5 Mental Set

The final factor important to effective classroom management is an appropriate mental set. Of the four elements outlined in Chapter 1, this is probably the most unusual, at least in terms of its title—mental set. But looking at Figure 1.3 in Chapter 1, we see that my meta-analysis shows that this element has the largest effect size. Specifically, the average effect size for mental set is –1.294 as compared to –.909 for disciplinary interventions, –.869 for teacher-student relationships, and –.763 for rules and procedures. Although the label "mental set" might be unusual in the parlance of education, it is highly descriptive of a critical aspect of effective classroom management. Effective managers approach the classroom with a specific frame of mind—a specific mental set.

The Research and Theory

The construct of a mental set in classroom management is quite similar to the construct of "mindfulness" in psychology. Mindfulness was popularized by Ellen Langer in a series of works (Langer, 1989; Langer & Rodin, 1976; Langer & Weinman, 1981). Langer explains that mindfulness involves a heightened sense of situational awareness and a conscious control over one's thoughts and behavior relative to that situation. This frame of mind is not easy to cultivate and maintain because the human brain is predisposed to focus on a very narrow range of stimuli and to operate quite automatically relative to those stimuli. That is, we typically do not attend to all of what is happening around us. In fact, we commonly operate with very little conscious awareness of our environment, particularly regarding routine activities. An interesting, albeit contrived, way to observe this phenomenon is to read the sentence below once and only once. While doing so, count the number of times the letter *F* appears. Remember, read the sentence once only:

FINAL FOLIOS SEEM TO RESULT FROM YEARS OF DUTIFUL STUDY OF TEXTS ALONG WITH YEARS OF SCIENTIFIC EXPERIENCE

How many times does the letter *F* appear? The answer is eight times. If you perform as most people do on this task, you did not discern all eight *F*s. This is because we do not process words on a letter-by-letter or even a word-by-word basis when we read. Rather, we use very little visual information to recognize words as quickly as possible. Additionally, we spend very little energy on the function words such as *of* and *from* because we can infer that they are there from our knowledge of English syntax. Given that you paid little attention to the function words, you might have missed the three *F*s that appear in the three *of*s and the *F* in *from*. Although this is a contrived example, it illustrates the fact that our typical frame of mind is not one that is disposed to noticing detail or deviations from our expectations.

For the most part, this poses no problem in our lives, yet this mode of operating sometimes produces humorous encounters. Langer (1989) relates the following examples:

> Have you ever said "excuse me" to a store mannequin or written a check in January with the previous year's date? When in this mode, we take in and use limited signals from the world around us (the female form, the familiar face of the check) without letting signals (the motionless pose, a calendar) penetrate as well. . . .
>
> . . . Once, in a small department store, I gave a cashier a new credit card. Noticing that I hadn't signed it, she handed it back to me to sign. Then she took my credit card, passed it through her machine, handed me the resulting form, and asked me to sign it. I did as I was told. The cashier then held the forms to the newly signed card to see if the signatures matched (pp. 12–13).

Langer refers to this automatic, unconscious way of interacting with the world as "mindlessness." This is the antithesis of the mental set teachers must have for effective classroom management. Specifically, the mental set necessary for effective classroom management requires teachers to cultivate a mindful stance relative to their "withitness" and "emotional objectivity." Both of these constructs have strong research support relative to their effectiveness. The results of my meta-analysis for these factors appear in Figure 5.1.

Figure 5.1 illustrates that within the category of mental set, withitness had the greater average effect size of –1.417, which translates into a change of 42 percentile points in the average amount of disruptive behavior. Again, I must caution that this extremely large effect size is based on relatively few studies (3) and relatively few subjects (426) and would probably be lower if more studies were available. With this caution noted, the average effect size of –1.417 provides evidence for the powerful impact of withitness. What is this behavior with the unusual name?

The term *withitness* was coined by Jacob Kounin, who is generally considered the first researcher to systematically study the characteristics of effective classroom managers. As described in Chapter 1, Kounin carried out his initial research by carefully examining videotapes of classroom teachers. He concluded that one of the primary differences between effective versus ineffective managers was not in how they handled the disruptive behavior

Figure 5.1
Effect Sizes for Mental Set

	Average Effect Size	95% Confidence Interval	Number of Subjects	Number of Studies	Percentile Decrease in Disruptions
Mental Set (General)	–1.294	(–1.098) to (–1.489)	502	5	40
Withitness	–1.417	(–1.202) to (–1.644)	426	3	42
Emotional Objectivity	–.705	(–.228) to (–1.181)	76	2	26

Note: Data were not available to compute average effect sizes for various grade level intervals.

