

THE JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION



DISES

Division Of International Special Education And Services
of
The Council For Exceptional Children

Running head: MANAGEMENT OF STUDENT BEHAVIOR IN MEXICO

Classroom Management: Mexican Teachers' Perceptions About, Management Of, And

Attributions Regarding Student Behavior

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Abstract

This study explores Mexican teachers' perceptions and attributions about student behavior and management strategies they use. Forty primary level teachers in Merida, Mexico public schools responded to a questionnaire developed for this purpose. Results indicate that desired behaviors include: interest in tasks, self-discipline, cooperation, and orderly work. Undesired behaviors represented externalizing or internalizing patterns. Teachers primarily use talking with parents, and increasing positives to increase/ maintain appropriate student behavior. They use talking with students and parents to decrease undesirable behaviors. Attributions related to both types of behaviors clustered in two categories: familial, and individual. Two thirds of teachers reported a need to be better trained in classroom management. Implications for the teacher training are discussed.

Classroom Behavior: Perceptions, Management and Attributions of Mexican Teachers

As the world becomes smaller, countries and cultures become more intertwined, and movement across arbitrary political boundaries becomes the norm, entire cultures as well as the microcosm of the classroom are impacted by inclusion of individuals with different cultural backgrounds. In focusing on the classroom, we have attempted to investigate how teachers in Mexico view their students' behavior. What types of behaviors do they view as desirable? Undesirable? What are their beliefs about the genesis of those behaviors? How do these foregoing concerns impact the way that they manage student behavior? And lastly, what do the results of this investigation tell us about teacher training in the area of classroom management? We attempted to answer these questions using a questionnaire developed in a related study by Williams, Lahdenpera, and Sanchez (2000). This study looked at cultural differences in classroom behavior and management practices across three countries – Sweden, Mexico, and the USA. This study extends those findings, looking in depth at one of those countries – Mexico. We would hypothesize that there would be congruence between three main areas – the types of behaviors they view as both desirable and problematic, to what they attribute these behaviors to, and the management strategies they choose given those attributions.

. In contrast with current American literature, little research has been published regarding how Mexican teachers perceive, attribute and manage student behavior(s) in their classrooms. In a global educational environment, as well as considering the broad transit of Mexican students across the US border, it is important to document the ways different teachers, such as those in Mexican schools, perceive and manage behaviors in the classroom. By considering, across cultures, the variables that affect student management we may be able to learn from our international colleagues methods and procedures that

improve student behavior, classroom climate, and contribute to improved student learning. As a part of this process, the ways that individual teachers perceive and manage student behavior cannot be overlooked.

Teacher Perceptions. Little has been published regarding the perceptions of Mexican teachers with regard to desired, and undesired, student behavior(s). Williams, Lahdenpera, and Sanchez (2000) found that generally speaking Mexican teachers tend to focus on behaviors related to on-task engagement. Fontana (1992), notes that a given behavior may be perceived differently by teachers from different cultural backgrounds. Research by Lahdenpera (1999) supports this view. In a study of Swedish teachers, she found that a greater number of students referred for behavior problems were immigrant children. She suggests that this is because the teachers in her sample perceived the different behavioral repertoires of immigrant children as problematic, instead of just 'different'. If one considers the individual school a microcosm of the culture of the region or country, then there is a considerable amount of information indicating that the specific school setting – with its own organization and dynamics - will lead to different student behavioral repertoires. It is certainly true in the United States of America (USA) that teachers perceive student behaviors that are positive as those related to compliance and academic productivity (Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey, 1995, Kazdin, 1978, Williams, Lahdenpera, & Sanchez, 2000). It has also been demonstrated that teachers tend to view behavior as being either externalizing e.g., acting out, or internalizing e.g., withdrawal (Williams and Haring, 1988)

.It can be seen, then, that student behavior may be perceived differently according to the teacher's culturally derived values toward certain types of behavior resulting in a teacher intervening (or not intervening) with that behavior.

