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Classroom Management Problems and Solutions

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CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

A few basic guidelines for classroom management can improve student behavior and reduce stress on the music educator.

BY DEBRA G. GORDON

Classroom discipline and management may be among the most difficult challenges for teachers, particularly for beginning teachers. While gum chewing and casual chatting may once have been the most taxing problems in the classroom, Mary John O'Hair suggests that disruptive behavior and violence have become only two of many problems hampering maximum efficiency in teaching and learning.¹ Furthermore, student apathy, negative attitudes, and inappropriate behavior may not only impede learning in the classroom, but several studies also suggest that they can cause a high degree of stress for the music educator.²

Compared with managing other kinds of classrooms, managing a K–8 (and, to some extent, a 9–12) music classroom differs in three basic ways. First, the music classroom is typically “product-oriented” in an immediate sense, and the nature of the work requires a group effort rather than the individual efforts of twenty-five learners working at different paces. Students



Photo by Jim Kirby

A well-managed classroom can provide an environment in which learning can take place pleasantly and productively.

are expected to sing, play instruments, listen, participate in movement activities, and actively create music in a collective, cooperative fashion. Second, the numbers of students participating in a music program and the class sizes are often much larger than those in

other classrooms. Music classes may often contain doubled-up general music classes, choirs of sixty or more students, and bands or orchestras of over a hundred students. Third, the outcome of the class effort is typically displayed through concerts, contests,

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competitions, and other public venues that place additional pressures on the music educator to maximize classroom instructional time. All of these differences require additional discipline strategies and management techniques so that music educators can position their students to achieve success.

The Rationale for a Management System

Both professional and personal reasons underlie the need for a specific classroom management system. First, virtually little or no learning can occur in a classroom bereft of effective management and discipline. In classes lacking discipline, precious learning time is wasted as the teacher attempts to implement management strategies. In essence, learning musical skills is replaced by correcting nonmusical skills; social learning becomes the main focus. Second, effective classroom management and discipline help to teach students responsibility and self-control. Third, from a legal perspective, if classroom management is absent or inconsistent, liability issues can loom. Teachers and administrators can be held legally responsible for nearly anything and everything that transpires in a classroom. And fourth, successful classroom management can set the stage for optimal learning, as well as reduce stress on the teacher.

Meeting Students' Needs

In general terms, each of us has a variety of needs that must be met so that we can work efficiently and enjoy life. Helping students meet their own needs is of utmost importance to enhance their learning opportunities and to maintain our own longevity in the classroom. On the subject of meeting students' needs, Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs is often used as a reference point.³ Herbert Grossman recaps students' basic needs and the order in which those needs must be met to produce well-balanced members of society.⁴ The following is offered as a summary of student needs and as a basis for planning classroom management:

- physiological satisfaction: taking care of hunger, thirst, and rest
- safety: avoiding injury, physical attack, pain, extreme temperatures, disease, and psychological abuse
- nurture: receiving love and acceptance from others and having a feeling of belonging to a group
- a sense of personal value: experiencing self-esteem, self-confidence, and a sense of purpose and empowerment
- self-actualization: realizing one's full potential.⁵

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Effective classroom management and discipline help to teach students responsibility and self-control.

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School staff may attend to physiological needs on a daily basis by providing breakfasts and lunches for needy students and, in some cases, making home visits to teach parents how to provide for their children's needs. Until these physiological needs are met, basic functioning in the learning environment is difficult, if not impossible. Although meeting the second category of needs—those relating to safety issues—may lie outside of the teacher's direct influence when students are away from school, some of these needs can be addressed in the classroom. Good classroom management can help to ensure that students are protected from physical attacks, from unhealthy environmental conditions, and from psychological abuse.

To meet the third category of needs, which include love and acceptance, the teacher has the potential to create a learning environment that is humane, fair, consistent, and devoid of criticism, innuendo, condescension, power plays, and favoritism. When students participate in a loving, caring atmosphere, it is safe to assume that they will learn to practice being loving, caring people. This is not to recommend overt demonstrations of affection, but rather to encourage attitudes and behaviors demonstrating that the teacher and students care for and are concerned about each other. The indifference or hostility that may prevail in environments lacking mutual care and concern can profoundly damage student learning, productivity, and achievement.

