

**Effects of Positive Behavior Intervention through Grace and  
Courtesy on an Upper Elementary Classroom Community**

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### Abstract

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is a proactive approach to establishing the behavioral supports and social culture needed for all students in a school to achieve social, emotional, and academic success. As more schools adapt PBIS to address students' academic and behavioral problems, there is a need to assess whether the pro-social benefits of PBIS can be achieved through other means. This action research explored the development of pro-social behaviors through the teachings of grace and courtesy in a fourth and fifth grade Montessori classroom during an eight-week study in a highly diverse, urban, public school in the Midwest. Data was collected using pre- and post-surveys completed by the students in the classroom concerning the classroom climate. The researcher also observed classroom behaviors and adapted grace and courtesy lessons as necessary to meet the needs of the students. Each week, students were given lessons in grace and courtesy specifically developed to address behavior issues within the classroom and promote pro-social behavior development. The goal of Montessori education is to develop and educate the whole person and in the principle of following the child, so lessons were given to individuals, small groups, and whole class, as warranted. Through the classroom observations, the researcher noted a correlation between the pro-social behavior goals of the PBIS model and the teachings of Grace and Courtesy in a Montessori elementary setting.

*Keywords:* grace and courtesy, PBIS, elementary, Montessori, pro-social, behavior

### **Introduction**

This year my Montessori elementary school implemented a school-wide initiative using the Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) model to make positive changes in our approach to behavior interventions. This is the second approach adapted in as many years and I was hopeful upon adoption that it would give us an opportunity to identify and define appropriate behaviors across the school and give common language to the teaching of the behaviors. As I sat in training over the summer, I found myself wondering why these ideals could not be taught through grace and courtesy lessons. The Montessori lessons in grace and courtesy are most commonly found in Children's House and explicitly teach how to interact with one's environment displaying appropriate manners, but I had not thought about teaching grace and courtesy in my fourth and fifth grade elementary classroom or what that would entail. After speaking with colleagues and revisiting Maria Montessori's writings, I believed that in our Montessori setting the pro-social and behavioral benefits we were seeking through PBIS could more easily be gained through specific grace and courtesy lessons adapted to the different grade levels and the specific needs of the classroom or school.

The purpose of this action research study is to examine how grace and courtesy lessons impact the classroom climate and encourage pro-social behaviors within the environment. I am interested in the parallels between the PBIS model and the teachings of grace and courtesy. Continued exploration into how teaching grace and courtesy in an elementary setting differs from a Children's House setting, gave me great insight into how we can support older students in getting along with one another and why it is important.

I wanted to establish behavior norms through grace and courtesy lessons, in order to observe the changes in the classroom climate and how my students interact with each other. After making observations and using Montessori principles, I made a plan of specific lessons to teach my students how to act and react to certain situations. These situations included, but are not limited to, bumping into someone, borrowing a pencil, and how to respectfully disagree.

I began to look for information on my primary research question: Are the pro-social behavior models of PBIS in line with Montessori grace and courtesy teaching? The following questions arose through my readings and guided my research:

1. Can I create a similar matrix for grace and courtesy as is used for PBIS?
2. How do I teach grace and courtesy in a relevant way for upper elementary students?
3. How does increased focus on grace and courtesy affect the classroom environment and the work period?

## **Literature Review**

### **Positive Behavior Interventions and Grace and Courtesy**

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) begins with identifying the desired behaviors within the school building and then building matrices to define, measure, and achieve these behaviors. These matrices build the foundation of common language and practices that everyone involved in the school can use to talk with children about appropriate social behavior (Carter & Pool, 2012) As more and more schools turn

to the use of PBIS models to support behavior within their buildings, it is important that schools, administrators, and teachers evaluate the social validity of PBIS within the school (Miramontes, Marchant, Heath, & Fischer, 2011). Grace and Courtesy lessons highlight the pro-social behaviors that make for a respectful and successful community environment in the classroom. Modeling of social scenarios helps students relate them directly to situations that may happen in and around the classroom. This paper examines the relevance and relationship between the PBIS model and Grace and Courtesy teaching in a Montessori elementary school and whether or not, they are in essence one and the same.

### **Positive Behavior Interventions to Improve School Climate**

The first step to implementation of PBIS is to define the expectations for behavior in every setting around the school (Carter & Pool, 2012). This includes identifying how behavior might look differently within different parts of the building. For instance, the expectations at recess will be different than the expectations for walking down the hall. Matrices are built for each area and expectations are worded in a positive manner. For example, “Walk in the hallways”, as opposed to, “Don’t run”. Once the matrices are built, then comes the direct teaching of the expectations to the students, allowing them time to practice each new skill.

