

1

Introduction and Overview

At McDougle Middle School, eighth grade students were sprawled out in clusters on the tile floor watching small windup toys wobble in forward movement alongside the length of a yardstick. High-volume chatter and relaxed laughter rose above the scene. The young teacher perched on her knees beside a group of students on the far side of the room.

Closer observation revealed that the students in Ms. Berge's class were conducting lab experiments to determine the negative acceleration rate of moving objects. The data that they collected and recorded were used for complex physics calculations, quite impressive mental activity for thirteen-year-olds! Thus began my quest to discover the procedures and secrets of teachers in adolescent classrooms who are recognized as outstanding classroom managers. Motivating this initiative was the key question, How do the best teachers of adolescents manage the physical, affective, and intellectual dimensions of classroom life in order for young adolescents to learn and develop socially, intellectually, and personally? The fourteen case studies that shape this book are the product of that year-long inquiry.

The purpose of this book is twofold. It first showcases classroom management strategies that work well for a group of exemplary teachers in Grades 5 through 9. More broadly, the book's purpose is to stimulate discussion about why these effectual approaches are developmentally appropriate for young adolescents, ages ten to fifteen. It is written for preservice and practicing teachers and other educators who are interested in learning about middle level teachers who manage the physical, social-emotional, and academic dimensions of the classroom environment to facilitate learning and responsible behavior.

DEFINING CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

Because the term *classroom management* once conjured up images of teacher dominance and student acquiescence, it is important to clarify the way in which the concept is viewed in these case studies. Classroom management in the book's context includes three interrelated dimensions of the learning environment.

1. The first component is the physical, or the teacher's use of time, space, and structural environment.
2. The second is the affective element, or those strategies used to promote positive personal and interpersonal development.
3. A third dimension of classroom management is the cognitive element, or the teacher's use of intellectual engagement to motivate students' appropriate behavioral management and commitment to learning.

Classroom management thus embraces all that middle level teachers do to organize space, time, resources, and instructional experiences in support of learning.

The close association of classroom management and effective teaching is supported in the current literature (Emmer, Evertson, & Worsham, 2003; Good & Brophy, 2003; Marzano, 2003). Successful teachers are those who

- Intentionally and proactively organize the classroom environment;
- Communicate and maintain high expectations for behavior, social interaction, movement, and intellectual engagement;
- Seek to build positive relationships with students; and
- Promote student self-management.

They further have the wherewithal to observe and address potential problems with tact, fairness, and objectivity, a skill coined in earlier decades as *withitness* (Kounin, 1970).

This view of classroom management reflects a paradigm shift from a model of teacher control and student compliance to the creation of a learning community that promotes relationship, belonging, and achievement (Curwin & Mendler, 1988; Deci & Ryan, 1998; Wong & Wong, 1998). Within this learning environment, the teacher's expectations related to personal behavior management and academic engagement are clear, communicated, and consistently maintained. Integral also are the elements of order, safety, and discipline.

THE DEVELOPMENTAL PARADOX OF YOUNG ADOLESCENCE

Classroom management in the middle grades (5 through 9) must take into consideration the unique developmental nature of students whose bodies and minds are undergoing remarkable changes (Beamon, 1997, 2001). Shifts in metabolism can render young adolescents listless or trigger squirming behavior,

and often their physical endurance decreases. Rapid growth may cause their bones and joints literally to hurt (Van Hoose, Strahan, & L'Esperance, 2001). Highly desired social relationships can be charted on an erratic graph of joy and disappointment as friendship groups shape and reconfigure. As young adolescents' bodies begin to develop, they often puzzle over new feelings and sensations, and their interest in the opposite sex can simultaneously excite and bewilder. Emerging intellectual abilities also carry the capacity for abstract thinking and reasoning, yet these cognitive changes are accompanied by a complicating capacity for worry and self-consciousness.

