

Responsive Classroom Management: Empowering Students and Teachers in Urban Schools

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Abstract

This research explores a finding from a multicase study of effective teachers working in urban high-poverty schools who used responsive classroom management as a tool. While classroom management was not the focus of the larger study, it emerged as a finding that was critical for participants as they fostered success for their students, and in the process, preserved and strengthened their commitments to work in challenging school contexts. The current study was undertaken to better understand classroom management and its commonalities across the teachers. Additional data analysis revealed connections between the certification program and teachers' implementation of a responsive classroom management approach that included common vocabulary, theories, and methods. This research reveals important connections between teacher preparation and effective teaching in urban high-poverty schools, which has practical implications for those concerned with this population of students and families.

Keywords: Classroom management, effective teachers, teachers' visions, advocacy

Introduction

Teachers who are skilled at classroom management may appear to outsiders as “naturals,” operating their classrooms with a calmness and precision that disguises the consistent cycle of reflection and adjustment they use to manage their students and the learning environment. While some describe the best classroom management as invisible, experienced educators recognize the importance that intentional classroom management has on students and teachers' success. Strong, Ward, and Grant (2011) compared practices of effective and less effective teachers concluding, “Top-quartile teachers had fewer classroom disruptions, better classroom management skills, and better relationships with their students than did bottom quartile teachers” (p. 349).

New teachers often report a lack of preparation and confidence for the management needed in their classrooms. Additionally, school administrators acknowledge that classroom management is one of the areas in which teachers are least prepared (Melnick & Meister, 2008). This is particularly concerning considering research indicating that productive classroom environment may be more important than curriculum and strategies for success in the complex environments of urban schools (Skiba, Ormiston, Martinez, & Cummings, 2016; Brown, 2003). Furthermore, demographic mismatches between teachers and students may hinder teachers' efforts at effective management when they make judgements regarding behavior and decisions for their responses through their own cultural lenses (Bondy, Ross, Galligane, & Hambacher, 2007).

Although teachers recognize the need for life-long learning, new teachers describe feeling more prepared and confident when they have participated in coursework focused on classroom management (O'Neill & Stephenson, 2012). Martin (2004) found that teachers who effectively manage their classrooms view the work as a process to be accomplished with students rather than a set of techniques to do to students. Rather than equating education with compliance, Morrison and Vaandering (2012) argue that management becomes a joint endeavor “when students are valued as human beings to be honored rather than objects to be controlled” (p. 145).

The complexity of classroom management is compounded when teachers attempt to implement ambitious pedagogies that often require them to “teach against the grain” (Cochran-Smith, 1991) of the norms of the school community in which they work. Lampert and Graziani (2009) explored novice teachers’ abilities to increase their own knowledge and improve student outcomes through the implementation of ambitious pedagogy, that is classroom practices that support student learning across ethnic, racial, class, and gender categories with the goal of fostering deep understandings rather than low-level knowledge acquisition.

Theoretical Framework

“Teachers who demonstrate care and a consistent demand for excellence have a significant positive impact on African American student achievement” (Acosta, 2015, p. 3). These teachers are committed to developing nurturing relationships and classroom environments where learning is cooperative and engaging. While this approach is considered widely to be a best practice, it contrasts to practices in urban education that are often discipline-oriented rather than community-oriented (Milner & Tenore, 2010; Noguera, 2003).

From a sociocultural perspective, the goal of classroom management would be the development of an effective learning community where students and teachers are full participants in the community of learners. Hickey and Schafer (2006) argue that classroom management’s main focus should be on the collective success of students and teachers with a focus on proactive approaches to classroom management rather than reactive ones. This includes ritualizing effective routines and practices that define the classroom community. This approach to classroom management emphasizes the social-emotional wellbeing of the students and teachers, as teachers scaffold students’ ability to manage themselves.