Teacher Attributions. These perceptions about behavior, whether it is viewed as desirable or undesirable, are directly related to attributions teachers give for student behavior. When a teacher asks the question – “why are these kids behaving this way?”, within the answer can be found how the teacher will intervene to either increase or decrease that behavior. This question of attributions thus gives us much information about what teachers do in their classrooms. In Mexico, teachers seem to be polarized in their attributions about student behavior. Cortés, (2000) found that Mexican teachers tend to believe that behaviors derive from the student’s internal turmoil and psychological disposition. Or, they tend to blame the family context for the child’s behavior. Watkins & Wagner (1991) in noting the importance of the family, asserted that, without a doubt, the family has a decisive and significant influence on the child. According to these authors, the parental perspective regarding school influences the way the student perceives their role in the school setting. Renfro (1998) found similar results in a study of Mexican teachers from Monterrey. His study came to the conclusion that teachers attributed student behavior to either individual or familial variables. He noted that “...some of the teachers believe that learning problems can be partially caused by family problems, including lack of parental involvement in education and lack of the financial resources needed to provide for the child's basic needs” (pg. 16). On the other hand, he also notes that teacher comments centered on the belief that “The child is like this and is never going to change” (pg. 17). As a result, the social context – the classroom – is undervalued in terms of the role it plays in promoting (or discouraging) certain types of behaviors.. Renfro (1998) does go on the note that some comments were gathered, from special education teachers, that other variables can account for a child’s failings – variables such as teaching methods, curriculum, and the social (classroom) environment. This latter view is certainly consistent with research that

has been conducted in other countries, most notably the USA. Much research points to the importance of the actual classroom in promoting behavior,. Indeed, there is a considerable amount of information that indicates that a student's behavioral repertoire in the classroom depends in large part upon the school atmosphere, expectations and rules that are in place, and the teacher's management style. (Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey, 1996, Walker & Shea, 1999). Indeed, as Corrie (1991) suggests, the classroom is a complex social context in which key players' values and perceptions are important in order to analyze and explain behavior management paradigms within those contexts.

Teacher Management. Perceptions and attributions of teachers about behavior seem to be an important element to consider, since these help explain how teachers attempt to manage student behaviors – both desirable and undesirable (Esquivel, 1999). Renfro (1998), in the area of parent teacher relations, writes that “If a student were to struggle, a majority of the teachers would give the parent advice on how to help the student”(pg. 17). He found that teachers emphasized parent contact, and believe that together they could support the child's progress in school.. He also found that Mexican teachers in his study tended to use the following with non-achieving students. “...give incentives, repeat instructions, give more time, have parents help, make easier exams, group students, teach thematically, teach globally, use learning games, use manipulatives, help individually, teach at student's level” (pg. 17). The former perspective indicates a congruence between attributions and management, that is, if teachers believe that the origins of school difficulties are primarily familial, then it would be consistent with this to first turn to parents to change that student's behavior. Williams, Lahdenpera, & Sanchez (2000) found that teachers in the USA tend to focus on in-classroom variables to manage student behavior. Consistent with this, they primarily attribute student behavior to curriculum, instruction,

and other ‘controllable’ variables. This is, in fact, consistent with the perspective of most teacher education programs in the USA. In Sweden, they found that teachers attribute student behavior to the student and consequently tend to focus on interventions that involve changing the student’s motivation to behave in certain ways. Little direct research, however, has focused on the connection between Mexican teachers’ attributions about and management of student behavior.

All of this information informs us about the important role that different cultural contexts play in student behavior in classrooms. Considering the continued globalization of education, we can learn from others in other countries and cultures. What do teachers in other countries do to effectively manage student behavior? Are they really that much different than what we might be doing? Are these methods effective in improving student learning? Do they result in increased rates of appropriate student behavior? An analysis of classrooms in other cultures may help us to better understand the dynamics in our own classrooms – and help us to better manage student behavior and learning. . We intended in this study to explore three things: the perceptions of Mexican teachers about their students’ classroom behavior, the attributions they make about the origins of that behavior, and the methods they report using to manage student behavior

Method

Participants

We randomly selected 20 primary schools in the city of Mérida, Yucatan, Mexico. In each school, 2 teachers from third grade and 2 from 6th grade were invited to participate in the study. Inclusion criteria were the following 1) teachers had taught the same grade in the previous two school years, 2) they voluntarily accepted to participate in the study.

