



Instructional and behavior management practices implemented by elementary general education teachers[☆]



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ABSTRACT

This investigation examined 317 general education kindergarten through fifth-grade teachers' use of instructional and behavioral management strategies as measured by the Classroom Strategy Scale (CSS)-Observer Form, a multidimensional tool for assessing classroom practices. The CSS generates frequency of strategy use and discrepancy scores reflecting the difference between recommended and actual frequencies of strategy use. Hierarchical linear models (HLMs) suggested that teachers' grade-level assignment was related to their frequency of using instructional and behavioral management strategies: Lower grade teachers utilized more clear 1 to 2 step commands, praise statements, and behavioral corrective feedback strategies than upper grade teachers, whereas upper grade teachers utilized more academic monitoring and feedback strategies, content/concept summaries, student focused learning and engagement, and student thinking strategies than lower grade teachers. Except for the use of praise statements, teachers' usage of instructional and behavioral management strategies was not found to be related to years of teaching experience or to the interaction of years of teaching experience and grade-level assignment. HLMs suggested that teachers' grade level was related to their discrepancy scores of some instructional and behavioral management strategies: Upper grade teachers had higher discrepancy scores in academic performance feedback, behavioral feedback, and praise than lower grade teachers. Teachers' discrepancy scores of instructional and behavioral management strategies were not found to be related to years of teaching experience or to the interaction of years of teaching experience and grade-level assignment. Implications of results for school psychology practice are outlined.

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1. Introduction

Teacher accountability is a prominent topic of conversation in educational arenas (Bales, 2006; Reddy, Kettler, & Kurz, submitted for publication). Recent changes in the American education system, including the passage of the No Child Left Behind legislation, have focused attention towards general education teachers and their practices and performance in classrooms. At the same time, Response to Intervention (RTI; Fletcher, Lyon, Fuchs, & Barnes, 2007) and Positive Behavioral Intervention and Support (PBIS; <http://www.pbis.org>; Sugai & Horner, 2002, 2007) frameworks are being integrated into school systems. Both programs heavily emphasize the role of the general education teacher as a key individual who implements best practice interventions for academic instruction, behavior

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management, or both. The current United States Secretary of Education recently underscored this emphasis by stating, “The quality of the teacher in the classroom is the single biggest in-school influence on student learning” (Duncan, Gurria, & van Leeuwen, 2011). Thus what, how, and at what level of quality teachers utilize best practices are critical contributors to elementary classrooms.

Perhaps one reason for the continued emphasis on the practices of general education teachers is that, in their role as a teacher, general educators may choose from a number of potential approaches to help students learn and ultimately achieve. These choices and the degree to which a teacher uses (or does not use) a chosen strategy can have implications for learning in the classroom. For example, one of the most robust predictors of academic achievement is the provision of academic response opportunities. Academic response opportunities represent chances for the student or students to provide answers, apply concepts, or contribute to group discussions on class content. Research has highlighted the number of academic response opportunities present in the classroom to be related to student participation and engagement in learning (e.g., Partin, Robertson, Maggin, Oliver, & Wehby, 2010; Stichter et al., 2009; Sutherland, Adler, & Gunter, 2003; Sutherland, Wehby, & Yoder, 2002; Taylor, Pearson, Peterson, & Rodriguez, 2003). Current research suggests these opportunities should occur frequently, as many as 3- to 4 times per minute (Englert, 1983; Stichter et al., 2009). In addition to providing these opportunities to respond, teachers must also offer time for students to think about and process academic material (Stichter et al., 2009).

An additional strategy teachers may use to help present and integrate academic content is to frequently review lesson content and material through summarizing concepts and lesson content. Concept summaries may include the activation of thinking about prior learning through review, serve as an advance organizer for the present lesson, reinforce learning through summary and repetition, and subsequently improve students' organization and recall of material taught and overall understanding of lesson content (Brophy, 1998; Brophy & Alleman, 1991; Hines, Cruickshank, & Kennedy, 1985; Reddy, Fabiano, Barbarasch, & Dudek, 2012; Rosenshine & Stevens, 1986). Additionally, the quality of academic feedback and the promotion of metacognitive, higher-order thinking (i.e., students' thinking about thinking) can serve as ways of promoting engagement in learning (e.g., Adey & Shayer, 1993; Bangert-Drowns, Hurley, & Wilkinson, 2004; Bender, 2008; Haywood, 2004; Mevarech & Kramarski, 1997; Taylor et al., 2003; What Works Clearinghouse, 2012).

