Individual Plan

The focus of my project was developing a more effective style of classroom management that allows for individual needs as well as general class progress through research, observation of successful teachers, and implementation of identified strategies.

Introduction

As I began my first year of teaching at Wakefield High School in Arlington, VA, I was confident and excited. I had completed my student teaching successfully in an Arlington County school and had excelled; I had even managed to find strategies to address students who were disruptive and lacked motivation. I had gone on to a long-term substitute position in the same school where I had complete autonomy for an entire quarter and, once again, met with great success and found fulfillment in teaching. My students at Wakefield come from more diverse backgrounds than those at Yorktown, but I felt ready and able to live up to all expectations in my first year. I found instead that by the end of the first quarter I was frustrated, depressed, and was questioning my decision to become a teacher.

Wakefield High School is one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse in the state: 37% of the students are Hispanic, 33% are African American, 18% are white, and 12% are Asian, there is one American Indian. Many of our students speak English as a second language. My class roster includes four twelfth grade English and one eleventh grade English class. All of my classes are “regular” as opposed to Advanced Placement or Gifted and Talented, so my students represent the population of the school as a whole. I have several students who are identified as having learning disabilities and many more who speak a language other than English at home. I feel that all of these diverse students can be successful in school, but I did not consider the impact of cultural and socioeconomic diversity on the motivation levels and behavior in the regular English classroom. I was unprepared for dedicating so much of my time to chronic classroom management problems.

In retrospect, I began the year in a way that led students to believe that my class was going to be “easy” and thus set the stage for many of the problems that I have encountered. My policies and rules were constantly changing and this showed the kids that I could be manipulated and coerced into what Robert Mackenzie calls a “classroom dance.” My twelfth grade students brought to my classes a plethora of issues that I was unprepared to deal with. Having spent much time thinking about the problems that I am still having with classroom management, I believe that the majority of issues that I am struggling with could
have been averted if I had dealt with them in a forthright manner early in the year. Every day that I have spent in the classroom has afforded me with many opportunities to learn about classroom management and to devise a plan for improvement. I found that there is an abundance of information on this subject, much of which is contradictory. As a result, my project involved many experiments, and I have by no means found the elusive answer. I have, however, come up with a list of practices that worked for me and have developed a list of ideas to implement from the first day of school next year so that many problems can be averted.

Goals

The goals of my project included identifying characteristics of a successful classroom and effective teachers through research and observation and then implementing these successful practices in my own classroom. By identifying the specific problems in my classes and trying to eliminate them, I hoped to develop an environment that is respectful, conducive to learning, and beneficial to all students.

Classroom management is a vast subject that could potentially include hundreds of factors. For the purposes of this project, I narrowed my research to three broad categories with several specific areas to investigate:

1. Presentation and Delivery
   a. preparation of lesson
   b. time spent lecturing versus student activity
   c. tone, volume, manner of addressing students, body language,

2) Organization of classroom
   a. seating arrangement
   b. handling of classroom business
   c. communication of assignments and grading

3) Discipline
   a. effective practices
   b. when, where, what, how

As my research progressed and I gathered more information, I tried many approaches and have found some that work for me, but I have found that many behaviors and habits are in place by the second half of the year and it is difficult, if not impossible, to change them at that point in the year. I decided that a good strategy would be to develop a list of suggestions for setting up classroom procedures for next year, as many classroom management problems can be avoided entirely if procedures are clearly outlined from the beginning. My classes have improved somewhat and I feel more competent, but I believe that the success of my project will be more clearly seen next year.
Methods

My methods for collecting data included several things: research of literature, observations of experienced teachers, reflection and analysis of my own teaching, informal interviews with students, attending professional development lectures and finally, implementation of successful practices. Some methods of data collection were more valuable than others, but all were beneficial in some way.

I began by reading several books about classroom management and attempting to identify the problem areas in my classroom. I compiled a list of questions about my classes based on information in *Discipline in the Secondary Classroom* by Randall S. Sprick and *In a Place Called School* by John Goodlad to help identify some of the problems in my classes (Appendix A). I also found many suggestions for setting up classroom practices and for observing teaching methods. The book that I found most helpful, however, was *Setting Limits in the Classroom: How to Move Beyond the Classroom Dance of Discipline* by Robert J. Mackenzie. This book is simply written and discusses discipline in practical, understandable terms. I accumulated many ideas for classroom management from which I was able to choose the techniques that seemed the best for me and test them in my classroom.

