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Behaviorism in the Classroom

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Behaviorism is a school of psychology developed by B. F. Skinner that focuses objectively on observed behavior as the concern of its research. In education, we are constantly assessing ourselves, our actions, and of course, how well our students are learning the information. Using behaviorism in the classroom is a great tool for assessment, as it is concrete and observable. When they can make these concrete observations, they can make records and evaluate what is and is not working. This is why behaviorism has led to the development of curriculum and standards. Most teachers use behaviorism in managing their classroom through things as common as raising hands for permission to speak or waiting in a line for the next activity. Teachers in both the elementary and secondary levels implement behaviorism’s operant conditioning approach through positive and negative reinforcement. These reinforcements are not only helpful in most educational settings, but are in fact necessary in early childhood and special education settings. Behaviorism makes for a classroom conducive to student interaction and learning.

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There are many ways in which behaviorism is used concretely in a classroom environment. At the secondary level, teachers may use behaviorist strategies without consciously realizing that they are such strategies. Behaviorism is not a strict set of rules or guidelines that must be followed. It changes with observation. For example, according to Dr. Brenda Werner, teachers may take away privileges if students break the rules. Edward Thorndike’s Law of Effect states that actions, which occur with a favorable effect, are more likely to be repeated, while an act that is followed by an unfavorable outcome is less likely to be repeated. In a high school classroom, this may look like taking away the privilege to use the restroom if a student in the past has used the time to smoke a cigarette. If bad behavior increases, more extreme measures such as detention can be used to decrease undesirable behaviors. A teacher in an elementary setting may use stickers to reward good behavior. In a similar way, a secondary teacher may use a movie and popcorn day for high school students. Another kind of reward teachers often use in the secondary setting for motivating students is through competitions such as math, science, or music competitions (Rideout, 2002). Reinforcement can be used to motivate students of all ages in all subjects.

For some students, behaviorism is a necessary approach to teaching. For example, in special education, the behaviorism approach is most successful in teaching social and language skills to students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) (Hawkins, 1990). Many times, students with ASD tend to be hostile towards peers and themselves and do not adjust to changing circumstances very easily. By using the behaviorism model and rewarding positive behavior, the student is more likely to repeat that behavior to receive an award. Likewise, using the behaviorism method by punishing negative behavior has the same effect on students. Using peer modeling as a part of behaviorism has been useful for teaching students who struggle with proper classroom behaviors. Another strategy teachers can use to address behavior issues is the ABC method. Teacher identifies antecedent, behavior, and decides a consequence. Implementing behaviorism approaches to teaching will strengthen those skills.

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Another instance where behaviorism is not only desirable, but also in fact necessary is in early childhood intervention. When a teacher is trying to discern whether a student may need more intervention in certain areas of development, it is critical that they take detailed and consistent notes on the behaviors of the student. In addition, it is also important to observe that students will build relationships with the environments they are present in. So, part of the behaviorist theory, in regards to early intervention, is looking at how the external environment impacts internal development of a given student. By observing the student’s behavior in a scientific way, they can more easily pinpoint the undesired behavior and the best way to treat it (Strain, 1992). Intervention aside, behaviorism, specifically through reinforcement, is most effective in working with young children.

Some critics believe behaviorism through reinforcement to be an ineffective strategy because the reinforcers will lose their strength over time and unwanted behaviors will reappear in the classroom. If behaviorism is used in the correct way, reinforcers will change over time and rewards will only be given out for a specific, high standard of behavior. If teachers are constantly assessing their methods and the reaction of their students as a good behaviorist would, they will recognize a lapse in motivation and change the reinforcement to something they see fit.

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Many people who oppose behaviorism simply misunderstand what it is really about. One of the most troubling accusations against behaviorism is that it is dehumanizing (Strain, 1992). Critics believe it focuses so much on a stimulus response method that it does not take into account the unique attributes of each individual student. Most teachers truly care about their students and their individual needs, and most of these same teachers use behaviorism in their classrooms. A true behaviorist takes all factors affecting the stimulus and response into consideration. This includes not only the external events affecting their behavior, but also the internal effects which include thoughts, feelings, and emotions (Strain, 1992). We agree that a teacher should be attuned to all of the unique human needs of each student and the background they are coming from. Behaviorism calls for a complete observation taking into consideration any and all factors. This will make it possible for teachers to effectively find a problem and immediately and appropriately treat that problem.

By making these extensive, concrete observations, teachers are able to more effectively evaluate their own teaching as well as their students’ learning. Benjamin Bloom was a behaviorist and formed his Bloom’s Taxonomy that we still use today because of behaviorism (Rideout, 2002). He thought it was necessary to make assessments based on observable behaviors in students. A teacher cannot concretely see that understanding has taken place, but they can objectively assess an action such as defining, listing, or analyzing. The government also likes to see objective statistics to know how students are doing in school. State standards and curriculum are a result of behaviorism and its clear method of assessment.

If teachers do not use behaviorism, how will they address problems when they arise in their classroom? The use of reinforcements is effective in managing classrooms in both elementary and secondary settings. Studies have found behaviorism to be the most effective way to make the observations necessary for early childhood intervention, both externally and internally. Students with ASD need the structure and consistency of behaviorism to succeed in their schooling. In everything we do in life, we like to see results. Behaviorism does exactly that. It makes it possible for us to see and record results so we can make assessments that are more informed and lead to more effective teaching and learning. Truly effective teaching will incorporate other educational theories along with behaviorism to produce the best results.

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