The fourth category, which encompasses self-esteem, self-confidence, a sense of purpose, and empowerment, contains elements that directly relate to love and acceptance. There appears to be an inextricable relationship among these needs. Students who are cared for can more easily assimilate caring qualities, which fuel their own capabilities to build self-esteem and confidence. Ultimately, the opportunity to strive freely to achieve the fifth category of needs—self-actualization—can be realized when the more basic needs have been fulfilled.

Contributing Factors

The following discussion focuses on specific causes of classroom misbehavior precipitated by the lack of fulfillment of human needs. A distillation of Maslow's categories will be used as a basis for suggesting specific solutions to classroom problems.

Richard Curwin and Allen Mendler present a list of global causes of misbehavior that describe more specific roots of classroom dissension: (a) violence in society, (b) massive media coverage of overt and covert messages regarding "sex, violence, and death," (c) a throw-away societal mentality focused on individual indulgence and subsequent escape from family commitment, (d) unstable home situations, and (e) a wide range of tempera-

ments among children.⁶ Curwin and Mendler also suggest more localized contributing factors, such as bored students, feelings of powerlessness, ambiguous parameters for behavior, lack of redirected outlets for expressing negative feelings, and personal attacks upon one's dignity.⁷

Other factors, more parochial in nature, may create problems in the classroom: (a) insufficient modeling by the teacher, (b) low expectations of students, (c) the "buddy" approach to managing students, (d) the teacher's failure to follow through with stated expectations, (e) the teacher's decision to ignore misbehavior, (f) the absence of concerted instruction in how to succeed, (g) the child's feelings of inadequacy and fear of failure, and (h) the child's lack of pride in self and in school.

Some of the causes of misbehavior are brought into the classroom via the "baggage" that students carry; other causes stem from misdirection or lack of direction by the teacher. Lack of or impaired interaction between student and teacher may offer yet another cause of misbehavior. For example, the teacher who neglects to present clear directives or modeling may communicate a perceivable lack of interest in student success, clearly expressing his or her low expectations. Children participate in classroom activities more readily if they understand what is expected academically and if they have sufficient information and practice in order to succeed. When students are insufficiently prepared for success, their interest and motivation can quickly wane.

A teacher's own expectations of students can invite misbehavior and provide an open forum for problems to arise. If the student recognizes that a teacher is indifferent to his or her success, the student may behave disruptively in order to gain attention or to take control of the class. Further complications arise when a child experiences feelings of inadequacy and a fear of failure. At this juncture, the student typically avoids opportunities to take risks in learning and may appear to be stubborn, uncooperative, or withdrawn. To build trust

and provide avenues for learning to occur, the teacher must work with the student to achieve small, incremental successes.



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Other difficulties result when the teacher becomes a "buddy" to students, communicating his or her desire to be liked. In this instance, the fine line between cooperation and respect becomes blurred. Classroom difficulties arise in managing students when they view the teacher as a peer figure rather than as the adult in charge. This abdication of authority profoundly erodes management, prompts students to take undue advantage of the situation, and opens the door to continual, disruptive student behavior. If the teacher remembers that the students are dependent upon adults for direction, motivation, and appropriate guidance and behavior in the classroom, he or she has a greater chance of remaining focused on teaching responsibilities and less on personal needs.

Having respect for other people and their accomplishments facilitates one's ability to feel pride in one's own competencies. Respect is both earned and learned in terms of behavior and attitude; therefore, it can be modeled by the teacher and transferred to the student in all classroom situations. This requires the teacher to teach respect for students, for adults, for

classroom materials and equipment, and for everyone's needs. The child who exhibits a lack of pride in himself or herself and in school has not been taught to have self-respect or to respect other people or equipment in the school.

Finally, the teacher who fails to follow through with stated expectations can quickly be interpreted as being less than truthful. Credibility issues can loom in the classroom, creating further challenges to the teacher. In addition, ignoring misbehavior communicates a silent signal to the student that continuing to misbehave is acceptable. Idle threats and the lack of attention to misbehavior clearly translate as open invitations to students. Some students will take advantage of any situation; therefore, sufficient planning, clear communication, and adequate guidance are necessary for student success and proper conduct to occur.

Specific Solutions

While a myriad of problems exist, they can generally be grouped into four levels by their degree of severity (see the Suggested Teacher Responses to Misbehavior in the Music Classroom sidebar for a synopsis). Problems in the minor disturbance category include holding hands, footsie-playing, playing with classroom equipment, and gum-chewing. These situations can be characterized as nuisances. In the second category are more difficult problems such as tattling, talking, crying, and inappropriate touching of other students. In the third category are very difficult problems, such as profane or crude language, obscene gestures, and sexually explicit comments. In the most difficult category are fighting and drawing weapons.