of students, but in the disposition of the teacher to quickly and accurately identify problem behavior or potential problem behavior and to act on it immediately. He referred to this disposition as *withitness:*

> Classroom management is unrelated to how you handle misbehavior and how you handle misbehavior is unrelated to the amount of misbehavior you get. There is one exception. For example, two boys are in the back of the class during an arithmetic lesson. One of them grabs the other's paper and the second one grabs his paper. Then the first one pokes the second in the shoulder jokingly and the other one pokes the first, then they chase each other around the table laughing, then one pulls the shirt off the other and the second pulls his shirt off. Then he unzips the second's fly and he unzips the first guy's fly and the teacher says, "Boys, stop that!" We said that was too late. So it wasn't how she said "stop it" or whether she walked closer or didn't walk closer. Or whether she threatened or didn't threaten. It was whether she demonstrated to the class that she knew what was going on, that she had eyes in the back of her head. It was not whether she came in right away but whether she came in before something spread or became more serious. And we gave that the technical term of withitness. That is the only thing that correlated with management success. (1983, p. 7)

Brophy describes withitness in more technical and less anecdotal terms. He explains:

> Remaining "with it" (aware of what is happening in all parts of the classroom at all times) by continuously scanning the classroom, even when working with small groups or individuals. Also demonstrating this withitness to students by intervening promptly and accurately when inappropriate behavior threatens to become disruptive. This minimizes timing errors (failing to notice and intervene until an incident has already become disruptive) and target errors (mistakes in identifying the students responsible for the problem). (1996, p. 11)

Finally, in their book *Looking in Classrooms,* Good and Brophy (2003) describe

withitness as depicted in Kounin's work in the following way:

> . . . Effective managers monitored their classroom regularly. They positioned themselves so that they could see all students and they continuously scanned the room to keep track of what was going on, no matter what else they were doing at the time. They also let their students know that they were "with it"—aware of what was happening and likely to detect inappropriate behavior early and accurately. This enabled them to nip problems in the bud before they could escalate into serious disruptions. If they found it necessary to intervene directly to stop misbehavior, they focused on the students who started the problem or were most responsible for its escalation. If they were uncertain about who was most responsible for the problem, they simply told the entire group involved to resume working on their assignments (to avoid publicly blaming the wrong student). (p. 112)

Although it might appear that "withitness" does not translate into specific behavior, in fact, it is a learnable skill. Indeed, Evertson (1995) has shown that many aspects of withitness can be taught and reinforced in a relatively short period of time.

The second aspect of an appropriate mental set for classroom management is "emotional objectivity." Stated differently, an effective classroom manager implements and enforces rules and procedures, executes disciplinary actions, and (even) cultivates effective relationships with students without interpreting violations of classroom rules and procedures, negative reactions to disciplinary actions, or lack of response to the teacher's attempts to forge relationships as a personal attack. As Ron Nelson, Ron Martella, and Benita Galand (1998) note, emotional objectivity allows the teacher to address disciplinary issues in an "unemotional, matter-of-fact" manner (p. 156). Robert and Ruth Soar (1979) emphasize the importance of emotional objectivity, noting that when teachers are not emotionally objective, they run the risk of undermining their entire classroom management system.

The importance of emotional objectivity was also demonstrated by Jere Brophy and Carolyn Evertson (1976) in their study of the classroom practices of teachers who consistently produce achievement gains greater than expected as compared to a randomly selected group of teachers. They note:

> The successful teachers usually had quite realistic attitudes toward students and teacher-student relationships. Although they liked the children and enjoyed interpersonal aspects of teaching, they took a professional view of their students, looking upon them primarily as young learners with whom they interacted within a teacher-student relationship. In contrast, the less successful teachers tended to take one of two contradictory extreme overreactions to students. The more common of these was a romanticized notion of the student as a warm, wonderful, lovely, precious, etc. person who was a great pleasure just to be around. In our observations, teachers who painted this rosy picture of students were not more likely to be warm toward them or to appear to be enjoying more realistic views. In fact, a few of the more gushy teachers had highly chaotic classrooms . . . which occasionally became so out of control that the teacher exploded in anger and punitiveness in spite of herself . . .

