

# The Other First Days of School: A Case Study of Two Teachers in an Urban School Setting

Cacey L. Wells

Appalachian State University

Stacy Reeder

University of Oklahoma

The first days of school are critical for many teachers across the country. They are often set aside to establish routines, expectations, the tone of the class, and begin developing the learning space for the year. As a result of high stakes accountability culture, many teachers revert to top-down management methods for establishing normative behaviors in their classes. This case study examines two mathematics teachers in an urban high school who approach their first days of school through alternative, democratic methods and learning spaces. Their examples include sharing ownership of their physical space, co-creating norms and building positive relationships with students, and providing students with opportunities to learn in ways that work best for them.

## Introduction

The first days of school can be an exciting time for many teachers. These days provide opportunities for meeting new students, trying new pedagogical ideas, starting the school year on a positive note. Many teachers engage students during the first days of school with introductions, rules, expectations, and even consequences (Wong & Wong, 2005; Lemov, 2010), resorting to top-down management strategies dependent on student compliance with teachers' and/or administrators' expectations. These practices are often rooted in antiquated practices that have been integrated into schools without question (Wells, 2017).

In our past work in an urban school district, we observed mathematics teachers' lessons and teaching practices. In many teachers' classrooms it was not uncommon to observe large posters titled *Classroom Norms*. These posters caused us to wonder what these were and how they came to be during the first days of school. Given the use of *norms*, the implication is the practices and expectations may have been developed by teachers with students (Sergiovanni, 2005). But, as it turns out, that was not necessarily the case. Teachers had superficially replaced typical classroom *rules* with the word *norms*. So, in practice, there was essentially no difference.

Disappointed by this realization, we wondered if there were teachers in this district who were thinking about their first days of school differently. Were there teachers who were thinking about learning spaces through an alternative

lens? There were. One teacher and her former student-teaching intern were contemplating their first days of school quite differently than many teachers. These teachers' approaches were unique and provided concrete examples for others to begin redefining their first days of school, including both cognitive and physical learning spaces they co-created with their students.

The purpose of this study was to highlight a case of mathematics teachers in an urban school setting who thought about their first days of school in a radically different way than what is typically observed in traditional classrooms. This study specifically aims to share these teachers' stories of how they engaged students on the first days of school in order to foster classroom environments and learning spaces that are rooted in shared control and democratic ideals. This study can best be described as an intrinsic, descriptive case study through three primary modes of investigation: individual, semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and analysis of classroom documents. Our study is directed by a sensitizing lens of extant literature around top-down management pedagogies, along with proposed alternatives. The broader goal of this research is to shed light on participating teachers' practices that are starkly different than many teachers within their district and to see how they went about creating learning spaces built around students' needs and shared voices.

This research sought to answer the following questions:

1. What approaches do participating teachers use when engaging students during the first days of school?
2. What factors potentially promote these teachers' abilities to engage students democratically? What factors might mitigate them?

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Cacey L. Wells is Assistant Professor, Appalachian State University.

Stacy Reeder is Professor and Dean, University of Oklahoma.

## Review of Related Literature

Democracy thrives on citizens' voices. Valuing individual and collective voices is essential to thriving democracies (Green, 1998; Seashore Louis, 2003), and this is especially true when initiating change within democratic systems. In schools, however, there often exists a superficial sense of democracy, where teachers or students are given a false "voice" resulting in little to no input on how school initiatives are shaped. Most directives stem from the top, from administrators or other stakeholders, deciding what policies and practices will best serve students (Houser et al., 2017). Rarely are teachers', much less students', voices considered when making decisions, and this often trickles down to classrooms. While leaders in schools may be well-intentioned, teachers and students generally have little or no say in matters that directly affect them (Wells, 2017). The following review of literature outlines the problematic nature of top-down management pedagogies.

