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Exploring the Foundations of Middle School Classroom Management

Effective ways to encourage and teach appropriate student behaviors are highly valued by educators. This article examines the work of several theorists who laid the groundwork for contemporary classroom management. Some of these theorists did not directly address behaviors in school settings; rather, they focused on other psychological aspects of human behavior. Moreover, they did their work prior to the middle school movement. Nevertheless, their theories have withstood the test of time and can be applied effectively to middle school classroom management. The theoretical contributions of B. F. Skinner, Fritz Redl and William Wattenberg, William Glasser, and Thomas Gordon all have particular relevance for middle school educators.

Rationale for Choice of Theorists

These theorists provided the foundational work for classroom management theory, and their ideas continue to influence classroom management. B. F. Skinner proposed behavior modification as a way to shape behavior. Although some contemporary educators might object to using rewards and punishments to shape behavior, tokens, stickers, and other rewards and punishments continue to be popular and effective management techniques. Redl and Wattenberg's group dynamics theories also are useful, in light of the powerful role that peer pressure plays in middle school classrooms. Students who model appropriate group behavior often influence other students to do likewise. In addition, middle school educators may use Redl and Wattenberg's idea of supporting self-control and appraising reality to help young adolescents learn to manage their own behavior. William Glasser's choice theory points to young adolescents' ability and need to accept responsibility for managing their own behavior. Rather than middle school educators demanding appropriate behavior, choice theory would suggest that young adolescents should make the choice to behave appropriately and take action toward that goal. Features of Thomas Gordon's theory, known as "Discipline as Self-Control," include the use of "I-messages" and active listening as ways of improving young adolescents' behavior. Middle school educators will likely be more effective when they point out the concrete effects of young adolescents' negative behaviors on others, rather than making accusatory remarks beginning with "you."

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EXAMPLES OF DEVELOPMENTAL CHARACTERISTICS, MISBEHAVIORS, AND THE APPLICATION OF A FOUNDATIONAL THEORY

<i>Developmental Characteristic</i>	<i>Example</i>	<i>Possible Misbehaviors</i>	<i>Example of the Application of a Foundational Theory</i>
Variations in developmental areas	A well-developed 15-year-old looks like an adult, but psychosocially is shy, timid, and childlike, and cognitively continues to function concretely.	• Talking, annoying others, and exerting power to avoid participating in social activities and in cognitive activities requiring higher levels of thought. • Trying to have the last word to "cover up" behavioral or academic failures. • Experimenting with alcohol and tobacco to demonstrate adult-like behaviors.	Using positive reinforcement such as ignoring talking and efforts to gain attention while reinforcing positive behavior, using only positive comments, and providing behavioral contracts. (Skinner)
Diversity in physical size	A 15-year-old looks like an 11-year-old.	• Demonstrating boisterous, disrespectful behaviors and challenging authority to prove "grown-up" status. • Wearing "adult-like" clothes and acting grown-up. • Avoiding activities requiring physical strength and stamina.	Teaching students that only they can control themselves, and making schools caring places with a sense of belonging and with opportunities for enjoyment. (Glasser)
Low self-esteem	A 12-year-old experiences low self-esteem in curricular areas and in most social situations.	• Talking around, being rude, goofing off, and disrupting others to hide inadequacies. • Being the class clown to avoid failing school work. Refusing to participate in group activities requiring individual accountability.	Demonstrating active listening and empathic understanding, and convincing students that they own the problem even though it affects others. (Gordon)
Peer pressure	A once-quiet 13-year-old becomes friends with members of a gang.	• Participating in illegal or disturbing behaviors. • Looking to peers for behavior standards rather than to adults or "individually considered" standards. • Seeking revenge and showing defiance to impress peers.	Helping students understand and appraise reality (e.g., seeing how annoying behaviors affect others), and helping students develop self-control. (Redl and Wattenberg)

Table 1

Table 1 shows the relationship between the developmental characteristics of young adolescents and some common behavior problems found in middle schools. The theories of behavior modification, group dynamics, choice theory, and self-control have relevance for managing young adolescents' behaviors in these and similar situations. To explore the specifics of how these theories address common misbehaviors in middle schools, we need to explore each of the theorists in more detail. Although each theorist can be used with a variety of misbehaviors, Table 1 shows the application of each theory to a different misbehavior.

