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NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

Making the Classroom More Student-Centered

A Thesis Submitted to the

University Honors Program

In Partial Fulfillment of the

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Elementary Literacy

By

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Capstone Approval Page

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Making the Classroom More Student-Centered

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HONORS THESIS ABSTRACT

Guidelines

Your abstract should begin with a definitive statement of the problem of project. Its purpose, scope and limit should be clearly delineated. Then, as concisely as possible, describe research methods and design, major findings, including the significance of the work, if appropriate, and conclusions.

Students whose thesis involves “creative” work (original, fine art, music, writing, theatre or film production, dance, etc.) should describe process and production. Indicating the forms of documentation on file as “thesis” materials.

Please have your advisor review your abstract for organization, content, grammar and spelling before submission.

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ABSTRACT (100-200 WORDS):

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the role of behavior management techniques in the classroom and to determine if students learn best in a student-centered classroom or a teacher-centered classroom. This exploration through interviews and research, will help to find out how teachers create a positive learning environment for a diverse group of students in the classroom and how a student-centered technique versus how a teacher-centered technique works in the classroom.

In my opinion, if teachers do not set up a positive learning environment for all students in their classroom, then they will not be in control of their classrooms.

Classroom management/expectations and creating a positive work environment are some of the most important things to set up in the beginning of the year so that the students know that if they are respectful to the teacher and their classmates then they will be respected in return.

For any teacher, no matter what age group they teach, setting up classroom rules and expectations directly at the beginning of the year is something that must be done. Teachers know that if they do not set up those expectations on the first day of school, it might be very challenging to go back and teach the expectations to the students. According to Robert J. Marzano in his book Classroom Management That Works: Research Based Strategies for Every Teacher (2003),

“Teachers play various roles in a typical classroom, but surely one of the most important is that of classroom manager. Effective teaching and learning cannot take place in a poorly managed classroom. If students are disorderly and disrespectful, and no apparent rules and procedures guide behavior, chaos becomes the norm. In these situations, both the teacher and students suffer.”

This is true in many cases. If the teacher does not set up his or her classroom expectations and rules on the very first day of school, then it is nearly impossible to get students to cooperate in the classroom later in the school year after their norms have already been established. For instance, when teachers do not stop little behaviors, such as a few students talking out or a student lying their head on the desk, then the students end up taking advantage of that, making it more challenging for the teacher to correct that behavior later on. According to Eric Hathaway in his article, The Value of Consistent Expectations (2015),

“In contrast, in classrooms where behaviors vary day to day or minute to minute, teachers struggle to teach and students often learn less than they should. Think about all the instructional minutes that are stolen by disruptive behaviors. Those missing minutes mean students have less time to focus on and master academic

standards. In an environment that's disorderly or chaotic — or worse, unsafe — students are also less likely to ask questions, engage in classroom discussions, and take academic risks in front of their peers. Further, the problem is compounded when struggling learners miss class time because of discipline referrals or suspensions.”

During the beginning of the fall 2016 semester, I observed just how hard it is to gain control of a class after the school year begins if the expectations are not set up in the class. The classroom teacher that I worked with during student teaching set up her expectations and appropriate consequences for the students on the very first day of school; however, as time went on, she did not stick with her expectations and consequences. For example, the classroom teacher would let little behaviors slip for one student, such as whispering to a friend at their table, and then discipline another student for the same behavior. When setting expectations for students, teachers need to set the expectations and stick with them, enforcing them for all students.

The school that I student taught at for the fall 2016 semester began incorporating the CHAMPS model of classroom management. The CHAMPS model for behavior management will not only be used throughout each classroom in the school, but it will be a district wide program and will be used throughout all four of the elementary schools in the district. The students had done learning walks in the hallways and throughout the school, where the school personnel champed out each activity for the students. For example, one of the activities was how the students should enter the building. The C in CHAMPS is for conversation which is their voice level. When they enter school, the students can have a voice level of 2 (which is conversation level),

however, when they get into their classrooms they need to have a voice level of a 0 (no talking) or a 1 (whisper). The H in CHAMPS is for help. If a student needs help coming into school, they are expected to find an adult to help them solve the problem. The A in CHAMPS is for activity, and the activity for coming into the school is that the students are expected to walk through the door and the hall down to the classroom. The M in CHAMPS is for movement and the movement and the movement should be walking down the hall, keeping their hands, feet, and materials to themselves. The P in CHAMPS is to participate. The students participate by walking into school and following the instructions of the school personnel. The S in CHAMPS is for success, so if they follow all the rules and expectations they will have success.

