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Beyond the Walls: Establishing Classroom Expectations in a Virtual Classroom

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Classroom expectations are clearly defined explanations of behavioral and classroom performance that help create a consistent and safe learning environment. The value of setting classroom expectations has been researched for nearly 60 years and researchers have consistently found that teachers who explicitly teach expectations have students who are: on-task at higher rates, have more prosocial behaviors with peers, and overall are more academically successful than children who have not been systematically taught classroom expectations. Setting expectations is a way to define appropriate classroom behavior and to build consistency and structure among students. As result of the COVID-19 pandemic, many classrooms around the globe are experiencing higher rates of behavioral challenges than pre-pandemic levels. Costello et al. determined that during a typical school trajectory, approximately 20% of children experience some social–emotional and behavioral (SEB) concern. There are predictions that these rates will double or triple after the COVID-19 pandemi. Educators are mandated to implement evidenced-based practices and therefore, should further explore the implementation of setting expectations while their students are engaged in virtual learning, hybrid learning, and/or returning to the brick-and-mortar classroom amidst the pandemic. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that systematically teaching expectations to all students in a virtual setting is an innovative and effective teacher classroom practice that can then be carried into the brick-and-mortar classroom as students return to in-person learning.

Keywords: virtual instruction, classroom expectations, SWPBIS, self-monitoring, student success

INTRODUCTION

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, most students were educated in-person (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2021) and from a young age, students learned classroom expectations from their teacher(s) and classmates. In March 2020, nearly all schools quickly and dramatically transitioned to virtual (entirely online) instruction due to the necessity to lock-down and quarantine amidst the coronavirus pandemic. Over a year later (as of May 2021), approximately 50% of K-12 students in the United States continued to participate in virtual or hybrid instruction (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). Hybrid instruction, also referred to as a blended classroom involves most course activity being conducted online, but there are some required face-to-face instructional activities, such as lectures,

discussions, or labs (Mayadas et al., 2015). While many students have returned exclusively to brick-and-mortar classrooms, it is evident that some families have opted to continue with virtual or hybrid instruction at a rate higher than pre-pandemic levels (American Enterprise Institute in partnership with the College Crisis Initiative of Davidson College, 2021; Saaverda et al., 2021). Many children continue to encounter various (and sometimes quite unpredictable) instructional formats and ever-changing behavioral expectations as the pandemic continues to impact student learning through quarantines, staff shortages, classrooms experiencing even greater academic ranges than pre-pandemic levels, and unique district instructional shifts.

As educators and students return to brick-and-mortar learning, the fluctuation of behaviors displayed in the classroom has become even greater than pre-pandemic levels, given that student experiences ranged dramatically throughout their time participating in virtual learning [National Association of School Psychologists [NASP], 2020]. Without a doubt, behavioral expectations throughout virtual learning varied greatly across homes given each family's unique circumstances while navigating a global pandemic (Goudeau et al., 2021). As a result of the factors listed above, students of all ages are now presenting with a vast range of social, behavioral, and academic skills/needs. Costello et al. (2003) determined that during a typical school trajectory, approximately 20% of children experience some social–emotional and behavioral concern. National Association of School Psychologists [NASP] (2020) now expects these rates to double or triple after the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition to these variables impacting student behavioral success, most children who are currently enrolled in grades kindergarten through second grade have not yet experienced a full typical year of elementary school. Beyond their early elementary experience being upheaved, these young learners had their preschool experiences greatly disrupted as well. Preschool and early elementary is a developmental time where students learn school readiness and behavioral/social group interactions, yet most students in grades kindergarten through second grade missed this developmental opportunity due to the necessity to remain at home during a significant portion of their formative years [Ladd and Price, 1987; National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 1996].

One important way to support students' behavioral success as they continue to participate in virtual learning and/or prepare to return to brick-and-mortar learning is to prioritize setting clear expectations within the classroom. Classroom expectations are clearly defined explanations of behavioral and classroom performance that help create a consistent and safe learning environment (Madsen et al., 1968; Grossman, 2004; Van Acker, 2007). Most students thrive on having expectations because expectations are a way to define appropriate classroom behavior while building consistency and structure among students (Zimmerman and Zimmerman, 1962; Madsen et al., 1968; Henley, 2006; Van Acker, 2007; Hester et al., 2009). Researchers suggest that when teachers set expectations, it increases the probability of increased levels of appropriate classroom behaviors (Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2020). Latham (1997) found that teachers who

taught expectations had students who were (1) on-task at higher rates, (2) had more prosocial behaviors with peers, and (3) were more academically successful than students that had not received systematic instruction regarding classroom expectations. As an added benefit, the teachers had additional time to instruct and had a higher rate of positive interactions with their students. Taking it a step further, researchers have found that uncertainty regarding teacher expectations can result in students engaging in unacceptable behaviors (Walker et al., 1999).

