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AUTHOR Lane-Garon, Pamela S.  
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## ABSTRACT

Teachers make ethically-related assumptions when designing and implementing classroom management plans. Teacher education programs often promote the practical values of order, prevention, and efficient intervention. It is important that they also stress the value of encouraging social-cognitive development in pro-social directions. This paper recommends that teacher educators: model, convey, and scaffold classroom management practices that will enable future teachers to create a caring community of learners; contract for individual differences, rewarding approximations to the goal; and teach and provide opportunities for guided practice in constructivist interpersonal conflict resolution. The caring community of learners is encouraged by the teaching and implementation of classroom meetings. When future teachers are taught mediation skills, they expand their own communication skills, self-regulation, perspective-taking, and facilitative language vocabularies. Ethical practice involves rewarding approximations toward the desired goal. Once rules are devised, a private contract can be created describing the target behavior and providing encouragement and recognition for small accomplishments. Teachers can provide a model for in-class guided practice in conflict resolution that supports and is in concert with the classroom discipline plan. Once teachers have experienced training in mediation, they can serve as models for students. (SM)

*Pamela S. Lane-Garon*

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## **Classroom and Conflict Management: Rethinking Teacher Preparation for Ethical Practice**

**Pamela S. Lane-Garon  
California State University Fresno**

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There are ethically-related assumptions made when teachers design and implement classroom management plans. Teacher education programs often promote the practical values of order, prevention, and efficient intervention so as to accomplish a swift return to the important academic learning tasks at hand.

However, if little value is placed on encouraging social-cognitive development in pro-social directions, classroom management becomes nothing more than “keeping the lid on.” It is the thesis of this author that teacher-educators need to model, convey, and scaffold the classroom management practices that will enable future teachers to:

1. **Create the *Caring Community of Learners*,**
2. **Contract for Individual Differences, Rewarding Approximations to the Goal,**  
and
3. **Teach and Provide Opportunities for Guided Practice in Constructive Interpersonal Conflict Resolution.**

**These are ethical considerations because** our classroom management efforts should reflect vision and respect for the developing self-regulation of students in our care and responsibility for joining parents in encouraging character, as well as academic development.

## 1. The Caring Community of Learners

The “Caring Community of Learners” (Larrivee, 1999) is encouraged by the teaching and implementation of classroom meetings. Community Board of San Francisco’s “Problem-Solving Classroom” model (author, 1998) is a good example. Every “managerial” interaction is also interpersonal. The teacher’s interpersonal skills either convey respect for the emerging integrity of students, or they do not. Experienced teachers understand that classroom *order* may be achieved *without* enhancing respect for developing students—sometimes at the expense of students. However, **an ethical choice requires** teacher training in interpersonal communication and facilitated problem-solving. Mediation training provides a good example. When future teachers are taught mediation skills, they expand their own communication skills, self-regulation, perspective-taking, and facilitative language vocabularies. Through this training they can become models for the “Caring Community of Learners” perhaps even when their own familial backgrounds have not prepared them well in this all-important domain.

## 2. Contracting For Individual Differences: Rewarding Approximations to the Goal

Rules or agreements to guide group behavior are essential. Classroom management models are generally supportive of this practice. However, too often we congregate mistaken behavior (rule infractions) in instances where students may not yet be capable of keeping a rule in the manner we desire. This can occur for a variety of reasons; some of which might be: 1) developmental delay, 2) learning disability, 3) attention disorders, 4) lack of school culture experiences, 5) mismatch between home and school expectations for behavior. **This is an ethical consideration because** consequences

(especially punishment) should not be inappropriately applied to students who have not yet had enough scaffolded practice demonstrating desired behaviors. Similarly, those students who may not be physically or mentally capable of demonstrating target behavior should be provided with support for progress, rather than punishment for failure.

A suggestion for ethical practice involves rewarding approximations toward the goal. Once the rules have been devised (usually cooperatively by teacher and students), each student might identify (with the teacher's help) a rule or behavioral guideline that is particularly challenging or difficult to keep. A private contract can then be created describing the target behavior and providing encouragement and recognition for small steps of progress—eventually leading to the target goal. An example of this practice in context might be: In a school where a program similar to Assertive Discipline (Canter & Canter, 1992) is used and a student with ADHD is working on *in-seat behavior*, the teacher may reward increasing frequencies of in seat behavior rather than consequating out-of-seat behavior. When each student has a personal improvement goal, we teach important life lessons: *We are not all at the same place in our development and learning...some of us have mastered some things that others have not. Nonetheless, we are all working on improvement and our teacher is encouraging us every step of the way.*

### **3. Conflict Resolution in the Classroom**

Finally, all human beings experience conflict in daily life. If we look carefully at the “discipline incidents” in elementary school classrooms, we can make distinctions between infractions that are interpersonal in nature and those that are about safety, property, and personal responsibility. If all these incidents are “lumped” and addressed through the discipline plan, then teachers will have abundant practice mandating solutions

to children's problems and children will have little practice in learning and practicing the conflict resolution skills necessary for developing social competence in their families and future workplaces. **This is an ethical concern because** if we acknowledge our role as the second most important socializing agent of future citizens, then we may do harm by neglecting to teach the skills of interpersonal conflict resolution. Teachers can provide a model for in-class guided practice in dispute resolution that supports and is in concert with the discipline plan.

Again, mediation is a good choice. Once the teacher has experienced training in mediation, s/he can serve as an excellent model and guide for students. There is some emerging evidence that use of such a model has a positive effect on academics—especially vocabulary development and expressive language in general (Marvel, Moreda, & Cook, 1993). Mediation is also supported by most Health, Social Studies, Language Arts and Multicultural Education frameworks. *More teacher time for teaching* has already been well established as an outcome of mediation implementation in school settings (Johnson, Johnson, & Dudley, 1992; Lane-Garon, 1998; Lane-Garon, 2000).

None of these three recommendations requires more time of teacher educators or of elementary classroom teachers. Each recommendation costs little and (this author believes) may have profound positive effects on the development of socio-emotionally literate and civil future citizens. By virtue of our role we have ethical responsibility to rethink classroom management practice—for a positive learning environment—for a positive living environment.

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Signature:	Pamela S. Lane-Garon, PhD		Printed Name/Position/Title:	Pamela S. Lane-Garon Assistant Professor Educational Psychology	
Organization/Address:	5005 N. Maple MS 303 Fresno CA 93740		Telephone:	559 278-0320	FAX:
			E-Mail Address:	pamelalg@csufresno.edu	Date:
					April 30, 2002



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