

What We Can Learn From Leo: On Reactive Classroom Management

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Abstract

This study investigates techniques for curtailing misbehavior in the classroom. An analogy is drawn with Leo the cat, with whom traditional classroom management techniques are ineffective at curtailing misbehavior, but kinder and more just techniques are effective. The academic literature and theory consulted agree that all techniques responding to student misbehavior are ineffective and even counterproductive: the only effective methods of classroom management involve building a foundation of teacher-student relationship where misbehavior does not occur in the first place. Still, the study, while bearing in mind that all techniques of response to misbehavior are ineffective, investigates which techniques are *less* ineffective. Observations of classrooms and interviews with teachers and students were performed. In the end, the study agrees with the literature, finding that response and non-response to misbehavior were broadly equally effective. Four effective techniques or circumstances were found that reduced misbehavior: additional adults in the classroom; higher grade levels of (i.e., older) students; a highly structured routine, especially with younger students; and amicable teacher-student relationships.

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Introduction

An Analogy

Sometimes, our cat Leo¹, usually a very good boy, decides to act out – scratching at random doors, chewing on charger cables, getting the zoomies (running around hectic and pell-mell), fighting with our other cats, etc. Ineffective techniques for getting misbehavior to desist include raising our voices to call his name or scold him, hissing “pssssst”, picking him up and moving him away from whatever he’s messing with – when presented with these responses, Leo will either not desist, will promptly go right back to whatever he was doing wrong, or will switch to some new misbehavior. Even if we lock him in the bathroom for ten minutes, he’ll frequently resume the behavior once released.

Techniques that do turn out effective involve redirecting Leo from the behavior: making a kissy noise to call him over to be petted, lavishing him with affection, giving him a treat, throwing a cat toy to play with. It could be that he’s only misbehaving out of boredom, and being given something more interesting to do quells the boredom; or perhaps he genuinely enjoys his misbehavior but he enjoys affection, treats, and cat toys more; or perhaps

¹ The Right Honourable Leopold Tiberius, 2nd Viscount Fluffypants – the only participant in this study not given a pseudonym.

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he knows I might give him affection, treats, or cat toys, and is misbehaving *for the purpose of* acquiring these things.

Are there some effective techniques, perhaps equivalent to the techniques effective for redirecting Leo's misbehavior, that a teacher can use with students who scratch at doors (metaphorically), chew on cables (metaphorically), get the zoomies (in some cases literally), or fight with other students (physically or verbally) – to descend from the analogy: to reduce behaviors such as getting out of seat, talking during quiet work or when the teacher is instructing, or staying out of room for excessive lengths of time on trips to bathroom – all behaviors which, for simplicity, I am referring to as *misbehavior*²?



fig. 1: The author (left) and Leo.

² I do not intend to imply any negative judgement of students by the term *misbehavior*, and indeed gave consideration to coining a new word so as to avoid negative connotations. I ultimately deemed that needlessly self-indulgent, trusting the reader to imagine an asterisk on my every use of the word, pointing to an imaginary footnote specifying that the behavior, though undesired, uncondusive to a learning environment, or even merely

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Obviously human young people are somewhat more cognitively complex than cats, but analogy with Leo inspires pedagogical contemplation nonetheless. Just as it is unclear why Leo misbehaves, human students come to the classroom carrying their own individual backgrounds, histories, identities, experiences, and even trauma, which could be what drives them to behave in various ways the teacher does not want. They might misbehave out of boredom; because they enjoy the misbehavior; or because they want to get something from the teacher; they might behave in a way that's normal in their home or in their culture, but which is not conducive to learning in the classroom³; they could be neurodivergently stimming; there could be other, more complex reasons⁴.

one that is neither but which the teacher is required by school administration to curtail, is not necessarily a moral or ethical evil.

³ Or, indeed, they could behave in ways which are normal in their homes and are not actually unconducive to learning but which the teacher, through unfamiliarity or preexisting biases, still seeks to shut down. Tackling teacher biases is an important but broad subject, unsuitable for this paper, which I leave for other writers and the preexisting literature.

⁴ My school's behavior reporting system lists these options for "Perceived Motivation": "Obtain Peer Attention"; "Escape/Avoid Tasks/Activities/Sensory"; "Obtain Items/Activities/Sensory"; "Obtain Adult Attention"; "Escape/Avoid Adult(s)"; "Escape/Avoid Peer(s)"; "Unknown Motivation".

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School is ultimately an unnatural place for children to be: there is very little physical activity outside of gym class (and, for younger children at some schools, recess); social interaction, a core component of our species's psychology, is frowned upon in the classroom and often only really permitted in the lunchroom; a teacher, although legally operating *in loco parentis*, is not, fundamentally, the students' parent, and so is (again, for young children especially) an unnatural caretaker.

Ultimately, behavior running contrary to the expectations or desires of the teacher or the needs of the classroom is not unexpected, unreasonable, or out of the ordinary – the ordinary for the species is not the ordinary for the school, because school is not ordinary for the species. So students deserve some modicum of grace for misbehavior, and coming down hard on them, in a carceral sort of way, is ultimately unfair.

Still, some student behaviors *are* disruptive to the learning environment and the learning of students, and need to be curtailed somehow.

To return to the Leo analogy: yelling and physical redirection are obviously ineffective, not to mention cruelly uncondusive to learning itself – “physical punishment can lead to more problems than it appears to solve” (Dubanoski, Inaba, & Gerkewicz, 1983); “teacher violence toward students [is] associated with emotional and behavioral problems and lower school

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performance” (Kızıltepe, Irmak, Eslek, & Hecker, 2020) – (plus a risk to the teacher’s job – and correctly so); sending a student out of the room (to some disciplinary location) leaves them missing out on content, is a squeeze of the pump of the school-to-prison pipeline, and then the student is likely to resume the behavior as soon as they come back anyway (Wang, Scanlon, & Del Toro, 2023).

