Better Classroom Management Through the Use of Attribution Theory and Teacher Emotion Regulation

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Introduction

Every teacher will come across a ‘problem’ student or class at some point. Most teachers will probably have a few ‘problems’ each year. As a high school teacher at a large public school, I have had my share of students who prove to have habitual discipline issues. This is a huge part of my job that I do not like. Despite what some of my students may think, I despise having to discipline students. I do not like it when students act out in my class, and I also dread having to call parents or talk to principals about students who are continuous class disruptions. I feel like I have done something wrong as a teacher, even though I have tried to be nice to these students, and I hate having to stop class and other students’ learning to address one student who decides to disrupt everyone else. I want my students to enjoy coming to class, and I want to be able to enjoy teaching them, but sometimes I get so fed up with unruly students that I cannot fathom staying in teaching for another 30 years.

I teach in a large suburban high school in Northeast Ohio. The student body is made up of somewhere around 2400 9th through 12th graders, most of them from white middle or working class families. My class load includes Introduction to Theatre, Acting, Mass Media, and Film Lit. All of these are semester classes. While I love my subject area and I really enjoy teaching the theatre classes and directing after school, I sometimes can get frustrated with my Mass Media and Film Lit classes. These classes are electives that many students take to fulfill a Fine Art requirement. Typically these are students not involved in an Arts class (ie: theatre, music, art), so many students take media classes not so much by choice but by a process of elimination. Class sizes for both sections are always very full and hovering somewhere around 30 students per class. I have taught for four years, all at this high school, and if there is one thing I could change about my teaching load it would be to decrease the class sizes. I find 30 students to be a
challenging number of students to teach, and I never feel like I get the chance to know many of my students in the half year that I have them. Nevertheless, a majority of my students say that they enjoy my classes and at the end of the course are glad they signed up for them. I often have students try to take one of the other subjects I teach because they enjoyed having me as a teacher.

But not all of my students feel this way. A major problem I seem to encounter at least once a year is a male student who feels the need to act out in class. One example of this is a student I will call Cory. Cory was a junior last year in my Film Lit class, a section with 29 students. The class met during the second semester, and I had the class 5 days a week for 52 minutes a day. Cory is a low-achieving, low-effort student and the majority of grades in his classes are D’s and F’s. From the very first day of class, Cory was very social and talked frequently with other students. Cory’s method of socializing, however, was very aggressive and usually included vulgar language, challenging other boys, and teasing girls. At first I tried to redirect Cory’s attention to the lessons by asking him direct questions during instruction. Most of the time Cory would respond with an, “I don’t know- I don’t care!” As his behavior became more distracting, I moved Cory away from who I perceived to be his friends. However, it did not matter who Cory sat by, as he would make new friends wherever I put him. If Cory was not talking during class, he was usually sleeping or listening to his headphones. Consequently, he did not take notes, participate in class discussions, or watch any of the films. When I tried to talk to Cory about his behavior, whether it be one-on-one or during class time when became particularly distracting, Cory would either ignore me completely or become angry and begin arguing with me. On a few occasions, Cory became such a distraction, either by continuing to talk to his friends or by becoming argumentative with me, that I sent him straight to the office and wrote an office referral. I attempted several times to contact home- via phone calls, emails,
and mailed letters, but I never spoke to either of his parents. Cory was frequently put in in-
school suspension (for other classes as well as mine), and during the last few weeks of school, he
was truant many times. Not so surprisingly, Cory failed Film Lit- the only student last year to do
so.

In dealing with Cory, I noticed that I became very upset. His verbal insults made me feel
like I was being attacked, and while I never insulted him back, I feel like I still let my emotions
have too much control, whether it be in my tone of voice or in simply giving up and sending him
to the office. I have had several students like Cory over my four years of teaching, and while
they are definitely in the minority of students I have taught, having one argumentative student
can ruin a whole class- or sometimes a whole day! I come home after these incidents feeling
shaken up and like I have personally failed as an educator. I have talked to principals and other
teachers about such students, and while it helps to vent, most of the time their advice is along the
lines of trying to ignore the student or just doing what I can to ‘keep the peace.’ I am not fond of
their advice because it always results in the student being allowed to fail and not learning
anything, either in terms of the lesson or in proper behavior, and because it seems to me like poor
classroom management. I work with some older teachers who, according to them, have just
given up and are counting the years until retirement. I do not want this to become me, but I
know I have already started to lose some of the excitement I had for the profession just a few
years ago.

