Avoiding Chaos in the Preschool Classroom:
Management Methods and Techniques

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Introduction to the problem

“No other aspect of teaching is so often cited as a major concern by prospective, beginning, and experienced teachers as classroom management” (Cooper, 2006, p. 236). To begin to address the problem of classroom management in a preschool setting, the definition of classroom management must be established. “Classroom management refers to all of the things that a teacher does to organize students, space, time, and materials so that the student learning can take place” (Wong & Wong, 2005, p. 84). Also, “classroom management involves all of the tasks that teachers and students perform in any given day covering a wide range of actions and attitudes associated with teaching and learning” (Hall, Quinn, & Gollnick, 2008, p. 440). New teachers experience a great deal of stress when addressing the topic of classroom management in preschool.

Classroom management is essential to effective teaching. So what happens when there is a lack of classroom management? A lack of classroom management in preschool is a problem that all teachers are faced with, especially new teachers (Oliver & Reschly, 2007). According to research, new teachers often struggle with classroom management and as a result leave the profession entirely. Teachers who struggle with a lack of classroom management are shown to be less effective. Lack of classroom management also leads to more referrals to special education for at-risk students (Oliver & Reschly, 2007).

“Ineffective teachers have classrooms that are not ready. Confusion leads to problems, problems lead to misbehavior, and misbehavior leads to constant tangling between teacher and students” (Wong & Wong, 2005, p. 91). No new teacher desires to
be ineffective. Classroom management is an important part of being an effective preschool teacher.

How does a new teacher avoid chaos due to a lack of classroom management in order to have an effective and positive classroom environment? How does a new teacher develop classroom management with little experience in the field? This essay shall discuss methods and techniques used in the preschool classroom to assist teachers in learning effective classroom management skills.

**History of the problem**

Classroom management is something that all teachers have struggled with for more than a hundred years. In 1907 William Chandler Bagley wrote about his management principles in the classroom based on psychology. The diction of that day and age was quite different from how society speaks today; nevertheless, research was already being published concerning a lack of classroom management. In 1933 Breed wrote about management based on personal experiences. Breed also used personal experiences and observations and based writing on psychology, just as Bagley had. Both Breed and Bagley focused on the authority of the teacher in their writing. In 1952, Brown put out a book about classroom management as well. His book focused on Christian values of citizenship and was embedded in progressive philosophy (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006). Research continues on from there, evolving through the century into the issues we currently see today in the preschool classroom.
Regardless of how teachers’ values have changed over time, classroom management has been something that teachers have studied, researched, and struggled with for many years. Professional educators strive to run an effective classroom that emanates positivity. In order to learn, students must feel comfortable and relaxed in the classroom environment. If student’s basic needs are not met, they will not be able to progress further than meeting that particular need (Huitt, 2004). It is entirely the teacher’s job to manage this environment so that students will be able to learn (Hall, Quinn, & Gollnick, 2008).

Jamie Woodard, a preschool teacher at Winona State University Children’s Center, stated in a personal interview that the best way to describe a lack of classroom management is chaos. She detailed that students’ anxiety levels increase if there is a lack of classroom management. As a result, less learning on behalf of the preschoolers is able to take place (J. Woodard, personal communication, September 14, 2009).

“If one considers the alternative to managing a classroom (which is chaos), effective classroom management can be viewed as central to all that is good and right about teaching” (Hall, Quinn, & Gollnick, 2008, p. 441). This statement encompasses the reason why teachers should be concerned about the classroom environment that they create for their students. “Students want a well-managed classroom more than the teachers do because there is a security in a classroom that is consistent” (Wong & Wong, 2005, p. 84). Preschool children in particular need security in the classroom. In Woodard’s preschool classroom, students often get upset and want to go home (J. Woodard, personal communication, September 14, 2009). Take for example, Maslow’s
AVOIDING CHAOS IN THE PRESCHOOL CLASSROOM: MANAGEMENT METHODS AND TECHNIQUES

Hierarchy of Needs. Maslow proposed that the higher levels of functioning which humans are capable of, could not take place unless the basic needs of the human are met. If school can be a place of comfort for the preschoolers, they will be more focused and be able to progress into the higher levels of functioning presented in Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (Huitt, 2004). Therefore, if a teacher is a true professional and desires the best for his or her students, he or she understands that classroom management is an essential part of the daily routine of teaching and learning.

