

## Finding balance: impact of classroom management conceptions on developing teacher practice

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### Abstract

A sociocultural perspective on teacher learning was used to investigate how three beginning teachers' conceptions of classroom management affected their developing teaching practices. Students were followed from student teaching through their first 2 years of teaching. Data sources included interviews, classroom observations, and teacher education portfolios. Although all three teachers shared common conceptions of management as establishing positive learning environments, only two of the teachers were successful in doing so. Four key ideas shared by these two teachers served as pedagogical tools that framed their decision-making and scaffolded their early practice. These four conceptions are linked to a course on classroom management not taken by the third teacher. Implications of these findings for teacher education are discussed.

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The overriding theme to my entire classroom management plan is nurturing a positive classroom community... If there is a safe environment in which to learn, then learning becomes something a child can embrace. (Hannah Moore, teacher education portfolio)

Undoubtedly, many teacher educators would share my delight upon reading such a vision of classroom management in a student's portfolio. Over the last 20 years, thoughtful discussion has influenced our thinking on the nature of classroom learning environments. Discussion has ranged widely on this topic from such areas as educational philosophy (Bowers & Flinders, 1990; Noddings,

1986) to classroom communication (Faust, 1997; Lemke, 1997); from issues of multicultural and democratic education (Au, 1993; Gathercoal, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Oakes & Lipton, 1999) to those of subject matter instructional approaches (e.g. literacy, Au, 1997; Cooper, 2000; O'Flahavan & Seidl, 1997). Hannah Moore left her teacher education program with visions of developing a positive and caring learning community in her classroom. But what will become of her vision as she steps into the role of teacher and encounters the challenges of first year teaching? How will her early classroom experiences affect the way she shapes and manages the learning environment for her students?

In this study, I investigated three elementary teachers' developing conceptions of classroom

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management as these conceptions interacted with their literacy instructional practice. Portfolio entries and interviews revealed that all three left their teacher education program with the perspective that classroom management is about creation of positive learning environments. But the concept of “positive learning environment” is both broad and vague. I examined these beginning teachers’ efforts to put their visions into practice.

## 1. Research on classroom management practices

Despite educators’ concerns with the nature of classroom learning environments, few recent studies have investigated either teachers’ knowledge or practices of classroom management in positive learning environments. We lack nuanced understandings of how teachers successfully establish and manage classroom environments that support both engaged learning and positive social interactions for 25–30 active children.

### 1.1. *Discrepancies and discontinuities*

In particular, research on classroom management had been neglected in favor of teacher subject matter knowledge and the instructional aspects of teaching (Borko & Putnam, 1996). As a result, knowledge of classroom management has not developed concurrently with changing ideas of more active and socially interactive teaching and learning. McCaslin and Good (1992) note this discrepancy between our understandings of the different aspects of teaching. They feel that ideas of effective classroom management have remained typically unchanged and attempts to create progressive curriculum reform have “created an oxymoron: a curriculum that urges problem solving and critical thinking and a management system that requires compliance and narrow obedience” (p. 12).

Discontinuities in our understandings *within* the area of classroom management may contribute to this discrepancy as well. By discontinuities I mean the tendency to focus only on the bits and pieces—certain segments of our knowledge—without considering the whole of either what is known or what

is entailed in management of the classroom as complex social and learning setting. Doyle (1986) first noted this lack of attention to the “sum of what teachers do” in an extensive review of the management literature. In a more recent review, Jones (1996) also pointed out this discontinuity within the area of classroom management. He noted that classroom management texts for teacher education placed almost no focus on fostering of positive peer interactions and effective collaboration. At the time of his review he found that only one major text on management included a chapter on peer interactions. Like Jones, I find this surprising considering the strong body of literature that demonstrates the link of positive peer interactions and cooperative organizations to learning.

Recently, some have urged educators to move toward broader and more comprehensive positions on issues of management (Jones, 1996; McCaslin & Good, 1992). As Jones advocates, “At its best, classroom management is not only a means to effective instruction, it also becomes a vehicle for providing students with a sense of community and with increased skills in interpersonal communication, conflict management and self-control” (p. 504). Nevertheless, lack of recent empirical evidence has left educators without clear direction and understandings of what knowledge and practices teachers utilize in creating and managing socially complex learning environments. It is as if we understand the blueprints for a house, but not the tools with which to construct it. With so little to guide our understanding we are hampered in our efforts to provide prospective teachers with the appropriate tools to implement their visions for establishing positive learning communities. Furthermore, we are equally hindered by our limited understanding of developing teacher practices, particularly in the area of classroom management.

