Happy Talk!
Inquiry 2006

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"Successful teachers know that their preventive, supportive, and corrective interventions are more fundamental to students' learning prosocial behavior than any discipline kit, program, plan, or package"
-Robert DiGiulio, *Positive Classroom Management*

Abstract

Happy Talk! How does "Positive Teacher Talk" Make a Difference?
Can incorporating positive teacher talk into daily routines help modify the
behavior of a challenging student? This inquiry presents data that
demonstrates the effects of teacher talk and related interventions, based on
the principles of positive discipline.

Description of Teaching Context

During the 2005-2006 school year, I have been participating in a yearlong student teaching internship in a self-contained, second grade classroom at Easterly Parkway Elementary School in the State College Area School District. The school has a transient student population due to its close proximity to a major university and an attendance area that includes many apartment complexes. Families are often moving in and out as positions at the university change or graduate students complete their studies. There are 22 students in my second grade class, nine girls and thirteen boys. Nine students have parents who speak a language other than English in the home. Two thirds of the students in my class come from an upper-middle class home environment. The other students come from families with a lower socio-economic status. One student spends most of her instructional day in a learning support classroom. When she is in our classroom, a support staff aide assists her. Another student has a wrap-around aide from an outside agency who focuses on her behavioral needs. This aide provides individualized behavioral support in the school environment and the home environment. There are also ten Title-One students in our class. Our classroom has a paraprofessional who aids in daily activities from 8:45am until 1:30pm. She provides one-on-one instruction for students, occasionally works with small groups, and assists with all classroom activities. In addition, she takes the students to lunch and spends the lunch period with them. My mentor teacher is Linda Hendrickson. She has been teaching for approximately 30 years.

Rationale

Since September, we have realized that the students in our classroom have a variety of behavioral, social and academic needs.   We have many students who are strong willed and somewhat argumentative. We also have several students who are dependent learners and in continual need of support while completing individual assignments. These two groups seem to be in a silent struggle for the attention of the adults in the room. During October, a boy named "Seth" joined our classroom. Although he was physically much smaller than the other students, his voice could be heard over an entire classroom of talking children, and he demanded twice the attention of anyone else. During a lesson on the carpet, he would shout any question that came to his mind. If his outburst was ignored, he would call out again and again until he was given attention. When he was asked to raise his hand, Seth would argue that he was raising his hand or just continue to ask other questions with no regard for the adult who had asked him to please sit quietly. At times, if an adult did not answer his question, he would turn to several students and ask them various questions until someone responded to him. The class quickly began to reject him. Whenever anything went wrong, Seth was the one everyone wanted to blame. Students were constantly reporting on things that Seth had done wrong. The more attention the students focused on his actions, the more Seth acted out.

Given the academic and social dynamics of my classroom, my *original* wondering was: *How can I build an effective learning community with a group of students who do not easily bond with one another?* The original idea for my inquiry, therefore was to implement various new strategies to see which, if any, would help build a stronger sense

of classroom community and belonging among the students. I wondered if adding puppets, rock buddies, classroom meetings and journal exchanges would act as methods of encouraging and creating a sense of classroom harmony. It became clear that I had so many wonderings that my inquiry was becoming much too large for my time frame. When I tried to narrow my thoughts, I could not keep my focus from Seth. I wondered why Seth was in so much need of attention. I wondered why he did not respond to adults in the classroom. I wondered why he had such a hard time communicating with other students. I also wondered why he felt he needed to aggressively defend himself whenever a teacher corrected his behavior. He seemed to be at the heart of all of my wonderings and ideas for strengthening the community.

I wondered if there was a more positive alternative since Seth seemed to be receiving only negative attention from the teachers and the other students. Based on my wonderings, my Professional Development Advisor gave me the book, *Positive Discipline* written by Jane Nelson. As I read the book, I began to wonder what would happen to Seth's behavior if the attention given in the classroom were positive.

In summery to this point my wonderings included:

Why was Seth in so much need of attention?

Why was he having such a hard time responding to adults in the classroom?

Why was it so difficult for him to interact with other students?

Why did he become so aggressive when he was asked to modify his behavior?

