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Culturally Responsive Classroom Management: Going Beyond Behavioral Learning

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As I sit in the corner of Sasha's fifth-grade classroom, I observe the following private interaction at her desk as students watch the morning announcements:

Sasha: Curt, the substitute wrote me a note on Friday about you being disrespectful when I was out. Listen, I do care about you and I want people to think you're respectful.

Curt: Ugh (rolls his eyes).

Sasha: See, this is the behavior I'm talking about. When you roll your eyes, that is disrespectful. We need to work on this.

Sasha confidentially identifies unacceptable behavior, addresses it, and provides a supportive pathway forward for the student.

With her consent, I spent two months in Sasha's fifth-grade classroom, observing and interviewing her about her classroom management practices. Sasha, a White teacher in her early thirties, has been teaching at the same urban school for nine years. Eighty-five percent of her students receive free or reduced-price lunch. The majority of her students are Black and Latino, and about 25% of the student body are English Language Learners. I selected Sasha's classroom for observation because her principal identified her as having exceptional success working with students who exhibited challenging behavior.

Research shows us that students of color experience disproportionate exclusionary discipline practices. These include in- and out-of-school suspensions and expulsions. During the 2009-2010 academic year, The Children's Defense Fund (2011) found that although Black children make up 18% of the US public school population, they represent roughly 35% of children who received at least one out-of-school suspension and 39% of students expelled. In their large-scale study, Skiba, Michael, Nardo, and Peterson (2000) explored disciplinary records

of more than 11,000 students in 19 schools and found that Black students were subject to harsher disciplinary sanctions and receive a higher number of office referrals for more subjectively defined behaviors such as "disrespect" and "excessive noise." To reduce exclusionary discipline practices, which take away from important instructional time, it is helpful to consider the management practices of successful teachers who instruct children from various racial, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Evolving Views of Classroom Management

Over the years, the meaning of classroom management has evolved from behavioral interventions helping teachers "control" students' misbehavior "to serving as a more holistic descriptor of teachers' actions in orchestrating supportive learning environments and building community" (Evertson & Harris, 1999, p. 60). Despite the conceptual transition, classroom management continues to be a pressing issue among all teachers, particularly for novices (Melnick & Meister, 2008) and those who teach in urban schools (Howard, 2003). The ways in which educators define appropriate behavior is culturally influenced and when teachers and students come from different cultural backgrounds, issues of student behavior are likely to surface. For instance, many East Asian cultures view direct eye contact as disrespectful when speaking with someone of dominant status (Galanti, 2004). However in western cultures, avoiding eye contact can be perceived as suspicious. As our nation's children become increasingly diverse, culturally responsive classroom management (CRCM) addresses "the need for teachers to develop the knowledge, skills, and predispositions to teach children from diverse, racial, ethnic, language, and social class backgrounds" (Weinstein, Curran, & Tomlinson-Clarke, 2003, p. 56). Seeking to create classrooms where all students are motivated to learn in a safe and supportive environment, teachers who are culturally responsive consider students' backgrounds

in their responses to their students' behavior. These teachers do not aim to control students or instill fear. Rather, these teachers focus on the whole child, and create learning environments that nurture their academic *and* social wellbeing. After spending two months observing Sasha's teaching and interviewing her both formally and informally, I have identified five CRCM strategies she used to prepare students for success both in and out of the classroom.

Knowing Students By Looking Beneath the Surface

Knowing students seems obvious but the process of doing so can be a challenge when teachers are faced with the crush of the classroom and do not share the cultural background of their students. From the beginning of the year, Sasha dug beneath the surface getting to know students on a personal level. That is, for Sasha, getting to know students meant more than acquiring information about test scores or whether a student had been retained. The review of the curriculum file was replaced for in-depth understanding of students' personal narratives. By conducting individual student interviews, developing relationships with families, and observing students as they interacted with peers, Sasha learned about students' often impoverished living situations and their effects on students' lives, specific family struggles, students' strengths, how they learned best, and specific skills they needed to improve. Sasha shared that students' goals included demonstrating respect for their peers, improving organizational skills, developing more positive attitudes, and learning to work with others. Taking a genuine interest in students guided the ways in which she used this information to personalize her management strategies in the pursuit of improving the skills they needed to be successful in life.

Consistent Reminders

Expectations were established at the beginning of the year and continually reinforced with reminders throughout the year. Sasha stated:

> I'm constantly reminding them of the expectations or if we go to the carpet or if we line up. It doesn't matter if we've done it fifty million times, just a reminder when we go over to the carpet I expect that you're doing this or that, or when we go to the library or whatever it is… even if they've heard it a million times.

Deep knowledge of her students led Sasha to use both subtle and direct reminders to help students participate more effectively. When some students would get off-task during instruction, Sasha used what she referred to as her "subtle stare" and this would serve as a gentle reminder to students that they needed to stay focused. While the subtle stare served as an effective reminder for many, some did not respond to this effort. By tapping one side of her temples with two fingers, this signaled to a particular student that he needed to focus without stopping classroom instruction. Aware that this student thrived on individual attention, her special hand code was a secret, and a personal reminder that only the two of them shared which made him feel special.

However, other students responded better to direct reminders which kept the instructional pace moving. One student who needed to work on making thoughtful contributions instead of off-topic comments, responded better to explicit conversations: "Do you think this relates to what we're talking about? Does it add to the conversation?," she asked. As the student shook his head she explained,

> Okay, I need to you to think about that before you want to share because if it's not going to help us any then I'm glad you made your connection but we don't want to waste time; we need to move on.

