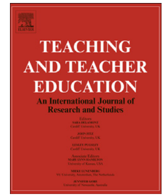
Teaching and Teacher Education 48 (2015) 56–65

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Teaching and Teacher Education

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/tate



Teachers' coping styles and factors inhibiting teachers' preferred classroom management practice

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Five factors inhibit teachers from applying their preferred classroom management.
- Non-productive coping relates to more awareness of two types of inhibitors.
- Productive coping relates to less awareness of personal inhibitors (e.g. no time).
- Problem solving does not relate to awareness of any of the inhibitors.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 22 May 2014
Received in revised form
19 January 2015
Accepted 21 January 2015
Available online

Keywords:
Teacher coping styles
Classroom management
Teachers' inhibitors

ABSTRACT

The relationship between 294 teachers' coping styles and factors they perceive as inhibiting them from using their ideal classroom management is investigated. The results show that a coping style that includes strategies such as self-blame and wishful thinking relates to greater identification of both personal inhibitory factors (e.g., time and work demands), and broader factors (e.g., accountability to parents). Conversely, a coping style incorporating physical activity and a focus on the positive, relates negatively to personal inhibitory factors. Somewhat surprisingly, teachers' use of socially embedded problem solving failed to relate to the perceived prominence of inhibitors to preferred management practice.
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1. Introduction

When teaching in the classroom, teachers often find themselves in a gap between their ideals of teaching and classroom management and the harsh, often rude reality of everyday classroom life.

The present study was designed to examine teachers' perceptions of factors which inhibit them from implementing their preferred classroom management practice, and to investigate the ways teachers cope with the gap between their preferred and current management practice, the gap between the ideal and the real.

1.1. Effective classroom management

Teachers must “establish order, engage students, or elicit their cooperation” (Emmer & Stough, 2001, p. 103) in order to create a classroom environment in which students learn, and which the teacher can manage (Burden, 2003). The importance of classroom management is widely documented (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006), indicating that teachers' effective managing of students' behavior and learning is critical to achieving positive educational outcomes. Teachers' classroom management practices can have a significant effect on students' concentration and self-regulated learning (McCaslin et al., 2006), autonomy and responsibility (Lewis, Romi, & Roache, 2012; Elias & Schwab, 2006; Psunder, 2005), moral and social development (Nucci, 2006), students' achievements (Freiberg, Huzinec, & Borders, 2008), attitudes toward schoolwork and their teachers, and the development of pro-social values (Lewis, Romi, Katz, & Qui, 2008). In addition, a significant body of research attests to the importance of effective classroom management to teachers' occupational well-being, and its effect on stress, strain, burnout, attrition, and self-efficacy (Kokkinos, 2007;

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2015.01.016
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Richards, 2012; Van Dick & Wagner, 2001; Woolfolk, Rosoff, & Hoy, 1990).

Effective classroom management requires more than actions taken to create and maintain a learning environment conducive to successful instruction. Because it is a complex social, psychological, and emotional process, involving interactions and relationships between teachers and students (Pianta, 2006), classroom management also includes establishing personal relationships with students and working within them (Brophy, 2006). A major theme of classroom management research is that teachers who are effective classroom managers demonstrate an ethos of "warm demander," that is teachers signify to all that they care for their students and simultaneously hold high expectations for their academic, social, and overall continued success (Pool & Everston, 2013).

Data from Australia indicate that teachers' classroom management is usually described in terms of punishments for inappropriate behavior and, less frequently, in terms of recognition and rewards for good behavior. There is also some individual discussion with teachers and some opportunity, albeit limited, for hearing students' voice through group decision making (Lewis, 2006).

A number of studies conducted in Israel, China, and Australia, have addressed the effectiveness of a range of classroom management techniques and their impact on levels of misbehavior. The results indicate the productive effect of recognizing responsible behavior, and discussing the impact of misbehavior on other students with the student who misbehaved. Students who had experienced recognition and discussion became more responsible, less distracted, and more positive toward teachers and schoolwork. Conversely, teacher aggression, manifested in group punishment, humiliating students, and yelling in anger, appears to be associated with more student misbehavior and higher levels of negative student attitudes toward learning (Lewis, Romi, Qui, & Katz, 2005; Lewis et al., 2008; Romi, Lewis, & Katz, 2009).

