Learning Classroom Management: Moving teachers from theory to practice in order to promote student success

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Introduction

The topic of classroom management can be polarizing. Some seasoned educators warn against the common novice teacher mistake of trying to be the kids' friend, stressing the importance of making it clear that misbehavior will not be tolerated. Others believe, if the teacher is good enough at teaching, every kid will be engaged, and behavior problems will simply not surface. With the emphasis on the ways teachers make their authority understood, or on behavior management as something to be avoided, the central issue is ignored: how are teachers ever going to be effective if they are not prepared to manage their classrooms, promote positive behaviors in children, and address challenging behavior when it exists?

A report by The National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) looking at teacher preparation in classroom management, specifically highlighting the course descriptions and degree requirements of a sampling of higher education institutions across the country, found that little instruction is offered to novice teachers in classroom management and when it is offered, it is often disjointed and goes no further than theoretical basics (Greenberg, Putnam, & Walsh, 2014). The report goes on to note that the teacher preparation dilemma is not merely the result of gaps in coursework. It cites the larger issue of a lack of consensus amongst teacher preparation programs on exemplary research-based strategies for classroom management, and how this lack of consensus leads to greater confusion concerning what is expected of teachers. As the report states, "The closest the field comes to an endorsed approach [to classroom management] is the apparent conviction that teachers should be able to rise to a level of instructional virtuosity that eliminates the need for defined strategies to manage a classroom" (Greenberg, Putnam, & Walsh, 2014, p. ii). It is therefore no wonder that young teachers receive the message that classroom management strategies are only needed by those who lack overall teaching ability. As a result, these teachers are left to their own devices to cobble together a response to challenging behaviors in the classroom.

This message seems to bear a striking similarity to the message adults often give children about behavioral expectations. Without any intentional instruction, practice in social skills, or clearly articulated expectations, children are expected to simply know how to behave. When children demonstrate that they do not *know* how to behave, they are often judged as "naughty," "out of control," or "defiant." When teachers demonstrate that they do not know how to prevent or address challenging behavior, they are judged as "inexperienced," "soft," or simply "ineffective."

With this in mind, the authors of this paper intend to explore strategies and solutions responding to the following questions:

- *Why* is teacher preparation in classroom management and child behavior essential?

- *What* do teachers need to learn in order to prevent and address challenging behavior effectively?

- *How* can teacher professional development move   beyond theory to an increase in applicable classroom management skills?

Strategies & Solutions:
Why is teacher preparation in classroom management and child behavior essential?

Research on the reasons teacher leave the profession can help us understand why classroom management must be acknowledged as a central skill in teacher preparation.

Teacher Retention

In a report from the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education on "What Makes a Teacher Effective" (What Makes a Teacher Effective, 2010-2014), which reviews current research on teacher preparation, the authors found that well-prepared teachers were more likely to stay in teaching. An often-cited reason for teachers leaving the profession is high levels of stress due to child behavior, as well as a lack of meaningful, on-going professional development and mentoring.

The cost of increasing teacher turnover is high, both financially and in potential talent lost. But, the disruption to the lives of students and families it causes is often forgotten. When a teacher is not able to manage the behavior of a few students, it gives powerfully negative messages to the entire class about their own worth and potential. When a teacher quits because of unmanageable child behavior, she/he sends the message that the group of children are a lost cause.

Lower Child Expulsion

In a national study of expulsion from preschool, Gilliam (2005) found that when teachers had access to mental health consultation for their students, the likelihood of expulsion dropped significantly. Indeed, even in the states that found decreases in child expulsion, teachers still insisted upon greater access to mental health consultation services. And yet, when asked to describe the element of the mental health consultation most helpful, teachers named the provision of "classroom-based strategies for dealing with challenging student behavior"(Gilliam, 2005, p. 12).

What if educators were prepared with these classroom strategies for addressing challenging behavior earlier? What if coursework in social-emotional development included strategies for preventing challenging behavior that built upon teachers' skills? A strong argument can be made that if these areas of teacher competency were prioritized through pre-service and in-service training, the results could make a positive impact on teacher retention, child expulsion rates, and the demand on specialized resources, such as mental health consultation.

