The Effects of Relationship-Driven Classroom Management

Lisa M. Laasch

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The Effects of Relationship-Driven Classroom Management

An Action Research Report

By Lisa M Laasch
The Effects of Relationship-Driven Classroom Management

By Lisa M Laasch

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in fulfillment of final requirements for the MAED degree

St. Catherine University

St. Paul, Minnesota

Advisor ____________________________ Date ________________
Abstract

This study was initiated to determine the effects of relationship-driven classroom management on positive behaviors in the lower elementary classroom. The research was conducted in a rural public Montessori school. Students were carefully observed to determine behavioral norms. Next, they were invited to participate in a survey to establish their current perception of positive relationships within their school and particularly with myself as a guide. Subsequently, I conducted a family survey, recorded daily observation of positive behaviors, and collected samples of student work during the research period. Finally, I re-administered the students survey to determine if they believed their relationships had improved. Although the test period was short, there was a noticeable improvement in positive behavior in the classroom. I observed a reduction in off-task behaviors, an increase in independent work, and an improvement in both the quantity and quality of follow-up work students produced. I anticipate the ongoing practice of relationship-driven classroom management strategies will continue to reduce misbehavior and create a more peaceful classroom. In the future, I will focus on preventative rather than reactive management. I will also be conscious to notice the positive. It is clear that a peaceful and positive environment increases productivity, learning, and feelings of success. This research empowered me to always look more deeply for the why behind the what.
One of the great joys of a Montessori environment is the freedom it offers students. They have the freedom to move as they need to, the freedom to choose their work and the freedom to repeat the lessons that inspire them to learn. These freedoms can also present unique challenges to the guide in the area of classroom management. In a traditional classroom students work, sit and move around at roughly the same times, so it becomes immediately apparent when a student is off task. Management tends to focus on transition times by responding with increased structure. As a neophyte Montessori guide, I have discovered managing behavior in this free-flowing environment to be one of my greatest challenges. This led me to reflect on my methods of classroom management, as well as explore techniques other Montessorians have found to be successful.

Research indicates the most effective approach to classroom management consists of incorporating both preventative and reactive strategies. This means misbehavior can be averted by taking steps to reduce students' desire to, or reasons for acting inappropriately. Reactive strategies are the way a teacher responds to misbehavior after it has occurred. According to Martin, Yin, and Mayall (2006) there are three major dimensions of preventative classroom management: instructional management, people management, and behavior management. Instructional management governs how information is presented and assessed, as well as procedures for daily operation. People management is the relationships teachers build with the students and the general classroom climate. Finally, behavior management is the proactive establishment and consistent use of rules, consequences and rewards.

As I reflected on my strengths as a guide, I felt my instructional management to be fairly sound. I have a good understanding of the Montessori curriculum and conduct daily
Grace and Courtesy Lessons to teach and reinforce the procedures for daily operation. I identified people management and behavior management as the areas with the most room for improvement. But how best to manage people and behavior?

Vitto (2003) noted classroom management could be strengthened by promoting positive relationships and setting clear expectations of behavior. In our classroom the rules for appropriate behavior are clearly posted. Additionally, we practice the expectations consistently when student behavior indicates a need for reinforcement. This led me to believe the key to improving my classroom management techniques lay in building positive relationships through my interactions. Studies indicate students who feel safe, cared for and valued as individuals achieve better academically, as well as have a more positive outlook on school. A teacher can promote this type of environment by intentionally building relationships and avoiding interactions that create barriers such as continual reminding, coercing, criticizing or lecturing (Vitto, 2003). My reflections lead me to the conclusion that I had focused my effort on the lessons and the environment while potentially neglecting the very reason I became a teacher, the love of children.

Throughout my observations I consistently noted instances of misbehavior among many students. Upon consideration of my own interactions with them, I was compelled to discover why they were misbehaving. According to Johnson (2007) the two major goals of misbehavior are to gain attention or power. His approach to proactive behavior management involves beginning every morning by greeting students individually and offering each of them a personalized comment, thus satisfying their need for attention. He also maintains effective teachers must give one reminder before a student receives a consequence. This allows students to choose to continue the behavior, or make a more
appropriate decision. By asking a student what they want and offering them choices, a teacher can provide them with a sense of power.