A functionalist would say that schools are the way in which society teaches its children to perform certain tasks, which are necessary for survival. There are three necessities according to the functionalist perspective: role selection, socialization, and training of society’s members. According to a functionalist, without these three things, society cannot continue to function. In a preschool classroom, students learn the norms of society or society’s valued behaviors. This falls under the category of socialization. These behavior values are established through the teaching of manners, respecting those in authority, and specific interactions with peers. If there is a lack of classroom management in preschool, students will not have the opportunity to establish the norms of society.

Training of society’s members is also initiated at a young age, beginning in the preschool classroom and sometimes earlier. Students are taught communication skills, technology skills, and everyday life skills needed to survive in society. Educators and researchers agree that teaching preschool children nonacademic skills is an important part of developing their overall competence (Protheroe, 2006). Once again, if the preschool
classroom has a lack of management, these learning opportunities will not exist. Students will not develop the necessary training to function in society. Classroom management in preschool is necessary for a fruitful learning environment. The survival of society depends on the socialization and training of its members.

“Classroom management plays a critical role in schools across the nation today. The increase of violence, lawsuits, and classroom disruptions make it necessary for more effective behavior management plans” (Victor, 2005, p. 8). Not only should teachers care about classroom management in preschool, but they should also care because their reputations and careers are at stake. If violence in the classroom erupts and something terrible happens, the teacher will be the one who is responsible. This could turn into a lawsuit and result in the teacher being terminated and having his or her license revoked.

“It is usually difficult for pre-service teachers to express philosophies of teaching and classroom management because pre-service teachers lack the experience and skills to understand how all of the elements of the classroom work together” (Project IDEAL, 2008). Another problem facing pre-service preschool teachers is the lack of experience needed to develop and comprehend effective classroom management. Teachers develop their strategies for managing the preschool classroom over time and through their personal experiences. Pre-service and new teachers face the problem of poor classroom management because of their lack of experience in the field of education.

“Many times professional educators strive for discipline when what they really need is procedure. The problem is that a procedure needs to be rehearsed and known by all. It must be rehearsed over and over again and followed through and equally applied to
Avoiding Chaos in the Preschool Classroom: Management Methods and Techniques

New teachers are determining how they want their classrooms to run. There is no rehearsal for classroom management on the first day of school for a new teacher. This is a major concern for new teachers as they begin their careers. How can a new teacher learn to effectively manage a classroom and avoid chaos during his or her first year in the teaching profession?

Reform solution

No clear-cut formula that new teachers can use when developing preschool classroom management techniques has been discovered, simply because each teacher is unique and each class that they will have is unique (Victor, 2005). There are techniques and methods that have proven to be useful to teachers who have been working in the field of early childhood education. Woodard (2009) and Brown (1975), teachers in the field of early childhood education, have used these techniques and found them to be advantageous. New teachers should consider these techniques when beginning teaching to assist in their development of classroom management skills. This section of the essay will provide solutions and ideas to overcome the lack of classroom management in preschool. The following methods will be addressed: (1) adjusting for each student; (2) arranging the classroom; (3) establishing rules, procedures, and routine; (4) being consistent and predictable; (5) using positive reinforcement; and (6) redirecting and giving choices.

Each method has its own benefits and contributes important aspects to the preschool teacher’s classroom management. Likewise, each technique should be
Examined and thought out thoroughly before it is applied. New teachers will have more
difficulty applying these techniques for the first part of the school year. “Clueless may be
the best way to explain the plight of neophyte teachers [...] They have no clue as to what
to do in the first days and weeks of school” (Wong & Wong, 2005, p. 13). Regardless,
new teachers must adjust quickly in order to be effective because “the first day of school
is the most important day of the school year. Effective classroom management practices
must begin on the first day of school” (Wong & Wong, 2005, p.82). So how does a new
preschool teacher deal with the stress of beginning a new school year?

Planning is of the utmost importance. A teacher must keep in mind, though, that
plans may need to be adjusted. “Although classroom management plans are written for
most classroom settings, classroom management is also affected by student
characteristics” (Project IDEAL, 2008). Each year, a teacher receives a new group of
students into his or her classroom. Keeping this in mind, teachers need to make
adjustments based on the students in the class. Part of being an effective preschool
teacher is being flexible. “Students are the result of a wide range of experiences and
situations that determine how they react to classroom activities and classroom
management procedures” (Project IDEAL, 2008). Therefore, teachers need to learn
about each individual student and keep track of each student to know what classroom
management techniques work and do not work.