Throughout the project, I kept a narrative journal to record the happenings in my classes. This journal became very useful as I discovered that many of the problems that were persistent could be traced back to me rather than to the students. As Sprick commented, any behavior that is repeated is being somehow reinforced. This was disturbing to me because I did not understand how I was reinforcing bad behavior when I thought I was discouraging it. I reviewed the written evaluations of my principal’s observations of my classes in search of areas to work on. As I continued collecting this data, I found an observation form and spent several days observing recommended teachers at my school to see how they handled similar problems. The observations focused on the number of students off-task, teacher reactions, and activities. I also noted the general tone of instructor, observable rules, particular behavior problems, and classroom organization. The observations were less helpful than I expected as every teacher had such a different style, yet they all seemed successful. I observed very few students who were off-task and few teacher errors in correcting these students (by praising bad behavior or reprimanding good behavior). As my research progressed, the success of different approaches began to make more sense as I realized that there is not one answer that works: much of the behavior in the classroom is dictated by the personalities involved as much as by the procedures. I attended a lecture by Dr. Sheila Mingo in February that reinforced this belief. I have included some of the material that Dr. Mingo shared that I found useful.

I conducted informal interviews with several students and found that their perceptions are in agreement with the experts. When asked what the most
effective way a teacher can address them to get results, they indicated that they liked one-on-one conferencing, to be spoken to like people, and they liked teachers who appear to like teaching and who seem genuine. The least effective ways of communicating included embarrassment in front of class, lecturing, yelling (provides short-term results), talking "down" to them, or showing distrust of students. Students also indicated that they liked hands on activities and a mixture of lecture and activity. For punishments, students said that the most effective methods include grade penalties, calling parents, going to office, and being sure to follow through. Detention was ranked as least effective. Classes that students enjoy have teachers who relate to kids and are straightforward, have logical consequences, use humor, use of different media, and hands-on, fun activities. Students say that the subject doesn't matter, if they like the teacher, they will like the class.

I was finding an abundance of information, but I was still unsure of the best practices for me. At this point in my project I felt that I needed to reflect more on my own teaching and classes. Some of the chronic problems in my classes included: off-task behavior (sleeping, talking out of turn, and writing letters); lack of academic motivation (including attendance problems, incomplete assignments, failure); and disruptive behavior (yelling, belching, cursing, touching other students, leaving seats). I was also able to identify my areas of weakness in handling these situations. I felt as though I could improve by being more organized in planning and delivery, more consistent in handling discipline, and more positive and unemotional in interactions with students.

Strategies and Findings

In discussing the strategies that I identified as successful and implemented, I will utilize the research categories that I identified earlier in the paper. I found some strategies for each area of investigation, some more successful than others. I tried several techniques that were unsuccessful including homework sheets, goal setting for the entire class, exclusion of unprepared students, and homework detention.

Presentation and Delivery

A. In the area of preparation, I feel as though I have improved drastically. Instead of trying to plan on a daily basis, I have begun making a weekly schedule that includes all assignments. This schedule, I post on the outside of my door so that students can check it at any time. Additionally, I write a daily plan on the board. This clarity in presenting assignments has made me more comfortable in many ways: I no longer worry that students weren’t told about assignments, I spend less time planning, I can spend less time trying to draw students’ attention to the board where assignments are written or to explain assignments in a lengthy manner because they are posted for all to see. Preparing on a weekly rather than daily basis also helped establish routines that students can follow: vocabulary is always due on the first meeting of the week, quiz on the second meeting. Having this structure has made me more comfortable and confident as it tends to shift the responsibility to the students and away from me. A structured
environment has helped some students, but those who are chronically absent or uncar ing about their grades showed little improvement.

B. I felt the burden of trying to make my students successful academically, and so I found myself doing all of the work: instead of giving students activities to help them find answers, I was preparing lessons where I gave the answers and explained them. I needed to find a balance between lecturing and student activity. Madsen says that the most successful classrooms seem to be those in which teachers “succeed in creating commonly shared goals and individuals cooperate in ensuring each person’s success in achieving them”(10). I felt that in my classes there was very little cooperation; the goals were mine, not the students’ and there was very little success. The lack of student participation in class activities had been noted by an observing administrator. It had further been suggested that I try to make my teaching style more student-centered so that the students would be more actively engaged in lessons. Of the most common classroom activities, I found that I was relying heavily on the ones that are passive for the student, specifically: lecture, practice and performance, and written work. I made a conscientious effort to include more practices such as simulation/ role-playing, discussion, group work, and performances in which the students were actively engaged. I still need to find more ways to express my enthusiasm for the subject by incorporating interesting props and visuals that highlight objectives and capture the students’ interest. Some of these practices were successful, others were not. For example, my twelfth grade students were studying poetry and were disinterested and lethargic. I assigned them a project in which they had to choose a poet to study, conduct research, and put on a presentation with a partner. Students were required to conduct discussions with other students and as a culminating activity, put on a multimedia presentation to teach the class about their favorite poet. The project was a success in that the students were more interested in studying a poet of their choice (some of them chose to examine the lyrics of songs), but I felt as though many of the students wasted most of the time given to them to work in class. Students were still unprepared when they came to class even when they had a partner that was dependent.

