

Generating Academic Urgency Through Improved Classroom Management: A Case Study of a University and Urban Charter High School Partnership

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This case study documents a university and secondary school partnership designed to improve classroom management and student time on task at an urban charter high school. The initiative utilized the expertise and knowledge of college of education faculty to identify and ameliorate the high school's observed barriers to students' time on task, and unsatisfactory levels of resulting academic success. The most pressing issues identified and addressed were excessive loss of learning time due to ineffective classroom management, and the resulting need to maximize engaged meaningful learning by limiting time wasted in the classroom.

Introduction

This case study describes a partnership between Northeast Urban University (a pseudonym) and Urban Charter High School (also a pseudonym) which began in late 2015. The administration from Urban Charter High School (UCHS) reached out to their neighboring university, Northeast Urban University (NUU), requesting assistance with ongoing challenges in the areas of classroom management and student time on task. In large part, the pressing nature of the school's needs was prompted by recent reports from state charter school accreditors citing UCHS multiple times for limitations in these particular areas. Given the state's documentation of these challenges, and the potentially dire consequences of failing to meet them, UCHS leadership felt compelled to seek outside expertise and assistance.

Urban Charter High School

Urban Charter High School is located in a medium sized city in the northeastern United States. It is a charter school, grades 9-12, with approximately 425 students, the majority of whom are from the immediate surrounding area. The high school was created in

the 2002-03 academic year and is chartered by the state department of education. It is affiliated with NUU, sharing some technology and library resources, and accommodates many of NUU's student teaching interns. Consequently, while there was a preexisting relationship between the two institutions, collaborations were infrequent.

Northeastern Urban University

NUU is a public, urban, diverse, commuter, Minority Serving Institution with a Carnegie Classification of Comprehensive University I. The university has an enrollment of approximately 6,200 undergraduates and almost 2000 graduate students. NUU's college of education is particularly focused on preparing teachers to excel in diverse urban environments. The college's faculty members possess expertise in urban education, which proved crucial to a positive collaboration. The faculty were also thoroughly familiar with the surrounding area and aware of prevalent challenges. Extensive knowledge of inner-city schools and surrounding communities has proven essential for effective collaborations with urban public schools (Collett, 2013; Collins, Weinbaum, Gilberto, & Vaughan, 2009). Consequently, NUU was in a good position to collaborate with UCHS to address its particular challenges.

Classroom Management and Time on Task

UCHS is not alone in its need for better classroom management and an associated increase in students' time on task. Effective classroom management remains among the most difficult of teacher tasks (Dicke, Elling, Schmeck, & Leutner, 2015; Kaufman & Moss, 2010; Kuster, Bain, Newton, & Milbrandt, 2010; Langdon & Vesper, 2000), and poor classroom management is a primary cause of chronic reductions in academic engagement and student learning (Emmer, Evertson, & Worsham, 2003; Freiberg, Huzinec, & Templeton, 2009; Kounin, 1977; Marzano & Marzano, 2003). Additionally, challenges with classroom management are a primary cause of educators leaving the teaching field (Weiner, 2002).

Given that university/k-12 partnerships have a long history of success in a variety of school improvement areas (Ado & Hersi, 2006), including addressing the need for improved classroom management (Bohanon, 2012), a college/school initiative was designed and instituted.

Initiative Design

The design and implementation of the initiative attempted to follow established best practices for effective university-school partnerships, including: engendering trust among all parties, articulating a shared vision, building in explicit assessment and accountability, and continuous communication (Friedman & Dorr, 2006).

As a first step, initial planning meetings between UCHS senior administration and NUU college of education representatives were held. These extensive planning meetings were valuable prerequisites for making certain both parties were in accord with what was to be done and how, thus ensuring a “shared vision” and mutual trust. Additionally, by building in a schedule of periodic status reports and updates, both ongoing communication and accountability were ensured.