Are there some teacher analogues to giving Leo affection, treats, and cat toys – ones which ideally do not invoke the moral hazard attendant with rewarding and incentivizing misbehavior (although, if the science backs up a technique, that is not *necessarily* a deal-breaker)? That is the core of this study.

A Personal History

I was hired at what we shall call STEM Charter School (SCS)⁵ as a building substitute in September.

Within a week, I was rehired (at the same school) as a long-term substitute to replace the three Spanish teachers in a row who had abruptly quit, the last one between the first and second day of school. Of course, I am not a Spanish teacher, and, in fact, *comprendo solo un muy poquito*

⁵ This, and the names of all teachers and students mentioned in this paper, is a pseudonym.

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Español, porque estudiaba en escuela pero no uso ahora – and I have now depleted my entire reserve of known Spanish. The actual teaching of the Spanish 1 class, to mostly freshmen students, was accomplished by Edgenuity, an app on the computer, with me supervising. Theoretically.

Among other causes, my inability to keep the freshmen under control and actually doing their Edgenuity work had me bumped back down to building sub by the end of winter break, as they brought in a more experienced long-term sub to accomplish what I had failed to⁶.

A month later, the school's teacher of Chemistry – a class of mostly sophomores and juniors – died abruptly. He had given me a drive home during a minor emergency once, and little did I suspect I would be taking over his class one day. But so it was that a little over halfway through the school year, I found myself a 'Chemistry teacher' in the same way I had earlier been a 'Spanish teacher'.

This is better, insofar as I know more chemistry, or at least science in general, than I do Spanish – I do have a Master's degree in a scientific field, albeit not chemistry specifically – enabling me to help the students more;

⁶ I have had many of my former Spanish students address me in the halls, saying, in various ways, that they preferred me to their new teacher. I always respond with, "Because he actually makes you do the work, right?" This is generally correct. They're probably better off now that they have someone more able to push them to do their work instead of goofing off.

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and moreover sophomores and juniors are perhaps somewhat easier to keep in hand than freshmen. Somewhat. As of this writing, a little over 5 weeks after taking over, approximately half of my Chemistry students are passing, i.e, doing any work.

Still, the lack of continuity and stability is a serious concern. The students have been suddenly left without a proper teacher $\frac{5}{8}$ of the way through the school year, and are dumped into a situation where they're learning from a computer, which many students have told me is much harder for them than a real teacher – of course they will misbehave.

As a long-term sub, and for that matter not teaching ELA, I have some ability to build and shape a classroom culture, but not quite as much as I would if I were able to bake the desired classroom culture into the lessons themselves.

As a science or social studies teacher, a culture of inquiry is – or can be, if deployed by a skilled teacher – implied by the course content. An art teacher's content carries self-expression, and a PE teacher's content can imply a certain level of physical self-improvement. ELA teachers, if able to select their own curriculum, have perhaps the most freedom here – if I want to bake anti-racism into the classroom culture, I can start by selecting a certain specific batch of texts (we live in a golden age of plausible selections for such texts); if I want to bake kindness into the culture, a different

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(though probably overlapping) specific batch of texts is in order; even if I wanted to teach mindless obedience, that option would be open to me through selection of texts.

Moreover, the style of lessons used can carry classroom culture. If a teacher chooses to focus on building consensus understanding through frequent Socratic seminars and Harkness discussions, that carries a different classroom cultural load than frequent individual work. Unfortunately, as a mere supervisor of Edgenuity, I do not have the option to manipulate lesson design in this way.

I'm also still substituting for teachers who are absent, when I'm not supervising Chemistry, and when I do so, I am thrust into an environment where I don't have the opportunity to build a classroom culture, where I have limited ability to build rapport and relationship with students – I would need to form relationships with every student in the school, not just those assigned to my classes on a long-term basis. Here, I don't even have my primary tool for learning students' names (a fundamental aspect of respect and relationship-building) – assigned seating.

Unfortunately for me, building classroom culture and rapport and relationship with students are vaunted in virtually all the literature as the single best – or, in the case of many papers, the only effective – technique

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to manage a classroom (Korpershoek, Harms, de Boer, van Kuijk, & Doolaard, 2016).

Even when I am a long-term substitute and do have the ability to build classroom culture and relationships with students, classroom management remains the area where my skills are most deficient, which promises both a long-term and short-term career hazard. Many a day have I found myself at a loss to calm a wild classroom of rambunctious youths, with calling in the disciplinary team to administer a good talking-to being the only tool readily available at my fingertips.

My school administration is more than happy to aid me in my quest to improve my classroom management skills, and fellow teachers and mentor teachers are happy to help by allowing me to observe their classes and take notes on their techniques. (Indeed, the administration is recently enacting an intervisitation scheme whereby all teachers in the school occasionally observe other teachers' classrooms, though my observations for this study are more frequent, lengthier, and more focused than administration-mandated intervisitation.)

The Question

The fundamental question at issue is: What techniques are most effective at reducing student misbehaviors?

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Both corrective (immediate, on-the-ground response to misbehavior) and preventative (e.g., building relationships with students, building a classroom culture) techniques will be useful for my career as an English teacher, but corrective techniques may be more immediately useful for my position as a substitute teacher.

What techniques, then, are *overall* most effective at reducing undesired behaviors? The literature tells us classroom culture and relationship-building is key, but this study can provide corroborating or countervailing evidence.