My goals for this paper, and professionally, is to learn how to better understand students
like Cory and how to use that understanding to both connect with the student in the classroom as
well as how to better address behavioral issues, and to also learn how to better control my
emotions as a teacher so that I can both address situations with a clear mind, as well as go home
at night without feeling so emotionally drained. To address this first issue of better understanding students, I will be looking at the attribution theory to determine how they view their ability to succeed, and what factors might be hindering them even putting forth an effort in my class. For the second issue, I will be using research done on teacher emotions to help me find ways to better regulate my own responses to student behavior. Using both attribution theory and teacher emotions, I hope to be able to enter next school year feeling more confident about my ability to handle, and maybe even head off, argumentative situations with students.

Theoretical Analysis

Attribution Theory

All people have certain areas in life if which they consider themselves to be good or bad, as well as important or unimportant. Our values help to provide motivation to us in determining whether or not we want or think we are able to complete a task. As students have experiences in their schooling, they will begin to develop a mindset about taking on new challenges based on their prior successes and failures. This is the main idea behind attribution theory, which examines the reasons students give, or attribute, for the outcome of a situation (Schunk, et. al, 2008). Attribution theory takes a deeper look at why students are prone to success or failure, based on the students’ preconceived ideas about their own potential on an assignment. By looking at a student’s reactions to a situation, we can begin to determine what the real issues are, whether they be ability or effort-based. In many cases, a student who is struggling may be doing so not so much because they are having trouble with the material, but rather because they have set up their own mental blocks they prohibit themselves from even putting forth the effort to try to succeed.
Attribution theory looks at several factors when determining what is motivating a student to put forth effort or to give up. The locus is looking at how a student will focus credit or blame on internal factors, such as studying hard for a test, or external factors, such as the teacher is unfair. The amount a student thinks he or she has the ability to control or influence a situation is called controllability. And lastly the stability of situation is how much students think things will change from one situation to the next (Schunk, et. al, 2008). Combining these three factors can give teachers a huge insight as to why some students put forth less effort than others. For example, a student with an external locus that all teachers are cruel will be unlikely to want to listen to their instructor. Perhaps the student had an experience in the past with a cruel teacher, and now he or she enters every classroom with the expectation that there is no way for them to be successful. It is important to look at students’ past experiences to see how they can influence current and future learning situations. By looking deeper into a student’s mindset, teachers can better determine whether a student is truly having problems grasping concepts, or if there is a preconceived notion that is preventing the student from wanting to learn.

In a situation with a student like Cory, I did not believe that he was incapable of completing the work. In fact, there were a few times in class that Cory did participate in the discussion, and I was always surprised that these were insightful comments. The main problem was that Cory simply did not do work and did not want to listen to me or my rules. In looking back on the situation, I believe now that Cory fits the profile of an ‘aggressive boy,’ as described in the BrainPower Program study conducted by researchers at the University of California (Hudley, et. al, 1998). Like the boys in the study, Cory did not take responsibility for anything that went wrong, and he was quick to place the blame for his shortcomings on someone or something else. This means that Cory had formed some inaccurate attributions in his mind, in
that he believed that he did not have much control over situations, and so his reactions were often angry and hostile because he saw no other way to influence an interaction. Aggressive boys like Cory feel limited in the scope of their reactions, and thus “make their social decisions quickly, ignore available social cues, and endorse retaliatory aggression” (Hudley, et. al, 1998, p. 272). I also think that aggression is often a reflection of insecurities about a student’s own abilities. In the school where I teach, and probably in most American schools, social status and appearances play key roles in a student’s ability to make and keep friends and feel accepted at school. Very few students are comfortable with the idea of being labeled as ‘dumb,’ so some students may act out as a way to avoid that potential label. If a student believes he or she is incapable of success, they may see acts of aggression as way out of having to put forth the effort and possibly failing. For many students, it is more socially acceptable and perhaps even more personally acceptable to be known as a ‘bad’ kid rather than a ‘dumb’ one. Thus, aggression becomes a sort of defense mechanism, and the aggressive student now has an acceptable excuse for why they are not passing their classes.

