Social Powers and Effective Classroom Management: Enhancing Teacher–Student Relationships

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As many educators can attest, the quality of teacher-student relationships often has enormous impact on student success at every level. When teacher-student relationships improve, concurrent improvements in classroom behavior such as reductions in aggression and increases in compliance with rules can be expected (Murray & Pianta, 2007). Students have also shown improvement in their social interactions, higher degrees of social competence, an enhanced sense of well-being, improved academic achievement, and reductions in school failure (Baker, Grant, & Morlock, 2008; Buyse, Verschueren, Doumen, Van Damme, & Maes, 2008; Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Hughes, Luo, Kwok, & Loyd, 2008; Murray & Pianta, 2007). Especially pertinent to students with learning and behavioral disabilities, these findings suggest that the traditional focus on instruction, transferring knowledge, and developing student skills must be coupled with an examination of nonacademic factors such as interpersonal relations and the social side of schooling (Crosnoe, Johnson, & Elder, 2004). Clearly, teachers of students with learning and behavioral disabilities need to be aware of the variables that enhance teacher-student relationships.

This article presents strategies developed by practicing teachers to illustrate the usefulness of one model for enhancing teacher-student relationships, the social powers model (Wood, 1996; Wood, Quirk, & Swindle, 2007), which distinguishes four types of social power that can be used by teachers to influence students to excel both academically and behaviorally: (a) coercion, (b) manipulation, (c) expertness, and (d) likability.

1. Coercion includes confrontation and/or control with some implied threat in which the student attributes any change he or she makes directly to the teacher. Coercion power could involve any type of intervention from a verbal reprimand to

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a point system. The element of coercion is implied in both cases, as students will change behavior because they feel that the teacher is the primary reason they chose to change, or they may feel they were compelled to change. If students do not feel that it is their idea to change, then it is generally a coercive approach. The element that makes a social power coercive is not the aversive nature of the approach, but rather adult involvement as the reason for the change. For example, when a teacher gives a point or takes away a point when using a token system, the student generally feels that the teacher is in control and she or he, as a student, has less input about the outcomes of behavior (Wood, 1996). Coercion social power plays an important role in a teacher’s relationship with a student, but it should be considered effective only if combined with the other types of power.

2. **Manipulation** is covert control of situations in which students change but do not associate the change with the teacher, and instead feel that they initiated the change. Unlike coercion, manipulation power leads students to an attribution that it was their idea to change. Whether it is the teacher’s tone of voice, providing student choices about how to complete work, or increasing a student’s sense of success, students will not feel that they were made to do the work or change the behavior, but instead will feel empowered because it was their decision.

3. **Expertness**, a method of helping students solve problems that they could not solve alone, results in students wanting to perform for a teacher, whom they view as a problem-solver. In this social power, students choose behaviors because they feel supported emotionally and psychologically by the teacher (Morris-Rothschild & Brassard, 2006). When a teacher takes the time to provide extra academic support, actively listens to a student’s concerns, or helps a student get connected with someone who will help him or her, students are more likely to do what is asked of them. An example: When faced with a request for a favor from a special person in their life, many people will say “yes” before even asking what the favor is about. This kind of relationship is crucial to students with academic and behavioral needs.

4. **Likability** is the teacher’s use of personal characteristics to influence students to behave in positive ways. If students like a teacher, they may be more inclined to do what the teacher asks. When a teacher is viewed as fun, interesting, and personable, students feel more connected to that teacher (Wood, 1996), and that type of connection increases their likelihood of cooperating with the teacher. Likability has some similar characteristics to the expertness social power base but is distinguished by less of a support factor from the teacher and more of a reinforcement element of fun and interest in classroom activities.

Wood (1996) pointed out that these four social powers are used singly and in combination by adults across many cultures, even though they may not be consciously aware of their use. Methods for employing these strategic social powers at the classroom level follow. The most successful strategies and techniques are highlighted for each type of social power to convey best practices.

