

# Classroom management: it's more than a bag of tricks

Written by Tracey Garrett, Ed.D

Cindy, a well-educated, highly qualified and recent college graduate pursuing a fourth-grade teaching position, offers a common response to the principal's interview question, "How do you plan to manage your classroom?" Cindy confidently responds, "I plan to develop a system where students will earn points for good behavior during the week and any student who earns a predetermined number of points will receive tickets to enter a raffle for prizes at the end of the week."

Like Cindy, thousands of graduates from teacher education programs across New Jersey excitedly prepare for the job search in hopes of landing a teaching position in this difficult job market. During these interviews, prospective teachers will undoubtedly be asked a question or two about classroom management. Many candidates will respond with answers similar to Cindy's and describe a plan to manage their classroom with an extrinsic reward-based system.

Unfortunately, Cindy's answer conveys a narrow, misguided view of classroom management. Her answer implies that she equates effective classroom management with bribing students to behave appropriately. But, don't students deserve to be held to a higher behavioral expectation than bribery? Her lack of understanding, however, about effective classroom management is not exclusively her fault. Her response is indicative of a larger problem - the lack of classroom management training included in teacher education programs.

Despite the importance of effective classroom management, the majority of teacher preparation programs (both traditional and alternate route) still do not require or even offer a course that focuses solely on classroom management. As a result, beginning teachers continuously cite classroom management as their number one concern. In fact, according to education professors and researchers Richard Ingersoll and Thomas Smith, 40 percent of beginning teachers leave the profession within the first five years and concerns about student discipline problems are second only to poor salary as the reasons cited for their dissatisfaction with teaching.

Due to the lack of preparation in this crucial area, preservice and novice teachers are quick to emulate their cooperating and mentor teachers' practices, many of whom also use extrinsic reward-based bribery systems. A common example is a system where students earn play money for exhibiting appropriate behavior (and possibly pay fines for misbehavior). Then, students have the opportunity to use the money at the school store to buy prizes. Although rewards can have a place in the classroom, they should not be the foundation of a teacher's classroom management plan (perhaps with the exception of special education settings). By replicating similar systems, teachers perpetuate this common misunderstanding of effective classroom management.

## Challenging misconceptions

If we want to challenge current practice and move away from management plans based on bribery, it is important for teachers to develop an understanding of what effective classroom management really entails. This is not possible until we confront two common misconceptions that hinder teachers' thinking.

The first misconception is the idea that classroom management can't be taught. Rather, it is something that you "just need to learn through experience." Interestingly, according to prominent teacher educator and

researcher Jere Brophy, classroom management can be counted among the major success stories of educational research in the 20th century. As a result, we now have a set of well-established research-based principles and strategies used by effective classroom managers that can be taught, observed, and emulated.

In addition, another common misconception is the belief that classroom management is no more than “a bag of tricks.” A quick search for the term “classroom management” on the rapidly growing online community Pinterest, a virtual pin-board style photo sharing social network site, provides evidence of this mentality. The majority of pins, as they are called on the site, are representative of the “cutesy” extrinsic reward-based systems. Although colorful, fun and sometimes helpful, these pins reinforce the “bag of tricks” mentality as well as the overuse of extrinsic reward-based systems. Once these misconceptions are challenged, teachers can develop an understanding of what is really involved in successful classroom management.

## **What is classroom management?**

If classroom management is not just a “bag of tricks,” what is it? Classroom management is a thoughtful and purposeful process consisting of actions teachers take to create an environment conducive to learning. These actions include:

1. Developing an organized physical layout of the classroom.
2. Developing clear rules and routines.
3. Establishing caring relationships with and among students.
4. Planning and implementing engaging instruction.
5. Addressing discipline issues.

I have provided specific ways to achieve each of these goals in the sidebar. It is important to note that there is research to support effective strategies and practices in each of these areas, which dispels the myth that effective classroom management cannot be taught.

Central to developing and implementing an effective classroom management plan is the understanding that the first four of these actions involve preventing behavior problems from occurring. The idea that prevention is key to classroom management is not new and was the result of classic research conducted by Jacob Kounin in 1970 and Emmer, Evertson and Anderson in 1980. Yet, it is fascinating that these classic, powerful research findings are still overshadowed by this misguided “bag of tricks” mentality. In actuality, if teachers are knowledgeable and develop a repertoire of research-based, effective strategies in each key area, they will prevent misbehavior and, ultimately, find little need to develop a “bag of tricks” or rely on extrinsic reward-based bribery systems to manage student behavior.

The bottom line is that effective classroom management is essential with respect to successful teaching. It sets the stage for learning. Without an orderly environment, classrooms are disorganized, chaotic and not conducive to learning. Therefore, it is imperative that educators combat this “bag of tricks” mentality and let go of the idea that classroom management cannot be taught. Only then can teachers challenge the use of extrinsic reward-based management systems, develop a substantive understanding of classroom management and create an effective management plan for their own classrooms.

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