

Survive and Thrive: Classroom Management in the Music Room

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Introduction

The old-school concept of classroom management is reactive. I remember as a beginning teacher being observed, and the form included “tick” marks indicating the number of times I corrected student behaviors. We were considered successful if we corrected undesirable student behaviors. I didn’t get it; if it got to that point, then it was too late.

I’ve always heard (research suggests) that we teach the way we were taught, and our teachers teach the way they were taught. If this is the case, how many of us are teaching in a 1960’s music room?

Classroom management is the lowest common denominator for so many other issues:

Are you exhausted every day?

Do you have classes you dread teaching?

Do you feel like you say the right things, but the kids aren’t getting it?

Do you wonder when the great musical moments will happen in class?

Is teaching not what you expected?

Well, then let’s talk.

Compliance isn’t the goal; it should be engagement.

Did you know?

53% of teachers who left the classroom cited classroom management as either “extremely” or “very” important reasons they left.

77% of beginning teachers feel they were unprepared to deal with classroom behaviors, even though they completed classroom management coursework.

82% of teachers who received classroom management mentoring in their first year stayed in the classroom past their first year, but...

Only 51% teachers who didn’t received classroom management mentoring in their first year stayed in the classroom past their first year.

Research suggests that it takes 4-7 years for a teacher to feel comfortable with classroom management techniques. By this point, many have left the classroom. This is also more than the classroom experience required for a terminal degree in music education (PhD,

DMA). Research also suggests that it takes 8 years or more for classroom management to become intuitive/instinctive. There are many variables which can affect these numbers.

Classroom management is the one thing that affects all other aspects of what we do, including pedagogy and artistry. Real artistry in the classroom can not occur without engagement.

Proactive classroom management is the foundation of effective and efficient pedagogy. Effective pedagogy is needed for artistry in the K-12 classroom. The idea that they are independent is outdated; kids don't study privately at the rate they used to, nor should they need to. They need us to help them be proficient on their instrument to achieve real artistry.

Let's explore a proactive, psychology-based approach to classroom management. In this type of classroom, confident students achieve at higher levels. They aren't afraid to make a mistake. The environment lends itself to them being expressive. Every day is the "best they've ever sounded and the worst the ever sound again."

TDLR: Compliance isn't good enough; engagement is the goal.

Background

Before moving forward, let's look at differences between engagement and compliance:

| Compliance | Engagement |
|--|--|
| Students participate to avoid consequences. | Students participate to learn and interact with content. |
| Leads to extrinsic motivation. | Leads to intrinsic motivation. |
| Studies/practices when it's necessary, typically for grades* | Studies/practices as the result of sincere interest, and the desire to improve and contribute. |
| Typically, doesn't volunteer to play or answer questions. | Feels safe to take chances, which lead to improvement. |

**Practice journals are not good examples of this!*

Now, let's look at differences between reactive and proactive classroom management.

| Reactive | Proactive |
|---|---|
| Addresses undesirable behaviors after they occur. | Focuses on preventing undesirable behaviors. |
| Disrupts instruction. | Maximizes class time. |
| Rules/Consequences | Expectations |
| Can create confrontational situations and can harm the student-teacher relationship | Fosters a feeling of safety in a structured environment |

One of the most important considerations for this discussion is the differences between rules and expectations:

| Rules | Expectations |
|---|--|
| Enforced with consequences | Fostered with positive feedback and praise |
| Not flexible | Molds to the situation |
| Compliance is the intended outcome | Engagement and ownership are intended outcomes |
| Intended to eliminate undesirable behaviors | Intended to encourage desirable behaviors |

Finally, when I think about an engaged classroom, the following factors come to mind:

- Be Present
- Redirect and Reinforce
- Feedback
- Build Connections
- Be Consistent
- Trust
- Be Prepared
- Be Positive

Be Present

There is nothing more important than what is going on in the classroom! Engagement is a two-way activity. Some factors that may take your attention from them:

- Attendance
- Email/paperwork
- Your phone!

What are things we can do to prepare for class that minimizes distractions?

- Lesson planning
- Score study
- Planning your day to allow for other responsibilities

Oh, and if you want them to be on time, then start on time.

Redirect and Reinforce

This is essential to molding and managing student discipline, behaviors, and engagement. Don't miss an opportunity to praise a student who is a positive example. This encourages the student to continue these behaviors, and it encourages others to follow the example; all humans want approval.

What if they are off task? Use non-verbal cues, when possible, to redirect undesirable behaviors, but immediately follow up with positive reinforcement when they do better. Proximity, eye contact, smiles, etc. are more powerful than words.

Feedback

The use of specific and timely feedback is one of the greatest tools to keep students engaged. When you stop in rehearsal, be sure that you have something important to say. Avoid non-specific feedback (e.g., "Nice"), or generic instructions without guidance ("Do it again."). If you want them to play it again, for example, tell them why, and then address it immediately after they perform the section.

This can be difficult if you are a beginning or young teacher, but it's still essential. Go observe other teachers or sit in on a room at Solo and Ensemble MPA. Write down examples of good feedback and make yourself a bank of example phrases. Sentences stems work great, too:

I really like the way you _____.

What do you think about the way we _____?

Build Connections

Connection is essential for communication and facilitates real learning. What can we do to build healthy, appropriate relationships with your students?

- Greet your students at the door (duh).
 - o Don't just say hi. Ask them how they are doing?
- Use humor
 - o Most of us are funny in some way...

- Beware of sarcasm. Not all students process it the same way, and it can be isolating.
- Be their cheerleader! Tell them you are proud of them. Call home and tell their parents you are proud of them.
- Attend events, when you can, to support their other activities.
- Make sure they know you are glad they are here.

Be Consistent

Clear, consistent routines and procedures provide safety and stability. Students should know what to expect when they enter your room, they should know what's happening next. Beware of "warm-ups" that are automated and don't require your attention. Do have a consistent, predictable routine, but do not forget this is the most important part of class. This is where the most important learning takes place. Have a routine, but make alterations to complexity and difficulty. This allows you to "say less." How many of your words are devoted to music?

It's also important to have consistent expectations for all of your students. Kids realize it when you give up on them; the other kids notice it, too.

Trust

Trust is a necessary ingredient for safety and security. Tell your students the truth. If something was good, they need to hear it. Likewise, if something isn't, they need to hear that too. They also need to trust that you are vested in their growth (see the "Connections" section.).

It's equally as important for students to believe that you trust them. Trust them to meet expectations. Trust builds ownership. Also, trust them to play more challenging music. They will rise to the challenge and grow from it. If kids are challenged, they won't work as hard.

Be Prepared

Planning is an investment in success. While "winging it" may work at times, more often it does not. The biggest danger in this approach is that you are planning as you teach, so it is impossible to be fully engaged in the process.

Set goals for each class each day. What do you want to accomplish? How will you get there? What if it doesn't work? Beware of "goal creep;" stick to your plan. Score study is an essential part of this process, but doesn't need to take long. Focus on score study that

is specific to your lesson plan. This can be time consuming but doesn't have to be. It also looks different for everyone.

Be Positive

Positive is inspiring and negativity is contagious. There is a difference between false positives and a positive outlook. The power of "yet" and "get:"

- You don't know your part. OR
- You don't know your part, **yet**.
- We have to go play at the pep rally. OR
- We **get** to go play at the pep rally.

If you want kids to stay engaged, make sure they feel glad to be there!