Just as Skinner believed that positive rewards shape most learned human behavior, many teachers believe that students will repeat "rewarded" behaviors and stop "unrewarded or ignored" behaviors.

B. F. Skinner (1904-1990)

The noted psychologist Burrhus Frederic Skinner proposed that proper and immediate reinforcement strengthens the likelihood that appropriate behavior will be repeated (Skinner, 1948, 1970). Skinner did not work in elementary or secondary classrooms, nor did he describe instructional or general classroom practices that should reduce students' behavior problems. Nevertheless, his research on operant conditioning, or behavior modification, had a profound influence on the field of classroom management.

Contributions of Skinner's Theories. William Wattenberg (1967) explained that many teachers believe B. F. Skinner's behavior modification approach holds potential for shaping students' behavior. Just as Skinner believed that positive rewards shape most learned human behavior, many teachers believe that students will repeat "rewarded" behaviors and stop "unrewarded or ignored" behaviors. Thus, teachers shape students' behaviors by first determining desired behaviors and selecting appropriate reinforcers to encourage students to repeat those desirable behaviors. As reinforcement occurs, the likelihood of students repeating positive behaviors increases (Bigge, 1976).

Reinforcement in a classroom can take many forms. For example, a teacher can reward students who complete their assignments on time by giving them each a token. When a student has a set number of tokens, he or she can redeem them for an item or privilege. In addition, rather than reprimanding misbehaving students, teachers can praise students who behave properly. According to Skinner's theory, the behaving students will continue to demonstrate positive behavior.

The misbehaving students, desiring the positive reinforcement, will begin to behave appropriately. For example, a teacher may reduce the number of math homework problems for students who correctly complete their work in class. The teacher seeks to reinforce the behavior of completing in-class work by eliminating or reducing the undesired homework assignment. To be effective, reinforcement should be appropriate and immediate.

Directions for Middle School Educators. Opportunities to translate Skinner's theories into practice in the middle school classroom include:

- *Ignoring inappropriate behaviors.* In spite of constant reprimands, Jasper, a 6th-grade boy, continued to click his ballpoint pen in an annoying fashion throughout class time. When his teacher simply ignored Jasper's behavior, yet praised the students surrounding Jasper for their good behavior and quiet work habits, Jasper stopped the clicking. At that point, his teacher immediately thanked Jasper for his considerate behavior.
- *Using only positive comments.* One 8th-grade teacher established a goal of making "zero negative comments" to students. Using praise and other forms of positive reinforcement, she constantly scans the class to identify proper behavior. She praises students who follow class rules, raise their hands before speaking, and otherwise act in ways that she believes contributes to a positive classroom environment. While she acts decisively and properly when students become physically or verbally abusive, even then she continues to be positive and to reinforce appropriate behavior.

- *Developing behavior contracts.* One 6th-grade special education teacher developed a behavior contract for LaShawn. LaShawn knows that she can earn points through appropriate behavior, and that those points can be used to purchase items at a special school store.

Fritz Redl (1902-1988) and William Wattenberg (1911-)

Several theories developed by Fritz Redl and William Wattenberg have contributed to classroom management and provided the groundwork for many later theorists. Specifically, their theories encompass group dynamics, self-control, the pleasure-pain principle, and understanding reality.

Contributions of Redl and Wattenberg's Theories. Group dynamics or "group life in the classroom" (Redl & Wattenberg, 1959, p. 262) has particular relevance to today's middle school educators, who need to understand how individual behavior affects group behavior and vice-versa. Middle school students often imitate peers' behaviors, especially when they do not want to be the first to demonstrate a behavior.

Redl and Wattenberg (1959) suggested that educators support students' self-control from the position that individuals can be responsible for controlling their own conduct. Much misbehavior results from a temporary lapse of an individual's control system, rather than from a desire to be disagreeable. If a student loses his or her self-control, a teacher can step in to help that student regain control. While most students want to behave appropriately, they sometimes need help achieving the necessary control. This lack or loss of control may occur because they forget, feel uncertain about the rules, are bored, or are tired of sitting. A teacher's assistance often can be minimal; the purpose should always be to help students retain, or regain, their control. At other times, this so-called situational assistance requires the educator to take stronger action.

