

Lessons from Research and Practice

SECOND EDITION

Carol Simon Weinstein Andrew J. Mignano, Jr.

ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

LESSONS FROM RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

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Rutgers Graduate School of Education

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ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

Lessons from Research and Practice

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INTRODUCTION



The Elementary Classroom Environment: Crowded, Complex, and Potentially Chaotic

For many prospective and beginning teachers, entering an elementary classroom is like returning home after a long absence. So much is familiar: bulletin boards still display "Good Work" studded with A's, stars, and smiling faces; bells and buzzers still interrupt lessons to announce fire drills; the dusty odor of chalk still permeates the air. The familiarity of these sights, sounds, and smells makes us feel comfortable and at ease; in fact, it may lead us to think that the transition from student to teacher will be relatively easy. Yet, ironically, this very familiarity can be a trap; it can make it difficult to appreciate what a curious and demanding place the elementary classroom really is. Looking at the classroom as if we have never seen one before can help us recognize some of its strange characteristics and contradictions.

Viewed from a fresh perspective, the classroom turns out to be an extremely crowded place. It is more likely a subway or a bus than a place designed for learning. In fact, it is difficult to think of another setting, except prison, where such large groups of individuals are packed so closely together for so many hours. Amid this crowdedness, however, students are often not allowed to interact. As Philip Jackson (1968) has noted,

... students must try to behave as if they were in solitude, when in point of fact they are not. . . . in the early grades it is not uncommon to find students facing each other around a table while at the same time being required not to communicate with each other. These young people, if they are to become successful students, must learn how to be alone in a crowd. (p. 16)

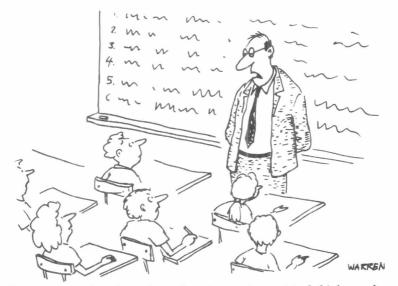
There are other contradictions in this curious place. Children are expected to work together in harmony, yet they may be strangers—even rivals—and may come from very different cultural backgrounds. Students are urged to cooperate, to share, and to help one another, but they are also told to keep their eyes on their own papers, and they often compete for grades and special privileges. They are lectured about being independent and responsible, yet they are also expected to show com-

plete, unquestioning obedience to the teacher's dictates. (This peculiar situation is captured in the cartoon that appears in Figure 1-1.)

In addition to these contradictions, Walter Doyle (1986) has pointed out six features of the classroom setting that make it even more complex. First, classrooms are characterized by *multidimensionality*. Unlike a post office or a restaurant, places devoted to a single activity, the classroom is the setting for a broad range of events. Within its boundaries, students read, write, and discuss. They form friendships, argue, celebrate birthdays, and play games. Teachers not only instruct, they also collect milk money, take attendance, and settle disputes. They counsel students with problems and meet with parents to discuss students' progress. Somehow, the classroom environment must be able to accommodate all these activities.

Second, many of these activities take place at the same time. This *simultaneity* makes the elementary classroom a bit like a three-ring circus. It is not uncommon to see a cluster of students discussing a story with the teacher, individuals writing at their desks, pairs of students practicing multiplication facts with flash cards, and a small group working on a social studies mural. Still other students may be passing notes about yesterday's soccer game. It is this simultaneity—this three-ring circus quality—that makes having "eyes in the back of your head" so valuable to teachers.

FIGURE 1-1 Students are urged to be independent and responsible, yet they are also expected to show complete obedience to the teacher.



"I expect you all to be independent, innovative, critical thinkers who will do exactly as I say."

A third characteristic of classrooms is the rapid pace at which things happen. Classroom events occur with an *immediacy* that makes it impossible to think through every action ahead of time. A squabble erupts over the ownership of an action figure; a student complains that a neighbor is copying; a normally silent child makes a serious, but irrelevant, comment during a group discussion. Each of these incidents requires a quick response, an on-the-spot decision about how to proceed. Furthermore, classroom events like these cannot always be anticipated, despite the most careful planning. This *unpredictability* is a fourth characteristic of classrooms. It ensures that being a teacher is rarely boring, but unpredictability can also be exhausting.

A fifth characteristic of classrooms is the *lack of privacy*. Classrooms are remarkably public places. Within their four walls, each person's behavior can be observed by many others. Teachers talk of feeling as though they are always "on stage" or living in a "fishbowl" (Lortie, 1975). Their feelings are understandable. With 20 or 30 pairs of eyes watching, it is difficult to find a moment for a private chuckle or an unobserved groan. But the scrutiny goes two ways: teachers constantly monitor students' behavior as well. And in response to this sometimes unwelcome surveillance, students develop an "active underlife" (Hatch, 1986) in which to pursue their own personal agendas. With skills that increase as they progress from grade to grade, students learn to pass notes, comb their hair, read comic books, and doodle, all—they hope—without the teacher's ever noticing. Yet, even if they avoid the teacher's eyes, there are always peers watching. It is difficult for students to have a private interaction with the teacher, to conceal a grade on a test, or to make a mistake without someone noticing.