Assistant teachers and substitutes were excluded. For our sample of 40 teachers, the mean age was 43 years old ($sd = 4.9$). On the average these teachers have been working in the school for 22 years ($sd = 4.8$).

Apparatus

A questionnaire containing multiple choice and open – ended questions, and a checklist of classroom management methodologies was developed for this study. The questionnaire gathered information in the three areas described above; teacher perceptions of desirable and undesirable student behavior, their attributions about the genesis of those behaviors, and a checklist asking for most commonly used classroom management strategies. This questionnaire may be obtained from the third author.

Procedures

As noted, 2nd and 6th grade teacher dyads were identified in 20 different schools. [PEDRO – SPECIFICALLY DESCRIBE HOW SCHOOLS AND THEN TEACHERS WERE CHOSEN HERE. REFER TO APA PUBLICATION MANUAL, SECTION WITHIN METHOD FOR GUIDELINES] We presented the teachers with the questionnaire, explained our purpose in general terms, e.g., “we want to find out more about how Mexican teachers perceive of and manage student behavior. Please fill out this questionnaire for us so we can accomplish that” The questionnaire is self-explanatory, so little had to be done in term of instructions beyond that. The questionnaire was developed in English, and then back translated into Spanish for purposes of administration. It typically took about 45 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

Results

Teacher Perceptions of Student Behavior

Qualitative analysis of the questionnaires resulted in the identification of 4 different categories of desirable classroom behavior. Analyzing the teachers' descriptions of the 3 most common desirable behaviors their pupil's exhibit in the classroom identified these categories, and then frequently noted statements were clustered by affinity. The four categories were: 1) Student shows interest in activities and class related tasks (demonstrate effort, is careful when elaborating assignments; 2) Shows discipline (is polite, respectful); 3) Has a cooperative attitude (works well with others, has good interpersonal social skills) and; 3) Works in a clean and orderly fashion (takes care of materials, keeps desk/work space neat and organized). The two most commonly identified categories, across both grade levels, were related to student interest in task, and discipline. Lower on the list of desired response classes were the categories of cooperative behavior, and being neat and organized. Table 1 illustrates a rank ordering of these categories by number of teacher comments for both the 2nd and 6th grades.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Teacher Attributions of Student Behavior

Several of the questions asked teachers to identify their attributions as to the genesis of desirable student behavior. Through this process, they were asked to describe the behavior(s) of both a model girl and boy. Results were qualitatively analyzed and two general categories of attributions can be identified. They are: 1) Familial causes, e.g., 'parents exercise a good supervision on them', 'there is a good family support network', 'they have acceptable role models at home'; 2) Individual causes, e.g., 'is his/her nature', 'she/he likes to be that way', 'She/he is a responsible person'. As can be seen in Table 2, 3rd grade teachers more frequently attribute family origins to girls' desirable behavior, whereas

they more frequently attribute constitutional characteristics to boys' desirable behavior. Teachers of 6th grade students attribute desirable behaviors for both boys and girls to family origins most frequently (see Table 3).

INSERT TABLES 2 AND 3 ABOUT HERE

Teacher Management Strategies

Teachers were presented with a checklist to ascertain their use of various management strategies for classroom behavior. From a list of 25 specific strategies, they were asked to pick the 6 that they most often used to maintain or increase desirable behaviors in the school. As can be seen in Table 4, the strategy most often used by both the 3rd and 6th grade teachers was "Get support from parents". Increasing positive reinforcements and 'establishing formal agreements (contracts)' were the next most frequently mentioned.

INSERT TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

Undesirable behaviors in the classroom

Teachers were also asked to identify the most problematic behaviors that students exhibit in their classrooms. Qualitative analysis of teacher responses to this question resulted in the identification of two broad clusters in this area: 1) Externalizing, disruptive behaviors e.g., fighting, swearing, lying, destroying property; 2) Internalizing, passive behaviors e.g., failing to complete homework, lack of participation and attention to teacher

presentation of material. As can be seen in Table 5, disruptive behaviors, for both boys and girls at both grade levels, were of the greatest concern to teachers.