### 1.2. *Teacher development and classroom management*

The difficulty of novices in dealing with the complexities of teaching and the social immediacy of the classroom is no small matter. As Crow

(1991) pointed out, “The research history is clear and consistent, novice teachers are inundated by classroom management problems and concerns” (p. 2). In an extensive review of 100 studies of beginning teachers, Veenman (1984) found that first year teachers ranked student discipline as their number one concern. Not surprisingly, beginning teachers with problems in classroom management are also more likely to leave teaching than those who do not have such problems (Taylor & Dale, 1971 as cited in Crow, 1991).

Because of the challenging nature of first year teaching, some have advocated narrowing the focus of teacher preparation programs to prepare novices for procedural abilities (Kagan, 1992) or to think of beginning teachers as “technicians” rather than teacher managers (Lasley, 1994). On the other hand, some have argued that due to the complexities of classroom settings we should prepare students for reflective practice. Stroiber (1991) investigated beginning teachers’ managerial development from the perspective that management is a complex decision-making process rather than an implementation of effective procedures. She compared students who were taught to use reflective approaches to classroom cases with those who were taught prescriptive approaches. The students who were involved in the reflective approaches developed more positive perceptions of themselves as problem-solvers, were able to generate more solutions to classroom problems, and took significantly more responsibility in planning for positive learning environments. Unfortunately, this study did not extend into first year practice, so we do not know if there were significant differences in these teachers’ beginning abilities to establish positive learning environments. But few studies have followed beginning teachers in their fledgling management efforts. There is no recent classroom research to either support these approaches or to explain why management rather than other aspects of teaching prove so difficult for beginning teachers (Crow, 1991).

### 1.3. *Teacher conceptions*

A handful of researchers (Crow, 1991; Needels, 1991; Winitzky, Kauchak, & Kelly, 1994) have

investigated the development of teachers’ knowledge regarding classroom management either across the first year or in comparison to more experienced teachers. In an expert–novice study that involved education students, first year teachers, and more experienced teachers, Needels (1991) investigated responses of the three groups to a videotaped lesson. She found that the responses of more experienced teachers were more detailed and complex, displaying knowledge of the connections between instruction and management. Significantly, the responses of first year teachers were more similar to those of the teacher education students than those of the experienced teachers, suggesting the role of experience to conceptual development.

Investigations of changes to first year teachers’ thinking through the use of conceptual maps (Winitzky et al., 1994) and metaphorical depictions of their roles (Crow, 1991) suggest that teachers’ conceptions of management can hinder as well as aid in teacher development. Conceptions can serve as lenses for interpretation of classroom events—thereby influencing teachers’ choices of action. Additionally, the studies found that teachers’ understandings of management and their roles can change over the course of the first year. Conceptual understandings appear, therefore, to play a critical role in beginning practice and in how teachers frame their management decisions. These researchers, however, did not investigate exactly how understandings were put into practice or exactly how practice affects changes in understandings. The one depiction of teacher practice (Crow, 1991) is a vague description of the classroom as “chaotic”. Further, while each of these studies of teachers’ knowledge assumes increasing competence through practice, earlier studies of teacher practice have indicated that beginning teachers become more controlling in their management practices (Tabachnick & Zeichner, 1984).

## 2. **Theoretical perspectives on teacher development**

To conduct this study, I drew upon socio-cultural perspectives of learning and teacher development. From this perspective learning is

viewed as an active process in which knowledge and meanings are constructed and reconstructed through participation in social interactions (Cole, 1996; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Lemke, 1997; Marshall, 1992; Rogoff, Baker-Sennett, Lacasa, & Goldsmith, 1995; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1985, 1998). Learning can be specific to or “situated” in a particular setting; one learns to drive a car on a roadway. A setting, however, is not a “static, isolated variable, [but] rather a dynamic constructed set of conditions out of which opportunities for meaningful engagement emerge” (Weade, 1992, p. 88). Learners bring prior knowledge and beliefs to these settings. Prior understandings frame how learners will both engage in new experiences and integrate new learning. Construction of knowledge—a complex, continuous process—involves both interpersonal as well as intrapersonal dimensions (Weade, 1992).

Development of teacher practice is thus seen as a complex and holistic process, rather than simply mastery of discrete skills and procedures that are to be applied in the classroom. Two major factors are significant to this developmental process: (1) the classroom as setting for teacher learning (the interpersonal dimension); and (2) the prior knowledge and beliefs which frame teacher learning in the classroom (the intrapersonal dimension).

