

Strengthening Professional Development Partnerships While Bridging Classroom Management Instruction and Practice

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Introduction

Classroom management is often noted as one of the most influential factors in determining success for first-year teachers and as the most influential factor in students' academic success (Marzano & Marzano, 2003). However, according to Haycock (2006), nearly half of this country's new teachers leave the classroom within their first five years, and for many of these teachers, the struggle with classroom management is the number one reason they leave the profession (Weiner, 2002). While school systems have responsibility in the ongoing professional development of their new hires, teacher preparation programs must also examine the role they play in building the foundation upon which their graduates develop and grow. Preparing new teachers to successfully manage a classroom is one of the most important tasks of teacher education programs. A strong partnership with local schools provides student teachers the opportunity to experience the real world of teaching and can greatly strengthen this foundation.

Inconsistencies

Teacher education programs have the task of developing thoughtful and socially progressive educators who can teach effectively. Smagorinsky, Cook, Moore, Jackson, and Fry (2004) indicate, however, that for many preservice teachers there seems to be a great divide between what their university professors teach and what they see practiced in the field. This inconsistency is challenging for many preservice teachers as they struggle with creating their own teacher identities (Stoughton, 2007). It is often difficult for preservice teachers to practice the management strategies taught in their university courses when the structure of their field experience classroom, the style of their cooperating teacher, and/or the requirements and restrictions from K-12 school administrators limit the types of strategies they are able to implement and practice in the field. This leaves the first year of teaching as the only true classroom management training ground for these novice teachers. In order to maximize the effectiveness of first-year teachers, teacher preparation programs and their school partners must work collaboratively to provide preservice teachers opportunities in which to implement and learn from a variety of classroom management strategies.

In 2001, Landau found that most universities addressed classroom management issues in the context of methods courses, with some programs having an additional stand-alone classroom management course to reinforce the concepts and theories. Instruction in methods courses and stand-alone courses typically consists of content related to organizational procedures, effective instructional strategies, and the formulation of a behavior management plan. Whether the classroom management content is integrated into methods courses or comes from a stand-alone course, Siebert (2005) indicates that many candidates feel unprepared to

manage their own classrooms and have specifically voiced concern about their ability to apply the theory they learned in their college courses to the reality of the classroom.

Oliver and Reschly (2007) suggest that teacher preparation programs need to give teacher education candidates more than the intellectual understanding of the issues related to classroom management. They should also provide ample opportunities for guided practice and feedback in organizational procedures and instructional strategies, as well as implementing both preventive and corrective behavior management strategies. As previously noted, a problem arises when the field experience site does not provide adequate opportunity for observation or practice of a variety of appropriate procedures and strategies. Some candidates simply observe and implement their cooperating teacher's procedures, strategies, and behavior management system, and seldom have the opportunity to learn from developing and implementing their own. According to Charles (2008), the most effective way to develop successful classroom management skills is to create your own personalized plan given the most current and relevant information available.

The University of Mississippi (UM) School of Education (SOE) conducts an annual Teacher Education Program Evaluation (TEPE) that is completed by student teachers, university supervisors, and cooperating teachers. Consistent with what is found in the literature from other teacher preparation programs, in 13 of the last 16 years, classroom management has been noted as one of the areas in need of improvement in preservice teacher preparation. While various approaches have been implemented over these 13 years to improve teacher preparation in classroom management, results of the yearly evaluation shows it to still be one of the top areas of concern. The majority of the concerns are consistent with the following selected clinical instructor comments from open-ended questions on the TEPE:

- "Student teachers are young and, until they get into their own classroom, won't really know how to 'manage' the room."
- "There were several times when I thought and the kids thought she was playing with them until she got angry when they weren't doing as she asked."
- "They do not always use what they know."
- "This is always an area that needs improvement on ... not so much that the student teacher doesn't know what to do, but they are sensitive to the classroom teacher's presence."
- "I suggest that preservice teachers do a one-week observation before school starts (their senior year). The first weeks of school are daunting even for veteran teachers, and we cannot expect a first-year teacher to know what to do in a classroom of her own unless someone has taken the time to show her. From experience, I can tell you that panic sets in when a first-year teacher is faced with a mountain of forms, the previous year's test scores, folders full of student information, a few scavenged classroom supplies, and a teacher's edition. Classroom management begins with knowing how to organize the chaos."