> There also were a few disillusioned and bitter teachers who looked upon students as "the enemy." (pp. 43–44)

Additionally, they note:

> We thought that the warmer, more affectionate teachers generally would be more effective than other teachers, particularly in low SES schools. As it turned out, teacher affectionateness did not show this relationship. It was unrelated, either linearly or curvilinearly, to students' learning gains. (p. 109)

Some teachers with whom I have discussed the disposition of emotional objectivity have reacted negatively, noting that it seems to take the "personal element" out of teacher-student interactions. If teachers are objective, then they, by definition, are keeping a distance from their students. Although it is true that keeping a certain psychological distance from students is necessary for effective classroom management, this does not have to translate into aloofness with students. It simply means carrying out the various aspects of classroom management without becoming emotionally involved regarding the outcomes—without personalizing the actions of students. This is very difficult to do because the normal human reaction to student disobedience or lack of response is to feel hurt or even angry. Such high-arousal emotional states do not provide a good basis on which to implement rules, execute disciplinary actions, or establish relationships.

Programs

Mental set as defined in this chapter is the classroom management factor that is usually not addressed directly in classroom management programs. That is, one does not generally find classroom management programs that address the constructs of withitness or emotional objectivity by name. However, a number of programs address the component skills associated with these two constructs. For example, the Classroom Organization and Management Program, or COMP (Evertson, 1995), provides strategies for enhancing teachers' situational awareness of the potential problems in the classroom. Think Time (Nelson & Carr, 1999) addresses emotional objectivity in some depth, particularly in situations when a teacher is employing disciplinary procedures in the classroom and when students are in the Think Time classroom (see Chapter 3 and Chapter 8 for discussions). Finally, Assertive Discipline (Canter & Canter, 1992) addresses strategies for enhancing withitness as well as strategies for developing and maintaining a healthy emotional tone.

ActionSteps

ACTION STEP 1 ▼

Employ specific techniques to maintain or heighten your awareness of the actions of students in your classes (withitness).

The very term *withitness* might make it appear that this characteristic does not lend itself to development. You either are "withit" or you're not. In fact, you can take at least three concrete actions to enhance your "withitness": react immediately, forecast problems, and observe a master teacher.

▶ Reacting Immediately

Virtually all examples of withitness explicitly note that teachers who have mastered this disposition frequently scan the classroom, particularly when working with a small group of students or an individual student (see Berliner, 1986; Brophy, 1996; Kounin, 1983). Stated differently, one behavioral characteristic of withitness is to periodically and systematically scan the classroom, noting the behaviors of individual students or groups of students. If anything inappropriate is occurring, attention is turned to it immediately. If you believe that you are not highly aware of what your students are doing, you can practice the simple behavior of looking around the room for indications of potential or actual disruption on a frequent and periodic basis. Here is a specific technique to try when you are engaged in whole-class instruction:

- Walk around the classroom, making sure you spend some time in each quadrant.
- Periodically scan the faces of the students in the class, making eye contact with each student if possible.
- As you scan the classroom, pay particular attention to incidents or behaviors that look like they could turn into problems.
- Make eye contact with those students involved in the incident or who are exhibiting the behavior.
- If this doesn't work, move toward the students.
- If the behavior or incident continues, say something to the students, keeping the comments as private as possible.

When you are working with an individual student or a small group of students, you can use the same technique, but simply begin by periodically looking up from the individual or the group to make eye contact with the other students in the class.

The following vignette describes one teacher's withitness.

> *"It's cool. She doesn't yell or glare or anything. She just looks." McKinley, an 8th grader, was describing her math teacher, Ms. Clark, who is known for keeping her students on task and doing so without sending kids to the office or to detention. Whether working with small groups or talking to the entire class, Ms. Clark always notices when kids are beginning to talk or behave inappropriately. No matter what she is doing, she stops, and in an almost frozen position, she makes eye contact with the student or students. Her Mona Lisa–like expression shows no negative emotion, only rapt attention. If the offending students do not notice at first, their peers alert them. When they stop their disruptive behavior, which is almost always in seconds, she continues where she left off. The polite attention and silence both set a positive tone and get the desired results.*

▶ Forecasting Problems

Another technique that enhances your withitness is to mentally review what might go wrong with specific students in specific classes and the way you will address these potential problems. The categories of students described in Chapter 4—aggressive, passive, attention problems, perfectionist, and socially inept—are particularly useful for this purpose. If you have students who fall within these categories, you can think through potential issues that might arise

with them before meeting with the class. For example, you might know that a perfectionist student in one of your classes frequently becomes agitated when she is having difficulty understanding something you are presenting or difficulty completing an assigned activity. If you know that difficult content or a difficult assignment is going to be part of an upcoming class, you can think through how you might interact with the student to head off potential problems. A hyperactive student (one of the subcategories of attention problems) in one of your classes might have difficulty attending to classroom activities immediately after lunch. Knowing that you will be working with him after lunch, you might identify those things you can do to head off potential problems or suggestions you can make to the student to avoid behavior problems. The following vignette depicts how this behavior might appear in the classroom.