Literature and Experts

As I began to review the literature, I agreed with the authors who stated that the most effective approach to classroom management is positive discipline. I began to wonder: Would positive discipline strategies work with Seth? I especially liked the philosophies of Dr. Jane Nelson and Robert DiGiulio. In his book *Positive Classroom Management*, DiGiulio states *"At its heart, positive classroom management is creative: It creates the best situation in which the student can learn and the teacher can teach."* Creating a place where students feel safe, encouraged and respected is essential to building a nurturing classroom-learning environment. In this environment, discipline is a learning experience and not a punishment. "Discipline is not the same as punishment. The root word of discipline is the Greek word disciplein - a verb, which means to learn… So discipline is helping people learn to control their own behavior" (Jim Nolan, personal correspondence).

"The development of a child's potential depends on the ability of the teacher to perceive the child's possibilities to stimulate the child to learn, and thereby to make the child's latent potentiality a reality" (Rudolf Dreikurs, *Maintaining Sanity in the Classroom*). As I continued reading the literature on positive discipline, I realized that in order for students to feel successful they must be reminded of the good they can do and be guided to set achievable goals. It is possible to find something positive about every student. As a teacher, my challenge is to help students work to their ultimate potential.

"We need to approach the issues of classroom management and discipline as much more than what to do when children break rules and misbehave" (Ruth Sidney Charney, *Teaching Children to Care*). Taking a pro-active approach to classroom discipline, the teacher can help students make good decisions the first time. Focusing on the good things students are doing can encourage others to follow the example.

 As I reviewed the literature about ways to incorporate positive discipline when dealing with a child like Seth, I really connected with the following quote: "Since discouragement is the primary motivation for [children's] misbehavior, adults need a toolbox full of encouragement methods," (Nelson, *Positive Discipline*). Reading this, I immediately thought of Seth. Seth was constantly being reprimanded for his negative behavior. When he was punished for misbehavior, he argued instead of discussing the problem. He had no concept of what he did wrong and showed no remorse for misbehaving. My personal beliefs were supported again in the literature by Robert DiGuilio: "As human beings, we all have needs to feel safe, to survive, to love and be loved, to be part of a group, and to grow in wisdom and self-knowledge," (DiGiulio, *Positive Classroom Management*). I believe the ideal classroom creates a community where these needs are met for each student. I wondered if positive discipline, especially positive "teacher talk", and goal setting would help me meet these needs for Seth.

Wonderings and Questions

After observing Seth in many settings, watching the patterns in his behavior and reviewing the literature, my wonderings became:

<u>Main Wondering</u>

- *Will implementing positive "teacher talk" help modify the behavior of an oppositional student?*

<u>Sub-wonderings</u>

- *Will the student in question begin to feel responsible for his actions after positive teacher talk is implemented?*

- *Does having a personal, non-school related talk with the student before school everyday affect the student's behavior for the day?*

- *Will teacher/student mini-conferences that focus on the positive influence student behavior if they take place immediately after every daily activity?*

- *Will teacher/student mini-conferences influence student behavior if they only occur occasionally throughout the day?*

- *Does knowing how the teacher personally feels about student behavior affect the actions of the student?*

- *Will implementing positive teacher talk also have an effect on the overall climate of the classroom?*

Inquiry vs. Project

Merriam-Webster defines inquiry as a "quest for information." That is exactly how I viewed this undertaking. In January, I began with a question, my wondering. I began to explore a variety of management strategies and research the literature. If this were merely a project, my goal would have been to modify or implement an idea I was sure would bring about precise results. My true goal, however, has been to determine what happens when modifications are made and to find out which modifications work best with this student. Any change observed has been viewed as a notable success. If this were a project, I would base my success on whether or not a *specific* change had occurred. With this inquiry, new challenges were not regarded as obstacles; they were new wonderings to be pursued. As I read, reflected and observed this student, I continually had anew wonderings. As a teacher, I realized that human behavior is complex and changing any child's behavior requires an understanding of the child, knowledge of human behavior, many management tools, the ability to be open minded and constantly "wondering" about my effectiveness as a teacher. Wonderings, I realized, never end when a teacher is truly reflective.