There have been several studies done on how to change or ‘retrain’ the mindset of students with negative attributions. Attribution retraining programs focus on looking at students who have in some reactionary way set themselves up for habitual failure and uses methods that help to reshape how a student thinks about and approaches challenges (Perry & Hall, 2003). Attribution retraining requires some sort of intervention where the teacher both assesses the source of negative attribution as well as implements specific methods to help a student refocus his or her perceptions. One such intervention was successful with groups of ‘bright girls,’ who are high IQ female students who are successful in early schooling, but who become afraid of failure in later grades and thus begin to struggle because they shy away from challenges (Dweck,
In the bright girls’ intervention, students were given a series of timed math problems that were just hard enough so that the students would fail by a small margin. Students were told to increase their effort on such assignments, and over time these girls stopped thinking about their work in terms of ability, which decreased their self-confidence and willingness to take on new work, and instead began to think of achievement in terms of effort. Because they had changed their mindset, students involved in the intervention became more successful in the classroom, and they also had higher self-esteem than before the intervention.

Attribution theory has helped me to see students, especially struggling students like Cory, in a new light. In the past I have been extremely frustrated by students’ lack of effort, especially when it is accompanied by negative and aggressive reactions. I can see now that my methods of trying to help these students have been unsuccessful not for lack of trying on my part, but because I was not addressing the real issues. In the future, I must find ways of helping students overcome negative mindsets and to try and find ways to make them believe that they are capable of achieving success in my classroom.

**Teacher Emotions**

Anytime we deal with relationships and interactions with other people, we are going to have some kind of emotional response. How we use these emotions dictate our reactions to situations and how the other person or people involved might similarly react to our behavior choices. Teachers have an especially challenging responsibility in this area, as our emotional responses help to set the tone and atmosphere for classroom learning (Schunk, et. al, 2008). This can be an extremely difficult position to be put in, because teachers are not only expected to control our own emotions, but we also have the added issue of interpreting student emotions and
responding in a way that will promote the greatest potential for success. It is important for a teacher to learn to regulate and to exhibit greater control over his or her own emotions so that they can have a greater impact on creating a positive, nurturing classroom environment. One way that some teachers have found success in managing emotions in the classroom is through the conscious up-regulating of positive emotions and down-regulating of negative emotions (Sutton, et. al, 2009). By increasing their own visible excitement over a learning activity or student success, teachers can help students feel more positive about the work they are doing in the classroom. Adversely, a teacher who down plays a tense situation or hides their own frustration at student behavior can bring conflict to a swifter end and make better classroom management decisions than one who lets their anger dictate their responses. Most teachers admit that they find themselves down-regulating and hiding their negative emotions more than they up-regulate positive ones (Sutton, et. al, 2009), but by learning to focus in on the joyful moments of teaching, a teacher may not only find him or herself enjoying teaching more, but he or she may also discover that the students become more positive and classroom management becomes an easier task. A teacher may be able to avoid future student misbehavior and confrontations by being pro-active in classroom management and creating an environment that is encouraging for student learning.

Being aware and in control of one’s own emotions is a task that is essential to any kind of leadership role. A person who has control over their emotions and is able to read other people’s emotions accurately are better decision makers than people who lack the aforementioned skills (Bliss, 2004). The ability to read, analyze, and respond to emotions accurately is called emotional intelligence. A person who possesses skilled levels of emotional intelligence typically “appears to be more effective to their superiors and subordinates” (Bliss, 2004, p. 3). This is
demonstrated in research studies, such as the one conducted by Patricia Pitcher in 1999, that find that high ranking business leaders who are more attuned to their emotions and to the emotions of the people they work with report not only more workers who are happy with their jobs, but also greater business success than leaders who have lower levels of emotional intelligence (Bliss, 2004). In a similar way, teachers are the leaders in their classroom, and so being aware of their emotional intelligence and learning how to improve skill sets in this area becomes crucial to being an effective teacher. Students come into a classroom with their emotions already running, and it is important for a teacher to be able to accurately read and deal with each individual student’s emotional levels for that day. A student who comes into class already having a bad day is going to be more likely to be distracted or cause behavioral problems during class time. A teacher who recognizes signs of distress will have a greater chance of reaching that student and finding ways of connecting and helping to regulate the student’s emotional state. Having the ability to be empathic and understanding or to simply take a moment and breathe before reacting to a tense situation can help a teacher to make better choices and be a more effective classroom leader.

