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# The Four Cs of Successful Classroom Management

By Jill Reese

**Y**ou look at your schedule, and dread fills your stomach. It's Wednesday, and you know what that means: a white-knuckle ride through a thirty-minute music period with students you hear all the way down the hall and around the corner as they approach your classroom. You've tried everything in your bag of tricks, but this class is the exception to every rule in the book. The most disappointing part of the situation is that you're spending more time and energy managing the class than making music. What is there left to do?

Douglas Nimmo asks a very important question for teachers who are trying to find ways to improve their classroom management. "Is it our job as educators to establish 'classroom control,' or are we to endeavor to create a healthy classroom learning environment?"<sup>1</sup>

The four Cs of classroom management—commendation, communication, consistency, and content—represent one of the quickest and most successful ways to establish a safe, healthful, and fun environment at any level, especially in elementary schools. Using the four Cs helps establish an efficient, supportive, and safe environment to nurture positive experiences in

music learning. Students can learn to evaluate musical ideas, think creatively, and solve problems. David W. Snyder and Harry and Rosemary Wong agree that consistent routines and procedures, student-teacher connection, and clear, open lines of communication at all levels are important parts of successful management for early-career teachers.<sup>2</sup> The same is true for experienced teachers. The management philosophy promoted in this article focuses on creating a successful environment and preventing problems from occurring, and it includes several techniques for intervention in ordinary classroom disruptions. Suggestions for further reading are listed in the classroom management resources sidebar.

## Commendation

The one-to-one connection between teacher and student, often involving praise, is a powerful tool for establishing respect in the classroom. Using a child's name and bringing attention to positive behavior can do wonders. As Douglas Bartholomew notes, "The purpose of praising students seems to fall into four broad categories: to recognize or show interest in them, to encourage them, to describe what we observe in their behavior, and to evaluate their performance."<sup>3</sup> In my classroom, I tend to combine types of praise

*The music educator's job is easier if the classroom offers a positive and challenging environment.*

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that recognize the student and describe the specific behavior while avoiding evaluative comments such as, “What a great student!” or “That makes me happy” or “I like that.” Thus, the student’s behavior is motivated by the desire to follow directions rather than the need to please the teacher. This works especially well with students who may be embarrassed or resist the praise if it is connected to a comment.

If you need all students to sit quietly with their legs crossed, pretzel-style, simply say, “Sarah is showing that she is ready with her legs crossed. Jack is sitting silently with his hands safely in his lap.” This technique capitalizes on a phenomenon that Jacob S. Kounin calls the “ripple effect.”<sup>4</sup> The ripple effect is characterized by one comment to an individual student who is influencing the behavior of an entire class. If there is a student who is not following directions, compliment the student or students near that person, specifically note the desirable behavior, and nine times out of ten the student will change his or her behavior to match the classroom expectations. For example, when one student is busy talking to a friend, bring attention to the positive behavior of other students: “Jean is sitting quietly and is ready to listen” or “Juan sat down without talking to his neighbors.” The positive comments create a nurturing and encouraging environment while also building the teacher’s rapport with the students who are working hard to be leaders in class.

Often, the large number of students in our programs prevents us from getting to know all students well. Positive and specific affirmation of individuals with exemplary behavior and leadership is another way to recognize and connect with the students who are on track without allowing the behavior of other students to take precious time in class.

Jim Fay and David Funk refer to relationship building as sharing control with the students by allowing them to make frequent decisions about their own behavior. Fay and Funk’s philosophy of “love and logic” encourages the teacher to build a “savings account” of control from which to draw when individuals begin to grapple for control. Some of their suggestions about the



Photo by Jim Kirby

**Consistent procedures in the classroom are the foundation for student expectations, allowing the teacher to guide rather than control.**

rules for giving choices include being sure to offer choices *you* like and being conscious of how you deliver the choices to the students: “You’re welcome to ...,” “Would you rather ... or ...,” “What would be best for you?” The student is then given a choice that will affect only himself or herself, not the teacher. For example, “Would you rather play with us by following the directions or learn about this by watching the other children?”<sup>5</sup>

Sometimes there is one student with the uncanny ability to twist the momentum of the class activities and negatively propel the mood of the class in a direction you were hoping to avoid. When there is a specific issue with a particular student or a particular class, closely examine the attitude you are projecting, and try to catch the specific student or the class doing something (*anything!*) that is positive—and bring attention to that. Usually, noticing the positive behaviors, even the smallest detail, is enough to give the classroom environment a positive spin. For example, the teacher can say, “I noticed your

eyes are right on me when I'm talking" or "I noticed that you are sitting tall." A change in the teacher's perspective can be a powerful element, even if the teacher is the only one who perceives the change at first.

