I was placed in a third grade classroom within a public school in a southeastern state. In the classroom were 21 students. The classroom was comprised of seven females and 14 males. Within the class, there were no special needs students. The classroom was set up so that the students are in groups of four to five with one group of three.

Statement of the Problem

I chose one student within the classroom for my case study. While the majority of the students followed the rules and procedures within the classroom, one student did not. I began to wonder why this student showed defiance toward his peers, me, and the classroom teacher. It was then, that I began asking my cooperating teachers about the student’s background. After learning that the student exhibits inappropriate behaviors that seem to result from experiences in the past, I began to wonder in what ways these behaviors could be eliminated or at least reduced. I chose
this student as the focus of my action research because I want to learn more about how to work with defiant students.

**Question for the Investigation**

How can the use of positive reinforcement impact my ability to maintain the attention of a defiant student during whole group instruction?

**Literature Review**

When a student is defiant, the purpose is not to upset us. The goal is to feel significant. The student’s defiance threatens our own need to be in control. It can be a challenge to meet both the student’s need to feel significant as well as the teacher’s perceived need for control. It’s important not to engage in a power struggle with a student. Once a power struggle has begun, both the student and the teacher have lost (Wilson, 2013).

When working with a defiant student it is important to remember to remain calm and use a neutral tone. Losing your temper only escalates the situation and may escalate the defiance demonstrated. It is vital to give clear directions to the student so that he or she is aware of what is expected. This process also allows the teacher to hold the student accountable. When discussing an issue with a defiant student, teachers need to remember to listen to the student and consider the opinions expressed. Such close listening allows the student to feel as if what he or she thinks and says is also important (Richert, 2007).

In order for teachers to eliminate the defiance exhibited by the student, we must know each of our students well. Knowing your students can help avoid many disruptions and issues. Teachers must know what triggers the defiance from a student. If we are aware of what may set off a student, we can then take a proactive approach in order to avoid future challenges (Crowe, 2011; Landrum, Lingo, Terrance, 2011). An example of a trigger for a student may occur when what the teacher is requesting them to do is out of their developmental stage. When we reach our frustration level, we no longer want to partake in a task. The same occurs with a frustrated student. Often a student will misbehave simply because he or she is not developmentally ready for a task. In order to avoid situations such as these, it is important to make accommodations that fit your students’ needs. These accommodations may need to be made in the assignments, routines and procedures, or even in the way the classroom is arranged. When there is a mismatch between what we are asking of the child and the developmental proficiencies, there is a higher risk for misbehavior to occur. Appropriate behaviors must be taught. Such teaching can be done in a variety of ways including modeling, private coaching, and targeting what your student is good at. If the goal is to ultimately change the student’s behavior, then the teacher must change instruction to fit the student’s needs (Crowe, 2010; Grothaus, 2013).

Teachers can predict and prevent many of the undesirable behaviors in the classroom. By knowing what triggers these behaviors we can learn to predict when and how they will occur. From these predictions, teachers can reevaluate how a situation will be handled. The teacher can change the environment in which the defiant student is in. The goal should be to eliminate an environment that allows problems that are predictable and to create an environment leading to
success that is predictable. In order to create an environment that leads to predictable success, the teacher must engage the students during instruction. Landrum, Scott, and Lingo (2011) found that, “Among the most effective teacher-based practices identified are such basic strategies as teacher clarity, teacher feedback, opportunities for the students to respond, modeling, and guided practice” (p. 33). These strategies are all done through engaging students during instruction thereby allow the teacher to help maintain success for all students. Modeling effective behaviors and giving students feedback on their behavior can help prevent and replace defiant behavior. It is important to focus on what the student is doing well. Positive reinforcement many times is forgotten when working with defiant students. Reinforcing even the “small” desirable behaviors helps teach the defiant student what he or she is doing well. In return, the student is able to understand how to deal with the same situation later on. It also is important to remember to provide many opportunities for successful responding. Multiple exposures is one of the keys to learning how to replace undesirable behaviors (Landrum, et al., 2011).

