
PIE-R²: The Area of a Circle and Good Behavior Management

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Abstract

When teachers consider behavior management issues in the classroom, they often focus primarily on student behavior. Nevertheless, managing inappropriate student behavior can often be improved by altering teacher behavior. Discussed in the present article are four components of teacher behavior that can lead to more effective management of student behavior. The four components are represented by the acronym PIE - R2. Each component is discussed in terms of its contribution to more effective behavior management.

Keywords

teacher behavior, teacher expectations, behavior management, planning,
student-teacher interactions

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class assignments and homework procedures (e.g., where to turn in work, where to write name on paper, etc.). Communicating transitional expectations teaches students how to perform necessary steps to move successfully from one activity or environment to another (e.g., enter/exit the classroom, request restroom breaks, passing out/collecting materials, etc) (McIntosh, Herman, Sanford, McGraw, & Florence, 2004).

Remaining fair, firm and consistent with all students is the second recommendation. "Fair" equates to providing students with expectations that are reasonable and attainable. Giving students directions and/or assignments within their ability promotes active involvement. "Firm" does not equal "mean"; rather, firmness is following through on statements one makes. A firm teacher makes statements of consequences to students, whether positive or negative, which students know will be enforced simply because the teacher stated them. Barbeta, Norona, & Bicard (2005) suggested that students sometimes misbehave due to inconsistent expectations and consequences. Clear classroom expectations and consistent enforcement of classroom rules show students that teacher behavior can be predictable. When students see that the teacher will be predictably consistent, the likelihood of positive interactions increases (Shores, Gunter, & Jack, 1993).

A final recommendation is to never expect more than each student is capable of giving. A common mistake is to set the same expectations for all students, which sets up those students who have difficulty with behavioral self-control to be viewed negatively by the teacher (Lane, Wehby, & Cooley, 2006). Each student will require individualized expectations.

Reinforcement Ratio

"Sit down! Shhh! I am not going to tell you again! Stop that!" says Mrs. Curtiss. "I feel like I am always reprimanding my students. My classroom feels negative and I go home tired and frustrated. What should I do?" says Mrs. Curtiss. "It is easy to get into that cycle of too many reprimands," says Ms. Caroline. "You will always have to use reprimands for students; however, remember that there are always students in your class that are exhibiting positive behaviors. When you see those behaviors, mention them to students. Don't just say, 'Good Job'; instead, give behavior specific praise, such as, 'That is fantastic writing!' 'I appreciate you staying in your seat!' 'I am proud of you for turning in your homework!' That should help to make your class not feel so negative and it may reduce your frustration."

Teachers often use reprimand statements in response to misbehavior. Sometimes the frequency of classroom misbehavior gets teachers into a pattern of verbally reprimanding students many times per day. By the end of the day, many teachers can be emotionally and physically fatigued by all of the negative interactions with students, and negative interactions can appear to dominate the teacher's memory of the day. This condition could result in increased stress, health problems and a negative attitude toward teaching, possibly leading to teacher "burnout." Any profession loses attractiveness when characterized by unpleasant interactions.

A similar condition can result from the perspective of the students. They can acquire a view of their school as an unpleasant place characterized by negative interactions. They can also develop a negative attitude toward their teacher because, in their view, the teacher "never" has anything nice to say to them. In general, a negative, unpleasant at-

mosphere can characterize the whole learning environment and make it unattractive to both teacher and student.

One way that the teacher can make the classroom atmosphere more positive and pleasant is to focus on his/her reinforcement ratio. "Reinforcement ratio" is the ratio of the number of positive teacher comments to the number of corrective/negative teacher comments. Examples of positive teacher comments include "good work," "that's right," "I like the way you are sitting quietly," or "I can't believe how hard you are working." Examples of negative/corrective teacher comments include "stop that," "sit down," "be quiet," or "I told you not to do that again." Neutral teacher comments are not counted in the reinforcement ratio. Examples of neutral comments include "turn to page six," "read the next sentence," "let's get out our math books," or "it is time to line up for lunch."