Glasser (1998) also theorized misbehaviors are created from unmet needs. He postulated that all people have five basic needs, which we meet in different ways and to different degrees. The needs are power, belonging, freedom, fun and survival. When a need is unmet it creates frustration and unhappiness. Glasser believed that we cannot change the behavior of others, only adapt our own to the situation in a way to achieve a desired result (1998). Thus, a teacher can encourage positive behavior by offering choices, giving students opportunities to become aware of their actions and regulate them, and using questions to facilitate reflection and inspire change. A particularly interesting technique for this is using WDEP conversations that encourage students to examine what they want (W), what they are doing (D) to get what they want, evaluate (E) how well this is working, and formulate a new plan (P) (Wubbolding, 2011).

Ultimately, students should be encouraged to behave through responsibility rather than obedience. This means they are able to make sound decisions even without the presence of an authority figure. Responsibility is a set of skills that can be explicitly taught. "The building blocks of responsibility are self-awareness, acceptance or ownership of one's behavior, self-evaluation of the effectiveness of one's behavior, and planning" (Vitto, 2003, p.141). Teachers must reinforce this by stating clear expectations for behavior, then consistently noticing the positive behaviors and expressing complete faith in their students. Students who feel their teachers trust them tend to rise to the expectation. When students do not meet the expectations, behaviors must be reiterated and practiced. Just as teachers guide academic learning, they must also educate students in aspects of social interaction (Johnson, 2007).
According to Vitto it is also important to have high expectations and "hold the students responsible for their behavior in a way that is firm, fair, and friendly" (2003, p. 73). Rewards and recognition are strong motivators to increase positive behavior, and are often more effective than focusing on misbehavior. When teachers acknowledge a student who is misbehaving, it can reinforce the negative behavior by providing students with a greatly desired need for attention. A teacher should make every effort to counteract negative interactions with several times as many positive interactions to ensure a positive student-teacher relationship.

In summary, effective classroom management is a multi-step process and must be proactive as well as reactive. As Oliver, Wehbly and Reschly concluded, “Whole-classroom, multi-component programs for classroom management have a significant, positive effect on decreasing problem behavior in the classroom” (2011, p. 6). After reviewing the literature it is apparent that teachers must reflect on their own approach to behavior challenges and adjust them rather than place the responsibility solely on the students to correct their behavior. This raises the question, “what effect will implementing relationship-driven classroom management strategies have on increasing the positive behavior of my lower elementary classroom?”

My study took place in a small public school in rural Minnesota with a total population of 145 students. Our demographic is primarily Caucasian with lower to middle income families. The participants in my lower elementary classroom consist of 24 students, 14 female and 10 male. The ages range from 6-9 years and include eight 1st graders, ten 2nd graders and six 3rd graders. I have two qualified Special Education students receiving services and nine receiving Title One services. There are a total of thirteen who have been identified as a high need academic or behavior concern. All of my
students took part in the study; however, I focused my interventions on those thirteen students in particular.

Description of Research Process

The research I conducted ran from March 24, 2014 to April 25, 2014. I collected a variety of data during the process of my action research. My data sources included: teacher observations of positive behaviors, family survey, initial student relationship survey, student work samples, and a follow up student relationship survey.

As I prepared for my research, I began to collected baseline data. I conducted classroom observations daily. During each session I noted the date, time and patterns of behavior in the room. On a form (see Appendix A) I recorded tally marks for Working Alone, Working Together, Sitting, Wandering, Fooling Around, Choosing Work, At Snack, and At Lesson. I also reflected on positive behaviors I observed. I used my observations to help select target students who could benefit from behavior interventions. I also considered their interactions with other students to determine if they engaged in positive relationships in the classroom.

The family survey was the next data to be collected (see Appendix B). All families were emailed a link to an online survey I created using a Google Form. The purpose of the survey was to get an initial impression of the relationships families perceive their student to have at school by inquiring about the child's interactions and experiences in the classroom. This baseline then allowed me to understand if students display positive feelings towards school while at home. The family survey consisted of ten statements for the respondent to rate on a Likert Scale, with one being rarely and five being often. Some examples of statements included, "My student understands the expectations for appropriate behavior at school," "My student seems to enjoy school," "My student feels
that their teachers like him/her," and "My student feels like a part of a community at school." The survey allowed participants to remain anonymous with the option of identifying themselves. Families were provided an opportunity to add additional questions or comments about their child's interests and experiences. The results of the family survey gave me insight into the relationship families currently have with their student. It also guided my efforts in building positive relationships with my students.

