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Classroom Management to Support Emerging Adolescents in Active Middle School Classrooms

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Abstract

Adolescents learn best through active engagement with ideas, the environment, and other learners. Teachers of adolescent students use multiple learning and teaching approaches that respond to student diversity. Middle level classrooms are complex, and dynamic, environments where individuals, and small groups of students, simultaneously engage in a wide variety of tasks. This article presents a discussion of connections between middle level concepts of teaching and learning and managing a classroom through creating opportunities for active and engaged learning. The article argues and concludes that classroom management is more about managing learning than managing behavior and that one effective way to manage student behavior is to create an environment where students continuously engage in active learning.

Keywords: Classroom Management, Middle School Classrooms, Emerging Adolescents, active learning, Structure Class Time

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Introduction

Classrooms within higher performing middle schools are well-managed learning environments (Wilcox & Angelis, 2007). One of the most effective ways to manage student behavior is to create an environment where students continuously engage in active learning (Haydon, Borders, Embury, & Clarke, 2009). Classroom management is more about managing learning than managing behavior. Successful middle level teachers develop rituals and routines to manage students and to guide both behavior and academics (Wilcox & Angelis, 2007). When the best classroom management rituals and routines are applied consistently across content areas, teaching strategies and learning activities, learning is optimized (Wilcox & Angelis, 2007). The strategies presented herein are designed to strengthen classroom management by increasing engaged learning in middle level classroom.

Structure Class Time to Manage Behaviors and Optimize learning

Frequently, middle school teachers use ineffective patterns of structuring class time (Palumbo & Sanacore, 2007). A common pattern is to divide the class into two segments. During the first segment, the teacher presents content, assigns readings, or provides directions. During the second segment, the students work to complete assigned tasks. When this pattern is used students often complete the day's assignments prior to the end of the class period. When students finish their learning tasks before the class time has expired, learning opportunities are lost.

An effective pattern of structuring class time to optimize learning throughout the class period is to break instruction into smaller teaching and activity sets and to intersperse each teaching and activity set with application problems and/or higher order thinking and reflective questions (Haydon, Borders, Embury, & Clarke, 2009). Using this approach the teacher is able to better engage all students bell-to-bell lessening the potential for wasted class time.

An example of how this works is to directly teach a new concept for ten minutes followed by ten minutes of individual or small group work. While students are still engaged in individual work, transition back to a whole-group focus to pose a higher order thinking question to be answered by all students. The question should be structured to engage each and every student. Questions should allow students opportunities to connect what they are learning to real life (National Middle School Association, 2010, p.21) and to help students to answer questions they have about themselves, the content and the real world (National Middle School Association, 2010, p. 22). If students are working on a wide variety of topics and tasks, an example of an appropriate higher order thinking prompt would be: Reflect on the learning you have done over the last ten minutes: What is one idea which you believe is important enough to share with all of your peers? Why is it important? After posing the question, and allowing appropriate wait time, ask each student to write a response.

If a question is important enough to pose to the entire class, it is critical that all students not only have opportunity to respond to the question but that all students are held accountable for providing a response. Student responses to carefully planned thinking questions form the basis for formative assessments that promote quality learning and provide continuous, authentic, and appropriate evidence about every student's learning progress (National Middle School Association, 2010, p. 24). Through such carefully constructed questions, as the one described above, students can strengthen both thinking and writing skills.

Even when questions are presented in such a way that all students can respond it is important for the teacher to provide scaffolding (Holton & Clark, 2006) for those who need extra support so all students experience some level of success in responding to all posed questions. Once students have written a response to the question, ask them to share with an assigned partner. Sharing with a partner is an opportunity for important peer interactions. This structures an avenue for young adolescents to form positive and healthy relationships with their peers (National Middle School Association, 2010, p. 61). This also assures that all students have the opportunity and support necessary to formulate an answer.

After students have shared with a partner, the teacher calls on students who are randomly picked to share their responses with the entire class. To keep students engaged, it is important that students know that there is always a chance that they will be called upon. The teacher can call on students at random knowing that all will have a response ready because they have all been provided time and support in writing a response and all have validated their thinking by sharing with a peer. After consideration of the higher order thinking question, students return to their individual or small-group work. This pattern is repeated multiple times over a class period.

The time for independent or group tasks should always be short enough that students do not feel that they are done with their work for more than a very short time period. When you follow this pattern of instruction, no student is ever finished with their work for the day much before the end of the

class period. This may seem at odds with developmental characteristics of adolescents including their wide range of intellectual development (National Middle School Association, 2010, p. 56). Indeed, students will vary widely in the complexity, quality, and quantity of work they complete in a given time frame. The idea presented here is not that students will reach the same or even similar points in their learning in the same amount of time. The idea is that by structuring the class as described all students will have a greater likelihood of being engaged throughout the entire class period. If there are still times when students perceive that they are finished, this period of time will be shortened as the teacher moves back from individual work to a whole-class focus.

Utilize Student Self-Reflection

At least one time during each class period, require the students to self-reflect on the quality of their work. In addition to providing formative assessment for the teacher, self-reflection provides self-awareness of students' efforts and helps them to associate their learning efforts with the evaluation and grades they will ultimately receive for their work (Maday, 2008). The importance of self-assessment and self-reflection is discussed in This We Believe as follows:

In developmentally responsive middle schools, assessment procedures also reflect the unique characteristics of young adolescents. Assessments should emphasize individual progress rather than comparison with other students and should not rely on extrinsic motivation. The goal is to help students discover and understand their own strengths, weaknesses, interests, and aptitudes. Student self-assessment helps develop a fair and realistic self-concept. p. 26

An example of an appropriate self-reflection prompt is: Think about your learning today and, using a scale from one through ten with ten being the best, rate the quality of your work. Then, in a well developed paragraph explain why you chose the rating/number you selected. Additionally you can prompt: describe something you did and/or learned well today and describe something that still poses a challenge for you.