### *Top-down Management Pedagogies*

Many teachers, regardless of experience, find themselves in situations where they are asked to manage their students. Thus, it has become normative to use terms like *classroom management* to describe ways in which teachers structure their classrooms and work with students. The term *management* invokes notions of hierarchy and power. Moreover, *classroom management* techniques typically aim to "produce desirable student behavior" and "maintain procedures, routines, rules, and standards" (Casey, Lozenski, & McManimon, 2013, p. 42). This often manifests itself in mandates posted in classrooms. These types of rules, norms, and/or expectations tend to be hierarchical and rely heavily on compliance (Sergiovanni, 2005).

Since the implementation of *No Child Left Behind (NCLB)*, high-stakes testing cultures with emphasis on data-driven initiatives have placed unrealistic demands on classroom teachers (Houser et al., 2017). These demands have forced many stakeholders to buy into the short-term promises of high performance on said tests. Nichols and Berliner describe this as "detrimental to the educational process" (2007, p. xv). This unhealthy union allows spaces for practices rooted in control to emerge. To meet demands and pressures, popular books, like Wong and Wong's (2005) *The First Days of School*, have seen increased use in many school districts across the US. A quick web search indicates that their books have sold nearly 4 million copies. The practices illustrated in their publications focus on maintaining classrooms that operate in ways that maximize order and control. In particular, Wong (2005) equates teaching to restaurant management with the assumption that educators can relate to this philosophy since they are likely familiar

with the work-world environment (Gill, 2015). Thus, many classrooms tend to be managed more like businesses that aim to produce students who can meet expectations set by those in power (Wells, 2017).

The Wongs are not alone in their approach. Other management pedagogies rooted in behaviorism, like Lemov's *Teach Like a Champion*, have also become staples in many school districts (2010). Those ascribing to top-down practices tend to overlook students and teachers as vested stakeholders in classrooms, who are seen as blank pages not involved in construction of knowledge. (Freire, 2000) Students and teachers are both encouraged to follow the structures set forth by those above them, similar to Anyon's (1980) findings around social reproduction theory of working-class students. Furthermore, Wong's approaches focus on controlling students through set procedures with predetermined negative consequences (Wong & Wong, 2005). A concern with structures like these is that they only take into account a unilateral voice in the classroom (Wells, 2017) rather than supporting democratic processes. Classrooms, though, are complex systems requiring more than easy-to-follow guides for managing students.

Classrooms have potential to perpetuate top-down systems (Houser et al., 2017; Shakouri & Bahraminezhadi, 2013). Unhealthy praxes create unbalanced expectations that resort in students playing behaviorism games where good behavior is rewarded, and poor behavior is punished. Additionally, when unspoken norms subconsciously socialize those within the system to know who is in control, "cultures of silence" begin to emerge (Bernstein, 1977; Freire, 2000; Lavia & Sikes, 2010; Spivak, 1988). In return, students' value is rooted in behavior rather than mastery of content. When behavior is the focal point, many teachers begin to worry about student disorder and non-compliance (Houser et al., 2017; Foucault, 1977). The idea of losing control forces those in power to tighten regulations within schools (Sue et al., 2009), which can result in behavior-focused systems where one's sense of belonging is absent.

One's sense of belonging to a community generally consists of four primary elements: membership, influence, fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connections (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). More specifically, this is "a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9). In healthy classroom communities, ideals cannot exist within top-down accountability cultures that propel suspicion, observation, and control (Foucault, 1977). Furthermore, dialogue and positive relationships are often repressed under the weight of top-down management approaches (Wells, 2017).

### *Problematic Mathematics Reform*

To complicate matters, mathematics teachers tend to feel the brunt of top-down initiatives. Every few years it seems as if another mathematics reform is initiated to remedy “failing” schools or to “help” US students catch up to other countries who are out-performing them on standardized tests (Raymond, 2018). To no one’s surprise, many so-called “failing” schools are generally located in areas of poverty and are often comprised of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Kozol, 1991). Inequities that marginalized groups already face are exacerbated by teacher shortages in schools deemed failures. To rectify issues in “failing” schools, social efficiency models of education are often implemented. New teachers arrive (some with little or no teacher preparation) and are often expected to serve as technicians, implementing procedurally- and computationally based mathematics curricula in an effort to help schools raise their rankings (Wells, in press). This crisis is the model of schooling itself and has been referred to as factory-model education (Pinar, 1994).

