



## Reducing reality shock: The effects of classroom management skills training on beginning teachers



Theresa Dicke\*, Jill Elling, Annett Schmeck, Detlev Leutner

University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany

### HIGHLIGHTS

- We developed a classroom management training (CM-Training) for teacher candidates.
- The CM-Training showed longitudinal effects on teachers' perceived skills.
- The CM-Training showed longitudinal effects on well-being.
- The CM-Training was in part superior to stress management training.
- The CM-Training is able to reduce symptoms of reality shock.

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### ABSTRACT

Being unprepared to deal with classroom disturbances is a major cause of beginning teachers' reality shock. However, a lack of options remains to learn dealing with such disturbances. In this study, the longitudinal effects of classroom management training are investigated. Participants ( $N = 97$ ) were assigned to one of two intervention groups (classroom management training/stress management training.) or to a wait control group. Results revealed that the classroom management group was superior in classroom management skills. Both intervention groups were superior to the wait control group regarding well-being. Overall, the training can be a useful supplement to teacher education.

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### 1. Introduction

A challenging part of the process that beginning teachers undergo, from learning how to teach to actually starting to teach in a real classroom, has been called many names, such as “praxis shock” (Veenman, 1984), reality shock, “the survival phase” (Huberman, 1989), “transition shock” (Corcoran, 1981), and even “shattered dreams” (Friedman, 2000). What these various labels have in common is that they refer to the collapse of ideals or expectations developed during teacher education, following a teacher's first confrontation with classroom reality (Friedman, 2000). As a result of such confrontations, strain or burnout, reflecting a prolonged and occupational-specific form of strain as the result of repeated

long-term exposure to stressors, can occur (Veenman, 1984). Despite the considerable differences in teacher preparation programs worldwide, all share a common factor: As beginning teachers learn to apply their theoretical knowledge in a practical context, international research indicates, they seem to struggle with this transition from learner teacher to beginning teacher: for example, in Israel (Friedman, 2000), the Netherlands (Stokking, Leenders, De Jong, & Van Tartwijk, 2003), the USA (Veenman, 1984) and, most importantly for the present study, in Germany (Klusmann, Kunter, Voss, & Baumert, 2012).

Recent research shows that strain and low levels of well-being in teachers are in large part caused by student disturbances (Bakker, Hakanen, Demerouti, & Xanthopoulou, 2007; Evers, Tomic, & Brouwers, 2004; Friedman, 2006). Thus, giving teachers special training in how to manage their classroom should allow them to deal with disturbances more efficiently (Emmer & Evertson, 2008) and, in effect, increase their well-being.

We conducted an experiment with three groups, who received classroom management training, stress management training, or

\* Corresponding author. Instructional Psychology Department, Faculty of Educational Sciences, Duisburg-Essen University, Berliner Platz 6-8, 45127 Essen, Germany.

E-mail address: [theresa.dicke@uni-due.de](mailto:theresa.dicke@uni-due.de) (T. Dicke).

no training, respectively, and observed the effects on short- and long-term levels of well-being and classroom management capabilities. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study that has investigated the relationship between strain and classroom management skills experimentally, allowing us to investigate causal relationships. The results from this innovative comparison allow for conclusions on the effectiveness of pre-empting the major teacher stressor of classroom disturbances, as opposed to learning how to deal with teacher stressors when they occur. In addition, our results provide direct evidence of the importance of classroom management skills for reducing reality shock and supporting teachers' well-being, thereby creating a better-prepared teacher workforce. In summary, our paper addresses a pressing issue in the contemporary Western world: how to prevent strain as a symptom of reality shock and thereby to retain beginning teachers by providing them with adequate classroom management skills.

### 1.1. Occupational situation of beginning teachers in Germany

Teacher education in Germany, in contrast to many other countries (for an overview see [Howe, 2006](#)), includes an additional element of teacher education, the so-called "Referendariat," the goal of which is to bridge the gap between university education and employment as an actual teacher. The Referendariat is an induction program to prepare teacher candidates for their role as teachers, and is characterized by a relatively strong integration of practical and theoretical elements ([Kunter, Scheunpflug, & Baumert, 2011](#)).

Thus, German teacher education consists of two phases. The first phase occurs at university and takes four to five years, during which time student teachers study two teaching subjects (such as Mathematics or English) and attend further general courses in Education, Pedagogy, Psychology, Sociology, and related topics. Practical training experience is at the heart of the second phase, the Referendariat, on which we focus in this study.

In this second phase, they attend courses regarding the general principles and methods of teaching (six to 8 h per week) at a teacher training college (the so-called Studienseminar). At this time, beginning teachers are allocated to schools, where they first observe other teachers during lessons and then gradually start to teach their first lessons independently (approximately 10 h a week) after about two to six months (see also [Howe, 2006](#)). The present study was conducted with a sample in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, where the total duration of the Referendariat extends up to two years. These teachers receive income for their services.