These paradoxical developmental changes have considerable implication for classroom management at the middle level. Unlike younger students who need closer supervision and guidance or older students who are more independent and self-directed, young adolescents thrive in a learning environment that is typified simultaneously by structure and freedom. They need to be able to move physically and to talk and interact socially, yet they also must know that their behaviors and attitudes can help or impede classroom learning. They need routines, procedures, and expectations in order to learn to work collaboratively and productively. While young adolescents need academic challenge for cognitive growth, they also need support to make new learning connections and to acquire personal learning strategies. Effective classroom management at this level is thus characterized by an intentional regard for young adolescents' unique physical, social, personal, and intellectual needs.

The teachers in the following chapters appear to understand young adolescents' unique developmental needs and manage their classrooms responsively. Their instruction is intellectually engaging, socially interactive, and physically active. They allow their students choices, options, and multiple ways to approach and demonstrate learning. They provide support but continually focus on engendering efficacious responsibility for appropriate behavior and academic commitment. They create supportive, expectant, and challenging classrooms where young adolescents learn to think critically and ethically, and to respect and care about each other.

THE TEACHERS AND THEIR SCHOOLS

The fifteen teachers were selected for the case studies by criteria related to the physical, affective, and cognitive dimensions of classroom management. These factors included minimal observed or reported student behavior problems; maximum use of class time for academic study; high level of engagement of students in learning experiences; and elements of organization, safety, and respect with the classroom environment. The teachers were further recognized by administrators and colleagues for the ability to facilitate a learning environment that is responsive to young adolescent development.

The teachers represent six schools in four districts in the central Piedmont region of North Carolina. A discussion of the schools' demographics, philosophical context, and leadership style follows in Chapter 8. Collectively, the classrooms span Grades 5 through 9 and comprise a variety of content areas, which include traditional core subjects (science, social studies, language

4 MANAGING THE ADOLESCENT CLASSROOM

arts/literature, and mathematics) and the electives of art, health, physical education, and life skills (see Resource C for teacher profiles). The teachers differ in gender, race, licensure areas, level and kind of educational degrees, and years of experience, and their students include a wide range of academic levels and behavioral needs.

It is important to note that many of the teachers chosen for this study have certification and teaching experience that extend from young adolescence through upper secondary school, so while the focus of this book is on classroom management for students in the developmental hinge years of Grades 5 to 9, the management models and practices that these teachers present have applicability for upper high school students as well.

It is also important to note that the participants in Grades 6 through 8, who teach the core subject areas of language arts, social studies, mathematics, and science, are members of interdisciplinary teams. The benefit of middle level teams in promoting supportive communities for young adolescent learning and personal development is widely recognized in the literature (Jackson & Davis, 2000; Stevenson, 1998; Van Hoose et al., 2001). By promoting interpersonal connections, increasing opportunities for academic success, and enabling a more cohesive context for common goals and expectations, team organization is recognized as a conducive structure for effective classroom management (Stevenson, 1998, pp. 218–19). Although the case studies predominantly focus on individual classroom management experiences, one titled “It Takes Two” in Chapter 7 showcases the collaborative benefits of a two-teacher seventh grade interdisciplinary team.

SHAPING THEIR STORIES

For two semesters, in early morning or later in the day between our classes, Emily Dreyer, my student research assistant, and I visited the teachers’ classrooms. Our purpose was to learn all we could about their classroom management approaches. Onsite, Emily and I scripted copious notes related to the physical, affective, and cognitive dimensions of classroom life. We documented the teachers’ instructional presentation and interpersonal interactions with their students, and snapped numerous photos of the physical outlay of their classrooms. Follow-up included informal conversations with the teachers and their principals, colleagues, and students, e-mails, formal questionnaires, and interviews with the teachers to verify our findings. Each teacher also shared pertinent materials and kept a running journal of strategies they found to be workable.

Initially, Emily and I were struck by the variations in the way each teacher uniquely coordinated the physical environment, interacted with students, and conducted instruction. A multifaceted color-coded organizational system in one classroom, for example, contrasted sharply with the cluttered room and free-flowing interaction in another. Other differences from one teacher to another included tolerance for noise level, the structural layout of the classroom, and the daily procedures related to movement and instruction.