Management pedagogies make sense in factory-model schools—especially since they are easy to implement and provide structure for teachers who are underqualified to teach (Rebora, 2013). If teachers can serve as technician-like instructors, they simply need a method for managing those who are in their classroom. In the 1990s, there was a consensus within the US population that schools should be held accountable for how their students perform on state and national exams (Johnson & Immerwahr, 1995) which resulted in the implementation *NCLB* in the early 2000s. As a result, the US has seen a trend in the decline of well-qualified teachers in public schools (Borman & Dowling, 2008). Top-down approaches are widely accepted and are reminiscent of Foucault’s (1977) notion of hierarchical observation. Constant monitoring, through mandated evaluations and observations, are a result of accountability cultures stemming from top-down, educational reforms, like *NCLB*. Due to pressure to perform well on high-stakes tests, teachers often revert to “back-to-basics” approaches that have proven, time and again, to be ineffective (Broom, 2015).

“Back-to-basics” and top-down management pedagogies lend themselves to the appearance of control over students in classrooms and leave little room for student voice. These practices—especially in lower socioeconomic communities—have created a space for routinized work to flourish (Delpit, 2012). In mathematics classrooms, this manifests itself in learning memorized procedures in lieu of deeper mathematical understanding (Boaler, 2016). Teachers who feel like they need to control, or manage, their students tend to resort to routine “busy work.” As a result, students typically reach an unspoken agreement with their teachers—“don’t ask much of me and I won’t make any problems for

you” (Delpit, 2012, p. 123). As the US educational landscape becomes desperate for well-qualified teachers in classrooms, top-down management pedagogies will continue to thrive unless alternatives are offered.

Consequently, top-down approaches to classrooms are often met with resistance from students (Wells, 2017). One alternative explored in recent years is the implementation of democratic practices in classrooms (Bovill, Cook-Sather, Felten, Millard, & Moore-Cherry, 2015; Macdonald, Gringart, & Gray, 2016; Reeder, Cassel, Reynolds, & Fleener., 2006; Sergiovanni, 1994). Within these, teachers create learning spaces where they work cooperatively with students to develop shared responsibility of learning in the classroom (Noddings, 2013). This shifts the focus from holding students accountable for their actions to helping them take responsibility for their learning through collaboration. While interesting theoretically, there has been less written about what these practices look like when implemented in classrooms and even less in mathematics education.

### Methods

Gaining an insider’s perspective into participating teachers’ classroom environments was critical to understanding their alternative approaches to traditional management pedagogies. Thus, a qualitative case study within a bounded system was utilized to conduct an intrinsic, descriptive case study on participating teachers’ natural environments (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). Descriptive case studies implement “thick descriptions” of a phenomenon (Merriam, 2009) and was the foundation on which this study was built. Producing thick descriptions was imperative to “interpreting the meaning of...demographic and descriptive data in terms of cultural norms and mores, community values, deep-seated attitudes and notions, and the like” (Merriam, 1998, p. 119).

### *Selecting the Cases*

The unit analysis for this study was a purposefully selected pair of teachers employed at the same culturally diverse high school in the central part of the US. Our research intended to consider the two participants collectively to search for common emergent themes that characterized their teaching styles and how they orchestrated their classrooms. In order to protect identities of participating teachers, pseudonyms were assigned for their names, school, and affiliations.

Selected teachers utilized unique pedagogies, particularly in how they conducted their classrooms. Participants were unique in several ways, including their approaches to teaching mathematics. Additionally, each had unique aspects within their teacher preparation and backgrounds.

Both teachers, Bailey and Nicole, had previously received awards for their work in education. They had résumés that could theoretically land them more prestigious teaching positions in or out of their state, yet they chose to teach at a school that faced challenges often found in urban cities with culturally diverse and economically disadvantaged students.