It's easy to focus on the behavior of one disruptive student or one challenging class. It's more difficult to become introspective and examine what you, the teacher, can do to change your interaction with the situation. Your frustration and exhaustion grow when you're under the misconception that you are responsible for all the control in the classroom. Connecting with the student and understanding the student's motivation behind the behavior<sup>6</sup> and the student's perception of the situation will be time well spent, even with a school load of four hundred students or more.

### Communication

Communication skills are your best tools for managing the teacher-student and teacher-parent relationship, especially when you're trying to refocus an individual student's behavior. Discreet individual communication between student and teacher is very useful when you're attempting a quick shutdown of disruptive behavior. Fay and Funk's "love and logic" encourages the teacher to communicate with the students using "enforceable statements"—statements that communicate how the teacher will behave rather than commanding behavior from the student.

able statement such as, "You are welcome to participate with us when others are not bothered." "Raise your hand before interrupting the class," can be changed to, "I can see that you are excited to share, and we will listen when you are ready to raise your hand to be called on."<sup>7</sup>

In more extreme cases of a severe disrupter, the goal is often to engage the teacher in a power struggle. Instead of engaging in an argument, offer the student a choice: "You can choose to stay here and follow directions or sit in our 'thinking spot' until you feel you are ready to join us safely."<sup>8</sup> You can use a time-out area to allow the student to solve the problem alone: "That behavior is not working during this activity. You are welcome to join us when you can think of a new behavior." This communication implies that a choice is to be made and that the student is in control of making that choice.

Proximity, eye contact, and the "two-strike" system described below are also valuable in saving face for the student and for the teacher, redirecting the student's behavior in a respectful manner and limiting the distraction from the classroom activity. John Robertson suggests that these approaches are "private and covert, implying a sense of solidarity with the students and a wish not to embarrass them in front of their peers."<sup>9</sup>

It's very important that the misbehaving student not be humiliated in class. Rudolph Dreikurs refers to logical consequences, or consequences

behavior and to help the student maintain what Fay and Funk refer to as "self-concept,"<sup>11</sup> eye contact with an off-task student and a shake of your head, while continuing your lesson, can often be enough for some. The next level of intervention requires the teacher to walk toward and sit next to the student. Proximity will often help the student refocus on the classroom activity. If the student's behavior requires further intervention, the final step would be whispering quietly to the student, "Stop" or "No." A short and pointed direction with eye contact will get the student's attention without inviting discussion or a reply that could result in further disruption.

This is where the "two-strike" system comes into play. Students are usually familiar with a three-strike system adopted from baseball. A two-strike system entails making students aware when a behavior is unacceptable and allows them the opportunity to change, but not to take advantage, since the second strike results in the teacher calling home. When the two-strike expectation is established in the class, simply leaning over to the student and whispering "Strike one" or even catching the student's eye and mouthing "Strike one" is often enough to catch his or her attention and refocus the behavior. As Robertson says, "Such low-key interventions convey the expectation that students will cooperate when reminded about their behavior and, by avoiding more public and intrusive interventions, teachers promote and foster trust in their relationships."<sup>12</sup>

The second level of intervention begins at "strike two" with parent contact and develops into a parent-teacher relationship with student progress in mind. For early-career teachers, calling parents can seem intimidating and nerve-racking; even experienced teachers do not enjoy spending evenings on the phone. When you make a quick phone call to a student's home, you will usually find that parents are sympathetic and willing to work with you to help modify the child's behavior and collaborate toward a more successful learning experience. At the very least, most parents appreciate

*“Most parents are willing to work with you to help modify the child's behavior.”*

It's a freeing moment for the teacher when he or she refrains from trying to control the students and begins to communicate her expectations in a manner that communicates how she will run her life. Instead of saying, "We're not going to continue until you stop what you are doing because it's bothering all the students around you," you can use an enforce-

that are related to the behavior and are intrinsic, rather than punishment that is often unrelated or arbitrary. Dreikers warns that student motivation for misbehavior may quickly escalate from attention-getting to power struggle to revenge, and then in extreme cases to students assuming that they can't succeed.<sup>10</sup>

To avoid a quick escalation of



being made aware of any issue with their child, especially when the communication is presented with the focus on concern for the student's progress.