INSERT TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE

Teacher Attributions of undesirable student behaviors

Several of the questions asked teachers to identify their attributions as to the genesis of undesirable student behavior. Through this process, they were asked to describe the behavior(s) of both a model girl and boy. Results were qualitatively analyzed and two general categories of attributions can be identified. They are: 1) Familial causes (lack of supervision, family conflict, divorce, lack of role models), and; 2) Individual factors, e.g., 'it's their nature, their personality', 'it's the result of emotional turmoil, learning disabilities'. As can be seen in Table 6, at the 3rd grade level teachers tended to identify familial factors to girls' misbehavior, and individual factors to boy's misbehavior. The 6th grade teachers tended to identify familiar factors for both sexes.

INSERT TABLE 6 ABOUT HERE

Management of undesirable behaviors

Teachers use of management strategies was also investigated using the aforementioned checklist. Table 7 summarizes these results. As can be seen, teachers prefer to speak to students in private and/or get parent support. More classroom centered strategies such as 'reward with extra privileges', 'cancel privileges', 'frequent reminders', 'group contingencies' and the like were used very infrequently, if at all.

INSERT TABLE 7 ABOUT HERE

Educational system support

Teachers were also asked the extent to which their efforts at classroom management were supported by their school district. The majority of teachers (73%) indicated that they get no support whatsoever from the school system. Those who do indicate some support identified visits from special education teachers (12.5%), training courses in the summer (10%) and conferences and other events (5%). Additionally, 85% of teachers asserted that what they learned during their teacher training was insufficient to handle behavior in the classroom. Respondents indicated that workshops and information about specific behavioral control strategies and courses on child psychology and development would be helpful to them in their efforts to more effectively manage their classrooms.

Conclusions

The purpose of the study was to identify the perceptions, attributions and management choices of Mexican teachers with regard to student behavior(s) in their classrooms.

With regard to perceptions of student behavior, it is not surprising that teachers viewed as desirable student behaviors related to showing interest in classroom tasks. This in fact was viewed as more important than 'showing discipline'. Of particular interest is that the category of 'demonstrates a cooperative attitude' was ranked much lower than either interest or discipline. Further research into instructional arrangements used by

teachers (e.g., whether cooperation is even required given the ways that academic tasks and demands are presented to students) would yield more information on this subject.

We found it interesting that Mexican teachers, across grade levels, tend to view the origins of both misbehavior and appropriate behavior differently. Teachers of younger students tend to view both desirable and undesirable behavior as originating within the student. This changed as students moved up in grade level, however. The 6th grade teachers viewed both desirable and undesirable behavior as being primarily familial in origin. This was true for both boys and girls at both grade levels. Of great interest to those of us involved in teachers education is that teachers did not rate classroom variables as primary in determining student behavior. As we would predict, this result is consistent with the attributions noted above. It is also consistent with what Renfro (1998) found.

We also found a great deal of consistency between attributions and management strategies used to reduce undesirable behavior. The top two strategies attempted, for both grade levels, was speaking to students in private (a student centered intervention) and getting parent support (a family centered intervention). Of interest to use was the fact that interventions that would be considered to be in the immediate control of the teacher (problem solving with students, modification/manipulation of the curriculum, use of behavioral procedures such as group contingencies, point systems) were ranked far down the list by both grade level teachers.

So, what do these results say to us about teacher education? How can we use it to better equip teachers to manage their classes? This is, after all, something that teachers in both Mexico and the USA say they need. We believe that it says that a systemic change will be necessary in order to effect management at the classroom level. Teachers need to

be presented with alternative explanations about the genesis of student behavior is they can be expected to use different methods of management in their classrooms. An analysis of the content of teacher education programs would probably have to be undertaken to ascertain where this could best occur. Additionally, further research within Mexican classrooms would yield data about what teachers actually do with children over the course of a school day. This empirical data could then be analyzed to determine levels of student behavior (both desirable and undesirable) and the types of responses teachers have for both those classes of behavior. This analysis of the interaction between student and teacher could then be used to train teachers to respond in different ways to their students.