In order for CHAMPS to be effective for the district, each teacher is encouraged to CHAMP out each activity with the students during the day. When a teacher CHAMPS the activity out they explain that each letter of CHAMPS stands for conversation (can the students talk during the activity?), help (how do the students get the teacher's attention and their questions answered?), activity (what is the task/objective? What is the end product?), movement (can the students move during the activity?), participation (how do students show they are fully participating? What does this behavior look/sound like?), and success (when the students meet the expectations they will be successful).

Those were the school's expectations of the students that were set up on the first day of school. The school district expected all teachers to follow that model in their own classrooms for academic activities. My classroom teacher did not follow the CHAMPS model on the first day of school when she was explaining her classroom expectations; she never once talked about the CHAMPS model of classroom expectations. She only

explained her classroom management systems to the students. For example, she uses a cup of beans, Class Dojo, and classroom cash. She uses the cup of beans when the students get a compliment from another teacher. Once the students earn so many cups of beans to fill the “good apple” (a red plastic apple), they earn a classroom reward, such as a party. She uses the classroom cash as a credit and debit system by rewarding the students with classroom cash when they are following the expectations, and takes cash away when they are not. About halfway through the first quarter, she decided that she wanted to try using the CHAMPS model in the classroom. It did not work because the students were not used to having their teacher CHAMP out everything since the beginning of the year. Had she started using it at the beginning of the school year, I believe it would have been more successful in the classroom.

The first days back to school with students will set the tone of the classroom for the entire year. Establishing classroom procedure with students helps create an environment that will be filled with learning and success that will continue through the entire year. There are many ways to set up classroom expectations. According to L. Today in the article The First Days Back – Setting up Classroom Expectations (2010), some ways to set up classroom expectations include modeling and explaining the movement of the classroom, establishing a short, but clear, list of classroom rules with the students help, and giving an overview of what the students are going to learn, and explaining their expected behavior for the year.

Teachers should also let the students know that most of the information that will be covered in the first few days is procedural and will lack fun and interesting content. It is during this time that the teachers will really get a feel for how their students will act

during the upcoming school year. At the beginning, teachers can really decide if they would like to move their classroom to a more student-centered classroom or continue to have a teacher-centered classroom.

There multiple differences between student-centered classrooms and teacher-centered classrooms. Both student-centered classrooms and teacher-centered classrooms contain advantages and disadvantages. According to the article Which is Best: Teacher-Centered or Student-Centered Education? (2016),

“When considering their approach to instruction, teachers are always looking for the method that is most beneficial for all of their students. Teachers want their students to enjoy the learning process, and they want the classroom to be orderly and controlled. As a result, the debate of teacher-centered vs. student-centered education has been in the forefront of educators’ minds for many years. Though many people have a specific idea of which type of education is best, there are both advantages and disadvantages to each approach.”

In teacher-centered activities, students are mainly working alone, and student collaboration is discouraged; however, there are still some advantages to working in a teacher-centered classroom. One of the advantages to working in a teacher-centered classroom would be that the classroom remains orderly. The students are quiet, and the teacher retains full control of the classroom. The last benefit is that due to the teacher directing all the activities in the classroom, they do not need to worry that students will miss the important topic (Which is Best: Teacher-Centered or Student-Centered Education, 2016).

On the other hand, there are also disadvantages to working in a teacher-centered classroom. When teachers are using the teacher-centered approach to education, the students are putting all their focus on the instructor. In teacher-centered classrooms, control is of primary importance, meaning the teacher exerts control over the students. Critics of teacher-centered classrooms argue that in these classrooms, compliance is valued over initiative and passive learners over active learners. One of the possible disadvantages to working in a teacher-centered classroom would be that when students are always working alone, they are not learning the social skills they need in order to work collaboratively with other students. The student's communication skills may suffer due to always working alone. In addition, teacher-centered instruction can get boring for the students; their minds may wander causing them to daydream and miss important information during the lesson. In a teacher-centered classroom, the teacher is directing all the classroom activities, so the students do not have a chance to express themselves, ask questions, and direct their own learning. Finally, in teacher-centered classrooms, teachers may rely on extrinsic motivation and rewards to influence student behavior. Here, completion of a task is seen as a prerequisite for obtaining something desirable, such as social rewards (e.g. positive praise), activity rewards (e.g. free time, computer time, extra recess) and tangible rewards such as pencils or stickers (Which is Best: Teacher-Centered or Student-Centered Education, 2016).

