is in these situations, when teachers feel at the end of their power and patience, that one must understand that not attaining certain academic objectives doesn't mean one has failed as a teacher, as there are still other 'duties' that a teacher has. Thus, discovering the balance between reaching academic goals and providing a healthy, empathic learning environment remains an ongoing challenge for teachers.

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Biodata

Andrei Bodea earned his MA in British Cultural Studies from "Babes Bolyai" University in 2023 and is particularly interested in incorporating movies and music into ESL classes. His focus is on creating class activities that mirror real-life situations, aiming to go beyond just language acquisition in the process of teaching English.