**Case for Bailey.** Bailey was a first-year teacher at West Central High School when this study was conducted. As Bailey navigated the genesis of her career, we were interested in how she implemented her teaching philosophy and beliefs associated with how she would organize and conduct her classroom. As a first-year teacher, her insights were different from veteran teachers who knew more about the school's culture. At the time of this study, Bailey was teaching high school Algebra 1 and Geometry.

**Case for Nicole.** Nicole was an enigma in mathematics education in her school, district, and state. She was a veteran teacher of color who found her niche in creating project-based learning experiences for her students. Nicole served as Bailey's mentor teacher the previous year and shared many of her methods for teaching with Bailey. Nicole's reputation was held in high regard in her circles of influence. During data collection for this study, she was teaching one section of AP Calculus for the first time and several sections of Algebra 2. She shared her interest in approaching her content in both courses using non-traditional methods both in teaching and how she orchestrated her students' learning environment.

### *Setting*

West Central High School was part of a large, urban school district (LUSD) consisting of nine traditional high schools and one magnet high school. While not an affluent school, West Central was located in an area experiencing gentrification. According to data provided by LUSD when our study took place, West Central High School's enrollment was 1,209 students. Of those enrolled, student demographic information was as follows: 53.9% Hispanic, 16.4% Black, 14.5% White, 6.5% Asian, 4.2% American Indian, 4.2% Multi-Ethnic, 0.4% Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. English language learners comprised 28.3% of the student population and 72.0% were considered too economically disadvantaged. Additionally, students faced other social issues such as a 47.6% mobility rate for students, a 33.6% turnover rate for teachers, and 8.0% student homelessness. Interestingly, only 15.4% of teachers were considered minorities.

### **Findings**

Findings for this research project are based on themes that emerged from data analyses. These themes integrate both participants' perspectives. It is important to remember that

Nicole had more than a decade of experiences teaching at West Central. Thus, understanding each case was important to consider how experience colored participants' perceptions. Findings are viewed through a sensitizing lens around issues associated with top-down management approaches. The following paragraphs illustrate how participating teachers' philosophies, classroom settings, and shared ownership of their learning spaces contributed to understanding their approaches for engaging students during the "first days of school," and what factors promoted their ability to engage students in democratic ways.

### *Teaching Philosophies*

Nicole consistently referred to her teaching style and philosophy as constructivist as opposed to behaviorist. Over the course of her fourteen-year career, she said that she continually evolved as an educator through professional development, reading, and through her own observations as she taught high school students. Essentially, she believed that students were able to construct knowledge with guidance from a well-qualified teacher. Nicole tended to resist behaviorist teaching models, believing they focused too much on behavior modification rather than teaching pertinent content. She said that her style of teaching relied on students bringing their interests and curiosities with them to class that she worries "get killed over time in school." Further, Nicole shared that most of her students interactions in classrooms had been centered around listening and maintaining "respectful" behavior.

Nicole's belief that her students had been conditioned to listen seemed starkly like Anyon's (1980) social reproduction theory that outlined how working-class students were inadvertently conditioned to quietly obey. Nicole said building on students' curiosities was integral to her pedagogy and the way in which she crafted her classroom environment. For Nicole, being "constructivist" meant she needed to organize her classroom in a way that supported students' interests and would cater to how they learned best. Her goal was to recondition her students to think about school from a fresh perspective, to explore their curiosities, and to think for themselves.

For a first-year teacher, Bailey's beliefs were quite similar to Nicole's in that she claimed to be "anything but traditional." In her secondary schooling, she had been taught using lecture-based approaches and found there "was another way to teach" during her mathematics methods courses in her university teacher preparation program. These "other" ways of teaching mathematics focused on students constructing meaning for themselves through discovery.

### *Classroom Settings*

Nicole's and Bailey's philosophical understandings of teaching and learning seemed to manifest themselves in how their classrooms were structured and how they worked during their first days of school to cultivate democratic classroom environments. Appendix A contains photographs of each participant's classroom during the first days of their school year. In the case of Nicole, Appendix A also highlights how her students helped transform the classroom over the first nine weeks of her school year.