Inquiry Plan Description

Step One

I wondered how Seth would react to the positive examples being set by other students.
The first part of my plan was to provide more positive comments to the entire class. I complimented students when they came to the carpet, sat quietly and showed me that they were prepared to start the next activity. During lessons, I thanked students who

were sitting on their bottoms and raising their hands quietly. While the class was standing in line, I pointed out the students who were setting a good example. When students were doing seatwork, I stopped the class just to tell them they were doing a good job. All feedback was specific to the behavior and the activity.

Step Two

I wondered if Seth would increase his positive behavior based on specific feedback directed to him and the attention he was given. Step one and step two were implemented simultaneously. Step two of my plan was to direct positive comments towards Seth when he was meeting expectations. I particularly wanted to communicate the specific reasons why I was giving praise. When Seth sat quietly for a notable period of time, I would tap him on the shoulder and give him a thumbs up. After the activity, I would tell him that I really liked the way he was sitting so quietly during the lesson. When he would move from one part of the room to another quietly, I would praise him. If he was working well with a group, I would tell him that I liked the way he was listening to what others had to say and waiting his turn to share. I was continually trying to "catch him being good" and comment on appropriate behavior.

Step Three

I wondered what would happen if I formed a personal connection with Seth. I planned to meet with Seth when he arrived each morning and talk to him about something he wanted to talk about. I started out by initiating the conversations, asking him about things going

on at home or about football. After awhile, Seth started sharing stories with me when he arrived each morning without being prompted.

Step Four

I wanted to know if setting goals and giving feedback for each activity would help Seth learn to monitor his own behavior. Seth and I started to have a "mini conference" before and after each activity. In between spelling and math, we met and discussed how things went during spelling and set our goals for math. Before an activity would start, we set goals for the activity. At first, I set the goal(s) for Seth and asked him whether he thought they were fair and if he thought he could meet them. "I think it would be good if you could remember to raise your hand quietly and remember to sit on your bottom." That would be a typical goal for Seth. After I had modeled the goal setting for about a week, I started asking Seth to set his own goals. After an activity was over, I told Seth what I thought he did well. Even if his behavior was not ideal during the activity, I would find something for which I could compliment him on. Behaviors that needed to be modified could be set as goals for the upcoming activity.

Step Five

I wondered if mini-conferences would work if they occurred occasionally throughout the day. After implementing the conferences described in step four for a few weeks, I wanted to see what would happen if the conferences were less frequent. Instead of conferencing between every activity, Seth and I met once in the morning to set goals for the whole day. Then, occasionally after activities I commented on something he did well

or something that made me proud. At the end of each day, I made sure Seth and I had

time to talk about how the day went. I asked him to think that night about what his goals

should be for the next day.

Step Six

I wondered if Seth's behavior would change if I let him see that his actions had an affect

on my feelings. I started to use phrases such as "It makes me proud when…", "It makes

me glad that…" or "It makes me sad when…" In our classroom we expect students to

use "I messages" when they need to solve a problem. I wanted to find out if this form of

communication would work if I used it with Seth.

Data Collection

- Observation of Behavior- Record Sheet *(Appendix A)*
    - This form of data collection was used to record the occurrences of

        problem behaviors and target behaviors. The sheet was also used to

        record the response strategy implemented by the instructor.

        - The record sheets recorded specific data beginning February 23,

            2006 through April 5, 2006.

        - Record sheets were usually completed by an observer.

        - Primarily Lynne Sanders, my Professional Development Advisor

            (PDA), or myself completed record sheets if my mentor was

            teaching.

        - Date, time and location of the activity were recorded on each sheet.

- The observer was asked to record student behavior, the strategy the teacher used as result of the behavior, and the student response to the teacher's strategy.

- Target behaviors and problem behaviors were also listed on the record sheet.

- Anecdotal Notes *(Appendix B)*

  o This informal form of data collection was used to record interactions that occurred between Seth and other students, and Seth and adults.

    - Anecdotal notes were recorded from February 7, 2006 through April 12, 2006 and are ongoing.

    - Specific information from 25 school days were included in the anecdotal notes

    - Anecdotal notes included interactions during instruction, transitions, in the hallway, and in the lunchroom.

