

Behavioral Observation

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EDU 2011-001

October 10, 2010

Introduction

Kaitlyn and Marina are both thirteen years old and in eighth grade at The Open Classroom in Salt Lake City. Each of them is vivacious, outgoing and artistic in their own way, choosing to express themselves through acting, art, poetry and stories. I have noticed they are interactive and age-appropriately social, however when they are together they exacerbate one another's sociality and tend to frequently get themselves in trouble. Kaitlyn has the ability to pull herself away from the crowd to do her own thing and get her work done, but Marina does not willingly do that on her own.

The Open Classroom, as quoted from their website, is "an innovative school that invites children, teachers and parents to collaborate as a community that inspires and celebrates the adventure of learning." (About The Open Classroom, 2010) It is a cooperative environment wherein the parents of the students spend time in the classroom teaching and working with the teachers. A casual atmosphere, without desks, that supports whole-child learning and provides space where the children can choose to sit on bean bag chairs, Pilates balls, couches or even in an old claw-foot bathtub.

Someone who is not familiar with the standards and philosophy of The Open Classroom may feel that it is chaotic. Honestly, even though I have extensive experience with this particular school, there were times, as I did my observation of the students, that I felt the structured chaos weighing on me. However, I love and appreciate that developing social skills is just as important at this school as academics. And, as I watched the children socializing their way through

language arts and social studies, I could see they were absorbing possibly more than I had at their age because they were able to be relaxed.

Behaviors and Monitoring

I chose to enter into my first observation very loosely, to match the structure of the school. It became clear quite quickly how I wanted to observe, what behaviors I wanted to observe and how I wanted to track these behaviors. The first observation, I went far too broad in my observation of behaviors that were out of line for even the loosely-structured Open Classroom. I began by comparing the difference between grades seven and eight, as well as male vs. female, in addition to observing and making note of the behaviors exhibited by Kaitlyn and Marina separately. The data gathered was vast and unruly, so I opted to drop everything except the specific data for Kaitlyn and Marina.

Because I am familiar with what is acceptable and unacceptable at this school, I chose to track any and all behaviors that did not fit in with the school and classroom agreements. I sat in the classroom for three hours both days, traveling with the students from subject to subject and positioning myself in the corner to listen, watch and take notes. One of the benefits of observing at the Open Classroom is that the students there are comfortable with having adults in the classroom. It is an everyday, all day long occurrence so they accept it as the norm and behave as such. My presence inside the classroom did not detract from their learning experience because, for them, it was nothing new.

Originally, I started out with about fifteen topics, but combined and narrowed the list to the remaining six as follows:

- Shouting out/interrupting – student talks loudly over other students, adults or the teacher to provide answers to questions without raising hand; tracking this behavior was specific to “circle” times when student should have been participating with the group as a whole and required the protocol of raising their hands if they wished to speak.
- Being noisy – student is either talking, drumming, humming or singing; this behavior was in relation to times when students were divided into small task-oriented groups rather than being with the group as a whole
- Whispering – student whispering or talking low so only neighbor involved in the conversation can hear the words, but is still a distraction to teacher or other students; this behavior was tracked while students were in “circle” or should have been listening to the teacher or adult who was teaching at that moment; this behavior is not traceable during small task-oriented groups because during that time sociality is encouraged.
- Wandering – student leaves group and wanders around room or out into hall.
- Not participating/off task – behaviors included drawing instead of taking notes (in hindsight, I now make note that Marina’s drawing may be a way for her to store the information she was absorbing but was unable to get onto paper in the form of notes),

staring off into space, playing with hair and similar behaviors; this behavior was tracked all day in “circle” and in small task-oriented groups.

- Distracting others – behaviors in other than talking such as poking, pulling hair, writing on the other student’s papers, body-bumping, etc.; behaviors tracked all day.

Because of the loose structure of my observation method, I think it most closely relates to event sampling which has been described as “...using a combination of different recording methods. This approach basically involves the observer recording on a checklist each time the child performs a specific action or exhibits a certain behaviour.” (Understanding Child Observation Methods, 2010)

