Learning Environment for First-Year Teachers

INTRODUCTION

Before new teachers step into their own classrooms, how can they best prepare? What skills and knowledge bridge the gap between fear and confidence for teachers who are tasked with leading a group of students for the first time outside the confines of a practicum or student-teaching scenario? Teachers coming in to the profession receive preparatory training, but much of that training centers on academic subject matter with less focus on strategies for managing the day-to-day operation of a classroom (Stough & Montague, 2015). When teachers make the step from student to teacher, they might be surprised and overwhelmed by the "reality shock" of their experience (Dicke, Elling, Schmeck, & Leutner, 2015). Knowledge of the subject matter is not enough if the classroom is not functioning in such a way that a teacher is able to effectively deliver the content to the students (Sueb, 2013). In this literature review, we'll discuss the topic of how new teachers can create a structured, supportive learning environment that serves both their students and themselves.

CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

Classroom management is a multi-faceted and diverse topic that is not easy to define succinctly. Emmer and Sabornie avoid providing a formal definition in the introduction to the second edition of the Handbook of Classroom Management but do provide a general framework with the statement that "classroom management is clearly about establishing and maintaining order in a group-based educational system whose goals include student learning as well as social and emotional growth" (2015, p. 8).

Pas, Cash, O'Brennan, Debnam, and Bradshaw refer to classroom management as "the foundation for effective teaching" (2015, p. 138). A lack of effective classroom management skills has been cited as the number one source of stress for teachers as they make the transition from training programs into the classroom (Dicke et al., 2015) and as the reason that some teachers choose to leave the profession early in their careers (Kennedy, Hirsch, Rodgers, Bruce, & Lloyd, 2017).

Younger, less experienced teachers tend to have more problems with classroom management than their more experienced colleagues, and those who have pursued alternative teaching certification have an even greater disadvantage. Compared to four or five years for an education degree program, alternative certification programs are typically one to two years in length, which allows even less time and opportunity for learning and practicing classroom management skills (Stough & Montague, 2015).

In the 2012-13 academic year, approximately 15 percent of new teachers were reported as completing their educational requirements through an alternative certification program (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

> *Providing interventions that help these teachers feel more supported and more effective at their jobs could be beneficial to helping to improve their perceptions of the classroom* **(Mitchell & Bradshaw, 2013)***, which could ultimately lead to greater retention.*

Classroom management skills need to be taught explicitly and practiced. There is a lack of evidence to support that they are gained with experience in the classroom. (Stough & Montague, 2015), but, given the opportunity, the skills are learnable (Raczynski & Horne, 2015), and even those teachers who already exhibit strength in this area can benefit from further professional development. (Stough & Montague, 2015).

Classroom management programs

The literature cites several existing classroom management programs, many of which have been in use for more than a decade and have been shown to produce positive results. While these programs generally include a professional development component for teacher training, they often also include components for student and parent training. Examples used in the studies we reviewed include The Incredible Years and Positive Behavior Interventions and Support (PBIS). The Incredible Years includes training for teachers on topics such as being clear when telling students what they need to do and teaching students to solve problems with classmates and regulate their emotions (Hutchings et al., 2013). PBIS teaches practices such as opportunities to respond, behavior-specific praise, and pre-corrections (Kennedy et al., 2017).

CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT IS NOT JUST ABOUT BEHAVIOR

Teachers' implementation of classroom management has been shown to downplay its complexity and typically focuses on behavior while neglecting other factors (Kwok, 2017). Beyond behavior, engaging students, involving parents, and establishing positive, consistent practices are all important aspects of classroom management and key to creating an effective, well-functioning classroom.

Student engagement

A teacher's motivational support in the classroom has been linked to student learning outcomes, though it isn't always clear to teachers what the connection is. Recent research has shown that engagement could be the link that completes that equation (Shernoff, Ruzek, & Sinha, 2017).

The way in which a teacher manages a classroom and interacts with students can affect how students perceive the environment (Mitchell & Bradshaw, 2013). The quality of the learning environment can, in turn, affect student engagement (Shernoff, Ruzek, & Sinha, 2017). By promoting engagement during the school day, whether through group activities (Gillies, 2015), using technology (Mason Bolick, & Bartels, 2015), or by eliciting academic responses (Cartledge et al., 2015), students become active participants in the classroom management process, stay on task more easily, are less likely to cause disruptions or behavior problems, and generally learn more (Cartledge, Lo, Vincent, & Robinson-Ervin, 2015).

A teacher's approach and the specific strategies that the teacher employs in the classroom can directly contribute not only to students' motivation, but also to their amotivation (Legault, Green-Demers, & Pelletier, 2006). Legault et al. suggest ways that teachers can enhance motivation among their students, which also highlight the potential link between classroom management and self-determination theory (SDT). These include:

- Encouraging a sense of competence.

- Supporting student autonomy.

- Promoting a sense of relatedness.

- Communicating effectively and providing constructive feedback as well as feedback that will help students use what they learn.

- Re-examining tasks that students seem to be finding uninspiring or boring.