Ms. Wilson knew that the first day of the new group project was going to be tough for some of her students. Further, she predicted that when the students became frustrated, they would probably begin to act out. She considered modifying the project to make it less complex, but she believed that backing down on rigor would cheat these same students of critical learning. Instead, she explained to the students that during the first few days of the project, she would be sitting on a stool in the middle of the room, a short, equal distance from each group, clearly visible to all students. Instead of moving around the room, her usual style, she would stay in the middle and students could come to her for help. From this strategic position, she could mentally shift her attention from group to group, keeping each group in her sphere of attention so that she could monitor their progress. She found that in this way she was always ready to compliment specific examples of on-task behavior and to act quickly if it appeared that frustrations were going to lead to disruptions.

▶ Observing a Master Teacher

Of course, some aspects of withitness are quite subtle and situational. Over time, some teachers have developed these subtle aspects of withitness to a high degree. If you are having difficulty with withitness or simply want some new ideas, you can approach such a teacher and ask to visit her classroom simply to observe. After class, in a debriefing format, you would describe the behaviors that you noted that appeared to be particularly effective. A conversation with the mentor teacher should provide valuable insights about the types of things she looks for and the type of thinking she engages in when she senses potential problems. If you feel comfortable with the mentor teacher, you might invite her into your classroom to observe and provide recommendations. The following vignette depicts how this dynamic might play out in the classroom.

"The beauty of Mr. Killian's style of discipline is that it is done in a way that maximizes instructional time. As you watch him, notice the continuous flow of instruction." This is how the mentor focused the observation planned for Ms. Jacobson, a first-year teacher. Sure enough, as she sat in the back of the room, Ms. Jacobson observed Mr. Killian constantly moving throughout the room,

always interacting with students about the content. When he moved toward students who were beginning to disrupt, it often appeared that he had been heading in that direction anyway. His actions were so subtle that they did not seem threatening, yet any disruptive behavior ended quickly. Ms. Jacobson wondered if she would ever be able to perform such an effective dance in her classroom. At least now she had a clear model in mind, and she knew that it was possible.

Action Step 2 ▼

Employ specific techniques to maintain a healthy emotional objectivity with students.

Emotional objectivity involves an avoidance of emotional extremes when dealing with students. This is especially important when you are implementing negative consequences for misbehavior like those described in Chapter 3. At one extreme you might show anger when disciplining students. A lesser but still ineffective reaction would be to show frustration toward the student. Anger and frustration on the part of a teacher are natural and sometimes unavoidable reactions to student misbehavior. But even if you do become angry or frustrated, it is not useful to display those emotions when employing negative consequences.

Another emotion or disposition that works against effective classroom management is hesitation. As Curwin and Mendler (1988) note:

> We have seen teachers who give consequences as if they are sorry that they have to give them. These teachers are telling students that they fear them and the students learn quickly that this teacher is easily intimidated. . . . On the other hand, an overly aggressive delivery can create hostility, resentment, and fear. These are not emotions that lend themselves to setting up a growth-producing interchange. (p. 98)

A number of specific techniques can help you obtain and maintain a sense of emotional objectivity with students.

▶ Looking for Reasons Why (Reframing)

Maintaining emotional objectivity is much easier if you don't personalize student misbehavior. Even something as simple as trying to understand the reasons why students misbehave can help you establish and maintain a healthy objectivity. This is because misbehavior on the part of students usually has little to do with a specific teacher (Dreikurs, 1968; Dreikurs, Grunwald, & Pepper, 1982). Once you realize this, you have a better chance of depersonalizing student misbehavior. This even works in the abstract. To illustrate, when a specific student misbehaves, you can explicitly identify reasons why the student might have misbehaved that do not imply disrespect for or aggression toward you. This strategy is a simple variation of a time-honored strategy from clinical psychology sometimes referred to as "reframing" (see Ellis, 1977; Meichenbaum, 1977). Langer (1989) exemplifies the nature of reframing using the following example:

> . . . take a couple, Alice and Fred, whom you see quite often. Sometimes you hear them fight a bit. You don't pay any attention; don't all couples quarrel? Now you

learn that they are getting a divorce. You call to mind all the evidence that explains this outcome. "I knew it; [I] remember how they used to fight. Their fights were vicious." On the other hand, perhaps you hear that they have just celebrated their silver anniversary. "Isn't that nice," you say, "they have such a solid marriage; they hardly ever quarrel and when they do they always make up so sweetly to each other." (p. 64)

Langer's example depicts how we tend to reframe quite naturally and unconsciously. When done consciously to help maintain emotional objectivity toward a class or specific students, it might occur as depicted in the following vignette.