After speaking with a parent, it might be helpful to sustain contact with the parent through a type of progress form that gives consistent feedback after each class. Most music educators have hundreds of students and not enough time to write a letter home after each music class. For this reason, teachers can use an easy-to-check-off behavior-modification form that lists a few positive behaviors and a few behaviors to work on (see the progress report in figure 1). This form can also be helpful in documenting behavior patterns in students who have Individual Education Plans or who are consistent offenders.

Speaking to the parents as soon as the behavior exhibits itself and continuing communication with them often resolves behavior issues of individual students, especially when used sooner rather than later. The behavior of the other students in the class may also be positively affected, because the class knows that something is being done about the behavior of the individual student, and the students are aware that you will not hesitate to speak with any of their parents if there is a concern. In the future, all that may be needed for any student in that class is a simple, "Is your home phone number 555-5555?" for that student to have better focus and more acceptable behavior. It is very important to follow through with the call to the parents if such a question is asked, because this commitment is a direct display of your dedication to the safety, consistency, and predictability that has already been established in your classroom.

### Consistency

All teachers create basic routines in the classroom, and these consistent procedures contribute to student management and save time once they have been established. Procedures are the foundation of student expectations, and a solid foundation allows the teacher to guide rather than control. It's easy to guide rather than control once consistent expectations are established, but it's almost impossible

**Figure 1: Progress Report to Parents for Encouraging Respectful Class Behavior**

### Progress Report

- Today your student was caught ...
  - Being respectful to other students
  - Staying in self-space
  - Following directions
  - Trying his or her best
  - Participating enthusiastically
  
- Your student is working further to develop skills in ...
  - Being respectful to other students
  - Staying in self-space
  - Following directions
  - Trying his or her best
  - Participating enthusiastically

to do anything but control when consistent procedures and expectations are missing.

The five rules I use to create a framework for my classroom are as follows:

1. Enter quietly.
2. Participate with the class.
3. Show respect for yourself, others, and the materials.
4. Try your best.
5. Exit quietly.

The classes begin and end the same way: every music period is focused on musical behavior. I greet the class at the door and we enter, quietly singing a song that will set us up for our first activity and set the stage for music class. The last thing we do before leaving the music room is line up and go over the rules to see how many stars we've earned. "Number 5—Is everyone lined up in a straight line, facing the door, hands at our sides, without talking to our neighbors? Yes." We progress backward through the rules, noting which rules have been followed with specific examples from the activities that day and noting which rules were not followed with specific examples from the class.

Harry and Rosemary Wong believe that "no matter what grade level you teach, all procedures must be rehearsed."<sup>13</sup> Going through the rules this way allows us to acknowledge the positive behaviors that contributed to the wonderful time we had, while also reviewing the expectations for behavior and talking about what behaviors we would change and how we would change them for an even more successful music class next time.

Establishing consistent procedures will take time, but it pays off in the future. One of Wong and Wong's strong statements that I return to time and again is: "The number-one problem in the classroom is not discipline; it is a lack of procedures and routines."<sup>14</sup> I have procedures for every activity and instrument, as well as for classroom material we have in the room. The students keep their hands relaxed behind their backs when we are passing out materials such as books or instruments, and between turns in using the materials. This is such a firmly established procedure from kindergarten through fifth grade that I notice hands instinctively rushing into our "safe spot" even when I

turn around to reach for the basket of scarves or rhythm sticks.

When I'm passing out materials, I'm usually performing the song or chant for the activity, and I skip over the students who forget to put their hands in the "safe spot." After realizing that they were not given the materials, the student will usually remember what to do before I get to the last person in the circle. Otherwise, I will use my "connection" strategy and compliment other students as I'm passing out materials as a reminder, without bringing specific attention to the student who is not ready. "Gina has her hands safely behind her back. James always remembers where to put his hands. Riley's hands look ready."

I teach my students to put their mallets on their shoulders when waiting behind a xylophone or glockenspiel. Students who are not at an instrument know that I will choose the students who are "air-practicing" for the next turn on the instruments. Hand drums are specifically placed with the drumhead touching the floor. This specific placement keeps the drumhead safe from being punctured on the off chance that someone steps on it, as well as keeping the instruments quiet and less tempting. With each movement activity in class, we review our three movement priorities: silence, safety, and self-space. Consistently reviewing the procedures at the beginning of the activity prevents the teacher from having to address expecta-

tations with individual students during the activity.

Wong and Wong suggest three steps when teaching procedures in your classroom: (1) explain, model, and demonstrate behavior; (2) practice the procedure; and (3) reinforce and reteach until the behavior becomes second nature.<sup>15</sup> The procedures established with my students are so clear and consistently followed that there are times when I don't need to use my speaking voice at all with the class. There are class periods where the only sound that is heard is music.