C. The most difficult area for me to address was that of teacher student interaction (tone, volume, manner of addressing students, body language). All research in this area endorses the idea of positive reinforcement for students and stresses the importance of teacher reactions to student problems. The area of teacher-student interaction is particularly difficult to evaluate because there is often only your perception of your behavior, but it is necessary to examine interactions in order to determine what behaviors are being negatively or positively reinforced. My reflective journal was helpful in this respect as was the utilization of video and tape recording classes. I also asked my teacher mentor to observe a class in which there were on-going discipline problems. Teacher-student interaction for me was directly related to discipline because many of the interactions that I was having dealt with behavioral issues about which I will go into more detail when discussing discipline. Basically, the most important aspect of addressing students is maintaining equilibrium and control, and I was lacking
in this because I was losing my temper due to student misbehavior. I had to make a conscientious effort to focus on positive reinforcement rather than negative. I found this aspect of classroom management very difficult because I was so annoyed by the disruptive behavior that was rampant in my classes. I attempted to recognize the students who were behaving, and I feel that I made some progress but much work is still needed in this area.

Organization of Classroom

A. Seating Arrangement is not something that I have found a satisfactory answer to. I have an extremely large room and have not yet found an arrangement that I am completely happy with. For some activities I like to have everyone close together; at other times I prefer for everyone to spread out to work. Similarly, I have some classes that work very well in groups, and some that cannot focus if collaborating. The only decisions that I have made in this area is that I think that it is better to change seating arrangements at least once each period (giving students a chance to move), I prefer for all students to be fairly close to me to ensure participation, and I will always assign seats. My options for seating will be limited next year because I will be moving to a much smaller classroom, so I don’t anticipate the same kinds of problems as I am having this year.

B. The handling of classroom business such as attendance and conferencing with students individually, needs to be taken care of as quickly as possible while students are busy working. Always have bell work so attendance can be taken care of efficiently, always have papers and supplies ready before class starts, allow for time during every class to speak to students individually if needed, and delegate responsibility. Let students be helpers (this can be a reward for good behavior and also is good positive reinforcement).

C. The communication of assignments I have addressed in discussing preparation. I feel that assignments should be posted where students can see them at any time, plans should be written daily on the board or overhead and the relative weight of assignments known. It is very important to maintain consistency in grading and to make sure that students understand the objectives and relative weight of assignments. An effective grading system should be clearly related to class objectives, the objectives themselves be understood, and a percentage of the grade should be based on daily participation and effort (Sprick 13-18). Many students in my classes who were not extremely motivated would complete small assignments but not the large ones because they didn’t understand the difference in grading. A point system is the best way for students to quickly and accurately understand the importance of assignments. A point system also allows more flexibility in getting students to complete work for limited points. An additional benefit to this type of grade system is in the relative ease with which students can keep track of their averages with a point sheet that they can fill in. I did not feel that it was wise to change my grading system in the middle of the year, but I will put a point system into practice for next year. Next year I also plan to utilize an electronic grade book that will facilitate conferencing
and allow me to print progress reports at any time. These programs are available on the computers at school and will be made available to me next year.

**Discipline**

I felt that I would have a very difficult time implementing many of the ideas that I was finding because discipline had become such an all-encompassing problem in some of my classes; it was increasingly difficult to think about anything else. I thought about some ways that discipline could be handled and made a list of consequences and mentally decided what behaviors merited what consequences. Just picturing in my head how I wanted my students to act during specific activities helped me to see what some of the problems were in my classes. For example, I had been giving a weekly vocabulary quiz since the beginning of the year. The students in my twelfth grade classes had gradually begun talking more and more during the quiz; I had failed to correct students for speaking out on several occasions, and the behavior had escalated. I had to decide on an appropriate consequence and then enforce it. For example, when would a verbal reprimand be more appropriate than isolation or ignoring? I attempted different strategies that I identified through my research with varying success. I found that I was unable to ignore misbehavior as recommended by one expert (to remove the negative reinforcement). It seemed as though many of my students wanted to see how much they would get away with, so ignoring was tantamount to waving a red flag.

