

Understanding and Implementing
Relationship-Driven Classroom Management

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A teacher's philosophy of education goes hand in hand with his or her classroom management style. For me, teaching is much more about facilitating than instructing. I hope to learn with my students and lead them to be lifelong learners. I was drawn to Relationship-Driven Classroom Management, a management system in which the teacher functions as an advocate instead of an adversary and helps students to not only develop academically, but also socially and emotionally by building relationships.

The essence of Relationship-Driven Classroom Management is in its name. This system works under the premise that teacher-student relationships are in and of themselves an effective intervention, rather than a prerequisite to intervention. Relationship-Driven Classroom Management "focuses on proactive and behavior management strategies that enhance teacher-student connections, promote social-emotional competency, and protect students from future risk" (Vitto X). Relationship-Driven Classroom Management is not just about creating a classroom community, but it is a series of intentionally planned and implemented strategies that foster a relationship between teachers and students which proactively reduce the amount of negative behaviors and encourage positive changes in the way which students think and approach problems.

The goals of Relationship-Driven Classroom Management are simple. This system is intended to create change in the way that students think, foster resilience and a sense of efficacy in students, and enhance students' motivation and responsibility. These are fostered primarily through caring relationships, but also positive and high expectations and opportunities to participate and contribute (Vitto). Former teacher, Torey Hayden, considers there to be three essential components of teacher-student relationships as a

vehicle for change: commitment, modeling, and communication (Marlowe 13). If subscribing to this management system, every teacher should demonstrate to their students an unwavering commitment and dedication to the student, model positive behaviors (particularly those related to social-emotional skills), and have open back-and-forth communication between them and their students.

These goals can be achieved through proactive strategies that foster positive relationships. Vitto suggests a variety of strategies that contribute to the prevention of negative behaviors. Some strategies to consider are emphasizing positive relationships among students and staff, treating all students with equal respect, making sure that opportunities exist for adults to spend quality/personal time with students, helping students to feel safe in expressing feelings, needs, and anxieties, teaching students how to deal with feelings, manage anger, and resolve conflicts, and creating ways for students to share their concerns.

The most common school operational systems are based on an authoritarian philosophical approach, most prominently the behavior model and the business model (Brant James 57), but Relationship-Driven Classroom Management does not fall into these categories. Proposed shortcomings of these traditional approaches include 1) an emphasis on control instead of change, 2) externalization of the behavioral problem, and 3) focus for a solution in the past or in the future (Brant James 58, Marlowe 13). Relationship-Driven Classroom Management on the other hand, centers on fostering both shortterm and longterm positive effects in students' academic and social lives by enhancing students' resilience, motivation, and responsibility. The Marygrove College Master in the Art of

Teaching program published an article citing additional benefits of Relationship-Driven Classroom Management, over traditional classroom management systems. These include the following (citations included as they were in the original article):

- Contribute to the academic achievement and motivation of our students (Elias, 1997)
- Decrease the likelihood of a student dropping out (Thurlow, Christenson, Sinclair, Evelo, & Thornton, 1995)
- Help prevent and reduce bullying (Olweus, 1999)
- Help prevent substance abuse (Resnick et al., 1997) and violence (Dwyer, Osher, & Warger, 1998)

If Relationship-Driven Classroom Management can accomplish so much, what settings should it be used in and why is this not the norm in classroom management? Research would suggest that this type of classroom management would have clear benefits in a variety of classroom settings. Graduate student Lisa M. Laash incorporated this style of management in a small, rural Montessori school with first through third graders. Laash's research revealed a definite increase in positive behavior in the classroom, reduction of off-task behaviors, and an improvement in the quantity and the quality of work that students produced (Laash 13-16). Torey Hayden has authored eight books about her experience using Relationship-Driven Classroom Management with students who had emotional and behavioral disorders. She attributes all of the success that she has had in the classroom to the relationships that she built with students (Marlowe 14-15). Likewise, there has been

ample research connecting Relationship-Driven Classroom Management in middle level and high school settings with positive short term and long term effects.

There is no set methods to perfect teacher-student relationships. However, there are little things that teachers can do everyday to support a Relationship-Driven Classroom (Marygrove MAT). Teachers should believe that their challenging students have something to teach them. Teachers should reject a zero-tolerance approach to negative behaviors, by looking at each situation individually. Teachers should build on their students' strengths rather than trying to make up for their deficits. Teachers should avoid sarcasm to create a safe space for their students, free of embarrassment. Teachers should greet students in the halls and as they enter the classroom. Ultimately, teachers will allow their classroom to be driven by positive relationships, because "everyone needs to know in a very real way that he or she matters to someone, someplace" (Marlowe 14).

Works Cited

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