Understanding this learner as she did, Sasha acknowledged his contribution but kept the focus of instruction on group learning and the students' personal goals.

Co-Creating Individualized Action Plans

Each student had an individualized set of skills to improve and Sasha supported and pushed students to accomplish their goals through action plans. Students identified personal

learning goals for themselves and action plans for reaching these goals. Meeting with each

student individually at least once a quarter, Sasha discussed their progress and steps they would

need to take to continue striving toward their goals. Curt's plan included working on being more

respectful to his peers and adults. His individualized plan entailed minimizing eye rolling when

another person is speaking, not putting his head down during instruction, and not stealing from

others. For the student who needed to improve his often negative attitude, Sasha gave a daily

morning pep talk and hug to help combat pessimistic thinking and setting a positive tone. Here,

Sasha shared a student's plan to improve the legibility of her handwriting and how she planned

to support the student in that goal:

> I've been talking to Michelle about her handwriting since the beginning of school; I've
> sent home handwriting sheets for her to improve her handwriting. I've had her take
> ownership of the things that she wants to improve upon and I have it taped up in front of
> my computer. It's Michelle's handwriting, her telling me she needs to work on her
> handwriting.

These individualized plans were not dictated by Sasha but generated by the students.

Action plans involved shared decision-making and in this way, she supported students to take

responsibility of their learning. Sasha insisted on co-creating individualized action plans with

students because she believed that skills such as organization, respect, and having a positive

attitude were crucial in the classroom and as future successful adults in society. The plans were

not a top-down approach from the teacher but instead, a co-identified and a co-constructed plan

of teacher and student working together.

Using Humor

Humor has been used by teachers to mitigate power differentials that exist between them

and their students (Bowers & Flinders, 1990). While teacher humor is not a new strategy, Sasha

used humor to effectively respond to off-task behavior. She often engaged in playful bantering

and joked with students to help redirect them to the task at hand. Examples of her humor are

evidenced in the following examples:

> (Two students are giggling and not completing an assigned task.)
> Sasha: (Smiling) Do you want me to come over and shake the giggles out?

> (Student appears to be reading but the book is upside down and closed on his lap.)
> Sasha: Are you reading? Hmm… that's an interesting way to read over there with your
> book closed and upside down. Get to work.

These admonishments using humor and appropriate banter were proactive, non-punitive ways

that Sasha deflected inappropriate behavior to assist students in appropriate classroom

participation. It is important to keep in mind that she was able to joke with students because of

the respectful and caring relationship she cultivated at the beginning of the year; a relationship

that her students tacitly understood and embraced. Indeed, her students perceived that she had

their best interests at heart and her humor further built a strong connection between them.

Communicating in Culturally Relevant Ways

Sasha understood that not all students were alike and was sensitive to the ways she spoke

to them. She conveyed that some students responded well when she was "stern" while others

would "crawl into [their] shell" if she spoke to them in a stern manner. She explained that, "some

students respond well when you're like, 'Let's go; I'm going to be tough on you. You better get

this,'" while other students "respond better to positive reinforcement like, 'Excellent; I love what

you're doing.'" The relationships Sasha fostered with students and their families prompted her to

communicate with them in culturally responsive ways.

For example, observing how one student's mother spoke with her son about football as

his extracurricular activity cued her to use this kind of language in her dialogue with him:

> Like … playing football is a privilege and it's something that comes secondary to your
> work in school. Proving yourself in school allows you that privilege to be able to go and

play football and have that fun. So it's things like that that I've heard his mother say to him, so I'm just supporting that in the classroom and … if that works that's what we're going to run with.

For another student who was content with doing the minimum to earn average grades, she responded with direct language to insist that average was unacceptable:

I want you to excel; I want you to be the best that you can possibly be, I want you to do your very best all the time. And I know for a fact that your grandparents feel the same way. They do not look at you and say 'Oh, he's just an average boy.' They see you like I see you. Nobody here thinks you're average. You need to prove to us that we're all right.

By developing a relationship with this student's grandparents who were his guardians and incorporating explicit language in her communication with him, she insisted that the student envision himself as a stellar student. If he was going to be the successful adult Sasha and his grandparents knew he had the capacity to be, Sasha believed it was her duty to demand that he do his absolute best. A single approach in communicating with students would be ineffective and thus, she responded to them in culturally familiar ways.

Conclusion

Certainly, this article does not convey that these practices are the only practices for enacting CRCM. In fact, researchers suggest that the first step is to examine one's ethnocentrism and biases to develop an awareness of one's racial identity and cultural norms often viewed as normal (Weinstein et al., 2003). Are certain students consistently sent to the office and why? What does the media tell us about African American males? How do we respond to the implicit bias that all of us have, including teachers? Sasha's story reveals that educators are capable of knowing students well and caring for them despite coming from dissimilar backgrounds but this does not happen without diligence. Sasha was able to recognize the individual needs of her students and understood that a one-sized-fits-all approach to classroom management would be

futile given their various backgrounds and personal goals. Culturally responsive classroom management practices, such as those enacted my Sasha, may serve as a viable way to counter disturbing trends for students of color and of low-income backgrounds in school discipline.

Word count: 2,266 (without references); 2,448 (with references)

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