To mold students' behavior, teachers can use the pleasure-pain principle, in which they deliberately provide experiences to produce a range of pleasant to unpleasant feelings. By doing so, the teacher hopes that the good feelings surrounding a pleasant experience will motivate an individual to repeat a desirable behavior, while an unpleasant experience will lead to avoidance of the unwanted behavior. Redl and Wattenberg emphasize, however, that the pleasure-pain principle does not mean that a teacher, in the heat of anger, should lash out at a student. Likewise, pain or punishment should not take the form of revenge (Redl & Wattenberg, 1959).

Redl and Wattenberg suggest that teachers encourage students to appraise or understand reality. For example, teachers can explain to students the connection

between their conduct and its consequences. They can use both criticism and encouragement, either privately or within earshot of the entire class (not scoldings or tirades, but rather soothing encouragements). In addition, educators can clearly define classroom and school limits or, to use Redl and Wattenberg's (1959) phrase, let everyone "know what the rules of the game are" (p. 361). These techniques help students develop the values and the sense of reality that should govern their behavior.

Directions for Middle School Educators. Redl and Wattenberg's (1959) theories have contributed significantly to classroom management. Middle school educators can take several directions from those theories:

- *Understanding group dynamics.* One 6th-grade teacher established a rule that students must raise their hands to answer a question. As the school year progressed, however, Cory began to answer questions without raising his hand. Believing Cory, an excellent student, had merely forgotten the rule, the teacher ignored the infraction. Soon, other students began to call out answers. Redl and Wattenberg would have pointed out that misbehaviors can be contagious within a group dynamic.

- *Supporting self-control.* An 8th-grade teacher supports self-control and helps students maintain appropriate behavior during whole-group instruction by constantly observing the class for signs of misbehavior. His goal is to correct misbehavior without verbally correcting the student, whenever possible. When he notices an undesired behavior—such as a student playing with a game instead of listening—he catches the student's eye and maintains eye contact for a few moments. Usually, once the student realizes that the behavior has been noted, he or she will stop. If the student persists, however, the teacher, without interrupting instruction, walks to the student's side and continues talking to the class, thus supporting the student's self-control.

- *Appraising reality.* In an effort to change student behaviors, a 7th-grade Spanish teacher encourages students to appraise reality. After one class, for example, she spoke with four girls regarding the effects of their cliquish behaviors on the entire class. Rather than trying to break up the group or to seat them in different parts of the classroom, the teacher encouraged the girls to understand the effects of their behavior on their learning and on other students in the class.

William Glasser (1925-)

While William Glasser's initial writings relied upon Freudian psychoanalytic theory, he eventually switched to a more behavioral approach that focused on helping people look to present conditions to find solutions to problems. Glasser's "quality school" (Glasser, 1992)

and "choice theory" (Glasser, 1997, p. 597) seem to have the most relevance for educators interested in classroom management.

Contributions of Glasser's Theories. In general, Glasser believes that students think rationally, yet still rely on teachers to make and enforce rules, and, when necessary, impose appropriate consequences and offer suggestions for changing inappropriate behavior. Nevertheless, he opposes coercion, either through reward or punishment. He calls for educators to transform schools into caring places that students enjoy, and where they can feel a sense of belonging.

Glasser advocates for a caring and "quality" school, one that helps students satisfy their psychological needs and adds quality to their lives (Glasser, 1993). While "quality" is an imprecise term, "it almost always includes caring for each other, is always useful, has always involved hard work on someone's part, and when we are involved with it, as either a provider or receiver, it always feels good" (Glasser, 1992, p. 37). According to Glasser, teachers must teach and manage in a way that adds quality to students' lives. In fact, Glasser even defines education as "the process through which we discover that learning adds quality to our lives" (Glasser, 1992, p. 39). Furthermore, Glasser (1992, 1997) maintains that quality schools can have positive academic and behavior results.

Glasser based his choice theory (1997) upon the belief that the behavior we can control is our own. To Glasser, four basic psychological needs drive students: the need to belong, the need for power, the need for freedom, and the need for fun. Once teachers meet these psychological needs, he says, students will behave appropriately. Likewise, if teachers fail to meet those needs, misbehavior will result. Glasser reminds educators that students must freely choose to change their behavior, and not do so because of rewards or punishment; otherwise, they are only acting in the moment to obtain the reward or avoid the punishment. Although educators cannot ultimately control students' behavior, they can still help students satisfy their four psychological needs, and thereby increase the likelihood that students will choose appropriate behavior.