**Techniques for Using Coercive Power**

Because using coercive power base methods can be risky, teachers must use this power in ways that are the least aversive. Students should understand boundaries and rules, but at the same time they should not feel this power as threatening to their own need to have some power in their lives. Students who are accustomed to frustration and failure may not react positively to a teacher trying to take their sense of power away (Morris-Rothschild & Brassard, 2006). Some specific ways to assure a less aversive use of coercive power include point systems, positive corrections, and supportive language.

**Point Systems**

Point or token systems allow students to earn points across a continuum of behaviors. For example, instead of a point system that is all-or-none, in which students who do not perform at 100% on a certain behavior get no points, receiving partial credit for some level of appropriate behavior is less aversive. This type of point system might indicate that a student could earn 0 to 4 points for a behavior rather than either 0 or 1 point. Because students with disabilities rarely operate in an all-or-nothing fashion, point systems should reflect that same variability in behavior. Behavior management systems should reward specific desired behaviors, not emphasize punishment for unwanted ones. Although both approaches would be considered coercive power because the student sees the teacher as the one making the decision about her or his behavior, the more positive point/token system builds a better relationship because the student who is accustomed to failure will feel more successful without having to be perfect.

**Positive Corrections**

Another type of coercive power is the reprimand. When “called down,” the student often feels forced to make a change, or is embarrassed into making a change, if the reprimand is heard by other students. Verbal or nonverbal corrections should be done in a manner that is less negative in the student’s eyes (Matheson & Shiver, 2005). The quality of the teacher’s voice and body language are important. The voice tone should be soft, yet assertive without tones of sarcasm and criticism. A teacher’s body language should be relaxed and not convey a threatening posture. For example, teachers should be careful not to stand over students when correcting them and, instead, should keep an appropriate
distance while talking to students face-to-face at their level. When students feel they are being physically overpowered, they often do not listen to the content of the message, but rebel verbally and/or nonverbally. Students with disabilities may expect that an authority figure is going to talk down to them. When it does not happen, they are often surprised and feel more connected to that teacher.

**Supportive Language**

How a teacher uses language to convey a correction often makes the difference in how emotionally supported a student feels. Using language that is less confrontational and more redirective provides a less aversive prompt, yet the student will understand that the teacher requires a change in his or her behavior. For example, confrontational language would be: “Who do you think you are, coming in my class acting like that?” The same corrective message can be conveyed with a statement such as: “I can see something is bothering you, have a seat now and we’ll talk about it in 5 minutes.” Students generally do not mind authority as much, if they feel supported at the same time. The following vignette provides sample changes in use of coercive power based on a composite of several high school resource teachers.

Before I started working on social powers I saw one student as the enemy. Every day was like going to war. I realized after learning about coercive power that I didn’t have to give up control with this student, but I also didn’t have to be in such a negative relationship. In fact, I felt he actually wanted boundaries, just not the negative ones I was giving. To be less aversive in my coercive power, I decided to have a private talk with him. I explained that I felt he often had important things to say and I would let him express himself if he did so appropriately. I also explained that I would no longer be using verbal reprimands with him. Instead of using a lot of criticism and verbal reprimands, I started using “statement cards.” When he was speaking out inappropriately, I would give him a card (without any oral comments) that said “Now is the time to stop.” If he stopped his inappropriate behavior, I would follow with a compliment card such as “Thanks for responding so well,” or “You are showing good control, you can express yourself later.” If he did not respond to the first card, then he got a card that said “This is your last warning.” If he responded well, then a compliment card would follow; if not, then I gave him a card with a mild negative consequence written on it, such as “You will not earn your bonus points for this period.” By drastically reducing my verbal reprimands, the student felt less compelled to argue and was willing to wait to have a chance to “speak his mind.” He also realized that the “last warning card” really meant I was serious and would not be getting into arguments with him any longer. When I shared this with his general education teachers, they also found this effective and reduced their negative reprimands and began to see improvements in both his behavior and his academic work production. They commented that they felt like they finally got to know him in a much more positive way.

