

I was hired a little more than halfway through the school year. The teacher I took over for moved to a different position in the school and the kids had been with a long term sub for about three weeks. Before I even started the actual teaching part, I had a day of observation with the long term sub at the helm. I sat in the back of the classroom and took notes on five periods of classes including how well they followed procedures and behavior in general. I introduced myself as their new teacher, told them a little bit about myself, and announced that I would just be watching them for a day. To my shock and disbelief, students in four out of the five classes exhibited very wild behaviors.

After about a month and a half of adjusting to the world of teaching and the schedule at our high school, I was formally assigned a mentor to meet with. My mentor sat down with me and in one of our first meetings, we walked through the CCT Performance Profile. I went through the indicators and self reflected upon my classroom environment, student engagement, and commitment to learning. As I checked off boxes in the matrix, I quickly came to discover my lowest scores were Indicator 4, "Fostering appropriate standards of behavior that support a productive learning environment for all students." I gave myself low marks on this one because I had one class in particular with some students who interrupted instruction far too frequently to achieve optimal productivity.

I'm actually really happy this is what the matrix brought to my attention, as I feel this is a matter of huge importance to figure out early on in teaching. I had a professor in college who harped on the fact that the most important part of classroom learning was an effective management plan. "Without effective classroom management," he told the class, "true learning could not happen." I really enjoyed my classroom management course because there was a lot of science behind it. As a social studies teacher, I like to see some evidence (ie documents, interviews, etc) that prove something to be true before I actually accept it. Classroom management seemed like a social science to me. My graduate class dove into the works of Savage & Savage and Marzano, both of which I actually used as guides for my Module I project.

The CCT Performance Profile let me know what my focus should be, but I was unsure of how I could do my best to foster an environment where *all* students are supported and free from behavioral distractions. I liked the idea of using a token economy to develop positive peer pressure and encourage desired behaviors from students. A token economy struck me as an interesting approach because I was also a psychology major and did a lot of research into operant conditioning. I read Walden Two by B.F. Skinner which was the idyllic behaviorist story where free will does not exist and all actions are controlled by a system of rewards and extrinsic motivation. Although the details of the story became twisted and unethical at points, the basic premise of the book was an interesting one. Operant conditioning has been used for years to influence the behavior of others.

I looked to the meta-analyses of Robert Marzano in his book, Classroom Management That Works for ideas and data. I was already familiar with the book since I had read it in graduate school the previous year, so I just needed a refresher. In Chapter 3, entitled "Disciplinary Interventions" Marzano helped back some thoughts that I already had with science and offer some methods that work in quelling interruptions. I knew this was an important module because as pointed out in a 1990 study, "Only about half of all classroom time is used for instruction, and disciplinary problems occupy most of the

other half” (Marzano, 27). This line actually got me pretty excited as I thought about how much more instructional time could be squeezed out of my short, fifty minute period.

Although I had a thought of establishing a token economy in my classroom, I didn’t know how exactly to do so. The system could be so complex, or very simple, but I wanted to design it to have the best possible results. This is really what Marzano’s research helped me do. Looking at all the possibilities for interventions, studies showed that the most positive change was affected through a system of rewards *and* punishments. Providing rewards for desired behaviors and punishments for inappropriate behaviors proved to be the best for decreasing disruptions (28). Although a reward would have been effective on its own, the system had the potential to be much more effective while paired with a punishment.

Teachers fill their rooms with praise and rewards; sometimes they are verbal acknowledgements, other times they take the form of stickers on papers. My token economy is different though, because the students are made aware of exactly when they will be rewarded and exactly when a punishment will take place. I wanted students to have an actual token that they could save up and cash in for rewards along the way. Not only would they be learning better behavior, but also the value in saving; there is the hidden curriculum. “These tokens can be used to reward or recognize appropriate behavior. When the student exhibits inappropriate behavior, tangible recognition must be taken away” (29). The idea of having a tangible object students receive or lose based on their behavior was one I loved because having the tactile stimulation of an object in hand gives the holder a sense of ownership. “Yes I earned this, I can see it, I can hold it, I understand this token’s value” are thoughts that a physical object can illicit.

I had to be patient and deny my eagerness to start a classroom experiment right away, because like a good scientist, I needed to collect some data first. The main issue I was trying to fix was the number of interruptions in a class. To see if this system worked in achieving that objective, I would need data, or a pre-assessment to compare later results to. I spent two weeks with a clipboard in my hand placing a tally on a piece of paper every time I was interrupted. I logged all this on my cteam.org beginning teacher journal so I wouldn’t lose the information. I thought the number of interruptions were bad, but it wasn’t until I had the actual numbers that I realized just how awful they were. It was now time to scientifically take control of my classroom.

I made a chart of behavioral expectations including how many points I thought each should be worth in this system. This communicated to students which were the most important to me. Since this was a system of punishments *and* rewards, points could be added or subtracted for numerous things; Perfect attendance +/- 1 point, 100% participation in the day’s activity +/- 2 points, 0 interruptions during instruction +5, 3+ interruptions -1 point for each. The list of desired actions had about 10 more items on it as well that I presented to the class for discussion. This allowed me to go over why each item was important to running a successful learning program and garner some additional student buy-in. When that was complete, I solicited ideas to make a rewards system. I needed to know what exactly motivated my students so I let them choose what their rewards would be and we ranked them in order of things they wanted least to things they wanted most so we could assign appropriate point values. The list is as follows: CNN student news at the end of class 25 points, 5 minutes to talk at the end of

class 50 points, +10 on a test 75 points, +3 on the final 85 points, 100 on a participation quiz 95 points, ice cream 110 points, choose dollar store items from a box 140 points, have pizza for lunch 160 points, popcorn and a movie 180 points.

