Running Head: NONCOMPLIANT STUDENTS IN THE CLASSROOM

No One Is Learning the Teacher’s Lesson when the Disruptive Student is on Stage: A Policy Analysis

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Abstract

The disruptive student has an inordinate effect on the learning, not only of himself, but also of all the other students in the classroom. This student also has an effect on the quality of work life for the teacher. Every teacher encounters difficult students. They are not so much a policy issue themselves but a reality that generates a lot of policy from the classroom and school level all the way up to the federal level. There are two ends of the spectrum on how to deal with these students – the hard-core law and order view and the student-centered blame education view. It is unlikely that the polarized view of either camp has a comprehensive solution to this issue. After all, if it was easy, someone would have fixed it long ago. That is because teachers would pay nearly any price to know definitively what to do with these most frustrating of students.

One of the most important skills that new teachers must develop is classroom management, especially when dealing with a disruptive student. And even though this skill is critical to any learning occurring in a classroom, a quick sampling of the checksheets for education majors at Appalachian State University turns up not a single requirement that students examine this critical skill. The Reich College of Education’s core curriculum for high school candidates does not require any formal study of classroom management. One place a study of the management of a high school classroom is offered is in the Family and Consumer Science Department. The class is offered as part of a block where students select a certain number of hours from a list of courses. So it would seem many teaching candidates are going into the work force with a giant hole in their preparation.

This is not a good thing. Anyone who has faced a room full of students for the first time would welcome some research-based reinforcement for what to do with the student who has no idea how to properly behave. I encountered my first three difficult students on the first day of my teaching during first period. They were a trio of young African-American men who had no idea how to behave period – much less in a classroom. I talked to my mentor and other experienced teachers and struggled the whole semester with them. Most of my colleagues advised sending them to detention when they misbehaved. I tried that, but really it only provided a brief respite from their presence. It did not result in any long-term improvement in their behavior. What I wanted was a way to keep them in the classroom, so they could learn with the other students.

Some in education are studying the difficult student, and the findings are intriguing. In an article called “The Search for True Grit,” Susan Black examines literature looking at the difference between the students who can pay attention in class and finish homework and those who cannot. “In a 2003 study, Vanderbilt University’s Kathleen Lane found that teachers in all grades and subjects, with little exception, ranked cooperation and self-control as the top two social skills “critical for success” . Black’s examination turned up a researcher who has defined a quality called “grit.” Grit is a “fusion of passion and perseverance,” and is more a part of success than intelligence or talent. What some schools are doing is trying to teach the struggling learner how to have this grit.

Sandra Dunning, principal of Abraham Lincoln Elementary School in Lowell, Mass., says her teachers tried many things, including restraining kindergarten and first-grade children who threw chairs, shouted curses, punched, and kicked. Two years ago, Dunning removed a group of out-of-control 5- and 6-year-olds and placed them in a separate classroom staffed with a teacher, and aide, and a social worker. Dunning, who has continued this policy, says it’s important to preserve peace in regular classrooms and help disruptive children learn self-control, so they can rejoin their classmates .

My interest in studying the difficult student crystallized one day as I was walking past a neighboring teacher’s classroom. This woman is a good teacher who laughs and jokes and generally has a good relationship with her students, but her classroom is always noisy. I mentioned to her that she could tolerate a lot more noise and talk in the classroom than I could. Her response chilled me to my core. She said, “Really I can’t. It drives me crazy, but I don’t know what to do about it.” This woman is a 20-year veteran of education, and she is counting down the years until she can retire. I thought a lot about that phrase and how I don’t want to be one of those jaded or embittered people counting down to retirement. I tell my students that one of the things they will learn about me is that I don’t keep doing things that don’t work. So I set about to study the difficult student.