The study examined here is guided by the work of scholars in the area of culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995), specifically its influence on Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, and Curran’s (2004) culturally responsive classroom management (CRCM). Weinstein et al. (2004) state that teachers who implement CRCM must (a) recognize their own ethnocentrism, (b) have knowledge of their students’ cultures, (c) understand the broader systems influencing education, (d) use appropriate management strategies, and (e) develop a caring classroom. This perspective is the foundation for considering the work of effective teachers working in diverse urban school contexts.

Study’s Background

Findings from a multicase study of effective teachers working in urban high-need schools revealed that the participants held similar core beliefs prior to beginning their teacher preparation program (Barker, 2016). Additionally, they believed that their preparation program had strengthened their core beliefs, which they acknowledged were initially “idealistic” and “shallow.”

The participants emphasized the role of the program in helping them to operationalize and focus their early visions for teaching into purposeful endeavors.

In anticipation that their own work as teachers would certainly have positive or negative influences on their students' success, the larger study found that the teachers enacted a vision of anticipatory advocacy (Barker, 2016). Anticipatory advocacy includes intervening actions that are the result of a dual awareness of students' immediate and future needs and have implications beyond boundaries of time and space in an effort to positively influence students' lives in the immediate as well as distant future.

In order to enact anticipatory advocacy, the participants employed tools to advocate for their students: (a) culturally responsive classroom management, (b) ambitious teaching, and (c) professional collaboration. These tools that the teachers had acquired during their preparation program produced expanding layers of success for the teachers and their students. These successes in turn reinforced the teachers' visions and gave them the power to resist professional weathering forces.

Classroom management was not the focus of the larger study, but rather culturally responsive classroom management emerged as a finding that was critical to the teacher's acts of advocacy. In order to understand how the participants used classroom management as a tool in their work, we returned to the data to focus on the theme for this study. This research underscores the significance of social and urban contexts that complicate management of children who are often racially, culturally, and economically different from many of their teachers (Weiner, 2003).

Methods

Participants

The four participants in the broader multicase study were graduates of the same cohort of an intensive, urban-focused, two-year certification and master's program. The participants were nominated by faculty of the program, and they were each confirmed by their principals to be effective teachers for their students. All four participants were female, two identified as European American, one as African American, and one as African American/Latina. The participants selected pseudonyms for the purpose of the study.

In order to explore in depth the culturally responsive classroom management tool, researchers in this study returned to the same cohort of graduates, analyzing data from all members of the cohort in addition to the original four case study participants. The mission of the program was to promote the success of elementary students schooled in high-need urban contexts through the development of pedagogically competent, equity-oriented, caring, empowered teachers who were change agents inside and outside the classroom. The program began with a culturally responsive pedagogy course which addressed first three elements of CRCM: (a) recognize one's own ethnocentrism; (b) have knowledge of students' cultures; and (c) understand the broader social, economic, and political systems in education (Weinstein et al., 2004). The course was followed by a responsive classroom management course which continued the work along with addressing Weinstein et al.'s (2004) last two elements of CRCM: (d) use appropriate management strategies; and (e) develop a caring classroom.

Data Collection and Analysis

Multiple data sources for the broader study captured the work of the four participants revealing their working theory and teaching methods. Similar to the work of Ladson-Billings (1994), the study utilized a reverse design approach to link effective teaching to initial preparation. This approach goes beyond positive shifts in attitudes and dispositions by tracing practices of effective teachers to elements of teacher preparation programs (Clift & Brady, 2005; Sleeter & Owuor, 2011).

Data for the broader study included analysis of program documents (admission documents, writing samples, course assignments, etc.), three interviews, and three field observations for each of the four participants. The four participants also participated in three focus group interviews. Over a period of 16 weeks, the teacher participants were interviewed and observed 25 times, capturing their work in the spring semester of their second year of teaching. The primary researcher used grounded theory to conduct data collection and analysis simultaneously within the study, spiraling in analytic circles in a recursive, iterative process (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998). Using the constant-comparative method of data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), the researcher analyzed the data using open coding before cycling back through to identify categories and relationships between categories that could constitute a model useful for understanding each case (Creswell, 2013). After open coding, the researcher cycled back through data for each individual participant to collapse codes, using focused coding to develop categories (Saldaña, 2013).