    - A tally was also kept in these notes recording the total number of times Seth interrupted large group or personal discussions on a total of six randomly chosen school days.

    - I was the sole recorder of this set of data.

- PDA Observations *(Appendix C)*

  o This set of data contains written reflections taken by PDA, Lynne Sanders.

    - Mrs. Sanders visited my room two to three times each week.

    - She would note the type of language, "teacher talk," used during communication with students.

- ▪ Mrs. Sanders also made general observations of Seth's behavior and interactions during instructional times.

- Oral Reflections with Specialists *(Appendix D)*
  - o This set of data was collected in order to determine if there were consistencies in Seth's behavior.
    - ▪ Occasionally, when gathering students from specials the instructor was asked to reflect on Seth's behavior while he was in their classrooms.
    - ▪ The standard question was: "How is Seth doing?"

- Mentor Reflections *(Appendix E)*
  - o In order to gain perspective on Seth's behavior in the classroom, my mentor teacher, Linda Hendrickson, was asked to complete an open-ended survey.
    - ▪ Mrs. Hendrickson was asked to write a brief statement describing Seth's behavior during the months of October and November.
    - ▪ After observing Seth's behavior during a lesson I taught, Mrs. Hendrickson was asked to reflect on Seth's current behavior.

- Para-Professional Reflections *(Appendix F)*
  - o In order to gain perspective on Seth's behavior in the classroom, the paraprofessional, Kathy Dodson, was asked to complete an open-ended survey.
    - ▪ Mrs. Dodson was asked to write a brief statement describing Seth's behavior during the months of October and November.

- After observing Seth's behavior during a lesson taught by myself she was asked to reflect on his current behavior.

- Seating Charts *(Appendix G)*

  - This set of data was used to determine how Seth's position in the classroom and seating proximity to specific students would affect his behavior.

    - In January 2006, the classroom was arranged for the new unit. The seating chart shows the location of Seth's desk in reference to the rest of the room *(G.1)*.

    - In April 2006, desks were arranged for the final unit of the year. This diagram also shows the placement of Seth's desk in reference to the rest of the room *(G.2)*.

Data Analysis

- Observation of Behavior- Record Sheet

  - The observations from the seven school days observed while using this method of data collection show that Seth's main off task behaviors included calling out and self distractions. Calling out was highlighted in yellow and off task behaviors were highlighted in light green.

    - 2.23.06- Seth lost focus and played with his nails a total of nine times

    - 2.24.06- (9:18)Seth was turned around completely backwards looking at the back of the room. (9:25) Seth was turned around backwards looking at the back of the room.

- 3.13.06- (9:56) Seth called out. (10:02) Seth called out to ask a question. (10:04) Seth screamed "Hey" into another students face.

- 3.14.06- (10:40) Seth calls out. (10:54) Staring at the wall not doing his work. (11:28) Walking around the carpet in the squat position.

- 4.3.06- (9:55) Seth called out a question.

  o Observations of Seth distracting other students were highlighted in pink.

  o Observations of "Teacher Strategies" that involved specific feedback were highlighted in dark green.

  o On task student behaviors were highlighted in orange.

- Anecdotal Notes

  o The tally of total daily interruptions was highlighted in red.

  o Seth's interactions with other students were highlighted in purple.

  o Seth's interactions with adults were highlighted in blue.

- PDA Observations

  o The main information drawn from this data source was confirmation of the use of positive feedback and discipline within the classroom.

  o The observation sheets were reviewed. Comments that referred to positive discipline or positive classroom management were highlighted in orange.

    - 2.13.06- "You are including positive comments."

    - 3.15.06- "Erin- you are making excellent progress in your feedback to students- you are becoming very specific and supportive and providing 'praise with reasons'"

- 3.15.06- "Positive teacher talk as student transitioned from spelling to math. Nice transition."

- 4.5.06- "Your positive talk as they gathered and you watched carefully for everyone to be quiet and listening was the best yet. You now are very comfortable and confident giving clear specific messages and praising the behavior you want to see in everyone. As you see, they respond very well and quickly are ready to begin."