What are some effective non-corrective techniques for reducing misbehaviors? We know from the literature that classroom culture and relationship with students is the *most* effective method, but we could use more specific techniques in this area, as well. For example, praise for desired behavior is commonly held as more effective at preventing undesired behavior than shutting down the undesired behavior directly.

Student motivation and engagement, of course, is a key – a motivated, engaged student is a student who is not goofing off. But Edgenuity does not, to say the least, present particularly engaging lessons. And absent teachers do not typically leave particularly engaging lessons for their substitutes. If I were able to design and present my own lessons, I'm much more confident in this area than in classroom management (though

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I'm sure I could use more techniques and skill polishing). What are some effective techniques for increasing student motivation and/or engagement?

There is a large gap in the literature the shape of corrective techniques, shutting down undesired behavior. The obvious conclusion is that this is ultimately simply ineffective; however, surely, one might think, there are bad and less bad ways to do this. What corrective techniques are, if not *effective*, at least *minimally ineffective* for reducing misbehaviors?

How might a substitute teacher, or one who is otherwise in a temporary position, create a positive classroom community and classroom interactions? How can a substitute teacher take up a culturally relevant approach to classroom management and community building? What techniques help build student relationships and cultivate positive classroom interactions in short-term teaching spaces?

And, as I am ostensibly an English Language Arts (ELA) teacher (positions at the steering helms of Spanish 1 and Chemistry classes notwithstanding), doing a project for an English Education class: are there any ELA-specific techniques that reduce misbehavior, techniques that work in an ELA classroom which wouldn't necessarily work in, say, a math or art classroom?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework we've been dealing with here has so far been mostly stimulus-response behaviorist – what stimulus can we deploy to elicit desired response behavior in students, or to desist undesired behavior? A seemingly simple, straightforward question. (Skinner, 1938)

But to actually *understand* the austere, behavioral data, we'll need more than this framework that sees students as automata, as machines (albeit black boxes – machines whose inner workings are unknown) that we just need to find the right code to input to achieve the desired results.

Undergirding any percipient or wisdom-expanding interpretation of the data must be the radical assumption that students are *people* – with their own lives, their own neurodivergences and neuroses and baggage, their own individual whole beautiful messy deals.

Nel Noddings

Nel Noddings (1984) pioneered the use of a feminist ethics of care in education, foregrounding empathy, understanding, and caring about one's students (Noddings, 2012). Relevant to the question of this study:

After listening and reflecting, the carer must respond. If she can, she responds positively to the student's expressed

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need. But, if there is a reason why she cannot respond positively to that need, she must still respond in a way that maintains the caring relation. There are many times when, as carers, we cannot satisfy the expressed need of the cared-for. Sometimes we lack the resources, and sometimes we disapprove of the need or how it has been expressed. In the latter case, it is especially important to find a mode of response that will keep the door of communication open. Instead of meeting the expressed need, the carer's objective is to maintain the caring relation.

Student misbehavior – like all behaviors – is fundamentally an expression of a need, so the first resort should be satisfying or addressing the student's need, with the recognition that often this will be impossible, and that even if we can't satisfy or address the need, it remains important to maintain the teacher-student relationship.

H. Richard Milner IV

Milner IV, *et al.* (2019) writes of *culturally responsive classroom management*, including five principles: "(a) recognition of teachers' own ethnocentrism; (b) knowledge of students' culture; (c) understanding of the broader social, economic, and political systems in education; (d) appropriate management strategies; and (e) development of caring classrooms", emphasizing that "developing and implementing culturally responsive

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classroom management is a *frame of mind more than a set of predetermined skills, actions, ideas, or strategies*, which is why it is so essential that teachers develop a set of understandings, beliefs, and mindsets to advance equitable classroom management strategies” (emphasis theirs) (Milner IV *et al.*, 2019, p. 27).

Effective culturally responsive classroom management hinges on “earning respect rather than demanding it”, employing such frameworks as “culturally and ethnically congruent communication processes, demonstration of assertiveness [...] showing a genuine interest in each student” to “teach[] to the very essence of students” (Milner IV *et al.*, 2019, p. 28).

bell hooks

The approach of bell hooks (1994) provides an intersection between Noddings’s feminist ethics of care and Milner’s culturally responsive classroom pedagogy: effective “teachers approach students with the will and desire to respond to our unique beings, even if the situation does not allow the full emergence of a relationship based on mutual recognition. Yet the possibility of such recognition is always present.” (hooks, 1994, p. 13)

Moreover, treating everyone – students and teacher – as similar seekers of knowledge is a key to hooks’s educational philosophy. According

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to hooks, “education can only be liberatory when everyone claims knowledge as a field in which we all labor.” The classroom is improved when “students and professors regard[] one another as ‘whole’ human beings, striving not just for knowledge in books, but knowledge about how to live in the world.” (hooks, 1994, pp. 14-15)

Literature Review

The literature is in broad agreement that it is, in short, futile to beat students about the head and neck with the iron fist of discipline – to paraphrase Princess Leia, “the more you tighten your grip [...] the more [students] will slip through your fingers” (Lucas, 1977).

Classroom Culture and Student Relationships

Much of the literature concludes that rapport, teacher-student relationship, and classroom culture are most effective at reducing misbehavior – focusing on the misbehavior itself is, at best, less effective.