Classroom management refers to teachers' strategies for regulating student behavior, interaction, and learning (Martin & Sass, 2010). The various classroom-management models can be classified into three approaches, based on the degree of a teacher's control over students' behavior and the degree of autonomy that should be given to students (Psunder, 2005). The first approach involves minimal teacher control and assumes students' responsibility for their behavior; management techniques are nonverbal cueing and nondirective statements (Wolfgang, 1999; Wolfgang, Bennett, & Irvin, 1999; Wolfgang & Wolfgang, 1995). The second approach views student behavior as the combined and cooperative responsibility of students and teachers, who together determine appropriate student behavior and set up unpleasant consequences for inappropriate behavior (Dreikurs, Grunwald, & Pepper, 1971; Glasser, 1969). Teachers who choose this democratic approach usually use questioning techniques (Wolfgang, 1999; Wolfgang et al., 1999; Wolfgang & Wolfgang, 1995), allow students to participate in decisions on managing their classmates' behavior, and encourage them to develop a mutually agreed contract for behavioral change (Psunder, 2005).

The third approach gives the teacher most power, as it is based on the assumption that students are not capable of realizing what is best for them, leaving decisions to the teacher. The teacher is entrusted with selecting the most appropriate behavior, reinforcing it, and eliminating inappropriate or disruptive behavior (Canter, 1976). Teachers who espouse this approach usually use power techniques, among them directive statements, threats, modeling, reinforcement, and physical intervention (Wolfgang, 1999; Wolfgang et al., 1999; Wolfgang & Wolfgang, 1995).

Reupert and Woodcock (2010) suggested another classification of classroom management strategies – by timing of strategy implementation: (1) *Reward strategies* (e.g. stickers) after student's desirable behavior; (2) *Preventive strategies* to avoid the occurrence of behavioral issues (e.g., establishing routines, seating arrangements, and class rules); (3) *Initial correction strategies* that include actions involving mild or low intrusive correction responses (e.g., proximity control, signaling, and directive statements); (4) *Later correction strategies* that are more assertive and forceful steps (e.g., time out and behavioral contracts). The third and fourth correction strategies are used after the undesirable behavior.

When considering the gap between preference and practice, we might ask whether teachers' preferred practices differ from effective classroom management practices. It would seem that if a technique is tried and true, it would be universally embraced and implemented.

However, there are many management styles, and in this sense, a classroom is a small organization whose management is dictated not only by the teacher – the direct manager – but also by school policies, cultural codes, and requirements set forth by the educational system. And while there are methods that have been proven effective – frontal instruction and various behavioral techniques – they may not be consistent with a teacher's personality and educational view. Overall, teachers' ideas of best management practice involve significantly more empowerment of students than is currently the case in classrooms. They prefer to utilize fewer control methods such as rules, rewards, and consequences, and seek to manage classrooms by organizing students to make their own decisions or by influencing each student to decide to behave well (Lewis & Burman, 2008). However, when asked about their everyday classroom experience, teachers mentioned factors that inhibit them from implementing their ideas of best disciplinary practice.

1.2. Classroom management inhibitors

Jackson (1968) noted that the complexity of classroom management results from several properties of classroom teaching, including multidimensionality (varied events and persons), simultaneity (many things happen at once), immediacy (the rapid pace of events limits reflection), unpredictability (of events and outcomes), publicness (events are often witnessed by many or all students), and history (actions and events have pasts and futures).

Lewis and Burman (2008) asked some 300 Australian secondary-school teachers to identify the main factors that prevented them from implementing their ideas of best classroom management. The teachers were asked to rate a list of potential constraints on various levels – personal, student, classroom, the school, and beyond (e.g. parents' preferences, government policies). The factors that were listed as most inhibiting best classroom management were excessive workload, classroom size and layout, and lack of support from the school administration. The result of the effect of these factors was that teachers found themselves to be more controlling of students than they thought was ideal. As might be expected, this gap between preferred and current practice was of concern to teachers, and the greater the gap, the greater the concern.

1.3. Present versus preferred classroom management – the gap

Teachers' dissatisfaction with their classroom management performance has been associated with a lower sense of efficacy (Woolfolk et al., 1990). Dissatisfaction plays a role in determining stress level (Greenwood, Olejnik, & Parkay, 1990), and consequently, could contribute to generating teacher burnout (Betoret, 2009; Betoret & Artiga, 2010; Kokkinos, 2007). In addition, differences between teachers' expectations and classroom reality are major causes for a novice teachers' sense of depression and turmoil (Conway, 2001).

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