### 2.1. *Classroom as a setting for development*

The classroom, as the social setting for teacher learning, provides a dynamic, yet bounded, set of conditions that engage and affect the learning process. These conditions serve either to support or constrain the specific course of teacher development (Grossman, Smagorinsky, & Valencia, 1999). Three aspects of the classroom as a learning environment affect teacher development: classrooms as physical settings; classrooms as settings for implementation of school/district policy; and classrooms as cultural settings. All three of these aspects potentially affect development of novices’ classroom management abilities. For example, school and district mandates for curriculum or instruction may require specific social organizations of teaching and learning within particular

curricular areas. Beginning teachers will have to grapple with issues of management specific to those types of social organization. Classroom management development may also be affected by the physical setting, such as number of students in the class. Of the three, the cultural setting of the classroom—with complex social interactions of teacher with students and students with peers—perhaps has the greatest potential to constrain or enhance development of novices’ classroom management abilities. Learning to manage complex social interactions in ways that foster student learning can only be achieved by doing it in classroom settings.

### 2.2. *Prior knowledge affects development*

Persons-in-activity (Lemke, 1997) do not participate in social interactions devoid of their own histories. Learning may be situated in particular contexts, but it an active process that is greatly affected by the prior knowledge and beliefs of the individual (Borko & Putnam, 1996). Teachers enter teaching with prior knowledge and beliefs which include ideas about children, learning, subject matter instruction, the nature of social interaction in the classroom, and one’s role in those interactions. These prior conceptions play a particularly critical role in beginning teachers’ development for two main reasons: (1) the significant influence teachers have on the construction of the classroom social environment, which then provides a setting for their continued development; and (2) the solitary nature of classroom teaching and the lack of directed guidance typically given to first year teachers.

#### 2.2.1. *Influence of teachers on social environment*

Not only must beginning teachers both teach and learn to teach concurrently (Wildman, Niles, Masliario, & McLaughlin, 1989), they are in the difficult position of shaping and managing learning environments as they are learning how to accomplish this. Beginning teachers, therefore, not only establish and maintain classroom environments that foster students’ development, but environments that create the conditions for their own development. The environments that teachers

establish can channel their developing practice by providing them with problem solving opportunities. Teachers' prior conceptions about classroom environments thus interact with factors of the setting in ways that influence the direction of teacher learning.

### 2.2.2. *Solitary nature of setting*

Beginning to learn about and understand one's roles in the classroom is essentially a solitary experience (Gratch, 1998). Novices must rely on prior knowledge, experience, and values to serve as the initial scaffolding for their continued development. Prior conceptualizations serve to frame teachers' initial ideas of their instructional–managerial roles in the classroom and of their interpretations of students' social/learning behaviors.

Prior knowledge gained from experience, however, will be limited due to the lack of experience with particular tasks. Most, if not all beginning teachers will have to put conceptions of classroom management into practice for the first time as they step across the threshold of their own classroom. Student teachers practice and learn in the classrooms of others. They are not the “real” teachers, and most likely children in student teaching situations do not view them as such. Student teachers are constrained by the established classroom norms to which the children are accustomed. They often strive to “fit in” rather than try out new ideas that might be different from those of the cooperating teacher (Grossman, Valencia, Martin, Place, Jay, & Thompson, 2000).

## 3. **Methods and data sources**

This qualitative study overlapped considerably with a larger, longitudinal study that investigated various influences on beginning teachers' literacy instruction. During the course of interviews and observations for the larger study, I became intrigued with how issues of classroom management appeared to affect the development of fledgling literacy instruction. For this smaller study, I focused on how the conceptions of classroom management of three elementary tea-

chers influenced their developing practices. The three teachers involved with this study, Hannah Moore, Charles Hooper, and Stephanie Nelson (all pseudonyms) attended the same post-baccalaureate teacher education program at a major research university. The coursework in this program emphasized development of teachers with: strong subject matter knowledge; understandings of learning as constructed rather than transmitted knowledge; and conceptions of reflective and collegial practice. I interviewed the participants for both the larger study and this smaller study. Interviews took place at the beginning and end of student teaching and 11 times over the course of the first 2 years of teaching. References to classroom management were spontaneous during student teaching and the first year of teaching. Participants were prompted for classroom management if it did not arise spontaneously in the second year of teaching. Additionally, two interviews in the second year of teaching were focused exclusively on issues of classroom management. Five of the interviews I did during these first years of teaching were semi-structured debriefings of 1- or 2-day classroom observations. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Observations were spaced out throughout the school year. Data also included participants' teacher education portfolios which included both philosophy and classroom management statements.

Data analysis was an iterative process over a 4-year period. I used multiple approaches including reflective summaries of field observations, preliminary domain searches, searches for disconfirming evidence, and coding. In addition to coding participant interviews, I inductively coded all field notes from the second year of teaching. I then used information gained from this coding to further ask the teachers about their conceptualizations of practice. As the last step of data analysis, I shared brief case summaries and thematic findings with each participant as a member check (Glesne, 1999). These analyses yielded rich descriptions of the teachers, the conceptions they brought to the settings in which they began their teaching careers, and how these conceptions both affected and were affected by classroom experience.