**Nicole's Classroom.** During the first weeks of school, Nicole's classroom appeared typical. There was a Smartboard, some generic posters, a teacher's desk, and student desks grouped together. When asked about the design of her classroom, Nicole shared that a major change was coming. She did not get into specifics early in our conversations but indicated her classroom would undergo a "transformation" during one of her first projects. In order to create a classroom space and culture that was less top-down in nature, and that supported her progressive philosophy, Nicole worked with her students to better understand how their past experiences in school impacted how they learn. Within the first few weeks, Nicole intentionally engaged her students in a project, *The Ultimate Classroom* that integrated mathematics content and the physical classroom space. This project consisted of students working collaboratively during the first days of the school to determine how their classroom might look and feel based on how they learn best. Nicole asked students to take short quizzes that would help them better understand their learning styles. She also asked students to try out different learning styles to see how they worked for them as they considered how the classroom should be designed to best fit their learning needs.

Some lessons observed during the *Ultimate Classroom* project involved Nicole asking students to take notes using different methods. These included methods like *Cornell Notes*, *Fruyer Models*, and iPads for digital notetaking. Students also engaged in structured conversations with one another in small groups about how they learn best and how their peers could support them. The culmination of this project asked students to work collaboratively to determine the layout and design of their classroom.

Nicole provided the students a small cash budget to consider when making decisions. Students articulated they wanted to have their desks grouped together so they could work collaboratively, they wanted colorful posters on the wall, curtains for the windows, and something they described a "relaxation area." Nicole considered all the students' requests and used the budget to create a physical space representative of her students. Appendix A illustrates the transformation that took place in Nicole's classroom.

**Bailey's Classroom.** Like many new teachers, Bailey inherited a classroom from a previous teacher. Desks were initially arranged in rows, a teacher's desk sat at the front of the room, and the walls were empty. Bailey wanted to create a space where her students felt welcomed and happy to learn. She shared that she wanted her room to be "bright" and a place where students could be friendly towards one another. To accomplish this, she removed all the individual student desks. She selected long tables from the district's warehouse that would fit together modularly so four to six students could sit together. She also selected new chairs for each table and "personally sat in each one" to ensure that students of all sizes would feel comfortable. It was important to Bailey that her students would feel like the classroom was theirs.

To help create a welcoming atmosphere in her classroom, Bailey used brightly colored posters to display classroom norms, quotes, and growth mindset attributes. There was also a large section of her wall space dedicated to something called "The Fridge." According to Bailey, "The Fridge" was a "fake refrigerator" for displaying student work. She indicated that many students rarely had their work displayed on their refrigerators at home. Recalling that this was an important aspect of her childhood that honored achievement, she created a space in her classroom to display students' best work. At first glance, "The Fridge" might appear to be simple bulletin board, but for Bailey it represented much more. Bailey shared that she wanted students to do work in her classroom that they could be proud of and share with others.

During Bailey's first days of school, students sat together at the large tables and collaborated regularly. For Bailey, students engaging in conversations around mathematics was essential to their sensemaking. Helping one another, articulating processes, and listening to others' perspectives was integral to Bailey's philosophy and classroom culture.

### *Shared Ownership*

Finally, teachers in the study were found to value and integrate democratic processes and procedures into their classrooms through bottom-up methods. Specifically, this notion of shared ownership was partly created through co-constructing classroom norms and by intentionally developing positive relationships with students. Nicole recognized that her role as a teacher was not built on a foundation of power and control. In fact, she said that her style of teaching required her to relinquish control of the classroom. For Nicole's classroom, this meant students had a voice; they had power and control in what happened in her classroom and how it happened. Students' collective voice was balanced by Nicole's voice and input. The two entities, Nicole and her students, worked in tandem to co-create a

classroom that was shared by all. The classroom was just as much the students' as it was Nicole's.

