



**Research Report of the Month**  
**MAY 2004**

Cothran, D.J., Kulinna, P.H., & Garrahy, D.C. (2003).

**"This is kind of giving a secret away...": students' perspectives on effective class management.**

Teaching and Teacher Education, 19, 435-444.

**Introduction**

With this report we reach the end of Volume One for UnlockResearch. Beginning in June of 2003 I have abstracted here the reports from 11 studies in which the results provided relatively complex, often somber, and sometimes even distressing portrayals of life in the public school gymnasium. Accordingly, it seems appropriate to end the academic year with a study that, if you still have a sense of humor after such a difficult year for physical education, will leave you with a smile on your face.

In this instance, we can regard the investigators' clear and thoughtful exposition, their positive concluding message, and the useful implications of that message for teaching practice, as just a happy bonus. Far more important for most of us right now is an opportunity to relax, have a bit of fun, and gain some perspective on our work – and few things serve those ends so well as a chance to see ourselves as others see us!

The story here is about managing PE classes, and the expert commentary comes from some of the most perceptive educational theorists that the authors could locate – one hundred and eighty-two middle- and high school physical education students. The fact that the account of this study could be read and understood without the slightest difficulty by undergraduate majors, veteran practitioners, PETE Professors, and (probably) most secondary school pupils, should not detract one bit from its serious purpose and powerful message. Serious intent all aside, however, I can't imagine that I am the only physical educator who, amidst all of our attention to designing and mastering effective techniques for class management and pupil control, has wondered what the people on the receiving end – the kids – think about those efforts to manipulate their behavior.

In your rare moments of quiet reflection, it surely must have crossed your mind that some of our carefully designed and well-intentioned strategies actually may provide more comic relief than control, at least from the perspective of our erstwhile clients. Further, in watching what happens in physical education classes I sometimes have wondered whether the students might have a better sense of what constitutes sound management technique than either teachers or experts in pedagogy. If you are skeptical about those possibilities, just read on.

**The Study**

It was the purpose of this study to examine students' perspectives on teachers' behaviors that impeded or contributed to effective class management. Unlike the veritable mountain of research on techniques for class management and how teachers learn and employ those strategies, there is only a handful of studies that deal directly with why students act appropriately or fail to do so, whether they even are aware of class management interventions, how they describe effective and ineffective class managers, and whether their views on such matters correspond to those of their teachers.

That students actively participate in shaping the learning environment is obvious, but how they interpret what teachers do in that regard is far less clear. Thus, Cothran, Kulinna and Garrahy were motivated by a simple proposition: without understanding students' perspectives, it is difficult (or

impossible) to design management plans for physical education that offer optimal conditions for successful and enjoyable learning.

### **Context and Participants**

In 14 different schools (including grades 6-12), the researchers recruited 182 volunteer physical education students (100 males and 82 females). Just over half of the sample was African American (53%), with the remainder of the participants representing Caucasian (30%), Hispanic (12%) and multi-racial or other heritage (5%). The schools ranged in size from small (350 students) to large (1900 students), and were located in inner city, suburban, and rural settings. Ten of the schools were located in neighborhoods that could be classified as lower in socioeconomic status, while four represented middle to upper middle class communities.

### **Design and Method**

A member of the research team interviewed students during class, either individually or in groups of 2-3 friends. Interviews lasted from 10 to 30 minutes, and employed a structured interview guide (specimen questions are included in an appendix to the report). The ensuing conversations included attention to descriptions of student behavior and misbehavior, opinions about the causes of student disruptions, the nature of classes in which good or poor behavior was commonplace, and perceived effectiveness of various management strategies. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed in full.

### **Analysis of Data**

Each of the investigators independently developed a method of coding the transcribed text. Coded segments were sorted into inductively developed categories that then could be clustered to create themes. The three independent sets of themes were then reviewed, compared, extensively discussed, and subjected to cycles of revision. From that process (at heart, a process of negotiation), a single set of common themes was extracted – each item of which had been addressed by at least 30% of the participants (many were discussed by a much larger percentage of students). Inspection of categories and themes to identify internal conflicts of meaning revealed few negative cases. Cross checks of data both across individual schools, and among the perspectives of the three investigators indicated a high degree of consistency.

### **Results**

The report provides a rich array of quotes selected from the student interviews. In reading them, I found it easy to conclude that many of the participants assumed their PE teachers didn't have a clue about how their pupils regarded efforts at class management. That gives a distinctive tone to the data, a slightly furtive voice that would be appropriate when someone who is an insider to a social context shares an account of what really is going on -- with an outsider for whom such information is otherwise unavailable. You may already have noted in the title of the report a student comment that is particularly revealing in that regard. We teachers may or may not be quite so out of touch with student perspectives on class management, but most of the participants in this study certainly regarded some of their instructors as generally oblivious – if not outright dense.