Use Advance Organizers to Structure Class Involvement

A strong method to facilitate structuring class time as described above is to use an advance organizer to provide structure for the entire class period (see Figure 1). It structures the acquisition of new knowledge, skills, and dispositions taught directly by the teacher, as well as higher order thinking, and self-reflection. The advance organizer provides a roadmap for students to follow from the introduction of the lesson through the conclusion. When students know where they are and where they are going in the lesson, they are less likely to mentally stray, and more likely to stay engaged. The advance organizer can be as simple as a table that provides information, writing prompts, and blank space where students write their responses.

The first box in an advance organizer might have a paragraph or an outline of a mini-lesson delivered as whole-group instruction. The following box might have a prompt asking the students to list three important ideas they have discovered about the problem they are currently working to solve. The boxes can even allocate time so that the students are aware that initially they will have, for example, fifteen minutes to work on their individual projects before they will be directed back to a whole-group focus. The third box might have a higher order thinking question or prompt: and the fourth a prompt for self-assessment and self-reflection. Following self-reflection, the pattern can be repeated with another box and prompt to list, for example, three things the student is still working to discover during the next fifteen minutes of class time, followed again with a higher order thinking prompt.

The advance organizers should be collected at the end of each class period. It is important for the teacher to provide meaningful feedback and return the graded organizer at the beginning of the very next class. This reinforces the importance of the tasks associated with the organizer and provides individualized feedback and direction. Prompt, meaningful feedback lets students know that their work is important. When students realize class work is important they are more engaged.

Figure 1. A strong method to facilitate structuring class time

Theme: What is So Special about being an American?							
Mini-Lesson Rights and Responsibilities		Native	Naturalized	Resident Alien	Illegal Alien	5 Minutes: Plan Your Learning	
Right to vote							List three learning goals you want to accomplish today.
Right to hold all elective offices including the presidency							1.
Right to the benefits of public policy (e.g., welfare, education, public services)							2.
Right to the protection of the U.S. government							3.
Responsibility to demonstrate loyalty to the U.S. government							
15 Minutes: Work in Groups	Describe one idea you encountered during this time which is important enough to share with your peers; why is it important?				15 Minutes: Work in Groups	Describe One idea you encountered during this time which you want to learn more about; why do you want to learn more?	
Using a scale of 1 though 10, with ten being awesome and 1 being lame, rate your progress toward meeting your learning goals: explain how you came up with the number you selected:							

Teach Important Content Each Day

To maximize engaged learning, teachers should teach important new content at some point in the class period every day. The new content can be part of a carefully crafted scope and sequence or it can stem from questions identified through individual or small-group investigations from the previous day. A frequent criticism of thematic curriculum is that necessary content might be overlooked as students explore individualized problems. Making certain to teach new content each day, even if it is a mini-lesson embedded within an integrated thematic activity, can alleviate trepidation for parents, administrators and even students who are very focused on high-stakes tests. If students know that each day new ideas for which they will be held accountable will be introduced, many will be more engaged.

Make Learning Accessible to All Students

Teaching diverse learners requires presentation of new knowledge, skills, and dispositions in ways that make the learning accessible to all. Students for whom new learning is not accessible can become frustrated or bored and create a classroom management challenge. Making learning accessible

to all learners can be construed as teaching within each student's zone of proximal development (Borthick, Jones, & Wakai, 2003), accommodating diverse learners (Burke, Hagan, & Grossen, 1998), providing scaffolding for all learners (Holton & Clarke, 2006), or as creating multiple paths of learning (Nichols, 2010). New and challenging content presented in ways that make the learning accessible to all learners will interest and motivate learners (Kraft, 2010).

Use Class Time Efficiently

Students tend to extend learning tasks to meet the time allotted. For example, if allowed fifteen minutes to write a paragraph, the results often will be very similar as if the students were allowed fifty minutes. This in no way suggests that teachers should not allow extended time for complex tasks; rather it is mentioned to reinforce the importance of using instructional time effectively.

Allow a reasonable time for completion of a task, and then carefully monitor student progress. As students complete the task before the time is up reengage the students. One strategy is to check on the work of students who finish early. If their work is done well you can ask them to assist other students. If their work should be improved you can give feedback and specific redirection.

Conclusions

Over time, when teachers consistently shift the class back-and-forth between teacher-directed whole-group activity, and individual and small-group work, and structure both higher order thinking and self-reflection students become accustomed to this pattern. Student engagement increases and there is more learning. Another benefit of this strategy is that through the guided reflection process the teacher is better able, day-to-day, to monitor and assess the level of learning and engagement when individuals and small groups are working on extended projects and problems.

When middle level classrooms are structured to manage behavior and optimize learning, all students will achieve at high levels. When students are provided opportunities to respond to higher order thinking and application questions which extend new ideas, and when students are provided structured interactions with peers to help concretize new understandings, new content will be learned well. As stated in the beginning of this piece, these strategies are designed for teachers to improve classroom management. As management improves, student learning increases because teacher success is positively associated with classroom management (Palumbo & Sanacore, 2007). As with anything new in the classroom, immediate results may not be seen—especially if it is midyear and students have already had some success in challenging the teacher's authority. If the teacher exercises patience and uses management strategies consistently, over time both classroom management and student achievement will improve.

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