#### 4. Findings and discussion

Three major findings emerged from this study. First, although all three teachers initially struggled with issues of classroom management, only two of the teachers were able to establish positive learning environments in their first 2 years of teaching. Second, multiple factors influenced the teachers' abilities to establish positive learning environments. However, conceptions about managing social interactions appeared particularly important to the establishment of positive learning environments. Four concepts of classroom management shared by the two successful teachers were not evident in the third teacher's thinking. These understandings appeared to be significant to the development of positive learning environments. Third, these concepts were clearly linked to the content and processes of a classroom management course taken by these two teachers.<sup>1</sup> In the following sections, I will elaborate on and discuss each of these findings.

##### 4.1. *Putting visions into practice*

All three teachers appeared to have no real difficulties with organizational and procedural aspects of classroom management. Their concerns about these issues were minimal. By the beginning of year two they not only displayed, but could talk about their developing skills such as the ability to multitask. Dealing with complexities of social management—establishing and maintaining social interactions both with and among students that foster learning—was another matter, however. Creating the learning environments that they had envisioned proved problematic for each of these teachers. As Stephanie pointed out just 6 weeks into teaching:

...you're working in an uncontrollable medium. I mean when you're working with kids, you can't predict what the group will be like year to year or morning to afternoon... I'm learning so much this year that I would never learn being a student teacher rather than a full teacher.

When faced with the uncertainties of classroom interactions with children, even Charles who seemed most capable and confident in his management said, "It's surprising that they don't just have a mutiny everyday. I know that's my worst nightmare." These teachers also faced difficulties in coordinating the multiple aspects of their teaching roles. Stephanie commented:

Most difficult for me is that you have to wear so many hats in there. It wouldn't be that bad, but you have to be a counselor, surrogate parent sometimes, nurse, and policeman. It's not just about teaching you know. It's hard.

Despite shared visions of creating positive learning environments, it became distressingly clear the first year that while Stephanie and Charles began to adapt and adjust to the demands of social management during literacy instruction, Hannah did not. Spontaneous references to management faded from Stephanie and Charles' interviews, but continued to dominate those of Hannah. She was particularly concerned over what she perceived as her failure to establish a successful writers' workshop, à la Calkins (1994). Hannah had read about this approach to instruction in her teacher education coursework. At the end of her first year of teaching, she lamented that instead of providing opportunity for positive learning experiences, students had gone from loving writing to hating it.

Rather than improve with a year's experience, Hannah's difficulties with management appeared to worsen during her second year. Students were still disrespectful to Hannah and to each other. During one set of literature circle discussions, at least one of the groups spent the whole time arguing with each other rather than discussing the selection. Over the course of the second year, Hannah began to rely more heavily on directed instruction with all students in the same basal text.

<sup>1</sup> I did not teach this course. Although I had access to the course syllabus, I did not have any opportunity to observe the teaching in this course. Understandings of the processes/content of this course are based on interviews with Stephanie and Charles and on entries in student portfolios. I had access to several student portfolios. Students who had taken this course invariably created classroom management entries based on course readings and assignments.

She abandoned the individualized writers' workshop toward the end of that year. Hannah also adopted a rigid, record-keeping behavior system.

During the same time, interruptions of instructional time for management issues became minimal in Stephanie and Charles' classrooms. Reliance on behavior management systems faded out for Charles by the end of year one and for Stephanie during year two. Instead, they depended on fluid interactions with their students. Stephanie commented, "I'm not feeling like I'm very structured at all with management right now... I'm just addressing things as they come up...it's just more my personality." Furthermore, even though the social organizations they had established and relied on for instruction differed, each of them increasingly adapted instruction to meet individual needs within these structures. As she entered her second year of teaching, Stephanie relinquished some direct control over students' behaviors during work times. She explicitly fostered her students' abilities to work cooperatively and help each other, so that she would be free to work individually with students. Charles' writing workshop, sporadic the first year, blossomed in year two. Students enthusiastically worked together on writing processes in a manner consistent with Charles' ideas of scaffolded instruction. Thus, management appeared to increasingly support positive learning environments in Stephanie and Charles' classrooms, but not in Hannah's.

Additionally, while Stephanie and Charles' confidence in their teaching increased, Hannah was demoralized. By the middle of her second year of teaching Hannah was burned out, doubted her abilities as a teacher, and said she would shift to first grade the next year. She did not think management problems would be so difficult with younger students. After two full years of teaching she poignantly remarked:

I'm just sick of only wanting to take management [courses] because you know, I'm so ready to teach. I want to teach so badly. I just want it, it's like this desire I have to teach.