A variety of solutions will be presented for dealing with these four categories; however, outcomes depend upon how the teacher intervenes, the personalities involved, the speed with which the teacher acts, and the consistency with which the teacher addresses discipline. In addition, the teacher's body language, voice level, gestures, and proximity to the students can affect the outcome.

Suggested Teacher Responses to Misbehavior in the Music Classroom

Level of Seriousness	Typical Behavior	Possible Solutions
1	Holding hands, footsie-playing, playing with classroom equipment, gum chewing	Use physical proximity: move toward student, make direct eye contact, intervene quickly.
2	Tattling, talking, crying, inappropriate touching of other students	Maintain physical proximity; give short admonition; reposition/separate student; divert positive attention to other students; reassure upset students; encourage students to express their discomfort; point out inappropriate behavior quietly; report serious incidents.
3	Profane or crude language, obscene gestures, sexually explicit comments	Quietly, firmly remind student that profane or crude language is unacceptable; confront student directly; move student; direct student to devise own plan of action; use quick intervention; stand between contributing parties; request involvement of school counselor.
4	Fighting and drawing weapons	Remove offenders from classroom immediately; ensure the safety of other students; obtain immediate intervention by school administrators and security personnel; notify counselor, parents, administrators, and authorities immediately; document all serious disruptions and note their consequences; use accurate, precise statements to describe situation.

Level-one problems such as footsie-playing, gum-chewing, and inappropriate use of classroom equipment can typically be approached in a variety of ways. The teacher's proximity can diminish the frequency of problems such as hand-holding and footsie-playing. Frequently, when students know the teacher is aware, the actions will stop. Simply moving toward the students involved can be a gentle reminder. Of course, this requires that the classroom is arranged so that it is conducive to the teacher's mobility. The teacher who is firmly planted behind the piano cannot use this tactic. Additionally, direct eye contact coupled with a quiet verbal message may provide quick, efficient intervention.

In a slightly different way, the teacher's physical proximity can provide a quick solution to gum chewing. When the teacher, without missing a beat in the teaching process, can "present" the trash can directly to the perpetrator for a "deposit," quick intervention without verbal attention to the problem can produce immediate

results. These solutions are quick to initiate and can be quite efficacious.

Level-two problems, such as tattling, talking, crying, and inappropriate touching, require more particular solutions. Two effective solutions for dealing with tattling include both direct and indirect means. The direct approach includes asking the student who chooses to be involved, "Does this problem affect you?" If the student answers "No," the tattling problem is solved. If not, the teacher will have to quiet the tattler and attend directly to the issue. Perhaps a problem-solving session will be necessary to ameliorate the situation, which can provide an opportunity for the student to suggest solutions.

An indirect approach could include hanging a picture of a cartoon character, pet, or hero figure on the classroom wall at the students' eye level. As a student begins to tattle, the teacher can direct the student to walk to the picture and express his or her problems to the "listener" (for example, Snoopy or Michael Jordan). The value of this approach, especially with very young

children, is that frustrations are vented without the teacher necessarily lending credence to the situation.

R. Louis Rossman suggests that disruptive students can be approached by using physical proximity or by presenting "a short admonition" prior to repositioning the student in an area where he or she cannot interrupt others' learning.⁸ Another tactic is to divert attention to those students who are performing at the level of expectations, for example, "Watch John, class; he is perfectly ready to line up. I can tell because he's waiting patiently and listening for directions." This tactic draws attention to positive behavior rather than reprimanding negative behavior. In more severe cases, separating the talkers will send a firm message to the class, particularly if they are moved to areas in the room that offer no opportunities to reengage in conversation. One cautionary statement is in order, however. If only one of the talkers is moved, the remaining student may gloat while the repositioned one may create further disruptions. In most of these instances, consistency

and fairness are key issues. If students perceive that the teacher is unfair or inconsistent, behavior can erode at an exponential rate.