The plan emerging from the meetings was titled, “The Strategic Classroom Management and Learning Optimization Initiative” and was based on the following theoretical framework and principles:

- Each town, school, classroom, teacher and student is unique. Consequently, while general best practices can and should be employed, solutions to challenges should emanate from an analysis of specific and particular teaching-learning environments rather than a priori assumptions.
- Classroom management and student learning are not separate. They inform each other in both obvious and subtle ways. Furthermore, effective classroom management is in fact a prerequisite to effective student learning.

- Substantive improvements in classroom management and student learning are the result of supportive, ongoing, and reflective collaborations involving all institutional constituencies (i.e. teachers, students, staff, administrators, families, community members, and outside agencies).

Building on these guiding principles, this comprehensive institutional classroom management plan sought to improve student engagement and time on task by improving classroom management.

As indicated by Smith & Trexler (2006) in order for university-school partnerships to work, the benefits of success need to be clearly articulated. Consequently, it was essential for UCHS to be fully convinced of the notion that classroom management initiatives can indeed result in increased time on task (Hollingshead, Kroeger, Altus, & Trytten, 2016), leading to the presence of increased teaching and learning.

Procedure

Following established guidelines for social science case studies (Berg, 2001), the complete initiative was broken down into four key phases: Pre-Planning, Phase One (Data gathering), Phase Two (Data analysis and proposed interventions) and Phase Three (Implementation, assessment, and follow-up). Each phase is briefly described below.

Preplanning

Preplanning consisted of multiple meetings with UCHS administration (the principal, and two academic area coordinators) discussing concerns, experiences and desires. This phase also included a thorough reviewing of institutional documents, including school handbooks/manuals, outside agency reports, administrative reports, and other sources of school data. Based on these conversations and document review, the researcher created the initial conceptual proposal outlined in the phases described above and below. Additionally, during this time

the researcher designed appropriate observation instruments and interview protocols for use during Phase One.

Phase One

Phase one consisted of data gathering, and included teacher observations and faculty/staff interviews.

Teacher observations

The UCHS administration provided the researcher with the names of twenty teachers to be observed over the course of approximately two months. According to the administration, the teachers were selected in order to provide the researcher with a generally representative sampling of teachers with varied levels of experiences, classroom management failures and successes, and from a variety of subject areas. Of the twenty teachers observed, nine were female and eleven were male, and half were tenured.

While the UCHS administration did make a general announcement to all teaching staff that the researcher would be observing various classrooms, no dates, times, or additional data were provided. The researcher does concede that the mere presence of an outsider can change the dynamics of a class, sometimes referred to as the “observer effect.” However, unannounced teacher observations were utilized to provide more authentic views of teacher performance and to avoid observing “canned” unrepresentative lessons and atypical teaching demonstrations.

Each class observation lasted approximately thirty minutes. The researcher attempted to enter the classroom as inconspicuously as possible. Generally, he arrived at or near the start of the class period, and sat toward the rear of the room. A laptop computer was used to take notes. For each visit the researcher documented the class, date, time, teacher name, and the number of students. Using an observation log, he then summarized all aspects of the teaching of the class with a particular focus on classroom management and student engagement. This was done for each of the twenty teachers selected for observation.

Faculty/staff interviews

Subsequent to the teacher observations the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with seven teachers (none of whom were among those observed teaching) and one administrator. Once again, these individuals were selected by UCHS administration in attempts to provide varied experiences and perspectives on the status of classroom management at the school. In large part based on the previous teacher observations, the researcher utilized the interviews to explore and explicate common themes that had arisen during the observations. An interview protocol of open ended questions was created based on the preliminary data analysis, and served as a guide for the interviews.

During this in-depth analysis emerging themes were codified based on the following essential questions:

- What are the most common classroom management issues teachers are having?
- What are the most serious classroom management issues teachers are having?
- What, if any, classroom management issues are being caused by insufficient/poor planning?
- What, if any, classroom management issues are being caused by insufficient/poor reactions to in-class disruptions?
- What, if any, organizational/structural institutional realities are contributing to classroom management issues?
- How, if it all, did issues with classroom management affect students' time on task and engagement?
- What, if any, specific skills/attitudes/behaviors do the teachers need to acquire or develop to improve classroom management?
- What, if any, specific skills/attitudes/behaviors do students need to acquire or develop to improve classroom management?

