



# Classroom Management Strategies for Difficult Students: Promoting Change through Relationships

Mary Ellen Beaty-O’Ferrall, Alan Green & Fred Hanna

Teachers in middle level schools face overwhelming demands and challenges in their classrooms. They are expected to know content and pedagogy, develop engaging lessons that meet the needs of diverse learners, and use a variety of instructional strategies that will boost student achievement while they simultaneously develop positive relationships with, on average, 125 students each day who are experiencing the personal, social, and cognitive challenges and opportunities of early adolescence (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1995; Schmakel, 2008).

Teaching is complex and cannot be reduced to discrete tasks that can be mastered one at a time. Teachers must “win their students’ hearts while getting inside their students’ heads” (Wolk, 2003, p. 14). As Haberman (1995) suggested, this winning of the hearts occurs through very personal interactions, one student at a time. This perspective is supported by research suggesting that teachers who develop such relationships experience fewer classroom behavior problems and better academic performance (Decker, Dona, & Christenson, 2007; Marzano, Marzano, & Pickering, 2003).

How can teachers engage students through enhanced personal interactions while simultaneously

managing classroom climate and instruction? The purpose of this article is to suggest specific strategies that integrate knowledge and skills from education, counseling, and psychotherapy to help teachers develop a strong management system based on the development of personal relationships with students. These techniques are specifically adapted for use by teachers and more clearly delineate the nature of developing relationships and deepening them for the purpose of making education more effective.

## Classroom management and relationship building

Research indicates that teachers’ actions in their classrooms have twice as much impact on student achievement as assessment policies, community involvement, or staff collegiality; and a large part of teachers’ actions involves the management of the classroom (Marzano, 2003; Marzano & Marzano, 2003). Classroom management is critically important in the middle grades years when students are more likely to experience declines in academic motivation and self-esteem (Anderman, Maehr, & Midgley, 1999). Research indicates that these declines can be linked

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This article reflects the following *This We Believe* characteristic: Value Young Adolescents — Organizational Structures — School Environment

to the classroom, and particularly to teacher-student relationships (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). When surveyed about their goals, adolescents have claimed that academics and the completion of their education are important to them. However, repeated studies of sixth through ninth graders have shown interest in academics, motivation for academics, and academic achievement levels decline dramatically during early adolescence, and especially during seventh grade (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1995).

One of the keys to effective classroom management is the development of a quality relationship between the teacher and the students in the classroom. Marzano, Marzano, and Pickering (2003), in a meta-analysis of more than 100 studies, reported that teachers who had high-quality relationships with students had 31% fewer discipline problems, rule violations, and other related problems over a year's time than did teachers who did not. This significant statistic justifies further investigation into developing relationships.

A critical component of developing relationships is knowing and understanding the learner. Teachers must take steps to learn and understand the unique qualities of middle grades students, who are at a crucial time in their development. Although they are good at disguising their feelings, they have been described as actually craving positive social interaction with peers and adults; limits on behavior and attitudes; meaningful participation in families, school, and community; and opportunities for self-definition (Wormeli, 2003). Teaching middle grades students is unique in its demand for unconventional thinking; therefore, middle grades teachers must be willing to break the rules and transcend convention. The strategies that will be described for dealing with the most difficult of students are in many ways just that—unconventional.

Teachers who adopt a relationship-building approach to classroom management by focusing on developing the whole person are more likely to help students develop positive, socially-appropriate behaviors. The characteristics of effective teacher-student relationships are not related to the teacher's personality or whether the teacher is well liked by the students. Instead, the relationships are characterized by specific behaviors, strategies, and fundamental attitudes demonstrated by the teacher (Bender, 2003) This approach involves taking personal interest in students; establishing clear learning goals; and modeling assertive,

equitable, and positive behaviors (Hall & Hall, 2003; Rogers & Renard, 1999).