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Crying can be a very disconcerting problem, particularly for the beginning teacher. When primary-level students cry, the cause can typically stem from homesickness, illness, or teasing. In this case, reasoning can work. Telling the student that you, as the teacher, cannot solve the problem unless you know what the problem is can quickly get the student focused. Calmly stress the need for the student to get control so that he or she can state what the problem is. It is probable that the young student needs only to be reassured. For the older student, crying is usually an infrequent problem; therefore, its occurrence is a signal that the situation might be serious. While illness or teasing may be identified as causes of the problem, it is possible that hormonal changes may induce emotional outbursts. Regardless of the suspected cause, it is still beneficial to encourage the child to calm down enough to talk clearly so as to be understood.

Typically induced by curiosity, inappropriate touching is a problem that can occur among younger children. Quietly telling the student that his or her behavior is inappropriate may be the most expeditious way to address the problem. Among older children, inappropriate contact needs

to be approached more seriously. Because this behavior could be indicative of sexual abuse, the teacher is advised to report these incidents to the classroom teacher, the school counselor, the principal, and the parents. A discreet word about the inappropriateness of this behavior could temporarily solve the problem until the situation can be addressed in more detail with the student and necessary school authorities.

Among level-three problems are profane or crude language, obscene gestures, and sexually explicit comments. The teacher must recognize the source of the profane language. It is possible that the student who is working diligently may "slip" a swear word in a moment of frustration. In this situation, the teacher may quietly remind the student that profane language is unacceptable in school. When the teacher recognizes that the student is deliberately swearing, it is usually a signal that the student wants attention or control or is extremely angry. This more overt situation will typically require the teacher to confront the student directly. Moving the student to the perimeter of the classroom or outside of it may be the most expedient way to solve the problem, because it eliminates the audience effect. With the student inside or outside of the room, the teacher can calmly address the student by saying, "I can tell you're upset. And since this behavior is unacceptable, let's find a way to deal with it." Certainly, students who behave this way need to understand that consequences result from it. Curwin and Mendler suggest that one means of approaching a solution is to direct the student to devise his or her own plan of action to deal with the problem.⁹ Placing the responsibility on the student causes him or her to think about and analyze the situation in order to present an acceptable plan. The result is that consequences, rather than punishment, can be utilized.

Obscene gestures and sexually explicit comments among students are unwelcome, difficult problems and can be potentially litigious. The teacher must intervene quickly in

these situations. Perhaps the teacher's physical stance between the contributing parties may be the first step in diffusing the problem. Subsequently, reminding the students that such behavior is unacceptable may temporarily stop the behavior; however, this alone may not solve the problem. Putting the responsibility on the student may be effective, perhaps by reminding the student that you, as the teacher, do not speak to students in such a fashion and that their participation in such inappropriate behavior is neither acceptable nor tolerable. In this instance, the school counselor could be asked to intervene and aid in identifying and addressing underlying behavioral causes.



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Finally, level-four problems, those of fighting and drawing weapons, require immediate intervention by school administrators and security personnel. The teacher should not use physical proximity, but rather ensure the safety of the other students. Students directly involved in aggressive acts like these should be immediately removed from the classroom, and the counselor, parents,

administrators, and authorities should become involved immediately.

If a problem of any level reoccurs or persists, it has not been solved, and it is imperative that the teacher take further, more in-depth measures to reach a solution. Furthermore, it is essential that the teacher document all serious disruptions and note their consequences. In the event that parents present questions regarding their child's misbehavior, the precise details in the documentation can usually satisfy their concerns. The documentation should include the date, time, and a description of the misbehavior and the consequences or solutions utilized to attend to the problem.

Proactive Management

While this discussion has been devoted to reactive measures when discipline problems occur, the most effective means of classroom management are proactive. Classroom environments that are positive, quick-paced, and interesting can contribute to effective classroom management. The teacher who consistently prompts students to perform up to expectations, models all preferred behaviors, and quickly diffuses problems can avoid greater frequency and severity of problems. How is this accomplished?

One of the first steps is to create an effective learning environment. A classroom like this is no accident, but rather a highly organized amalgam of expert modeling, explicit directives and directions, consistent action regarding student behavior in the classroom, and inspiration that will motivate learning. At first glance, this description might deter prospective educators because it seems to make extreme demands on the teacher. This composite of skills, however, is not a result of trial and error. It can be acquired by instruction and practical application.

In establishing positive, effective classroom management, the first requisite is a high degree of musical skill on the part of the teacher. It is necessary for the teacher to be a good musician, to model musicianship skills, and to be comfortable and confident when participating in music

and managing the students. Those teachers skilled in music and management usually demonstrate knowledge of what to teach, as well as how to teach. Their sense of direction is strong, both for themselves and their programs.