Milner and Tenore (2010) establish six features important to effective classroom management by teachers, especially in diverse or urban classrooms: “understanding equity and equality[;] understanding power structures among students[;] immersion into students’ life worlds[;]

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understanding the Self in relation to Others[;] granting students entry into their worlds[;] and conceiving school as a community with family members.” This is perhaps based more in their teaching and ethical philosophies than in behavioral science with regards to effectiveness. (Milner & Tenore, 2010)

Wolff, Jarodzka, and Boshuizen (2017) found that, when shown videos of classroom disruptions, expert teachers focused their attention on student learning, while novice teachers focused on behavior and discipline. This relies on the *prima facie* fair and reasonable presumption that more experienced teachers are more effective teachers, so areas where experienced teachers pay attention are more worth paying attention to for effective results than where inexperienced teachers pay attention. I don’t have any specific counterarguments to that, but it is not necessarily as tautologically self-evident as it seems. (Wolff, Jarodzka, & Boshuizen, 2017)

A meta-analysis by Korpershoek *et al.* (2016) determined that the largest contributor to effectiveness of classroom management strategies is focus on students’ social-emotional development, although focus on the teacher, on student behavior, and on teacher-student relationships also have small but significant effects on all outcomes except motivation. (Korpershoek, Harms, de Boer, van Kuijk, & Doolaard, 2016)

In short, the literature is overall in broad agreement that classroom culture and student relationships are more effective pedagogically than

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fighting the fires of misbehavior. Novice teachers, building a pedagogical city, invest in a fire department; expert teachers build their city out of stone instead of wood.

Self-Efficacy

Some studies conclude that teacher self-efficacy in the domain of classroom management is an effective reducer of classroom misbehavior – or at least predicts reduced classroom misbehavior. Believing that you are good at classroom management, like Dumbo and his magic feather, is a key to actually being good at classroom management – a key I need to work on, a magic feather I need to find a way to acquire. (Or it could be that the direction of effect is the reverse of this – that teachers who *are* good at classroom management therefore accurately *perceive* themselves to be good at classroom management.)

Lopes *et al.* (2017) found that teachers with high classroom management self-efficacy, i.e. who perceive themselves as good at classroom management, reported less time spent dealing with classroom misbehavior, regardless of specific classroom behavior management style reported. A glaring problem with this study, of course, is that it is all based on self-reporting, not observation of classes by an outsider, so all it's really saying is that self-perception of classroom management skill correlates to

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self-perception of classroom management success, without touching on *actual* skill or success. (Lopes, Silva, Oliveira, Sass, & Martin, 2017)

Lee and van Vlack (2018) found that classroom management self-efficacy correlates positively with enjoying being a teacher. (Lee & van Vlack, 2018) Dicke *et al.* (2014) found that lower self-efficacy in classroom management predicts emotional exhaustion for the teacher, as the burden of classroom disturbances weighs on them. (Dicke, et al., 2014) I can feel these results in my soul – those days where I have to deal with the most misbehavior, when my responses to misbehavior are least effective, lead me to judge my own classroom management skill more negatively, and are the days I feel mentally the worst when I come home.⁷

Similarly, Braun *et al.* (2022) found that proactive behavior management practices are more common among teachers with the highest occupational health, less common among those with lowest occupational health. (Braun, Kaihoi, McDaniel, & Bradshaw, 2022)

The direction of effect could plausibly go either way, or both ways – it could be that higher self-efficacy leads to more effective outcomes and higher occupational health, and/or it could be that more classroom

⁷ I ascribe this, at least in part, to my own psychology and history: I tend to measure my self-worth by being good at things, so low self-efficacy – not believing myself to be good at something – leads to diminished self-worth.

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management problems in the classroom leads to both the teacher's disbelief in their own ability to manage a classroom and lower occupational health.

Shutting Down Misbehavior

In the research, there is a tremendous gap in terms of conclusions – no study seems to conclude that any form of shutting down misbehavior is effective at reducing misbehavior. The obvious meta-conclusion is that shutting down misbehavior is simply ineffective in all instances; that if you're to the point of shutting down misbehavior, it's already too late – and shutting it down can be counterproductive anyway, especially in the long term.

Milner, *et al.* (2019) opine that "Students rightfully resist adults' efforts to control them." This seems to be borne out by the research literature. Unfortunately, their recommendations all have to do with creating "a classroom environment that is safe, affirming, learning centered, innovative, intellectually challenging, and engaging" and moving "away from a propensity to control the minds, hearts, and bodies of their students", precious little of which is within the power of a substitute teacher. (Milner, Cunningham, Delale-O'Connor, & Kestenberg, 2019, p. 1)

Moreover, according to the same authors, classroom management as traditionally envisioned – where attempts are made to keep students

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controlled, on a tight leash – is a chief contributor to, or at the very least symptomatic of, the “cradle-to-prison pipeline” (Milner, Cunningham, Delale-O'Connor, & Kestenberg, 2019, pp. 33-56). The solution to this problem is a restorative justice framework, where students take responsibility for their own actions – which of course takes much more to put in place than the one class period allotted to a substitute. (Milner, Cunningham, Delale-O'Connor, & Kestenberg, 2019, 133-166)

According to a study by Reinke, Herman, & Newcomer (2016), students who received mostly negative feedback during a 5-minute window at the beginning of the school year “were rated at the end of the year as having a significant increase in problems with emotion regulation, concentration problems, and observed disruptive behavior”, while students who received mostly positive feedback in those 5 minutes were rated as having increased prosocial behaviors. One could reasonably extrapolate and conclude that negative feedback is actively deleterious to student behavior in the long term, and positive feedback is beneficial – one might say teacher feedback has a sort of feedback effect. Or, of course, one could reasonably propose that students against whom teachers have some preexisting bias will be more likely to experience negative comments in the first 5 minutes and problems throughout the year, as the teacher spends the whole year picking on them. (Reinke, Herman, & Newcomer, 2016)

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Ehrhardt-Madapathi, Pretsch, & Schmitt (2018) found a similar feedback effect. More teacher-student interactions rated by observers as just – generally speaking, more positive interactions, or at least interactions free from bias and overreaction – led to reduced behavioral problems and increased joy of learning in students, while more unjust interactions led to increased behavioral problems and decreased joy of learning. (Ehrhardt-Madapathi, Pretsch, & Schmitt, 2018) This lends credence to Milner's theories, mentioned above.