For the study presented here, a second coder independently analyzed 50% of the cases focusing on codes related to classroom management. Those codes were compared to determine agreements. Disagreements were discussed to determine satisfactory agreement, and finally categories were collapsed to determine final categories/themes.

Findings and Discussion

Findings from the broader multicase study revealed that teachers enacted a vision of anticipatory advocacy. Anticipatory advocacy includes intervening actions that are the result of a dual awareness of students' immediate and future needs and have implications beyond boundaries of time and space in an effort to positively influence students' lives in the immediate as well as distant future. The teachers, each of whom held beliefs that aligned with the culturally relevant foundations of the program prior to their selection, employed responsive classroom management, ambitious teaching strategies, and professional collaboration, tools they acquired and honed during their preparation. Those tools enabled them to experience successes that bred additional successes, strengthening their visions and protecting them from professional weathering forces (Barker, 2016). One participant, Michelle described how responsive classroom management led to layers of success,

I constantly heard that they were the worst class in the entire school, that they didn't know how to do anything, so we worked on behavior first. You know, being consistent with my rules, my classroom management, to the point where I have had people come up to me telling me now that they're the best class in the entire school. Like the music teacher, they get a sticker every single time. Little things like that, that even though they're still labeled as 'the really bad class,' people are noticing that they're not really bad, I guess. (...) So, that's one way I feel like I advocate for them is just trying to erase that label that they've been given by having people come

and see that they really are working, the conversations that they're having – just little things like that.

Teacher Expectations and Methods for Culturally Responsive Classroom Management

While participants in the broader study were not asked to discuss their philosophy or approaches to classroom management as part of their visions for and enactments of advocacy for their students, classroom management themes emerged early during data collection for all four teachers. Constant comparative analysis of interviews and observations revealed that all four teachers had similar expectations for their roles as teachers that guided their actions in creating their classroom communities. Specifically, they believed: (a) Teachers have a responsibility to ensure that all students learn both academically and behaviorally; (b) Teachers have a duty to care for the whole child including their safety, basic needs, and emotional wellbeing; (c) Teachers have an obligation to advocate for their students both in the present and for the future; and (d) Relationships are instrumental to effective teaching (teacher-students, teacher-parents, students and educators working within the classroom).

In addition to holding similar expectations that influenced their classroom management, the teachers used a similar vocabulary when discussing identical methods of classroom management, the same language and methods that are characteristic of their teacher preparation classroom management methods courses. The classroom management methods that were most salient and crossed all four of the cases were: (a) classroom meetings, (b) choice words, (c) ground rules and routines, and (d) logical consequences.

Classroom meetings. Classroom meetings, often referred to as “morning meetings” by the participants, were times when the teachers intentionally worked on building relationships with and among their students. Jordan described how classroom meetings built relationships and supported her goals for her work,

I like to bring in things that the students kind of connect with already, whether it's from the environment or from their community – kind of bring things on their level. We always have group discussions, such as morning meetings, which I was taught when I was in the UACM [Urban Accelerated Certification and Master's] program kind of just, ‘How are your days going?’ We're just having a normal conversation.