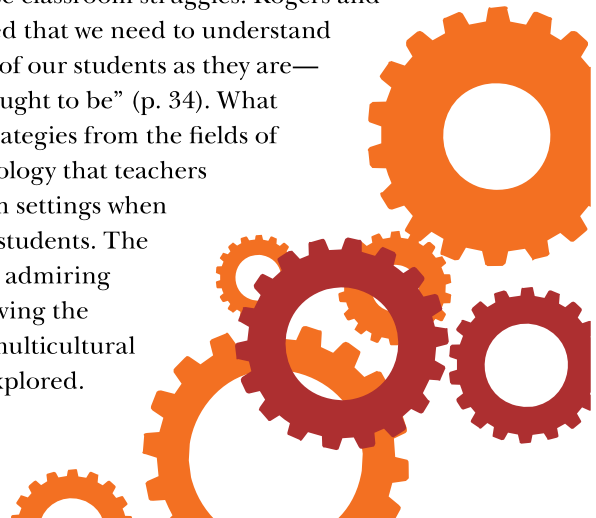
Research indicates that the most effective classroom managers do not treat all students the same. Effective managers employed different strategies with different types of students (Brophy, 1996; Brophy & McCaslin, 1992). Teachers with effective classroom management skills are aware of high needs students and have a repertoire of specific techniques for meeting some of their needs (Marzano & Marzano, 2003).

Adelman and Taylor (2002) reported that 12% to 22% of all students in schools suffer from mental, emotional, and behavioral disorders, and relatively few receive mental health services. The Association of School Counselors noted that close to one in five students has special needs and requires extraordinary interventions and treatments beyond the typical resources available to classroom teachers (Dunn & Baker, 2002). It is often these very students who create the most daunting challenges for teachers.

## Strategies for building relationships

According to Wolk (2003), "Teacher-student relationships permeate the classroom, with relationships both helping and hindering learning and affecting everything from curriculum to choice of teaching methods." Wolk asserted that for most teachers, "their relationships are their teaching" (p. 14). Current literature on building relationships as a means to manage classrooms includes recommendations such as using gentle interventions, finding time for bonding, avoiding punishments, and building activities that ensure success for all students (Hall & Hall, 2003).

These strategies, though helpful, may still leave teachers struggling with the most difficult students. Ideas from the fields of counseling and psychotherapy can be applied to these classroom struggles. Rogers and Renard (1999) asserted that we need to understand the needs and beliefs of our students as they are—not as we think they ought to be" (p. 34). What follows are specific strategies from the fields of counseling and psychology that teachers can apply in classroom settings when dealing with difficult students. The strategies of empathy, admiring negative attitudes, leaving the ego at the door, and multicultural connections will be explored.



## Building empathy

Probably the most important aspect of a positive helping relationship is empathy on the part of the helper (Garfield, 1994; Goldfried, Greenberg, & Marmar, 1990; Luborsky, Crits-Christoph, Mintz, & Auerbach, 1988; Orlinsky, Grawe, & Parks, 1994; Sexton & Whiston, 1994). In actual practice, empathy on the part of the teacher results in the student feeling understood. Empathetic relationships are especially important for difficult adolescents (Bernstein, 1996; Mordock, 1991). Unfortunately in education, empathy is a concept largely misunderstood and even trivialized as a form of affection or caring. To the contrary, caring and empathy are not at all the same. Adler (1956) defined empathy as “seeing with the eyes of another, hearing with the ears of another, and feeling with heart of another” (p. 135). The end result of having been shown empathy is that the person “feels understood.” This is crucial to reaching and relating to young adolescents (Hanna, Hanna, & Keys, 1999).

Many teachers simply assume they understand the student’s problems and dilemmas, and mistakenly try to communicate their understanding in ways that only distance the student. For example, a female middle grades student once told a disappointed teacher that things were really hard at home and studying was

difficult. The teacher responded by saying, “Well, you have to get past it and study anyway. I have been teaching for a long time, and there isn’t any excuse I haven’t heard.” The student, of course, had no indication that the teacher understood at all and was actually discouraged by the teacher’s unempathetic response. If this teacher had taken the time to show that she understood the student’s dilemma, she would have learned that the parents of the student were verbally fighting with each other every day, threatening each other with divorce, and arguing over custody of the children. They also fought about the father’s drinking.

The teacher could have easily encouraged the student with an empathetic response such as, “It must be really difficult trying to study while listening to your parents fighting and wondering what is going to happen with your family.” Such a response would have communicated understanding to the student that she would have found valuable and that would have enhanced the level of respect she had for the teacher. Such a response also would have encouraged the student to communicate with the teacher so that the teacher and student could brainstorm ways to keep the student on task with her various assignments.

## Admiring negative attitudes and behaviors

At first glance, this approach would seem to violate all that we know about behavior modification, but it is based on a well established area of research called “positive psychology” (Seligman, 1999). This approach looks upon negative student behavior as a skill he or she has been practicing and refining for many years. Most of these skills have their beginning in the student’s family life. In the case of a manipulative female teen, for example, being manipulative might have been the only or best way of getting her needs met in her family. It is to be entirely expected that she would bring these same skills to school in an effort to meet her needs there as well.