After careful review of the literature, there are four important factors to consider when setting classroom expectations in a virtual and/or hybrid setting to prepare students to a transition back to brick-and-mortar schools. These include (1) Co-development of positively-phrased expectations; (2) Ensuring that expectations are age-appropriate and easy to understand; (3) Teaching expectations to fluency; and (4) Empowering students to take ownership of the class expectations by systematically teaching them to self-monitor their behaviors. Each of these factors will be expanded upon.

CO-CONSTRUCT EXPECTATIONS WITH STUDENTS AND ALLOW THE STUDENTS TO HAVE A VOICE IN THE PROCESS OF CREATING AND SETTING POSITIVELY-PHRASED EXPECTATIONS

Sugai and Horner (2006) assert that expected behaviors should be clearly defined within the classroom. It is incorrect to assume that students of any age should know what is expected of them without explicit instruction and clearly defined expectations. Many educators advocate having students help develop class expectations and/or have them participate in defining what the expectations look like (Maag, 2004; Burden, 2006). This can be done in-person or virtually by holding a class meeting and encouraging all students to brainstorm a list of positively-phrased expectations that they would suggest the class adhere to. Once the list is exhausted, the class can work together to whittle down the expectations to three to five mutually exclusive expectations that are framed positively (Miller, 1956). Miller (1956) was the first to identify that working memory has limitations and therefore, he asserted that more than five expectations may be difficult for students to recall. Setting three to five mutually exclusive expectations is the ideal range because students and staff can quickly recite and remember them. Practically speaking, most people would not remember more than five to seven items from a grocery list if they hadn't written them down.

It is also important to ensure the expectations are operationally-defined and stated positively so that the students are continuously exposed to the behaviors that are expected (Grossman, 2004; Maag, 2004; Burden, 2006). For example, if the class expectation is to "Be Kind," teachers can ask their students what "Being Kind" means to them. Students can incorporate their own words to demonstrate what being kind means to them. Co-constructing expectations can be a fun and interactive

process. Students can be creative and write, draw, take pictures of themselves, find pictures on the internet or in magazines of examples and non-examples of the expected behaviors. Allowing students, this opportunity to develop the class expectations is helpful in ensuring students fully understand the expectations (Burden, 2006).

Student-constructed expectation charts can be displayed in the virtual or brick-and-mortar classroom, as a reminder of the agreed upon expectations. Virtual instructors are encouraged to consider using an interactive online whiteboard/bulletin board such as Google Jam Board for co-creating the class expectations (Google, 2022). Throughout the school year, expectations across elementary, middle, and high school evolve. Therefore, expectations can be fluid within a classroom and can be added to or modified throughout the year (Maag, 2004).

CONFIRM THAT THE EXPECTATIONS ARE SIMPLE, EASY TO UNDERSTAND, AGE-APPROPRIATE, AND ENFORCEABLE

There is consensus that classroom expectations should be simple, easy to understand, positively stated, and enforceable (Hemmeter, 2007; Gable et al., 2009). Once the (three to five) expectations have been set, they should be clearly communicated and reviewed (McIntosh et al., 2010). Graphic organizers and scaffolding strategies may be helpful in clarifying the expected behavior and establishing classroom routines (Rock, 2004; Bear, 2005). It is important for educators to remember to use language that is familiar to their students yet, they can also make teaching expectations feel relatable by tying the expectations to the classroom themes. For example, if a teacher has a space themed classroom, using terms like "Out of this world!" might be language to reinforce the expectations.

Gable et al. (2009) found that teacher expectations vary across learning environments and therefore the expectations should be publicly posted and reviewed on a regular basis. Examples and non-examples can and should be modified for every virtual and in-person learning environment. Just like one would provide examples of how expectations differ on the recess yard, in the classroom, or in the library; educators can also provide differentiated examples of expectations in the online environment during group instruction, throughout independent work, in breakout rooms, and in virtual reward rooms.