In addition to instruction-related strategies that are proximal to learning, there are classroom management strategies that can also promote effective learning environments (Gable, Hester, Rock, & Hughes, 2009). Multiple studies in the 1960s and 1970s illustrated that teacher attention (following positive behaviors), reprimands (following negative behaviors), and instructions impacted student behavior and rule following (e.g., O'Leary, Kaufman, Kass, & Drabman, 1970). These behaviors include positive attending strategies such as labeled praise or “catching students being good.” Multiple studies indicate that such contingent attention results in improved classroom behavior and rule-following (e.g., Hall, Panyan, Rabon, & Broden, 1968; Madsen, Becker, & Thomas, 1968; Thomas, Becker, & Armstrong, 1968; Walker & Buckley, 1968; Ward & Baker, 1968; White, 1975). Likewise, corrective feedback in the form of reprimands, informing the child privately and neutrally of misbehavior, or other methods of redirecting (e.g., prompting and preventing misbehavior through routines) can also improve classroom behaviors (e.g., Abramowitz, O'Leary, & Rosen, 1987; Acker & O'Leary, 1987; O'Leary et al., 1970; Rosen, O'Leary, Joyce, Conway, & Pfiffner, 1984). In addition, clear behaviorally-specific instructions and commands result in higher rates of student compliance and follow-through compared to instructions and commands that are vague or unclear (e.g., Forehand & Long, 1996; Walker & Eaton-Walker, 1991).

Based on this long-standing and considerable research literature, these teacher strategies have clear evidence as effective interventions to promote student behavior and learning. However, this literature is limited in some respects. First, these strategies are typically employed in a reciprocal, recursive, and ongoing fashion in classrooms with multiple combinations of strategies being necessary and dependent on the content and type of lesson (e.g., White, 1975). Studying any single strategy in isolation ignores the fact that teachers typically employ many of these strategies and some are dependent on one another (e.g., a teacher who issues many vague directives may have to issue more corrective feedback if students are not following the directives). This point is underscored when one considers the ratio of positive, supportive statements and demands or reprimands that occur in the classroom. Recommended ratios of at least three praise statements for every demand or reprimand are often required for improving student behavior and academic performance (e.g., Fabiano et al., 2007; Good & Grouws, 1977; Pfiffner, Rosen, & O'Leary, 1985; Stichter et al., 2009). Second, there are important developmental considerations that may make some strategies more appropriate for younger ages relative to older ages in school. For example, White (1975) documented the decrease in teachers' use of positive attending strategies starting in the second grade of school. One explanation for this finding could be that as children progress through school and learn routines and expectations, there may be a reduced need for frequent behavior management in some situations (Brophy & Good, 1986). However, it remains unclear how educators' grade-level assignment impacts general instructional and behavioral management practices. In addition, there is a question regarding whether teaching experience may play a role in the use of best practice strategies. Although intuitively it may make sense that more experienced teachers utilize greater amounts of best practices, research findings regarding the effects of teacher experience on strategy use are mixed (Ghaith & Yaghi, 1997; Guskey, 1988), and this area of research is in need of additional study.

This investigation examined general education kindergarten through fifth-grade teachers' use of classroom instructional and behavioral management practices through direct observations with a new teacher assessment tool, the Classroom Strategies Scale (CSS)-Observer Form. One output produced from the CSS-Observer Form, is an actual frequency rating of a teacher's use of specific instructional and behavioral management strategies (e.g., providing opportunities to respond; providing corrective feedback to students) as well as a complimentary recommended frequency rating of the degree to which the strategy *should have* been used given the classroom context. To facilitate the development of practice goals, a discrepancy score is calculated between the frequency and recommended frequency rating. Small discrepancy scores indicate practice appropriate for the observed context whereas large discrepancy scores suggest areas of instructional practice that may need improvement.

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