Steffensen and Havgaard (2020) conclude that foregrounding knowledge practices specific to the material studied (prioritizing thinking like an historian in history class, for example, or thinking like a scientist in science class) was effective at reducing misbehavior, while foregrounding behavioral norms served only to produce power struggles between students and teachers. (Steffensen & Havgaard, 2020)

Ultimately, in situations, such as substitute teaching, where shutting down misbehavior is the only obviously available tool, the literature would lead us to believe there is no good way to do it. Nevertheless: there must be a bad way to do it and a less bad way to do it. A more detailed exploration of this dichotomy, however slight it may be, is where this study comes in.

Other than classroom culture and student relationships being effective at reducing misbehavior, directly addressing misbehavior being ineffective at

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reducing misbehavior, and classroom management self-efficacy correlating with classroom management success (or at least to positive self-image as a teacher), the literature presents few to no options for reducing misbehavior.

The Study

As befits the conceptual dualism in the background theory between behaviorism on the one hand and culturally responsive pedagogy and pedagogy of caring on the other hand, this study somewhat mixes quantitative and qualitative standpoints – teacher classroom response techniques were quantitatively assessed for their frequency of use and their effectiveness, with recognition based on the literature – and, ultimately, a corresponding conclusion – that this is in a sense asking the wrong question: there are no truly effective *techniques*. Interviews with teachers and students provided additional context for the success or failure of those techniques.

This is a mostly-qualitative case study of teachers and classes in STEM Charter School (SCS), a small charter high school in a Rust Belt city on the Great Lakes.

SCS is a K-12 school, though I only work and observed in the high school building. The school's stated focus is on preparing students for the workforce. The student body is 43% Black, 28% Hispanic, 14% White, and

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7% multiracial. They are 6% English Language Learners, 12% with disabilities, and 83% economically disadvantaged.

The school is festooned with references to RALPH, which stands for tenets of good character: Responsibility, Accountability, Leadership, Perseverance, and Honesty.

Participants

Teachers observed and interviewed were selected from teachers touted as having good classroom management skills. These included ELA teachers and the officially designated mentor teacher. Teachers including Mr. Maestro, Mrs. Capuchin, and Mr. Lionel were observed teaching ELA classes. Mrs. Charles, SCS's mentor teacher, was observed teaching social studies.

Mr. Lionel and Mrs. Charles were also interviewed. A selection of students from my Chemistry class were interviewed as well, including Suravi and William.

Data Collection

From mid-March to early May of 2024, teachers at SCS were observed in practice in their classrooms along with their students, with specific attention and focus on:

- Student misbehavior;

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- The teachers' responses;
- The effectiveness of those responses.

Other data points collected included:

- What are the vibes of the room?
- What grade level?
- How many adults are in the room?
- Are there special education students?

All classes were observed in 120-minute blocks, a single class from beginning to end. Mr. Maestro's 11th grade ELA class was observed 3 times; Mrs. Capuchin's 10th grade ELA class was observed twice; Mr. Lionel's 12th grade ELA class was observed twice; Mrs. Charles's 9th grade Global Studies class was observed once.

Additionally, teachers and an arbitrary assortment of students in the author's Chemistry class were interviewed for their perspectives. Of teachers, Mr. Lionel participated in an 11-minute-long interview; Mrs. Charles participated in a 13-minute-long interview.

Questions asked of teachers included:

- How long have you been a teacher? Why did you get into teaching your subject/grade?
- What's your personal teaching philosophy?
- What do you feel are your strengths and weaknesses as a teacher?

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- How would you describe, or rate if you'd like, your skill (self-efficacy) when it comes to classroom management?
- What would you say is overall the key to effective classroom management?
- Do you have any "secret weapons" when it comes to classroom management?
- Can you describe the process of getting your classroom to this point?
- When a student behaves disruptively or isn't doing their work, what kind of thing do you do?

Students were selected from my Chemistry classes with an eye to getting the perspective of the most and least disruptive, the most and least diligent, with an additional spicing of students with whom I already seem to have a rapport. They were not rewarded with extra credit, but they were rewarded with donuts from the nearby Tim Horton's. Of students, Suravi participated in a 12-minute-long interview; William participated in a 8-minute-long interview.

Questions asked of students included:

- What year are you in school?
- What's your background? (Race, culture, religion, family wealth, that sort of thing.)

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- What kinds of things do you like to do? (Sports? Clubs? Free time activities?)
- What's your favorite class? Why?
 - Who's your favorite teacher? What do you like about them?
 - Do you feel like you learn more with your favorite teachers than with teachers you like less?
- What's your least favorite class? Why?
 - Describe your least favorite teacher – what don't you like about them?
- How would you say you are as a student...
 - Do you do all your schoolwork? Why/why not?
 - Do you actively participate in class? Why/why not?
 - Do you make a habit of skipping or disrupting any of your classes? Why/why not?
 - When you have homework, do you do it? How do you manage your time outside of class?
- Say you're doing something the teacher doesn't want you to be doing. You're not doing your work, or you're talking to your friends when the teacher is talking, or you're on your cell phone, something like that.
 - How, ideally, would you like the teacher to respond?

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- What response from the teacher would you like the least/hate the most?