Next, I administered the initial student survey (see Appendix C). This survey was intended to be more in-depth than the family survey. It also was designed to give a method of comparison between family perception and student response. I hoped it might provide insight regarding the truthfulness of the students’ responses, as well as their level of comfort in answering honestly. This survey was conducted anonymously to reduce the risk of students emotional discomfort and encourage candidness in their answers. It was comprised of statements similar to the those in the family survey but in more simplified language. The response choices were simply "Usually," "Sometimes," or "Never." Each statement was followed by a space for additional comments with the directions "If never please explain." The survey was imbedded into my classroom wiki. I took small groups of students to the computer area in our school where they completed the survey online. I read the survey aloud for the emerging readers in our group. Using Google Forms, I was able to break down student responses into data representing their impression of our classroom climate. The student survey helped me to narrow my focus to student areas of concern. It also helped me understand how I could improve upon my positive relationships with the students. Based on their responses, I assessed which strategies I would implement to build and further strengthen relationships in my classroom. Finally, I selected the interventions I believed would most directly address the students' needs.
First, I chose to meet their need for attention. I positioned myself at the door every morning and offered a greeting as well as a unique personal comment to each student as they entered the classroom. I also identified the students who exhibited more instances of misbehavior and targeted them with positive attention. To assist my consistent use of positive attention, I placed three paper clips in my right pocket each morning and again in the afternoon. Each time I made a positive personal comment to a target student I moved a paperclip to the other pocket. I also placed a "Caught Being Good" chart in a visible place near my lesson platform. I added tally marks each time I noticed students behaving appropriately at circle time. When the students reached 100 tallies, they were able to earn an extra recess on Friday afternoons.

Next, I focused on providing students with a sense of power. The three methods I implemented were offering choices, incorporating interests, and conducting conversations promoting self-awareness and problem solving. First, I added a suggestion box to our peace table. I encouraged students to add comments about what they would like to learn more about, as well as what lessons they would most like to attend. Students could also submit questions or comments for discussion at our daily classroom meetings. In addition to offering choices in learning and follow up work, I decided to consistently respond to any misbehavior with a choice statement such as "You may ____ or you may ______." I also followed up any repeat misbehavior by giving students an opportunity to become aware of their actions and self-regulate them. I chose to use the technique called WDEP conversations. When faced with repeat misbehavior, I asked students to examine what they wanted (W), then I asked what they were doing (D) to get what they wanted, next I had them evaluate (E) how well this was working, and finally, they must formulate
a new plan (P). Consistent use of this technique is intended to provide a sense of power through learning to take ownership of one's own actions and to make necessary changes.

After implementing the interventions, I continued to conduct classroom observations daily during my research period. I noted the date, time and patterns of behavior in the room by recording tally marks in the same manner I had used to collect my baseline data (see Appendix A) I also continued to reflect on positive behaviors I observed. I paid particular attention to those I had identified as target students in my initial observations. I continued to note interactions reflecting positive relationships. I was then able to compare this data with the baseline data I had generated prior to the interventions to evaluate the effect of these relationship-driven classroom management strategies on the positive behaviors in my classroom.

To assess the impact of the selected interventions on the target group of students I had identified through my observations, I collected samples of their work. Each week I gathered and dated a piece of work from two different subject areas. When selecting each work, I made sure to ask at least one question, as well as offer some specific positive feedback about it. Then I placed the work in a portfolio so I could see what impact, if any, the positive relationship building was having on their effort and quality of work.

After implementing these interventions for four weeks, I had the students retake the survey to see if their feelings regarding their level of positive relationships at school had changed. I followed the same procedure as the initial survey, taking students in small groups to access the survey form imbedded in my classroom wiki. I read the questions aloud for those who requested it. After students completed the final survey, I was able to compare the data with their previous responses and assess any shifts in attitude.
In the next section, I will analyze all of the data I gathered. I will provide visual representations of the data gained through my observations and assessments. I will also share examples of student work collected during the research period. Then I will outline what effect, if any, the interventions had on the positive behavior in my classroom.