Directions for Middle School Educators. Glasser's theories have several practical applications:

Glasser believes that students think rationally, yet still rely on teachers to make and enforce rules, and, when necessary, impose appropriate consequences and offer suggestions for changing inappropriate behavior.

- *Encouraging caring.* One 5th-grade teacher, cold and aloof, rarely smiled and would abruptly and unenthusiastically answer students' questions. She thought students would interpret efforts to be kind and caring as weaknesses to be exploited. In turn, her students seemed to model themselves after her; they lacked the cooperative and social spirit exhibited in other 5th-grade classes in the school. Another teacher recommended that she try demonstrating a little kindness and caring. As her attitude improved, so did her students' attitudes and behavior.

- *Utilizing choice theory.* Tyrone, a 7th-grader, was new to the school, could not successfully do his work, and was ostracized for having a disabling condition. While he yearned to belong, make friends, and be liked by his peers, he chose to misbehave by talking out of turn, speaking sarcastically to the teacher, making cutting remarks about others, and disrupting his classes. Finally, a perceptive teacher realized Tyrone's psychological need to belong and helped him understand his choices and the results of those choices. As Tyrone's behavior improved, his classmates' feelings and responses toward him also changed.

- *Ensuring enjoyment in school.* One 7th-grade teacher demonstrated a caring attitude, but he thought an idle mind led to misbehavior. Therefore, he never let the students in his classes stop working. Everyone always sat in rows and worked on drill sheets. His principal eventually convinced him that he could accomplish just as much if he let the students engage in enjoyable learning activities (such as group work, peer tutoring, and role playing), as well as provide opportunities to socialize.

Gordon maintains that although the teacher ultimately assumes responsibility for the classroom, the student actually "owns" many of the problems.

Thomas Gordon (1918-)

Thomas Gordon asserted that effective teachers need the skills to identify student problems and needs. With that knowledge, teachers then can change the class environment and instructional practices to improve student behavior, by sending what he called "I-messages" and actively listening. Gordon's emphasis on teaching effectiveness is founded on his belief that a good classroom manager needs to implement effective instructional practices. Especially important to middle school classroom management is Gordon's work on teacher effectiveness training and children's self-discipline.

Contributions of Gordon's Theories. According to Gordon, teachers need to insist upon self-discipline in their students. Rather than yelling, screaming, and punishing students to no avail, teachers should realize that they cannot accept responsibility for someone else's behavior and should insist that students accept the responsibility to discipline themselves. Gordon found a system of rewards and punishments to be ineffective.

Gordon reminds teachers to ask themselves, "Who owns the problem?" (1974, p. 46). He maintains that although the teacher ultimately assumes responsibility for the classroom, the student actually "owns" many of the problems. For example, one daydreaming student does not interfere with the progress of an entire class. Although the teacher should send the message that daydreaming is unacceptable, the problem is the student's and, ultimately, he or she will have

to accept responsibility for changing the behavior.

Along with promoting the idea of problem ownership, teachers need to engage in "active listening" (Gordon, 1974, p. 63). Students need to know that their teacher genuinely understands their concerns. This message cannot be communicated through silence or a brief acknowledgement of students' comments. Active listening also can help teachers better understand behavior problems, while prodding students to identify the causes of the misbehavior, accept responsibility for the problem, and determine a solution.

Empathic understanding, in which a teacher learns about individual students, their specific needs, and their interests and abilities, is one of the best ways to correct or prevent student misbehaviors (Gordon,

1989). In this way, a teacher can tailor curricular and instructional decisions toward individual students without sacrificing academic rigor, achievement, productivity, or creativity. Among the causes of students' misbehaviors might be feelings of inadequacy, stressful home situations, or events from other classes.