What does any educator who has practiced a few years know about the most difficult to manage students? They have many politically correct titles – the difficult student, noncompliant, insubordinate, nonconformist, the disruptive student, even kinesthetic learners. One teacher at my high school has been known to call these students “a waste of skin” and another “a waste of oxygen.” These are not professional attitudes, but given the impact that the difficult student can have on the atmosphere in a classroom every day, they are understandable.

What else do educators know about these students? Most often they are male; and most (but certainly not all) come from the lower social and economic status in society. Since there are common characteristics, then there must be ways to examine the academic life of these students using sound methods and come to some practical ideas of how to better serve them. After all, these are the students who stand to gain the most from education and who really *need* a teacher more than the stable, functioning student. A quick examination of the articles on any academic database shows that this is an issue on the minds of many educators. ERIC shows 3,004 articles for the search term “classroom management.” Academic Search Premier finds 2,597, and Academic OneFile turns up 2,835. For the term “disruptive students,” ERIC shows 285 results; Academic Search Premier 164 and Academic OneFile 134. So it is obvious that teachers, and many of them, are concerned about this issue, and that they need to be prepared to manage a classroom and the difficult student well from day one. This is critical because, unlike most professions, teaching is one that expects novices to perform solo from the first moment of their professional careers. There is no residency or internship. Teachers are just thrown into the mix.

What becomes apparent when dealing with disruptive students is that unless the teacher takes quick, decisive and authoritative action, it will be the difficult student who is in charge of the room every day. Teachers, administrations, school boards, and state departments of public instruction across the nation spend inordinate amounts of time preparing for and reacting to these students. There are plans, policies, laws and regulations that number in the hundreds for what to do with the student who won’t behave in the classroom.

The policy

The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction addresses student behavior on its website in several places. In general, DPI’s position is stated in the Safe and Drug Free Schools section and says, “A trend of decreasing, zero or near-zero incidence of school disruption, crime and violence, based on three or more years of date [sic] measures; as well as a trend of scientifically measured positive perceptions of the school as safe, orderly and caring by a representative sample of the major stakeholders in the school (e.g. students, staff, parents.)” .

DPI has endorsed a program called Positive Behavior Support. The vision of this policy is “All schools in North Carolina will implement Positive Behavior Support as an effective and proactive process for improving social competence and academic achievement for all students.” The goal of PBS is to make decisions at a school level based on research that are then continued or altered based on the school’s data; to clarify and communicate the expectations for behavior with school rules and improve consistency of enforcement; and to teach students social competency skills. The social skills include self-control, problem solving and anger management instruction for students who continue to struggle after PBS has been implemented . The website reports significant gains in academic performance in reading – a cornerstone of No Child Left Behind – at Bald Creek Elementary School in Yancey County. Scores in reading went up about four points the first year of the program’s full implementation and then rose again the next year. Beginning with 161 office referrals in the 2003-2004, referrals declined the next school year to 147 and to 64 the third year. The program depends on consistent school-wide implementation of rules and on “catching students being good.” It also works off of studies that show positive reinforcement is a powerful motivator and that quality-based rewards result in better performances on task. A negative relationship was shown with a tangible expected reward that was not linked to quality of work” .

The Literature

The responses to disruptive students and policies about them are polarized, to say the least. The law-and-order camp is best represented by an article in the Times Educational Supplement by Steve Devrell.

As I write this article, I am certain there is some ‘professional’, tenuously attached to education, who is thinking up some new syndrome to explain the disruptive behavior of a minority of pupils. It makes me laugh that whenever you offload your frustrations in the privacy of the staffroom, there is always some colleague who has read the latest claptrap from psychologists and has a title or some initialisation [sic] to explain away your frustrations.

He or she has ADHD or BBCD or SKYTVD or QWERTYUIOPASDFJKLD. Whatever the excuse, you are made to feel just a little guilty for not being more understanding. The fact that the little demon has been driving you mad all day and raised your blood pressure to the ozone layer somehow seems immaterial. What nonsense!