Data Analysis

The observations and interviews were descriptively coded with four codes: when misbehavior occurs, does the teacher...

- Address it with an incentive, a promise of reward ("carrot").
- Address it with a threat, a promise of punishment ("stick").
- Address it with tacit but implied punishment – consequences are always implied in any interaction with an authority figure ("tacit").
- Not address it.

Subsequently, does the misbehavior...

- Increase or decrease?
- Immediately?
- For how long?

When a desired behavior occurs, does the teacher praise it?

- Does misbehavior subsequently occur?
 - From the praise-ee?
 - From peers?

These data were then analyzed for commonalities.

Results and Findings

Mr. Lionel

The walls of Mr. Lionel's room hold various vivid elements reflecting the teachers' personality. A bookshelf in one corner is decorated with construction paper fire, which Mr. Lionel tells me is because they studied *Fahrenheit 451* this year.

Mr. Lionel has two additional adults in the room (not counting me) during most of the lessons I observed – a co-teacher and a paraprofessional.

Mr. Lionel has a focus on making a difference to students, personally if not academically – “meeting kids as people who exist in the world, as opposed to just students, is really important. Looking at students beyond students, with their lives, and just trying to make a difference, even if it's not academically, making some sort of difference so that they can go home feeling like they can accomplish something.”

Mr. Lionel's main suggestion for classroom management is in accord with the literature – that it has to do with rapport, connection, uplifting students, not iron-rigid discipline.

With that in mind, he also says that structure – a common theme among teachers at SCS – is an important foundation for classroom

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management, from the beginning of the school year: structure, routine, expectations. He starts the year with as much as two weeks of just hammering home the structure of the class, and from there the structure can be gradually loosened.

Structure can be loosened more for upperclassmen than lowerclassmen: "So my sophomores, I'm probably a little more strict, a little more routine and structured. And I try to make sure that the students are doing what they need to do and that they're successful. When it comes to the seniors, I feel like they're adults and that they need to make good decisions. And sometimes I will let them make bad decisions before I help them to make good decisions."

In terms of student misbehavior, Mr. Lionel says, "I think avoiding those things to begin with is key, right? So making sure that you're wandering around the room, the kids know that you're checking in on them, that you're behind them." True to his stated techniques, Mr. Lionel circulates the room during individual work time, and disruptions and distractions are rare.

In his 12th-grade classroom, misbehavior is uncommon. Simply addressing it makes it stop (as in the case of a drowsing student, simply being told "Your eyes are closed" is sufficient).

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Mrs. Charles

The corkboard over Mrs. Charles's desk displays many personal pictures, including many of a small child about whose relationship to Mrs. Charles I don't enquire. The rest of the walls bear a variety of inspirational posters. There are places on the walls where images are displayed during gallery walks.

Mrs. Charles is an 18-year veteran teacher, and the teacher mentor for incoming teachers at SCS. Tiny and vivacious, she speaks rapidly, even when performing direct instruction; I wouldn't entirely blame students for falling behind and getting lost. Frequent checks for understanding are called for, and she makes them, frequently cold-calling students selected with popsicle sticks.

Mrs. Charles became a teacher because she loves teenagers as people: "I think they're fun and interesting and, you know, I really enjoy challenging them and helping them to reach their goals, whatever those may be." She is emphatic that all students can succeed, given structure, high expectations, and support.

The first step in a classroom is structure, and the second step is relationship-building. When sufficiently structured, all students are equipped to succeed:

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The more structured you can be as a teacher, the more students that you can reach. And even your kids who don't need high structure still benefit from it. So, if you can set up your classroom at the highest level of structure possible, you're going to reach the most students and I think it's specifically clear when you think about: the younger students need more structure than older students, and neurodivergent students need more structure than non-neurodivergent students.

But creating the structures benefits everybody. [...] I think it's super important, especially in the beginning of a year, to create a very structured environment that is clear and concise for all students. And I find that those students who are neurodivergent, they can function within those structures in a way that makes them feel safe.

And then as the year goes on, you can relax your structures a little bit because the students feel confident functioning within your environment and they feel safe in an environment. So, structures make students feel safe no matter whether they are on the spectrum or not. It doesn't matter because that safety creates an environment of effectiveness, right, for everybody.

[In April,] I don't have to give the same clear instructions that I would give doing the activity for the first time in September or October. And so, even those neurodivergent students can participate in activities where students are moving and working together in groups because the instructions are given in a clear and concise way and then followed up multiple

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times throughout the school year. So, I think that that's super important for everybody.

Mrs. Charles's classroom is all about structure. When students come in, they have an immediate task to Do Now. When they want to go to the bathroom or otherwise leave the room, the queue for doing so is on the whiteboard (I use such a queue myself, but the innovation of making it public had not occurred to me). She begins with a recap of the previous class. The format of the body of the class is very structured: a few minutes of direct instruction; a few minutes of individual or partner work; Mrs. Charles solicits answers through popsicle-stick-powered cold-calling; repeat several times; class concludes with an Exit Ticket.

Mrs. Charles's ninth-grade students were not actively disruptive, though I did see a few spend a significant portion of the class on their phones, sleeping, or pretending to sleep but actually being on their phones below their desks. In many cases, Mrs. Charles either did not notice, or (more probably) chose not to confront, this behavior. At one point, a student emitted a loud, wookiee-like yawn while Mrs. Charles was speaking; she proceeded without acknowledging it. It did not happen again. This is in accord with Wolff, Jarodzka, and Boshuizen's (2017) finding that novice teachers attend to misbehavior, while expert teachers attend to the lesson.

