

Running Head: WHAT HAPPENS TO THE ATMOSPHERE

**What Happens to the Atmosphere in My Classroom
When I Focus on the Positive Behavior of My Students?**

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What Happens to the Atmosphere in My Classroom

When I Focus on the Positive Behavior of My Students?

I am in the unusual situation of holding two separate positions at Central Regional High School in northwestern New Jersey. For six periods of the school day I am the Media Center assistant working with classes, small groups, and individual students who use the Media Center both during the school day and for extended hours at the beginning and end of the day. For the remaining two periods of the day I teach various history classes on different grade levels depending on my teaching assignment for a particular school year.

I began the 2006-07 school year assigned to the Media Center full-time, and was not scheduled to teach any history classes. In October of 2006 a new teacher who had been hired to teach history on a part-time basis resigned and I took over her classes, teaching two sections of U.S. History II. Both classes were designated as "General" level which is one level below the college prep level. Students assigned to G level classes typically exhibit one or more of the following criteria: a previous academic performance that indicates an inability to perform the work expected in a higher level group, a classification that requires an Individual Educational Profile (IEP), behavioral issues, or attendance issues.

School Culture and Community

The total enrollment for Central Regional for the 2006-07 school year was approximately 880, with students coming from four sending districts. Two of the sending districts, Westville and Northville, are predominantly middle-class communities, which contribute 18.3% and 16.7% respectively of the total student population to Central Regional. Eastville is a larger, economically diverse community which accounts for 29% of the total student population. There are numerous residents who receive some public assistance or live in low-income residential

units while others own homes of substantial value. In contrast the largest of the sending districts, Centralia, is a much more affluent community which covers the largest geographical area and accounts for 34.6% of the total enrollment (Central Regional High School Guidance Dept., 2006).

There is little cultural diversity in any of the four communities with more than 94% of the total population listed on the 2000 census as Caucasian, 0.5% African American, 1.4% Asian, and 4.0% Hispanic or Latino (http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/SAFFacts?_event). The New Jersey School Report Card for 2005-06 states that 98.4% of the students use English as the first language spoken at home, with only 0.3% considered to have Limited English Proficiency (<http://education.state.nj.us/rc/rc06/narrative>). Central Regional's student population reflects the limited cultural diversity of the area. The 2006-07 enrollment figures show that 2% of the students are African American, 7.8% Hispanic or Latino, and 1% Asian in cultural background. The number of classified students utilizing Individual Education Plans (IEP) is 139, or 15.7% of the total student population (Central Regional High School Guidance Dept., 2006).

Classroom Dynamics

The scenario was my 7th period class of 21 students: twelve male and nine female; fourteen juniors and seven seniors, five of whom were repeating the class. Three of my students were classified and had IEPs that allowed them extended time for test-taking purposes. Two of the three were assigned to a resource teacher for one period each day. Approximately two-thirds indicated plans to attend college; only one of the seven seniors planned to continue his education after high school.

From my first day with this class I experienced significant difficulties in classroom management. There was a group of students that included the five repeating seniors and several

juniors that was chronically disruptive, inattentive, rude, and sometimes openly defiant. Two or three other students took the role of “fellow travelers,” sometimes participating in the negative behavior of this group. The classroom atmosphere was often chaotic and confrontational. The rest of the class was resentful of the problems caused by this core group and looked to me to address the issues.

In order to understand the scope of my question and the various ways in which I approached my exploration of it, it is necessary to give a description of some of my students as individuals. I have chosen to use pseudonyms that are descriptors of them as seen through my eyes and influenced by events that took place in our classroom. Collectively, I mentally referred to them as my “Hooligans.” While this may appear at first to have a negative connotation, over time this became a term of endearment.

Seniors

Tattoo Guy was classified as Emotionally Disturbed and was prone to sudden mood swings that resulted in explosive anger. He used compliments to set up a situation where he could ridicule his targets, and I was often his intended victim. His attendance was very erratic; I never knew when he would appear in my classroom with his power- and revenge-seeking behavior.

Hershey Boy had very erratic attendance, a strong personality, and often demanded to use the hall pass at inappropriate times. He had received a serious head injury in an accident a few years before and often used it to excuse both his absences and his behavior. He was very creative in the ways in which he sought and gained attention.

Heavy Metal Man was rarely in class, but his presence served to set the tone for defiance and confrontation. He was very bright and could have easily passed the class but chose not to do so. He stated emphatically that his main goal was to get his parents to allow him to drop out of

school and make his fortune as a self-proclaimed musical production genius. He refused to follow even the most benign requests, argued over every assignment, and tossed out caustic comments from the back of the room.

Cell-phone Girl acted as the unofficial den mother to the boys. She kept their class papers for them and always seemed to have their belongings in her car. She was a flagrant cell-phone abuser who could be very sweet and cooperative when she chose to be but was like a lioness defending her young when crossed.

Wannabe was much more a follower than a leader. He added a confusion factor to the room just by being his good-natured, go-along-for-the-ride self. He would disappear with the bathroom pass for 20 minutes, resulting in near-riots by students waiting for their turn to use the pass.

Juniors and Fellow Travelers

Paris Hilton was the poster girl for “the rules don’t apply to me.” She had a very problematic relationship with Mom which she transferred to any female authority figure. Although very bright, she admitted that she was in the class because she was very lazy. She always did her work and performed well on tests, and she let everyone else copy from her both in and out of class. She was oppositional, very defiant, and highly manipulative. She liked to massage the boys’ backs as well as their egos. Her favorite activity was to light a fire under...

...Macho Man, who was an immature, loud, aggressive, and defiant boy prone to sudden outbursts of a hair-trigger temper. He was very big and intimidating in size and nature and took advantage of others’ weaknesses. Underneath the brash exterior he was very insecure and had low self-esteem. He used profanity liberally in all situations and often referred to the girls in uncomplimentary and even obscene terms.

N. Archist was sometimes hard to figure out. He was very knowledgeable about history and politics and was a self-designated anarchist. He had the ability to perform at a high academic level and always scored high marks on quizzes and tests, but never brought a book to class or turned in written assignments. He liked to debate issues and was a very persuasive speaker who was well-informed on current events. He would challenge my knowledge and trip me up whenever he could.

Social Girl was very manipulative, untrustworthy, confrontational, and sometimes tried to turn discipline efforts into ethnic harassment (It's because I'm Latina).

Hat Guy allowed himself to get dragged into classroom dramas that did not concern him, and went off like a rocket when corrected. He was definitely a follower.

My first impression of my students was formed as an observer, rather than as their teacher. A few days before the departing teacher's (Ms. L) last day the department supervisor asked that I sit in on the classes. The intention was that I would see her teaching style and plan a way to merge it with my own over time. My journal entry (JE) for that day was short but indicated that I was already concerned about the situation I was walking into:

I sat in on both classes this afternoon. Since they are watching *All Quiet on the Western Front* there is not a lot to observe. Both classes will be challenging groups and, as juniors and seniors, new strategies will be necessary and old ones will have to be modified. I've had some of these kids before – it will be interesting to see how they've grown in the past two years. One class in particular is very upset by the change – they spent most of the period bemoaning the loss of their current teacher. (JE, 10/18/06)

I spent the weekend prior to taking over my classes in a graduate class where we responded to prompts about teaching. My own response to the prompt, *How do you expect that you might become a better teacher?*, indicated that I was already monitoring my own performance.

I need to step outside myself and see me as the kids do. Not what I'm wearing or if I'm having a bad hair day, but whether or not I model effectively the behavior I expect from them – to be respectful, open-minded, patient, compassionate...I need to be less rigid at times – my Type A personality influences everything I do. Sometimes rules have to be broken. (JE, 10/21/06)

Framing the Question

My relationship with this class did not get off to a good start, partly due to some issues left behind by the former teacher, but also due to the fact that she and I were two totally different people. She was teaching for the first time while I had classroom management routines developed over several years of experience with adolescents. The kids were accustomed to choosing their own seats, not having to meet deadlines, using their cell phones, cruising the halls with the bathroom pass, and generally doing what they pleased. They resented me as her replacement, especially my attempts to reclaim control of the classroom.

I entered my classroom determined to follow the original plan made with my supervisor for a smooth transition. I would continue to use Ms. L's grading system and behavior standards for a while and make only small changes along the way as necessary. By midterms I would have things shifted around and most of the changes would be painless. However, as stated so poignantly in one of Murphy's Laws, "All skill is in vain when an angel pees in the barrel of your rifle." Within a few days my journal foretold the fate of the smooth transition plan.

So much for the plan. 7th period was awful – had a showdown with Paris Hilton, who has

been a problem since Monday. After three warnings I moved her seat where she popped and cracked her gum continuously, so I told her to get rid of it. She refused. I picked up the trash can and held it out. She refused, arguing the whole time. Five or six others started popping gum. I revoked their gum privileges after writing Paris Hilton up for insubordination and sent her out. We're at a stalemate. None of them would get rid of their gum. Do I start issuing detention tomorrow? If I let it go I've given up a lot of ground.

(JE, 10/25/06)

While my actions were not necessarily inappropriate they led me into the pitfall of getting into a power struggle with an expert power-seeker, a mistake often made by a less-experienced teacher, and one that I was usually able to avoid. By the end of the first week I came to the conclusion that the students had controlled this class rather than the teacher, and that they were operating at the level of Ms. L's expectations for cooperation and behavior. I recalled being concerned in my last conversation with Ms. L when she told me that "they're used to being able to hand their work in late" (JE, 10/21/06).

I struggled with many issues over the next week, from the lack of textbooks brought to class to the constant parade in and out of the room all period to use the bathroom, get a drink, or escape from the room for other purposes which I learned about as time went on. Macho Man liked to cruise the halls and was returned to the room by staff hall monitors a number of times. Social Girl used her cell phone to arrange a time to meet her girlfriends in the bathroom, often leaving the room for as long as 20 minutes. Cell-phone Girl always had to see a teacher, a guidance counselor, or go to the main office to get permission to retrieve something from her car. Hat Guy always needed a drink *now* and Hershey Boy would call out from his seat that he was going to pee where he sat if he didn't get to use the pass.