As our observations and contact continued, however, Emily and I were able to discern patterns or themes that appeared to cut across grade levels or content areas. Each theme is noticeable to some degree in all of the teachers' classroom management approaches, but each pattern is more characteristically dominant in fewer. The arrangement of the fourteen case studies into titled chapters purposefully highlights these connecting and prevalent themes. The brief synopses below and the introduction of each chapter provide a rationale for this organization. The culminating Chapter 9 provides a discussion of the thematic commonalities and draws a parallel to current research in classroom management and in developmentally appropriate middle level practice.

It is also important and interesting to note that within each chapter's thematic organization are variations in the way this theme manifests in the case study. The theme of "high expectations and instructional accommodation" is prevalent in Chapter 3, for example, yet the individual management style of each of the three eighth grade language arts teacher contrasts sharply. Shifting responsibility to students is the connecting pattern of the two case studies in Chapter 4; however, differences are apparent in grade level, kind of student accountability, and nature of classroom environment. Accompanying many of the case studies are favorite strategies shared by the teachers, and at the end of each chapter are questions to facilitate discussion and analysis with suggested responses.

THEMATIC ORGANIZATION OF CHAPTERS

Chapter 2, titled "Management Through High Engagement," showcases two teachers who set high expectations for student learning and behavior and expect no less. Academic engagement is high and rules are simple: Learning is going on here. Don't impede the progress! In Case Study 1, "Just Don't Get in the Way of My Learning!" a seventh grade science teacher near a large university community manages through high-paced academic engagement. A simple test review becomes a shared intellectual task of generating, synthesizing, and evaluating content knowledge related to genetics and cell division. Case Study 2, Assessment-Driven Management, reveals the way an eighth grade language arts teacher uses a computer-based assessment system to identify students' learning needs and to determine the composition and flexible rotation plan for groups.

Chapter 3, "Shifting Speed—Not Lowering Expectations," is a trilogy of case studies that feature language arts teachers who have back-to-back classes of advanced learning and inclusion. While their personal management styles differ, each teacher holds high expectations for student learning regardless of academic level. In Case Study 3, *A Silent Seminar??* eighth grade academically gifted students move like clockwork through the transitions of multifaceted lessons about theme and literary perspective. On another day this same teacher reviews for a test with an inclusion class by simulating the game of Jeopardy. Interestingly, the 500-level slots in each literary category are many of the first chosen!

6 MANAGING THE ADOLESCENT CLASSROOM

Case Study 4, “She Never Stops Teaching,” profiles a sixth grade language arts teacher who does not allow the students’ diverse ability levels to prevent her from using an instructional approach she knows is a good one. An advanced class is divided into literature circles, each becoming “expert” in one of four young adolescent novels they have self-selected. The fact that her second block is an inclusion class with a range of special needs doesn’t stop her from using a variation of the same cooperative learning strategy. In Case Study 5, “I Try Not to Fight Every Battle,” the teacher’s approach is noticeably realistic. Ten of the nineteen students in this eighth grade inclusion class are identified as exceptional, another by Section 501, and several have attention deficit disorders (ADDs). Rather than lowering expectations, he opens the opportunity for all students to complete a multifaceted research project, with amazing success!

In Chapter 4, “Shifting Responsibility to Students,” the teachers place prime emphasis on students’ assuming responsibility for classroom administration, behavior management, and their own learning. Case Study 6, Class Secretary, features an eighth grade teacher who relies on designated students, selected for a week’s duration, to maintain a notebook for attendance records, homework assignments, and missed work. It is also their responsibility to ensure that the absent student signs off! The Land of Woz is the title of Case Study 7. The fifth grade teacher firmly believes that students need to take charge of their learning. The ten-year-old Wizards serve as tour guides for third and fourth graders along the school’s nature trail on Earth Day. They also roll cages and glass containers of the classroom “critters” on carts to other classes to share their expertise on reptiles, mammals, and amphibians.

The prevalent theme in Chapter 5, “Making the Physical Environment a Partner,” is the teachers’ strategic use of the physical environment to facilitate student movement and learning. In this scenario in Case Study 8, “This Is Their Space . . . Not My Room,” an orderly system of work folders, designated student assistants, labeled shelves and cabinets, multiple designs and models, and ample supplies enables this art classroom to seemingly run itself. Color drives the organizational plan for the sixth grade mathematics class in Case Study 9, *If It’s Written in Blue . . .* Color-coded folders, board assignments, manipulative boxes, and portfolios ease the coordination of activity within and transition between the three schedule blocks.