There were aspects of Nicole's classroom unlike many others. The way in which the learning space was physically, cognitively, and emotionally designed and how Nicole co-constructed norms and expectations with students was infused by a shared sense of responsibility between and among members of the community. Nicole noted this commitment among the students in saying "learning is an investment. So, sometimes [students] may not really want to learn in math, but they want to be committed to the people around them." To foster students' commitment to one another, Nicole asked her students to apply for and interview for roles within projects. Each role was unique. Some students were project managers responsible for helping their peers stay on track and meet deadlines. Other roles included subject matter experts responsible for helping their peers fill in gaps in their learning.

During the first month of school, Nicole was intentional in her efforts to provide time for students to explore various learning styles and strategies for learning. This happened while students were learning new content and applying for roles. She described this process in her Algebra 2 class:

It is new content for Algebra 2. And that's what makes it so much more powerful because they get to think back to what it was about what happened today that really helped me. Is a jigsaw really helpful for me? Is working with people really where I get solidification? Is Cornell Notes the best way for me to record? So, they keep analyzing because they are learning something new, but it is hard for them because I'm also pushing them to be like 'What really worked?'

To accomplish this, students were given activities in which to engage using an iPad application called Nearpod. When using Nearpod, Nicole preloaded a series of activities onto slides in which students could individually work through on their iPad. Nicole likes Nearpod because it provided students with time to work individually and with groups while working at their own pace. If a student or a group of students had a solid understanding of their content, they could get started on the assignment and Nicole could track their progress. Using Nearpod allowed Nicole time to sit with students who were struggling, helping them clarify any misconceptions they had about the mathematical content.

In Bailey's classroom there was a feeling of comradery. This seemed to exist because of the way her classroom was structured, with tables rather than individual desks, the fact that students were encouraged to engage in conversations with one another, and the sense of pride that came from

students sharing their work with others and displaying it in the room. Bailey said:

"I have five grouped tables with six chairs at each. This automatically creates a culture of talking. Which, most teachers are like--it eats them away. But, when they are working on stuff ... and I hear someone say or argue a point about whatever math they are doing, it's like, that's why I do it..."

While the physical space directly correlated with student collaboration, Bailey's instructional strategies were also integral to students collaborating during the first days of school.

Finally, Bailey shared that her classroom felt "comfortable." Students regularly worked collaboratively and shared responses to question prompts. If a student shared an incorrect answer, Bailey would kindly work through the problem with the students so they could understand their error. Not only were mistakes valued in Bailey's class, but students were tasked with working with one another and established a sense of shared responsibility to one another. Bailey believed her students felt the need to make sure everyone had a grasp of the content. One class shared with her: "If one of us fails, we all fail." This conveyed what shared responsibility for learning meant to Bailey. For both teachers, students were expected to be engaged in learning and to use their time working collaboratively to help one another master content in a shared environment.

## Classroom Norms

One way each participant worked to share ownership of their space was through a process of determining classroom norms. Each teacher had two large posters on the wall by their Smartboard™ that were titled "Teacher Norms" and "Student Norms." These later became an anchor for each of their classrooms to help when students behaved in ways contrary to the posted norms. Interestingly, norms for both teachers were agreed upon by both students and teachers through democratic processes.

For Nicole, establishing classroom norms took several weeks and involved a variety of conversations and student assignments. She did not want to rush through the process just to have them posted on the wall. By taking time to thoroughly establish normative behaviors and expectations for her class, she felt her students were more apt to take them to heart. Once Nicole's norms were established, she would revisit them throughout the year. During one observation, Nicole explicitly pointed to one of the agreed-upon norms and encouraged students to focus on it throughout the week. This intentionality became less frequent throughout our observations. Nicole felt that by devoting more time to

working with her students at the beginning of the year, she would be able to focus less on misbehavior for the rest of the year. When asked about discipline issues, Nicole said she had relatively few in comparison to some of her colleagues and attributed this to co-creating norms and sharing responsibility for the classroom culture with her students.