Much like teachers need to be taught how to implement classroom management strategies and then spend time practicing these strategies, students need to be taught and given opportunity to practice appropriate classroom conduct. Beyond teaching academic skills, teachers should explicitly teach "soft skills" such as how to work and communicate effectively in groups, how to ask and answer questions (Giles, 2015), how to cope with stress (McCaslin, Sotardi, & Vega, 2015), and how to behave in class (Lewis, Mitchell, Trussell, & Newcomer, 2015). For example, Giles (2015) cites the importance of teaching students how to participate in high-level discussions, which opens up the potential for the teacher to then ask questions that challenge students and make them think

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critically about their learning. Students trained in such a way can actively engage in a two-way conversation rather than relying on passively receiving one-way communication from the teacher.

Parental involvement

Parents' involvement in their child's learning can support teachers' efforts in the classroom. With parental cooperation, a teacher's classroom management and instruction can be enhanced (Walker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2015). Inviting students' families into the classroom, getting to know parents' goals for their children, and keeping the lines of communication open are all components of parental involvement.

Both parents and schools have goals for their children. For example, schools might have a goal of developing students to be skilled, productive citizens, while parents might have a similar goal that their children lead an economically productive life. Inviting students' families into the classroom can open a two-way discussion of goals and provide parents and teachers the opportunity to discuss how the two sides intersect (Walker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2015).

Technology can supplement these personal connections and assist teachers with keeping parents informed and engaged about what is going on in the classroom. Email, class blogs, and social media are all potential avenues for reaching parents, and teachers might choose to employ one or more of these tools for their classroom (Mason Bolick & Bartels, 2015).

Positive interpersonal relationships

As studies have shown with parenting methods (Walker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2015), the most effective classroom managers are cited as those who are firm but caring, showing what is often termed as "warmth" (Raczynski & Horne, 2015) toward students.

Raczynski and Horne (2015) refer to a "high structure, high support" classroom and cite listening as the most important skill teachers can employ related to classroom management. They indicate that effective listening is characterized by respect, dignity, empathy, and caring, and they argue that students sometimes simply need someone to listen to them in order to work through a problem.

After studying classroom management beliefs of teachers in an urban school, Kwok (2017) found that those teachers with a more relational approach to classroom management tended also to be rated higher by field instructors for instructional quality. Based on his finding, he speculates that a focus on relationships could be the key in distinguishing the most effective teachers.

Supportive classroom environment

Proactive, positive classroom management has been shown to contribute to a supportive, constructive classroom environment. Whereas, an increased reliance on exclusionary discipline techniques has been shown to correlate with student perceptions of a lack of order or discipline in their classrooms (Mitchell & Bradshaw, 2013).

Employing positive strategies such as precorrections, consistent rules and expectations, praise, and student involvement in setting rules can help teachers to build a supportive, constructive classroom (Mitchell & Bradshaw, 2013).

Physical changes to how a classroom is organized can also have an effect on the environment and change the dynamics of class behavior and interactions. Each classroom is different, but two potential starting points are providing students with adequate room to move about, which facilitates group work and active learning (Pas et al., 2015) and arranging the room to avoid crowding and distractions (Sugai & Simonsen, 2015).

For students who are struggling with behavior, an overall change to the classroom environment

could be the motivation that they need to make individual changes that align with the new dynamic (Pas et al., 2015). Hutchings, Martin-Forbes, Daley, and Williams (2013) found that students whose teachers began using the Incredible Years program in their classrooms showed less negative behavior toward the teacher and less off-task behavior than they had before the program was implemented. The authors suggested that the students might have been more motivated toward compliant behavior after they perceived teachers responding to them in a less negative way.

Consistency

When teachers are assigned to their own classroom, it is generally the first time that they are responsible for establishing the routines that will set the tone for the school year. Establishing clear expectations early on and maintaining consistency are key to successful classroom management. Rules and precedents should be established beginning on the first day of school whenever possible. Otherwise, there is the potential for negative student behaviors to become normative (Pas et al., 2015). A pattern of positive interactions, on the other hand, will generally lead to positive patterns and relationships over the long-term (Wubbels et al., 2015).

DEMOGRAPHIC CONSIDERATIONS

Classroom management is not a one-size-fits-all proposition. A teacher's goals and strategies will vary based on students' backgrounds, needs, and grade level.

Cultural considerations

Today's classrooms are becoming more and more diverse. Tartwijk, Brok, Veldman, and Wubbels (2009) argue that the multicultural classroom is becoming the "standard" classroom. Traditions, religion, ethnicity, and native language all contribute to a multicultural environment.

Each classroom is unique, and by learning about the distinctive cultures among their students, teachers have the opportunity to better understand students' points of view and make adjustments to their methods, communication patterns, and instructional strategies to best match those students' needs (Brown, 2003). Wubbels et al. refer to teachers' ability to "immerse themselves in the lives of their students" (2015, p. 373). Values held by one culture might not be widely accepted or understood in another culture. For example, students from a culture that favors the group over the individual might struggle to adapt to a classroom culture that emphasizes competition among students (Cartledge et al., 2015). A teacher's awareness of these potential conflicts can help in building a more positive, inclusive classroom environment.