How ironic that most of the people who are making a nice little earner from championing the latest excuse for bad behavior, never actually teach. They arrive in schools with their clipboards, observe, offer some ‘bum fluff’ of an idea and disappear from the premises in a cloud of Ford Fiesta exhaust fumes” .

Devrell’s solution to those students who “simply get a great deal of enjoyment from disrupting classes” is to make parents pay a deposit against their child’s behavior. The deposit could then be fined for misbehavior. He suggests £25 for a detention, £100 for a suspension and £500 for a permanent exclusion. He further suggests that those who get their deposit back earn a £200 bonus. The way to pay for the bonus? He says the fines from the disruptive pupils will pay it. “Draconian maybe, but in the 34 years that I have been in schools, there has been a dramatic move from a respect for education to a disregard that, in certain individuals, makes the job of teaching almost impossible. At this rate, a further generation will see education in such chaos that it may never recover” (Devrell, 2006)

At the opposite end of this spectrum is the school-is-responsible camp. In an article on alternative schools for disruptive students, a warning is delivered about how the focus should be on schools versus individuals. The fix-the-student focus won’t work, the article says.

* A focus on fixing “problem” students may obscure or ignore school-based problems. Large classes or schools make it easier for marginal students to fall through the cracks and for their academic, behavioral and social needs to be overlooked. Children who repeatedly fail academically and socially are more apt to give up or become alienated and antisocial…
* Teachers may not have received training in behavior management and instructional strategies to help students with different learning needs…
* A focus on problem students may threaten system equity by segregating poor, disabled, and minority students in alternative programs. Preliminary studies in two states caution that alternative schools may become “dumping ground” for undesirable or unwanted students… (Gregg, 1999).

The article further goes on to examine the different focuses of alternative schools and whether they seek to educate, discipline or to heal the disruptive student. The article says punishment is the least effective method and often further alienates the student.

Somewhere in the middle is a more philosophical view. In an article titled, “Reflective Discipline” Leah Moorefield recounts how she uses a reflective space and writing activity to deal with disruptive students. She wanted a way to deal with disruptive students that did not completely derail her teaching. “Students disrupt class for a myriad of reasons, and few of them are immediately obvious. Children are often disruptive because they are hungry, tired, unhappy, sad or angry at a previous situation. They act out because they crave attention, feel left out or are bored” (Moorefield, 2005).

She said she had a student who began fighting, screaming and throwing things at the climax of an important lesson. The student ended up going to the office with a discipline referral. Later, the teacher found out the family had been evicted from their home, and the child had spent the night in a van. “After about a year of fighting with students, I found a couple of things to be true. First, rarely do classroom disruptions relate to the issue at hand. Second, a teacher cannot figure out and solve a conflict while teaching a class. Third, in-the-moment emotions distort true issues that arise with children” (Moorefield, 2005).

Outside of viewpoints, there are articles that deal with the nuts-and-bolts of teacher methods, reaction, seating arrangement and other physical and practice issues that affect student performance. These are the truly data-driven folks who are looking at what is happening and how it’s working.

A survey of the effectiveness of in- and out-of-school suspension showed a clear correlation between OSS and eventual drop-out. Suspension, it says, “has been linked to a variety of negative outcomes for students, including academic failure, negative school attitudes, grade retention, and increased school dropout rate” (Flanangain, 2007).

The article also says suspensions rarely make sense as a punishment for students because student behavior doesn’t generally improve after a suspension. Also, it is often used for a variety of nonserious offenses like disobedience and disrespect, attendance problems, and general disruption. “Despite the overwhelming popularity of in- and out-of-school suspensions among educators, there is little scientific research to show that zero-tolerance or other tough measures are effective in reducing student’s behavior problems or increasing school safety” (Flanangain, 2007).