Although this may seem like a safe environment for beginning teachers to develop, so as to face the challenging demands of teaching gradually ([Howe, 2006](#)), the reality can be quite different. During the first year, the hours of teaching can increase dramatically, to the point where the majority of beginning teachers work nearly the same hours as fully-employed teachers, and also face the other related challenges of the teacher (i.e. administration, relations with parents, time pressure). Further, although beginning teachers are assigned to a mentor ([Howe, 2006](#)) and are meant to be supervised, especially in the beginning, supervision is often neglected, due to staff shortages. Thus, beginning teachers in Germany are paid teachers who experience the strong pressure of "normal teacher hassles" and in addition feel the pressures associated with attending teacher college and facing exam situations ([Christ, 2004](#)). This makes the participants of the present study particularly interesting, as they are on the one hand officially still only on the threshold of becoming a fully qualified teacher, and yet already have to deal with the full responsibilities.

However, international research indicates that, regardless of the differences in the organizational aspects of teacher preparation programs worldwide, all teacher preparation programs are alike in

that beginning teachers learn to employ their theoretical knowledge within a practical context and seem to have difficulties with this transition, resulting in teacher stress, strain and burnout (e.g., [Friedman, 2000](#); [Klusmann et al., 2012](#); [Stokking et al., 2003](#); [Veenman, 1984](#)).

### 1.2. Classroom disturbances

Friedman's review of teacher stress ([Friedman, 2006](#)) indicates that burnout arises from issues associated with social–psychological aspects of teaching, from classroom management issues and problematic teacher–student relationships, rather than from instructional teaching problems (e.g., low academic student achievement). In particular, inexperienced teachers—that is, beginning teachers—perceive student discipline as their most serious teaching challenge, one that they feel unprepared to cope with ([Evertson & Weinstein, 2006](#); [Jones, 2006](#); [Rieg, Paquette, & Chen, 2007](#)). Further, research indicates that beginning teachers' perceptions of being unprepared would appear to be a problem worldwide, as studies conducted in Australia ([O'Neil & Stephenson, 2014](#); [Woodcock & Reupert, 2012](#)), Israel ([Gal, 2006](#)), China ([Lewis, Romi, Qui, & Katz, 2005](#)), Jordan ([Al-Zu'bi, 2013](#)), the UK ([Merrett & Wheldall, 1993](#)), the USA ([Hammond Stoughton, 2007](#)), the Netherlands ([Stokking et al., 2003](#)) and Germany ([Christ, 2004](#)) indicate. [Jones \(2006\)](#) sums up a large number of studies with similar findings: classroom disturbances are the biggest threat to new teachers, and new teachers feel unprepared to deal with them. In sum, the findings indicate that classroom disturbances and student disruption are apparently major predictors of teacher stress and strain, particularly for beginning teachers ([Veenman, 1984](#); [Zhai, Raver, & Li-Grining, 2011](#)). Minimizing classroom disturbances is a prerequisite for high-quality instruction, and is also a distinct aim of classroom management in general ([Evertson & Weinstein, 2006](#); [Lewis, 1999](#)). Put simply, a good classroom manager is able to prevent undesirable classroom behavior and thereby can foster desirable behavior ([Emmer & Stough, 2001](#)).

Based on these findings, we consider that classroom management is likely to represent a very effective resource that should be able to buffer the effects of job demands for beginning teachers, on strain.

### 1.3. Classroom management

Classroom management is broadly defined as "the actions teachers take to create an environment that supports and facilitates both academic and social–emotional learning" ([Evertson & Weinstein, 2006](#), p. 4). Good classroom managers choose management styles that match their instructional goals, classroom activities, and students' characteristics ([Emmer & Stough, 2001](#)). In their meta-analysis, [Wang, Haertel, and Walberg \(1993\)](#) identified better classroom management and teacher–student interactions (academic and social) as major predictors of student learning. [Wang et al. \(1993\)](#) also point out that this effect is directly related to a decrease in discipline problems, such as off-task behavior.

Further, research conducted in the Netherlands has investigated the interpersonal relationship between students and teachers as an important aspect of classroom management ([Wubbels, Brekelmans, den Brok, & van Tartwijk, 2006](#)). The authors identify several profiles of teaching style as perceived by teachers but also, more importantly, by their students. Specific teaching styles are important for student outcomes; research on these profiles shows that more authoritative or directive teacher behavior, for instance, leads to higher cognitive achievement, whereas higher cooperative teacher behavior leads to higher student motivation ([den Brok, Brekelmans, & Wubbels, 2004](#); [den Brok, Fisher, & Scott, 2005](#)).

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