**Techniques for Using Manipulative Social Power**

Manipulative social power yields some of the most effective strategies, yet it is often least used by teachers, especially with the most difficult-to-manage students. Helping students feel that they have made decisions, and have some power, suggests strategies such as (a) giving them choices about rules and consequences; (b) giving them some decision-making powers about how they complete academic work; (c) using self-monitoring sheets instead of point/token systems that are teacher-controlled; (d) making assignments more interesting, relevant, and motivating; and (e) ensuring that students will have a high degree of success both academically and behaviorally. Additionally, having a higher ratio of positive to negative interactions with students is important (Sutherland, Wehby, & Copeland, 2000). This is not simply the old idea of “catching them being good.” Instead, this approach emphasizes connecting to students with nonpraise comments (e.g., “I see you are starting the work,” or “okay” as you walk by a student who is appropriate) and nonverbal gestures (e.g., a touch on the shoulder or a head nod that indicates they are doing what is being asked of them). Teachers often become coercive as they walk around the class by attending only to those who are behaving inappropriately. When students get this type of treatment in both special and general education, they can become accustomed to responding only to the negative.

Finally, a very important aspect of manipulative power is teaching students to use language that allows them to meet their own needs. Students with social or behavioral problems tend to become resistant or act out when they are frustrated. Instead, they need to learn vocabulary that will express their need so they do not have the desire to act inappropriately. For example, students can be taught to say “I need some time,” “I can’t talk now,” or “I am just sick of this work.” If students know that they can share their feelings without getting in trouble, they may be less likely to shut down or act out. All of these suggestions give the student some sense that “I am successful because I made the choice,” or “I am going to stop yelling because in looking at my self-monitoring sheet I didn’t realize how often I was yelling out.” See the following composite vignette for an
example of how an elementary teacher in a self-contained classroom for students with behavior and emotional problems would change her use of manipulative power.

I decided I needed more manipulative social power. My coercive power was hampered because my students felt very little control over their lives and had little academic or social success. I changed my point system to a self-monitoring system. Instead of rating each student three times a day, I started allowing the students to rate their own behavior with a sheet similar to the point system I had been using. During designated “banking” times, students turned in their sheets with the points they felt they had earned based on three specific behaviors. I would record the points and help each student graph their progress over time. In addition, I put an “invisible mark” with a special marker on the sheets of two students each day. At the end of the day, I revealed who had the invisible mark, and if those students had reached their goals they got to choose the class fun time for the afternoon. Occasionally students would be dishonest on their sheets; usually, however, they would not give themselves enough credit. If a student was dishonest, I explained that they had not accomplished all they indicated and then made the correction myself. Dishonest behavior became a rarity. I was amazed by the results. The inappropriate behaviors in my class fell by 86% in 5 weeks. In addition, I also dramatically increased the amount of successful academic work completed by students by teaching them more at the independent and instructional level rather than the frustration level, which produced a 62% increase in work completion.

Techniques for Using the Expertness Social Power Base

In times of need, people generally gravitate toward those people in their lives recognized as problem-solvers. The same is true of students. When students see teachers as individuals who are there to listen, to provide additional help with academic and personal issues, and to support them in tough times, they are more likely to comply in the classroom (Hamre & Pianta, 2005). Teachers must actively listen to students by using reflection and decoding of feelings rather than dismissing their concerns because they seem trivial or distracting to the task at hand. Special education teachers are in a particularly unique position to do this. For example, if a student is upset because of a breakup with a relatively new girlfriend or boyfriend, comments such as “Don’t worry, you’ll find someone else,” or “You need to get over it and pay attention to your work” may not be the most effective. Instead, simple replies such as “I know that must hurt,” or “It’s hard to concentrate when you are upset” help to build relationships. Students who feel listened to are more likely to trust and identify with the adult.