As with any program, consistency is key. The expectation must be enforced across the school with fidelity in order to be successful. Studies done in Connecticut (Gage, Sugai, Lewis, & Brzozowy, 2013) and Florida (Kincaid, Childs, Blase, & Wallace, 2007) found that schools that implemented PBIS with fidelity were more

successful in improving school climate (fewer antisocial behaviors, fewer instances of bullying, and more examples of promoting equity) than schools that did not.

Bradshaw, Waasdorp, and Leaf (2012) offered one of the first long term studies of the effects of PBIS on behavior when studying schools over a four-year period. They found that students who attended schools that had school-wide positive behavior plans were 33% less likely to receive office referrals than students in comparison schools. In addition, they noted that the effects of PBIS were most pronounced if the students began the intervention during kindergarten. This suggests that the earlier the exposure to PBIS, the greater the potential impact. This begs the comparison of how grace and courtesy lessons are started with the youngest of students, and how the climate of Montessori schools compares to traditional schools because of this integral part of the Montessori philosophy throughout the learning experience.

### **Identifying Behavior Expectations**

In Carter and Pool's (2012) article on teaching appropriate social behavior to children, the authors state that we cannot expect children to meet behavior expectations if we do not teach those expectations explicitly. In regards to PBIS, this is definitely one of its goals. The flexibility of PBIS allows it to be used in a small setting (classroom) or a larger one, such as a school or district. It is important that the expectations are clear and concise and allow the child to be successful. If PBIS is being implemented in a school setting, the teaching and enforcement of the expected behaviors should be consistent throughout the building. The uniformity of the message from all adults within the setting

will allow children to thrive in an environment that is consistent, predictable, positive, and safe.

According to Mitchell and Bradshaw (2013), there is a correlation between school climate and a successful and effective educational environment. School climate is defined as shared beliefs, values, and attitudes that shape interactions between students, teachers, and administrators. It is a product of the social interactions in the school, and is influenced by the educational and social values of those within the school. Therefore, each building would have a climate unique to them and their population of staff and students.

In defining behavior expectations, Carter and Pool (2012) say there are two major steps: 1) identify broad expectations, and 2) define specific examples. The first will be done through staff meetings and cohorts among colleagues to find the overarching values that are held to be important and the second will be breaking those apart into workable pieces. The broad expectations give schools the language to help shape the specific rules. Once the language is there, it can be defined across settings. For instance, being “safe” in the classroom, will look and feel different than being “safe” on the playground.

The end result is a set of matrices for every area in the classroom and school building with explanations of how each behavior, looks, sounds, and feels. The PBIS plan is comprehensive and with proper, consistent implementation, it can improve the overall school climate while reducing exclusionary discipline strategies (Mitchell & Bradshaw, 2013).

**Increasing Pro-social Behaviors and Emotional Regulation**

Grace and courtesy lessons are structured to help students learn to handle challenges (Cobb, 2015). If a behavior is desired, then that behavior is explicitly taught and practiced. Just as in a PBIS matrix, grace and courtesy lessons are developed to promote positive behaviors in students. Cobb (2015) goes on to say, “Through the lessons of grace and courtesy, we instill the values of respect, honesty, integrity, courage, and kindness.” These are the very cornerstones for positive behavior and regulation of one’s self.

While grace has a definite physical connotation, it can also be used “to emphasize the integration of body, mind, and spirit” (Noddings, 1992, p. 47). Courtesy is defined as “well-mannered conduct indicative of respect for or consideration of others” (Webster’s, 2002). By putting them together, Montessori came up with a way to address expectations by involving the whole child in his own exploration of self and identity. The elementary teacher must use the children’s powers of thinking and imagining to involve students in identifying the behaviors that make the classroom work better (Lillard, 1996).

Grace and courtesy lessons are flexible and can be based on observable behaviors within a classroom at a moment’s notice. A lesson can be developed spontaneously to effectively demonstrate how to be aware of one’s behavior and how it may affect others. This gives immediate feedback to the student about a behavior in a positive and purposeful way without demeaning the child. “The essence of grace and courtesy is presence; it is the presence of being human.” (Schaefer, 2015) When students begin to internalize their part in the whole of the classroom, they can increase their ability to

regulate their emotions and understand that the balanced behavior of all is necessary for the caring of the community.

