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ABSTRACT

This study examined teachers' use of the judicious discipline (JD) model in their classrooms. Participants were three elementary, middle, and high school teachers who completed a pre- and post-teacher variance instrument about classroom disruptions. The instrument presented two classroom incidents and asked them to explain student behavior and rate likely interventions. Each teacher agreed to a protocol of classroom activities to implement JD in their classroom. Classroom observations were conducted when students were engaged in a classroom meeting. Results indicated that all teachers modeled JD and were open to student ideas. There was evidence of a positive classroom environment. However, there were distinct changes in teachers' attitudes toward a set of varied classroom issues over time. The secondary school teachers' attitudes moved from a behavioral to a more biophysical and ecological approach. By the end of the year, these two teachers had very positive experiences. The elementary teacher did not have the same experience and felt her teaching had not been as successful as that of the other teachers. Though her philosophy was similar to theirs, she was not able to put it into practice. (Contains 28 references.) (SM)

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Implementing Judicious Discipline: The Story of Three Teachers

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Introduction

This is an exploratory study to examine effective teachers and their use of Judicious Discipline (JD) model in their classrooms. The results of this study will help establish a research base about effective practices for JD

Background

For many pre-kindergarten through grade 12 teachers, most studies of effective first year teachers have found that classroom management skills are of primary importance in determining their success as teachers (Brophy & Evertson, 1976). Successful and effective classroom management practices respond to problems when they occur and to preventing problems before they occur (Emmer, Evertson, Clements & Worsham,1997). A key variable in the prevention of any classroom management problems is the establishment of positive student-teacher and peer relationships in the classroom (Jones & Jones, 2001).

The most successful classroom management practices are those that go beyond strict obedience to include student self-understanding and self-control (McCaslin & Good, 1992). Yet, many classroom management and discipline strategies currently used in American schools are based on behavior modification philosophies (Hill, 1990). In such cases, students may feel powerless to control their lives. Such a powerless attitude may make students at-risk for school failure. As Sarason (1990) suggests,

> ...the sense of powerlessness [that students must feel] frequently breeds reduced interest and motivation, at best a kind of passionless conformity and at worst a rejection of learning. When one has no stake in the way things are, when one's need or opinions are provided no forum, when one sees oneself as the object of unilateral actions, it takes no particular wisdom to suggest that one would rather be elsewhere. (p. 83)

The United States lives under a democratic rule of law and some people believe our children should have the opportunity to practice and use democratic principles in our schools. Most educators agree that our youth need to learn to be responsible citizens. Still, researchers have found that most American schools do not provide students with opportunities to engage activities that allow them to practice and internalize behaviors consistent with citizenship and civility (Goodlad, 1984; Sizer, 1984; Boyer, 1983; Lipsitz, 1984). There are a small number of classroom management programs that encourage students to become responsible for their own actions (Fay & Funk, 1995; Gossen, 1997; Nelson, 1996; Curwin & Mendler, 1988). But, there are few models of classroom management that specifically encourage students to feel a "proprietary interest in school and classroom rules" (Gathercoal, 1997) and that encourage students to "construct their own moral meaning" (Kohn, 1996). In fact there is only one

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classroom management program that is based on the Constitution of the United States – Judicious Discipline (Gathercoal, 1997).

Because Judicious Discipline (JD) is a relatively new program there has been little research completed to support the claims of the program (McEwan, 1990; Gathercoal & Nimmo, 1996; McEwan, Gathercoal, & Nimmo,1999; Landau & Gathercoal, 2000; Ackley & Campbell, 2000). Because of the small research base and with the encouragement of the program's originator, Dr. Forrest Gathercoal, I examined how three effective practitioners have implemented JD in their classrooms. Each of these three teachers has volunteered to participate in this study.

Method

I have secured the cooperation of three teachers: one elementary, one middle school, and one high school teacher. Each of the three teachers completed a pre and post teacher variance instrument about classroom disruptions (Winchell, K.A., Hyman, I.A., Scirica, S.M., Cozzi, S.R. & Mihalich, D.M., 1998). Each teacher also agreed to follow a mutually agreed upon protocol of classroom activities to implement JD in their respective classrooms. I personally visited and observed two of the three classrooms at a time when the students were engaged in a classroom meeting.

Instrument

The teacher variance inventory instrument developed by Winchell, K.A., Hyman, I.A., Scirica, S.M., Cozzi, S.R. & Mihalich, D.M. (1998) presents the teacher with two different classroom incidents. In the first incident, the teacher respondent chooses a best choice from among the choices of reasons that would explain the cause of five different incidents of students' misbehavior. The second section of the instrument asks the teacher to rate a list of five likely interventions to the student misbehavior described in the first section and then choose the best intervention in both an "actual" classroom situation and in an "ideal" classroom. The teacher responses are then scored on a continuum with a behavioral response on one end and an ecological/systems response at the other end point. Between those two poles lie a interpersonal, humanistic, and biophysical responses Hyman, I.H., Dahbany, A., Blum, M., Weiler, E., Brooks-Klein, V. & Pokalo, M. (1997).

The three subject teachers in this study completed the teacher variance instrument twice, once in the Fall near the beginning of school and once in the Spring near the end of the school year.

Findings

My observations in the teachers' classrooms were inconclusive. Each of the teachers modeled how a teacher using JD might function. All the teachers were

open to student ideas and suggestions. I found evidence of a positive classroom climate in each classroom.

However, in comparing pre and post responses on the teacher variance instrument (Hyman et. al., 1997), I did find some quite noticeable changes in the teachers' attitudes towards a set of varied classroom issues. Both the middle and high school teachers had a marked change in attitudes toward these incidents. They moved from a behavioral posture to a more biophysical and ecological approaches. By the end of the year when many teachers are having discipline issues, these two teachers had very positive experiences. When asked, both teachers confirmed that they felt they had completed a very successful year of teaching.

The elementary teacher in the study did not have this same experience. In her opinion, her teaching year had not been as successful as the other two teachers characterized their experiences. However, it is interesting to note that her "ideal classroom" choices on the instrument were in line with the other two teachers but in her classroom for this particular year she felt that she was not able to put her philosophical beliefs into practice.

Conclusion

Teachers who use JD in their classrooms find that their classroom practice is based on a reciprocal relationship with their students. When students fulfill the expectations of the teacher, the teacher is more likely to implement biophysical and ecological approaches to discipline situations. These approaches are inherent in a JD model. When students do not fulfill teacher expectations, teachers are less likely to use biophysical and ecological approaches even though they may hold such beliefs philosophically.

It is interesting to note that the results of this small study find partial support from a much larger study of middle school students and their teachers (Ryan & Patrick, 2001). In that study, middle school students who perceived their teacher as caring and supportive had a positive correlation with students' "confidence related to the teacher, self-regulated learning, and disruptive behavior" (p. 454).

Might this be just one side of a two-sided coin? The results of this small study suggest that when students have a teacher who treats them in primarily an ecological or biophysical approach, the students are far more likely to attend to classroom activities and spend less time in disruptive activities. The first move is with the teacher. Yet the teacher usually waits to see if the class meets her expectations before she will respond in a more biophysical or ecological approach to classroom disruptions.

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