The token I used was a slip of uniquely designed cardstock I called a Democracy Dollar. I had my paraprofessional tally behaviors throughout class and hand a slip out randomly to a student once certain points had been achieved. It was the responsibility of those individual students to make sure they put their slips in the clear plastic container positioned at the front of the room as the period wound down. Every Friday we were to tally them up together and decide if a reward was going to be cashed in for or not.

One cancerous factor I could see leading to the downfall of this token economy quickly was a lack of buy-in from certain students. In particular, I had two very chatty students who seemed to be leaders of the “talk out of turn” rebellion in my room. Instead of trying to fight their personalities totally, I empowered them by appealing to their leadership abilities. I pulled them both aside after class one day and struck a deal that if they were my leaders in making this program successful, everything that the class received for a reward, they would get double. They seemed to really like this idea since their eyes were focused on the higher point rewards like a dollar store prize, or ice cream. This was probably the best idea of this plan because positive peer pressure was an obvious and powerful persuader. I can clearly recall one of my student leaders saying, “Shh, stop talking and finish your bell ringer or we’re not going to get a ticket.” The other student leader I remember redirecting a student to raise her hand when she had just shouted something out. I was very pleased with their role in making the classroom more functional.

Extrinsic motivation has proved to be a powerful force in many different instances worldwide, however, I am really seeking to change behavior and make a better, more conscious student. To do this, I have to encourage a change to intrinsic motivation, to make these ideas so much a part of student that they act a certain way just because they feel that is the right thing to do. My token economy needed a little something added to it to get closer to that effect. Marzano captures the essence of a book called *Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A’s, Praise, and Other Bribes* by citing the authors opinion that “Even if it [reward] did succeed in keeping order in the classroom, this program, like all carrot-and-stick techniques used at school or at home, fails to help children become reflective, compassionate people” (34). The heart of the matter here seems to be reflection. Why is a student doing something? Why is it the right thing to do? How can they do better in achieving the right thing? I helped my students introspect more by imposing a daily reflection at the end of each class. For the last four minutes, we stopped the lesson and in permanent classroom folders, they graded themselves based on effort and behavior ONLY. They then had to write a brief sentence describing why they got that grade. What I found more than anything else, was that students were painfully honest.

For weeks in a row, there was a total transformation in my room. Students appeared more motivated in everything they did, there was an air of positivity, and there were far less interruptions than before the Democracy Dollars. However, one week, everything just stopped and behavior started to revert back to normal. It’s not that kids hadn’t done a good job in accruing tickets, they had. In fact, they had upwards

of 160 tickets collected. The problem was their dedication to saving and the ensuing frustration. Unanimously the class had decided to go for the popcorn and movie. Of course, it was the most illustrious, sitting on top of the reward chart visible to all with its offer of satisfying multiple desires for food and entertainment. Every Friday, the class said no to lesser rewards and agreed to march on to the top. After a long time of no reward, frustration set in with the feeling that they would never reach the top and most started to give up.

Without changing my instructional approach, the academic impact this token economy had on students was huge. The test average of the class jumped to an 82 from a 71 (I was tracking this because an 85 class average on a test was +10 points) when interruptions were minimized. It seemed that all students were paying attention more because the difficulty of the material didn't change, and neither did the mode in which I delivered it. Despite the fact that good behavior eventually tapered off, this one impact alone is huge. Students were also more focused on the bell ringer to start class off. That activity always connects the lesson to them so to have more understanding up front, means there will be more interest throughout the lesson. Because they were more focused on the bell ringer writing, there was a basis to make discussions livelier as well. From beginning to end, everything about the class and everything about the students was improved.

I learned countless valuable lessons through this whole system. First, I realize the need to have smaller rewards along the way so students don't get discouraged. Next time I attempt a classroom token economy, I may lower the point requirements on rewards so it becomes easier to cash in on a positive consequence. After this, I conducted an impromptu operant conditioning experiment with my psychology class using stickers. I found that a ticket itself can be the reward as students no matter what age, absolutely love stickers. My class was never so alive, engaged, and respectful as when I passed out stickers to reinforce desired behaviors. They get to keep those shiny pieces of animated paper which are instant rewards that can be displayed as a badge of recognition.

The formal and informal data I was able to collect helped guide my instruction in other classes as well. I stuck with the end of class self reflection for all my students and I learned to communicate my expectations as a teacher more clearly. I also noted and practiced that when students have a say, they are more likely to buy into something, such as in designing classroom rules. This was the first year in our school being a PBIS institution. Next year, we roll out a reward system for positive behavioral support. I can be an asset in that committee by sharing the successes, failures, and data that I collected from the token economy I had in place before a school-wide launch.

In the time since my Module I experiment was conducted, I learned just how motivated students are by food and praise. I have implemented afterschool pasta parties at certain checkpoints throughout the semester for kids who are improving their behavior and/or academics. This type of recognition along with the appreciation that my meatballs are made from scratch and they can eat as much as they want has made some reassess just how hard they try. At the end of the day, it has really come down to knowing my students. In the token economy I had to know what rewards they wanted before I could make the system work. In my classroom, I need to know what each student likes so I can connect with them and motivate them both in effort and in learning. Sometimes being able to manage a student is as

simple as knowing that they are obsessed with Call of Duty, or that they have a Justin Bieber signing toothbrush. The first step in motivating an audience is to know the audience.

### **Works Cited**

Marzano, R. (2003). *Classroom management that works*. New York, NY: Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development