Why did Hannah have so much more difficulty than Stephanie and Charles in establishing the positive learning community she envisioned? What

can account for the differences in the development of these teachers? In the next section, I examine the factors influencing their early development.

#### *4.2. Factors influencing developing practice*

Not surprisingly, multiple factors influenced the teachers' developing social management abilities. Based on the perspectives of teacher development that underlie this study, we must consider both beginning teaching contexts and the initial conceptions that the teachers brought to these contexts as critical factors in their development. Analysis of these factors suggests that initial conceptions of classroom management played the more significant role in these teachers' abilities to establish the positive learning environments that they envisioned. Furthermore, some particular understandings about classroom management appear to be critical in helping teachers initially establish positive learning environments.

#### *4.3. Teaching contexts*

Stephanie, Charles, and Hannah all chose to work in urban settings with diverse student populations, but the specific contexts for management of literacy learning environments were unique. Let me give you a brief description of the each of their initial teaching contexts.

Stephanie taught second grade in a low-income urban area with a high immigrant population. The 25–28 students in her class were quite diverse culturally and linguistically. Due to concerns with low test scores, a school-wide reading program was mandated. This program involved a good deal of partner/group work. Although this program was designed for literacy instruction with homogeneous groups of students, the school staff was dedicated to heterogeneous grouping. Stephanie, therefore, taught reading and writing to all the students in her class. The wide-range of reading ability of her students added to the diversity of her classroom. Despite the difficulties this diversity created for her beginning instructional abilities, she felt compelled to keep pace in the program with the other, very experienced, second grade teacher. Most of Stephanie's instruction was

organized for the whole class. During work times she walked around working individually with students.

Charles taught third grade in a large urban school district. Student demographics were very similar to those of Stephanie's school. He worked in an open-concept school in which community was a key word. The ability to look over at what other teachers might be doing was considered a boon by Charles as he first started teaching. Although writing instruction involved his whole class of 25 students, Charles had a small group of students for reading—14 his first year of teaching and eight in his second. Students were grouped for reading at Charles' school, and he worked with the struggling third grade readers both years. He had considerable latitude in designing curriculum and instruction, and over the two years developed a multifaceted and increasingly individualized literacy curriculum. Several identified special education students were in his reading group. During Charles' first year these students spent part of their reading time with the resource teacher. After a conversation with his principal, Charles adjusted for the logistical problems this posed by dividing his students into two even smaller reading groups to meet their needs. Small group interactions were observed in his writing time as well.

Hannah taught fourth grade in a private parochial school. Unlike Stephanie and Charles who had grade-level teammates, she was the only teacher at fourth grade. Hannah's class size was small, ranging from 13 to 16 her first two years of teaching. Her students were far less racially and ethnically diverse than those of the other two. Most of her students were European American. According to the principal of the school, some of the students were placed in the school by their parents because of difficulties in the public school setting, often with behavior issues. The students were also fairly homogeneous academically her first year of teaching; all of them tested at grade-level reading ability on the Informal Reading Inventories that Hannah administered. Although Hannah had to follow a required curriculum, she was free to establish instructional approaches of her own choosing. She set up writing and reading learning activities that were socially interactive

such as writers' workshop and student-led literature discussion circles. No other teachers at Hannah's school used these approaches to writing and reading instruction.

#### *4.3.1. Analysis of contextual factors*

Nothing in the contexts themselves would seem to predict that Hannah would have far greater problems to deal with in terms of classroom management. One could argue that the student–student interactions were likely more sophisticated and complex in the social organizations Hannah favored for literacy instruction. But Charles and Stephanie were both observed using partner and group work successfully to foster learning goals. Hannah had management problems during teacher-directed basal lessons as well. After one particularly difficult lesson, a student assumed I was there to evaluate Hannah. He pointed to me taking notes in the back of the room and asked her if she was going to be fired!

Hannah also had the least amount of support from other school staff. She did get advice from the “teacher next door”, but significantly lacked the degree of support, especially from the principal, that both Charles and Stephanie mentioned. During her second year when management issues became more severe, the principal, who was not an educator, purposely did not observe her. He decided it would be best for her to work out her problems on her own. We can only speculate on what might have happened had Hannah had more support. But we also need to keep in mind that Charles and Stephanie never had the same degree of difficulty with management as did Hannah.

Hannah taught older students, and it appeared that she had a very difficult group of students her second year of teaching. However, I felt that that there did not seem to be glaring differences in the students across these three classrooms that could account for Hannah's problems. Charles and Stephanie had difficult and resistant students to deal with as well. For example, I observed Charles in his first year of teaching escort a student to the office who was having problems acting appropriately during reading time.