- To what extent is the school administration supporting or inhibiting quality classroom management?

Phase Two

Phase two consisted of further in-depth data analysis and the eventual transformation of that analysis into major findings and proposed interventions.

Conducting this type of qualitative research, the acts of data collection and data analysis are semi-distinct processes that often overlap. Consequently, following established qualitative practice, the researcher analyzed the data from the observations and interviews on a continual basis, consistently updating the research field logs that were kept (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Additional aspects of the logs included field notes, personal reflections and descriptions. Following established research procedures, these writings were then turned into longer writings called “analytic memos” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). The analytic memos allowed the researcher to synthesize emerging thoughts and observations.

Detailed conclusions are presented in the “Findings” section below. The interventions were designed to address the most salient findings in ways that were both effective and practical.

Phase Three

Phase three involved implementation, assessment, and follow-up. Initially, a comprehensive list of possible interventions was presented to UCHS administration. Subsequently, after multiple conversations concerning appropriateness, fiscal constraints, and feasibility, specific interventions were selected for implementation.

These interventions are presented below. Furthermore, a means of assessing the degree to which, if at all, the interventions were successful is also discussed.

Findings

Deficiencies in classroom management severely restricted the time for, and amount of, quality engaged teaching and learning. Therefore, it was concluded that an overriding goal of

the institution must be to maximize the following: student engagement; sense of learning urgency, and excitement; and overall time on task.

Specific Issues Identified

1. Lack of clear relevance as to learning purpose, goal, and contextual meaning.

The primary ingredient for effective classroom management and student learning is student engagement (Prior, 2014). Students who are engaged are less likely to misbehave or disrupt class, they are too busy engaging. However, constant and continuous student engagement was rarely evidenced during the observations. Engagement was sporadic and inconsistent at best. In large part this was because teachers often did not do adequate jobs of making clear to students the relevance of what they were learning, how what they were learning related to what they had learned previously, and the purpose/value of the learning objectives. Relevance, meaning, and purpose are noted prerequisites to quality student learning and engagement (Marzano, Marzano, & Pickering, 2003).

2. Inability to set an initial classroom climate conducive to quality engaged learning.

Very often UCHS teachers began teaching prior to the entire class exhibiting focus and readiness. Fully capturing students' attention is an essential initial step in setting the stage for quality learning (Kronowitz, 2012). However, this was often not observed. There were multiple instances of teachers beginning the class talking over groups of students chatting with their backs to the teacher, and explaining activities while students were still entering the room. Additionally, it often took teachers between eight and ten minutes to transition the class (and even then only *some* of the class) from social/hallway mode to focused academic mode.

3. Excessive distractions from students in hallways and student movement in and out of classrooms

Severe and excessive distractions from students in the hallways were observed firsthand, and were commonly reported as impediments to classroom management and learning through the teacher and staff interviews. In many classes students not in the class would knock on the classroom door, make eye contact with students in the class, and/or begin talking to students in class. This was an obvious and constant distraction that most teachers either ignored, or perhaps worse, did not even notice.

A related chronic disruptive force was students constantly coming in to and leaving class, which often disrupts lesson flow and student learning. The students came and went for a variety of reasons including: bathroom breaks, nurse/counselor visits, special programs, and field trips. As an observer the researcher was not always certain of the exact reasons for this constant movement, but what was clear is that it often disrupts flow and decreases time on task (Marzano, Marzano, & Pickering, 2003), and can detract from the type of positive classroom climate crucial for successful teaching and learning (Brackett, Reyes, Rivers, Elbertson, & Salovey, 2011; Downey, 2008)