While the student-centered classroom also has its advantages and disadvantages, the focus is quite different in a student-centered classroom. A teacher in a student-centered classroom is interested primarily in helping the child engage with problems and issues (sometimes in a real-world context), search below the surface for answers, try to

find various possible solutions or explanations, and construct his or her own meaning about the world. In these classrooms, teaching methods or strategies include active, reflective thinking skills, inquiry, exploratory discussions, role-playing, demonstrations, projects and simulation games. When working in a student-centered classroom, the teacher and the students share the focus. Instead of the instructor standing at the front of the classroom lecturing the students, the teacher and the students interact equally, group work amongst the students is encouraged, and students learn to communicate and collaborate with one another. Working in a student-centered classroom, students are learning those communication and collaboration skills in group work that will benefit them as they continue on in their school career and even later in life. Students are encouraged to monitor their own learning. They are asking more questions when they don't completely understand the topic and are completing the tasks more independently. One last advantage to working in a student-centered classroom would be that students are more interested in learning during activities where they can interact with one another and participate actively in the classroom (Which is Best: Teacher-Centered or Student-Centered Education, 2016).

Some might perceive that there are also several disadvantages to working in a student-centered classroom. One of the cons to working in a student-centered classroom would be because the students are often talking during collaborative activities, the classroom is often busy, noisy, and chaotic. Since the students are not focused on the teacher, and they are encouraged to work collaboratively in groups. There is more talking than in a teacher-centered classroom. The teacher must attempt to manage all the students' activities at one time, which could be difficult if different students are working

on the same project but are all at different stages on the project (Which is Best: Teacher-Centered or Student-Centered Education, 2016). One way that a teacher could manage all the students' activities at once would be to circulate through the classroom, to see how each group is doing. In a student-centered classroom, due to the instruction to all of the students at once, some of the students might miss the most important information that is being delivered for that lesson. Another possible disadvantage would be that some students prefer to work on projects alone, so due to the environment relying so heavily on collaborative group work, the student may feel overwhelmed in those situations, causing group projects to become problematic (Which is Best: Teacher-Centered or Student-Centered Education, np, 2016).

Classroom management styles vary based on the teacher. Classroom management is a complex concept that includes the organization of the physical environment, the establishment of rules and routines, the development of effective relationships (student to student, teacher to student), and the prevention of and response to misbehavior. Several teachers use different personal management techniques while others use a district wide management technique. In the classroom, it is helpful to view classroom management beliefs and practices on a continuum from teacher-centered to student-centered. For example, it has been found that educators vary along a continuum of beliefs about the way children learn to behave. At one end of the continuum is the teacher-centered educator and at the other end is the student-centered educator (Garrett, p. 34, 2008). On the far left of the continuum, would be the teacher-centered perspective where teachers focus more on taking authority over the class so all the focus is on the teacher. On the far

right of the continuum would be the student-centered perspective where the students are encouraged to work collaboratively and take control of their own education.

Educators that work in a more teacher-centered classroom are more likely to focus on authority and compliance over cooperative work. According to Tracy Garrett in the article Student-Centered and Teacher-Centered Classroom management: A Case Study of Three Elementary Teachers (2008),

“The educator with teacher-centered orientation is likely to be highly controlling, employing punitive sanctions, moralistic perceptions, highly impersonal relationships with students, attitudes of general mistrust and a major focus on the maintenance of order. Critics of teacher-centeredness argue that in these classrooms, compliance is valued over initiative and passive learners over active learners. To help teachers maintain control over students, instructional methods that promote a focus on the teacher are frequently used, such as lectures, guided discussions, demonstrations.”

On the other hand, an educator with a more student-centered classroom orientation is likely to maintain a classroom climate in which positive, active interaction and communication, close personal relationships with students, mutual respect between the teacher and student interaction and student to student interaction, positive attitudes, student self-discipline, self-determination and independence are fostered in an environment such as this.

In most cases, teachers do not choose to work solely in a teacher-centered classroom or a student-centered classroom. Most of the time they switch between the two. It all depends on the way the students act and if they can or cannot handle the tasks. In my experiences, I have worked with three different teachers, all of whom taught different grade levels. They all tended to switch between the teacher-centered classroom structure and the student-centered classroom structure.

I interviewed all three of the teachers via email and got their perspectives on the topic. The first question asked read, “As a teacher, how would you support building a positive and safe learning environment for all of your students?”

In the interview by Teacher A, a third grade teacher, she responded by saying, “I am a third grade teacher and have been an elementary school teacher for sixteen years. I believe that making the classroom a “home away from home” atmosphere is the most important thing I can do to help ensure that the students believe that they are safe and loved in the classroom. We use books and biographies Heroes for My Son, Heroes for My Daughter to help shape our classroom. We focus on “filling buckets” and helping other people. In turn, we learn how much we gain by helping others.”