Analysis of Data

The first data I gathered was the baseline of student behaviors. I conducted daily observations at various times, during which I recorded tally marks identifying students behaviors. The categories included: Working Alone, Working Together, Sitting, Wandering, Fooling Around, Choosing Work, At Snack, and At Lesson. This provided me with a overview of my students behaviors. I analyzed the data by averaging the behaviors over the observation period and comparing the percentages of positive behavior to misbehavior. The results are shown in Figure 1.

The positive behaviors are represented by shades of green, off task misbehavior by yellow and disruptive misbehavior by red. This indicated less than one-fourth of my population was generally misbehaving while over three-fourths of my class was consistently exhibiting positive behaviors. This was an encouraging baseline which helped me to focus my attention on those students who were having the most difficulty complying with the expected behaviors.
Next, I used my observation notes to identify target students who were consistently exhibiting misbehaviors. My reflections on behaviors showed my target group consisted primarily of both boys and second graders as can be seen in Figures 2 and 3. The greatest quantity of positive interactions were noted among girls in my classroom see Figure 3.
The next data I collected was the family survey. Ten of twenty-three families responded to the survey. The survey was comprised of ten statements to be rated on a Likert Scale, with one being rarely and five being often. The questions focused on the student’s experiences and attitudes towards school. The data for the family responses can be seen in Appendix D.

The responses indicated that only half of the families felt as if their student often enjoyed school. However, the majority felt their student understood what behavior was expected at school, as well as the connection between that behavior and any related consequence. They generally believed the consequences to be fair.

Overall, families believed their student had a good relationship with me as a teacher. They indicated that their student felt safe talking to me and believed that I truly liked them. The responses showed most families perceived their students felt successful and enjoyed learning new things. Most families considered their student part of a community at school. I noticed the vast majority thought their students were heavily motivated by rewards.
Upon completion of the survey, families were encouraged to include additional questions or comments. They also had the opportunity to share something their student would like to learn more about. There were many positive comments from the families who participated in the survey, “My child is learning great and likes the school. I am happy and grateful with his success....” “We enjoy the communication we get from the class room” and “...[my son] enjoys the learning process”. Some suggestions for improvement were, “…[I] think the school year is too short and I would like to see more emphasis on improving handwriting.” and “Our school day is too short to accomplish what needs to be accomplished”. One family who’s student responded poorly stated, “Hey Ms. Lisa, please don't take my responses personally. The farther we get down this road the harder it seems to get.”

Next, I administered the initial student survey. This survey was composed of twenty-six statements to be rated as usually, sometimes or never. The statements were framed in a positive manner, subsequently answers of usually indicated the student’s agreement with the statement and never reflected student concern related to the statement. I generated a graph (Figure 4) comparing all twenty-six statements. Where the graph illustrates responses of never, as shown in red, I considered these topics to be areas of concern. Responses of sometimes, as displayed in yellow, indicated room for improvement regarding these topics. The green bars, representing usually, showed which topics students perceived in a positive manner. By focusing more closely on the statements that received responses of never or sometimes I was able to assess my students needs and select appropriate interventions to address those needs.

While implementing the interventions, I continued to conduct classroom observations daily during my research period. I noted the date, time and patterns of behavior in the
room by recording tally marks in the same manner I had used to collect my baseline data. I once again averaged the data over the research period and analyzed percentages. When compared with the baseline data, by the final week I noted a 3% decrease in incidents of fooling around and a 2% decrease in wandering, for a total of 5% reduction in off task behavior. I also saw a 5% rise in students observed sitting. Interestingly, while I hoped to see a positive effect on relationships in the classroom, there was actually a 5% increase in students observed working independently and a 3% decrease in students working together. See Figure 5.
work that was collected before the interventions, the work I selected after implementing the interventions showed improvement in quality as well as quantity. I noticed greater effort was invested in follow up work in general during the research period. The students also exhibited a greater sense of pride and accomplishment in their work than I had seen prior to the interventions. See Figures 6-7.

Figure 6

Figure 7

Finally, I re-administered the student survey. After completing the final survey, I was
able to compare the data with their previous responses and assess any shifts in attitude. The results are provided in Figures 10-12. Figure 10 shows a general pattern of growth in responses of usually, indicating students noticed an improvement in these areas. Figure 11 depicts a reduction in the impression these topics needed improvement. Finally, Figure 12 shows the decrease in concern regarding these statements.