As part of the transition it had been decided that the first marking period grades would be established at the time Ms. L left, which was 8 weeks into the 10-week marking period. The remaining two weeks would be added on to the second marking period when all grading decisions would be mine. This had been explained to the students, and Ms. L had informed the students of their grades before leaving. At the end of the marking period the students asked for their grades and I reminded them that they already knew them. In order to put an end to the chorus of “I forgot” I told the students their grades again, using the list provided to me by Ms. L. I was totally unprepared for what followed. Several of my seniors denied having earned such low grades and accused me of changing them after Ms. L left. They were quickly supported by their fellow travelers and the whole group stormed from the classroom, their intention being to take their complaints to the superintendent’s office. My journal entry for the next day told the story:

There was a total mutiny over grades in Per. 7. To make it short, all the low grades are being artificially raised. So they are getting what they want with no consequences for their actions of leaving the classroom, screaming and shouting, and making me the whipping boy for Ms. L’s mistakes. Their outrageous behavior has been rewarded and a precedent has been set. (JE 11/2/06)

My supervisor described the scene in the superintendent’s office as he explained to me why he was revising all the grades. I realized that I had been cut off at the knees, my authority and credibility having been seriously undermined by the actions of others. How could I possibly solve the behavior problems in my classroom without the support of the people above me?

I often felt like a lion tamer stranded in the center ring without my whip and chair, and I knew the lions wanted to feed. I exhausted my supply of classroom management strategies by the

end of the first month. Cooperative discipline techniques fell flat in a room full of oppositional defiance and chronic noncompliance. I tried to choose my battles carefully and overlooked small things as I fought the fires of bigger problems. I rewarded good behavior and punished bad by issuing detention or sending the worst behavior problems to the discipline office. I tried humor but soon found that I had lost my own sense of humor from the daily tug of war for control of the room. I offered choices, gave extensions and amnesties for missing or late work, searched for hours for materials that would raise the interest level, planned lessons that appealed to the entire Visual-Auditory- Kinesthetic-Tactile (VAKT) spectrum, and wore some of my funny hats (they hated them). I made phone calls to parents and left messages, many of which were never returned, and conferred with my supervisor, guidance counselors, the discipline office, and colleagues.

I found myself in daily power struggles which gained me nothing, often spending a great deal of time just getting students into their seats. Since most never brought books or notebooks to class, trying to teach a lesson became a monumental task. The erratic attendance records of some of my students meant that I never knew what to expect, as the class mix was rarely the same from day to day.

I went to see the movie, *Freedom Writers*, and envied Hillary Swank's idealism and perseverance in her role as first-time teacher Erin Gruwell as she inspired her at-risk students to break the cycle of violence that threatened their lives and futures. I commented to my friend as I watched the movie, "That's my class, except for the drive-by shootings" (JE, 1/19/07). Gruwell's students were the victims of gang violence and the despair of life in the barrios of Los Angeles. My students were well-fed, lived in decent, even luxurious, homes, and owned their own cars. I wondered what caused them to be so defiant and cynical.

It was certainly no mystery why I began to frame my question in a context that focused on the many behavioral issues in my classroom. I began the process thinking about my seniors: *How can I motivate disaffected learners who are repeating a course required for graduation?*

Multiple versions of the question followed:

- *What happens when I personalize instruction for my disaffected learners and how does it impact the rest of the class?*
- *What strategies can I use when I have exhausted my repertoire of cooperative discipline techniques?*
- *What happens when I challenge unmotivated students to take responsibility for completing the work required to pass the class?*

And my own personal tongue-in-cheek favorite:

- *How does cooperative learning help unmotivated students to satisfy course requirements while actually doing diddley-squat?*

I began to notice a pattern in my questions – they were all very negative, reflecting my own negative attitude towards my class and my teaching ability. I knew that I needed to find a more positive way to phrase my question, so I arrived at the next set:

- *How can I reclaim the focus from my behaviorally challenged students?*
- *How can I shift the focus from my chronically disruptive students?*

On the second day of my graduate class, EDUC 601: Modes of Inquiry and Research, I had an epiphany: I had to *find* the positive in order for my question to *be* positive. After several brainstorming sessions with my cohort I finally arrived at, *What happens to the atmosphere in my classroom when I focus on the positive behavior of my students?* I inserted myself more firmly into the question by claiming responsibility for the focus and realized that if I noticed

positive behaviors instead of putting all my emphasis on the negative that it would result in a better outlook for all of us. (JE, 2/18/07) This approach led me in new directions.

Focusing on negative behaviors and events served no purpose other than to confirm what I already knew. I didn't know how often during a class period my students did something that was positive or didn't do something negative when they could have. Noticing the good moments would allow me to take advantage of even small temporary improvements to offer a smile, praise, or a reward.

I became very excited and began to journal many different ideas which became sub-questions: *What strategies had I used that hadn't worked? How could I determine my students' reinforcement preferences? How could I learn more about them as individuals? What would they come up with if I asked them to list words that they would use to describe our class? What would happen if I asked them to make another list of only positive things and how could I use that information as a jumping-off point for putting new strategies into play?* Most important, *how could I use the positive to bring about change?* (JE, 2/18/07)

What did I need to know?

The first step in understanding the problems I was encountering was to become more knowledgeable about the causes of the negative behavior of my students. This led me to an exploration of Oppositional and Defiant Disorder (ODD.) In the article, *Understanding and Addressing Oppositional and Defiant Classroom Behaviors*, Salend and Sylvestre (2005) outlined the characteristics as follows:

Students who exhibit oppositional and defiant behaviors engage in a persistent pattern of manipulative or noncompliant behavior. These behaviors, which occur frequently for a minimum of 6 months, may include a combination of the following: refusing to comply

with rules; blaming or arguing with others; losing their temper; being easily angered, frustrated, and annoyed; cursing and using inappropriate language; having low self-esteem; appearing to enjoy annoying and bothering others; and seeking attention. (p. 32)

Upon reading this I identified a number of my students who could be veritable poster children for ODD. Although the article detailed the process that would be used by prereferral services to identify students with special needs, Salend and Sylvestre (2005) felt that their suggestions for working with ODD students could be used to support the learning of all students. Among the 14 suggestions listed were the following: encourage family collaboration and communication, provide social skills training, build relationships with students, give students choices, teach students self-management interventions, and establish and teach rules.

Using Salend and Sylvestre's (2005) term of noncompliance to further my search for information, I found that a theme that runs through much of the literature on ODD is that traditional discipline strategies do not have any place in dealing with noncompliance.

The ways we typically confront an oppositional and defiant youngster are ineffective: ignoring, pleading, bargaining and helping don't work. "Get tough" approaches such as threatening and showing anger aren't successful, either. They give the child the message 'Do this or else,' and the child opts for the 'or else.' (Sutton, 1997, p. 1)

If a child's ODD behavior can be predicted, it can often be helpful in eliminating it. Sutton (1997) gives an example of how to avoid obstructionism, an action that deliberately delays or prevents progress. A child "accidentally" drops a box of crayons just as the class is getting in line to leave the room. The next day as the children line up the teacher quietly comments to the child that she was wondering if the child was going to drop the crayons again. The expected result is that she won't. This "spitting in the soup" is a very temporary solution to a behavior problem,

but the author suggests that it can get a teacher past a difficult spot. Some of my students were prone to pushing their very heavy textbooks off their desks so that they hit the floor with a resounding crash that made the whole class jump. Using Sutton's suggestion, short-circuiting the behavior could be possible. However it could also lead to several books crashing to the floor. It would be interesting to see what would happen if I tried this technique.

A commonly suggested strategy was to give a non-compliant student a specific job to do, such as handing out materials or explaining the class assignment. The theory was that this would raise the child's self-esteem by giving him some status with his classmates and it would be an incentive for the student to complete the assigned work (Sutton, 1997). I often use this strategy with mixed results. Sometimes the student rises to the occasion and sometimes it gives him the stage to perform for the class while he has their undivided attention. However, if I could bring about a change in the classroom atmosphere I might find this technique to be more successful.

In the past I had successfully used many cooperative discipline techniques to resolve problems due to the four types of misbehavior outlined by Linda Albert (2003):

Let's define misbehavior as anything students do that interferes with our teaching, distracts other students from learning, or disrupts their own learning...When students choose misbehavior over positive behavior, what do they hope to gain? Ultimately, they're seeking to belong, to find their place in the group. Along the way, however... they misbehave in an attempt to obtain immediate gratification. What they want usually corresponds to one of these four goals: attention, power, revenge, avoidance of failure. (p. 19)

According to Albert (2003), some students misbehave in order to get extra attention, and will do anything to distract the teacher and classmates to gain an audience. Power seekers refuse to comply with rules or teacher requests in order to gain control of situations in a quest for

power. In an effort to get even for real or imagined hurts, revenge-seeking students will target the teacher or other students, often disrupting the established order. Some students try to compensate for low self-esteem and a feeling of failure by choosing non-compliance or withdrawal in avoidance-of-failure behaviors. I encountered all four of these types of misbehavior with my 7th period class, and found myself returning to books and articles that I had read a few years before while taking a graduate class in Cooperative Discipline. I could see a strong and obvious link between my students who engaged in non-compliant and defiant behavior and the misbehavior types described by Albert. Why couldn't I find success in responding to this misbehavior by using the techniques that had worked so well with students in my past experience? The only answer that made any sense to me was that I had never had so many students together in one place exhibiting such a wide range of misbehaviors at the same time. It crossed my mind that the individual who had scheduled this group of students to be together had no idea of the bad chemistry that would result.