In the interview with Teacher B, a fourth grade teacher, she responded, “One of my goals as a teacher is for every student to feel like they are just as important for the rest. I try to find ways through humor and jokes to make the kids feel at ease, along with being direct about my expectations for them as a class and also individual goals I have for them. For example, for students with behavior or academic concerns, I discuss what I’m seeing and ask for ways that we can improve the situation so the kids feel as though we are working towards a common goal. Also, if the need arises for me to talk with a

student, I always do it in a private conversation with a low, kind voice so the students know my intention isn't to get them in trouble but to work to fix the situation.”

In the interview with Teacher C, a first grade teacher, she responded by saying, “The teacher needs to establish clear rules and expectations for the classroom. These need to be modeled and practiced with the students. There need to be clear consequences for rules and expectations that are not followed, and the teacher needs to make sure to carry through with the consequences. The students will quickly learn what is expected of them and that the teacher will not tolerate any hitting, talking badly about others, etc. There also needs to be rules on how to work in small group and encourage each other. This needs to be modeled several times so students understand that they need to work together and encourage each other.”

The second question of the interview, the question asked, “In this environment, how do you ensure that you're meeting the needs of all of your students?”

Teacher A responded by saying, “Because we are “at home” in the classroom, I make a point of learning as much about my students as I can (family members, pet's names, etc.) so that students feel comfortable in the classroom. I also try and contact parents as volunteers and just to get to know the students.”

Teacher B responded by saying, “As someone who has worked in my building for 10 years, I make it a point to get to know all the students in the building so when they come to me, they already feel at ease. I work with past teachers, along with observations and conversations with the students, to ensure that I understand what their needs are as quickly as possible at the start of the year. From there, we have a lot of open conversations about growth mindset and monitoring their own learning (i.e. - fist to five)

so that the students are more aware of what they need and advocate for themselves as needed.”

Teacher C responded with, “We have guided reading and reading intervention time to make sure each student is being challenged and/or encouraged at their reading level. We have math interventions for student who are struggling with math concepts. We keep track of all the behavior with behavior flip cards and mark it on their calendar each day. If a pattern begins to emerge, in regards to bad behavior, we are able to address it to make sure the other students in the class are not being bullied or interrupted during their learning time.”

The third question that was asked to the group of teachers asked, “How does the classroom environment promote interaction among learners—and how do you operate in that environment?”

Teacher A stated, “Respect is the most important interaction property we focus on. Students must respect themselves, each other, and their teachers throughout the year. Once they learn these parameters, academics can come easier.”

Teacher B responded to that question by saying, “In my classroom, we do lots of ‘turning and talking’. I ask the kids to discuss things, their interpretation or opinion, etc. This allows all students to process and share their ideas in a low-stress environment. I also let the kids choose things that we are going to do or learn so they feel their voices are heard. Also, last year, I started flexible seating where my classroom has places for students to choose to sit (yoga balls, standing tables, low tables, scoopie seats, yoga mats, a teepee, etc.). Each day, they can choose where they want to sit and who they want to sit by. My only expectation is that their seat is one where they can work and be successful

as learners each day. This allows students to interact with a variety of students each day. They can sit by their friends or by someone else depending on their choice each day. I've noticed it opens up the students to a variety of interactions because they aren't sitting by the same people for a prolonged period of time like they were in a traditional desk layout."

Teacher C stated, "Students work together during math interventions on math games, the Tier 3 intervention students go to a teacher aide for more intense interventions, and students who are struggling come to work with me on a concept. The students working on math games during intervention time work together while I'm working with students who are struggling. I model for them how to play the games and they work on them together. During reading interventions the students are working on daily 5 groups. They can read to self, read to someone, work on spelling words or do a project with a partner."

The fourth question that was asked to the group of teachers was, "How do you encourage classroom participation?" and they all responded with great answers.

Teacher A stated, "Students are called on when they raise hands, when they don't raise hands, by using "sticks" with their names on them, and by having students call on the next student for answers. I sometimes let the students be "the teacher" and say I'm tired of teaching. Students can talk at tables, with partners, ask three before me, or be alone at times. Any case, I expect that they participate whenever I call on them. For those shy students, I let them call on someone to help or answer their question."