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The second requisite is a highly organized and well-planned music curriculum and lessons that contribute to effective learning. Here, the music teacher assumes the "travel agent" approach, finding the most efficient way to get the class from point A to point B, or from the beginning to the end of the school year, with definite objectives, goals, and aims. Third, quick pacing profoundly affects classroom management. When students are focused and remain on task, they are much less likely to become involved in covert classroom activity. Focused, participating students are much more likely to learn through activity rather than passivity. Fourth, the appropriateness and variety of musical activities provided can significantly affect classroom demeanor. This requires that the teacher recognize and implement lessons that are age appropriate, motivating, and worthwhile in terms of teaching and learning. Finally, the

teacher must assess the students frequently, know the students, and continually improve the learning experiences by remaining a constant learner.

A teacher's ability to influence his or her classroom environment should not be underestimated. The teacher who models a positive attitude, is supportive of students and their efforts, and approaches behavior in appropriate ways will usually find that the class mirrors that image. This occurs subtly because the students learn to act like the teacher by spending time under his or her tutelage; they learn what they are taught.

Verbal and body language are easily recognized and interpreted by students. Students are quite perceptive, often more so than we acknowledge. Hence, the teacher's body language can become a primary way to convey thoughts and feelings, communicating through physical stance, posture, proximity to the students, tilt of the head, and facial expression. When using the body to further communicate with the students, smiling, nodding, giving thumbs up or a high five, and applauding can effectively communicate approval of students without overusing a particular expression such as "very good."

The teacher must be a good role model, further extending the positive atmosphere. The teacher's actions are visible to the student, thereby requiring the teacher to practice what he or she preaches in order to effectively reinforce students. Teachers who expect their students to be polite listeners and cooperative learners must also model this with students and fellow colleagues. These are learned behaviors.

Teachers who truly know their lesson material and are effective managers can subsequently focus on motivational strategies, student assessment, and reflection on teaching and learning. Children can readily recognize when a teacher must bury his or her nose in music or is hesitant to manage, and they will find opportunities to act up. As Robert Tauber, Cathy Sargent Mester, and Stephen Buckwald posit, the teacher must know his or her lines; they compare the performance

of teaching to that of an actor in a play, who must note the care and time devoted to entrances, exits, timing, and delivery.¹⁰

The teacher who verbalizes expectations and promotes effective learning and self-discipline will usually reap the benefits. Attitudes, behaviors, and expectations can be verbally and nonverbally reinforced and communicated through a variety of learning experiences. Praising good behavior and musical accomplishments is one way to focus attention on expectations that have been met. Praise must, however, be used judiciously, to compliment students who perform up to expectations and to encourage students to perform to maximum levels.

Teaching students to respect each other and the teacher is an integral part of the curriculum—it's a learned behavior. Students in music classrooms must learn to function together as a group much more than in other classes. Social skills, cooperation, and group performance are of paramount importance to a music program's success.

As a former general music teacher, I realized that when my students did not perform up to my expectations or they misbehaved, it was ultimately due to my lack of specific directions or insufficient modeling and subsequent rehearsal. I learned this by observing my students in other teachers' classrooms. When I realized that my students' performance, musically and behaviorally speaking, was a direct reflection of my teaching, classroom management and discipline improved immensely. I raised my level of expectation, and my students performed well under almost any circumstances. This dramatically increased the trust level between the students and me and further allowed me to seek out opportunities for them to perform all over the state, because I could be confident that their behavior would not regress.

Conclusion

Several studies have identified classroom discipline as a profound source of stress for music teachers.¹¹ If preservice programs devote adequate time and effort in preparing teachers for

classroom management, the teachers can begin their careers with the necessary tools and skills to manage effectively. When management becomes a less profound factor in teaching, stress may be greatly reduced, which could greatly enhance teacher effectiveness, encourage collegiality with faculty and staff, and prolong professional commitment to the music classroom.



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The issue of classroom management is an important one for all teachers. Arming future educators for the rigors and demands of the classroom appears to be the most effective and expeditious way to contribute to their success. The teacher who is knowledgeable only about music may quickly fail in the classroom; however, the one who has a working knowledge of music and classroom management is far better equipped. Both preservice instruction and practical application of management strategies and techniques should be requisites for teacher preparation programs. Given the predicted shortages of teachers, these skills and tools seem to be particularly necessary in order to extend the teacher's professional longevity.

Notes

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