I was experiencing what many educators call the "difficult child, the child for whom nothing in the typical repertoire of classroom strategies seems effective in reducing chronic misbehavior" (Albert, 2003, p. 21). My classroom had not one difficult child, but a large number of them, and I was often overwhelmed and discouraged by the task of dealing with them. I had never really thought in terms of liking or not liking my students before, and I realized that I was allowing myself to see the behavior problems as personality traits. Albert advised that sometimes it was the students that were in the greatest need of encouragement towards positive behavior that were the ones to which we, as teachers, found it the hardest to give such support.

These students are often masters at manipulating adults. They have an uncanny way of spotting and magnifying our insecurities. Why should we have to spend our time and exert

special efforts to encourage students who are repeatedly disrupting our classes and making our lives miserable? Shouldn't these students be expected to show at least some minor changes in their attitude and behavior before we modify ours? (p. 22)

I wondered whether I was falling into the trap of this kind of defeatist thinking. I had always considered myself to be encouraging and supportive of all my students, regardless of their personalities, yet I was finding it very hard to get past the outward demeanor of some of these kids in order to provide what was necessary to bring about any change.

I returned to my exploration for ways to address some of the issues, which seemed to be growing exponentially as time went on. Some days I wanted to turn and run as my *fight or flight* instinct took over, and my amygdala, that part of the brain that controls emotional responses, was in a state of total confusion. The days when I stood my ground and tried to force compliance were often nightmares, which literally kept me awake at night. However, on the days when I was more passive, trying to choose my battles carefully and ignore small issues, chaos reigned then as well, leaving me to try and decide which was the lesser of the evils. I was drowning in the negative feelings I had about my students, myself, and my teaching practices. I began to realize that the greatest obstacle I would have to overcome in order to improve our time together was my own negativity.

My concern grew for the rest of the students in my class, the ones that worked hard, came prepared, and asked day after day, "Can't you *do* something about them?" I had a responsibility to provide all my students with a comfortable classroom atmosphere and to meet all their various individual needs. My other students related how difficult it was for them to function with all the disruptions, especially in learning situations that required concentration, such as testing. They

also confirmed my belief that the classroom had been out of control from the first day, explaining that Ms. L had handled most of the misbehavior by ignoring it or giving in to it.

During this time I had frequent conversations with colleagues as I looked for techniques that worked or didn't work in other places, with other groups. I was especially interested in conferring with other teachers that had my students in their classes. While my colleagues indicated that they experienced many of the same difficulties with these students, no one else had the entire group at one time. Although they shared with me strategies that they used, no one was able to suggest anything that I had not already tried. I had refused to react to some negative behaviors based on the fact that a non-response wiped away the expected payoff of gaining attention. I had stared them down, giving "the eye" to acknowledge their behavior and letting them know that it had to stop. I inserted offenders' names into the context of the lesson and moved closer to students to discourage them from continuing their disruptions. I turned out the lights and waited silently for the class to settle down, lowered my voice so that they had to strain to hear me, and used various means of distracting students from negative behavior such as delegating small tasks to disruptive students. I moved seats, allowed choices, and gave praise for compliance. I tried to diffuse confrontations by putting off discussions of misbehavior until later when we could all respond more rationally. I allowed students to save face by having the last word or complying in their own fashion, even if it was not exactly what I was looking for. I agreed with students, changed the subject, and changed the activity at times to avoid escalation of an erupting situation. While some of these techniques worked once in a while, they were not enough to bring about what I had determined was absolutely necessary – a change in the atmosphere of our classroom.

In order to bring about a change I needed to find a new direction for all of us. In my continued quest for information I came across a new term: *attribution training*.

Students who exhibit oppositional and defiant behaviors can benefit from attribution training, which involves teaching them to understand how their actions affect their success and failure. By offering attribution training, teachers can help students develop the belief that their actions affect their success. This understanding can in turn minimize the extent to which the students blame others for their own difficulties.

(Salend and Sylvestre, 2005, p. 34)

I found attribution theory to be a simple concept with unlimited potential for use in the classroom. The basic principle is that it is intrinsic in humans to search for ways to explain what goes on in their own little corner of the world. One way to explain events is to place responsibility on someone else, which is known as an external attribution. In contrast, an internal attribution places complete responsibility on the individual. Depending on whether an event or behavior is perceived as being internally or externally motivated, future behavior can be influenced (Booth-Butterfield, 1996).

Booth-Butterfield (1996) provides an example which illustrates the theory in its simplicity. A student gets back a test with a poor grade and has to decide what caused the poor performance. The student is unlikely to admit to poor study habits, so the responsibility must lie with a bad teacher or a confusing textbook. The poor performance is perceived as being caused by external factors. When the same student earns a high grade on the next test, the success is explained by internal factors, to being smart and well-prepared. The key to influencing behavior is in how the failure or success is explained. If the student makes an external attribution there is no motivation to make any adjustments to a future test-taking situation. However, the student who makes an

internal attribution will then view himself as a smart person with good study skills that accounted for his success. This in turn will result in following the same steps to prepare for the next test, thus enduring another success, which positively reinforces the behavior.

If I presented my students with more choices and opportunities for success would they be more likely to make internal attributions which would lead to improved academic performances? If I offered the right reinforcement for my students' positive behaviors would they then see themselves as cooperative people and self-regulate their behavior because of improved self-perception? How could I determine what reinforcements would lead students to make internal attributions that would lead to self-regulation?

One possibility was to make use of the type of forced choice survey illustrated in *Addressing Student Problem Behavior – Part III, Appendix C* (Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice [CEEP], 2000). A forced choice survey requests students to make a series of choices between different paired types of reinforcements. Each choice is given a coded category: adult approval, competitive approval, peer approval, independent rewards, and consumable rewards. When totaled, the results indicate the types of reinforcement that may appeal to the individual. Collecting similar data from my students could help me to know more about them and to individualize the way I respond to them. It could reveal the means that I could use to bring them to an internal attribution, and could be a very valuable tool for building relationships.

Another way to use attribution theory is to teach students to use self-management interventions. In order to self-manage the behavior of getting out of her seat too often at inappropriate times, the willing student can keep a tally of how many times this is done in a class period for a designated period of time, such as one week. Once the student has a self-made record of this behavior she can make the attempt to reduce the number of times it occurs until it

diminishes to an acceptable level. It then becomes internal attribution because the student makes the decision to stay in her seat rather than constantly being corrected by the teacher. Reinforcing the behavior with a self-selected reward will then help the student to choose to stay in her seat (Salend and Sylvestre, 2005).

Additional research led me to appreciative inquiry, which is “an approach...based on strengths rather than weaknesses, on a vision of what is possible rather than an analysis of what is not” (Henry, 2003, p. 1). Henry relates how David Cooperrider first coined the term “appreciative inquiry” in his article, *Leadership at Every Level: Appreciative Inquiry in Education*. The theme of this article is “What we focus on increases” (p. 1). If we focus on the negative we are likely to encourage more negative outcomes. When we focus on what is already working, improving on the positive becomes a reward in itself. Cooperrider’s initial studies primarily focused on organizational settings such as the Cleveland Clinic. He found that his interview subjects became depressed and demoralized when he focused on the Clinic’s problems. However, when he focused on the positive aspects of the Clinic’s operation, both the subjects and the interviewers showed an increase in energy. Cooperrider recognized the attitude that, “When I do good I feel good; when I feel good I do good” (p. 2). By focusing on the positive, appreciative inquiry builds on already existing successes and “provides an orientation and methods to build on the best of the past and present to create the best possible future” (p. 5).

If I asked my students to make a list of five words or phrases to describe our class there could be an outpouring of “history is boring,” “she’s always yelling at us,” and “too much work.” I wondered what responses I would get if I asked them to list five *positive* things about the class. Would they recognize the fact that they have very little homework, or that I gave frequent extensions for missing work? They might comment that they received extra help

whenever they needed it. Perhaps someone would remember the times that I cut them some slack when they were having trouble at home, or that students in the class were willing to help them. Maybe they would remember a compromise that helped them pass the marking period. The main thing was to get each of them to find at least a few positive things to build on, rather than always complaining about the things they didn't like. And if I would take more notice of the times when they stayed on task, even for a short period, or made positive comments when they stayed in their seats rather than always correcting them when they didn't, they might find that they enjoyed a more relaxed atmosphere.

If I combined appreciative inquiry and attribution theory, could I get my students to notice more positive things? Would they attribute an improved classroom climate to their own actions, thereby reinforcing their own positive attitudes?

In summarizing what I had learned I found a number of common themes in my survey of literature in the areas of ODD and non-compliant behavior, appreciative inquiry, and attribution theory:

- Build relationships with students.
- Amplify the successes that already exist.
- Utilize self-management techniques.
- Build self-esteem.
- If the focus is on the positive it will help to locate the energy to bring about change.

I realized that I was not the composer; I was the orchestra leader. If I used appreciative inquiry to promote a more positive atmosphere in my classroom and utilized attribution training to promote self-esteem and self-regulation, I might be able to make a new arrangement of the original composition.

Methodology

In order to find out what would happen when I focused on the positive behaviors of my students I had to find ways to notice whatever positive things were happening in our classroom. I knew that the kind of study I was planning would be primarily anecdotal, and would require that I keep track of what I did and how my students responded to my actions. With that in mind I planned to keep a journal to write about events, strategies used, and student responses. I would also record my observations and make field notes about classroom events. The journal and field notes would be coded to look for patterns resulting from the infusion of attribution training and appreciative inquiry into my teaching strategies. My research had also led me to the discovery of additional cooperative discipline techniques that I intended to try.

I wanted to find a reliable way to notice the positive things that happened. I decided to use a behavioral tally sheet (Sprick, 2006, p. 40) to record both positive and negative behaviors (Appendix A). I established a code of abbreviations so that I could make quick notations. I anticipated keeping this behavioral record on a daily basis, reviewing my findings at the end of each week.