One could also make the case that Stephanie, rather than Hannah, had the most difficult

situation to deal with as a first year teacher. She had to establish a learning environment in which her 25+ academically and linguistically diverse students participated in learning activities. Charles and Hannah, on the other hand, had to create learning environments with much smaller and academically homogeneous reading groups. Hannah began teaching with only 13 students, and Charles could seat his reading groups around one table.

In sum, while several factors appear to create unique learning contexts for each of these teachers that could serve to enhance or hinder development of social management abilities, these factors do not seem to play the dominate role in their development. Although the learning contexts for teachers varied, the constraints of classroom life were similar. Each utilized a range of social organizations for literacy instruction in which the roles and responsibilities of teachers and students shifted. No matter what the circumstances or the particulars of the visions, Hannah, Stephanie, and Charles all had to deal with immediate social demands of the classroom and the day-to-day interactions with children around learning and teaching of subject matter. In order to pursue understandings of Hannah's difficulties, we must now focus our attention on the conceptions of classroom management that served to guide the development of early teaching practices of the teachers.

#### *4.4. Initial conceptions of classroom management*

Investigation of these teachers' conceptions of classroom management and their roles as classroom managers revealed that all held complex views about their roles in managing positive learning environments. Some of these conceptions were unique and individual. All three shared common understandings, as well. In addition, Charles and Stephanie shared four central conceptions of classroom management that appeared significant to their early management practices.

##### *4.4.1. Individual understandings*

Investigation into their conceptions revealed unique conceptions of their roles as classroom

managers. These understandings appear linked to the teachers' prior knowledge, beliefs, and experiences. Individual differences influenced the establishment of unique learning environments discernible to the observer.

Stephanie had been involved in competitive sports. Like a coach, she was all business—striding purposefully around the room and encouraging students to “knock my socks off” or demanding of them, “prove it to me”. She perceived her role in the classroom as being the leader of the classroom team.

Personal interactions with students were central to Charles' conceptions of teaching, and he described himself as a “warm demander”. He discussed how his “sense of urgency” about his students' learning led to his demands on them. Charles' “sense of urgency” was first demonstrated in his essay to gain admission to the teacher education program. In this essay, he critically discussed the lack of school success for some of the students with whom he went to school. He perceived his fellow students as capable, yet believed that their needs were not met by the school. They were allowed to lag behind. As a teacher, Charles' sense of urgency was especially noticeable in interactions with his struggling readers. Charles demonstrated warm interactions with students through providing a good deal of positive support for student responses and efforts, use of humor, and asking of questions that implied caring. But he also required that students remain focused and on task during reading instruction and work times. I observed him chastise students when he perceived that they were not focusing on their reading assignments.

As a beginning teacher, Hannah perceived her role in the classroom as one of “motivating student-centered learning”. She established a physical environment that appeared appealing to children with such items as a classroom guinea pig and beanbag chairs in the reading corner. Students were free to work wherever they wanted around the room during certain activity times. She utilized student-directed instructional approaches, and was especially vested in setting up an individualized writers' workshop.

Differences among the teachers put an individual stamp on each classroom, but do not explain either success or failure to establish a positive learning environment. In many ways Charles and Stephanie's classrooms were as distinct from each other's as they were from Hannah's. In fact, from my observations it appeared that in many ways Charles and Hannah's classrooms were more similar.

#### 4.4.2. *Shared understandings*

All three teachers shared common understandings about the importance of the organizational aspects of classroom management. For example, each entered into lessons with teacher/student materials well organized and prepared. Additionally, Hannah, Stephanie, and Charles shared common conceptions regarding social management, such things as: interacting with students in respectful ways, the importance of establishing caring relationships with students, and the importance of acknowledging and encouraging the diversities of their students. Their knowledge about students' backgrounds, interests, and learning strengths and weaknesses was extensive. I observed each of them cultivate personal relationships with students. At times I was touched by interactions of these teachers and their students: a gentle hand on the shoulder and an inquiry rather than a brusque reprimand for off-task behavior; the giving of a book to a student at recess for a very particular and personal reason; the spontaneous joining in singing of "Bingo Was His Name" with students during a phonics lesson.

Quite possibly the shared understandings expressed by these teachers may be critical and necessary to establishment of positive learning environments. I would certainly think so. But they were not sufficient to guide Hannah's novice efforts in classroom management.

#### 4.4.3. *Four common conceptions of classroom management*

Investigation of these teachers' understandings of classroom management revealed that four common conceptions appeared prominently in Charles and Stephanie's early thinking, but were never mentioned by Hannah. Mention of these

ideas first appeared in Charles and Stephanie's teacher education portfolios or in interviews with them during their first 3 months of teaching. The same concepts were discussed by each of them 2 years later as well. The four concepts include: conceptions about their sense of authority and responsibility for social interactions in the classroom, explicit teaching of social skills, task analysis, and self-management.