Arrangement of the preschool classroom is important when establishing
classroom management. “Evertson’s studies have shown that effective teachers had the
classroom ready. They prevented problems by implementing a plan at the beginning of
the school year” (Wong & Wong, 2005, page 92). The way the classroom is arranged establishes the flow of the classroom. It affects routine and transitions. The classroom should be organized in a manner that is inviting to the students. This is especially important because the preschoolers are so young and need a comforting environment in order to learn. The classroom routine and rules can be established through the arrangement of the classroom.

Establishing rules, procedures, and routine are also elements of classroom management that should not be overlooked. “Society has expectations for interactions in public spaces” (Project IDEAL, 2008). A functionalist would agree with this statement and add that it is necessary for young students to learn these expectations in order to behave properly and discover their role in society. These expectations, or rules, are something that preschoolers need to know and understand for a classroom to be well managed. These rules should be based on the classroom teacher’s goals and expectations for his or her students. Rules should be few and specific (Victor, 2005). Preschoolers should not be expected to remember many rules. They should, however know the few established rules in the classroom, which will help keep confusion to a minimum and allow the teacher to be in control of the classroom.

“An effectively managed classroom runs smoothly, has minimal confusion and interruptions to learning, has little down-time, and has maximal opportunities for students to learn” (Project IDEAL, 2008). Once routine and rules have been established and implemented, the teacher should stick to it. Woodard said in an interview that keeping the routine the same every day is key to having good classroom management.
Preschoolers will know what is coming next and know the rules they are to follow. It makes transitions easier and allows students to focus on the task at hand (J. Woodard, personal communication, September 14, 2009).

Transitioning is an important aspect of routine in the preschool classroom. It helps students to know what is coming next and keeps order in the classroom as preschoolers move from one activity to the next. Warner (2006) states “transitions provide a meaningful bridge from one portion of the day to another” and “can help cut out unnecessary changes in routine” (p. 122). This is important for preschoolers because they require security and order; without order students become confused and learning is not able to take place. Also, a functionalist would see transitions as valuable tools to train students to follow directions, which is a necessary part of learning to live in society.

When establishing rules and procedures for the classroom, it is also important to remain consistent and predictable, otherwise chaos will indeed ensue. “Therefore, the most important thing a teacher can provide in the classroom during the first week of school is consistency. Classroom practices and procedures must be predictable and consistent” (Wong & Wong, 2005, p. 84). Victor (2005) also advocates that consistency is important and positively affects classroom management. This is true when discussing transitions and any other part of the daily routine. “When environments are unpredictable, students will behave in ways that create predictability, even if it appears that they are causing more negative consequences for themselves” (Oliver & Reschly, 2007, p. 12). To avoid this negative behavior, stick to the established routine so that students will know what to expect. It allows for a more comfortable atmosphere and
AVOIDING CHAOS IN THE PRESCHOOL CLASSROOM: MANAGEMENT METHODS AND TECHNIQUES

allows preschoolers to whole-heartedly engage in their learning endeavors.

A great way to motivate preschoolers to follow the rules and procedures laid out in the classroom is through positive reinforcement. There are three components to positive reinforcement. First, positive reinforcement is an incentive for the students to continue acting in a particular manner. There are many examples of positive reinforcement, such as a smiling and proud glance, an encouraging word, or praise for a task well done. Second, the reinforcement should be given after the task has been performed and not before. Third, positive reinforcement should be used to encourage behavior to continue in the same way. Positive reinforcement is a wonderful way to establish a welcoming and supportive classroom environment. Students will be more excited to win the favor of the teacher and therefore establish better behavior habits (Project IDEAL, 2008). Victor (2005) believes that praise is effective and should be used often in the classroom. Students will respond well to it and it is an easy way for teachers to establish better relationships with their students.

Research conducted by Project IDEAL (2008) states:

Although a classroom management plan emphasizes classroom management's role in preventing inappropriate and off-task behavior and maximizing instruction, what happens when positive reinforcement does not foster the appropriate classroom behavior and inappropriate or off-task behavior continues? It must be handled promptly to deter its continuation and to redirect behavior to learning.