Clinical instructors are not the only stakeholders concerned about the classroom management preparation of preservice teachers. The preservice teachers themselves have raised concerns about their classroom management instruction. The following comments come from student teachers at UM answering an open-ended question related to the stand-alone classroom management course EDCI 419:

- “Strategies learned in classes consisted primarily of theories that fail to work in the real classroom.”
- “I have had a disaster of a time with classroom management as there was no management in place in the classroom where I was a student teacher. I would use many of the techniques [learned in the classroom management class] in my own classroom in the future, but for now I am just at the mercy of my CI.”
- “I do not think that any of the strategies learned in EDCI 419 were effective. The strategies we talked about were more idealistic than realistic in my opinion.”
- “EDCI 419 needs to be improved to better benefit student teachers who are dealing with real-world situations and guidelines.”

Based on the results of these surveys and information gleaned from research studies, the UM SOE, along with their school partners, implemented another improvement strategy to assist preservice teachers in building the foundation needed to become effective classroom managers. Partnerships with area school districts have been an integral part of the UM teacher preparation program since 1982. This long-term collaborative partnership proved invaluable. SOE faculty developed a new assignment for the stand-alone classroom management course EDCI 419 that required candidates to develop and implement an original management system in their student-teaching classroom. This assignment was completely dependent on the cooperation of the K-12 clinical instructors. Without the school partners’ willingness to cooperate and collaborate, the assignment would not have been possible. The collaboration proved to be an excellent outlet for providing “on the job” classroom management training.

Implementation

The new assignment, implemented in the spring of 2008, required student teachers to use their theoretical knowledge of child growth and development and provided them with experience in practical application while in the student-teaching field placement. Student teachers designed and implemented a comprehensive management system for the students in their field placement while under the supervision of university faculty and their clinical instructors (cooperating teachers). As a culminating project, student teachers shared their management systems with their peers during a classroom management fair.

Two hundred and thirty-five student teachers at the University of Mississippi in 12 course sections developed individual management systems during the spring of 2008. Implementation was carried out in the student-teaching field placement classroom during the final semester of the senior year. Student teachers assimilated ideas from class discussions,

their field experience placements, and professional readings to devise their systems. They determined age-appropriate rules, rewards, and consequences, and then devised a motivational plan to implement their system. The implementation plan included a positive reward system for individual students or groups of students and a system for tracking behavior infractions. Emphasis was placed on providing positive recognition for students following the rules. Student teachers provided a description of the student population, their definition of *classroom management*, their philosophy of classroom management, plans for parental involvement, and a description of a positive learning environment, which included organizational procedures and instructional strategies. Course professors and clinical instructors reviewed the system and provided feedback to student teachers. Once the system was reviewed and revised, the system was implemented in the student-teaching classroom. While this particular assignment was new, the structure of the student-teaching semester lent itself well to the assignment, making the transition smooth.

One concern for university professors was the willingness of the clinical instructors to relinquish control of their own management systems to be replaced with the student teachers' systems. To the relief and delight of the faculty, the vast majority of clinical instructors welcomed the idea and supported the student teachers' systems and their implementation. The willingness of the clinical instructors to work with the student teachers on the assignment speaks to the nature of the strong and fruitful partnership between the UM SOE and the K-12 schools.

As part of the partnership between the university and the school sites, clinical instructors agree to a set of responsibilities when they welcome a UM SOE student teacher to their classrooms. These responsibilities are laid out in the *Field Experience Handbook*, which is given to all student teachers, supervisors, principals, and clinical instructors. These guidelines state that by the 6th week of student teaching, the student teacher should assume all responsibilities in the classroom (Field Experience Clinical Practice Handbook, 2009). In other words, by the 6th week, the clinical instructor becomes an observer and evaluator as the student teacher takes on all classroom duties and responsibilities. In the past, this included implementing the clinical instructor's management system. With the new classroom management assignment, the student teacher is now planning and implementing his or her own system.