Rather than engage in a power struggle with such a student, a teacher should acknowledge the skill that the student has worked so hard to develop—and then redirect it. Give her credit for all of the years she has practiced the skill. This will also lead to an increase in the student’s perceived empathy from the teacher. After acknowledging the skill, reframe the skill and then redirect it. It is important that this skill be applied with sincerity. Any hint of sarcasm could lead to further alienation between the student and the teacher.



*Teachers who truly understand young adolescent learners are best able to build strong relationships with students. photo by Alan Geho*

Let us extend the example of a manipulative, young adolescent girl. She is engaged in a behavior that, in all likelihood, annoys both adults and her peers. However, there is a skill that may be present in the girl that can be reframed as the “ability to influence people.” Rather than address the girl’s manipulations as such, mention to her, “I have noticed that you have the ability to influence people, is that true?” She will probably reply

receive it from an adult is precious indeed, and it often inspires immediate loyalty and respect toward a teacher. When communicated genuinely and honestly, it also increases the level of perceived empathy from an adult.

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with something like, “What do you mean?” The teacher can respond by saying, “Well, I have noticed that you can get people to do what you want them to do. Am I wrong?” It would help if the teacher used specific examples. At this point, the student will likely look at the teacher somewhat suspiciously and smile, saying, “Well that’s true sometimes, I guess.” The teacher can then respond, saying, “You have a valuable skill there. If you used it in other ways, you may find more successful ways of getting your needs met. This skill could be valuable in certain careers, such as corporate management, sales, or even counseling.” The young adolescent is usually quite surprised to hear something that she has previously been criticized for now being admired and looked upon as something potentially valuable.

Another example of the application of this approach would be the case of a young adolescent who consistently displays the infamous “bad attitude.” Quite at variance with the usual characterization of the bad attitude, we look at it as a skill that is often practiced and has a particular goal. The goal is to display and announce defiance and, to a certain degree, independence. Instead of fighting the attitude, punishing it, or even ridiculing it, try admiring it, putting aside any disgust or exasperation. “Wow,” the teacher might say, “You sure do have an impressive attitude. It is very well constructed, and I can tell you have been working on it for years.” One’s first thought on reading this might be to conclude that such an approach is simply crazy. However, a large percentage of young adolescents respond to this tactic with a smile and a greater willingness to continue the discussion. Admiration is extremely rare in the lives of young adolescents, and we dare say, much rarer than love. To

the class. In the case of the disruptive class clown, the reframe would be along the lines of admiring the student, then reframing the clown act as natural comedic skill. A possible redirect could consist of a challenge to the student to use that skill in a creative way and in an appropriate setting that can be set up by the teacher according to the personality of the student.

### Leaving the ego at the door

It is readily apparent that to follow this relationship approach, a teacher or school administrator must have the capacity to suspend the flaring up of his or her own impulses, issues, and negative reactions. Young adolescents are highly skilled at reading teachers and identifying the things that make them impatient, rigid, angry, and upset. Young adolescents often share insights with each other about what annoys teachers and school administrators. The ability to manage one’s own issues as they arise is one of the counselor’s most demanding skills. It also marks the difference between the effective and the ineffective counselor (Van Wagoner, Gelso, Hayes, & Diemer, 1991). It is also an assessment of truly effective relationship-based teaching. Once a professional gives in to emotions such as anger, exasperation, or displeasure, his or her ability to function becomes impaired to a degree. It seems no one knows this better than some young adolescents, who may be quite aware of the effects they have on adults.

When a teacher takes the comments and manipulations of students personally, interpersonal chaos is likely to follow. Thus, it is a good idea for a teacher to learn to suspend his or her own issues as they arise—to “place them on the shelf,” so to speak, to

be addressed later. One of the hidden advantages of working with young adolescents is that they have much to teach us about our own reactions and habitual ways of interacting. All too often, the student becomes the teacher of lessons that may not be learned in any other context (Hanna, 2002). Suspending one's own reactions is a skill, to be sure, and it is a skill that can be improved with practice.