4. Teacher enthusiasm often lacking

A core element of classroom management theory is that teachers create the learning climate of their classrooms and communicate values and expectations through attitude and actions (Brackett, Reyes, Rivers, Elbertson, & Salovey, 2011; Wong, & Wong, 2009). Furthermore, it has been well established that successful teachers demonstrate sincere caring about both the subjects they teach and their students' wellbeing (Busteed, 2014; Noddings, 1992). However, at times, some of the teachers observed taught in a perfunctory manner, emitting a degree of staleness and resignation, and a lack of sincere interest in what they were doing. Consistent with research in the field (Brigham, 1992; Zhang, 2014), there appeared to be a clear cause and effect relationship between this lack of enthusiasm among the teachers to teach and the lack of enthusiasm among the students

to learn. An energized and enthusiastic disposition and attitude can go a long way toward creating engaged learners less likely to misbehave or distract others.

5. Excessive “down-time”

All of the issues mentioned above contributed to the overarching issue of excessive downtime where little or no instruction was being done. This is critical. In fact, the overriding purpose of virtually all classroom management is maximizing students’ time on task (Good & Brophy, 2008; Intrator, 2004), and it’s particularly vital in urban schools like UCHS (Smith, 2000), where on average students have less learning time than their higher income peers (Yettick, 2014).

Excessive downtime was observed in a disturbingly wide array of ways: at the beginning of class, when teachers and students required too much time to transition to work mode; during the lesson, when students were uncertain about what they should or should not be doing; while students used technology for socializing purposes rather than academics; when, on various occasions, students sat in classes doing nothing because there was a class trip earlier, or special event soon to come, or some other unusual happening; while students chatted socially during group work; and when pupils and teachers were distracted by students roaming the hallways and/or interrupting class. According to Weinstein (2007) it is imperative that that schools like UCHS enhance procedures for monitoring student movement, maintaining activity flow, and minimizing transition time.

Recommendations

In order to address the documented issues, the following specific recommendations were made to UCHS administration:

- 1. Have administration assess, recognize, value, and reward student time-on-task as a paramount institutional goal.*

An essential focus for addressing all of the deficiencies noted above is to increase the degree to which the administration

(any and all of those observing /evaluating teachers) recognizes, values, and rewards the behaviors they would like to promote.

In order to gain a thorough and realistic picture of how teachers are actually teaching, there should be increased formal and informal observations and all should be unannounced. However, in line with a new mission statement/culture focused on maximizing student engagement, prior to any observations it should be made crystal clear that the primary capacity administrators are looking for is the ability of the teacher to keep students engaged and challenged for the *entire* class period. Specific and clear information as to what supervisors are looking for in their observations is an effective means of changing behavior and improving teaching and learning (Hill & Grossman, 2012).

2. Institute school-wide start of class routine

Given the documented lack of context, meaning, and attentiveness exhibited in many of the classes observed, UCHS should institute a school-wide start of class routine focused on providing these crucial elements of engaged learning. Specific examples of possible strategies, included “do nows,” start of class engagement questions, anticipatory sets, and learning objective clarification activities. In addition to actively engaging students, implementing beginning of class activities can create a sense of routine, which is a widely recognized tool for calming students and improving classroom management (Mundschenk, Miner, & Nastally, 2011). Finally, if done well, these approaches create relevance by building off of what students already know. This sort of constructivist approach has been shown to be an effective tool for quality classroom management (Brophy, 2010).

3. Provide refresher courses to faculty on basic best practices of classroom management

Given the various routes of teacher certification now available in most U.S. states, it cannot be assumed that all teachers have received comprehensive training in best practices of classroom management. Furthermore, research argues that

regardless of path, most teachers would benefit from increased high quality professional development in the area of effective classroom management (Monroe, Blackwell, & Pepper, 2010). Consequently, UCHS should engage in ongoing professional development focused on specific, practical, and effective approaches to classroom management. Finally, it is essential for high school administrators to be consistent in how they respond to misbehavior and rules violation (Jones, Jones, & Vernetta, 2013). By consistently addressing discipline issues and supporting teacher actions, UCHS can further improve the overall quality of classroom management schoolwide.