Part of the *Ultimate Classroom Project* was based on the idea that students were able to share control and power within Nicole's classroom. The process by which students accessed their voice came through a guided exploration of sorts into co-creating shared normative behaviors that were best for the entire class. This process began with students writing down as many as five negative experiences they had in past school years. Nicole collected these and compiled them digitally into an online word cloud generator. The result was a jumble of words projected onto her Smartboard™. Larger, bolded words indicated words and phrases that occurred more frequently. When asked why she began this process with negative experiences, Nicole shared that her students "can easily think about what they don't like and then turn that into a positive."

One example of a classroom norm for Nicole's AP Calculus class was that students and teachers use each student's preferred name. This issue arose when students were asked to articulate their negative experiences. Nicole shared, "So, apparently everybody in here hates it when somebody doesn't use their name when they are referring to them." Once major themes came out of the word cloud, Nicole asked students to write what they felt should be five possible norms for the class. The norm of referring to students by the name they preferred was later consolidated into a larger themed norm called "Be Mindful", which asked Nicole to be mindful of students' situations outside of class and issues students felt were important to them.

After students determined their classroom norms, they were compiled by Nicole and included in a binder that sat on top of students' desks. There was one binder for each table of desks. Within the binder were the classroom norms, the references for how the class handled issues, and a team contract for how the group would work together as a team on projects and assignments.

Bailey, similar to Nicole, worked with her students to co-construct norms for their class by starting with negative experiences they had in school. She used similar methods to compile students' responses into larger categories. The final product of classroom norms consisted of both teacher-oriented and student-oriented norms. Bailey and her students were each expected to follow these agreed-upon norms. Unlike Nicole, recapitulation of classroom norms did not occur as often as there seemed to be external pressures that were more pressing for Bailey as a first-year teacher. Co-created norms for Bailey's class were prominently displayed

in the room for students and Bailey to see. If a student or group of students was not following the agreed-upon norms, Bailey reminded them in the moment to "be respectful" or "be helpful;" however, there was not a set-aside time to review norms as part of her normal classroom routine.

These processes allowed both Bailey and Nicole to cultivate a similar sense of belonging and acceptance for their students and themselves in their classrooms. Students were expected to maintain a positive sense of responsibility towards their learning and one another. This seemed to starkly contrast many behaviorist-oriented rules and expectations that hinge on accountability and consequences.

## Cultivating Relationships with Students

Another contributing factor for participants to share ownership with their students was by intentionally cultivating positive relationships with their students. Bailey and Nicole both regularly engaged students in kind and caring ways. This involved sitting with students rather than hovering over them, ensuring that they spent time with each individual or group of students, greeting students warmly and kindly, and communicating with students openly and honestly. Both Bailey and Nicole worked to treat students as equals. When discussing her relationships and boundaries with students, Bailey put it this way:

"It's like a fence. Like a chain-link fence...It is chain-linked, not barbed wire. Like, you can see through it, you can sometimes put your arm over it, but you're never in the other yard. I'll inquire. I'll let you vent and then I'll tell you to go sit down. So, it's just like this push and pull of like, 'I love you. I want the best for you.... but also you need to respect me and listen to me.'"

For Bailey in particular, a boundary existed between her and her students. As a first-year teacher she kept some space between her students while getting to know them on a deep level. The boundary she maintained was something more permeable that could be seen through, where one could poke their fingers through, or even reach over. However, students could not get completely over the fence. In our observations, Bailey maintained professional boundaries, but was also willing to be transparent with students about various aspects of her life. Interestingly, students were very open with Bailey and shared many personal details of their lives. In doing so, meaningful relationships could flourish.

Bailey found her relationships with students difficult to describe. She said, "I mean it's not a friend, it's not a boss, it's just a teacher." She shared that they were not exactly like that of a peer or "friend," yet she also did not feel that she was in a position of power over her students like that of a manager or "boss." For Bailey, her relationships with students and her

ability to connect with them fell somewhere in the middle. Simply put, she said she was a teacher—having a unique relationship that was oftentimes challenging to describe.