Gordon also recommends that teachers send "I-messages" (1974, p. 136). When a teacher begins a statement by saying "you," he or she focuses the message only at the student, rather than conveying how the teacher feels. Saying to the student "You stop that!" or "You had better quiet down or else!" poses roadblocks to effective management. Instead, an I-message expresses how the teacher feels about the student's behavior or communicates how it affects him or her. For example, teachers can make statements such as "I'm frustrated by all this noise," "I'm really annoyed when people get pushed around in this room," "I have difficulty working in all this clutter," or "I am troubled when I don't receive your homework" (Gordon, p. 137).

Gordon (1974) proposed a six-step problem-solving process for resolving conflicts: 1) define the problem, 2) generate possible solutions, 3) evaluate the solution, 4) decide on the best solution, 5) determine how to implement the decision, and 6) assess how well the solution solved the problem. This six-step approach can be used to address almost any problem or conflict—students constantly talking, forming cliques, making too much noise, or bullying other children on the playground. Ultimately, the students will learn to accept responsibility for resolving difficulties.

Gordon also believed that children should be taught self-discipline. In *Teaching Children Self-Discipline* (1989), he considered the word "discipline." As a noun, it suggests order, organization, knowledge of and compliance with rules and procedures, and consideration of others' rights; as a verb, it suggests control and punishment. Gordon maintained that disciplining children might be the *least* (emphasis Gordon's) effective way to achieve discipline at home or in the classroom, and that discipline in the form of punishment produces aggression, hostility, and violence in children. Ultimately, Gordon believed that children should be taught discipline in a nurturing way, rather than having it imposed upon them. Instead of using rewards and punishments, he recommended noncontrolling methods to change a child's behavior, with the goal of having the child accept responsibility for the problem.

Directions for Middle School Educators. The teachers in the following examples have found Gordon's theories to be effective and relatively easy to implement.

- *Demonstrating empathic understanding.* During the first few weeks of school, one 6th-grade teacher gives his students an interest inventory, reviews their permanent records, talks with their parents, and "interviews" each student. He learns as much as he can about his students and looks for their challenges and potential problems as well as strengths on which he can build instruction. He has very few behavior problems. This is mainly due, he thinks, to his students' recognition of their teacher's sense of empathic understanding.

- *Promoting active listening.* When one 7th-grade teacher saw Jermesha enter the room one day, she could sense the girl's anger and frustration. When the teacher questioned Jermesha, the young woman responded: "Nothing's wrong and I don't want to talk about it." The teacher replied, "OK, but if you feel you need an ear, I have a free period later today." That afternoon, Jermesha did share her feelings and the teacher was able to help Jermesha find a way to solve her problem.

- *Avoiding "you" statements.* An 8th-grade teacher encourages his students to focus on sending I-messages, which he tries to model in his own interactions. For example, after he noticed some students in his social studies class picking on a special education student, he approached the problem and began a class discussion by saying: "I become concerned and annoyed whenever I see someone being bullied by others."

A Synthesis of the Foundational Theorists

Middle school educators can either adopt the ideas of one foundational theorist or use an eclectic approach that incorporates the most applicable aspects of each theory into the model. Unless a middle school formally

adopts one classroom management model for all teachers to use, educators usually select an eclectic approach, seeking what works best for them and their students.

What aspects of each theorist might a middle school teacher select to address the misbehaviors described in Table 1? While these are individual decisions, several aspects seem generally applicable for managing young adolescents. First, Skinner's use of positive reinforcement and his behavioral contracts appear to have potential—many teachers find success when they reinforce positive behavior and refrain from making negative comments. Second, Redl and Wattenberg's approach of providing situational assistance and helping students regain self-control also is effective, as is the suggestion to have students appraise reality to determine how their behavior affects others. Third, Glasser's proposal to make schools caring places with a sense of belonging has potential for improving middle schools' learning environments. Fourth, Gordon's theories can prove especially effective when educators insist upon self-discipline, demonstrate empathic understanding, and send "I-messages."

Teachers use Skinner's operant conditioning when they reward positive behavior and fail to reward negative behaviors. They take advantage of Redl and Wattenberg's theories when they consider the effects of group behavior on individual behavior, and vice-versa. Teachers are incorporating Glasser's "choice theory" when they provide opportunities for children to choose between appropriate or inappropriate behavior. Last, Gordon's work emphasizes that teachers should consider individual student needs and insist that students accept responsibility for behavior. Thus, the foundational theorists of classroom management highlighted here continue to provide direction for contemporary classroom management.

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