Through the process of having a “normal conversation” as a classroom community, the teachers strengthened their relationships with their students and in the process communicated and modeled care and respect, nurturing an environment that encouraged students to build positive relationships with each other. Lola described how building community through classroom meetings developed healthy relationships:

You don't have to be hard in my classroom. For example, so we do morning meetings. And I have a special place in my heart for young Black men, because I feel like they're so misunderstood. Especially as they get older, they're seen as a threat kind of. You know? And you see it even perpetuated in third grade how they interact with each other. They try to be hard and, you know, whatever. But it's interesting. At the beginning of the year, we do ‘hug, handshake or high-five,’ which is like a morning meeting activity. And they greet each other, and they get to choose which one that they want. So, in the beginning it's always like handshake, high-five. And now towards the end of the year it's like, ‘I want a hug.’ So, they

hug each other. So just, again, allowing them to have that emotional space to kind of be themselves, and it's okay, you know?

Conducting daily classroom meetings was one method the teachers brought from their preparation program that supported their enactment of their core beliefs related to culturally responsive classroom management. Classroom meetings were opportune times for the teachers to incorporate another classroom management tool, and that is language as described in Peter Johnston's (2004) *Choice Words: How our language affects children's learning*, that positively supports student success.

Choice words. Johnston (2004) argued that talk is the central tool of a teacher's trade, an action that positions children in relation to each other and within their worlds. Language was an essential tool for the teachers in this study. They used their words to build relationships and to demand academic and behavioral excellence. They were outspoken advocates for their students' safety, basic needs, and emotional wellbeing. They described their acts of advocacy as powerful both for the present and for the future. Susie explained the power she felt as a teacher:

I think about that every day, how much power and influence I have over them, and I think a lot of people in teaching just don't realize that, or don't know it. They must not, based on some of the ways they talk to kids, because if you did—

I just feel like as a teacher, especially in elementary school, you have such power to shape the way kids think about themselves. And I can either be a negative influence or try not to be an influence – like be ambivalent or something. Or I could work to be a positive influence, and I would like to be that.

The teachers rarely directly corrected their students, but rather asked questions that gave them the power to direct their own actions. For example Jordan would say, "What am I going to tell you? Is this a third-grade line? Check yourself. Are you doing the right thing?" She explained why asking questions of her students was effective for management:

I think it contributes because they have a reminder. They do a self-check, and so you could kind of see them self-check. Or I'll compliment somebody and they'll say, 'Oh, well, let me fix myself,' and they'll change how they're behaving, and then kind of just having that discussion.

Susie explained her determination to equip her students and to trust them with their choices. "You are a person. You have agency in the world. You can make the change," she explained:

Should you be okay in a not great situation? No. Some people need a little more direction on how to do that and need a little more help in their stepping stones. But this is a conversation I have a lot with my students.

Ground rules, rituals and procedures. Establishing mutually created ground rules was a foundational experience for the teacher candidates' in their preparation program, and this was a strategy that they implemented within their own classrooms in order to support their high expectations for student behavior and to foster trust and mutual respect. Lola described ground rules within her teacher preparation cohort, "I think the ground rules kind of set up the safety net," she recalled. "It was not always pretty, but it was a relatively safe space. We were able to at least not be afraid to truly speak our minds. It was a foundation." Jordan recalled that the establishment of "ground rules" during the teacher preparation program was helpful in maintaining her own beliefs. She explained:

In Maymester, we started off with creating ground rules, which I felt allowed for open conversation and respecting that everybody has their own opinion and pulling from it, and honestly, I've taken that into my teaching career as far as faculty meetings and grade-level meetings. You know, if you value everybody's opinion, maybe you can work together to come up with something. You can say it, and nobody judges you.

Carried into the classroom, establishing ground rules also worked as a safety net for the students. Lola explained:

Well, our rules in our classroom-- of course I allow them to participate in that process. I don't just say, 'Here are the rules.' It's all about us interacting with each other and with the people around us. You know, we offer it within a school. Of course we have our community, but how do we respect everyone in it and all of that?

Ground rules, routines, and procedures gave the classroom community a set of logical and clear expectations and predictable routines to follow, strengthening the students' abilities not only to make their own positive decisions, but also to support each other as a community in making good choices. Jordan explained:

You are affecting somebody else, no matter where you are. We're in a classroom full of 23 kids, so if I have to get on you for doing something, then they're not getting what they need. So kind of that [idea that we are] working together, we're all here for the same purpose. I really like them to self-reflect, and they kind of take care of each other like a family.