In my experience as a teacher, the most success I have had in having good classroom management and student success is when I am truly having fun with what I am teaching. This happens a lot in my theatre classes, where I often get to step in and take an active role in running and demonstrating acting games. These games usually involve some kind of performance, so when we first play the game, I will set the bar, so to speak, with some kind of overdramatic example performance. The students seem to really enjoy seeing me act silly, and this tends to make them less nervous when it is their turn to get up in front of the group. I always have kids open up after a lesson like this and readily engage in feedback and class discussions about what
they just experienced. In time, my theatre classes tend to become more comfortable with each other and with me as their teacher, and I definitely feel a stronger bond with these students than with any other of my classes. The atmosphere for the theatre classes almost always feels warm and exciting, and I find that these classes also tend to be the most encouraging and cooperative of all my students.

However the most discouraged I have been as a teacher is in a class where I have had a student like Cory who comes in with a negative attitude. While I try to treat every day like a new experience and do my best to not harbor negative feelings against any student, I find that students like Cory get my blood pressure rising very quickly. I become upset when they ignore me and my rules, and I feel personally attacked sometimes with the things they say to me that are disrespectful. I also feel like my inability to control their negative behavior is a reflection of poor management skills on my part, and I can feel my confidence levels dropping. I often react quickly to student arguments in attempt to get them under control. While I always am respectful to my students, I do sometimes let them see that their behavior is making me angry or upset, but this always results in them reacting with more anger at me. The more I threaten them with punishments, the more they talk back, and in the end class has been disrupted and the atmosphere is damaged for other students, even after the disrupter is dealt with or removed from the classroom.

In the both of the above situations, I can definitely see the up-regulating of emotions. In the case of my theatre classes, we are all feeding off the positive energy from each other, and the class period is enjoyable and successful for all. With disruptive students like Cory, I am trying to quickly take control of a negative situation, but I am not taking the time to down-regulate my own emotional reactions to what is happening. This tells me that for future situations, I need to
focus on planning lessons that promote a positive, enjoyable atmosphere and experience for my students, and that when students act up, I need to take a moment and assess the situation and my own emotions before I can down-regulate negative feelings, for both myself and the upset student. By focusing on creating positive experiences, I hope to be able to decrease the chances of negative situations arising. But when they do, I hope to be better prepared to take a step back and be able to calm down the student before escalating the situation any further.

**Practical Applications**

As was mentioned in the introduction section of this paper, I am hoping to learn how to better connect with and understand my students so that I can deal with behavioral issues in a healthy, productive way that is not emotionally damaging to myself or my students. I particularly want to learn how to better handle situations with argumentative students, like Cory, who in the past have not only disrupted an instructional period, but have also had the ability to ruin my entire day. In looking at the research for both attribution theory and teacher emotions, I believe that I can develop greater classroom management tactics through pre-emptive planning that both enlightens me to student mindsets and needs, as well as creates a positive atmosphere that contributes to student learning. My plan for applying attribution theory and teacher emotion research will be to develop a daily plan that will set up all students for a successful class period.

Attribution theory states that as human beings, we are more successful when we have a good understanding of the environment that we are in (Schunk, et. al, 2008). Additionally, we have a natural inclination to want to analyze and discover what things are the way that they are, and how students attribute success and failure will “influence learning-related emotions, cognitions, and motivation” (Perry & Hall, 2003). Therefore, students must feel that they are
capable of learning the material before they are even taught the material, or else they are in danger of failing because of a pre-conceived mindset. Likewise emotional states can influence a child in different ways from day to day, and not everyone is naturally skilled in interpreting and dealing with their emotions in an appropriate, productive way (Bliss, 2004). So if a teacher hopes to have a successful day of instruction, first we must find a way to gauge the mindsets and emotional levels of each student before teaching can even begin. This is why I have chosen to develop a daily bell work activity that each student will complete daily right as they walk in the classroom. By completing bell work, I am aiming to both prepare the students for class period of active learning as well as getting some background information from each individual student that will help me to get to better know them and the influences on their learning.