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Mrs. Charles emphasizes relationship-building for classroom management:

If the structures are in place, the other students know how to function when you need to solve a problem. So, keeping those structures are important. And again, things are going to happen, right? Stuff happens.

But when stuff happens, if there's a kid that's being particularly disruptive or a kid gets ill in class or has a panic attack or is having a bad day or has an altercation with another student: Because your structures are what they are, the other students, you can almost take them out of the equation. So, then I can insert myself into that situation with the student who's struggling.

So, for example, if a student is being disruptive or two students want to fight with one another, I can remove them in a way that the other students can then continue with the structures in class. And we're in a place where we have supports, where that can happen and I can remove those students. But again, the relationship is super important because if two students are having a conflict with each other and I try and help and deescalate the situation, their relationship with me is what is going to help them transition to a behavior that I want to see.

Mrs. Charles's emphasis here is, of course, in accord with the literature.

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Mrs. Capuchin

In Mrs. Capuchin's room, daily learning targets and agenda are on the whiteboard. Charts, posters, and student work pepper the walls. Personal teacher photos and books are on a shelf unit at the back of the room, behind two teachers' desks.

Mrs. Capuchin is frequently sarcastic, especially as a method of classroom management. She does not maintain an iron fist of discipline in her class; disruptions and distractions are somewhat frequent. She does tell me this is her largest and chattiest class – the most difficult, classroom-management-wise.

When one student whistles a tune, Mrs. Capuchin calls it out sarcastically, "Of course you're whistling, you're amazing." The whistling desists and does not resume.

In Mrs. Capuchin's 10th grade classroom, calling out misbehavior proves temporarily effective at best. Mrs. Capuchin uses many 'tacit-consequences' responses, several 'stick' responses, and several non-responses, and phones or earbuds go away when asked, only to come back out several minutes later. These responses tend to desist the behaviors temporarily at best.

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Mr. Maestro

Mr. Maestro's room is brightly lit. A handful of ELA posters and accoutrements are on the walls. There are a couple of shelves full of books and knick-knacks.

Like Mr. Lionel, Mr. Maestro's classroom has multiple adults (not counting me) – Mr. Maestro, a co-teacher, and, during one lesson, a visitor from the middle school, working on a Master's degree project.

Mr. Maestro is singled out by Mr. Lionel as having good classroom management skills.

Like Mr. Lionel, Mr. Maestro and his co-teachers circulate the room during individual work time.

Like Mrs. Capuchin, Mr. Maestro mostly utilizes 'tacit-consequences' and the occasional 'stick' response; as when Mrs. Capuchin uses them, these are only temporarily effective, with misbehaviors desisting and then resuming a few minutes later.

Suravi

Suravi, a small, gregarious 15-year-old hijabi sophomore, originally from Bangladesh but who has spent most of her life in the eastern United States, is friendly and kind. She loves science, math, and chatting with her

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friends. She sits and chats with Vicky in Chemistry class, and brought another friend when I interviewed her during her lunch.

Suravi agrees that she learns more from teachers with whom she has a better rapport. Suravi's favorite class used to be chemistry, and her favorite teacher (although she resists the question, saying "I don't like picking favorites") was my predecessor, until his untimely demise. Now, in the absence of a proper chemistry teacher, trying to learn from an app on the computer, it is her least favorite class.

There is also currently much drama with other students that is interfering with Suravi's enjoyment of school, especially in the Chemistry class, and interfering with her ability to learn – "I don't like anyone in here. I feel so uncomfortable in here because no one here likes me either." In partner work, she's usually the one who actually does the work, and then her partner usually wants to just mooch off her answers.

She doesn't like homework, and frequently procrastinates on it.

On the occasion that Suravi misbehaves, she prefers that a teacher be direct but kind, asking her to desist but without sarcasm or rudeness. "In [Mrs.] Charles's room, I was doing my makeup this one time, and she was just, like, [...] 'you should be doing your work' kind of thing. And I was, like, oh, okay. And then I was just [...] kind of trying to do, like, both at the same time."

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William

William self-describes as diligent and hardworking. He is one of my Chemistry students who, in the last week of the third quarter, burned through enough material to catch up to where he should have been, earning a good grade for the quarter in the end.

William hates when teachers play favorites. When he misbehaves, he prefers that the teacher pull him aside privately, rather than embarrassing him in front of the class.

In William's favorite class, mechanical engineering, with his favorite teacher, the teacher allows a great deal of autonomy, letting students creatively problem-solve for themselves.

Discussion

The observations in this study did tend to bear out the literature's conclusion that addressing misbehavior directly is ineffective. "Stick" and "tacit" were approximately as effective as not addressing misbehavior at all – most behaviors stop on their own eventually anyway, while addressed behaviors tended to stop only temporarily. Observed teachers used "carrot"

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so rarely that its effectiveness remains unknown, so the possibility of bargaining with students is unexplored.

To return to an earlier-mentioned metaphor: a fire department does not *prevent* fires; we should instead build with stone instead of wood.

Impact of Additional Observers

Of course, we know from quantum physics that observing reality changes it (Baclawski, 2018). Might I, then, have been affecting misbehavior by being an additional adult in the room, even though I was doing nothing but sitting in the back or side of the room, taking notes? Impossible to say for sure – there are too many confounding variables to compare observed classes against my own classes, and it is, to understate the matter somewhat, difficult to observe a class other than one's own in a way that doesn't correspondingly increase the observedness of said class.

It is a known finding in psychology that being visibly watched tends to improve behavior, an effect known as the Hawthorne Effect (Dear, Dutton, & Fox, 2019). Just so in the classroom: one finding that was reasonably consistent in my observations was that having multiple adults in the room – teachers, co-teachers, paraprofessionals, disciplinary staff on the occasions that they visited to check for dress code violations – tended to reduce incidence of student misbehavior simply by their very presence.