Information gathered through the use of a forced choice survey would allow me to determine reinforcement preferences for my students, individually and as a group. I was very curious to know what motivated my students. I adapted a survey that I had found in my research (CECP, 2000, p. C-8), including some consumable rewards that my students were already accustomed to receiving from me (Jolly Ranchers, Snickers bars, and gum) and others that I knew would appeal to them, such as choosing a class game.

I planned to collect data by having my students make a list of five words or phrases that described our class. I wanted to find out what they noticed about the existing atmosphere, so that

I knew what to target to remove some of the negative energy that was present. At a later date I would ask them to make a list of five positive words or phrases to see if they had noticed any changes in the interim.

My students were required to write their names and destinations on a sign-out sheet when using the hall pass. In addition, they posted the time when they left the room and the time they returned. Recognizing their status as young adults I allowed them to use the pass for the bathroom without making a specific request. They did have to ask permission beforehand to go anywhere else. I suspected that pass use was sometimes connected to a desire to escape the room rather than a true personal need. As this information was already being collected prior to this study I felt that it would be a simple matter to review the sign-out sheets on a weekly basis to look for patterns, and to see if those patterns changed over time with a more positive atmosphere.

I would confer with colleagues, guidance counselors, my department supervisor, and administrators for suggestions and collaboration. These conversations would be documented in my journal and field notes.

Before proceeding with those parts of my research plan that included student participation, it was necessary to obtain the appropriate permissions (Appendix B) to make sure that all ethical considerations were in place. I received my superintendent's permission for my study, most of which was to be completed during the last 10 weeks of the school year. I then mailed letters home to parents to explain my research interest. They were asked to return a signed copy of the letter giving permission for their students to participate in my study. I also asked for the letter to be returned if they did not want their student to participate so that I knew the parents were aware of the study. I wrote a separate letter for my students that were over 18 years of age that requested their participation. Although not everyone returned permission letters, I did manage to

get them for most of the Hooligans. I sweetened the pot by giving packs of gum to the students that returned them. Paris Hilton wanted the gum so much that she brought one in and another one from her mother arrived in the mail.

My first task in building new relationships with my students was to learn what was important to them. I always attended at least one game in every sports season for each of my students, as well as concerts and plays in which my students were participants. I hoped that my presence at student activities would let them know that I was interested in them as people, rather than just as students in my class. I began to plan my schedule each week so that I could attend more student events. I made it a point to compliment each individual's performance during our class time the next day. Although few of my 7th period students were involved in student activities, the ones that did participate seemed pleased to see me at their events and reacted positively to my compliments in class.

I learned through my research that one way to build relationships with oppositional students is to promote interactions with these students that contain no expectations. Talking about the weather or the upcoming holiday week-end is non-threatening, when students can say as much or as little as they choose to and yet still be made to feel important. "Make sure this interaction contains no expectations – this might be the only unconditional interaction that the youngster has with an adult" (Sutton, 1997, p. 2). I began to make conversational overtures with one or two of the Hooligans each day about their jobs, movies, pets, and anything else that came to mind. By making a specific effort to speak to my noncompliant students I hoped to build new bridges to more cooperative relationships.

Experience has taught me that while it is important to acknowledge improvement, it is not often the best idea to do so in front of the class. A student that accepts a casual comment as she

comes in the door (Good for you – you remembered to bring your homework today!) can be very put off for fear of being teased by the rest of the class when the improved behavior is publicly recognized. Sutton (1997) says that it is also important to avoid making too much of small improvements or the student may feel patronized or manipulated. With this in mind, I was very careful to choose a time to praise students that would not make them uncomfortable. I learned quickly which students wanted public praise when they made their own announcements of the compliments I gave them privately and demanded that I repeat them to the class. I looked for opportunities to offer a smile, a compliment, or a small reward to all of my students, but I targeted the Hooligans as often as I could without it seeming contrived.

My journal entries during late February indicated that I was making some progress. My students were beginning to notice my attempts to work with them.

Progress reports are due tomorrow. When I did grades over the weekend more than half in each class were failing. With all the lost time for snow days, I knew that I needed to make some allowances. Sending home lots of discouraging news just isn't the answer. I gave the kids the entire period to make up work while I held a conference with each one. I made a lot of concessions in the interest of fairness...Some of them even showed some appreciation for the opportunity to improve their progress reports, knowing that I didn't have to give them so much consideration. (JE, 2/28/07)

However, there were many days when noncompliance and confrontation still ruled the class, as illustrated by a journal entry a week or so later.

On Monday Paris Hilton returned to school after being gone all last week. I had noticed Macho Man had been much more focused in her absence, and he had actually turned in work. Within seconds of Paris Hilton's entry into the room the two were back to business

as usual, moving all over the classroom, talking constantly, disrupting the very short lesson I had hoped to get in. (JE, 3/8/07)

I tried to vary the activities in our lessons as much as possible. Students in previous years always enjoyed playing games, and my lesson plan on a Friday afternoon frequently included games such as Jeopardy or Hangman. One day I decided to use a game called “Fact or Crap.” Usually the name alone was enough to get the students engaged in this team game that involved earning tokens for deciding whether a statement was a fact or fiction. I alternated statements about our current area of study with other random facts included in the game box, and awarded homework passes or bonus points according to the number of tokens earned. I was surprised when the kids showed no interest in playing the game. Tattoo Guy said, “We want to play Seven Up.” I sometimes used this old elementary school game as a down-time activity. On this particular day I wanted to review some of the chapter material instead of playing a guessing game. As I would not agree to the game of their choice, Tattoo Guy said, “We don’t want to play your dumb games. Just give us worksheets to do and leave us alone.” The game idea was abandoned when the rest of the Hooligans refused to play. (JE, 3/12/07)

One area of continuing conflict was the enforcement of rules that were made by the administration. Students were not allowed to have water bottles except in the cafeteria, but my students often brought soda or water to class where I would attempt to enforce the school policy. They went off like 4th of July rockets when told to put them away, and displayed their defiance by taking frequent drinks. After some screens mysteriously fell from our classroom windows, the superintendent restricted the opening of our windows to 3 inches and the kids were instructed not to touch them. Each day the Hooligans entered the room and raised all the windows. I was physically unable to close them, which meant that the first few minutes of every class were spent

coaxing students into complying with the superintendent's edict. The kids saw me as inflexible and unreasonable, and often continued the battle for the entire class period. (Field Notes (FE), 11/4/06 and 2/24/07)

Like Gumby, that rubbery character from children's TV, I had to be exceedingly flexible. I was the Monty Hall of the second floor, playing "Let's Make a Deal" to maintain some semblance of order, often giving in on my own rules in order to gain compliance for those imposed by the administration.

I had a difficult confrontation with Heavy Metal Man that seemed to shock the entire class. He had appeared in the classroom after a week's suspension and I had given him a folder containing the work he had missed. As I tried to explain what he needed to do he began to argue over the due date that I had established for the work to be handed in. I suggested that he begin to do the work rather than use valuable time arguing about it and walked away from him to end the conflict. As I reached the front of the room he jumped out of his seat and yelled, "You're not even a teacher. My mother said so. You're just a librarian." There was total silence as the class waited to see what I would do. I remembered Albert's (2003) suggestion to use a fogging technique when verbally attacked by a student. "This involves responding to inflammatory statements as if they are of little or no importance. Such a response tells students that we cannot be manipulated by insults" (p. 67). I ignored Heavy Metal Man and went on with my instructions to the rest of the class. As he continued to call out insults, I moved closer to him. When I finished speaking I leaned over and spoke firmly and quietly to him. I gave him the choice of beginning his work or being sent from the classroom. His response was to overturn his desk and storm from the room. I expected the Hooligans to come to life and support him, and to direct their anger at me. I was very surprised when Hat Boy said, "Wow, is HE in trouble!" That

seemed to break the tension; there was a minute or two of excited conversation among the kids, and then we went on with our work. This was progress! (JE, 2/26/07)

A few days later I was notified that Heavy Metal Man had withdrawn from school. As a senior he had no hopes for graduation. He was failing four classes, including mine. According to his guidance counselor he had finally convinced his parents to allow him to withdraw. I found myself harboring feelings of relief that I would no longer have to deal with him, but also the regrets I always felt when a student decided to leave school.

While Heavy Metal Man's departure eliminated some of the conflict in my classroom, I still had more than enough defiance left in the room.

Paris Hilton is determined to push the assigned seat issue to the limit each day. I had given her a seat months ago away from all her buds...she kept moving to a seat in the back of the row. Finally I let her stay there, telling her that since she preferred it I would make it her permanent seat. Since then she has persisted in moving over a few seats to sit with her crowd, forcing the issue again. Today I had enough. After requesting that she go to her (assigned) seat a number of times and getting backtalk, I set the rest to work and went back to talk to her quietly. I gave her the choice of moving or leaving. She continued to come back at me, at which time she spouted the "F" word. The choice was then to leave on her own or have her escorted out. I was headed to the phone to call for assistance when she finally left the room, spouting profanity. (JE, 3/19/07)

I used my behavioral tally sheet to keep track of each student's positive and negative behaviors. I tallied the behaviors each day, and then reviewed the sheet at the end of each week, looking for patterns. I noticed that some students were more willing to make contributions in class when there was an incentive. It was always difficult to get students to volunteer to read

aloud at the times when we had to read a section of the textbook, and I did not like forcing anyone to read. I began to offer “bonus points” to students that volunteered and noticed an immediate response. Soon I had more than enough volunteers, and some of the Hooligans even argued over whose turn it was. This solved two problems: we accomplished the reading that was necessary in a much shorter time than previously, and students whose grades needed improvement found a way to make up for some of the zeros they had received for not handing in written work. I noticed that there were fewer complaints and conflicts over completing the day’s work: a negative (reading aloud) had been turned into a positive experience. (FN, 3/28/07)

I began to look for other opportunities to award bonus points. I found activities for each chapter that would reinforce learning and offered bonus points for completing them by a certain date. While studying World War II, I found a crossword puzzle that highlighted many of the names, dates, and places that I knew would be on the final exam. When I first distributed the puzzle there were complaints that it was too much work, as there were over 150 clues. I explained that those who chose to do the puzzle would receive a bonus point for every 5 correct answers, and gave them three weeks to work on the puzzle. About half of the class eventually handed in the puzzle, some completing only 15 answers, and others as many as 75. (FN, 3/29/07)

My next step was to introduce the forced choice survey (Appendix C) to my students. I expected reluctance on the part of some, and was pleasantly surprised when all of the students who were present that day agreed to participate. I chose a day during the week when standardized testing was being done. We had shortened classes due to the testing and I felt that my students would appreciate a break in our class work. I explained that the survey was voluntary and that I appreciated their help. It probably didn’t hurt that I handed out their favorite candy, Jolly Ranchers, along with the survey. Students were not required to put their names on

their papers. There was conversation and laughter during the 15 or 20 minutes that it took for the class to complete the survey, which seemed to hold their interest, and the period passed pleasantly. (JE, 4/5/07)

I returned to my reading in the area of cooperative discipline. All of my students had the potential to move towards more positive choices. It was up to me to get that movement started by overcoming my own negativity and raising my expectations.