Research indicates that classes in which the teacher has a strongly positive reinforcement ratio often have fewer behavior problems (Shores, Gunter, & Jack, 1993). Unfortunately, however, there are many classrooms in which negative or corrective comments are far more frequent than positive comments. In a study by Van Acker, Grant, and Henry (1996), the authors reported a ratio of one positive statement for every four negative/corrective statements. Such a negative ratio indicates that students are receiving more attention for inappropriate behavior than for appropriate behavior.

Why do We Need a Positive Reinforcement Ratio?

Assuming that teacher attention is reinforcing for most students, it is logical to assume also that students will engage in behaviors resulting in teacher attention. In a study of preschool classes, Van Der Heyden, Witt, and Gatti (2001) found that there was a greater probability of attracting teacher attention for exhibiting disruptive behavior than for exhibiting appropriate behavior. When this happens repeatedly, students learn that engaging in off-task or disruptive behavior (talk outs, being out of seat, etc.) is more likely to result in teacher attention than being

on task. If there is insufficient teacher attention to on-task behavior, then the frequency of inappropriate behavior may increase as a function of teacher attention in the form of negative or corrective statements.

Perhaps teachers verbally attend more to off-task behaviors in the classroom because these behaviors disrupt the flow of the classroom routine and interfere with learning. Nevertheless, consistently negative teacher statements can result in an unpleasant classroom atmosphere and can result in diminished effectiveness of associated punitive interventions. If inappropriate student behaviors persist, it is likely that negative teacher statements would be followed by punitive interventions (e.g., lost recess time, lost computer time, or forfeiting tokens in a token economy). Researchers have demonstrated, however, that in classrooms where teachers consistently implement punitive interventions to address off-task behavior, while never or seldom praising on-task behavior, the punitive interventions lose their effectiveness in de-

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creasing behavior (Van Acker, Grant, & Henry, 1996). Once again, the net effect of “punitive” interventions would be the opposite of what the teacher intended.

Recommendations

It is recommended that teachers strive for a reinforcement ratio of at least 3:1 (Shores, Gunter, & Jack, 1993; Sprick, 1981). Taking into account differences from one student to another, the teacher can experiment with the ratio to determine what level of positive statements seems to produce the best results. Some authors recommend that disruptive students should get more positive comments for their appropriate behavior than students who do not tend to be disruptive (Sprick, 1981). Nevertheless, it is strongly recommended that all students receive positive comments and that the class as a whole receive positive statements.

It should be noted that even teachers with excellent behavior management skills will have to make some negative or corrective comments because no group of students has been shown to exhibit appropriate behavior all of the time. In fact, research has demonstrated that use of teacher praise only, to the exclusion of negative statements, resulted in more disruptive behavior than a situation in which the reinforcement ratio was 3:1 (Pfiffner, Rosen, & O’Leary, 1985).

Although numerous recommendations could be made to improve one’s reinforcement ratio, three are discussed below. The first recommendation is that teachers assess their own reinforcement ratio using either of two methods. One method involves having another person monitor the content of teacher comments during a specified time period. Each comment would be categorized as positive, negative, or neutral and the reinforcement ratio would thus be determined. A less

disruptive method involves the teacher placing a tape recorder at her desk and recording the class for a specified time period (Hardman & Smith, 1999). Later, the teacher can evaluate the content of her own statements as she listens to the recording.

A second recommendation for improving reinforcement ratio is that, for every negative statement, the teacher should make at least three positive statements. Implementing this recommendation requires the teacher to mentally recognize each occasion in which s/he makes a negative statement, and attempt to state at least three positive comments before issuing another negative one. This strategy requires a heightened awareness of one’s own negative statements.

A final recommendation involves a teacher commitment to “catch students being good” (Brownell & Walther-Thomas, 2001). Maag (2001) suggested that teachers fail to reinforce positive behaviors because those behaviors are expected. Because of this expectation, a teacher of 20 students might attend to the 1 or 2 disruptive students, when there are 18 or 19 students behaving appropriately. Though the disruptive might seem more apparent, there are far more students who are on task and following classroom rules than are causing disruption. Though off-task and disruptive behaviors often seem to “demand” teacher attention, making the effort to acknowledge and praise appropriate student behaviors increases the probability that these positive behaviors will increase because students often find teacher attention to be reinforcing. Students might be motivated to decrease their inappropriate and disruptive behavior once they realize that teacher attention can be received for appropriate behavior.