Within the context established by that student disposition, then, the results support two quite different kinds of conclusions. First, students reported that the most important elements in a teacher's managerial repertoire, the strategies that were perceived as persistently evoking positive student reactions, were: (1) setting early and clear expectations and consequences for behavior, (2) enforcing those with consistency and fairness, and (3) developing caring and respectful relationships with students. While there were some highly informative details within that general perspective, such findings about what students believe and value are so familiar as to seem pedestrian. Precisely those points have been the managerial mantra of specialists in effective teaching for many decades, both for the classroom and for the gymnasium.

A second kind of conclusion can be drawn from the data analysis, however, and it is one that for me, at least, was a complete surprise. Despite the wide variety of school contexts and the participants' enormously different social and cultural backgrounds, three independent readers (with three independent sensitivities to what the students were saying) found a single, clear, and uniform message. Students want teachers who manage by being clear, consistent, fair, respectful, and caring. The investigators detected almost no deviation from those central themes. Put another way, students in every demographic corner of this diverse sample appeared to share a common understanding of why

and how particular class management strategies worked, or didn't work. They also held a generally shared notion of what was liked and respected in teacher behavior – and what they found unreasonable or offensive.

Here are some of the topics on which students had firm opinions.

On using threats to control behavior – "Don't make false threats because nobody will ever trust you. If you said I'm gonna take you down to 112 [the school's room for in-house suspension], then you take me to 112, and you don't ever tell me where I'm going next time [because] next time I'll know I'm gonna be played."

On when to set clear expectations and consequences – "This is kind of giving a secret away, but you've gotta lay down the rules on the very first day. If you let the first few days go until we get, like on track, what with everyone getting classes changed, then you've [already] lost it. You start from the beginning and lay down the rules. Don't let us break the rules and then try the rules later 'cause no one will pay attention."

On enforcing consistent consequences – "Don't change the rules like on one day you are going to give five points for this, and the next day you're going to give two. Don't do that because it makes everybody mad."

On why some teachers don't want to be strict about rules – "Don't be afraid to punish them. Don't think that if you punish them that they are not going to think you are cool or that they are not going to like you."

On simply not knowing how to manage a class – "You'd think he was a janitor. He doesn't know how to control the class. That's sad. It's like, 'Who gave you your teaching degree?'"

On how fun and caring help negotiate the delicate line between too lax and too strict – "A lot of times if you have a stricter teacher you can have more trouble because students will want to act up to make some fun, if the teacher isn't fun. If the teacher is making it a little more fun though, and likes the kids, and is strict, then that's OK."

On the central role of building relationship with students – "If you have a relationship with your students, they're gonna trust you more and they're gonna respect you more and then they'll be nicer to you."

On what students do when they want to be nicer to a respectful teacher – "We like don't mouth off to her. We try not to talk when she is talking and we don't talk back. We try to listen and remember what she is telling us like directions and instructions and then we aren't whining about what she wants, what she has planned."

On what teachers have to do to develop a caring and respectful relationship with students – "You [the teacher] have to act like you really do care what's going on with the kid, not just in class, but outside of class."

On the place of listening in a respectful relationship – "She listens when you talk and she understands like what you're saying. She doesn't just nod her head and say 'okay.' She will take our opinion and not just have hers overrule us."

On the place of reciprocity in a respectful relationship – "Let them [students] know you're a real person. I don't think you should be too close, but let them know a little about yourself. [One day] she told us everything about her family. It kind of made you feel more, made you want to listen more. She opened up to us which made us want to open up to her more."

On what students' think should be the order of things in building a respectful relationship  
– "Respect them [students] so they can respect you back."

On the management consequences of losing it – "My teachers that don't yell have the best control over the class 'cause when they yell, it's kind of like giving up some of the authority and respect."

## Discussion

However inelegant their means of expression, it is clear that students have some very sophisticated (and deadly accurate) ideas about class management. In fact, they are perceptive enough to hold the specifics of particular rules and consequences as less important than the teacher's ability to communicate those rules – and then enforce them equitably. Further, I believe it takes an unusually high order of social understanding to realize that the ubiquitous teacher belief in maintaining a social distance between themselves and students as a means of establishing discipline is seriously misplaced. The participants in this study saw quite clearly that distant relationships more often served to increase rather than decrease problems of control.

Finally, the students whose voices are heard in this study did not share the dominant notion in American culture that authority comes with the role that a person fills. I have no doubt, for example, that I sometimes have anticipated a kind of unquestioning respect from students just because I was "the teacher." The researchers in this study, however, detected a sharply contrary belief among their participants. Many of the students assumed that moral authority (and the respect that goes with it) must be earned and should not automatically be given.

To the extent that such a difference in teacher and student perspectives is operative beyond the present sample, in schools everywhere, that divergence views must play a large part in the fact that many teachers have continuing problems with class management. Those teachers may be victims of an unsuspected clash of cultures. They and their pupils start with different understanding of what has to happen if good order is to be established. The authors of this report suggest that one way of resolving that clash is for teachers to tap into student perspectives on management as a resource when designing more effective strategies. I believe one might even add that those who operate teacher preparation programs should read this report in its full, original form – and take copious notes.

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