The first concept Charles and Stephanie shared was a strong sense of their role of authority and responsibility in the classroom. Charles said in his portfolio: "I must accept this authority and demonstrate a degree of control in the class in order to ensure my classroom as a safe place..." Both Stephanie and Charles were clearly in charge in their classrooms in ways that Hannah was not. Stephanie was definitely a coach, in tone and manner. She said, "I'm there as a leader and a guide." Besides being warm, Charles was the demander. On more than one occasion he talked about having to learn that he could not be the students' friend, but had to assume the role of authority in the classroom.

Along with this conception of their authority came concomitant expectations for student behavior and enforcing of social norms. Each used strong phrasing in portfolios regarding expectations for student behavior. Stephanie did not allow talk of violence or guns in her class. Although Charles, like Hannah, conducted private conversations with individual students who were having difficulties, he authoritatively and publicly invoked the understood norms of the classroom: "That is not the way we talk in our class."

Charles and Stephanie were equally clear that they were responsible for students' learning of appropriate social skills. They did not assume students' prior knowledge, but spoke of the need to explicitly teach social skills. In their teacher education portfolios they each advocated teaching of social skills as part of the curriculum. Social skills instruction showed up both in their practice and in what they said. For example, early in the school year Stephanie taught her students expectations for partner interactions. She only had to say "partner position" and her second graders knew what to do in their partner work. She said:

It [the reading program] takes a lot of direct teaching about the behaviors like—how do you set up for partner reading, what do you do as a partner reader, what is your job as the reader, what’s your job as the listener... I make it clear with the kids that if they don’t know what to do, it’s ok. Then that’s my job to give them a strategy or teach them what to do.

Similarly, Charles talked about the need to teach students these same skills for partner work. In addition, he explicitly taught his students such social skills as: how to use words in their disagreements; how to greet guests; and, since his students ate lunch in the classroom, even how to eat with a fork for some of his students new to the United States.

The third concept shared by the two was that of task analysis—analyzing learning and social activities in order to understand exactly what students were being asked to do. Stephanie’s portfolio contained a paper for a course project in which she had to do task analysis. Two years later, talking about this assignment Stephanie remarked, “And some of the things we had to do for this project have been really useful, such as a task analysis. Something I probably would have never thought up on my own.” Mention of task analysis rose spontaneously and consistently in early interviews with Charles. For him, task analysis occurred in everything he did from “planning a lesson on division to figuring out how to line students up to go to recess”. In talking about classroom management he said, “The more practical stuff is task analysis, to be able to know again what it is they know, what it is they don’t now, and what do you need to teach them.”

The last concept that Stephanie and Charles shared was the concept of self-management as an important component of classroom management. Working closely all day with elementary children is emotionally taxing. Both Stephanie and Charles talked about having to control their emotions in order to do what’s best for children. Charles commented, “You have to be very deliberate about all of your emotions... I had to check myself. I was about to let him have it, but I said, ‘What purpose would it serve right now?’”

Stephanie said she was working toward not letting the students “push her buttons”. Near the end of 2 years of teaching she remarked, “It’s something I never realized before I got into teaching, that it was going to be that intense... Hopefully classroom management has become less about me and more about the kids.”

These four conceptions of management would not necessarily be discernible to the observer. I was surprised as they emerged from the data. They had been played out and adapted according to both school contexts and individualistic conceptions of management. Stephanie and Charles clearly conceived of these four concepts as vital to their understandings of teacher practice.

#### 4.4.4. *Analysis of conceptual understandings*

These findings suggest that initial conceptions and understandings of classroom management were critical to these teachers’ abilities to establish the positive learning environments that they envisioned. Furthermore, the four conceptions shared by Charles and Stephanie appear to have played a central role in providing pedagogical tools (Grossman et al., 1999) and vocabulary that allowed them, as novices, to make sense of complex and intense social interactions in the classroom. These understandings seemed to both frame decision-making processes and scaffold Stephanie and Charles’ early efforts to successfully manage complex learning environments. In addition, these particular conceptions seem to have influenced feelings of self-confidence and supported increasingly complex instructional practices.

Hannah, on the other hand, did not have these four conceptions to scaffold her early teaching experiences and support her development. Her difficult early experiences seem linked to the lack of understandings critical to social management in complex classroom settings. Hannah expressed no understandings that might correspond to instruction of social skills, task analysis, and conceptions of self-management. In addition, unlike Stephanie and Charles, Hannah had limited understandings of the authority and responsibility that teachers might assume in classrooms and how that plays out in complex social interactions. Her conceptions of how a teacher “facilitates” learning did not

reveal understandings either of the complexities of social interactions in classrooms or the shifting balances of power within those interactions. For example, at the beginning of her second year of teaching Hannah tried to increase the amount of support she provided students in writers' workshop. Instead of considering changes in terms of her direct interactions with students, she created learning packets for them. She hoped that the packets and forms would serve to direct the sequence of their learning and productive use of time. These changes reflected an emphasis on setting up external frameworks for the student-centered learning that she envisioned. Hannah felt that once the external social organizations for instructional approaches such as writers' workshop were set up, appropriate student behaviors and responsible learning would simply fall into place.