Comparison of Behavior

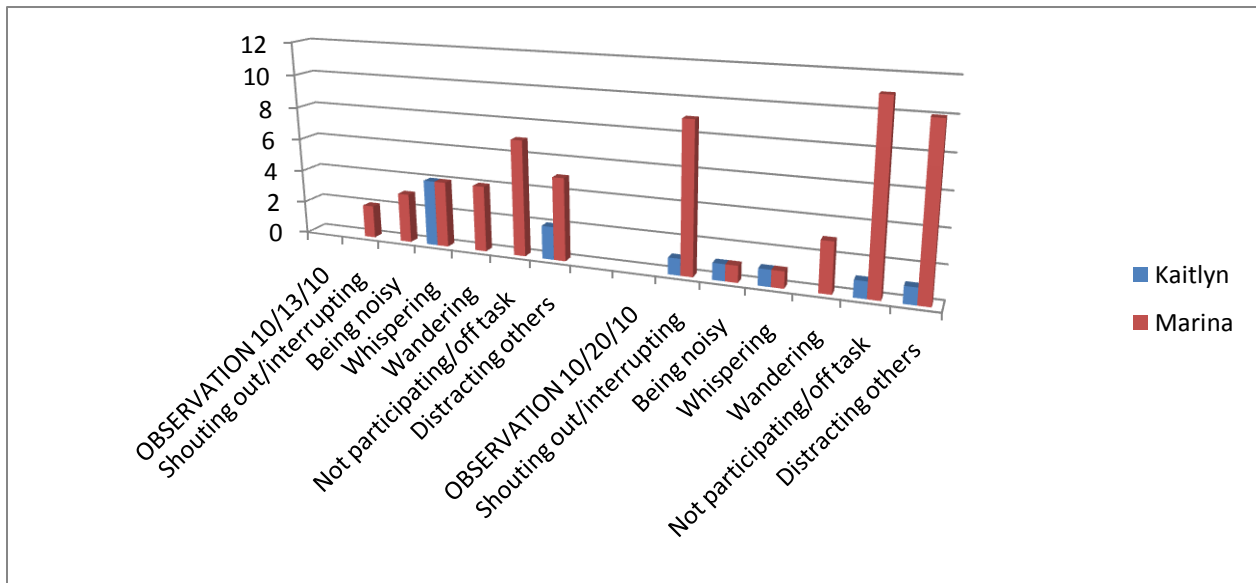


Figure 1: Observation of Kaitlyn and Marina

Intervention Recommendations

One of the things I have admired about the Open Classroom's philosophy is that they enforce the student's right to learn, the student's right to be responsible for their education and success. They tend to stand back, more often than not, and allow the children to flail and make mistakes so they are able to learn from the natural consequences that occur. While there are specific guidelines that every student must follow, with very clear consequences for misbehavior, the guidelines are lenient and provide a lot of room for individual interpretation on purpose.

In light of this, I know that token economy would be an impractical program for the upper grades at the Open Classroom. Token economy is defined as:

“a system of individual reinforcement of target behaviors in which tokens are administered and exchanged later for backup. To be successful, a person must be reinforced for increasing or decreasing existing behavior as well as successive approximations of the behaviors we wish to establish.” (Token Economy, 2005-2010)

In addition, because the Open Classroom emphasizes individualized learning programs in general for all of their students – even if they are not on an IEP – and layered curriculum, it makes it difficult to provide enforceable changes that are not already outlined in their school-wide behavioral plans.

Faculty, administration and parents are all instructed that, rather than dictating to the students what sort of behavior they “should be” doing, they are to *ask* questions that get them thinking for different options. Such as, “Is there something more productive you could be doing with your time?” or “Is what you are doing right now fulfilling the directions given?” I

appreciate this approach because it turns the responsibility back to the student so they are able to recognize their behaviors and self-correct. This would be my approach in my classroom, as well and it is the method I saw replicated while observing Kaitlyn and Marina.

Another method that we have used for Kaitlyn specifically has taken place during PTKs and quiet, one-on-one times with her teacher or me. Kaitlyn is a gifted and talent student for whom everything *seems* to come easily. Her teachers and I have each sat down with her together and separately to reinforce her abilities to excel as a student and then have asked her how she thinks she can “be an example” for students that are struggling, how she can support them and how she can better support herself in making decisions that result in a more beneficial outcome such as completing assignments in class and on time. On her own, she has begun separating as a way of supporting herself and others when the socializing takes over the working time. This choice supports her in getting her work done and supports her friends by reminding them of their intended focus, as well.

Conclusion

This experience opened my eyes to a new aspect that I have never noticed before about being at the Open Classroom. First, in observing the students, rather than being actively involved in the class, I finally came to understand what the teachers mean when they say, “this program is not right for this student.” I saw that the loose structure, for some students, was not enough to keep them focused. Sadly, these students are the same students that are at the Open Classroom because “regular” public school cannot handle them. They end up at the Open Classroom as a

last –ditch effort to get them to succeed in school. For some students, they can turn around the “bad habits” that have been enforced over the years. However, for students with significant learning disabilities or behavioral problems, it is hard to support them within the program by the time they have made it to the upper grades. Many of the teachers have attested to the ability to help the students with behavioral problems if they get them young enough – being able to turn around oppositional defiance disorder and the like. But once they are 12-13 years old, their behaviors are strongly ingrained.

Another thing I noticed is there are a lot of behaviors that go unnoticed by the teachers – and by me when I am teaching or co-oping. There is just so much going on in a classroom, it makes it difficult to stay on top of the misbehaviors. It is only after the behavior has gotten extreme that the teachers begin reacting to it. There are subtle misbehaviors continually going on – especially by the students that I know to be on behavioral IEPs – that do not get caught and they seemingly continue to “get away with” the poor choices that affect other students as well. That realization causes me great concern and frustration.

References:

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