- 4.6.06- "You gave very specific positive feedback to those who followed your directions exactly."

- Oral Reflections with Specialists
  - Analyzing this data showed the continuity between Seth's behavior in the classroom and during specials. Comments that demonstrated this continuity were highlighted in light orange.
    - 2.9.06- P.E.- "He does have a hard time controlling himself."
    - 2.17.06- Music- "He is all over the place. Today wasn't a bad day though."
    - 2.28.06- Art- "I have a hard time finding a good place for him to sit."

- Mentor Reflection
  - This data was reviewed to find connections between Seth's previous behavior and his current behavior.

- This data would have been more beneficial if it had been recorded with the baseline data in January.

- Paraprofessional Reflection

  - This data was reviewed to find connections between Seth's previous behavior and his current behavior.

  - This data would have been more beneficial if it had been recorded with the baseline data in January.

- Seating Chart

  - During the Mexico unit, the placement of students' seats was analyzed on a daily basis.

    - There were no altercations between Seth and other students at his table.

    - The other students at Seth's table were highly motivated and almost always had their work done.

  - Those factors were taken into consideration when a new seating pattern was being arranged for the final unit, The Land of Make-Believe.

    - Seth was once again placed with students who were unlikely to engage in an altercation with him.

    - He was also placed with a highly motivated student who would gladly set a good example for him to follow.

Claims

- **We must shift our attention from focusing on what is wrong to what is right in order to connect in a positive way with a student.**
  - PDA Observation- These observations demonstrate the use of positive teacher talk in the classroom.
    - 4.5.06- "Your positive talk as they gathered and you watched carefully for everyone to be quiet and listening … As you see, they respond very well and quickly are ready to begin."
    - 4.6.06- "You gave very specific positive feedback to those who followed your directions exactly."
  - Anecdotal Notes- Notes show the effect of "positive teacher talk" on the student in question.
    - 2.28.06- "When he came back in the room today we were doing center work for spelling. As soon as he came back in the room I told him to listen to something important. I then gave a general compliment to the class telling them what a good job they were doing working in their groups. Everyone was quiet, the only talking I heard was about the spelling words and everyone was doing a fabulous job cooperating. When everyone started working again, I asked Seth if he thought he could work that well too. He said he could. He followed all directions and only asked questions when he raised his hand. He spoke in a quiet voice. At the end of

the activity, I told him what a good job he did speaking softly and cooperating with his group."

- o "Encouragement is providing opportunities for children to develop the perceptions that 'I'm capable, I can contribute, and I can influence what happens to me or how I respond'" (Nelson, *Positive Discipline*).
  - Focusing on the positive allows students to develop and believe the self concept that they do have the ability to succeed.

- **Changing a student's behavior is a slow, gradual process and we must notice and celebrate small successes.**
  - o Anecdotal Notes
    - 2.14.06- "There weren't enough supplies for all of the students to complete the large group assignment. Some kids had to go first and others had to wait. Seth was getting antsy and didn't want to wait. He started getting into a fight with one of the other students over the supplies. I told him that she had started first and that he would have to be a helper. Then he started being pushy and telling her what to do. I then told him he had to be a silent helper, he could hand her things but he had to let her do her own work. Then when it was her turn to help him she would be a good helper for him because he set a good example. He participated beautifully in this task and even thanked his partner after the activity. I thanked him for doing such a great job."

- 4.11.06- "One student in the class came up to me today after read aloud and said, 'I forgot to give you your daily hug.' Seth stood there watching and kept watching me. I asked if he would like a hug too. He said yes and got a big smile on his face. He gave me a big hug. Then he and the girl smiled at each other and walked to the door together."
  - "Education is not a product… it's a process… a never ending one" (Bel Kaufman, 1967).
    - Education truly is a never-ending process. Therefore, it is important to focus on the small successes we meet along the way rather than the possibilities of the end result.