Leaving the ego at the door of the classroom is perhaps the most valuable suggestion we have to offer, along with showing empathy. Without this, however, empathy may never get a chance to emerge. Young adolescents closely watch the reactions of adults to see if they practice what they preach. For example, if Tom, a seventh grade student, erupts in class one day because he is being teased for being a "suck-up," a very typical teacher response is, "Just try to ignore what the other kids are saying." However, if a teacher or counselor tells a student to "ignore" the taunts or insults of another and then reacts angrily to being disrespected, the student, like most of us, will have little respect for what amounts to hypocrisy. Demanding respect is not as effective as earning it, and how the teacher comports himself or herself has much to do with how he or she is viewed and respected by students. To successfully build relationships and apply the skills mentioned in this article, leaving the ego at the door can be viewed as a prerequisite. At various times, leaving the ego at the door can be connected to issues of culture as well.

When a disruptive young adolescent routinely pushes a teacher's buttons, that teacher has an ideal opportunity to apply the practice of leaving the ego at the door. It is human nature for teachers, or anyone for that matter, to get upset when an adolescent pokes fun at a personally sensitive topic or issue. This is especially true when it comes to the topic of authority. Many teachers believe that they must have absolute authority in the classroom. They also believe that this authority comes automatically with their status as the teacher and does not necessarily have to be earned. When students question this authority by being non-compliant or engaging in disruptive behaviors, they may easily trigger an emotional reaction from the teacher see Dooner, et al., in this issue. For example, Sammy, an eighth grade student, might say, "Why should I listen to you? You're just a middle school teacher. Why don't you have a good job?" The unexamined response that a teacher might give is this: "You have no right speaking to me like this. I know a lot

more than you do, and I know you have detention today. See me after school." Because teachers do have authority and certain privileges afforded to them by their position, anger and frustration often lead to the abuse of power in punitive ways. This usually happens when the adult does not take the opportunity to examine his or her own vulnerabilities on a regular basis. When the disruptive adolescent repeatedly insults or disobeys the teacher, the teacher's ego takes over, demanding respect.

If the teacher had taken the time to examine his or her own vulnerabilities, he or she might have said, "You sound like my mother. She didn't think I should become a teacher either. She wanted me to wear a starched shirt and tie every day and work in a big law firm. But I tell her I get to be a part of the lives of more than 120 seventh graders—including yours, Sammy. What more power do I need?" Then the teacher can turn the topic around to question the student by saying, "What does your family say to you about what you hope to do someday?"

When a teacher is self-aware of vulnerabilities, such as the need for power, he or she is more likely to respond strategically rather than emotionally. For example, a teacher who knows he is sensitive to students questioning his authority can anticipate that middle grades students will, in fact, question his authority. Such awareness can lead to the use of empathy or the admiration of negative behaviors, as previously discussed. In essence, the key to leaving one's ego at the door is awareness.

## Multicultural connections

Developing relationships with students who come from culturally different backgrounds can be challenging and requires specific skills from new and experienced teachers alike (Nieto, 1999a, 1999b, 2008). The recommendations for forming relationships made earlier in this article are essential when cultural differences are present. That is, having empathy, admiring negative behaviors, and leaving one's ego at the door can go a long way toward bridging the gap between culturally or linguistically different (CLD) learners and the teacher.

The challenges within the cross-cultural encounter lie in overcoming the additional barriers that prevent teachers from letting down their guard to empathize and develop stronger relationships with students. These barriers exist due to a fear of the culturally different, a lack of knowledge about the differences and similarities between cultures, persistent negative stereotyping, and general intolerance. To overcome these barriers

and develop multicultural competence, a teacher must overcome his or her fears and unresolved issues regarding cultural difference. This can be achieved by gaining deeper knowledge about himself or herself and the culturally different student. (Bradfield-Kreider, 2001).

Practices from the field of counseling have great promise for enhancing relationships in the culturally diverse classroom. In counseling, multicultural competence consists of being acutely aware of cultural attitudes, beliefs, knowledge, and skills of both the counselor and the client (Arredondo, 2003). Training new counselors involves an examination of how the new counselors feel about themselves and culturally different clients. Such competencies can easily be used as a guide for classroom teachers who want to enhance their relationships with CLD students.

It is important to help teachers become aware of how their racial and cultural heritages may impact their classroom climates. This awareness helps prepare teachers to identify and work through any existing intolerance they may have for students who come from different ethnic, racial, class, or religious backgrounds. It is equally important for teachers to be aware of their negative and positive emotional reactions to CLD students. For example, if the disruptive adolescent described in the previous scenario happens to come from a racial or ethnic background that is different from that of the teacher, checking one's ego becomes more complicated. It is, therefore, vital for the teacher to be aware of his or her cultural and personal biases and the connections between the two. Then, when challenges to authority occur, the teacher who is aware of his or her "stuff" is better equipped to respond in more strategic ways. Such self-examination helps teachers leave their egos at the door and ultimately develop empathy for those they teach.