The majority of the participating clinical instructors was eager to work with the student teachers and provided them the opportunity to implement their systems. Unfortunately, there were a few reluctant clinical instructors who did not want their management system changed in the middle of the school year. The student teachers placed with these clinical instructors developed their plans but were not able to use them with the students in the classroom. This left them without the firsthand experience of balancing their personally developed management system, adjusting the system to meet the students' needs, and finding ways to motivate students to stay focused on the system they created. While these students missed out on an important aspect of the experience, they still benefited from the development of their own management system. In the summer of 2008, the UM SOE began making plans to ensure that all student teachers experience the full impact of this important learning opportunity. In order to convince the reluctant clinical instructors to allow their student teachers to fully implement the new systems, faculty at the UM SOE turned to their Office of Field Experiences for help.

Biannual meetings between supervisors and clinical instructors or administrators orchestrated from the Office of Field Experiences became the perfect place for discussing the new classroom management assignment. These meetings were initially set up to ensure that consistent information about the teacher preparation programs was communicated to all 72 individual K-12 partner schools in 17 different districts across the northern part of the state. The rural nature of the area, and the relatively large number of candidates spread over one main campus and four branch campuses, necessitates the large number of partner schools and districts. The year following the initiation of the new classroom management assignment, when supervisors visited the school sites and reviewed the *Field Experience Handbook*, they also took the opportunity to discuss the new classroom management assignment. These meetings gave clinical instructors an outlet for questions and concerns surrounding the assignment. UM SOE faculty hoped these discussions would convince clinical instructors who were reluctant to hand over the “classroom management reins” to their student teachers to do just that. Reports from faculty who taught the management course the second year (2009) pointed to greater participation by their student teachers. In fact, only 5 student teachers were unable to implement their own plans. In the previous year (2008), the number of student teachers not able to implement their plans was 36. The meetings with the school partners seemed to make a difference. There were fewer student teachers than the previous year who were unable to fully implement their classroom management systems and more who were given the opportunity to see their plan in action.

The Culminating Project

Following their implementation of the classroom management system, each student teacher prepared and presented a formal presentation of his or her system at the Classroom Management Fair. At the last meeting of the classroom management course at the university, student teachers designed a display to showcase their system. Included in the display were examples of materials needed to implement the plan, as well as a one-page handout that described the system. The handout provided specific details as to how the system was implemented and highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of the system that became evident during implementation. By providing copies of the handout for their peers, when the fair was over student teachers had more than 30 examples of classroom management systems to rely on during their first year of teaching. Learning was extended when student teachers had the opportunity to discuss their systems and exchange ideas with classmates. These presentations also enhanced the learning for the 5 student teachers who were unable to implement their system in their field placement.

Some student teachers implemented strategies that were similar to those used by their clinical instructors; however, many took the opportunity to implement a management system that was in direct contrast to their clinical instructor’s style. For these student teachers, the project provided practice with a system they created that reflected current theories and practices and were supported by research in the field. Many student teachers stated that their clinical instructors expressed interest in using their plans instead of their own, even after the end of the student teaching semester. The following student teachers’ comments reflect the value they placed on the experience of the fair:

“The management fair was beneficial because I was able to see my classmates’ ideas and discuss the classroom management ideas they had learned from their clinical instructors. It was like I had a treasure chest of ideas at my finger tips.”

– Emily, University of Mississippi, Elementary Major

“I was able to see classroom management ideas for a variety of grade levels. I did my student teaching in a first-grade classroom and really needed to see what types of management systems worked for upper grades. The fair was a great way for me to gather these ideas.”

– Sarah, University of Mississippi, Elementary Major

“I thought the fair was really beneficial for me because my classmates’ ideas helped me develop my own ideas further. It was something we were actually using with our kids and that made the whole assignment meaningful.”

