Clear Rules and Expectations

Module 1

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During the science lesson Susie got up to sharpen her pencil. Before I could tell her to sit back down and raise her hand, Bill got up to fetch his textbook from the reading table. I called out to Bill to return to his seat, which he did only after claiming his book. I then turned my attention to Susie and asked her why she got up without asking. She replied that she thought it was okay since Alex got to sharpen his pencil without asking during transition. I then asked Bill why he got up without asking and he said it was okay because Susie got up without asking. Disappointed by their explanations, I asked the entire class if it was okay to break the class rules just because somebody else did. My inquiry went ignored until Susie raised her hand and asked, "What are the rules?"

Description of the Procedure

Every general and special educator shares a common goal of cultivating socially supportive learning environments. To accomplish this goal, teachers need to provide classrooms that promote the development of social skills and other strategies for problem solving, conflict resolution, maintaining friendships, facilitating cooperative learning, and building self-esteem. A classroom support structure devoted to cultivating socially responsible students focuses on promoting an accepting environment that supports the growth of social skills and addresses problem behaviors using positive behavior supports. The first step in this process involves establishing a rules-guided classroom where teachers regularly emphasize academic and social expectations (Meadan & Monda-Amaya, 2008).

Effective positive behavior management begins with clear rules and expectations. Expectations are the desire for appropriate behaviors while rules are the framework for achieving desired behavioral expectations. Positive expectation outcomes are achieved by teaching and reinforcing rules and routines aligned with school-wide expectations that identify and define acceptable classroom behaviors (Newcomer, 2009). Classroom rules serve to maintain order within the classroom by regulating student behavior (Thornberg, 2009). Clear and concise rules and expectations maximize attentiveness to instruction and on-task behavior while minimizing inappropriate student behavior (Boyle & Scanlon, 2010). Essentially, classroom rules are established to eliminate behaviors that are most likely to interfere with instruction or may cause harm to students and school property (Vaughn & Bos, 2009).

Maximizing instructional time by minimizing inappropriate behavior is the basis for adopting clear rules and expectations and requires an ongoing cooperative effort between students and their teacher. Teachers must discuss student expectations and classroom rules and routines—

both written and unwritten—from the very first day of school. Teachers should post the rules in a conspicuous location and ensure that all students understand their reasoning and meaning. Teachers must reiterate the rewards for following rules as well as actions to be taken for disobeying the rules. Just as importantly, classroom routines should be established that reflect the principles of the classroom rules and provide structure and organization to daily activities. Most of all, teachers must be willing to enforce classroom rules; otherwise, they are not effective (Boyle & Scanlon, 2010).

Research that Supports Rules and Expectations

Numerous studies show that students from classrooms with clear and concise rules and expectations perform classroom obligations and routines more smoothly and with fewer interruptions (Boyle & Scanlon, 2010). Well-articulated classroom rules and routines are a major influence on student expectations given that 20% of classroom time typically is spent in organizational matters such as attendance, passing out assignments, collecting homework, and transitions. Classroom efficiency begins with the enforcement of clearly established rules and routines which can cut organizational activity time in half (Major, 2008).

Classroom rules and expectations provide the foundation upon which to build an effective management system. These expectations are provided through the establishment of clear, explicit, and easily understood classroom rules within a learning environment that supports student adherence of the rules. A positive environment can be maintained by teacher acknowledgement of appropriate behaviors for students, encouraging student participation, providing frequent opportunities to respond, and restating periodically the importance of appropriate behavior (Allday, 2011).

Use of Rules and Expectations

Within every classroom, teachers wish to create structure and organization that maximizes student engagement while minimizing inappropriate behavior. A supportive classroom climate with high rates of student participation and an emphasis on positive behavior provides a strong basis for effective rule making, implementation, and enforcement. It is within this context that every teacher should establish a clear, concise, and understandable set of classroom rules that articulate teacher expectations and provide procedures for conducting classroom activities, obligations, and routines (Boyle & Scanlon, 2010). Students from classrooms that do not have clear, concise, and understandable rules and expectations typically display an increase in off-task and inappropriate behavior at the expense of instructional time (Allday, 2011; Boyle & Scanlon, 2010; Major, 2008; Miller, 2009).

Guidelines for Implementation

There are four basic tenets of rule creation as identified by Barbetta, Norona, and Bicard (2005):

1. Limit the number of rules to four or five positive statements that are measurable, observable, and objective, and include the students as active participants in the rule-making process.
2. Explicitly explain the reasoning for each rule and teach the rules until every student understands them.
3. Print the rules in bold, easy to read print, and post them in an obvious location and reiterate them to the class on a regular basis.
4. Rigidly enforce the rules with no exceptions.