### **Classroom Management through Grace and Courtesy**

This definition of acceptable social behaviors can also be defined through Montessori-based Grace and Courtesy lessons. In Schaefer's (2015) article, she describes how grace and courtesy create the culture of the school by our behavior, expectations, and constant manifestation of respect. Grace and courtesy lessons change through the different phases of development, *or sensitive periods*, as defined by Dr. Montessori. *Sensitive periods* are transitory periods in an organism's development and promote the acquisition of specific functions or characteristics. Once achieved, the sensibility dies away often to be replaced by another (Standing, 1957). In Children's House, courtesy is taught through practical life activities, such as serving tea and snack, or how to move calmly through a room. As the *sensitive period* changes, so must the teaching of grace and courtesy. As the child enters upper elementary, grace and courtesy becomes a matter of developing those behaviors that increase respect of others and what it means to work in peace with others, more so than the development of manners.

Huneke-Stone (2015) suggests that grace and courtesy lessons are created as a first period lesson, in which we directly show the behavior. It can be told through story and/or acted out. For upper elementary students, a "practice society" can be created to encourage small group opportunities to use the elements of the lessons for grace and courtesy. It is the students' "work", to ask themselves: "How do I balance my needs and desires with the needs and desires of the group?" (Wilson, 2013) It is through this

discovery that students in the upper elementary classroom will engage in the bigger picture of what it means to have a collaborative, peaceful classroom and in turn, a collaborative, peaceful society at large.

“Obedience is no mechanical thing, but a natural force of social cohesion, intimately related to the will, even its sublimation” (Montessori, 1989). It is through a Montessori teacher’s understanding of the social being of the upper elementary student that the lessons of grace and courtesy can be the tools to effective classroom management.

### **Conclusions and Limitations of Current Research**

Research examining the correlation between use of PBIS and Montessori Grace and Courtesy lessons and the development of pro-social behaviors was not available. However, the pro-social goals for PBIS and Grace and Courtesy are in line with each other. PBIS offers a three-tiered model for promoting social-emotional development. The first tier has an emphasis on building positive relationships and supportive environments for students (Carter & Pool, 2012). The second tier provides explicit teaching of social skills, and the third tier is for individualized attention to persistent challenging behavior. Grace and Courtesy lessons seek the same results- a more cooperative, peaceful, and productive learning environment, through a more individualized approach.

While PBIS uses well-defined expectations delivered through matrices and explicit teaching, Grace and Courtesy lessons can either be planned in advance as part of the curriculum, or delivered in an impromptu fashion in response to specific events. The

flexibility of Grace and Courtesy allows teachers to model and support pro-social behaviors with a natural flow within the context of any given situation. In addition, grace and courtesy lessons allow students to practice modeled behaviors in a neutral setting that provides the tools necessary to be successful in future interactions with classmates (Miller).

In order to gain a more complete understanding of how PBIS and Grace and Courtesy compare, a direct study between a Montessori classroom and a classroom using a PBIS model would need to be performed. Such a study would provide insight into the achievement of improved social behaviors and the sustainability of either method.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants and Setting**

This small-scale qualitative study took place in a public Montessori elementary school in a large urban school district in the Upper Midwest. The school is located in a highly diverse neighborhood and enrolls approximately 861 students with 48.8% African American, 36% Caucasian, 5.9% Hispanic, 3.9% Asian, 2.8% American Indian, and 2.6% 2 or more races. The school has one pre-K classroom, four kindergarten classrooms, 11 first/second/third grade classrooms, six fourth/fifth grade classrooms, and offers a traditional middle school model for sixth, seventh, and eighth grade. 28.2% of students receive English Language Learner services, 6.5% receive special education services, 59.1% qualify for free or reduced lunch, and 2.1% are homeless/ highly mobile.

Data was collected from 27 fourth and fifth grade students in my own classroom. The classroom consists of 31 students with four opting out of the study. Of the

participants, there were twelve fourth grade students (seven girls and five boys) and fifteen fifth grade students (seven girls and eight boys).

The majority of the students have attended the school since at least second grade so they have experience within a Montessori setting. In the year the action research was conducted, 87% of the students had attended the school for at least one year previous to the study. Students who have an IEP or are designated ELL are supported by staff outside of the classroom.