Many schools embrace School Wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS); an evidenced-based framework for improving school climate, social-emotional competence, academic achievement, and decreasing unsafe behavior in schools (Lee and Gage, 2020). Just as in a brick-and-mortar schools, SWPBIS can be used to make virtual instruction more effective than schools that do not embrace SWPBIS (Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2020). School-wide expectations can easily be incorporated into classroom expectations including in a virtual/hybrid setting. Centennial School of Lehigh University (Lehigh University, 2002)

is an excellent example of SWPBIS expectations. The Centennial School's Take Five Program, which is modeled after the nationally recognized High Five Program of Fern Ridge Middle School in Veneta, Oregon (Taylor-Greene and Kartub, 2000) meets all the criteria outlined above: five positively stated expectations:

a. Be There, Be Ready
b. Be Responsible
c. Be Respectful
d. Keep Hands and Feet to Self
e. Follow Directions

When adopting school-wide expectations as class expectations, students can still engage in co-construction of posters or digital bulletin boards that outline examples and non-examples. Neef et al. (1983) found that including a "do" and "do not" example increases the rate at which students comply with classroom rules. Some teachers choose to further enhance the understanding of the class expectations by including visuals cues while teaching examples and non-examples that align with each expectation (Jaime and Knowlton, 2007). Co-constructing examples and non-examples not only helps students understand what is expected but also clearly demonstrates what is not expected as well. Additionally, it ensures consistent language of expectations across various staff that support students in-person or through virtual instruction. When everyone is clear of what is expected, students will thrive and learning will flourish. This is even more important now, following over 2 years of unexpected learning amidst a global pandemic.

Making expectations enforceable means setting reasonable expectations based on the levels of the learner(s). For example, the expectations regarding "Following Directions" would look very different for a preschooler than the expectations set of "Following Directions" for high schoolers. Sharing the agreed upon classroom expectations with parents/guardians further supports enforceability, generalization, and follow-through across settings (Forehand et al., 1981). It is recommended that educators use enforceable terminology that could easily transfer from virtual to in-person learning to further streamline the transition as students move back to brick-and-mortar instruction.

TEACH TO FLUENCY BY *EXPLICITLY* TEACHING AND PRACTICING THE EXPECTATIONS

Co-creating and visually displaying class expectations is a valuable first step in supporting students in learning class-wide expectations. Next, the expectations must be taught, reviewed, and practiced (Hester et al., 2009). It would be remiss to assume that students remember the classroom expectations, in-person or virtually, if they are exclusively posted at the beginning of the year and not revisited. Children thrive when they have been systematically taught the meaning of each expectation to fluency (Burden, 2006). Fluency is defined as response accuracy and rate that demonstrates understanding (Binder, 1996). Explicit

teaching and practice are needed to bring new skills to fluency (Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2020). When students can quickly and accurately identify what is expected of them, they are more likely to understand and engage in expected behaviors. Gable et al. (2009) suggested that by limiting the number of expectations to three to five, the expectations can be more easily be taught directly and systematically. This further supports the notion that it is ideal to have no more than five expectations.

One way to enhance a student's grasp of the class expectations is for educators to provide positive behavior-specific praise when they observe their student(s) demonstrate appropriate expected behavior(s) in person or in the virtual classroom. Behavior-specific praise is most effective when it is immediate and includes an identification of the expected behavior (Alberto and Troutman, 2017). Teaching to fluency and providing behavior-specific praise are strategies that can be easily implemented within a virtual educational setting.

As alluded to above, best practice suggests that educators do not simply post or share expectations exclusively at the beginning of the year but rather, dedicate brief frequent instruction targeting the expectations (Paine et al., 1983). The action of practicing and reviewing classroom expectations (even if just for a few short minutes) should be a priority for teachers at any grade level. In a brick-and-mortar classroom or virtual setting, teachers can infuse language aligned with the expectations throughout the school day by "catching" students engaging in the class expectation and labeling it (i.e., "Amelia, I love the way you are *Following Directions* by starting your classwork"). Educators can make explicit teaching interactive by incorporating games, role play, modeling, and/or infusing other digital mediums such as online resources. For example, Blooket (Stewart, n.d.); PollEV (PollEverywhere, 2022); or creating short videos on social media using TikToc (ByteDance, 2022) or FlipGrid (Microsoft, 2022) may be ways to further enhance instruction of class expectations in a virtual format. Using engaging instructional modalities is an effective way to reinforce expectations in an enjoyable and innovative way.

