



## Pre-service teachers' episodic memories of classroom management

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### ABSTRACT

This study focused on past excellent teachers' classroom management strategies from the perspective of 148 pre-service teachers. The purpose of the study was to examine how pre-service teachers' memories reflect classroom management models that are typically taught in teacher education coursework prior to their study of those models, as well as to explore memories that did not fit a particular model. Results indicated that pre-service teachers related episodes that clustered on establishing rules, but were less likely to relate experiences based on other strategies such as withitness, smooth transitions, or formal classroom meetings. Implications for teacher education are explored.

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Teacher educators have long recognized that pre-service teachers' beliefs about teaching stem, in part, from the memories they collect as they progress through 12 or more years of observing and interacting with their own elementary, middle, and high school teachers (Clark & Peterson, 1986; Lortie, 1975, 2002; Mead, 1992; Nespor, 1987; Wilson, 1990). Indeed, Levin and He (2008) found that the single most important source for pre-service teachers' beliefs about how to teach comes from what Lortie (2002) coined the "apprenticeship of observation" (p. 61).

While appearing useful for developing beliefs about teaching and an understanding about how to teach, the apprenticeship of observation presents a challenge for teacher educators. Charged with disseminating accepted theories and methods of effective teaching, teacher educators carry out their work in the face of students who, guided by years of teacher memories, tend to filter teacher education coursework according to their established beliefs about how to teach (Calderhead & Robson, 1991; Goodman, 1988). Consequently, it is useful for teacher educators to both recognize and explore students' memories to understand their beliefs about teaching and to determine potential gaps in pre-service teachers' prior knowledge. Careful attention to such prior knowledge can inform teacher education coursework and open avenues for dialog with future teachers.

To that end, this qualitative phenomenological study examined 148 pre-service teachers' handwritten episodic memories about a past teacher (kindergarten through college) who, from the

students' perspective, demonstrated excellence in the classroom. As a teacher educator this collection of memories offered a collection of diverse student experiences for me to explore pre-service teachers' beliefs and prior knowledge.

For example, students recalled practices and strategies that excellent teachers used to build positive classroom relationships, such as cultivating respect and voicing encouragement. Additionally, students recalled strategies that excellent teachers used to build vibrant and productive learning communities, such as organizing cooperative learning activities and communicating high expectations. Exploring pre-service teachers' written memories allowed me to report emerging themes along with rich narrative descriptions to support the themes.

### 1. Purpose

The current study centered on one of the emerging themes – that of past teachers' classroom management strategies. The purpose of this study was to analyze how pre-service teachers' memories reflect classroom management strategies and models that are typically taught in teacher education coursework, as well as to examine memories that may not fit a particular model but have, nonetheless, informed pre-service teachers' beliefs.

I sought to explore the following questions: (1) How do pre-service teachers describe their past excellent teachers' classroom management strategies? (2) To what extent do pre-service teachers' episodic memories implicitly reflect strategies from three selected classroom management models (i.e., Assertive Discipline, Withitness and Group Management, and Choice Theory) prior to study of these models in teacher education coursework? (3) How

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can pre-service teachers' memories and prior knowledge be useful in teacher education coursework?

The rationale for engaging in this inquiry was to offer a window into pre-service teachers' memories and beliefs about classroom management. If pre-service teachers tend to filter teacher education coursework according to their established beliefs, stemming from their memories, then understanding those beliefs is useful as teacher educators help pre-service teachers unwrap and probe their prior beliefs to inform their future practice.

## 2. Literature review

The literature review defines classroom management noting its universal nature and describes classroom management models that have served as a research-based framework for teacher education to inform pre-service teachers' thinking. The related literature further examines how pre-service teachers' memories of past teacher practices help shape their understanding about how to teach. Finally, the literature suggests that teacher educators who purposefully uncover pre-service teachers' prior experiences have a context for meaningfully integrating those experiences with teacher education coursework.

### 2.1. Classroom management

Educators have defined classroom management as the specific ways in which teachers organize and maintain a classroom environment conducive to effective teaching and learning (Brophy, 1996; Doyle, 1986; Duke, 1979). Marzano (2003) suggested that classroom management consists of integrating four areas including establishing rules and procedures, enforcing disciplinary actions, building classroom relationships, and creating a management mind-set.