### **Lessons and Observations**

Before I began teaching and planning the grace and courtesy lessons, I asked the students to complete a survey about the climate in our classroom. The survey sought to find the students' perceptions of how well the class works together and overall attitudes about the class. I used questions from student surveys used by the school district to assess student attitudes towards their teacher and their classroom (Appendix A). I developed the lessons based upon situations and issues we had been having in class that seemed to be disrupting the work cycle and the peace in our classroom.

I explained to the class that we would be working together to develop more courtesy and kindness in our room. I had planned out a series of lessons to improve etiquette during lesson presentations and the work cycle, but then realized through my observations of my classroom that I had many more opportunities to impact the overall climate in our classroom through demonstrating more effective, and kind, ways of speaking to each other in response to various situations.

I had observed and noted an increase in arguments in the classroom that seemed to be about little things like bumping into another student. So, I responded with a lesson in how to take a breath and allow our friends to apologize or say, “Excuse me” before yelling and jumping to conclusions. The lesson had a dramatic and humorous skit, with time for discussion and for students to practice in small groups. This did double duty, as it got them up and interacting with students they normally would not have and taught them how to have appropriate responses to small situations in the classroom.

Throughout the weeks of the study, I witnessed situations and created lessons in grace and courtesy that allowed students ways to explore how we create community in our classroom. About midway through the study, I decided to also try a social experiment during work time that fit with our goal of increasing grace and courtesy in the classroom. The whole class wrote it up exactly like a science experiment, with a question and a hypothesis. The question was this: “What happens if I am completely responsible for my voice and my work efforts?” (I would not be reminding or nagging them to stay on task). They would then make observations through the work cycle, and we would reflect at the end of the day. Students came up with some fantastic ideas on how to make the work cycle more cooperative and productive. I implemented some of the suggestions and believe this gave students a feeling of ownership in their learning environment.

Through that experiment, I developed some visual prompts through ActivInspire for transition that kept my voice quiet. I utilized my Promethean Board and created a checklist for students during transition (Appendix B). This allowed students to take even more ownership of their personal behavior and created more time for me to observe the behavior and any changes in the class. I continued to teach grace and courtesy during the

work cycle. I responded to many situations with humor and a quick demonstration. I started to notice a calmer, kinder community begin to emerge in our classroom.

### Data Analysis

I collected data through pre-and post-surveys about the classroom climate. I also tracked overall work completion during the time of the study and compared it to the previous quarter before any interventions started. The pre-survey responses to classroom climate showed that the majority students felt that the class worked cooperatively and respectfully often or always (Figure 1). There was no significant change in this result in the responses in the post-survey. There was a slight increase in work completion for Quarter 3 (50.6%) over that of Quarter 2 (42.1%).