How we view students who misbehave influences our expectations. If we see them as “bad” or as kids who have something “wrong” with them, we tend not to expect much improvement... We can raise our expectations by describing misbehaving students as students with a “choosing disability” – an underdeveloped ability to choose appropriate behavior. (Albert, 2003, p. 9)

I looked for opportunities to catch my students “being good.” I made it a point to privately thank students for compliance. “Thank you, Paris Hilton, for having your book opened to the correct page.” “Thank you, Tattoo Guy, for staying in your seat while the others finished the quiz.” “Wannabe, I really appreciate the fact that you returned so quickly with the pass.” When Macho Man completed even part of a written assignment I made sure to let him know if he had answered the questions correctly.

My journal entries showed that I was making progress with some of my students. I clung to small victories to encourage myself. While viewing a film on school desegregation in the 1950s I made the following entry:

I warned the kids ahead of time that some of what they would see and hear would be very disturbing. (A student) left the room to use the bathroom. When he returned he entered noisily, disrupted the class, and started making inappropriate comments. The kids were very

interested in the film, with the exception of the Hooligans. There was a great deal of talking and laughing, getting out of seats. Some of the others started speaking up telling them to be quiet. It's the first time I've ever noticed any of the others talking up before. Is this progress? (JE, 4/21/07)

Was it possible that an improvement in the atmosphere was giving my other students a new sense of security? When I asked some of them what had prompted them to speak up I was told, "If we have to be with them (the Hooligans) we want to make it a better place to be."

I recorded small successes in my journal entries as time went on, but I was afraid to read too much into them. There were still days full of conflict and confrontation. I began to feel some excitement while reviewing my journal entries for coding purposes when I came across the following entry:

I noticed how many smiles and even jokes I got from N. Archist today. He was very difficult in the beginning and then sullen for a while. Now he's relaxed and (almost) easy to deal with, although he still doesn't do much work...I can't pinpoint when things began to change with him. I kept smiling and chatting whenever I had the chance, in the classroom and out. I used humor with him at every opportunity, and teased about getting work done instead of leaning on him. Hat Guy's attitude and behavior have changed a great deal, too. Somewhere along the line we stopped butting heads. He smiles and laughs more, and doesn't go off the deep end when I have to correct him. (JE, 4/30/07)

I chose the last part of class on a Friday in early May to hand out index cards and ask my students to make a list of five words or phrases to describe our class. Cell Phone Girl's reaction was to say, "You really don't want to do that." I assured the class that I did, and gave them no directions other than to be sure that their lists reflected what *they* thought, not what was being

said by others. Freedom of expression was ensured when I told them that they did not have to put their names on the cards. There was a lot of conversation as they worked on their lists. I asked Social Girl to collect the cards as the bell rang, and I put them away to review later in the day.

(FN, 5/4/07)

I missed class one day due to a field trip to HersheyPark with one of my student activity groups and I brought back candy bars for my classes. Hershey Boy said, "It was a nice and kind thing you did" (JE, 5/7/07). This was how I came to call him Hershey Boy. That recognition from one of my most difficult Hooligans meant a great deal. I don't think that I would have gotten that compliment a few months before.

At the beginning of June I asked the class to make a list of five positive things about our class. Tattoo Guy said, "This is hard," but began to write. Paris Hilton said, "This is stupid," but worked on her list. "Are you going to give us candy?" Social Girl asked. When my response was, "No, not today," she proceeded to work on the list anyway. If nothing else, we had reached the point where the Hooligans were sometimes willing to allow me to try something new without short-circuiting the activity from the outset. (JE, 6/7/07)

Findings

I originally felt that the results of my study would be found primarily in my journal and field notes and this turned out to be a valid assumption. When I coded my journal and field notes to find patterns I identified a number of instances where the successful use of AI, attribution training, and cooperative discipline appeared to be evident. Wannabe often came to class without his book. Instead of commenting on the fact that he didn't have his book, I offered him the use of an extra book I kept in the room with a request to bring his own book the next day. On a day when he brought his book I let him know that I noticed that he had remembered, and told him

that I would remove an unprepared mark for each day that he remembered to bring it. I was surprised and pleased when he brought his book three days in a row. We both laughed when we didn't use the book on two of those days. Wannabe began to respond to smiles and quiet compliments, and he seemed to be making a conscious effort to stay out of classroom dramas. (JE, 3/19/07)

I ignored many small disruptions and turned some of them into positive moments. On the days when Tattoo Boy came to class I was sometimes able to ward off his attempts to stir things up by telling him how much he had been missed during his most recent absence and complimenting him on his shirt or his hair. If nothing else it threw him off balance, and it was often well into the class time when he recovered from my use of the "spitting in the soup" technique suggested by Sutton (1997).

As I spent more time giving compliments for good behavior I noticed a change in some of my students' reactions when I had to correct them. I realized that positive changes were taking place when Hat Guy put his Spanish homework away without me having to tell him to do so. I smiled and nodded at him and he smiled back sheepishly at having been caught. This was a far cry from the boy who had previously thrown the Spanish book on the floor, saying, "What's the big deal?" (JE 4/4/07)

Macho Man was in danger of failing the class for the year. I had spoken to him privately a number of times to encourage him, explaining what he needed to do to pass. Beneath all that bravado I saw a very insecure boy.

Macho Man did very well (on the test.) After saying over and over again that he was going to fail, and me responding over and over, "No, you're not – I have confidence in you – you know this stuff," he scored an 85. I just kept circulating around the room, encouraging

him and letting him know when his answers were right to keep him working. I think it really made a difference. (JE, 4/25/07)

Before taking the next quiz he again expressed his feelings of failure. I reminded him of the grade he had earned on the last test, and repeated my previous words of encouragement, expressing my confidence in him. He was all smiles when I handed back his paper, with a score of 90 and a smelly sticker at the top of the paper. "I *knew* I could do it!" he said. Did he study? Did he make an internal attribution based on his previous performance? I wasn't sure whether this was the power of positive thinking, or attribution training at work, but I saw the flush of success on his face and we celebrated his accomplishment. (FN, 4/30/07)

After using the behavioral tally sheets for a few weeks I found that it was taking too much of my attention to record all the behaviors. I abandoned the tally sheets, but not before gaining some valuable information during the weeks I had used them. I was able to pinpoint days when there had been more positive behaviors as time went on. The tally sheets also indicated how frequently I was using positive reinforcement, both with the group and with individual students, which allowed me to adjust its use when necessary. (JE, 5/22/07)

When I reviewed the completed surveys I was very surprised to find that all but a few students had written their names on the papers. I was even more surprised when I tallied the results of the survey. I had assumed that many of my students' answers would indicate that peer approval was most important to them. However, this was not the case. Sixteen students completed surveys, and only one student's responses indicated that peer approval was most important. Adult (teacher) approval received the top mean score (12.8), while peer approval received a score of 6.7. Independent rewards received the second highest score (9.4); consumable rewards, 8.4; and competitive rewards, 3.1 (APPENDIX C).

The results of the survey made me aware that I had more influence on my students than I ever would have imagined. My students were looking for my approval, whether or not they realized it. It was a simple matter to hand out candy or give out homework passes as rewards for games and high test scores. I knew that my students would “work for food.” It was another matter to reinforce more subtle behaviors.

I found evidence in my journal and field notes that my students sometimes exhibited compliant behavior without the need for a tangible reward. I had suspended Social Girl’s pass privileges due to her frequent misuse of the pass. On a very warm day I handed her the pass and said, “I think that you need a drink.” She returned very quickly. A few days later when she asked to use the bathroom I handed her the pass, thanking her in advance for her quick return. I reinstated her pass privileges, and she continued to use the pass responsibly. (JE, 5/8/07)

By the end of April the kids were asking permission to open the windows. Although they were opened to more than the prescribed 3 inches, they were raised to what I considered an acceptable height. This had been achieved after I began to assign the job of opening the windows to some of the Hooligans as they came through the door. Once they began asking for the job, we negotiated the height. There were only a few days during May and June when I had to ask someone to lower the windows a few inches. I acknowledged their desire for fresh air, and they acknowledged mine not to be on my superintendent’s black list. It was a comfortable compromise. (JE, 6/13/07)

In early May I asked the kids to make a list of five words or phrases to describe our class. It was a very warm day, so some of the responses centered on the heat and humidity in our classroom. I expected many responses to paint an unkind picture of me, considering how much conflict there was in the room. I did *not* expect any of the kids to place the blame for their

unhappiness on their classmates instead of me. They described the class as hot, stinky, unfocused, obnoxious, unruly, out of control, boring, loud, wild, stupid, stressful, and ignorant. I was truly amazed at some of the responses: fun, interesting, entertaining, encouraging, kind, funny, easy, and unique. There was one response that gave me a great deal of food for thought. I recognized N. Archist's handwriting. "You get strict about little things and become angry and uncompromising quickly. Chill out. Give a little to get a little." I kept this card in my plan book for the rest of the year, and am considering having it laminated. Whether or not I agreed with my student's opinion, his words are ones that I want to remember (See Appendix D for the complete list of responses). (JE, 5/4/07)

I would have welcomed collegial support; unfortunately, it was not always forthcoming. I spoke with a guidance counselor about one of my seniors to advise him that the student was in danger of failing for the year and that he was constantly disruptive in class. He told me that he would call the student down for a conference. The next day I reminded Hershey Boy that he needed to hand in his assignments if he wanted to pass the class and graduate. He responded, "Mr. G. (the guidance counselor) says I only need a 65 to pass for the year, so that's all I have to worry about" (JE 4/2/07).