The final student survey concluded my data collection. In the next section I will discuss the deductions I made as a result of the data. I will also relate any hypotheses I made regarding further improvements in my classroom management.

Action Plan
Despite the fact that my research period was relatively brief, the results were encouraging. Overall, positive behavior had increased, student work had improved and their perception of relationships in the classroom had been enhanced. All of my data pointed to the benefits of relationship-driven classroom management strategies.

Interestingly, while I hoped to see a positive effect on student relationships within the classroom, there was actually a 3% decrease in students working together and a 5% increase in students observed working independently. This caused me to wonder if simply increasing independent work would increase on-task behaviors or if there is a direct correlation between particular students working together and misbehavior.

A concern for the future of my classroom will be building relationships among my students to improve their feeling of safety and security as members of a community. I hope to find this will also increase on-task behaviors when students are working together. Several students indicated they did not feel liked by others. Due to the three year age range, I think friendships in the classroom can be difficult to navigate. Students are often dealing with a vast diversity of maturity and social skills. I plan to implement more social stories and community building activities to help strengthen relationships within my classroom community.

I would also like to further address my students impression of fair treatment. By incorporating students more actively into classroom meetings and other decision making roles, they may have increased confidence in the equity of their treatment as individuals, as well as a whole. I wish to reinforce the understanding that fair is not always everyone getting the same thing, but each individual getting what they need.

Similarly, students expressed they initially did not feel comfortable asking questions or making mistakes in class. I wondered if this was primarily related to the response of
other students or their perception of my reaction. I will encourage students once again to add questions anonymously to the classroom comment box if they do not feel comfortable asking in front of others. I believe this will increase their self-confidence in advocating for learning.

I was pleased to note that, overall, students believed I liked and cared for them, they also indicated they trusted me. However, the results of the survey showed I still may need to make myself more approachable to students. I will continue to be firm, fair, and friendly. I hope as I proceed to build positive relationships with my students that they will feel more confident about approaching me. By responding to their requests with choice statements, I believe their feelings of power will increase, causing them to become more independent and perhaps need to approach me less often.

When incorporating more choices for the students, I noticed most students responded very well to this technique. In an environment known for independence, students clearly like to be in control of their decisions as much as possible. They showed much greater interest in both the lessons and the follow up work when I invited them to additional lessons of their choice. While the students seemed reluctant at first to add suggestions to the classroom comment box, as they became aware of others receiving specialized self-initiated lessons, they grew more confident about making their own requests. In the future I would like to intentionally build a culture where students feel their interests are an essential part of their classroom and school experience.

Moving forward, I would also like to see my students have more opportunities to help outside the classroom. Although they have many responsibilities caring for our classroom environment, they did not indicate a feeling of having relationships within the school or
beyond it. I believe they would gain a deeper connection to others by participating in collaborative projects with other classrooms, as well as our community as a whole.

Although many families did not take the time to respond to my survey, I felt the results were promising. The responses indicated a positive attitude regarding student perceptions of both their relationship with me and the classroom climate as a whole. The student survey reinforced this optimistic view. Due to the positive responses regarding the use of rewards, I feel it would be beneficial to incorporate their use more into my classroom management tools. If the rewards are primarily intangible things like games, art, music and free-time activities I believe this would motivate students towards appropriate behavior and also increase their enjoyment of school as a whole. I would be interested to study how the use of both extrinsic and intrinsic rewards would further affect the positive behaviors in my classroom.

I learned many things during the course of my action research. Building relationships truly improves behaviors. My classroom management was greatly improved when I actively met needs because students who’s needs are met exhibit more positive behaviors. In the future, I will focus on preventative rather that reactive management. I will also be conscious to notice the positive. It is clear that a peaceful and positive environment increases productivity, learning, and feelings of success. Even more exciting, I discovered the joy of building and strengthening relationships with my students.

I now realized the ways in which I had limited positive relationships through barrier-creating behaviors such as reminding and directing. I also noticed I felt a greater sense of peace when my interactions with my students were more friendly and my calm demeanor further improved our relationship. Positive attitudes are contagious! Finally, my research
taught me to always look more deeply for the why behind the what. I know my approach to teaching will never be the same.

