Classroom Management

Introduction

Without an effective classroom management plan; learning fails to exist among the students. Throughout my experiences from being a student and also a teacher, I have noticed that effectively utilizing classroom management strategies is mandatory to complete in order to successfully teach your students. Behaviorism is; “a school of thought established by John B. Watson, which dealt solely with observable behavioral acts that could be described in objective terms,” (Schultz & Schultz 2012). The main focus of behaviorism when implemented into teaching and instruction is managing the behaviors of students within the classroom environment to increase their maximum learning potential. The different theorists that stood by Behaviorism contributed a variety of elements that have impacted education today including; positive reinforcement and contingency plans.

Positive Reinforcement

Reinforcement, which can be implemented both positively (also known as behavior modification) and negatively, involves increasing a behavior by either adding something pleasant or eliminating something unpleasant. Positive reinforcement involves giving some sort of reward or preferred activity immediately after a student displays a desired behavior in order to maintain or promote that behavior in the future. In order for maximum learning to take place; behavioral systems including reinforcements must be implemented first hand. Within positive reinforcement, there are three types of reinforcers that can be used to enhance the process. Social, tangible, and activity reinforcers provide students with a “reward” for the desired actions that they have progressed toward (Duncan, Kemple, Smith, 2000).
**Social Reinforcers**

I have used social positive reinforcement quite frequently throughout both of my student teaching placements and in my current position as a teaching assistant of a self-contained classroom. I have used praise multiple times that seemed to work effectively with both general education and special education students. A simple; “good job” or a recognition for a student’s participation or hard work has shown me more benefits than can be imagined. I once had a very shy and timid young girl in my first grade general education placement and when I praised her on volunteering to help a friend or presenting something to the whole class, she beamed with joy. I noticed that this helped her come over her shyness the next few weeks and she had an increase in participation during lessons. Positively reinforcing her through praise right after displaying a positive behavior (participating in lessons) caused her to seek that positive reinforcement again, leading her to engage/participate in more lessons.

**Activity Reinforcers**

Activity reinforcers are usually the second most used form of positive reinforcement; they involve the teacher setting some sort of schedule that has an enjoyable activity as a result of students engaging in the desired behavior (Duncan, Kemple, Smith, 2000). Whether it is extra free-choice time, being able to have a class helper job, or working toward a celebration, this type of reinforcer guides students to success when implemented properly. I have used activity reinforcers throughout my student teaching with a first grade classroom. To combat my students’ chattiness during independent work time, I set up a positive reinforcement of extra free-choice time at the end of the day. My students would much rather have this time playing with manipulatives or playing classroom community games instead of what they usually do; reading
silently at their desks, so this was reinforcer was definitely motivating for them. Unfortunately we still had some days of noisiness during independent work time but these days was an opportunity for them to reflect and realize why they did not earn their positive reinforce at the end of the day.

It is also important for teachers to make sure to clearly communicate the specific desired behavior and the “activity” reward in order to remind students what they are working for; since activity reinforcers are not always necessarily immediate rewards. This is especially true for special education classes and with students diagnosed with autism. Repetition is key for students with autism; throughout my days as a teacher assistant I need to verbally state what the student is working for numerous times so that he/she knows that they will get it eventually after displaying the desired behavior. For example; one of my students dislikes Group Speech time and he will usually tantrum, scream, and engage in aggression. But it is helpful when he is reminded before Group Speech and most importantly throughout Group Speech, that he will earn music time if he listens and behaviors appropriately during the lesson. The times that he is constantly reminded of the desired activity reinforcer he will be earning after group speech (usually specific Youtube music videos) will cause him to stay motivated and display the desired positive behaviors during the lesson.