Keeping a reflective journal helped me realize that although I thought I was being very strict, in reality I was not giving clear messages or following through with consequences. Instead I was giving repeated warnings, becoming angry and yelling or getting drawn into a debate with students. As a result, I was losing my temper and feeling guilty and angry while students continued to misbehave with no consequences. I felt that I needed to initially deal with overt behaviors only and prioritize (not try to change everything at once), and to begin giving tangible rewards for good behavior (try to catch them being good). I found many good ideas for setting up a plan to make the necessary changes in Robert Mackenzie’s book.

Foremost, I needed to first begin to send clear verbal messages. I was currently giving multiple warnings without consequences, ignoring misbehavior, bargaining and negotiating rules, arguing, pleading, bribing, giving unclear directions, and ineffectively role-modeling good behavior by losing my temper. I was guilty of many behaviors that led to confusion and students acting out with no consequences. I needed to begin to change these behaviors by first clarifying my expectations by setting firm limits, stopping the power struggles, providing encouragement, and providing logical consequences for misbehavior.

To eliminate power struggles, I would first give a clear message with a choice. I found that I was very unclear about how I wanted students to behave. For example, a chronic problem in one class was talking during quizzes. An example of a normal exchange went like this: “B.J., stop talking or you will get a zero.” The student would stop talking for a short period, then inevitably start again. “B.J., didn’t I tell you to stop talking?” Once again, there would be a brief
period of silence, then more talking. At this point, I would lose my temper and yell. Meanwhile, B.J would have finished his quiz (I never followed through with the threat of a zero) and would be very pleased with himself for having made class more interesting, made me angry, and gotten a lot of attention.

In order to stop this interaction, Mackenzie recommends first giving a clear message with a choice. For example: “B.J. would you like to finish your quiz without talking or do you want a zero?” If it doesn’t appear that the student has heard the instruction, check in: “B.J., what are your two choices?” If student begins to argue, coerce, or blame, cut off the discussion by simply and calmly saying, “I will not debate the rules with you.” If either of us is feeling angry, use a cool-down period to regain composure: “B.J., you appear to be angry with me; why don’t you sit in the back for a few minutes until we can speak normally.” This was quite an effective strategy. Until I began researching, I didn’t realize how much time I spent debating classroom policies with the students. Simply becoming aware of what I was doing was helpful, and almost everyone was benefiting: students who were misbehaving were at last seeing some consequences, and students who were behaving all along were happy that I wasn’t angered by the bad kids. I also benefited by clarifying my expectations in that I wasn’t losing my temper, feeling as frustrated, or feeling taken advantage of.

Another area that I had to focus on was encouraging good behavior. This was extremely difficult for me as I had been so focused for so long on the bad behavior, it was hard to change my focus and recognize the good. I made an effort to show appreciation for the students who were doing what they were supposed to be doing rather than becoming angry at those who weren’t. On several occasions I took kids who were prepared for class to one side of the room for group discussions while unprepared students had to do individual assignments. I began choosing students of the month, and also allowed students with high participation grades to choose music to play during work times. Giving choices is important in classroom management; students had to be given the choice to do the right thing rather than being told that they must, and then thanked for doing the right thing. It is also important that students understand that their actions are noticed and have an effect on their grade.

Following a suggestion by Sprick, I have devised a system for keeping a daily participation grade for students. Keeping an accurate record requires a little practice, but I have found it to be very beneficial. I post the grades every two weeks (after all classes have met five times) and record a grade in my grade book. Students are always welcome to look at their grades during class. I have found participation grades to be very helpful on occasion: as a student misbehaves, I simply make a show of recording their misbehavior and often, this is enough to stop the misbehavior. I have found that students respond well to points and tangible benefits.

Another area of discipline that must be thought about before the school year begins is in making logical consequences for behavior. Being sure that consequences are logical is important because the student can see and understand the repercussions for their actions. This is an area that I had already
spent some time thinking about, as mentioned earlier, but putting it into practice was new. Consequences must be given in a normal voice, be simple (such as separation from peers or activity), applied directly after infraction, and used as often as needed. Some of these things would simply require practice and self-control, but I did have to begin instigating some new consequences. For example, in my more disruptive classes, students would often swear and get reprimanded by me. I began, instead of using a verbal reprimand, having them sit in a “time out” area in the back of the room. All the students loved this idea, and I found that I didn’t even need to go out of my way to enforce this consequence after the first couple of times; the students would do it themselves. I have to admit that I had doubts about using a time out area in a twelfth grade classroom, but it has been extremely effective, especially given the fact that I have an extremely large room with many potential time out areas. Many of the students recognized the appropriate nature of this punishment: it was consistent with the juvenile nature of their actions.