By providing a sense of fairness and equity within the classroom, rules can be adopted and followed in good faith (Miller, 2009). Teachers also must be mindful of the focus for each rule (Vaughn & Bos, 2009). An evaluation of school and classroom rules reveals five distinct rule categories: (1) *rational rules* that regulate student behavior toward others (such as "show respect toward the teacher and your fellow classmates"), (2) *structural rules* that regulate classroom activities (such as "raise your hand before speaking"), (3) *protective rules* that concern the safety and health of students (such as "always walk and keep your hands to yourself"), (4) *personal rules* that require students to take responsibility for their own actions (such as "think before you act"), and (5) *etiquette rules* that regulate student behavior in social settings (such as "speak politely to all teachers, students, and visitors") (Thornberg, 2009).

Teachers should make every effort to involve students in the rule-making process. Teachers should stress that rules should be phrased as positive statements and not include the words "never", "don't", and "do not". With encouragement, students often offer rule suggestions that match the teacher's expectations. All rules should be measurable, objective, and observable. Teachers also should ensure the rules are few in number, brief and concise so that they are easy to understand, and easy to remember. Teachers also can use keywords to aid rule memorization (Barbetta et al., 2005; Vaughn & Bos, 2009). For example, consider the following rules:

1. Be prepared! Have your materials and assignments ready when the bell rings.
2. Act nicely! Be polite to your classmates, teachers, and visitors.
3. Follow directions! You will succeed if you slow down, listen, and pay attention.
4. Raise your hand! Ask permission first before you speak or leave your seat.
5. Clean up! It's your classroom. Keep it orderly, neat, and safe. (Moore, 2009)

When the classroom rules have been agreed upon, print and post them within view of all students (Vaughn & Bos, 2009). Teachers should model, role play, and provide examples of the expected appropriate behaviors (Meadan & Monda-Amaya, 2008). Teachers should consider a quiz or having the students write down the rules and have them send a copy home to their parents. Teachers should make a habit to reiterate the rules regularly and to involve students in regular rule-review meetings (Barbetta et al., 2005). Cultivating a classroom climate of teacher-pupil trust and academic success will improve compliance with classroom rules and expectations (Miller, 2009).

A contingency plan outlining critical classroom routines is as valuable as clear and concise classroom rules. Although these contingencies are not directly stated as part of the classroom

rules, teachers should have established contingency routines ready in advance to avoid potential problems. Possible scenarios and contingency recommendations include:

1. Teach the students that at the start of every class they should seat themselves in a prompt and orderly manner with all their materials ready for the first lesson.
2. Teach the students to quietly raise their hand every time they have a question.
3. Teach students to wait their turn to speak.

Obstacles to the Use of Rules and Expectations

It is impossible for all problematic behavior to be eliminated from the classroom. Students who fail to follow the rules may be doing so due to contributing factors, such as an acquisition deficit (not knowing how to appropriately follow the rules under adverse conditions), a performance deficit (not following the rules due to lack of desire to do so), a fluency deficit (not following the rules due to insufficient modeling or lack of examples), or a competing behavior (substituting a more convenient behavior instead of the appropriate behavior) (Meadan & Monda-Amaya, 2008). These students may require additional strategies to encourage rule compliance, such as activity or tangible reinforcers. Teachers, therefore, should establish ways to respond to these undesired behaviors instead of waiting to react to them. Well-constructed classroom rules help to reduce problematic behaviors by encouraging positive interactions, but formation of the rules is only the first step. In creating a positive classroom environment, rules must be presented clearly to students and regularly revisited (Gable, Hester, Rock, & Hughes, 2009). Often, teachers make the mistake of introducing rules on the first day of class and never revisiting them. Considering that teachers spend multiple sessions teaching their students basic reading, writing, and mathematics skills, limiting classroom rule instruction to only one brief session on the first day of school is a disservice not only to the students, but the teacher as well (Allday, 2011).

Research has shown that only through early exposure, regular reiteration, and rigid adherence to classroom rules will teacher expectations be met (Allday, 2011). For instance, in the example scenario if the teacher had reiterated the classroom rules briefly at the start of class the likelihood of Alex, Susie, and Bill all getting up without permission would have been diminished greatly. The teacher could have ameliorated this problem behavior using choral response following reiteration of each rule; providing examples of acceptable behaviors and role playing; and, when misbehaviors do occur, the teacher should state the rule that was broken and offer to the students a more appropriate response. Teachers also need to monitor the effectiveness and consistent enforcement of rules. In the example scenario, the teacher could occasionally film sessions for later review, have a coteacher or paraeducator maintain a record of rule enforcement, or have the students self-monitor their behavior (Yell, Meadows, Drasgow, & Shriner, 2009).

To avoid undesirable behaviors that lead to rule-breaking, teachers need to take proactive steps to eliminate influences that promote problem behaviors within their classrooms (Allday, 2011). For instance, teachers can arrange the classroom so that students are seated away from undesirable stimuli which may involve separating students who aversely interact with each other.

Teachers can also provide positive replacement behaviors in order to diminish undesirable behavior or offer rewards for adherence to the classroom rules.

In sum, few strategies have been as widely researched or proven as effective as clear rules and expectations. Teachers should ensure that rules are clear, concise, and few in number. Teachers should acknowledge student compliance with classroom rules and expectations and teachers should impose consequences for rule violations.

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