Students who are preparing to teach indicate that classroom management is a pressing concern as they envision life as a teacher (Balli, 2009). Concern with classroom management tends to be universal despite variations in practice stemming from societal norms in human relationships that influence student and teacher interactions (Shin & Koh, 2008). Indeed, the international similarity of classroom management concerns was highlighted in a study of student teachers in international settings. Comparing current field experiences in one country with previous field experiences in another, student teachers noted that two features of teaching were universal, classroom management and administrative procedures (Roberts, 2006).

### 2.2. Classroom management models

Over the years, educators, psychologists, and researchers have developed a range of classroom management models to help teachers establish effective classroom rules and procedures (Canter & Canter, 1976, 1992; Dreikurs, Grunwald, & Pepper, 1982; Ginott, 1995; Glasser, 1986, 1990; Kounin, 1970; Skinner, 1974). Although variations on classroom management models along with additional strategies regularly appear in teacher education textbooks, a review of four recently published teacher education methods textbooks (Emmer & Evertson, 2009; Henley, 2006; Marzano, 2009; Wilen, Hutchinson, & Ishler, 2007) revealed a common set of three classroom management models: the Assertive Discipline Model, the Withitness and Group Management Model, and the Choice Theory Model.

The common inclusion of these three models indicated acceptance of these models for dissemination and study in teacher education coursework. Based on common textbook inclusion, the Assertive Discipline Model, the Withitness and Group Management

Model, and the Choice Theory Model were selected as a lens through which to explore pre-service teachers' episodic memories of classroom management. Using these classroom management models offers theoretical and philosophical underpinnings for why teachers would choose to implement certain classroom management strategies. Thus, they provide a framework for situating dialog with pre-service teachers about their prior knowledge and beliefs as they study new concepts and formal models. An overview of the three selected models follows.

#### 2.2.1. Assertive Discipline

The Assertive Discipline Model (Canter & Canter, 1976, 1992) is premised on a teacher's right to teach and a student's right to learn. It proposes that the teacher must take charge of the classroom with a predetermined classroom discipline plan composed of rules and procedures intended for optimal classroom functioning. In this model, teachers clearly and firmly assert their expectations for appropriate behavior as well as consequences for misbehavior. Teachers take time at the beginning of the school year to teach students the rules and procedures for how to behave in all classroom situations. Subsequently, teachers implement the rules and procedures by consistently reinforcing appropriate behavior and applying consequences for misbehavior.

The early version of the Assertive Discipline Model (Canter & Canter, 1976) was criticized by some as a traditional behavior modification approach that relied on elements of teacher control and failed to foster student self control (Kohn, 1993). In light of the critique, the updated version of the model (Canter & Canter, 1992) better defined the differences between rules and procedures and placed more emphasis on establishing a positive classroom climate. The updated model includes implementing positive consequences for appropriate student behavior and avoiding knee-jerk harsh consequences for misbehavior. With this clearer conception of its intent, the updated version of the Assertive Discipline Model remains one of several classroom management models that pre-service teachers examine within teacher education coursework.

#### 2.2.2. Withitness and Group Management

A second model commonly found in teacher education textbooks is the Withitness and Group Management Model (Kounin, 1970). This model proposes that teachers must be *with it* to remain aware of what is happening everywhere in the classroom at all times. The crux of this model suggests that even when teachers are concentrating on lesson delivery or helping a small group of students, they need to regularly scan the entire classroom and rapidly assess the extent to which students are attending to the teacher or the task at hand. Teacher adherents to this model develop the ability to multitask in order to quickly address off task behavior while seamlessly continuing with the lesson. Indeed, the model proposes that teachers cannot afford to focus exclusively on one student for much more than a minute if they expect to keep abreast of an entire classroom of diverse students. The model emphasizes smooth transitions, variety in classroom activities, and frequent timely feedback to awaken interest and encourage on-task behavior.

#### 2.2.3. Choice Theory

The Choice Theory Model (Glasser, 1986, 1990) is the third selected model commonly included in teacher education textbooks. This model views the teacher as a lead manager, who seeks student input for a democratic classroom, rather than as a boss manager who seeks to control student behavior. The philosophy underpinning this model is based on the premise that students are rational beings capable of controlling their own behavior and making good behavioral choices when their universal human needs for

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