The next step in handling discipline is in maintaining consistency; I would need to continue with the practices outlined above and add measures to keep the problems from happening again. I would need to role-model corrective behavior, give students the opportunity to try again the right way, provide limited choices, and instigate a two-stage time out (inside the room and outside the room). These practices should help students begin to make the right choices about how to act. When these activities begin to pay off, I can add limited choices and then add natural consequences. I never got to the point where the behaviors were under control enough to allow for natural consequences, but I have seen significant improvement and I feel that these practices will be more effective if instigated at the beginning of the year.

Conclusion

Many of the areas that I have worked on have been difficult to maintain. As the end of the year draws near, it seems as though there is little purpose for corrective behavior and a greater emphasis on prevention. I have become much more adept at controlling my interactions with students. There have, of course, been exceptions but overall I have improved my tone, and increased positive interactions.

I have found that classroom management is a very individualized concern: every teacher may have different expectations for behavior. The only universal is that to be effective at classroom management, a teacher must be willing to hold a microscope to themselves and be willing to accept constructive criticism. The first step in effective classroom management lies in clarifying to yourself and to your students what your expectations are for behavior and academics. Secondly, an effective teacher must be willing to reflect honestly on their practices (what really happens, not what you want to happen), and lastly, an effective teacher must not be afraid to implement new methods. I hope that the list of recommendations (Appendix B) for next year will be helpful to other new teachers.
Appendix A

1. Are rules and consequences clearly identified?
2. Is there consistency in consequences?
3. Are students treated with respect?
4. Are punishments implemented unemotionally and in private?
5. Are students encouraged to set goals?
6. Is positive feedback provided and highly contingent on student behavior?
7. Are students informed of how well they met expectations after each activity?
8. How is work assigned and collected?
9. What is the grading system?
10. Are course objectives clearly defined?
11. Is a percentage of grade based on participation and effort?
12. Is there a monitoring system that gives students immediate and continual feedback?
13. Are students encouraged to keep track of their own grades?
14. Do students understand the relative weight of assignments?
15. How do I respond to students (including spoken or written words, physical expression that are facial or bodily, closeness and touching, activities, rewards)?
Appendix B

I. Presentation and Delivery
   A. Preparation of Lesson
      1. Make a weekly schedule and post it
      2. Put daily schedule / objectives on the board
      3. Establish a routine that allows for a variety of activities
      4. Make sure expectations / objectives are clear
      5. Don’t lower standards
      6. Recognize when a student is doing something right
   B. Lecture versus Activity
      1. Keep lecture brief; always include visual
      2. Give students note sheets to fill in
      3. Give students structured activities
      4. Let kids figure things out themselves
   C. Interactions with students
      1. Maintain a calm, steady voice
      2. Never debate the rules
      3. Address the positive actions of students
      4. Try to have 3 positive interactions for every 1 negative
      5. Keep reprimands unemotional and based on behavior

II. Organization
   A. Seating
      1. Arrange desks so all are clearly in view (no hiding)
      2. Make sure people can move easily
      3. Assign seats first day Classroom Management Strategies for 1999-2000
      4. Display student work and pictures of students
   B. Handling of Classroom Business
      1. Always collect / check homework immediately
      2. Use bell activities to allow for role etc.
      3. Delegate responsibility to students (make this a reward for good behavior)
      4. Have all papers etc. ready before class begins
      5. Don’t let individual distract the class: allow for mini-conferences

III. Discipline
   A. Rules
      1. Post on the first day
      2. State positively
      3. Non-negotiable
      4. Don’t allow infractions even once (especially in the beginning)
B. Consequences
   1. Give limited choices
   2. Make consequences logical
   3. Have a time out plan and area
   4. Always follow through with consequences
   5. Plan for misbehavior; know what you will do just in case

C. Prevention
   1. Recognize and reward good behavior (students of month, teacher helper)
   2. Give a participation grade
   3. Use preferred activities as an incentive (educational games, movie, free time)
   4. Use a tape or video recorder to evaluate your responses to students
   5. Have an experienced teacher or administrator observe and make recommendations