Finally, over the course of the academic year, classes construct a joint *history*. This sixth characteristic means that classes, like families, remember past events—both positive and negative. They remember who got yelled at, who was chosen to be the paper monitor, and what the teacher said about homework assignments. They remember who was going to have only "one more chance" before getting detention, and if the teacher didn't follow through, they remember that too. The class memory means that what happens today affects what happens tomorrow. It also means that teachers must work to shape a history that will support, rather than frustrate, future activities.

Crowded, competitive, contradictory, multidimensional, simultaneous, unpredictable, public—this portrait of the classroom highlights characteristics that we often overlook. We have begun the book with this portrait because we believe that *effective organization and management require an understanding of the unique features of the classroom.* Many of the management problems experienced by beginning teachers can be traced to their lack of understanding of the complex setting in which they work.

Past experiences with children may also mislead beginning teachers. For example, you may have tutored an individual student who was having academic difficulties, or perhaps you have been a camp counselor or a swim-club instructor. Although these are valuable experiences, they are very different from teaching in classrooms. Teachers do not work one-on-one with students in a private room; they

seldom lead recreational activities that children have themselves selected. Teachers do not even work with youngsters who have chosen to be present. (See Figure 1-2 for Calvin's perspective on compulsory attendance.) Instead, teachers work with captive groups of students, on academic agendas that students have not always helped to set, in a crowded, public setting. Within this setting, teachers must gain the cooperation of students and foster their involvement in educational activities. This is not a simple task, and the difficulty is exacerbated if we are not sensitive to students' needs and interests. As Tracy Kidder (1989) notes, in far too many classrooms it seems "as if a secret committee, now lost to history, had made a study of children and, having figured out what the greatest number were least disposed to do, declared that all of them should do it" (p. 115). But it doesn't have to be like this.

The purpose of this book is to help prospective and beginning teachers understand the special characteristics of the classroom setting and their implications for organization and management. We hope to provide concepts and principles that you can use to think about the managerial tasks you will encounter as a teacher. For example, once you recognize that students are a captive audience, you are better able to see why it's necessary to stimulate interest in lessons. If you are aware of the crowded, public nature of classrooms, you can minimize congestion and provide needed privacy through the careful arrangement of your classroom furnishings. A group of strangers can become a cohesive learning community if you know how to foster an atmosphere of caring and mutual support. Simultaneity of classroom events is manageable if you teach students what to do when you are busy elsewhere—and if you hold them accountable for doing it.

GUIDING ASSUMPTIONS

Five underlying assumptions have guided the content and organization of this book. First, we assume that most problems of disorder in classrooms can be

FIGURE 1-2 Calvin is captive. (Calvin and Hobbes @ Watterson. Dist. by Universal Press Syndicate. Reprinted with permission. All rights reserved.)

CALVIN AND HOBBES







avoided if teachers use good preventive management strategies. Thus, we emphasize the prevention of misbehavior, rather than strategies for coping with misbehavior. This emphasis is consistent with classroom management research conducted within the last 25 years. In a now classic study, Jacob Kounin (1970) set out to explain the differences between orderly and disorderly classes by examining how teachers responded to misconduct. To his surprise, he found that the reactions of effective and ineffective managers were quite similar. What accounted then for the differences in order? Kounin eventually determined that the orderly classes were more the result of a teacher's ability to manage the activities of the group than of particular ways of handling student misconduct. Kounin's research changed the way in which we think about classroom management. The focus is no longer on ways of disciplining students, but rather on ways of creating and maintaining a classroom environment that supports learning (Evertson and Randolph, 1995).

Our second assumption is that the way teachers think about management strongly influences how they behave. Research has provided some fascinating examples of the relationship between teachers' beliefs about management and their behavior. Consider, Sarah, for example, a first-year teacher who was having difficulties managing her class (Ulerick and Tobin, 1989). Sarah's behavior in the classroom seemed to reflect her belief that effective teachers should use "charm and humor" to engage students in learning and gain their cooperation. In short, her thinking about management reflected a metaphor of "teacher as comedian." Eventually, Sarah reconceptualized the role of teacher, discarding the comedian metaphor and adopting a metaphor of teacher as "social director." As "social director," the teacher's job was to "invite students to appropriate, interesting, and meaningful learning activities" (p. 12), and to assist students in directing their own learning activities. This change in Sarah's thinking about classroom management led to changes in her behavior and dramatic improvements in the atmosphere of her classes.

In a similar study, Carter (1985) reviewed narrative descriptions of life in the classrooms of an effective and an ineffective classroom manager. Carter's analysis of the descriptions led her to conclude that the two teachers thought about classroom management in very different ways. She concluded that the effective manager saw her managerial role as "a driver navigating a complex and often treacherous route" (p. 89). From this perspective, her responsibility was to guide classroom events smoothly and efficiently; she emphasized the academic tasks that students needed to accomplish and did not allow minor misbehavior and interruptions to get her off course. In contrast, the ineffective manager seemed to see her role as "defender of a territory." Constantly vigilant for threats to order, she was careful to catch all misbehavior whenever they occurred and used reprimands and appeals to authority in order to control inappropriate behavior.

Taken together, these studies suggest that teachers who view classroom management as a process of guiding and structuring classroom events tend to be more effective than teachers who stress their disciplinary role or who see classroom management as a product of personal charm (Brophy, 1988). This