This two fold approach would address, both inductively and deductively, changing classroom management methodology in Mexican classrooms. Hopefully, this would focus on a need that Mexican teachers have voiced – that they need and want better methods for dealing with student behavior in their classrooms. .

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Table 1

Categories of desirable behaviors in the classroom by grade.

Categories	Rank	3er. grade	6° grade
		<u>F</u>	<u>F</u>
Shows interest in classroom tasks	1	21	26
Shows discipline	2	15	17
Demonstrates a cooperative attitude	3	9	9
Works in a clean and orderly fashion	4	2	2

Table 2

Frequencies obtained by gender and grade in each category (N=80)

Category	Gender Towards		Grade	
	Boys	Girls	3°	6°
Shows interest in school tasks	26	23	20	29*
Shows discipline	8	8	10	6
Demonstrates a cooperative attitude	5	4	7	2
Works in a clean and orderly fashion	1	5	3	3

Table 3

Attribution categories of desirable behaviors by gender and grade

Category	Third grade		Sixth grade	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls

Family origin	9	12	13	12
Constitutional origin	11	8	7	8

Table 4

Frequency of strategies used by grade to promote desirable behaviors

Strategy	General (n =40)	3rd (n =20)	6th (n = 20)
Get support from parents	28	14	14
Increase positive reinforcements	22	10	12
Establish formal agreements	20	8	12
Stress rules	18	7	11
Provides emotional support	18	11	7
Rewards with privileges and extra activities	13	6	7
Speak to students in private	13	6	7
Teach specific abilities	12	3	9
Provides successful academic experiences	10	3	7
Takes away privileges	9	5	4
Establish partial goals	7	3	4
Set example with other students	6	3	3
Provides a written report for the students	6	4	2
Focus in problem solving	6	4	2
Reports to the Principal	5	3	2
Ignores undesirable behaviors	2	0	2

Consults with special education teachers	4	2	2
Consults with other teachers	3	1	2
Punish undesirable behaviors	3	2	1
Consults with a psychologist	2	2	0
Handles behavior charts	2	1	1
Nags the student in the classroom	1	0	1
Uses token economy	1	0	1
Expels from the classroom	0	0	0
Uses group punishments	0	0	0

Table 5

Frequency by grade and gender of undesirable behaviors

Categoría	3rd grade		6th grade	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Disruptive behaviors	12	13	11	8
Little interest in school tasks	8	7	9	12
Total	20	20	20	20

Table 6

Frequency of attribution of undesirable behaviors by gender and grade.

Category	3rd grade		6th grade	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls

Familial causes	6	12	11	12
Epigenetic factors	14	8	9	8

Table 7

Frequency of strategies used to reduce undesirable behaviors

Strategy	General (n =40)	3rd (n =20)	6th (n = 20)
Speaks with students in private	36	17	19
Gets parents support.	30	16	14
Increase positive reinforcement	24	11	13
Establish formal agreements with students.	18	10	8
Stress rules	14	8	6
Consults with special education teachers	14	7	7
Informs the principal	13	7	6
Provides emotional support	13	6	7
Focus on problem solving	11	5	6
Reward with privileges and extra responsibilities	9	3	6
Consults with a psychologist	8	4	4
Consults with other teachers	8	4	4
Teaches specific social abilities	7	3	4
Cancel privileges	6	2	4
Punishes undesirable behaviors	5	0	5
Establishes individual goals	5	0	5

Strategy	General (n =40)	3rd (n =20)	6th (n = 20)
Provides successful academic experiences	5	1	4
Ignores undesirable behaviors	4	2	2
Expels from classroom	2	1	1
Set examples with other students	2	2	0
Provides a written report	2	2	0
Nags in the classroom	1	0	1
Uses behavior charts.	1	0	1
Uses group punishments	1	0	1
Uses token economy	1	1	0