What do teachers need to learn in order to prevent and address challenging behavior effectively?

The National Association of Early Childhood Teacher Educators (NAECTE) clearly states their position on preparation for young children: "Teachers with a sound preparation in early childhood education… are able to meet the social/emotional needs of young children, to support their development of key social skills and to more effectively prevent and modify behavior problems" (NAECTE, Position statements, bylaws, and policies, p. 2).

This position is echoed in the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care Competencies for Early Education and Care and Out-of-School Time Educators, and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's Model System for Educator Evaluation Teacher Rubric. As seen in Table 1 and Table 2, there is specific mention of the competencies and indicators supporting social emotional growth, including preventing and addressing challenging behavior in both descriptions of teacher competence

Table 1:

Excerpts from Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care Core competencies for Early Education and Care and Out-of-School Time Educators (2010)

Area 1: Understanding Growth and Development of Children and Youth	**Area 2:** Guiding and Interacting with Children and Youth	**Area 5:** Learning Environments and Implementing Curriculum
Creating a safe, nurturing, and challenging learning environment that encompasses developmentally appropriate practices, establishes foundations for future growth, and engages young people in building social skills and knowledge.	Using appropriate guidance techniques for specific ages and developmental stages based on realistic and developmentally appropriate expectations for the behavior of children and youth and appropriate guidance techniques for specific ages and developmental stages.	Recognizing characteristics of high quality environments and utilizing strategies such as: consistent schedules and routines, transition activities for moving from one activity to another, interesting materials and activities appropriate by age group, and arranging a classroom to enhance children's learning.
	Recognizing factors that impact behavior and implementing strategies to help children and youth develop self-regulation, self-concept, coping mechanisms, self-comfort skills, and positive interactions with their peers and adults.	

Table 2:

Excerpts from Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's Model System for Educator Evaluation Teacher Rubric (2012)

Indicator	Level of Teaching Practice Proficient	Level of Teaching Practice Exemplary
Indicator II-B. Learning Environment: Creates and maintains a safe and collaborative learning environment that motivates students to take academic risks, challenge themselves, and claim ownership of their learning.	**Proficient:** Uses rituals, routines, and appropriate responses that create and maintain a safe physical and intellectual environment where students take academic risks and most behaviors that interfere with learning are prevented.	**Exemplary:** Uses rituals, routines, and proactive responses that create and maintain a safe physical and intellectual environment where students take academic risks and play an active role—individually and collectively—in preventing behaviors that interfere with learning. Is able to model this element.
II-B-2. Collaborative Learning Environment.	**Proficient:** Develops students' interpersonal, group, and communication skills and provides opportunities for students to learn in groups with diverse peers.	**Exemplary:** Teaches and reinforces interpersonal, group, and communication skills so that students seek out their peers as resources. Is able to model this practice.
Indicator II-C. Cultural Proficiency: Actively creates and maintains an environment in which students' diverse backgrounds, identities, strengths, and challenges are respected.	**Proficient:** Consistently uses strategies and practices that are likely to enable students to demonstrate respect for and affirm their own and others' differences related to background, identity, language, strengths, and challenges.	**Exemplary:** Establishes an environment in which students respect and affirm their own and others' differences and are supported to share and explore differences and similarities related to background, identity, language, strengths, and challenges. Is able to model this practice.
II-C-2. Maintains Respectful Environment.	**Proficient:** Anticipates and responds appropriately to conflicts or misunderstandings arising from differences in backgrounds, languages, and identities.	**Exemplary:** Anticipates and responds appropriately to conflicts or misunderstandings arising from differences in backgrounds, languages, and identities in ways that lead students to be able to do the same independently. Is able to model this practice.
Indicator IV-E. Shared Responsibility: Shares responsibility for the performance of all students within the school.	**Proficient:** Within and beyond the classroom, consistently reinforces school-wide behavior and learning expectations for all students, and contributes to their learning by sharing responsibility for meeting their needs.	**Exemplary:** Individually and with colleagues develops strategies and actions that contribute to the learning and productive behavior of all students at the school. Is able to model this element.