**Tangible Reinforcers**

Tangible reinforcers are what I work with the most in my current classroom. They are material or external rewards that can be in the form of candy, chips, sensory items, or stickers. The students that I currently work with; who are also my second student teaching placement students, are all diagnosed with autism. Reinforcements in the form of edibles are highly
motivating for students with autism; many of the students have a preferred candy or snack that they will work diligently and behave positively for. Research shows that positive reinforcement can increase working memory of students with autism; particularly in regards to counting (Baltruschat et al. 2010). It is amazing to me to see how tangible reinforcers can hold such an effect. In my current classroom we perform individualized discrete trial training for a thirty minute time block, two times a day. This is where a student and a staff member will sit down and they will work on basic receptive commands, motor imitation, or other tasks that are specifically designed for that student. Tangible reinforcers in the form of; chips, candy, and soda, are used doing this time to allow students to work towards a “treat” as they are sitting appropriately completing the discrete trials. Performing discrete trials with at least five children has shown me how the tangible reinforcers are a huge influence on the success for the students to master certain concepts and behave appropriately during the time.

**Contingency Plans**

An effective method to promote or maintain desired student behaviors is through the creation and implementation of contingency contacts. Contingency contracts puts both positive and negative reinforcement into action by creating an agreement between the teacher and student that specifies tasks and learning goals that are necessary to reach the expected outcome. Schunk (1990) reveals that when students are participating in their goal selection, students are more committed and motivated to accomplish their goals in a timely, productive manner. These goals need to be as specific as possible so that students are clear in what is expected from them and so they can accurately achieve them.
Contingency contracts can be implemented in an array of educational environments. Due to the flexibility and use of targeted behaviors, teachers can modify each contract in order to fit the needs of every learner. Students with disabilities often benefit from tailored behavior plans in which expectations and consequences are clearly identified (Schunk 1990). As well, learners that struggle with a specific problematic behavior can use these contracts as a tool to improve individual accountability and choice in behavior plans.

I have used two forms of contingency contracts throughout my experiences as a teacher and teaching assistant. During my first student teaching placement I had one male student who displayed defiant behavior and also displayed difficulty staying on-task during lessons and independent/group work time. He would disrupt the flow of lessons and distract other students from completing their work. I sat down with him and created a contingency contract plan to work on improving his behaviors and staying on task during instructional time. During the meeting we agreed to create a “Happy Face” scale and at the end of every school day we would meet to review the day and to select a face representing his behaviors for that day. We went over what each smiley face meant and agreed that the scale would also include a comment from me explaining the day; which his parents would be required to review and sign. After having two weeks of consistent “good” or “excellent” smiley faces, the student would be rewarded with extra recess time. Unfortunately it took a while for him to receive the extra recess time but by the end of the time spent with him, he truly had made progress. He no longer had loud outbursts in the middle of quiet work time or lessons and he even started producing much better completed work at a faster rate than before. If I were to implement this contingency contract again I might offer little rewards for maybe three consecutive “good” or “better” smiley faces so that he was getting reinforced while working for the larger more desired reinforcement. I think at some
points he realized that two weeks was too long a time to wait for that reinforcement and it discouraged him.

**Social Learning Theory and Active Engagement**

The social learning theory is “a theory that emphasizes learning through observation of others” (Woolfolk 2012). The social learning theory revolves around individuals learning from watching others and acting on what they have learned according to the consequences they saw. For example; a behavior a student witnesses can change their cognition for that future behavior, or the environment in which a student is raised in can affect that students future behaviors. A huge part of this theory is the observation of other individuals. Teacher modeling skills or strategies in lessons assists students in observational learning and exemplifies the basis for the social learning theory. Bandura’s “Bobo” doll experiment demonstrates this theory perfectly. When children viewed a tape of a model kicking and punching an inflatable doll; and saw either a punishment or a reward out of it. The ones who viewed the tape of the model getting punished were least aggressive with the “Bobo” doll when they were presented to play with it. On the contrary, the children who viewed the model getting rewarded were more aggressive with the “Bobo” doll.