References


Appendix A:
Action Research Behavior Observations

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<th>Working Alone</th>
<th>Working Together</th>
<th>Sitting</th>
<th>Wandering</th>
<th>Fooling Around</th>
<th>Choosing Work</th>
<th>At Snack</th>
<th>At Lesson</th>
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Reflections:
Appendix B:
Family Survey

To view live survey:
https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1GaVrluciCm8GK_QzDPStXiQ_w_MjrsB93EbUu3Lvlac/viewform

Family Survey

Rarely <-- > Often 1-5 Scale

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<th>Question</th>
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<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My student seems to enjoy school</td>
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<td>My student understands the expectations for appropriate behavior at school</td>
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<td>My student works well when a reward is offered</td>
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<td>My student finds consequences at school fair</td>
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<td>My student sees the connection between</td>
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<td>My student feels that their teachers like him/her</td>
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<td>My student feels successful at school</td>
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<td>My student feels like a part of a community at school</td>
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<td>My student enjoys learning new things</td>
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Appendix C: Student Survey

To view live survey: https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1yhvneDm3ZKfQSqYa8V1GYS1cHviLNtaiUXg9y_HHbl/viewform

1. My teacher treats all students fairly
   • Usually
   • Sometimes
   • Never
If Never Explain

2. My teacher is clear about what behavior is expected
   • Usually
   • Sometimes
   • Never
If Never Explain

3. My teacher lets us help in our classroom, school or community
   • Usually
   • Sometimes
   • Never
If Never Explain

4. My teacher talks to students kindly
   • Usually
   • Sometimes
   • Never
If Never Explain

5. I feel safe in my classroom
   • Usually
   • Sometimes
   • Never
If Never Explain

6. My teacher is patient and calm
   • Usually
   • Sometimes
   • Never
If Never Explain

7. My teacher shows me how to correct answers
   • Usually
   • Sometimes
   • Never
If Never Explain

8. My teacher tells us what she wants us to learn
   • Usually
   • Sometimes
   • Never
If Never Explain

9. My teacher asks me what I want to learn about
   • Usually
   • Sometimes
   • Never
If Never Explain

10. My teacher acts the way she wants us to act
    • Usually
    • Sometimes
    • Never
If Never Explain

11. My teacher lets us make choices
    • Usually
    • Sometimes
    • Never
If Never Explain

12. My teacher explains how to behave appropriately
    • Usually
    • Sometimes
    • Never
If Never Explain
13. My teacher has consequences when the rules are not being followed
   • Usually
   • Sometimes
   • Never
   If Never Explain

14. My teacher is friendly and easy to talk to
   • Usually
   • Sometimes
   • Never
   If Never Explain

15. My teacher helps me do my best
   • Usually
   • Sometimes
   • Never
   If Never Explain

16. My teacher believes I do good work
   • Usually
   • Sometimes
   • Never
   If Never Explain

17. My teacher likes the subjects she teaches
   • Usually
   • Sometimes
   • Never
   If Never Explain

18. My teacher expects us to help solve problems
   • Usually
   • Sometimes
   • Never
   If Never Explain

19. My teacher notices when we make good choices
   • Usually
   • Sometimes
   • Never
   If Never Explain

20. I feel like my teacher likes me
    • Usually
    • Sometimes
    • Never
    If Never Explain

21. I feel like my classmates like me
    • Usually
    • Sometimes
    • Never
    If Never Explain

22. I do good work at school
    • Usually
    • Sometimes
    • Never
    If Never Explain

23. Learning is fun
    • Usually
    • Sometimes
    • Never
    If Never Explain

24. My teacher listens to me
    • Usually
    • Sometimes
    • Never
    If Never Explain

25. It is ok to ask questions and make mistakes in class
    • Usually
    • Sometimes
    • Never
    If Never Explain

26. I like school
    • Usually
    • Sometimes
    • Never
    If Never Explain
Appendix D

**My student seems to enjoy school**

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**My student understands the expectations for appropriate behavior at school**

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**My student works well when a reward is offered**

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My student finds consequences at school fair

My student sees the connection between their behavior and consequences

My student feels that their teachers like him/her

My student feels successful at school