This writer doesn’t suggest what a school or teacher is supposed to do with the seriously disruptive student instead of suspending him. He does suggest, perhaps, ISS is a better consequence than OSS. It also categorizes as minor problems some issues that most teachers find insulting, maddening and unacceptable like disrespect and disobedience. How is a classroom to function if students don’t have a consequence for being disobedient or disrespectful?

Another examination of disruption is a study from Australia of the literature on seating arrangement and classroom management. The article takes the position that prevention of problems is better than reaction to problems.

Arranging antecedent events to promote on-task behaviour [sic] is frequently less labour intensive for the teacher than managing a contingency arrangement; seating arrangements certainly deserve some attention from current educational researchers. From a behavioural analytic perspective, environment and behavior are not separable and must be considered as one unit…

There is no single classroom seating arrangement that promotes positive behavioural outcomes for all tasks, because the available research clearly indicates that the nature (i.e.; interactive versus independent) of the task should dictate the arrangement (Wannarka, 2008)

The article suggests that the most effective arrangement of seats for individual work and to see disruptive students is rows. Group tables or clusters of desks promote distraction in individual work. Group tables and clusters of desks are best for activities like brainstorming that require student interaction with peers (Wannarka, 2008).

What to do?

I propose that desk arrangement and ISS or OSS or all these other trappings are not the most effective way of dealing with disruptive students. The most effective way to deal with a disruptive student is with a well-trained teacher who is prepared to manage a classroom well. And the one place where all teacher candidates find themselves is in a college of education somewhere studying Brown vs. Board of Education, Piaget, Peterson and Introductory Psychology. I think it would be beneficial to educators, students and the profession as a whole for teaching candidates to be required study classroom management and the disruptive student. After all, the amount of time teachers spend discussing the difficult student in lounges, staffrooms, at the lunch table and after school, should be evidence enough that a formal study of classroom management techniques would be beneficial. But that anecdotal evidence is backed up in the literature. Classroom disruption and management issues contribute to lost instructional time in every school in the nation.

Surveys have shown that misbehavior usurps valuable classroom time and is a source of stress and distraction for teachers and administrators. In a survey of 805 members of the American Federation of Teachers union, 17% of the members reported that they lost 4 hr or more of teaching time each week because of disruptive students; 19% reported that they lost 2 or 3 hr each week. Furthermore, administrators can spend considerable time disciplining students and recording and reporting student misbehavior” (Finn, 2008).

Think about the additional instruction that could go on if teachers could reclaim that four hours. Think of the lesson planning, peer support, enrichment and other valuable activities teaches could engage in if they weren’t spending so much time trying to figure out what to do with that one maddening student.

Polls support the idea that teachers are not prepared to manage classrooms. “Discipline and behavior problems are driving teachers out of the profession, the Public Agenda poll reveals. More than one in three teachers said colleagues in their school had left because student discipline was such a challenge. Eighty-five percent of the teachers polled thought that new teachers are particularly unprepared to deal with behavior problems” (A Call to Order, 2008).

The logical place to find these new teachers and offer them instruction in managing classrooms is in college. This is when a detailed semester-long examination of the principles of managing students and classrooms would be easy to do. Teachers who are working, especially beginning ones, don’t need any extra work. They have enough with IEPs and 504s and ESL students and hall duty and athletic gates and faculty meetings and email and all the other hundreds of little things that make up a school day and don’t involve teaching anything.

One of the most powerful ways to influence colleges of education to include these courses in the required curriculum would be through beginning teacher networks. Appalachian State University has one. I know this because I get regular emails about it. The program is a valuable one, and perhaps through advocating to people who are concerned with new teachers and their performance in classrooms, a change is possible. New teachers could give reports of what they need in order to manage a classroom, and tell what difficulties were the most frustrating. These accounts, along with selected scholarly articles on the subject, could be presented to the beginning teacher support staff with the goal of having them help to lobby for a change in the curriculum.

