We don’t treat every student the same when it comes to instruction. Why do we think we need to treat them all the same way when it comes to classroom management?

By Tracey Garrett, Ed.D.

If you work with a diverse student population, then you know to create an environment where all of your students can grow and succeed academically. In other words, you differentiate your instruction. Over the years, views on effective instruction have shifted from approaches based on a “one-size-fits-all” mentality (i.e. teach to the middle and hope that everyone understands) to a perspective that focuses on the concept of differentiation.

Educator and author Carol Ann Tomlinson defines differentiation as adapting your instruction to meet your students’ needs. Advocates of a differentiated instructional approach believe that teachers can maximize student understanding and student engagement, two key elements of student learning, if they implement a differentiated instructional approach.

While many teachers have made this instructional shift, they do not apply these principles to classroom management. Most frequently, a rigid set of rules and consequences is established and implemented across the board with as much consistency as possible. Little consideration is given to the individual student involved in the transgression before selecting an appropriate way to address the situation. In other words, there is no such thing as differentiated classroom management.

Over the years, however, views on effective classroom management have also shifted. For many years, the goal of effective classroom management was to control students’ behavior, which may have been possible with a “one-size-fits-all” approach. Yet, in today’s classrooms, the goal of effective classroom management should be to establish an environment conducive to academic and social emotional learning. To accomplish this goal, teachers are still encouraged to focus on clearly established rules and consequences. But they are also encouraged to develop caring relationships with students and to be flexible with the implementation of the consequences. Teachers who focus on these tasks will create an environment where students choose to behave well and engage in academic activities and will ultimately foster a positive atmosphere for academic and social emotional learning. However, neither of these tasks can be effectively addressed by doing things the way we always have done them.

With the growing diversity present in today’s classrooms, the reality is that the best way to meet students’ academic, social-emotional and behavioral needs is to create a truly differentiated classroom. This means we need to view both our instruction and classroom management approaches through the lens of differentiation. Furthermore, it means that we cannot adopt the mentality that fairness is equivalent to treating every student exactly the same. Rather, we must strive to individualize our instructional and classroom management approaches to give every student what he or she needs to be successful.

Think about your practice. Do you implement a differentiated approach to instruction? What about a differentiated approach to classroom management? Or, is it possible that you may have created a mismatch with a classroom that features an individualized approach to instruction while still implementing a traditional approach to classroom management? Since it appears, that many teachers have made the differentiated instructional shift, here are some practical strategies to help teachers think about implementing a differentiated approach to classroom management.
DIFFERENTIATING YOUR CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

Two key areas where teachers can differentiate their approach to classroom management include developing caring relationships with their students and implementing consequences to address misbehavior.

Building caring relationships

According to teacher educator Rob Marzano, effective relationships between the teacher and student are the cornerstone of effective classroom management. Students who feel cared for by their teacher are more likely to behave well and engage in academic activities. This contributes to the overall positive learning environment. But, it is not possible to use the same strategies to build caring relationships with each of your students. In other words, teachers must differentiate the strategies they use based on a particular student’s personality. For example:

• Acknowledge students’ growth and achievements. Recognize students for their successes and accomplishments. Whether a student improved on a math test or scored the winning goal, he/she will appreciate that you noticed. However, depending upon the student, is this acknowledgment best offered as public or private praise or written or verbal praise?

• Develop connections with students. Share a few of your own interests such as favorite hobbies or sports teams with students. Similarly, get to know something personal about each student. Depending upon the student, can this information be shared freely verbally or would a written interest survey serve as a more effective springboard for sharing?

• Attend extracurricular activities. Make an effort to attend the school’s extracurricular activities such as sporting events, school plays and musical performances. After the activity, would particular students be comfortable with acknowledging your presence and introducing you to their family and friends or do they prefer your quiet presence and support?

• Provide academic support. Be available to help students who are struggling academically. But, think about the students involved and whether they would respond better to an individual or small group setting.

• Learn about student’s cultural backgrounds. Become knowledgeable about customs, traditions and holidays in which your students participate. However, think about each student. Will some students openly share this information with you or should you do some research before engaging in conversation with certain students about different topics?

• Become aware of developmental characteristics. Learn about the different developmental stages of your students and plan lessons accordingly. For example, are some students ready for more abstract thinking tasks while others need to stay with more concrete activities?

• Be sensitive to students’ moods. Notice when a particular student is “off.” Whether he or she seems angry, upset, etc., he or she will appreciate the teacher noticing. However, is this the type of student who would welcome an empathetic ear or someone who would prefer a smile and supportive pat on the back without any further discussion?

Implementing consequences

Despite engaging and differentiated instruction, well-established classroom rules and a commitment to developing caring relationships, misbehavior will sometimes arise. The most effective way to deal with misbehavior is through the use of consequences. At times, the effective use of consequences allows you to redirect the misbehavior without losing the momentum of your lesson while other times it allows you to help students learn something about why their behavior was inappropriate and how to make a better choice the next time a similar situation arises. The use of consequences offers another opportunity to differentiate one’s classroom management based on the particular student involved. Here are some practical strategies:

• Utilize verbal and nonverbal interventions. Use strategies such as “the look,” proximity, facial expressions, calling on a student or a public rule reminder to refocus students on the task at hand. However, consider how the student involved will respond to the selected intervention. Will the student be mortified by a public intervention? Is a gentle, nonverbal intervention enough to redirect the student’s behavior?

• Implement logical consequences. Select logical consequences that are related, reasonable and respectful. Think about the student involved and decide if it is more effective to involve the student in selecting a logical consequence for him or herself or do you need to impose the consequence on the student?

• Use culturally consistent language. Adjust your speech patterns according to what is effective with each student. For example, speech patterns in some cultures use more explicit directives such as “clean your room before dinner” while others use what are sometimes referred to as “politeness formulas” such as “I see some hands that need washing.”

Think about your students and consider which type of communication is more effective for each student.

• Design behavioral contracts. To deal with more serious or chronic misbehavior, create behavior contracts for individual students. Each student’s contract should specify the individual goals, how the particular behavior will be monitored and what type of positive reinforcement will be used. Depending on the student, each student’s contract will be individualized to meet his or her specific needs.

Neither instruction nor classroom management can be addressed effectively by adopting a “one-size-fits-all” approach. Given the variety of academic, social-emotional, and behavioral needs present in today’s diverse classrooms, it is imperative that teachers implement a differentiated approach to both instruction and classroom management. Use these practical classroom management strategies as you create a truly differentiated classroom.

Tracey Farrell Garrett, Ed.D., a former elementary teacher, works as a professor in the Department of Teacher Education at Rider University. Effective Classroom Management – The Essentials was published by Teachers College Press in July 2014. You can contact her at Tgarrett@ridex.edu.