### Content

Music is the reason we become music teachers, and it's the reason the students come to our classroom. The content of music class can be a powerful motivator and manager. Thomas Jefferson once said, "It is amazing how much can be accomplished when one is always doing."<sup>16</sup> The saying is true in your music classroom. Use your content in transitions, such as singing a song while you are passing out the scarves for a movement activity, performing a chant with body percussion as you enter the classroom with the students, singing tonal patterns with solfège as you pass out the dry-erase boards for a notation lesson, or allowing individuals to improvise new rhythm patterns. Have the class echo new rhythm patterns as you pass out rhythm sticks. Limiting "down time"

or time without a focused goal helps students remain engaged and out of trouble. The more teaching and music-making we can include in each lesson, the fewer disruptions we will have and the more we will accomplish with our students.

### Making Music the Goal

Shouldn't the goal in our classrooms be management so seamless and so natural that it becomes inconspicuous? I have heard from many early-career music teachers that the job of a music teacher is much more management than it is music. That doesn't need to be the case. The four Cs are my blueprint for successful classroom management and even more successful music-making experiences. They have helped to create what Alan Gumm calls a "positive learning environment."<sup>17</sup> Through a specific type of praise, as well as through encouragement and clear direction, students are led to enjoy and desire learning. It takes hard work and time to establish seamless management within your classroom, especially in the beginning.

Like all teachers, you'll have your share of disruptive students who will require some of the techniques mentioned here, but you can use these strategies in your classroom to establish a safe, productive, and nourishing environment for learners at your school. It's difficult and frustrating to be given a checklist of procedures to use with troubled students who require individualized attention, because each student, situation, teacher, and school is different and should be treated as such. Rather than give a list of procedures for dealing with severely troubled students, I have included some suggested reading on this topic. I heartily encourage you to use the wisdom of the teachers, counselors, administrators, and university staff within and outside your school community.

Whether it's the beginning of your career, the beginning of a new situation, or the beginning of another year, the four Cs can help you put minutes—and often hours—in the bank. Take the time to establish a connection with your students through commendation, communication, consistency, and content.

### Suggested Classroom Management Resources

- Campbell, Patricia Shehan, and Carol Scott-Kassner. "Motivation and Management." In *Music in Childhood*, 45–69. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Group, 2002.
- Dreikurs, Rudolph, and Loren Grey. *Logical Consequences*. New York: Meredith Press, 1968.
- Fay, Jim, and David Funk. *Teaching with Love and Logic*. Golden, CO: Love and Logic Press, 1995.
- Haugland, Susan L. *Crowd Control: Classroom Management and Effective Teaching for Chorus, Band, and Orchestra*. Lanham, MD: MENC / Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2007.
- Wong, Harry K., and Rosemary T. Wong. *The First Days of School*. Mountain View, CA: Harry K. Wong Publications, 1998.

## Notes

1. Douglas Nimmo, "Judicious Discipline in the Music Classroom," *Music Educators Journal* 83, no. 4 (1997): 27.

2. Douglas W. Snyder, "Classroom Management for Student Teachers," *Music Educators Journal* 84, no. 4 (1998): 37-41; Harry K. Wong and Rosemary T. Wong, *The First Days of School* (Mountain View, CA: Harry K. Wong Publications, 1998).

3. Douglas Bartholomew, "Effective Strategies for Praising Students," *Music Educators Journal* 80, no. 3 (1993): 40.

4. Jacob S. Kounin, *Discipline and Group Management in Classrooms* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1970).

5. Jim Fay and David Funk, *Teaching with Love and Logic* (Golden, CO: Love and Logic Press, 1995).

6. Rudolph Dreikurs and Loren Grey, *Logical Consequences* (New York: Meredith Press, 1968).

7. Fay and Funk, *Love and Logic*, 29.

8. *Ibid.*, 8.

9. John Robertson, "The Boss, the Manager and the Leader: Approaches to Dealing with Disruption," in *Teacher Leadership and Behavior Management*, ed. Bill Rogers (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2002), 24.

10. Dreikurs and Grey, *Logical Consequences*.

11. Fay and Funk, *Love and Logic*.

12. Robertson, "The Boss," 24.

13. Wong and Wong, *First Days of School*, 182.

14. *Ibid.*, 167.

15. *Ibid.*, 174.

16. Thomas Jefferson quote taken from [www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/t/thomasjeff120900.htm](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/t/thomasjeff120900.htm).

17. Alan J. Gumm, "Music Teaching Style Ideas and Implications," *Music Educators Journal* 80, no. 4 (1994): 35. ■

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