Considering these teacher standards, it is not only incumbent upon teacher preparation programs and ongoing professional development opportunities to provide high-quality training that fulfills these categories, the standards themselves could be considered an element of the solution. Simply put, teacher performance indicators could be distilled into competencies found to be effective in classroom management.

The National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) asserts that in order to have a well-managed classroom, teachers must plan and implement daily routines before any misbehavior has a chance to erupt; and they must establish the right kinds of interactions with students to consistently maintain focus on instruction (Greenberg, Putnam, & Walsh, 2014). In that effort, the NCTQ identified five research-based classroom management strategies essential in teacher training:

1. **RULES:** establish and teach classroom rules to communicate expectations for behavior

2. **ROUTINES:** build structure and establish routines to help guide students in a wide variety of situations

3. **PRAISE:** reinforce positive behavior, using praise and other means

4. **CONSEQUENCES:** consistently impose consequences for misbehavior

5. **ENGAGEMENT:** foster and maintain student engagement by teaching interesting lessons that include opportunities for active student participation (Greenberg, Putnam, & Walsh, 2014, p. 3)

These five strategies do indeed crystalize a good deal of what is described in teacher performance indicators related to classroom management, and provide a strong example of clearly described competencies.

Finding consensus in teacher competencies for preventing and addressing challenges within the classroom environment is an essential first step. But, considering the reported lack of teacher training in classroom management beyond theory, it is essential to investigate how teachers can be trained in order to make that crucial move from theory to practice.

How can teacher professional development move beyond theory to an increase in applicable classroom management skills?

In an analysis of evidence-based classroom curricula and parenting interventions focused on social-emotional development, Barton et al. (2014) concluded, "social-emotional competence involves both preventing challenging behaviors and intentionally teaching specific social-emotional skills" (Barton et al., 2014, p. 3). We assert that the classroom management skills we seek in teachers must also be intentionally taught, which means providing teachers the opportunity for practicing the skills concretely in an effort to reach mastery.

The growing emphasis on evaluating teachers by observable indicators of skill calls for greater understanding of competency-based education methods in teacher preparations programs. While the term competency-based education

describes a set of principles, the two principles that seem especially salient to the discussion of teacher preparation are:

- Learning outcomes emphasize application of knowledge and skills, and

- Effective use of rapid feedback (Sturgis & Patrick, 2010)

The standards and indicators by which we measure teachers' competency can be further defined as observable skills. Teacher preparation in classroom management should focus on observable skills as outcomes to coursework, providing opportunities for practice, but also including self-reflection on skill mastery and the timely feedback of a mentor or coach. Indeed, research shows that the use of coaching is essential in adult skill-building (Joyce & Showers, 2002), and is specifically effective in cultivating demonstrated classroom management skills in teachers (Artman-Meeker, Hemmeter, & Snyder, 2014). With this framework in mind, teacher preparation programs can examine their offerings with a focus on improving the bridge from theory to practice.

Conclusion

If we are truly going to raise the standards of teacher preparation, we must start with a firm grasp of what professional skills each teacher needs to do his or her job. Being able to provide a positive learning environment is the stage on which all other teacher skills can be demonstrated. A thorough understanding of how elements such as classroom design, schedule, routine, and rules affect the behavior of children and adults alike must be paired with formal instruction on how children build social and emotional skills. To provide such an environment, teachers need to feel confident in the use of a variety of strategies to prevent, minimize, and address challenging behaviors. And, like any student, novice teachers require a variety of learning opportunities in addition to didactic instruction, including observation, practice, and feedback in order to feel confident in the use of classroom management techniques. Without this element of teacher preparation, we will continue to throw teachers into classrooms, and watch them either sink or swim. Teachers deserve more, and so do the children.

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