4. Create classroom management mentors

Assuming quality professional development, once a core number of seasoned teachers have gained competence and “expert” or near expert status in effectively managing their classes, these individuals can serve as classroom management mentors for those who are less experienced or skilled in this area. It is not surprising that experienced teachers have been found to exhibit superior classroom management as compared to novices (Melnick, & Meister, 2008; Putman, 2012; Wolff, Vanden, Jarodzka, & Boshuizen, 2015). Consequently, the ultimate goal should be to develop a cycle of in-house professional development where teachers can train each other on techniques and strategies they have found effective. These sorts of teacher communities have been found to be effective means of improving teachers’ professional skills, as well as building stronger senses of camaraderie among teaching staff (Vangrieken, Meredith, Packer, & Kyndt, 2017).

A collaborative culture of ongoing training and development often results in new levels of excellence schoolwide, and an institutional ethos where managing classrooms, students, and learning effectively is both celebrated and rewarded.

Initial Assessment

Though still in its early stages, the intervention has moved the school closer toward the stated goal of improving student

engagement and time on task by improving classroom management.

At the start of the 2016 school year UCHS adopted a school-wide start of class routine closely modeled after one of the specific suggestions provided in the researcher's report. The strategy engages the students immediately when they enter room by following a series of simple steps designed to make clear the learning objective, the relevance of the lesson, and the relation of the day's lesson to previous lessons. It also utilizes a "do now" type activity directly related to the learning objective, which would then be used to initiate classroom discussion once all of the students are settled in, paying attention, and thoroughly engaged.

The researcher trained school curriculum and instruction leaders in the application of the start of class routine, which was subsequently implemented schoolwide. As would be expected, there was some initial resistance to adoption of the strategy, but eventually more and more teachers began bought in. Two months into the new semester, the researcher provided professional development to the entire school faculty on both the start of class routine and other strategies reviewed above. Subsequent to the professional development, school administrators anonymously surveyed the teaching staff about the extent to which they were incorporating the suggested methods, as well as their perceptions of changes to student engagement. According to survey, a majority of teachers (80%) were using the method, and 90% of them indicated "substantial" increases in student time on task.

Future assessment will utilize both qualitative and quantitative methods to explore teachers' perceptions of student behavior and discipline. The following types of data will be collected: administrators' teacher evaluations, as well as experiences with detentions, referrals, and disciplinary actions; students' perception of their classroom experiences and feelings of safety and security; and because classroom behavior is so closely linked with student learning, select measures of academic performance can also be used as criteria for evaluation.

While more work needs to be done, it is clear that UCHS has begun to not only change its procedures and techniques, but

its culture as well. Based on administrator feedback and direct observation, a renewed emphasis on maximizing on task student engagement has begun to permeate all aspects of the school. As this culture gains stronger footing and meaningful time on task becomes the norm, all of the constituents- administrators, teachers, students, and families- will continue to reap the benefits.

Conclusion

The partnership and initial success described here is the result of two essential components required for effective university/school collaborations designed to improve schooling. First, the value and importance of direct observations and close communication with school personnel cannot be overstated. It was essential to get into the school and engage in thorough, candid, observations to get an up close, in-person look at what was really going on. A cursory review of the school and/or a reliance on what might occur at similar schools would not have resulted in ascribed solutions as contextually relevant, and ultimately effective, as those engendered by close observation.

Second, the ongoing, authentic, and non-adversarial nature of the relationship between university and school representatives laid essential groundwork for coming up with effective responses to stated challenges. Had either side been territorial, resistant or condescending, overall quality and effectiveness would have suffered greatly. Additionally, it was important that the relationship not be hierarchical, with the university “experts” bestowing wisdom on the school, telling them what they were doing wrong. Instead there were give and take discussions where the knowledge and expertise of both sides were respected and applied.

Ultimately, it is hoped that case studies such as this one leverage accumulated research and theoretical knowledge, and through collaboration, bring them to bear on the significant ongoing challenges faced by practitioners in the field.

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