- **When using positive discipline, a teacher must use very specific feedback that lets the student know when the teacher is pleased.**
  - Anecdotal Notes
    - 3.28.06- "I decided to change the way I phrase my discussion with Seth before and after activities. When I am telling him about the things he does well, I say 'I was proud of you for …' Then, when I talk to him about things that he needs to work on I say 'It makes me sad when you do this… I wish you would do this.' It is sort of a varied form of an 'I message'."
    - 4.12.06- "…Today when he was starting to get uneasy before lunch (he was starting to wander around the room, couldn't stay in

his seat, started to call out), I went over to talk to him. I said, "Seth, it is making me upset that you are wandering around so much. What do you need?" He then began to mumble about things going on in different parts of the room. At this point I told him, "It would make me really happy if you could just stay in your seat and get this work done before lunch. I know you can get it finished. Do you think you can get it finished?" He looked at me for about 30 seconds, then he agreed. I asked him if it would help if we made a plan… I then told him that I would help him think of a sentence and I would write down the key words of the sentences. He had to write the sentence and then raise his hand quietly…"

- 4.12.06 "Do you think I can get this done in time?" I told him that I KNEW he could get it done in time. He followed every instruction and finished his work…

o Observation of Behavior- Record Sheet

- 3.30.06- Observer: Lynne Sanders
  - 11:49- Teacher Strategy- "Giving specific directions"
  - 12:03- Teacher Strategy- "You came by and gave specific instructions."
- 4.05.06- Observer; Lynne Sanders
  - 11:41- Teacher Strategy- "You stopped and complimented good listeners and mentioned several by name, including Seth."

- o PDA Observation
  - 3.15.06- "… you are becoming very specific and supportive and providing 'praise with reasons'"
  - 4.05.06- "…specific messages and praising the behavior you want to see in everyone."
  - 4.6.06- "You gave very specific feedback to those who followed your directions exactly."
- o "We will not survive as a culture unless we teach our young people the basic understandings we all need to get along with each other" (DiGiulio, *Positive Classroom Management*).
  - The understanding that our actions can affect the feelings and emotions of others is a fundamental part of a student's social growth.

- **When a teacher is very consistent in giving positive feedback for appropriate behavior, a child's behavior can begin to change.**
  - o Anecdotal Notes- Daily Interruption Tally
    - 2.14.06- Total Interruptions- 41
    - 2.17.06- Total Interruptions- 33
    - 2.21.06- Total Interruptions- 49
    - 2.28.06- Total Interruptions- 27
    - 3.21.06- Total Interruptions- 16
    - 4.12.06- Total Interruptions- 9

- Paraprofessional Reflection
    - "He can work on his own much better and longer than he had before."
- Mentor Reflection
    - "Currently Seth calls out much less frequently."
- Observation of Behavior- Record Sheet
    - 3.13.06- Observer: Erin Hamilton
        - 9:56- Student called out unrelated question.
        - 10:02- Student called out to ask a question.
        - 10:04- Student screamed "Hey" into another students face.
        - Total interruptions in 13 minute period on the carpet- 8
    - 4.05.06- Observer: Lynne Sanders, PDA
        - 11:38- Walked to rug quietly.
        - 11:41- Sitting quietly and listening.
        - 11:45- Watching board.
        - 11:52- Sat quietly, no wiggling.
        - Total interruptions in 17 minute period on the carpet- 0
- "Every child wants to succeed. Every child wants to have good relationships with others. Every child wants to have a sense of belonging and significance" (Nelson, *Positive Discipline*).
    - Allowing a student opportunities to feel important, involved and successful helps build possibilities for future success.

Conclusions

As a pre-service teacher, this inquiry has proven to me the importance of including positive discipline practices into daily routines and activities. I wondered if implementing the principles of positive discipline in my current classroom would affect the behavior of a student with challenging behaviors. While his behavior may not be considered completely improved, a change did occur.

I plan to use positive classroom management techniques beginning on day one in my own classroom. I can then alter and add more positive discipline strategies as new challenges arise. I now firmly believe that student misbehavior should be viewed as a cry for attention. By taking the proactive approach, using positive classroom management, I hope to give students that attention in a positive way.

New Wonderings

- Will using positive classroom management help limit challenging behaviors?

- Will I be able to individualize positive attention, by having mini-conferences with selected students when I am the only adult in the classroom?

- In what other ways can I individualize positive attention?

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