Other ways of building expertise include (a) making appointments with students to discuss problems, (b) providing extra academic help by arranging for a tutor, (c) providing a student an adult mentor, (d) arranging weekly “just-you time” for short conversations about things going on in the student’s life, and (e) having them complete forms that help you understand what they are feeling and knowing how to help them in a crisis. The following vignette, based on a composite of elementary teachers involved in inclusion classrooms, illustrates use of expert power.

I felt I was lacking in expert power, so I decided to try this with two very difficult students in my class. I explained to them that I would like to meet with them twice a week (I designated different days for each of them) for 3 minutes each time. They would be allowed to talk about whatever they wanted, e.g., what they had been doing at home, their animals, what they like to eat, etc. I assured them that except for emergencies, I would not allow anything to interrupt their time. I also did not make the time contingent on appropriate behavior (I had other strategies in place for that). Remarkably, with only 2 weeks of implementing “Just You Time,” both students started responding to other management strategies used by the general education teacher and myself and their inappropriate behaviors all but disappeared! I felt like I gained so much power with these two students because no one had ever just taken the time to listen to them and get to know them, and they now saw me as a “real” person, not just some authority figure who got them in trouble. As a result of the dramatic improvements, the general education teacher started using “Just You Time” with several of the students in her class and had the same success.

Techniques for Using the Likability Social Power Base

Likability often seems to be simple, and some may feel that it always comes naturally, but teachers should realize that they can purposely build likability in the classroom. Students are much more likely to respond to commands made of them if they see the teacher as personable, charismatic, funny, and interested in them as a person. Just as adults want to join in with the fun, students often seek out what is fun and change their behaviors if they predict that something is going to be interesting and new. Teachers increase their likability when they (a) engage in fun activities with students, (b) remember birthdays, (c) spend time outside of class (e.g., attending student sporting or music events), (d) use humor in the classroom, (e) find out about the students’ personal interests, and
Balance Is the Key

Teachers need to use all four social power bases when dealing with students. In other words, teachers who work with students with learning and/or emotional/behavioral disabilities should attempt to equally mix their use of coercive and manipulative power in the classroom. Furthermore, these two social powers should be combined with a classroom management style that helps students see teachers as problem-solvers (expertness) and as having personal characteristics that make the student want to perform well (likability). An overuse of a single social power, with little or no use of any of the other power bases, can lead to a relationship that makes a student feel emotionally unsupported or unsure of the procedures and rules of behavior management in the classroom. The benefits of becoming more balanced are illustrated in a sample middle school resource teacher’s story in this final vignette.

First I drastically reduced the number of verbal reprimands and replaced them with “insanely” positive comments. Those comments were not just in the form of praise but also in the form of making positive connections more often than negative connections. I accomplished this by standing next to students who were on-task, making simple statements such as “okay” to students working on the right page, and asking to see the work of someone who was working diligently (manipulative). For those students who needed correction, I did it privately and often in written form with a “warning card” rather than the usual negative reprimands (coercive). To increase expertness, I started using reflective statements such as “It must be really hard to work when you are so upset,” rather than criticizing the student for letting personal problems interfere with their work. I also made monthly appointments with students who wanted and let them discuss whatever they would like. Finally, I increased my likability to become more balanced by adding fun incentives in my classes. I set up a magazine center for students to visit when their work was completed and I gave the students the chance to earn “skip the problem” passes based on specific goals for work completion. Becoming balanced has made teaching a completely different experience for me. Rather than thinking that I had chosen the wrong profession, I am now confident that I am where I am supposed to be!

Conclusion

An assessment of the balance of social powers can make a difference in how connected the students feel to the teacher and the class and how motivated they feel to achieve success.

These vignettes illustrate the importance of teacher-student relationships with students with behavioral and learning disabilities. The techniques discussed in this column, and based on the social powers model, offer specific methods for developing more positive interactions and hence more successful students and teachers.

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