



Complementary roles of care and behavioral control in classroom management: The self-determination theory perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study examined how classroom management practices—care and behavioral control—were differentially associated with students' engagement, misbehavior, and satisfaction with school, using a large representative sample of 3196 Grade 9 students from 117 classes in Singapore. Results of hierarchical linear modeling showed differential relations. After controlling for students' gender and socioeconomic status, both care and behavioral control were positively related to student engagement. Moreover, behavioral control was a significant negative predictor of classroom misbehavior and care was a significant positive predictor of satisfaction with school. Our findings underscore the importance of blending care and behavioral control to achieve multiple goals of classroom management.

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1. Introduction

Accumulating research has revealed that classroom management is a critical component of effective teaching (e.g., Brophy, 2006; Carter, Cushing, Sabers, Stein, & Berliner, 1988; Doyle, 1990; Emmer & Stough, 2001; Good & Grouws, 1977; Jones, 1996; Soar & Soar, 1979; Torff & Sessions, 2005; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1993), but too many teachers were distressed with the ineffectiveness of classroom management. For example, teacher stress and negative emotion are often related to student misbehavior (e.g., Blase, 1986; Emmer, 1994; Feitler & Tokar, 1992). In search of the causes of and the cures for the persistent problem of engaging student learning and reducing misbehavior, researchers have adopted a broadened view of classroom management which encompasses not only using control to reduce misbehavior, but also establishing good teacher–student relationships, creating supportive classroom environments, and responding to students' needs for love, respect, and sense of belonging to school (e.g., Allen, 1986; Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps, 1997; Emmer & Gerwels, 2006; Emmer & Stough, 2001; Jones, 1996; Pianta, 2006; Ritter & Hancock, 2007; Watson & Battistich, 2006).

This broadened view takes into consideration the student-centered and humanistic approach to classroom management, emphasizing care, guidance, and self-discipline (Freiberg, 1999). It is also consistent with the prevailing student-centered approach to instruction. However, the humanistic approach to classroom management has not kept pace with instructional reforms. As Morse

(1994) commented: "It is sad to note that proposals for school reform or special education inclusion seldom give attention to conditions which would facilitate the school as a setting for continuity of caring for children." (p. 132). In practice, conceptions of classroom management typically remain rooted in behaviorism and the most common approach to classroom management is controlling student misbehavior (McCaslin & Good, 1992).

Understanding how care and behavioral control are related to student outcomes has become an increasingly important topic in classroom management and schooling (Jones & Jones, 2004). Especially when recommendations for school reforms are being suggested, research on this issue assumes a particularly important role. However, empirical research that examined the roles of both care and behavioral control is relatively scarce in the classroom management literature. Accordingly, the present study views care and behavioral control as complementary components of classroom management and seeks to provide empirical support for this view. We focus not only on how care and behavioral control are differentially related to behavioral outcomes (misbehavior and engagement), but also to affective outcomes (satisfaction with school).

2. Theoretical framework

In this article, we used self-determination theory as a theoretical framework for understanding the roles of behavioral control and care in student outcomes. Self-determination theory emphasizes the significance of three basic psychological needs in people's self-motivation and healthy psychological growth—the needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy. According to self-

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determination theory, social-contextual conditions that provide people with the opportunity to satisfy their basic needs lead to enhanced motivation, optimal functioning, and psychological well-being, whereas environmental factors that thwart these basic needs result in opposite outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

The application of motivation theories to management practices is not new. As early as 1950s, *Liken (1953)* argued that motivation is the core of management in organizational settings. However, motivation theories have seldom been linked to management practices in classroom settings despite recent advances in research and theorization. In the current study, we provide a self-determination perspective on classroom management. There are a number of benefits for doing so. First, self-determination theory helps to resolve the empirical and conceptual confusion of the control construct in the classroom management literature by deepening our understanding of the differences between behavioral control and external control. In addition, it provides a reasonable explanation of why behavioral control does not undermine an individual's sense of autonomy (Deci, 2008). Second, self-determination theory provides a psychological explanation of the beneficial effects of teacher care from the needs satisfaction perspective. Third, self-determination theory provides a theoretical lens for researchers and teachers to view classroom management from an adaptive motivational and positive psychology perspective by emphasizing the importance of moving beyond the traditional function of classroom management (i.e., reduction of misbehavior) to include other key indicators of effectiveness such as engagement and psychological well-being.

3. Teacher control

3.1. Conceptualization of control

The effectiveness of the control approach to classroom management has been hotly debated. Some empirical findings show that teacher control could reduce misbehavior and increase desirable behavior (e.g., *Nicholls & Houghton, 1995*), whereas other findings show that controlling contexts undermined intrinsic motivation and produced passivity (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999; Lewis, Romi, Katz, & Qui, 2008; McCaslin & Good, 1992; Ryan & La Guardia, 1999). To answer the question of whether control is desirable or not, it is important to make a clear distinction between external control and behavioral control. External control refers to the use of salient rewards and deadlines to coerce or pressure individuals to think, behave, or feel in certain ways. The opposite of external control is autonomy support, which refers to conditions that facilitate the experience of volition, choice, and freedom (Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Deci, 2006). Therefore, external control is expected to undermine students' sense of autonomy and intrinsic motivation.

In this article, teacher control was defined and operationalized as teachers' attempts to stop, reduce, and correct misbehavior, and to maintain desirable behavior. This operationalization of teacher control refers to behavior control but not external control because it aims at regulation of student behavior by rules and expectations to create an orderly environment. Behavior control is related to conformity to social rules and expectations. In the educational psychology and self-determination literature, a contextual variable closely related to the concept of behavioral control is structure, which refers to information concerning expectations, guidelines, contingencies, or limits that are present and operative within some social context (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Deci, 2008; Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Reeve, 2002). The term "structure" is more often used in instructional contexts, whereas the term "behavioral control" is frequently used in classroom management

contexts. Because both behavioral control and structure are concerned about providing consistent rules, and expectations, *Deci (2008)* argued that behavioral control is closer to the concept of structure than to the concept of external control given the way they are defined in self-determination theory.

Why would behavioral control and structure not undermine students' sense of autonomy? Self-determination theory provides an explanation for this issue. Social interactions are governed by rules and regulations. Structure and behavioral control provide rules, expectations, guidelines, and contingencies within some social context. One central issue in self-determination theory is internalization and integration of social rules and values with the sense of self such that social values can be endorsed by the self, and thus is experienced as self-determined (Ryan & Deci, 2000). According to self-determination theory, acting in accordance with social norms is the process of subjective endorsement and ownership of these norms. When social norms and expectations are endorsed by the individual, conforming to these norms is likely to be experienced as self-determined (Vansteenkiste, Zhou, Lens, & Soenens, 2005). Therefore, behavioral control and structure could facilitate the endorsement of social rules and would not diminish the sense of autonomy.

3.2. Empirical evidence and hypotheses

There is evidence that behavioral control was associated with decreased externalized problem behaviors of their children (*Barber, Olsen, & Shagle, 1994*). In addition, *Skinner and Belmont (1993)* found that structure provided by the teacher was positively related to students' behavioral engagement. Consistent with self-determination theory, *Taylor and Ntoumanis (2007)* obtained evidence that the relation between structure and positive student outcomes was mediated by students' perceptions of autonomy and competence. Furthermore, *Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, and Kindermann (2008)* found that teachers' care, provision of structure, and autonomy support were positively related to engaged behavior and emotion, and were negatively related to disaffected behavior and emotion. *Jang and Jeon (2008)* found that both autonomy support and structure make important contribution to supporting students' classroom engagement. In light of our definition and the findings reviewed above, we therefore hypothesized that teacher control would be negatively related to student misbehavior and positively related to student engagement in the classroom.

4. Teacher care

4.1. Conceptualization of care

Teachers' care, warmth, support, and involvement are highlighted in the classroom management (e.g., *Jones & Jones, 2004*), developmental (e.g., *Steinberg, Darling, & Fletcher, 1995*) and educational psychology literature (e.g., *Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Wentzel, 1997*). The meanings and measures of these concepts often overlap with one another. For example, *Diamond et al. (2005)* defined teacher care as the child's perceived care, warmth, understanding, and affection. *Chang (2003)* used the term teacher warmth to refer to the qualities of a teacher who cares about, listens to, likes, respects, and understands their students. *Midgley, Feldlaufer, and Eccles (1989)* defined teacher support as students' perceptions of their teachers' care, friendliness, and fairness. Self-determination theorists used the term involvement to refer to teachers' interest in, emotional support for, and affection toward their students (*Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Skinner & Belmont, 1993*). From the self-determination perspective, teacher involvement leads to positive student outcomes because it satisfies students' basic needs for relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). In the present study, we use the umbrella term teacher

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