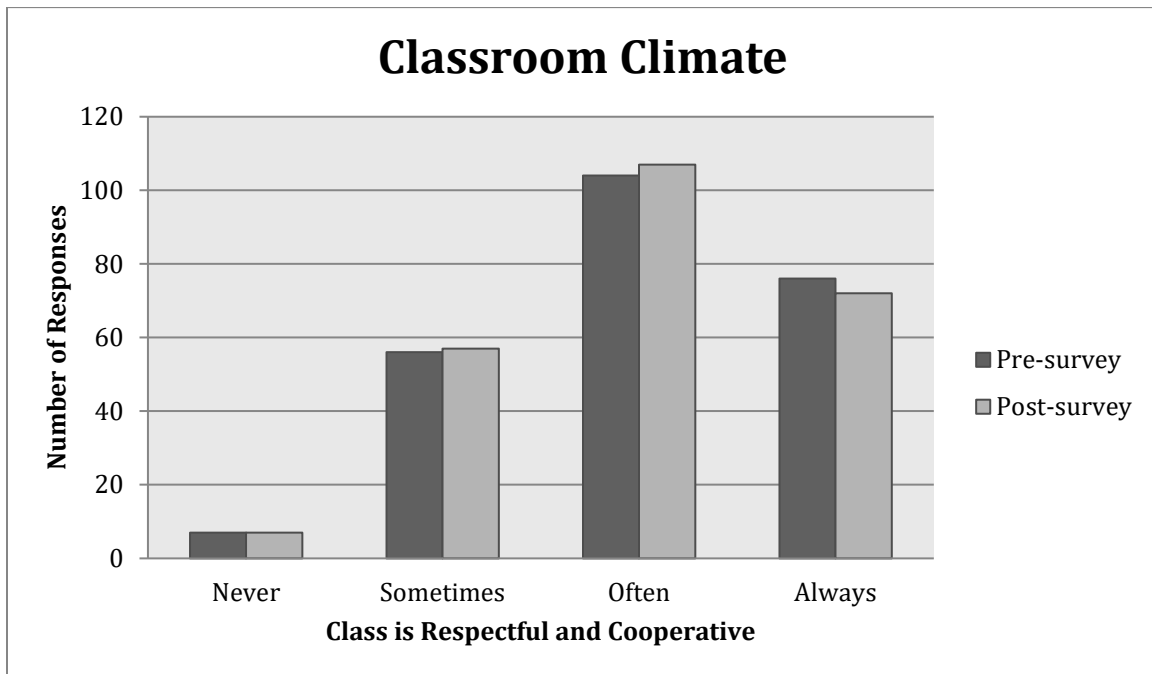


Figure 1: Student Responses to Classroom Climate

I conducted observations of the class and their interactions to see if were happening to the overall atmosphere in the classroom. I noticed that students appeared to be more patient with each other and were more likely to solve disagreements in a cooperative, constructive manner without adult intervention than prior to the study. During transitions, it seemed more common to hear students offering to help each other and I was hearing more use of manners. For example, it became more likely to hear a student say, "Excuse me" or "I'm sorry," than to hear them respond with a rude comment. I noticed that I also felt less tense and stressed by the end of the day because of the more pleasant and helpful attitudes within the room.

### **Discussion and Future Action**

I believe it is possible to create a matrix built upon the things I learned during this study that would fit the PBIS model. There seems to be a parallel in the two approaches to intervention. My plan would be a more basic outline, since the biggest take away I had was that grace and courtesy in upper elementary encompasses many more learning opportunities and is more adaptable to specific situations than I had previously considered. Properly thought out lessons, plus the ability to act immediately on an unfolding situation allows grace and courtesy to be an effective way to develop the pro-social behaviors that PBIS seeks to promote.

I was able to be completely flexible and responsive to situations in a way that I had not been prior to the study. This ability to think in a more open way also allowed me to spread kindness to students throughout the building. It has been weeks since I taught some of those lessons and I still hear more "Excuse me, are you all right?" instead of

immediately yelling and accusing. The classroom community is also starting to feel more cohesive.

I will continue to implement and search out ways to teach grace and courtesy in my classroom. This will include some beginning of the year lessons that will set the class up for success during the work cycle. It is important that I begin the year with grace and courtesy lessons. My students will get the benefit of practicing those behaviors that will make them an integral part of any community. This is also a chance for me to open the dialogue in my school to reevaluate what it means to teach grace and courtesy and work together to plan how to gain a more consistent way of teaching across the grade levels.

It was key that I found the article by Huneke-Stone (2015) late in my study. It gave me a more clear direction of how to proceed and teach grace and courtesy in my classroom. Next year, I propose to have a practice society in my class. I would also like to invite my team to participate. This would be a great way for us to continue our efforts at a more unified message from all of the E2 teachers on the team. I'm eager to continue my observations and apply those observations immediately to my teaching to encourage the pro-social behaviors that are so valuable to a peaceful community.

## APPENDIX A

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Classroom Climate Questionnaire**

Prosocial behaviors is defined as voluntary behavior intended to benefit another and includes: helping, sharing, cooperating, and reasonably controlling emotional states.

**Scoring Key**

Answer how well each statement describes how you feel. Score each answer as follows:

- 0 - Never
- 1 - Sometimes
- 2 - Often
- 3 - Always

	<b>Score</b>
I like school.	
I feel like I do well in school.	
My teacher wants me to do well.	
My teacher has clear expectations for behavior.	
My teacher treats me with respect.	
Good behavior is noticed by my teacher.	
I get along with other students.	
I feel safe in my classroom.	
Students treat each other well.	
My teacher, or another adult, will help me if I need it.	
Students in my class behave so that teachers can teach.	
Students show respect for each other.	
My classroom is a friendly place.	
Students work together to accomplish goals.	
Students work together to solve conflicts.	

Comments:

## APPENDIX B

**Lunch Transition:**

- You are responsible for keeping track of the clock. Your area/table should be clean.
  - You know if it is done. The temp outside feels like
  - You may get your things for lunch/recess when you are done. 25
  - Be in line and silent by 12:09pm to be dismissed for lunch.
- 

**End of Day**

- You are responsible for cleaning your area/table.
  - You know if you are done. (all paper/trash is picked up, chairs stacked)
  - You may put your bin away and get your things when done.
  - Be seated in class and silent to be dismissed.
-

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