– Eleanor, University of Mississippi, Elementary Major

Results

Preliminary feedback from student teachers and clinical instructors suggests that the assignment was beneficial and rewarding. More concrete results can be seen through the UM SOE Student Teacher Assessment Instrument (STAI). This assessment is an evaluation rubric based on the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) standards and is used each semester to collect data on student-teacher progress. The instrument contains 38 items divided among 5 competencies. One of the competencies, Managing the Learning Environment, contains 7 items specific to classroom management. The items are as follows:

- Demonstrates fairness and supportiveness in order to achieve a positive, interactive learning environment
- Uses instructional time effectively and monitors student participation and interactions in learning activities
- Attends to and delegates routine tasks of an effective classroom management plan
- Applies the principles of effective classroom management using a range of strategies to promote cooperation and learning
- Monitors and adjusts the classroom environment to enhance social relationships, motivation, and learning
- Utilizes individual and group responses to pace learning, proceed with new work, or reteach unclear parts of the lesson
- Attends to organizing time, space, activities, and materials to provide equitable engagement of students in productive tasks

Each semester, results from supervisor assessments of student-teacher performance is disaggregated and reported to determine the effectiveness of the program. Table 1 below reveals results on the Managing the Learning Environment competency of the STAI during the student-teaching semester for the year prior to the implementation of the classroom management assignment (2006–07) as well as for the initial year of implementation (2007–08) and the following year (2008–2009). The numbers indicate the percent of student teachers scoring in each rating category for the competency related to management. Improvement across the span of years is evident.

Table 1
Student-Teacher Assessment Instrument
Managing the Learning Environment Competency

Spring '07 Student Teaching			
Excellent	Satisfactory	Needs Improvement	Unsatisfactory
N=200			
64.57%	35.43%	-	-
Spring '08 Student Teaching			
N=223			
75.02%	24.98%	-	-
Spring '09-Student Teaching			
N=252			
79.06%	20.89%	0.06%	-

The student teachers are improving their management skills through the implementation of a system they created. They no longer have to rely on developing much-needed classroom management skills through the use of a system they had no hand in creating or for which they may not even philosophically agree. These preservice teachers have firsthand knowledge of what it means to plan, implement, and revise a policy in an authentic classroom setting. Their comments on the open-ended item on the Teacher Education Program Evaluation provide further evidence of the benefits of this assignment. The item stated: What strategies learned in EDCI 419 Effective Classroom Management for Teachers were the most helpful to you in student teaching?

- “The Classroom Management Showcases presented by peers. There were tons of great ideas.”
- “Making a classroom management plan was most useful. It made me take out time and think of something that I can do and use in my classroom. It was a very meaningful project.”

- “I think that preparing our own classroom management plan has helped me to think about what is actually going to happen in the classroom. I had a blast implementing my management plan in my student-teaching classroom. I got to experience firsthand how to carry out a real discipline system! I really liked how my teacher shared her personal experiences and suggestions with our class to help us prepare for our own classrooms!”
- “Presenting a showcase of the classroom management plan that we enacted in our student teaching”
- “The classroom management class in the spring was VERY beneficial and gave me many ideas and answered so many questions concerning classroom management problems that may arise. The classroom management showcase was also a very good learning experience and most importantly, USEFUL!”

These future teachers have a head start when it comes to preparing for their first year as in-service teachers. The gap between theory and practice and ideas and implementation has been bridged; candidates have a stronger foundation and their K–8 students will be more successful because of it.

The partnership between the UM SOE and their K–12 school partners has also benefited from this assignment. The first year of implementation reemphasized to the UM SOE faculty an important lesson: Communication is an essential ingredient to any healthy partnership. While most clinical instructors were open to allowing a new management system in their classrooms, some were not. Those who were reluctant simply wanted and needed an upfront explanation of the assignment and an opportunity to ask questions and air concerns. Once this line of communication was open, most of these clinical instructors were accepting of the idea. The success of the classroom management assignment showcases the benefits of a healthy university and K–12 school partnership, an open line of communication, and a willingness of all parties to improve the quality of the student-teaching experience. After all, it is the K–12 learner who reaps the greatest reward when universities and K–12 partner sites work together to provide the best training possible.

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