I sought out the opinions of my colleagues frequently. I was surprised at how many of them felt that I was expending too much effort trying to bring about changes in my classroom. When I related examples of how some of the Hooligans were beginning to respond I was told by Mr. T., "Don't lose sleep over them. Teach the ones that want to learn and forget about the others." Mr. R. stressed "accountability for everything" and commented, "You can't help some kids." (FN, 5/2/07) I was discouraged to find so much negativity among my colleagues but, having put my own in a box in my mental closet, I did not allow it to impede my efforts.

When I asked my students to write lists of five positive things about our class I didn't get a list from every student, and it was obvious from the conversational snippets that I overheard that some of the kids were not taking the task seriously. The results, however, were gratifying. "Considering how the year went, the results were surprising. For the most part the kids saw me as fair, caring, someone who cuts them a break, even if they think I'm too tough on them sometimes" (JE 6/7/07).

Most important, they recognized many positive things about our class: they had sometimes received help and support from classmates; they could ask questions and talk about things; they were given choices; they got to work with partners; and they had opportunities to earn bonus points (see Appendix E for complete list of responses).

I continually reviewed the pass sign-out sheets but I did not notice any changes in pass use over time. While the atmosphere in our classroom may have improved, my students' needs or desires to leave the room appeared to stay the same regardless of what was going on in the classroom. (FN, 6/8/07)

I focused on a particular group of students while completing this study, but it is worth noting that I used all the same strategies with my other class. Although I did not record daily events, it was exciting to see the positive changes that took place with that group of 24 students. It affirmed my belief that the infusion of AI, attribution training, and cooperative discipline can create a climate of cooperation and comfort that minimizes behavioral problems and maximizes instructional time.

I must also mention the rest of the students in my 7th period class, the ones who were compliant and worked hard in class, who sometimes suffered in silence during the chaos that plagued our classroom. We shared jokes, pleasant conversations, and knowing looks over the

heads of the Hooligans. Their resilience and good natured tolerance often helped me to keep my patience when it was sorely tried. Their sighs of relief when a confrontation was avoided and smiles of appreciation when a conflict was resolved were the measures of my success.

Final Reflection

I wish I could report that a miracle took place in my classroom, and that the remainder of the year passed pleasantly, with tears and a giant group hug on the last day. But my story is not a fairy tale; it is a reality show. There were frequent incidences of defiance and noncompliance right up until the last day of school. Yet there were also moments when I could see that there had been some positive changes.

My relationships with Hat Guy, N. Archist, and Wannabe improved to the point where these students smiled, laughed, and responded to my conversational gambits and jokes. It was a red letter day for me when N. Archist actually acknowledged the changes that had taken place, subtle though they may have been. “Mrs. Hayn, this isn’t such a bad place to be” (FN, 5/29/07). I asked him to try and pinpoint when his feelings had changed, but he did not connect it to anything in particular.

I watched with tears in my eyes as all but two of my seniors marched in the graduation procession in June. Heavy Metal Man had exited the school in March, and Hershey Boy failed to pass English. When we talked about it he actually took responsibility, telling me, “I did this to myself. It’s nobody else’s fault.” He told me of his plan to take English in summer school, and thanked me for allowing him to pass my class. “Nobody really gets a 66. I know that you helped me out.” (JE 6/13/07) I had indeed made the decision, after a great deal of thought, to give Hershey Boy the little boost needed to reach passing territory. It was possible that he would take

one summer school class to earn his diploma; I wasn't so sure that he would find the motivation to take two.

Early in the year I began to refer to my group of noncompliant students as the "Hooligans." I hesitated to use the name when I began writing about my experiences due to its negative connotation. However, there came a point in time when the negativity fell away and it became an affectionate name for this group that tried my patience and my beliefs in my own teaching ability. While working with my two accomplishment partners I told stories of my adventures with them. We all laughed at my descriptions of their personalities, and as I told my stories I realized that there had been many moments when I had appreciated their humor and the creativity that accompanied some of their behavior. I learned a great deal from my Hooligans.

I will see the rest of my students in the Media Center and the halls during the next school year. I will welcome the opportunity to continue those relationships, now free of the stress and conflict of the past year.

This was a year that sorely tested my strength and stamina, but it was also a teaching moment for me that lasted for eight months. As a committed life-long learner I have chosen to give it a positive spin. There will be new faces in my classroom in September, and new opportunities to use what I have learned this year.

"Success is measured differently in each circumstance." (JE, 6/14/07)

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APPENDIX A

Behavioral Tally Sheet

Exhibit 2.2
Behavior Record Form

Date _____ Reminders _____

Name	Fri.	Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Thurs.	Total

Codes: Positive
 OT - on task
 PB - positive behavior (misc)
 C - compliment
 S - smile
 P - prepared

Negative
 T - talking
 O - out of seat
 NOT - not on task
 D - disrespectful
 U - unprepared
 UB - unacceptable behavior misc.
 PR - profanity
 N - non-compliance
 S - strikes

APPENDIX B

Permission Letters

March 23, 2007

[Redacted]

Dear [Redacted]

In order to complete the requirements for my M.Ed. from The College of New Jersey, I am completing a capstone project in teacher action research. I am requesting your permission to proceed with the necessary research for this project.

My study is based on the question, "What happens to the atmosphere in my classroom when I focus on the positive behavior of my students?" The focus of the study is my teaching practices and how I can improve them to benefit my students. I will be observing student responses and making personal journal entries based on particular strategies that I may use in order to bring about positive changes in the classroom atmosphere. My research will not interfere with classroom instruction time, nor will it require my students to do any additional work in or out of class.

I anticipate using approximately 20 minutes over the course of the 10-week study to get feedback from my students regarding several types of positive reinforcement, which may include the following:

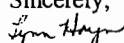
- a 10-minute forced-choice survey (copy attached);
- a 5-minute feedback activity at the midpoint of the study
- a 5-minute feedback activity at the end

I will secure permission from parents and students with adult status, by means of the attached letter samples. There will be no identification of either [Redacted] or the students in any way. Although my study must include demographic information about our school community and sending districts, there will be total anonymity of our school and the surrounding communities.

If you have any questions regarding my research or would like further information on the educational theories (appreciative inquiry and attribution theory) I will be exploring, I will provide journal articles and complete research plan details on request.

If you are willing to give permission for me to proceed with my research, please sign the signature line below and return a copy to me.

Thank you very much for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Lynn Hayn

Superintendent signature

Date

March 26, 2007

Dear

As a requirement to complete an advanced degree in education through The College of New Jersey, I am currently working on my Master's thesis. My research involves the use of various reinforcement strategies to see if there is a positive impact on our classroom atmosphere; the information gathered will be used as motivational tools to increase student performance and self-esteem.

The focus of this study is my teaching practices and how I can improve them to benefit my students. I will be observing student responses and making personal journal entries based on the particular strategies that I may use to bring about positive changes in the classroom atmosphere. My research will not interfere with classroom instruction time, nor will it require my students to do any additional work in or out of class. Your child will be asked to complete a 10-minute survey at the beginning of the study, and a 5-minute feedback activity at the midpoint and the end of the study.

There will be no identification of [redacted] or the students in any way. Although my study must include some information about our school community and sending districts, there will be total anonymity of the students, our school, and the surrounding communities.

If you have any questions regarding my research or would like further information on the educational theories I will be exploring, I will be happy to speak with you. I can be reached from 7:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m. and 2:30-3:30 p.m. each day at (973) [redacted]

If you are willing to give permission for your child to be included in this research, please sign on the signature line below and return a copy to me. If you do not want your student to be a part of this study, please circle the words "do not," include your student's name and your signature, and return a copy of the letter to me.

Thank you very much for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Lynn Hayn
Lynn Hayn

History Department

I do/do not give permission for my son/daughter _____

to participate in the research as stated above.

Parent/Guardian Signature

Date

March 26, 2007

Dear

As a requirement to complete an advanced degree in education through The College of New Jersey, I am currently working on my Master's thesis. My research involves the use of various types of reinforcement to see if there is a positive impact on our classroom atmosphere.

The purpose of this study is to gather information about student preferences for types of reinforcement and use the information gathered to decide which types of reinforcement may bring about positive improvements to the classroom atmosphere. In other words, if I can determine what most people like as an incentive to improve work habits and performance, I can hopefully find ways to motivate the class and you as an individual. There will be no additional work required of you either in or outside of class. You will be asked to complete a 10-minute survey at the beginning of the study, and to participate in a 5-minute feedback activity at the midpoint and end of the study.

There will no identification of students or ██████████ in any way. Although my study must include some basic information about our school community and sending districts, there will be total anonymity of the students, our school, and the surrounding communities.