EMPOWER STUDENTS TO TAKE OWNERSHIP AND RESPONSIBILITY OF THEIR OWN BEHAVIOR. RECOGNIZING EXPECTATIONS IS THE FIRST STEP OF TEACHING SELF-MONITORING

Axelrod noted that when students learn to manage their own behaviors, the outcome is win—win: The students have learned an important life skill; becoming more independent (which leads to increased quality of life) while simultaneously, the teacher is provided with the opportunity to focus more on academic instruction and adaptive behavior skills (Salter and Croce, 2014). Self-management can successfully increase behavioral and classroom performance and contributes to increased time in the least restrictive setting (Wehmeyer et al., 1998; Dalton

et al., 1999; Koegel et al., 1999; Todd et al., 1999). Students who engage in self-monitoring show an increased level of self-determination (Wilson, 1999). Researchers have been specifically studying self-management since the 1960's. More recent evidence of self-management interventions are synthesized in the National Autism Center's National Standards Report (National Autism Center, 2015), the Research Synthesis on Effective Intervention Procedures from the University of South Florida Center for Evidence-based Practice (Dunlap et al., 2003) and the National Professional Development Center-Evidence Based Practices (Steinbrenner et al., 2020).

In its simplest terms, self-management involves the individual use of behavior change procedures that produces a desired behavior change (Cooper et al., 2007). Self-management procedures consist of a series of steps where a person first determines whether a specific behavior has occurred, next records the occurrence of this behavior, and then obtains access to reinforcement (National Autism Center, 2015). A goal of self-management is to help the student become more independent and less reliant on teacher directed behavior management strategies (Newman et al., 1995).

Recognizing expectations is the first part of teaching self-monitoring. Notably, the first and important step of self-monitoring in schools is for the student to identify what target behavior(s) to self-reflect on. Having clear expectations encourages students to accept increased responsibility for their own behavior (Gable et al., 2009). This brings the reader back to Sugai and Horner's (2006) assertion that a critical first step teachers should take is establishing classroom expectations with their students. Once these expectations have been clearly learned by students, they can be on their way to developing the valuable life skill of self-monitoring.

Self-management tools are highly versatile and can be completed on paper, *via* self-monitoring apps, and can be incorporated into a virtual setting by utilizing the Google Suites (Sheets, Slides, and/or Jam Board). The key to setting up any effective self-management system is pre-planning; working smarter, not harder. It is important for teachers who incorporate self-management systems in their classrooms to consider the logistics before beginning to implement the strategy. Some of the variables to consider when setting up an in-person or virtual self-monitoring system include: (1) Operationalizing target behaviors, (2) Identifying procedures and schedule for monitoring the behaviors, (3) Confirming that the expectations are simple, easy to understand, age-appropriate, and enforceable, (4) Planning the reinforcement procedures to implement when the goal is met, and (5) Fading of the intervention as mastery is achieved (Salter and Croce, 2014).

While this manuscript is not intended to expand on how to implement self-management interventions, the reader is encouraged to take a deeper dive into articles summarizing the effectiveness of self-management in schools. When students acquire the skill of monitoring and reflecting on their own behavior, they can become more independent, self-determined, and have an improved quality of life (Salter and Croce, 2014).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Whether students are learning in a virtual environment, hybrid, or brick-and-mortar setting, educators cannot presume children will know how to behave in a classroom without explicitly teaching expectations. Regardless of where or how they are receiving their instruction, it is our responsibility to systematically teach classroom expectations so that students can be successful learners. Due to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, students are experiencing a time where there is uncertainly all around them and educators can further support their students by providing structure, routine, and predictably within the virtual, hybrid, and brick-and-mortar learning environment.

Infusing technology while systematically teaching expectations to students in a virtual setting is an innovative and effective teacher practice that can then be carried into the brick-and-mortar classroom as students return to their school campus. It is also a strategy that should be implemented with students who continue to attend school virtually on an ongoing basis. Hester et al. (2009) reviewed the literature of classroom expectations and found that they have withstood the test of time in terms of empirical support and are an essential component that should be incorporated into general classroom management to create a positive, safe, and predictable learning environment. McIntosh et al. (2010) followed this up by stressing that it is part of a teacher's responsibility to teach appropriate behavior.

Future research should investigate teacher's implementation practices of setting clear expectations. This research can dive deep to evaluate the implementation of teaching expectations (1) prior to the pandemic, (2) during virtual learning amidst the pandemic and (3) as teachers continue to navigate the return to brick-and-mortar classrooms as the pandemic continues.

In summary, there are four important factors to consider when setting classroom expectations in a virtual and/or hybrid setting to prepare students to a transition back to brick-and-mortar schools: (1) Co-construct positively-framed class expectations with student input, (2) Confirm that the expectations are simple, easy to understand, age-appropriate, and enforceable, (3) Teach to fluency by explicitly teaching and practicing the expectations, and (4) Empower students to take ownership and responsibility of their own behavior by systematically teaching self-monitoring. Recognizing expectations is the first step of teaching self-monitoring; a valuable life skill.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Both authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work, and approved it for publication.

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