In conclusion, working with a defiant student is not an easy task. It requires a lot of support for the student from the teacher. Understanding and predicting the problem behaviors is key if we want to eliminate the defiance. Further, it is also important to model and teach the expected behaviors. By using such procedures, we can focus on when the student exhibits positive behaviors and make sure those behaviors are being rewarded. By focusing on the positive behaviors, the student will begin to feel valued and important. If the student feels like what he or she has to say and offer is of value, then that student will stop acting out, and begin to work within the classroom setting. Like many efforts in education, multiple exposures and time are vital if we want to eliminate the defiant behaviors.

**Plan of Action**

I implemented positive reinforcement during whole group instruction to begin to address the problem. The use of positive reinforcement was selected because the research literature indicates it helps teach what behaviors are desirable and improves the relationship between the student and the teacher. The strategy has the potential to eliminate undesirable and defiant behaviors exhibited by the student. It also builds up the student’s self-esteem and teaches how to control emotions. Lastly, the research literature indicates the teacher can develop a deeper understanding of how the student is feeling and of the individual’s strengths and weaknesses.

This positive reinforcement strategy was implemented throughout 10 days in the semester, specifically during whole group instruction. Observations were recorded daily to use as data to predict what triggers the undesirable behaviors. The data were used to predict and prevent outbursts from the student in the classroom. Each time the teacher interacted with the student, the teacher worked to clearly state the expectations for behavior and model the expected behaviors. The teacher also emphasized and focused more on what the student did well both academically and socially. Each time the student had an outburst and exhibited defiance and other undesirable behaviors, the teacher was to calmly ask the student to step away from the rest of the class. At this point, the teacher would handle the situation away from the other students and clearly explain why the student was being reprimanded. Consequences for behaviors need to be consistent so there is no confusion as what will happen when the defiance and undesirable behaviors occur. Each day, the teacher pulled aside the student and had a conference about how
the day went. Not only were any outbursts be discussed, but the positive behaviors as well. This conference took place away from the rest of the students. Each time a positive behavior was exhibited by the student, the teacher positively reinforced the student discretely. At the end of my study, I looked at how the student responded each day when the positive reinforcement strategy was used.

**Timeline**

Day 1-2: Observations of what triggers the student’s defiance and also what the student does well.

Day 3: Observations of what the student does well. Begin giving choices when speaking with the student about their behavior.

Day 3-5: Observations of the student’s behavior continues. Focus on what the student does well and begin giving choices. Explain why student is either being reprimanded of rewarded for their behavior.

Day 6-10: Observations of the student’s behavior continues. Begin pulling aside and conferencing each day about the student’s behavior, both positive and negative.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

For this action research project, I chose to work with, and observe, one student. From my daily interactions with this student, I collected data regarding the student’s behavior when using positive reinforcement. The data were collected from my daily observations. Figure 1 represents whether or not the student responded positively or negatively.

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Figure 1. Student’s exhibition of positive or negative response to positive reinforcement

Data Analysis

After looking over the data, I noticed the student began exhibiting positive behaviors when I explained my reasoning and conferencing in private. I also noticed some of the triggers of outbursts and defiant behaviors. Triggers identified included when the student felt embarrassed or threatened, and before and during working in groups with peers. Some days, even with positive reinforcement, the student relapsed and exhibited many defiant behaviors. This relapse or regression seemed not to be related to a change in the classroom context, but I have no date on what stressors might have been occurring at home or otherwise outside of school. Each time an outburst occurred at the school, the student faced strict consequences at home. Overall, with positive reinforcement from me and the cooperating teacher, the student began being more compliant suggesting a link between reduction of defiant behavior and our expression of valuing and respecting the student.

Conclusion

If I were to implement the positive reinforcement strategy with a defiant student again, I would do so for a longer period of time. The action research experience indicates to me that this strategy could be used with students in any age group. If I were to implement this strategy in upper grades, however, I would focus more on the conferencing aspect so that the student felt like his or her thoughts were valued and to keep the student accountable. If I were to implement this strategy in lower grades, I might add a journal or a token economy as the younger students might benefit from journaling and illustrating their feelings and thoughts. As for the token economy, the literature indicates only rewarding positive behaviors would motivate all the students to try to exhibit positive and desirable behaviors.
References