In our observations, Nicole worked to positively engage with her students before, during, and after class. A key component to how Nicole built relationships with her students was her vulnerability. Nicole asked students to share their thoughts, share pertinent information about their personal lives (to the extent they were comfortable), and their mathematical knowledge. Interestingly, this was very much reciprocated by Nicole. Relationships in her class were not one-sided; Nicole was willing to share with students how she was feeling and what she was thinking. In one observation during her AP Calculus class, students were working on understanding instantaneous rates of change. The concept of an instantaneous rate of change is a foundational and profound concept in calculus classes, and Nicole was vulnerable with her students about her difficulty in fully grasping the concept in a conceptual way to help her students learn it best. Nicole's relationships with her students were on full display, not only when she was formally teaching, but also when she was working with students in small groups and in one-on-one situations. She made it a point to speak with each student every day. This was an admirable goal, and we were able to see how she did this on multiple occasions.

## Discussion and Implications

The teachers in the study both admitted frequently that they were not perfect in their attempts to create alternatives to top-down management pedagogies. They did however embody characteristics associated with growth mindset research, learned from their mistakes, and forged ahead while being transparent with their students. Both teachers willingly chose to teach in their school within the constraints of traditional 45-minute class periods and their district's top-down reform initiatives that many teachers across the US work within daily. That said, both teachers were determined to approach their classroom culture, policies and procedures, and pedagogies differently than they experienced as students and in contrast to common practice.

These cases can serve as models for how teachers can use the physical, emotional, and intellectual spaces in their classrooms to cultivate environments or cultures that are unique to their students. In each case, both Bailey and Nicole worked to build positive relationships with their students and began that work in the early days of the school year. They were willing to relinquish power and control over their classrooms in order to co-create normative behaviors and procedures that worked for them.

Additionally, findings from this study are in stark contrast to the top-down approaches presented by Lemov, Wong and

Wong, and others. The first days of school were not taken literally by either teacher, but over time and through democratic practices, they established norms, routines, and expectations. Both understood that the work to establish democratic classroom environments took considerably more time than dictating rules and procedures. However, it was important that their students have a voice in the classroom. While doing this necessitated beginning in the first days of school, the endeavor took time and intentionality, extending well beyond the first days and weeks of school. Each seemed to be comfortable with taking time to co-establish norms and expectations. Teachers also seemed to reap benefits from this ultimately by experiencing fewer discipline issues than their peers. By building personal relationships with their students, they were able to connect with them mathematically as well as socially and emotionally.

Unfortunately, US urban school systems are replete with top-down management of policies, curriculum, and pedagogic approaches that encroach on teachers' autonomy in their classrooms. Bailey and Nicole demonstrated that alternatives exist. Both teachers worked tirelessly with their students over the course of several weeks to establish agreed-upon norms for their classroom and to establish positive relationships with their students. They valued shared ownership of their classroom. By working with their students, these teachers created cognitive, emotional, and physical learning spaces that thrive on input and shared ownership. This stands in contrast to Wong and Wong (2005) and provides possibilities for establishing norms and procedures that are not solely teacher driven but can be developed with and for students.

## Limitations and Implications for Future Research

Because of the nature of our study, there are some implied limitations. First, as a case study, the number of participants are limited. With a larger number, some of our findings could have been more generalizable. However, since this was a case study focusing on the uniqueness of two teachers, we felt it important to share our participants' stories with the broader research community. Additionally, the participants in this study were located at the same urban school. Thus, they have some shared experiences in this space that may not exist elsewhere. Finally, the participants themselves come from quite unique backgrounds and their lived experiences are their own, making it difficult to paint broad strokes for how their experiences may apply to others.

In terms of future research, we feel our project can add to the breadth of research around learning spaces. Specifically, the strategies our participants implemented can be used (and have been used) by other teachers. There are most likes more teachers working in alternative ways to rewrite



narratives of top-down, management styles of teaching rooted in behaviorism. It would be interesting to learn more about teachers in other settings who are thinking about their first days of schools in unique and empowering ways. We would recommend research in the form of future case studies in suburban, rural, and other types of urban schools. Having more perspectives to consider can pave a way for more teachers to consider alternatives that empower their students and give them a voice.

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