I have definitely utilized and seen the Social Learning Theory work among the classrooms that I have student taught in. My students have modified or corrected their behaviors in order to gain some sort of reinforcement or reward. One of my particular students diagnosed with autism tends to have a difficult time staying on task throughout a lesson and may engage in crying, getting out of his seat, and aggressive behavior. During these times I reward the other children for displaying positive behavior and for paying attention with a highly valued reinforcer
that’s preferred by the non-engaged student (soda, chips, candy). By observing the others gain a reward for sitting in their seats makes him aware what is expected from him behaviorally in order to receive the reinforcement that he desires. Thus hopefully causing him to self-regulate his behavior in future lessons so that he as well may receive the positive reinforcement. This does not always work every time but there has been a slight decrease of this behavior over the course of the year. He tends to remain more on task and compliant then he did in the beginning of the year when I student taught.

Active engagement refers to the joint functioning of motivation, conceptual knowledge, cognitive strategies, and social interactions in literacy activities (Guthrie & Anderson, 1999). In order for active engagement to occur a pre-established classroom management routine needs to be in place. I have actively engaged my students in my first grade student teaching placement by increasing the number of positive interactions throughout the day. I have performed this under whole class settings, group settings, as well as individual instruction. To keep my students actively engaged I ensured to involve them in the learning process instead of simply lecturing or giving them the answers. For example in one of my lessons my first graders couldn’t answer a question about what personality traits a character had in a story that we read. Instead of simply just telling them what personality traits the character had and why, I reread some parts of the book and suggested to my students to look for clues based on what the character said or did in order to find the a solution. My students actually enjoyed this process and had a greater understanding of how to find evidence for personality traits then they would if I simply stated the answer to them. The students successfully continued on to the next part of the lesson where they had to independently read passages and state the personality traits for the given characters. By
keeping students actively engaged I was able to successfully keep them motivated and move through the zone of proximal development effectively through my scaffolding.

Classroom management strategies are truly detrimental to think about and establish prior to for any planning of learning to take place. Without knowing your students and how to manage their behaviors or help them regulate them, the cost of the classroom productivity can be in jeopardy. Classroom management will always be a skill that I will be working on to further develop and strengthen as I enter my future teaching since every class I have will be different from the last.

Standards

The first Marist Initial Teaching Standard I am addressing is **Standard 2.** One aspect of Standard 2 is the teacher understanding the different theories of learning. I addressed this aspect by being aware of Vygotsky’s theory of the zone of proximal development. By scaffolding my students in the character trait lesson, I was able to effectively keep them engaged and understand the concepts of the lesson.

Another aspect of **Standard 2** involves encouraging students to hold responsibility over their own learning. I addressed this aspect by incorporating positive reinforcement and the theory of observational learning which allowed my students to self-regulate their behaviors during lessons. Ultimately student learning increased since the positive behaviors that were reinforced in my instruction were staying seated and participating in lessons.

Another aspect of **Standard 2** involves recognizing how children learn and develop. Knowing my students is key and I believe throughout my implementation of positive reinforcement, contingency plans, observational learning, as well as active engagement, all meet
this aspect of the standard. Not every child is the same and each situation or behavior is contextual for that specific student. Knowing the reinforcers that work for certain students to stay on task is something that I learned over time and practice every day.

The second Marist Initial Teaching Standard I am addressing is **Standard 8**. Since there are a variety of skills that are important for students to develop within the classroom, including social skills, and self-regulatory skills, teachers must be aware to how they can strengthen them. One of the aspects involves the teacher being able to “use motivation theories and behavior management strategies and techniques.” This aspect definitely deals with the teacher having the ability to effectively motivate students and manage behaviors in order to prevent any disruptions during lessons and a flow to the learning. For example; I have used positive reinforcement quite frequently and the observational learning theory to motivate students to pay attention and correct their misbehaviors or maintain their positive ones.

The other aspect of **Standard 8** states the teacher being able to; “engages students in decision making.” Allowing students to play a role in their learning process will ultimately produce more engaged students and active learning. Within my lesson on character traits I refused to simply tell the answers but required students to utilize their higher order critical thinking skills in participating in the lesson to find the answer. This allowed the students to be actively engaged and feel a bit more responsible in their own learning.
References