As a young man, Mr. Cannady used to experience road rage, feeling incredibly angry when other drivers did things like cutting him off or failing to yield. Then he took a course that taught him to use a technique called reframing. Now when someone cuts him off in traffic, he tells himself, for example, that the person is probably not paying attention because of a sick child and is trying to get home quickly. This new frame immediately calms him down and prevents him from feeling personally offended. When he began to teach, he transferred this technique to the classroom. When students refuse to do class work or if they talk back inappropriately or simply do not pay attention in class, Mr. Cannady tells himself that they are probably covering up insecurities, or that they must have had a bad morning at home, or that they just got some bad news. This approach helps Mr. Cannady keep calm and allows him to perceive students' behaviors as discipline challenges, not as personal attacks.

▶ Monitoring Your Own Thoughts

One strategy for maintaining a healthy emotional objectivity involves taking the time to monitor your own attitudes about specific students (Good, 1982; Rosenshine, 1983; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). This is similar to the strategy of reframing, but it has a different emphasis. You are probably aware that when your attitude about specific students is positive, it is fairly easy to interact with those students. However, you might not be aware of the extent to which negative attitudes toward specific students get in the way of interacting with them. The following process has been recommended to counteract the bias created by negative attitudes toward specific students (Marzano et al., 1997):

- Before class each day, mentally review your students, noting those with whom you anticipate having problems (either academic or behavioral).
- Try to imagine these "problem" students succeeding or engaging in positive classroom behavior. In other words, try to replace your negative expectations with positive ones.
- When you interact with these students, try to keep in mind your positive expectations.

The following vignette depicts how one teacher uses this process.

Ms. Young's mantra is "Don't hold a grudge." She desperately needs this mantra when she finds herself spending an entire evening obsessing about the behavior of a student that day. She understands herself well enough to know she must instead spend the evening saying

over and over to herself, "Don't hold a grudge. Don't hold a grudge." Before she goes to bed, she also makes a commitment to herself that she will say three positive things to the student during the following two days. "Even if all I can find to compliment is the color of the students' clothes, I always find three things. The act of saying the positive things aloud changes my perceptions of that student, even if my positive statements are met with a scowl. By the time I have said the third positive thing, I almost always feel the tension in my shoulders ease, and I feel ready to develop a different relationship with the student. To paraphrase C. S. Lewis, I say the positive things not because it changes the students, but because it changes me."

▶ Taking Care of Yourself

The final strategy for maintaining a healthy emotional objectivity has nothing to do with students. Rather it has to do with taking care of your own emotional health. Curwin and Mendler (1988) explain the benefits of such behavior:

> We have stated time and time again that it is critical for you not to carry anger, resentment, and other hostile feelings once a discipline situation is over. If you are angry with a student from an incident that happened the day before, you might enter a power struggle just to flex your muscles and show who is boss. Don't. Start fresh each day. (p. 105)

Wisely they offer some simple suggestions for lessening the stress that might accumulate from a particularly difficult management day:

- Sit in a comfortable chair and practice deep-breathing exercises, keeping your mind free as you do so.
- Use guided imagery to create a "private retreat" for yourself that you visit briefly at the end of each day.
- Maintain a healthy sense of humor about your disciplinary encounters with specific students. Keep in mind that students are not adults yet and are acting out many issues that might have nothing to do with you.
- Seek out movies and television shows that make you laugh. Laughter is one of the easiest and most effective ways of lessening the tension that accompanies an unpleasant management experience.
- Be your own best friend by treating yourself to a reward on particularly difficult days.

The following vignette illustrates some of these techniques in action.

"It's no fun to teach anymore." Recently, Frank Catrera has noticed that he hears these words from colleagues more and more frequently. He feels sorry for them because he is still having a blast. Of course, he acknowledges that he also has dark days—there is no doubt about that. But whenever he notices that he is taking things too seriously, he knows what to do. Before going home, he goes into the media room to spend about 10 minutes watching his favorite video, an old, hilarious Saturday Night Live *comedy sketch in which Jerry Seinfeld portrays a teacher with some very frustrating, but typical, students. No matter how many times he sees this tape, it always makes him laugh out loud. After hearing his*

colleague's comments, he decides that he probably needs to drag along a few of his colleagues with him next time, just to remind them teaching, even when frustrating, is fun.

Summary

The fourth aspect of effective classroom management, an appropriate mental set, involves two specific characteristics: withitness and emotional objectivity. Withitness is the ability to identify and quickly act on potential behavioral problems. Emotional objectivity is the ability to interact with students in a businesslike, matter-of-fact manner even though you might be experiencing strong emotions. This is particularly important to do when carrying out negative consequences for inappropriate behavior.