Ground rules and clear consistent procedures fostered trust, respect, and ultimately, success by proactively aligning the community about expectations.

Logical Consequences. All four teachers referenced and were observed using logical consequences as part of the classroom management approach. On occasions when students did not follow rules and classroom routines, they knew that they could expect the logical consequences of their actions rather than an arbitrary or inconsistent punishment. Michelle explained the importance of choosing consequences that make sense for occasions when students fail to keep ground rules:

It kind of goes back to being proactive instead of reactive and thinking about the things that you're doing before you do them and also having logical consequences. I mean a child using bad language, losing five minutes of recess. He probably needs those five minutes of recess as a break, so I think that is really important too.

Michelle also set up her classroom community to be logically responsive to student needs instead of deeming these behaviors as discipline issues:

But you also kind of have to choose your battles. I still have about seven boys that are really active and my expectation for them is not, you have to sit in your seat all day long. 'You can stand up. You can move around; you can do the things that you need to do.'

With the implementation of logical consequences, students had the opportunity to make conscious and logical decisions about their behavioral choices. Lola explained:

I kind of make the kids responsible for themselves. I definitely allow them to kind of help each other out, and I make it so that it's definitely logical consequences, – 'Alright guys, so if you take my time, I have a job to do, I'm going to take your time

later. There's going to be something that you want to do that you're going to have to wait on, because we have to get this lesson done.' But, I also make it so that they're responsible for each other, because they know very well what they're supposed to be doing. 'So if you see your folks, someone that you know, one of your friends cutting up, you might want to help them out, because, otherwise, you're going to have to reap the consequences for that as well.'

Consistent and logical consequences based on ground rules that the classroom community had created set the stage for the teachers' students to make conscious choices and to realize that they had agency within the community and more broadly in their personal lives. Autonomous thinking was a skill that fit with the high expectations the teachers held for their students. They viewed them as young people who would one day become adults with serious life choices to make for themselves and their families. Lola explained the importance of developing agency within her students:

That's why I'm such a big proponent of autonomy, because if you have the ability to think for yourself, that can totally influence so many other parts of your life. So, if you are constantly thinking, 'Well, do I agree with what's going on? Do I disagree with what's going on? Why do I not agree with this?' Whether they're out socially or whatever, it can totally help them just kind of adjust to society and do what they need to do. Maybe not just become a drone, but – Be a leader.

Logical consequences followed ground rules created by the classroom community and consistent routines and procedures to set up an environment where students could be successful and fairly autonomous in their school environment.

Implications and Conclusion

The teachers in this study credited their teacher preparation program for giving them the tools they needed to enact their visions for advocacy within their work. They enacted a vision of anticipatory advocacy in order to positively influence their students' lives in the present and in the future. In the process, their actions produced success for themselves and for their students, and they also served as a powerful defense mechanism that shielded them from professional weathering forces, protecting and further strengthening their core beliefs (Hammerness, 2006). Culturally responsive classroom management was one tool acquired during their preparation that supported their efforts to build relationships, to foster academic and behavioral excellence, to care and advocate for their students' safety, basic needs and emotional wellbeing and to advocate for them both in the present and for the future.

Although all four teachers had different personalities, they had similar core beliefs and expectations that guided their similar classroom management methods. While there is evidence that their core beliefs, to some level, predated their participation in the certification program, the certification program appeared to give the teachers common vocabulary, theories, and methods to implement culturally responsive classroom management, which in turn strengthened their core beliefs, fostered successful student outcomes, and bolstered their commitments to their urban school contexts. Research, such as presented here, reveals important connections between teacher preparation and effective teaching in urban high-poverty schools, which has practical implications for all stakeholders concerned with this population of students and families.

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