It would be very helpful to me, and to you, if you would participate in this research project. If you are willing to be included in this research, please sign on the signature line below and return a copy to me.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Hayn

Mrs. Hayn

For students over 18 years of age:

I give my permission to be a part of the research project stated above. I understand that I am not required to participate and that this study will not require me to do any additional work in or outside of class.

Student signature

Date

Student's date of birth

APPENDIX C

Choice Survey

Name _____

“You have worked hard on an assignment and think that you have done a super job on it. In thinking about a reward for your effort, which one of the two things in each pair below would you most like to happen? Please choose the one from each pair that you would like best and mark an “X” in the blank that comes in front of your choice. Remember, mark only one blank for each pair.”

- | | | | |
|-----|-------|--|------|
| 1. | _____ | Teacher writes “100” on your paper. | (A) |
| | _____ | Be first to finish your work. | (CM) |
| 2. | _____ | Five Jolly Ranchers. | (CN) |
| | _____ | Classmates ask you to be in their group for an activity. | (P) |
| 3. | _____ | Be able to choose a class game. | (I) |
| | _____ | Teacher writes “100” on your paper. | (A) |
| 4. | _____ | Classmates ask you to be in their group for an activity. | (P) |
| | _____ | Be first to finish your work. | (CM) |
| 5. | _____ | Be able to choose a class game. | (I) |
| | _____ | Five Jolly Ranchers. | (CN) |
| 6. | _____ | Teacher writes “100” on your paper. | (A) |
| | _____ | Classmates ask you to be in their group for an activity. | (P) |
| 7. | _____ | Be first to finish your work. | (CM) |
| | _____ | Be able to choose a class game. | (I) |
| 8. | _____ | Five Jolly Ranchers. | (CN) |
| | _____ | Teacher writes “100” on your paper. | (A) |
| 9. | _____ | Classmates ask you to be in their group for an activity. | (P) |
| | _____ | Be able to choose a class game. | (I) |
| 10. | _____ | Be first to finish your work. | (CM) |
| | _____ | Five Jolly Ranchers. | (CN) |
| 11. | _____ | Teacher writes an “A” on your paper. | (A) |
| | _____ | Be the only one that can answer a question. | (CM) |
| 12. | _____ | A Snickers (or other favorite) bar. | (CN) |
| | _____ | Friends ask you to sit with them. | (P) |
| 13. | _____ | Have 10 minutes of free time. | (I) |
| | _____ | Teacher writes an “A” on your paper. | (A) |
| 14. | _____ | Friends ask you to sit with them. | (P) |
| | _____ | Be the only one who answers a question. | (CM) |

- | | | | |
|-----|-------|---|------|
| 15. | _____ | Have 10 minutes of free time. | (I) |
| | _____ | A Snickers bar. | (CN) |
| 16. | _____ | Teacher writes an "A" on your paper. | (A) |
| | _____ | Friends ask you to sit with them. | (P) |
| 17. | _____ | Be the only one that can answer a question. | (CM) |
| | _____ | Have 10 minutes of free time. | (I) |
| 18. | _____ | A Snickers bar. | (CN) |
| | _____ | Teacher writes an "A" on your paper. | (A) |
| 19. | _____ | Friends ask you to sit with them. | (P) |
| | _____ | Have 10 minutes of free time. | (I) |
| 20. | _____ | Be the only one that can answer a question. | (CM) |
| | _____ | A Snickers bar. | (CN) |
| 21. | _____ | Teacher writes "Perfect" on your paper. | (A) |
| | _____ | Have only your paper shown to the class. | (CM) |
| 22. | _____ | A can of Snapple. | (CN) |
| | _____ | Classmates ask you to be group leader. | (P) |
| 23. | _____ | Have 10 minutes of free time. | (I) |
| | _____ | Teacher writes "Perfect" on your paper. | (A) |
| 24. | _____ | Classmates ask you to be group leader. | (P) |
| | _____ | Have only your paper shown to the class. | (CM) |
| 25. | _____ | Have 10 minutes of free time. | (I) |
| | _____ | A can of Snapple. | (CN) |
| 26. | _____ | Teacher writes "Perfect" on your paper. | (A) |
| | _____ | Classmates ask you to be group leader. | (P) |
| 27. | _____ | Have only your paper shown to the class. | (CM) |
| | _____ | Have 10 minutes of free time. | (I) |
| 28. | _____ | A can of Snapple. | (CN) |
| | _____ | Teacher writes "Perfect" on your paper. | (A) |
| 29. | _____ | Classmates ask you to be class leader. | (P) |
| | _____ | Have 10 minutes of free time. | (I) |
| 30. | _____ | Have only your paper shown to the class. | (CM) |
| | _____ | A can of Snapple. | (CN) |
| 31. | _____ | Teacher writes "Excellent" on your paper. | (A) |
| | _____ | Have your paper put on the bulletin board. | (CM) |
| 32. | _____ | A pack of gum. | (CN) |
| | _____ | Friends ask you to work with them. | (P) |
| 33. | _____ | Be free to work on something you like. | (I) |
| | _____ | Teacher writes "Excellent" on your paper. | (A) |

- | | | | |
|-----|----------------|--|----------------------|
| 34. | _____
_____ | Friends ask you to work with them.
Have your paper put on the bulletin board. | (P)
(CM) |
| 35. | _____
_____ | Be free to work on something you like.
A pack of gum. | (I)
(CN) |
| 36. | _____
_____ | Teacher writes "Excellent" on your paper.
Friends ask you to work with them. | (A)
(P) |
| 37. | _____
_____ | Have your paper put on the bulletin board.
Be free to work on something you like. | (CM)
(I) |
| 38. | _____
_____ | A pack of gum.
Teacher writes "Excellent" on your paper. | (CN)
(A) |
| 39. | _____
_____ | Friends ask you to work with them.
Be free to work on something you like. | (P)
(I) |
| 40. | _____
_____ | Have your paper put on the bulletin board.
A pack of gum. | (CM)
(CN) |

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.

REINFORCEMENT INVENTORY

SCORING KEY

_____ **Adult approval (A)**

_____ **Competitive approval (CM)**

_____ **Peer approval (P)**

_____ **Independent rewards (I)**

_____ **Consumable rewards (CN)**

Modified from:

Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice. (2000). *Addressing student problem behavior- part III, p. C-8.*

Survey Summary (16 responders)

		*MEAN
Adult approval (A)	14; 11; 12; 16; 15; 14; 14; 8; 7; 10; 7; 14; 16; 11; 13; 15	12.8
Competitive approval (CM)	3; 4; 0; 1; 2; 4; 7; 0; 5; 6; 8; 0; 0; 0; 9; 1	3.1
Peer approval (P)	5; 1; 9; 8; 5; 3; 4; 11; 3; 11; 8; 7; 9; 14; 2; 7	6.7
Independent rewards (I)	7; 10; 13; 7; 8; 6; 11; 14; 15; 9; 13; 8; 8; 7; 8; 7	9.4
Consumable rewards (CN)	11; 14; 6; 8; 10; 13; 4; 7; 10; 4; 4; 7; 8; 8; 10	8.4

* The mean was determined by dividing the total of each response by the number of responders.

APPENDIX D

List of Five Words That Describe Our Class

<u>Responses</u>	<u>Period 7 (12 responders)</u>	<u>Period 8 (8 responders)</u>
Hot & stuffy, smelly	6	6
Disruptive, obnoxious, rude, unruly	8	4
Loud, noisy	4	4
Slow, unaccomplished	2	2
Interesting	2	2
Out of control	2	
Easy	1	5
Bored, boring	4	1
Good experience	1	
OK at times	2	
Blamed for stuff we don't do	1	
Strict about little things	1	
Uncompromising	1	
Give a little to get a little	1	
Don't pay attention	1	
Unfocused	1	
Stressful	1	
Fun		7
Annoying	1	1
One of a kind, unique		2
Kind		1
Hard-working		1
Under control		1
Learn a lot		1
Exciting		2
Encouraging		1
Good movies		1
Best because it's the last class of the day		1

Period 8 responses are shown for comparative purposes only.

APPENDIX E

List of Five Positive Words that Describe Our Class

<u>Response</u>	<u>Period 7 (14 responders)</u>	<u>Period 8 (16 responders)</u>
Mrs. Hayn is nice/caring	1	4
We get candy and gum	3	4
Bonus points	1	7
Help from another student	1	2
Work with partners/groups	5	5
Easy work	4	3
Good teacher	1	1
Funny/fun	1	5
Movies	1	3
Sit where we want/by friends	1	3
We can ask questions, talk about things	1	
Mrs. Hayn cuts us some slack	4	9
Friends are in this class	1	
Get credit for any work done	1	1
Small class	1	
Sometimes challenging	2	
Alternatives for projects	2	1
Games	2	3
Mrs. Hayn's positive attitude	1	
Teacher not the problem, we are the problem	2	
Fair	1	2
Plenty of grades to have a better chance	2	
Interesting	1	
Patience with people	1	1
Not hard if you pay attention		1
Good test reviews		1
Learned a lot		1
Rewards	3	8
Organized		3
Not much homework	2	3
Other responses that had nothing to do with the activity	9	6

Period 8 responses are shown for comparative purposes only.

Running Head: SUBJECTIVITY ADDENDUM

**Subjectivity Addendum: What Happens to the Atmosphere in My Classroom
When I Focus on the Positive Behavior of My Students?**

Lynn Hayn

EDUC 602: Inquiry in Practice

Summer 2007

My years of experience in working with adolescents have led me to a series of beliefs about my teaching practices and my students, some of which proved to be valid and some of which I must reevaluate in view of the particular experience I have had this past year. Each school year, each class, and each individual student provides a different learning experience.

I believe that it is necessary to start out the year with a lot of structure. It is possible to ease up as time goes on, but very difficult to regain control if good management practices are not in place at the beginning. This approach has always worked well for me. As a new teacher I had a long list of rules that covered everything from proper care of textbooks to preparing for final exams. After a few years of classroom experience I found that, while there were some essential rules that had to be stated to avoid chaos and confusion, it was a better practice to address other issues as they occurred and to involve my students in determining consequences.