The two teachers featured in Chapter 6, “Knowing What Works for You”, differ in teaching style, personality, subject area, and years of experience. Each, however, knows what is necessary to facilitate learning and what they personally need from students to make this happen. In Case Study 10, *Proceed With Caution*, the complex nature of rotating center activity in a seventh grade life skills class justifies the time taken initially for an elaborate explanation of the room’s physical environment. A heterogeneous group of seventh graders follow the teacher on a visual tour as they become acclimated to the procedures for using the kitchen, sewing, child care, and personal image centers. The personal style of the young eighth grade science teacher in Case Study 11, *All Wound Up*, offers a sharp contrast. The classroom and adjacent hallway are transformed into “labs” for collaborative experiments

to determine the negative acceleration rate of a windup toy. This teacher tolerates considerable talking as small groups of students test, record, discuss, and figure complex calculations.

The power of the positive is the permeating theme in the last three case studies in Chapter 7, “Believing Less Is More and Positive Is Better.” From sixth grade health education to ninth grade English literature, these student-centered classes are conducive environments for adolescent social-emotional development. Case Study 12, *Battle of the Sexes*, showcases a teacher in two settings: a sixth grade health classroom during a sex education unit and the school gymnasium, where she manages the rotating drills of a co-ed group of forty-eight seventh graders. Emphasis in both locations is placed on adolescents’ positive emotional and social development as the frame of reference for actions, thinking, and lifestyle. The two seventh grade teachers in Case Study 13, *Divide and Conquer*, are a true team. Each is responsible for a specialty area, either language arts or math, and they team on a rotating two-week schedule to teach science and social studies. What is unique is that they group students flexibly according to individual needs, interests—and even, on occasion, by gender!

The ninth grade teacher in the last case study (14), *They Call Her “Miss D.”* has taught high school English for seven years. A focal point of her classroom is the No Putdown Zone, an area on a small front bulletin board. Covered in student-generated reminders of respectful language, it serves as a deterrent to negative comments often exchanged by fourteen-year-old students.

Chapter 8 provides information about the context and geographical setting of each of the five schools. Key administrators share personal philosophies related to young adolescent learning and outline school expectations and policies regarding classroom management. Chapter 9 culminates the book with additional analyses of the common themes connecting the case studies. Reference is drawn to underlying current research in young adolescent development, social cognitive theory, motivation, and learning.

CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT IN THE MIDDLE

I have written and spoken often about the kind of classroom that best supports the intellectual, physical, social, and personal needs of young adolescents, ages ten to fifteen. My belief that these environments should allow movement and interaction, and that instruction should be engaging, relevant, and appropriately challenging, is grounded in my own teaching, personal research, and the work of middle level educators. Young adolescents deserve an orderly, safe place to learn; they also need for their minds, emotions, and individualities to be stimulated within meaningful and achievable learning experiences. They respond positively to high expectations for accountability, clear communication of limitations, fair treatment, and consistency. In classrooms where young adolescents’ needs are met and the focus is on building academic competence and personal responsibility, most behavioral problems are minimized.

8 MANAGING THE ADOLESCENT CLASSROOM

Each teacher who so graciously opened the classroom door revealed a dynamic environment supportive of students' unique developmental needs. Interaction is intellectually engaging, expectations for student learning and actions are high and firm, and good behavior is prevalent. Classroom management at the middle level is the proactive and strategic structuring of the physical, affective, and cognitive dimensions of classroom life, with consideration for young adolescents and their learning.

This book offers many ideas rather than one formula for good classroom management. Each teacher is as unique as his or her personal style and preference. Through a collection of case studies and an analysis chapter, this book distinguishes some commonalities among outstanding classroom managers and explores why these identified practices are effective for young adolescent learning and development. In a time of unsettling public debate about the roles of school in society and the commitment of teachers—when the odds seem to be cast against good teachers and teaching—I have had the opportunity to learn about classroom management from a group of exemplary ones. The following pages share their stories.