This strategy would not be the first avenue to explore, however. I believe that change on the university level will be possible only if those who are in the trenches of education demonstrate a real need and demand it. The documentation of the need must begin at the school and then district level. Since DPI already has a data-driven program that it wants all schools to adopt, it makes sense to take the money and resources and use that program to attempt to improve classroom behavior and reach disruptive students. In this time of high-stakes testing, it is critical that teachers reach every student possible. Better training in classroom management and handling the disruptive student should improve academic performance, even if it is just because “good” students who will work will have more time to do so. Any principal who wants to improve test scores should be agreeable after a presentation on the data about how much time teachers are spending managing behavior – not covering content.

The following is a list of steps to begin advocating for better classroom management training for teacher candidates.

* Present research and data to West Caldwell Principal David Colwell.
* Implement PBS or some other specialized training on classroom management and behavior improvement at West Caldwell High School.
* Poll or survey new teachers in Caldwell County Schools on most important first-year issues and preparation for classroom management. Polls should be conducted periodically during the entire school year with a summative poll during the planning days after the last day of school.
* Collect and assemble data.
* Prepare presentation.
* Present presentation to Beginning Teacher staff at Caldwell County Schools. Ask for support in getting presentation before Caldwell County School Board.
* Present presentation to Caldwell County School Board and ask members to endorse effort to have classroom management and disruptive student training added to education curriculum at Appalachian State University.
* Contact Beginning Teacher’s Network at Appalachian State University. Give presentation and ask for support in effort to have classes added to curriculum in the Reich College of Education.

The Caldwell County Schools has a new teacher support program that includes fairly extensive training and then a three-year mentor program where new teachers are supported by an experienced teacher in their specialty. I participated in this program and found it very valuable. It gave me the feeling that the district would support me and gave me some valuable information about navigating the bureaucracy of the system. But one of the best resources the new teacher program gave me was a copy of Harry Wong’s The First Days of School. I used Wong’s ideas and principles when I started, and I believe without them, my first year would have been much worse. The first year is a struggle for any teacher. All the veterans admit it. My mentor said, “The first year, you’re in a fog. Something is always catching you by surprise. When you come back for the second year, the fog will have lifted.”

I found that was true, but how much easier my first year could have been if I had a few more tools in my bag on the nuts and bolts of running a classroom.

The first days of school can make or break you. Based on what a teacher does or does not do, a teacher will either have or not have an effective classroom for the rest of the year. What happens on the first days of school will be an accurate indicator of your success for the rest of the school year.

Douglas Brooks, in his article “The First Days of School,” discovered two things:

1. Very few teachers receive any instruction on what to do on the first day of school.
2. Very few teachers get any experience or training during student teaching on what to do on the first days of school. (Wong & Wong, 2001).

I read Wong cover to cover before I started school that first year, but even then I wasn’t as prepared as I could have been. I ignored one of his directives – the one that said to make direct eye contact with each student on the very first day. New teachers aren’t comfortable with that. It’s frightening enough to be responsible for the education of a room full of teenagers. Looking them in the eye? Who has the time or the nerve? I regretted that decision. Since then, I have made direct eye contact with each student in each class on the very first day. It is a powerful tool.

Teacher education rarely prepares the student teacher for noninstructional tasks. You will have lots of ideas for instructional tasks: bulletin boards, activities, projects, books and media. But you probably will have received no training in such noninstructional activities as how to maintain discipline, conduct a parent conference, keep a grade book, act and dress for success, teach procedures and routines, or deal with negative, nonsupportive, and energy-draining students and colleagues (Wong & Wong, 2001).

Wong started me down the path toward effective management. But I know there is so much more out there. His strategy of direct eye contact is just one of many great, quick and easy techniques for managing people. There are other powerful tools out there, and I believe colleges should be exposing teacher candidates to them well before they stand before a room full of students praying that they won’t succumb to a bout of intestinal panic. This kind of training can make the difference between simple survival to mastery. And teachers who have mastery can transform a classroom into a highly efficient, humming learning machine.

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