The rule that I use most often is, “manage your impulsivity.” It is meant to get my students to think before they act, rather than to just live in the moment, and to help them resist the urge to give in to inappropriate impulses. However, I failed to take into account the fact that I was changing the rules in the middle of the game. Although my original intention was to gradually bring my students around to my way of doing things, I was put into the game when it was already in progress and there were patterns of behavior that had already been set in stone. I was never able to use this rule effectively this year, and I was unable to develop a relationship with my class that supported student involvement in determining consequences. (JE, 3/15/07)

Most of my teaching experience has been with younger students. I was accustomed to helping freshmen make the transition from 8th grade to the high school environment, a process that generally took from September until Christmas vacation. I came to know the “little kids”

very well over the years, and was quite successful in helping them to make the adjustment to an environment where greater accountability was expected of them.

Although my supervisor and I had discussed the fact that a different approach would be necessary with older students, I made some errors in judgment in the first few days with my students. I allowed myself to engage in a power struggle with a few of the most challenging ones that set a very negative tone for all of us. I believed that by giving respect to my students that it would be returned in kind. When I found that this wasn't the case I attempted to deal with the most flagrant disruptions by taking a very hard line on discipline, with the idea that I could draw back as time went on. The kids were already angry and I sensed that they felt abandoned by their original teacher. My attempts to bring some sense of order to the classroom increased their anger and frustration.

I have always felt that it is essential to have high expectations for achievement, performance, and behavior. If I do not set high standards for them then they will only do what they have to do to get by, instead of working towards a higher goal. When classwork and homework assignments were met with considerable resistance I implemented a strategy designed to minimize objections. Homework assignments were limited to an average of two per week. By keeping homework to a minimum, my students were responsible for some preparation outside of class time but not overburdened with what they might consider "busy work." I was very surprised when even the limited number of assignments was not only a point of contention, but resulted in very little work being handed in. Although a few members of the class handed their work in on time and completed to the best of their ability, the majority complained that they had no time due to sports, work, or other outside activities and consistently turned their work in long after the due date. I regularly made lists of overdue work for each student in an effort to keep them from

falling into failure range at progress report and report card times. I sometimes felt as if I was being an enabler, allowing my students to continue the bad habits they had developed at the beginning of the year. At other times I felt it was a necessary concession considering the many areas of conflict I was trying to resolve. (JE, 2/27/07)

Games and other learning activities had always been a mainstay of my lessons. I was often surprised by the fact that many of the students were critical of my game choices, and expressed a desire to sit and complete worksheets for most of the period. Many of the students in this class only showed an interest in playing a game if it was one of their own choosing, such as Seven Up or Hangman. While I did use these games at various times for downtime activities, I was more likely to plan games that allowed a connection to the curriculum, such as Jeopardy. My belief that all kids would rather play a game than complete worksheets proved to be a complete misconception (FN, 3/12/07).

I planned projects that would allow us to leave the classroom and work in the Media Center where we could utilize the internet and school's vast print collection to research relevant topics. Usually the students worked in pairs or groups, sometimes selecting topics from a list that I had made and sometimes choosing their own partners and topics to create a project of their own design. I believed that allowing students more choices was a good way to motivate them to produce a finished project that showed the time and effort that had allotted to complete the work. In order to make it easier for students working in pairs or groups, the actual project construction was often scheduled during class time. Unfortunately, the end results were often disappointing and lacked effort. I began to allow my students to choose their own partners more often, knowing that the Hooligans would probably choose each other. This meant that the rest of the class was

able to work more effectively, since they were not always faced with partners that did not contribute or in other ways hindered the cooperative effort (FN, 3/23/07 and 4/4/07).

I had always made it a practice to make positive contact with every parent at least twice during the year, often making compliment calls or sending postcards and notes home to announce student achievements. This usually resulted in a better working relationship between school and home, so that when it was necessary to report problems there was a sense of working together to solve them. Unfortunately there were two factors that seriously affected my ability to develop this kind of working relationship with many of the parents of these students. It was very difficult for me to find positive things to say about some of my students considering the negative feelings we had about each other. This was something I had never encountered before – I had always found ways to praise even my more challenging students. It was difficult to find positive things to say about a boy whose use of profanity was my most vivid memory at the end of the day, or to compliment a girl who was consistently disrespectful and dishonest. I would reflect on the happenings in my classroom while driving to and from school. I often thought about something my vice principal was fond of saying when we conferred on discipline problems: “Remember, they’re sending us the best they’ve got.” With this in mind, I worked harder to find positive attributes in my students so that I could present a more balanced picture when it was necessary to contact parents.

The second factor that interfered with my attempts to make a school-home connection was the difficulty I encountered when trying to make contact with many of the parents. I had always been quick to inform parents of changes in performance and attitudes, and addressed behavioral problems as soon as they appeared. My own experience as a parent influenced my actions as a teacher. I wanted honest assessments of my children’s academic and behavioral issues so that I

could provide support and respond in an appropriate fashion at home. I assumed that most parents shared my feelings. I was surprised at the lack of response from some parents, who failed to return phone calls or ask questions about progress reports and report cards, and sometimes gave the impression that they were disinterested in their student's classroom difficulties. At times I felt as if my attempts to communicate with them in an open and honest manner were considered more of an intrusion than a desire to help their children. This made me reluctant to make contact with home, especially when my students would let me know that a message had been received but apparently ignored. Sometimes I had to force myself to make phone calls and was prepared to meet resistance when contact was finally achieved; I struggled with this facet of my responsibility, something that I had never encountered before (FN, 3/15/07).

At times my students were unrelenting in their criticism of my inflexibility when school rules and policies were concerned. There were a number of incidents involving the school's superintendent that resulted in an edict for a particular rule or procedure to be implemented in my classroom. While it was not my intention to disown the rule or policy, I was careful to make clear to my students which rules were mine and which were his. When I tried to enforce the various rules and policies dictated by others, the end result was often allowing my own classroom procedures to go by the wayside in order to eliminate some of the conflicts. Although I consider myself a team player I resented the position in which I found myself. I did not want my students to think I was uncompromising and inflexible about so many things (FN, 11/4/06 and 2/24/07).

It seemed as if I was always doing battle – with my students, my situation, and, more than anything else, with myself. The greatest obstacle I had to overcome was my own negativity. Although my students were responsible for their defiance and noncompliance, I have to accept

Running Head: IMPLEMENTATION

Implementation: What Happens to the Atmosphere in My Classroom

When I focus on the Positive Behavior of My Students?

Lynn Hayn

EDUC 602: Inquiry in Practice

Summer 2007

Implementation

“Who dares to teach must never cease to learn.” - John Cotton Dana

Breaking in a new pair of jeans requires some time and effort. When you first buy them, they tend to be a little stiff and scratchy, especially if they are dark blue denim. So you wash them a few times in warm or even hot water, use lots of fabric softener, and dry them before you even wear them. After a few times through the cycle they feel a little softer and smoother. And as time goes on they continue to soften and fade until eventually they are so comfortable that you can't manage without them. They become non-edible *comfort food*, like macaroni and cheese, Campbell's chicken noodle soup, and warm chocolate chip cookies.

The process of defining my question was very much like breaking in a new pair of jeans. My first attempts at writing were a little stiff and didn't really feel comfortable. So I revised and edited, expanded and revised, until I had gone through a number of versions. And after each revision the question felt a little better. As the negativity of the question faded, it began to feel softer and it was a better fit. In the end, I reached the stage where I could call my question comfort food.

By the time I was finished writing my story I realized that what I had actually done was to solve a puzzle. Appreciative inquiry, attribution training, and cooperative discipline were the pieces that had to be put together to solve the puzzle that was my question: *What happens to the atmosphere in my classroom when I focus on the positive behavior of my students?*

Appreciative inquiry was the largest piece of the puzzle, and David Cooperrider's (1999) vision has become a part of my own. “Appreciative Inquiry (AI) begins an adventure...even in the first steps, what is being sensed is an exciting direction in our language and theories of change – an invitation, as some have declared, to a ‘positive revolution’.” (p. 1)

I will use appreciative inquiry by noticing the positive behaviors of my students and providing reinforcement through my words and actions. Although I will try to catch all my students “doing good” I will make a conscious effort to target those with non-compliant behavior issues. I will use consumable rewards (kids will do anything for a Jolly Rancher!) selectively and appropriately as rewards and prizes, and will limit their use as a means to gain compliance.

Attribution training is the second piece of the puzzle. It is one of the tools that can be used to help my students to tap into their potential, both in academic achievement and in the development of coping mechanisms to deal with the stress and confusion that accompanies adolescence. The greatest challenge they face is making the right choices

As humans, we are all imbued with a self-serving bias – we tend to take credit for our successes and deny responsibility for our failures (<http://www.cognitivebehavior.com/training/Theory/Attribution%20Training%205A5.ppt>). Through attribution training adolescents can learn to take internal responsibility for their actions rather than using external factors to excuse bad choices or poor academic performance, thus increasing their self-esteem. Raising self-esteem promotes a more positive self-image. When we focus on the positive, we locate the energy for change.

The use of attribution training may also provide for a better relationship with the teacher whose classroom I share. If I notice how clean and orderly the classroom is at the beginning of the period (assuming that it is) my students may begin to make internal attributions that will keep it that way, which eliminates the struggle of getting them to set it straight at the end. Thanking my students for their compliance beforehand may keep them from touching things on the other teacher’s desk.

in a shop they never complained – they commented on the strong economy. When we expressed our regrets at leaving beautiful Ireland to return home, they turned our regrets to laughter by saying, “An’ we be missin’ you already!” There is a lesson to be learned by looking for silver linings. I hope to carry that outlook into the next school year.

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