



See and tell: Differences between expert and novice teachers' interpretations of problematic classroom management events



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Experts' central focus for managing events is whether or not students are learning.
- Teacher-to-student interactions are crucial to how experts' interpret classroom problems.
- Novices offer partially integrated perspectives when problematic events are striking.
- The timescale of events differs significantly between expert and novice teachers.
- Novices tell what they see; experts integrate the meaning behind what they see.

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ABSTRACT

Experience in the classroom influences how teachers interpret classroom events. This article investigated differences between expert and novice teachers' interpretations of authentic, problematic classroom events. Two types of videos presented problematic events, displaying either unrelated problems, such as disengaged, off-task students, or interrelated problems leading to a flagrant disruption. Predicted differences in teachers' verbalized interpretations were analyzed through a multi-category coding scheme. All coding categories showed significant main effects for expertise. Novices interpretations focused on issues of behavior and discipline. Experts were markedly focused on student learning, stressing the influential role of the teacher on events arising in the classroom.

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1. Introduction

Classroom experience influences how teachers grasp the meaning of classroom events. Expert and novice teachers' noticing (perception) and sense-making (interpretation) of the classroom have been shown to differ in several key ways. Experts possess a wealth of knowledge about classrooms – the kinds of situations and social interactions that arise in the course of teaching – and

have developed elaborate practical knowledge for making sense of the complexity of events unfolding in classrooms. Novices, in contrast, have limited, less elaborate knowledge, and attend to classroom events with less interconnectedness and coherency. The goal of this study was to identify significant differences in how expert and novice teachers processed different types of problematic classroom events.

1.1. Developing classroom management skills

Learning to manage a classroom and teach effectively is complicated, and the majority of the knowledge and skill

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development required for effective teaching takes place within the classroom itself (Doyle, 1977). Amongst the many competencies teachers need to develop, classroom management is widely recognized as a daunting challenge and concern for teachers, particularly beginning teachers (Emmer & Stough, 2001; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004).

Classroom management refers to the multifaceted actions a teacher takes to create, support, and facilitate the goals of instruction and learning in the classroom. It is a system of activities for maintaining an effective learning environment. It includes, but is not defined by, *discipline*, which comprises actions taken to prompt behavioral changes in students who do not comply with expectations, especially behavior that disrupts the classroom management system and the learning environment (Brophy, 1988; Doyle, 1990; Woolfolk-Hoy & Weinstein, 2006). The primary purpose of classroom management is maximizing learning, and a secondary purpose is minimizing misconduct that is disruptive to learning.

Depending on their level of experience, teachers conceptualize and represent classroom management differently (Wolff, van den Bogert, Jarodzka, & Boshuizen, 2015). Less experienced teachers assess management in terms of rules and discipline in the classroom: how attentive pupils are, whether or not they are on-task and exhibiting acceptable classroom behavior. For more experienced teachers, matters related to student thinking are of greater concern: they focus on the quality of the student attention they observe, how engaged students are in learning processes, and how learning may be improved in particular contexts (Copeland, Birmingham, DeMeulle, D'Emidio-Caston, & Natal, 1994; Wolff et al., 2015).

In the context of teaching, a tension exists between the immediate needs of classroom practice, and the long-term, on-going process of developing professional skills to effectively manage classrooms. Expert teachers' knowledge of classrooms is richer and more accessible than that of beginner teachers, allowing them to quickly process complex information, represent problems flexibly, and recognize meaningful patterns amidst the complexity and problems. Novices need time to develop and automatize their management routines so they can move beyond simply dealing with classroom problems and devote cognitive resources to understanding why and how classroom problems arise (Berliner, 2001). On the one hand, teachers face immediate, fast-paced, on-the-spot classroom complexities, which cause difficulties for novices. On the other hand, experts have the benefit of experience and knowledge accrued over time in order to face such complexities insightfully and effectively (Doyle, 2006). Considering the persistent difficulty that classroom management presents to teachers, and the tight link between how a teacher interprets classroom events and the knowledge and skills they apply to managing events, this study seeks to identify clear differences in expert and novice teachers thinking about classroom management events.

1.2. Perceiving and interpreting classroom events

Classroom management can be considered fundamental to successful teaching and learning: it is intrinsically linked to both the content being taught and the pedagogical processes through which content is delivered. These components are intertwined such that skillful classroom management relies on the acquisition of event-structured knowledge (Brophy, 1999; Carter, 1994; Doyle, 1990). A *classroom event* refers to a moment in time that is situated in the space of the classroom and – in the mind of the teacher – is tied to the ongoing activity in the classroom. Classroom events

are generally directed towards a goal (for example, managing a group of high school students) and involve both animate and inanimate objects (for example, students and worksheets, respectively). The temporal and spatial boundaries of events are notoriously fuzzy, and when they begin and end depends on who is observing them (Zacks, Speer, Swallow, Braver, & Reynolds, 2007). A classroom event may be perceived as a discrete occurrence or as a progressing series of occurrences (i.e. multiple events) linked to the *classroom situation*, which is the combination of circumstances in the classroom. Accordingly, what constitutes a classroom event depends upon on a teacher's perception and interpretation of a given classroom situation.

Teachers' ability to recognize and interpret classroom events gradually develops through classroom experience, relying on knowledge situated in the context of classrooms (Bromme, 2001; Doyle, 1990). Classrooms are perplexing, multidimensional environments that are not always predictable: there are numerous co-occurring events, a variety of purposes and objectives to be accomplished, and many different people to account for. The continual, co-occurrence of events, i.e. their multidimensionality and simultaneity, demands that teachers perceive, process, and decide what to do about these events almost instantaneously, emphasizing the immediacy of the classroom (Doyle, 2006; Sabers, Cushing, & Berliner, 1991). Concepts of classroom management are tightly connected with how a teacher perceives, thinks about, and makes sense of classroom events.

Teachers must first notice and recognize events before they can render them meaningful. The events a teacher notices, as well as the meaning attributed to them, is determined by their perception of classroom information (the people, objects, interactions, and spatial dimensions of the classroom itself) and the way these merge with ongoing knowledge-based processing, which transforms this information into an interpretation. In this study, *perception* refers to the sensory information a teacher notices in the classroom, i.e. visual/audial cues and events. *Interpretation* refers to a teachers' ability to make sense and derive meaning from the classroom events and interactions they perceive. Interpreting classroom situation draws upon prior knowledge of classrooms events, awareness of current events arising in the classroom, and an integrated fusion between what one knows about classrooms and what one is perceptually aware of in real-time (Carter & Doyle, 1987).

There are several interconnected cognitive elements for any form of professional practice (such as interpreting the classroom): assessing events, deciding whether or not actions need to be taken, pursuing a course of action, and monitoring one's thoughts, activities, and reflections (Eraut, 2007). The timescales of interpretive processing are not fixed: sometimes processing is automatic and rapid, other times deliberative and prolonged. Timescales depend upon the event, the situational context in which it occurs, and the accumulated knowledge about such events. As a teacher acquires expertise, they accumulate vital event-knowledge that influences and transforms their representations of events and the resultant situations they construct. Greater expertise generally leads to quicker access to knowledge for interpreting events and (re)acting to the progressing situation they are part of. The time it takes to recognize, assess, and make decisions about events reduces as expertise increases (Eraut, 2007). Consequently, expertise transforms the way a teacher represents their professional knowledge and understands problems inherent to the teaching profession (Boshuizen & Schmidt, 2008; Carter, 1994). Thus, interpretations of classroom events, problematic and non-problematic alike, can be expected to vary in formulation and focus based on levels of teaching experience and

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