Teachers hope to avoid any disruptive behavior in the classroom, but when it
AVOIDING CHAOS IN THE PRESCHOOL CLASSROOM: MANAGEMENT METHODS AND TECHNIQUES

occurs, there must be a way to deal with the situation at hand. Redirection is a form of classroom and behavior management that Woodard uses in her classroom. It is a way to take the preschooler out of the situation and put them in new and positive situation (J. Woodard, personal communication, September 14, 2009). If redirection is not effective, there are other options. Giving the preschooler a choice is a good way to help involve them in the decision-making process (Victor, 2005). Give the student two choices that will stop the behavior, but allow them to pick an option that they prefer. Any way that a teacher chooses to deal with disruptive behavior, the teacher must always be consistent. This allows the preschoolers to know the expectations of the teacher at all times. There will be less questioning and less confusion for both the students and the teacher.

These solutions to a lack of classroom management are hands-on and practical. They are applicable to real-life situations in the preschool classroom. The solutions provided are more advantageous than others suggested over time because they are based on recent research. Woodard (2009) is a preschool teacher practicing the methods and techniques presented. She has found them to be successful in her modern-day preschool classroom (Personal communication.)

**Implementation of the solution**

The methods for managing the classroom addressed have all been tested by early childhood education professionals. The idea is to incorporate each of the suggestions into the preschool classroom in order to obtain an optimal learning environment for the students. New teachers who have little experience managing a classroom can think
through how to handle the situations by examining each method and determining how to use it effectively in his or her own preschool classroom. The result of proper implementation of each method is a comfortable, happy, safe, and supportive environment for both the students and the teacher.

Basing classroom management off of the class itself is a solution for classroom management struggles with individual students. Project IDEAL (2008) has proposed a way of keeping track of each student to help make the required adjustments. A teacher can take samples of observations and anecdotal records of students and create a chart to keep track of that student’s needs and types of effective instruction and management for that student. Important things to include in this chart are the student’s name, whether or not he or she has special needs, whether or not he or she is a special education student, how his or her needs are addressed in the classroom, and a section for comments. This is a great way to get to know the students individually and from here, effective management can be established.

The arrangement of the classroom is another technique that is important in establishing preschool classroom management. Jamie Woodard, a preschool teacher, gives a great example of how her classroom arrangement assists in management. Woodard described a situation in which classroom arrangement is helpful in her managing strategies. When the preschoolers are finished with lunch and before naptime, she allows certain stations to be open in her classroom and others are closed. (For example, the preschoolers are allowed to play, look at books, and play with puzzles.) Her classroom is separated into stations, but still open for students to play and socially
interact. Here, students are receiving socialization, one of the three important aspects of functionalism. She has established the designated areas and students know where they are allowed to be and where they are not allowed to be at various times throughout the day. The preschoolers in her classroom are aware of the rules and expectations established, which are assisted by the arrangement of Woodard’s classroom (J. Woodard, personal communication, September 14, 2009).

Establishing rules, procedures, and routine are all extremely important elements when discussing preschool classroom management. Preschoolers should not be expected to remember many rules, but they should be expected to follow them. How do rules, procedures, and routine assist new teachers in developing classroom management? “Children, as well as adults, feel more secure when they know what is expected of them. The establishment of a limited number of ground rules gives everyone this information” (Brown, 1975, p. 18). If children know the rules and procedures established in the classroom, they will indeed feel more secure and will therefore feel free to explore and learn within the preschool classroom. Also, if the students are aware of the routine, they will know what to expect and what is expected of them. They will consequently feel more comfortable in the classroom, resulting in a better learning environment.

Woodard uses routine as an effective tool to keep students focused and the classroom well managed. The routine used in her preschool classroom is consistent and the students know when transitions will occur and how to perform during these transitions. One of her strategies that have been proven to work in her classroom is the task board. Children are assigned specific tasks that need to be completed every day that
are part of the daily routine. Examples would be feeding the fish or bell ringer for story time. This helps students to know who the helpers are for the day and keeps things fair. The students know when the tasks are completed during the day and are excited to help out in the classroom. Woodard uses this effective technique to keep her classroom running smoothly and involve the preschoolers in the daily routine (J. Woodard, personal communication, September 14, 2009).