Developing better bell work is something I have been questioning and experimenting with for the entirety of my four years of teaching. In my school, I have encountered teachers who swear that it is a life-saver at the beginning of class as well as teachers who discount it as nothing more than busy work. UCLA psychology professor Dr. Fred Jones promotes bell work as the defining moment between the social atmosphere of the hallways and the work atmosphere of the classroom (Jones, 2007). Students need bell work to signal the start of learning and to transition to a state of mind where they are prepared to be engaged in learning. For teachers, bell work helps focus students in the first few minutes of class while the teacher is engaged in other tasks, such as taking attendance or talking with students who were absent the day before. Without bell work, students use this time to continue socializing, and the teacher then has to take even more time to quiet down the class after administrative tasks are done. With bell work, students are already working and preparing for the day’s activities. Good bell work not only quiets students down at the start of a class period, but also “serves a purpose in getting the day’s
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“Good bell work brings a student’s focus into the classroom and readies them for better learning experiences.” (Jones, 2007)

Because I am trying to make better connections with my students in an effort to understand both their attribution mindset as well as their emotional states, I have developed a check-in sheet that can be completed as bell work on a daily basis. On the check-in worksheet, which is attached in the appendix, students will fill out their emotional state for the moment and to what they attribute these feelings. I have included a box with sample emotion types to give students a starting point that they can pick from, but they are not limited to the options in the box. I also ask students why they are feeling a certain way, both so I can get a better insight to the student’s current situation and so that I can get a better picture of how they are likely to attribute successes and failures in the classroom. For example, a student who comes in constantly in a bad mood and blames this on other people is likely to have an external locus of control, and will probably have a harder time taking responsibility for success and failure (Schunk, et. al, 2008). If a student takes self-blame for his or her negative emotions, they may have lower self-esteem and attribute success and failure as a measurement of self-worth (Dweck, 2000). Both types of students are going to need extra encouragement and positive reinforcement to retrain them to focus on the effort they are putting forth in assignments, as opposed to placing blame in areas that hurt their chances of success. By using the bell work to chart students’ daily feelings and thoughts, I increase my chances of identifying these students and what their underlying problems are.

In addition to the emotional states question, I will also have students complete a brief learning activity to transition them into the class period. The goal for this question is to be some
type of review or anticipatory question that will prepare them for the day’s lesson. Sample questions types will include:

- Respond to a quote.
- Write your own definition for a word.
- Have a partner discussion and record what you discover.
- Simple Sentence Contest (write a larger, more elaborate sentence).
- Current Events Response.
- Review Questions.

The goal with the bell work question is to choose something that is relatively simple and stress free that will make students feel at ease in the classroom. This will give each student a sense of accomplishment right at the start of class, as well as help create a positive atmosphere for learning and creative ideas. Combined with the emotions check-in, I hope that the daily bell work will encourage students to stop and think about their own emotions, give me the ability to better read and understand my students, and the set the tone for a successful class period for everyone.

Reflection and Conclusion

As I am preparing to begin my fifth year of teaching, I feel like I have gained some valuable insight from my research this summer. Instead of feeling helpless and unable to deal with ‘problem’ students, I now feel like I have a new approach that will help me to set up a positive classroom environment that will hopefully discourage aggressive student behavior before it even begins. Before starting this research, I had viewed classroom management primarily as a way to deal with issues in the moment or after a situation had occurred. I now see
that there are ways that I can change the environment of my classroom to encourage better student behavior. Instead of letting one negative experience ruin a learning experience, I can regulate my own emotions and the atmosphere of the classroom to promote more positive feelings. By taking the time to get to know my students and how they think and react, I can also encourage them to let go of negative mindsets and change the way they view learning and their ability to succeed.

Both attribution theory and teacher emotion regulation research has taught me to stop and think more before acting in the classroom. As a young teacher, I want to be able to solve problems quickly and prove that I know what I am doing. But sometimes it is better to take a moment, breathe, and remind myself that I do need to engage in negative emotions to gain control of my classroom, because I already have control and can do a better job with positive feelings. I have also come to understand my students in a way I had not thought about before, and I will take the time to better understand struggling students’ backgrounds and mindsets about learning before I get frustrated at them for not doing work.

I am looking forward to seeing how my new bell work procedure will work in my classes. I trust that I will get some complaints at first- because what is high school without teenage eye-rolling!- but after they get used to it, I think many students will appreciate my effort to get to know them a little better. I am hoping that the bell work fosters better learning relationships with my students and that I can address learning and confidence issues that I had not perceived before.
References

Bliss, S.E. (2004). The Affect of Emotional Intelligence on a Modern Organizational Leader’s Ability to Make Effective Decisions. Retrieved from the EQI.org Website:

http://eqi.org/mgtpaper.htm


Appendix

Daily Check-In Sheet

Name:________________________________________ Class Period:__________________________

On-time or late?__________________ Reason:__________________________________________

Today I am feeling (happy, sad, tired, upset, nervous, ________________) because:

Additional notes or news to share (optional):

Bell Work Question: