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The defining features of teacher talk within autonomy-supportive classroom management

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Autonomy-supportive classroom management removes barriers to learning.
- Enactment of autonomy-supportive classroom management differs along informational and socioemotional continuums.
- Students endorse positive affective responses to teaching with transparency and providing choice.

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ABSTRACT

Classroom management practices were studied in middle school classrooms with positive interpersonal classroom climates, high levels of student engagement, and high levels of autonomy support. Students' motivational responses to autonomy-supportive instructional interactions were explored to understand variability within classroom management practices identified and described in this study as providing autonomy support. Our findings suggest proactive classroom management is enacted through instructional interactions wherein teachers scaffold students' autonomous self-regulatory capacities that sustain student engagement in classroom activities by supporting students' strategy use, transferring responsibility to students, encouraging students' to structure physical and social contexts to support learning, and promoting prosocial behavior.

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1. Introduction

One of the most neglected aspects of a teacher's instructional practice is classroom management despite the fact that classroom management is one of the most prominent aspects of instructional quality (Kunter, Baumert, & Köller, 2007). Moreover, no clear cross-national differences appear in the practices of teachers or the pervasiveness of one particular kind of classroom management approach (Wubbels, 2011), suggesting an international, broad-reaching need for research in this area of teaching and teacher education.

Historically, classroom management has been conceptualized almost exclusively as teachers' reactions to students' misbehavior rather than teachers' proactive encouragement of student initiative and thinking (McCaslin & Good, 1992). However, such a conceptualization may have adverse motivational and learning consequences. From a motivational perspective, classroom management systems that are reactive and environmentally generated, often based on extrinsic rewards, are less likely to enhance student engagement as compared to classroom management strategies that focus on learning, autonomous self-regulation, and subjective well-being (Reeve & Jang, 2006). From a learning perspective, compliance-oriented management strategies and systems do not align well with promoting students' higher-order, complex thinking (McCaslin & Good, 1992).

In the dynamic global 21st century, cognitive tools that youth might employ to help them achieve complex and evolving goals are increasingly required in the labor market and critically needed for productive contributions in the civic arena (Larson & Angus, 2011). Thus, a central question relevant to teaching and teacher education internationally is how teachers can manage their classrooms in ways that support such student development.

The purpose of this study is to extend classroom management theories by developing richer conceptualizations of how teachers manage classrooms in autonomy-supportive ways through

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scaffolding students' self-regulatory capacities. To do so, we analyzed teacher talk within classroom management interactions in six public middle school classrooms with positive interpersonal classroom climates, high levels of student engagement in classroom activities, and high levels of autonomy support. The main goals of this study were (a) to identify classroom management practices within autonomy-supportive instructional interactions in participating teachers' classrooms and (b) to describe the specific ways teachers provided autonomy support in the service of managing student behavior. As such, our guiding research questions included the following:

> Research Question 1: What kinds of classroom management practices occur within autonomy-supportive instructional interactions in middle school classrooms with positive interpersonal climates and high levels of student engagement?
> Research Question 2: In what specific ways do the focal teachers provide autonomy support during instructional interactions aimed at managing student behavior?
> Research Question 3: How do enactment characteristics of autonomy-supportive classroom management relate to students' motivational endorsements of autonomy-supportive instructional interactions?
> Research Question 4: What kinds of affective responses do students have in response to autonomy-supportive classroom management?

1.1. Theories of classroom management

The history of classroom management research reveals several progressive, but overlapping, waves of theory development since the 1960s. Initial research focused on classroom management came from two very different sources—behavioral research and ecological studies (Brophy, 2006). Classroom management applications of behavioral theory typically involve one or more of the following operations: positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement, extinction, response cost punishment, or punishment involving presentation of aversives (Landrum & Kauffman, 2006). Early applications of behavioral techniques focused on shaping individual student behavior through reinforcement (Brophy, 2006) and thus prioritized teachers' reactions to misbehavior. The process-outcome paradigm, an extension of behavioral research, integrated naturally occurring teacher behavior demonstrated in the classroom context into the research focus to establish links between teachers' actions and students' behaviors (Gettinger & Kohler, 2006). For example, Kounin (1970) identified the following teacher actions as related to students' increased focus and decreased misbehavior: withitness, overlapping ability, lesson smoothness and momentum, group altering, and stimulating seatwork. Likewise, Good and Grouws (1977) found teachers' use of accountability differentially predicted student achievement gains dependent upon amount, with moderate (versus low or high) amounts having the strongest association. While these studies attended to student responses to teacher behavior—both reactive and proactive—these studies did not conceptualize classrooms as situated activity settings (Doyle, 2009) wherein the notion of person-environment fit suggests the developmental affordances and constraints of a setting are co-constructed by the participants themselves (Brophy, 2006).

Our work builds upon ecological studies of classroom management by focusing on the transactional source material influencing the social processes within a classroom. Like others working from this perspective, we focus on the developmental implications of management interactions. Namely, we prioritize a focus on student *development* rather than student *behavior* to suggest that classroom management is developmentally instigative. As such, we conceptualize teacher talk during classroom management as on-going, naturally occurring, interaction-specific "interventions" that act as reinforcing feedback loops. These feedback loops become part of the recursive processes in classrooms. Through on-going participation in these interactions students derive self-perceptions—both positive (i.e., "I belong here." "This is for me.") or negative (i.e., "I do not belong here." "This is not for me.") (McCaslin, 2009). These perceptions, in turn, influence students' shorter-term willingness to assent to learn from a teacher particularly when the task is challenging (Erickson et al., 2007) and students' longer-term identities as learners (McCaslin, 2009; Nasir, Snyder, Shah, & Ross, 2013).

1.2. The developmental importance of autonomy support during the transition to adolescence

Autonomy, or the ability to think, feel, and make decisions for oneself, is a developmentally normative process and particularly important to adolescents within the school context (McElhaney, Allen, Stephenson, & Hare, 2009). Adolescents, as they approach higher grade levels, desire more autonomy, yet often the school environment can become "developmentally regressive" and increasingly controlling (Eccles et al., 1991, p. 56). A lack of appropriate support for autonomy may lead to negative psychological or behavioral outcomes and declines in motivation and engagement (Eccles et al., 1991; Zimmer-Gembeck & Collins, 2003). Adolescents build their sense of autonomy through transactions and interactions within the environment (Zimmer-Gembeck & Collins, 2003). Thus, the adequacy of a social context (e.g., a classroom) in meeting autonomous needs determines the level of engagement of the adolescent. This has been empirically supported in a longitudinal school-based study where adolescents' perception of their level of autonomy in classrooms at the beginning of the school year predicted their engagement at the end of the year (Hafen et al., 2012).

2. Methods

During the months of September to December 2012, ten instructional segments were videorecorded in the six focal classrooms using a two-camera digital video system that included a mounted sound mixer and an enhanced wide-angle lens. Based upon previous experience with video research in classrooms, we decided that 10 h of videorecording would provide enough raw footage from which to support robust data selection. These instructional segments (duration 38–72 min) represent naturally occurring intact disciplinary blocks and, therefore, vary in length dependent upon specific school schedules on the day we filmed. The instructional segments were uploaded in Transana 2.52, a multimedia coding software. The three authors coded these instructional segments using a researcher-developed, literature-based coding scheme. Data collection, relevant to this study, also included student surveys (administered in September and April) and student video-viewing sessions (convened in April and May). Further details of the sample, data collection procedures, and data analysis are provided in the sections that follow.

2.1. Sample

During the summer prior to the 2012–2013 academic year, the assistant superintendent of the participating urban school system nominated six teachers (one per K–8 school) who taught grades four through eight and had a history of establishing positive relationships with students. This administrator held the

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