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In my student teaching, perhaps my most effective teaching was performed when a paraprofessional was present, voluntarily taking the role of 'bad cop' to my 'good cop', quieting down the class with the iron fist of discipline better than I ever could with kindness and relationship-building. But did the suppressed students actually learn significantly more from me while suppressed by my 'bad cop' compatriot than the unsuppressed students, running amok in her absence, did? Or were they less chaotic simply because there was a third adult in the room (a second one actively managing the class)?

In another twist on behaving differently under observation, the *teachers* may have been on their best – i.e., most effective – behavior because they were being observed by an outsider – perhaps especially Mrs. Charles, the school's official mentor teacher, attempting to demonstrate maximally effective teaching techniques for a novice teacher. This is less concerning for this project's purposes, because maximally effective teaching is exactly what we want to see and make record of.

Something like the Hawthorne Effect occurs even when the 'observer' is inanimate, such as an illustrated depiction of an eye, an effect known as the Watching-Eye Effect (Dear, Dutton, & Fox, 2019). The laptop on which I was typing my notes, then, festooned as it is with a variety of googly eyes, might also have had some small quelling effect on misbehavior.

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Of course, these effects could potentially be turned usefully to a teacher's purpose: the Hawthorne Effect would seem to suggest that the teacher simply paying more attention could ameliorate misbehavior; the Watching-Eye Effect would seem to suggest that decorating the room with an eye motif could also ameliorate misbehavior – at the risk of carrying unsettling panopticon vibes.



fig. 2: 'Beholder' the laptop

Grade Level and Structure

The most consistent finding in my observations and interviews, in accord with my experience supervising classes, the absolute best technique for preventing or desisting student misbehavior is: for the students to be upperclassmen. The higher the grade level, the more well-behaved the students. Freshmen run amok (except in Mrs. Charles's highly structured classroom); seniors diligently do their work without disruption and mostly without distraction; sophomores and juniors are in their places on the spectrum between those two extremes.

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Structure and consistency seems important and possibly effective – or at least effective teachers seem to treat it as important, although that's at least partially coming down as a mandate from Administration. Mrs. Charles, the most vociferous proponent and agent of structure, also had a well-behaved classroom of freshmen, who seemed more engaged than oppressed.

Mr. Lionel may have hit the nail on the head, combining the mantra of structure with the observation that upperclassmen don't misbehave much, when he observed:

So my sophomores, I'm probably a little more strict, a little more routine and structured. And I try to make sure that the students are doing what they need to do and that they're successful. When it comes to the seniors, I feel like they're adults and that they need to make good decisions. And sometimes I will let them make bad decisions before I help them to make good decisions.

With seniors, give them their head and they'll run, making mistakes and learning from them; with lowerclassmen, give them structure and they'll be less trouble. Presumably emphasizing structure applies even more to freshmen than sophomores; to juniors, a bit less than sophomores but a bit more than seniors. Mrs. Charles was mostly in agreement, that younger

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students (and neurodivergent students) benefit *more* from structure, but *all* students do benefit from structure, especially at the beginning of the year.

Relationship

The literature and interviewed teachers agree that teacher-student relationship is of utmost importance in classroom management.

Being oneself is key – the students, according to Mr. Maestro, can smell fakery a mile away. I know from my student teaching that I do much better teaching when I let myself free of a stiff teacher persona and start being my own goofy self.

According to Mr. Maestro, there is a line to walk between too strict on one hand and trying to be the students' friend on the other – falling off the line in either direction spells doom.

Implications

The ultimate, practical solutions for classroom management revealed by this study are several: ensure that all students are upperclassmen, ensure that there are multiple adults in each classroom, ensure that the classroom is structured well and consistently, and ensure that rapport is reached and maintained with each student.

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Prohibit Freshmen

It is, of course, infeasible to actually enforce the complete absence of freshmen in favor of seniors. Lowerclassmen are simply a fact of life, which no further ink will be spilled lamenting here.

Additional Adults In The Classroom

Say my findings are borne out by other research and it does turn out that extra adults in the room can consistently maintain more effective classroom management simply by their presence, without anybody even actually having to play 'bad cop'. What does this mean for schools?

In this day and age of layoffs and hiring freezes – as of this writing, the Buffalo Public School district just recently announced layoffs for 30 staff members, retirement for 42, and a hiring freeze preventing 187 open positions from being filled (Kassahun, 2024) and Denton Independent School District in Texas has frozen hiring for currently 78 open staff positions (Forte, 2024) – will any district dig deep into their budgets to hire *twice* as many teachers – or at least a paraprofessional for every classroom, if they want to save a few dollars?

SCS is unable to find one proper Spanish or Chemistry teacher to hire, which is why I find myself supervising these classes – can schools even find

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enough teachers and paraprofessionals to put two adults in every room, doubling their teaching staff, even *if* the money is there to pay them?

Structure

All teachers interviewed agreed that structure is of paramount importance, especially for younger students, especially earlier in the school year. Structure can be gradually loosened over the course of the year, as long as it was well-instituted in the first place.

The Last Word: Relationship

Each teacher must achieve rapport with their students in their own ways, specific to the teacher and to each student. There is no one-size-fits-all key to teacher-student relationship, though it does generally start, according to all my observations and many of my interviews, with being oneself.

Teachers interviewed touted both structure and teacher-student relationship, but my vibes-based assessment of my observations, and my interviews with students, would, I judge, put the focus on relationship as the very slightly more important of the two – just as the literature, and Leo the cat, would have us believe.

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