Brown (1975) writes:

Planning the daily schedule lets everyone know at about what time a few basic activities will occur and what the sequence of events for that day will be. Consistent daily routines can greatly reduce confusion and wasted time […] A schedule that provides for change of pace and variety while at the same time letting children know what they should be doing, or what they are to do next, helps develop independent behavior in a comfortable setting (p. 26).

When students are comfortable and are able to be independent, they will learn better. Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs is an example of how this is applied. If students do not have the basic need of “bodily comfort” met, they will not be able to progress further than meeting that particular need. If student’s basic needs are met in the preschool classroom, the student will be able to move into higher levels, involving cognition, which he or she will be able to learn and explore (Huitt, 2004).

Positive reinforcement is a highly effective way to manage the preschool classroom because preschoolers often seek the approval of the teacher. Giving students
praise for doing something right is an excellent way to motivate students to follow the rules. In a number of training workshops on early intervention in high-risk schools, teachers focus on learning classroom management strategies. One of the strategies addressed was effective praise. Webster-Stratton, Reid, & Stoolmiller (2008) write:

> There is substantial evidence indicating that well-trained and supportive teachers, who use high levels of praise, proactive teaching strategies, and non-harsh discipline, can play an extremely important role in fostering the development of social and emotional skills and preventing the development of conduct problems in young children (p. 2).

It is important to show preschool students that they are a positive part of the classroom. It builds their self-esteem and helps to develop necessary life skills. This refers back to functionalism and the importance of socialization of students, particularly preschoolers.

Sometimes praise and positive reinforcement are not enough to solve all the problems that may occur in the preschool classroom. Two options that are highly effective are redirecting and giving choices. “By developing redirection skills you can often ward off problem situations before they occur” (Brown, 1975, p. 63). Redirection allows students to problem solve with minimal involvement on the teacher’s part. These problem-solving skills are training for future situations that students will face, which are a necessary element, according to a functionalist perspective.

If the student is not able to work through his or her situation through the redirection, Brown (1975) suggests giving the student an either/or choice scenario. This will allow the student to practice decision-making skills by deciding for him or herself.
which option he or she prefers. Ultimately, it allows the teacher to stay in control of the situation. This management skill is shown to be highly effective. Woodard (2009) uses this technique in her preschool classroom on a regular basis to solve problems. These two classroom management techniques allow the teacher to be in control of the situation, while enabling the students to solve their own problems in the classroom.

**Conclusion/Collaborative Action**

Who is accountable for classroom management in preschool? “The teacher is responsible for organizing a well-managed classroom where students can learn in a task-oriented environment” (Wong & Wong, 2005, p. 83). Therefore, teachers are the ones who are to bring about this reform in classroom management. Although the implementation of this reform can be difficult for new teachers, there are some ways to be prepared to integrate effective management techniques and methods. Woodard (2009) suggests observing veteran preschool teachers who have learned how to effectively manage their classrooms using these techniques. This will allow a new teacher to see an example of how to implement the techniques before he or she utilizes them in his or her own classroom. Along with observing veteran preschool teachers, a new teacher might also choose to interview that teacher (Personal communication). The veteran teacher may share ideas with the beginning teacher that may not be viewed during the period of observation.

Woodard (2009) also suggests self-evaluation. An efficacious way to execute a
self-evaluation is by video taping during a lesson and then viewing the video afterwards. This allows the beginning teacher to see how he or she is handling particular situations (Personal communication). It is also a way to check for consistency, which is important in classroom management. Through the viewing of the recorded session, the teacher is able to survey individual student’s reactions to classroom management techniques. The new teacher may choose to change a technique or an approach to a particular situation with a child based on the reactions viewed in the video recording.

Teachers should work together to bring about this reform. Veteran teachers can assist beginning teachers in promoting and achieving effective classroom management in preschool classrooms. Through the utilization of the methods and techniques described, beginning teachers can overcome the chaos of a classroom that is not well managed. Effective teaching can be achieved while a safe and comfortable learning environment is established. Through the application of these techniques and methods, beginning teachers can learn to effectively manage their preschool classrooms.
AVOIDING CHAOS IN THE PRESCHOOL CLASSROOM: MANAGEMENT METHODS AND TECHNIQUES

References