Teacher B responded by stating, "One of the things I do is make sure the kids have a balanced representation of voice. Once I've heard from the regulars, I probe for

kids I haven't heard from. I always say "who's voice have I not heard from lately" to give the quieter kids a chance to get prepared to answer. I also use the turn and talk strategy so the kids have plenty of chances to share in a non-threatening way."

Teacher C responded with, "I'm very careful at the beginning of the year to call on students even if their hand isn't up and help them along with an answer to build their confidence. I have the students work with a partner on some projects and walk around to listen to the discussions they are having. It helps some students to be one on one with someone so they feel more comfortable. I can join in with their conversation and encourage what great ideas they have. They also love to use the smartboard so, they know if they are not sitting quietly, they will not be asking to come up and write an answer on the smartboard."

The fifth question that all the teachers were asked was, "Are there any challenges to student-centered classrooms?"

Teacher A said, "If the students truly respect one another, there are few challenges. But, sometimes I need to get involved...but usually by having a class meeting to discuss a problem that has arisen in our classroom. Students discuss consequences and empathy in these discussions."

Teacher B stated, "The biggest challenge is letting go of what you think of as a traditional classroom with lots of teacher talk, teacher-directed decision making, etc. For some teachers, that is a comfortable setting because they are in control of every aspect and giving up that control is frightening to teachers."

Teacher C responded with, "To keep the students focused on the task at hand. Although you'd get that in any first grade classroom. It can be difficult at first to get the

students to complete small group tasks and stay on task. This is something that needs to be modeled and practiced.”

The sixth question in the interview reads, “Have you changed from a teacher-centered to student-centered classroom or from student-centered to teacher-centered classroom?”

Teacher A responded by saying, “I do a little of both. I love the students to lead math but I always do a mini-lesson so they have been modeled or scaffolded into the lesson. I let students share and discuss writing, reading strategies, social studies and strategies that scientists use. STEM is something I try and provide to the students as well. STEM stands for science, technology, engineering and mathematics. I like to allow the students time to work cooperatively in groups, especially during science activities. I like to let them pretend they are scientists. It is all very hands-on for the students and very engaging.”

Teacher B responded by saying, “I’ve always been a student-centered teacher in my decision making (thinking of their needs vs what I want to do), but in the past few years, I’ve increased the opportunities for the students to have a voice in their education (flexible seating, blog post responses for reading, extension activity choices, etc.)”

Teacher C stated, “I would definitely say from teacher-centered to student-centered. When I started 20 years ago everything was teacher directed all day long. Now the students take accountability for many things (small group work, partner work, etc.)”

The seventh and final question of the interview read, “Did you see a difference in student behavior from operating in a teacher centered classroom as opposed to a student-centered classroom?”

Teacher A responded, “The students are not as bored with me when they are the “teacher”. I believe they love to be the “boss” and enjoy watching each other taking the lead. And, I enjoy learning about my little teachers as well.”

Teacher B stated, “Absolutely! Now that my students participate in flexible seating, I’m amazed at how much more relaxed my room is. The students are more willing to monitor their own learning because they know the expectation is set for them (as to which seat they pick). I find that by setting parameters for how our classroom operates, they are much more responsible with times when we are less structured (experiments, group work, etc.). My classroom seems much more interactive than ever before!”

Teacher C stated, “You have to be very strict at first in a student-centered classroom and teach the students what the expectations are so that when they are set free to work in small groups and as partners they understand what is expected of them. They also are able to have conversations as a class without everyone interrupting.”

The interviewees responses indicated that not one of them used only one style of classroom management. They did not only work in the teacher-centered classroom or the student-centered classroom. They use a little bit of both styles when needed during the different times of the school year. Based off on Teacher C’s answer, “You have to be very strict at first in a student-centered classroom and teach the students what the expectations are so that when they are set free to work in small groups and as partners they understand what is expected of them. They also are able to have conversations as a class without everyone interrupting.” A teacher does need to be very strict if they are set on using a student-centered classroom style, especially if they want to use this style with

younger students. This goes back to setting the expectations for the students before the lesson or activity begins.

It has been shown to me through my interviews and research that there is not one set way for instruction and management in a classroom. Different teachers prefer different teaching styles, and some set up their own behavior management techniques while others follow a district-based behavior plan. Through looking at the student-centered classroom and the teacher-centered classroom, both have their advantages and disadvantages. Through interviews and research, I found out how teachers create a positive learning environment for a diverse group of students in the classroom through both the use of teacher-centered classrooms versus student-centered classroom. a combination of teacher-centered and student-centered learning is often the best choice for most classrooms. When a teacher uses both types of instruction, a greater number of students are reached. A well-balanced classroom should be the goal of every educator.

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