Teachers involved in a classroom management initiative in a multicultural setting can measure their progress using self-assessment tools, such as the Cultural Responsiveness Assessment and 5 x 5 Walkthrough from Indiana University (Cartledge et al., 2015).

Tartwijk et al. suggest several practical ideas that can help teachers create a positive multicultural learning environment:

- Stick to your own rules.

- Rules and procedures are essential to order, especially at the start of a class.

- Sometimes it is better to ignore small misbehaviors.

- Calm or silence is sometimes better for correction than yelling or taking another intense action.

- Provide rational, rather than controlling, arguments for following rules.

- Build positive relationships with the students.

- Engage in informal communications, perhaps as students are entering the classroom, as a way to get to know students better.

- Anticipate student responses to instruction and keep that in mind as you're planning.

- Be proactive in encouraging student attention and engagement.

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Grade level considerations

At the high school level, Shernoff, Kelly, et al. (2016) considered classroom management from the perspective of environmental complexity, which attempts to balance environmental challenge with environmental support to achieve a state that maximizes student learning. Results of the group's research indicated that environmental support was more positively associated with student engagement than was environmental challenge. This support was manifested in things such as feedback, quality relationships, and motivation. Whereas, environmental challenge was more positively associated with academic intensity, manifested in things such as complex and challenging tasks and clear goals.

Other research has also indicated a link between relationships and behavior for high school students. Going beyond asking rote questions to providing leadership opportunities in the context of classroom activities seems to be an effective way for teachers to promote positive engagement at the high school level. Classrooms with more consistent behavior among students tended to have teachers who provided more opportunities to respond, more positive recognition of behavior, fewer statements of disapproval, and less use of reactive behavior management (Pas et al., 2015).

In middle school, students are in the midst of a transition into adolescence and might benefit significantly from the support that comes from positive teacher-student relationships. Establishing these relationships could help teachers in the middle grades to be more effective and bring about more positive outcomes for their students (Walker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2015).

In elementary contexts, involving the entire classroom in behavior monitoring can be an effective strategy. Evidence-based classroom management practices like the Good Behavior Game can be used to support this process (Oliver et al., 2015).

BEST PRACTICES FOR CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT TRAINING

The research suggests that simply providing teachers with a professional development course is not enough to elicit meaningful transfer of classroom management techniques (Kennedy et al., 2017). Additional support is needed to help ensure teachers' success in implementing what they've learned. Classroom management practices might not be effective if the teacher does not implement the practice accurately, does not use the practice in its entirety, or does not continue following the practice consistently over time (Oliver, Wehby, & Nelson, 2015).

Oliver et al. (2015) argue that finding methods to both support and maintain high levels of accuracy in teachers' practice of classroom management strategies is an important goal of a professional development design. Evidence shows that, without support, accuracy tends to decrease within 10 days after a teacher implements a new practice. Modeling and follow-up coaching sessions from a more experienced practitioner can aid in retention and implementation. Other types of post-training support, such as self-reflection checklists, can also be valuable in helping teachers consistently practice the strategies that they've learned in training.

Video modeling and coaching

With video modeling, teachers can view and analyze a video recording of themselves or others performing a classroom management technique (Kennedy et al., 2017). The video format provides the benefit of being able to record, pause, and replay a scenario to reinforce learning.

In a study by Kennedy et al. that used key components of the PBIS model, teachers in the treatment group were shown a CAP-TV video presentation that first explained the PBIS classroom management interventions and then demonstrated their use. The presentation was followed up with one-on-one coaching sessions and classroom observation to check whether teachers were

implementing the interventions. Teachers in the comparison group attended a professional development training that involved a classroom management lecture and discussion and they did not receive any follow-up coaching. Results showed that teachers in the treatment group employed PBIS interventions at a higher rate than those in the comparison group.

When they are shown a video demonstration as part of a professional development class, teachers have reported a desire to see authentic examples that depict real-world classrooms similar to the ones where they are teaching or will teach, rather than unrealistic, idealized examples (Larson, 2015).

Self-reflection and checklists

Journaling and checklists can help teachers reflect on and assess the current state of their own classroom management and set goals to address areas of weakness or unmet needs (Larson, 2015, Stough & Montague, 2015). Using a checklist can also help teachers to ensure that they are accurately and consistently following evidence-based classroom management practices. Once teachers have mastered a given practice, they might find ways to adjust the practice to better meet student outcomes in their specific classroom context. When making such adjustments, keeping notes can help in tracking what was changed and monitoring the resulting outcomes.

Promoting teacher self-efficacy

"Strong and positive associations have been found between teachers' self-efficacy and students' and teachers' perceptions of the quality of teacher-student relationships" (Wubbels et al., 2015, p. 372). By providing first-year teachers with classroom management training and allowing them opportunities to practice what they've learned, we will go a long way in developing a class of teachers that will in turn be effective at the end goal of leading and developing their own students.

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