For teachers to engage in successful intercultural interactions, they must maintain an astute approach to learning relationships and be aware of the ways schooling helps to reinforce social class differences (Hipolito-Delgado & Lee, 2007). Marginalization refers to the historic and systemic ways in which people are adversely affected by racism, poverty, and other forms of oppression (Green, Conley, & Barnett, 2005). Teachers who are vested in educating students who come from such backgrounds should develop relationships by making meaning of the curriculum as it relates to their lived experiences outside the school. Taking this

approach allows teachers to share their own personal experiences about hardship, triumph, and failure, regardless of the similarities or differences with the student's life.

Programs such as *Facing History and Ourselves* ([www.facinghistory.org](http://www.facinghistory.org)) and *Rethinking Schools* ([www.rethinkingschools.com](http://www.rethinkingschools.com)) provide curricular materials that are designed to provide these kinds of shared self-examination experiences in the classroom. *Facing History and Ourselves* engages students from diverse backgrounds in an examination of racism and prejudice to promote a more informed and tolerant citizenship. Through study and discussions of current and past historical events, students are encouraged to analyze their own thinking, see the world from more than one perspective, and place themselves in someone else's shoes as they examine events from history around the world. Together, students and teachers struggle to form judgments about human behaviors. Curricular materials expose students to such topics as violence in Northern Ireland, genocide in Cambodia, AIDS victims in Africa, anti-Semitism in London, or Mexican immigration struggles in California. Even though many of these events may occur miles away in different states and different countries, many of the core



*Teachers can best develop empathy for students when they are aware of their own personal and cultural biases. photo by Alan Geho*

issues are still the same. When teachers use curriculum and content that hold personal meaning to them and their students, barriers are more likely to break down for

must begin with a new paradigm in which teachers view classroom management as an ongoing exercise in building relationships.

**When teachers use curriculum and content that hold personal meaning to them and their students, barriers are more likely to break down for everyone, and relationship building has a better chance.**

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One strategy from *Teaching History and Ourselves* is called the Life Road Map ([www.facinghistory.org](http://www.facinghistory.org)), which allows teachers and students to develop a map of their lives by creating sequences of events, including important decisions and inspirations. This strategy would be useful to a teacher with students who have recently immigrated to the United States. It would promote an appreciation for one's own culture and for the cultures of others that are represented in the classroom. It also would provide a forum for sharing difficulties that teachers and students have faced, some of which will be a result of culture and race.

A similar strategy, developed by *Rethinking Schools*, provides a template for teachers and students to write a poem called "Where I'm From" that reveals information about their lives outside school (Christensen, 2002). Students are encouraged to include information in the poem by studying items found in their homes, in their yards, and in their neighborhoods and the names of relatives, foods, and places they keep in their childhood memories. For a teacher with students from a variety of cultures in one classroom, these poems could be read aloud and posted to provide a powerful way of building relationships and community in the classroom. For both of these strategies, it is critical that the teacher participate by completing the assignments and sharing them as well.

## Conclusion

Efforts to improve education must focus on the single most important component: the classroom teacher (Ingwalson & Thompson, 2007). Teachers in middle level schools must be well prepared to face the challenges of working with young adolescents; and critical components of teacher preparation are the knowledge and skills from education and related fields that will enable them to develop effective, and often unconventional, management systems in their classrooms. This effort

For dealing with the most challenging of students, teachers can learn and apply strategies used in the field of counseling and psychotherapy, such as building empathy, admiring negative attitudes and behaviors, and leaving one's ego at the door. It seems particularly important to provide specific strategies for dealing with what can often be the problems that prevent us from persevering in the important work of helping students learn. In the area of classroom management, it is critical that teachers find ways of building relationships with *all* students, from the most motivated to the most difficult. To borrow the words of Rogers and Renard (1999), when we enter into understanding human needs and relationship-driven teaching, "amazing things can happen" (p. 34).

### Extensions

Identify three obstacles that interfere with your ability to make meaningful connections with your students.

Think of an educator from your past with whom you did not connect. What would you say to that educator about building relationships with students?

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