Despite such attempts at scaffolding, Hannah continued to have difficulties with managing students' productive learning during literacy instruction. It was definitely not for lack of trying. Hannah even took a workshop on management after her first year of teaching. Unfortunately, it did not challenge Hannah's underlying assumptions of her role in classroom management. With limited conceptual understandings of management, Hannah was stymied in her attempts to reflect on and deal with the problems of social management that she faced in her class. Unlike Charles and Stephanie, Hannah was not able to establish balances of power, responsibility, care, and respect between herself and students to create the positive learning environment that she envisioned for her class.

During her first two years of teaching, Hannah was limited by her own understandings, as was Marilyn in Crow's (1991) study of first year teachers. Hannah, like Marilyn, found herself "lost, discouraged, and perplexed" (p. 19). Hannah was thus thrown off balance by the difficulties of beginning teaching and lacked appropriate pedagogical tools to help her regain her footing.

#### 4.5. *Developing conceptions in practice*

Based on their conceptual understandings of classroom management Hannah, Stephanie, and

Charles established social environments in their classroom that then influenced their development as well as their students' learning. As I noted earlier Stephanie and Charles' early successes with management set the foundation for continued growth. They came to rely less on external management systems. Both of them guided students' opportunities for responsibility. Each expressed confidence in her/his management abilities.

Hannah's also learned from the classroom environments she established during this time. Unfortunately, she learned the "hard way". Some of her basic conceptions of management began to change near the end of her second year of teaching. Interestingly, the four conceptions that had scaffolded Stephanie's and Charles' developing practice from the beginning started creeping into her understandings. Alterations in Hannah's perspectives were precipitated by pressure from concerned parents who forced a parent-teacher meeting about her management of the classroom. This meeting forced Hannah to confront her difficulties with management. As a result of this trying encounter with parents, Hannah gained access to a curriculum involving explicit teaching of social skills. She began using it immediately and reported noticing a difference in the students' interactions. She continued to use this curriculum in her third year of teaching. Furthermore, many difficult classroom experiences forced Hannah to reconsider her ideas of student-centered learning vis-à-vis her authority and responsibility in the classroom: "I never held them accountable in any sort of way and kids are funny that way. It's really a hard balance I find... They just need to do it."

Hannah also discussed how she had begun to step back from the emotional manner in which she reacted to students' behaviors. Although she did not use the term "self-management" as had Charles and Stephanie, the concept was the same. During the member check meeting, we talked about the concept of self-management and that all teachers deal with their emotions. Hannah had felt that her emotional reaction to beginning teaching was an individual response, rather than one she shared with other teachers. Hannah thought

of herself as a “bad teacher”. Sadly, lack of understanding that classroom management included management of one’s emotions seemed to further undermine her confidence.

By the end of the second year, after reflection on painful and difficult experiences, Hannah still maintained her conceptions of classroom management as creation of positive learning environments, but as she said, “How I would achieve it is very different from what I expected.” Hannah appeared to finally have some pedagogical tools that would help her begin to build the positive learning environment she had envisioned.

The emotional toll on Hannah during these first two years was obvious. I often had difficulty just sitting and observing in her room. I can only guess at the emotional and academic toll on the students. At the end of two full years of teaching, Hannah felt she was still back at square one in terms of her development:

I’m not a person of experience yet. I just have two years of experience that has awakened me to the reality of dealing with kids... I don’t think that I felt as responsible as I do now... I never really dealt or grappled with the idea that kids will do things wrong. And sometimes they’ll make bad choices—even in an environment.

We cannot know how Hannah’s early teaching experiences might have been different had she had understandings of these four concepts. We do not even know if Hannah will eventually move toward a balance that empowers students in ways that she envisioned. As I mentioned earlier, by the end of her second year of teaching Hannah also adopted a rigid, record-keeping behavior system. She talked about finding the “right system” for her third year of teaching. But certainly, the value of these four concepts to teachers is suggested by the differences in Hannah, Charles, and Stephanie’s early experiences. Changes to Hannah’s understandings further suggest the value of these concepts. Further analysis revealed the significant role teacher education program might have played in the development of these teachers’ understandings of classroom management.

#### 4.6. *Role of teacher education*

Each of these teachers attended the same teacher education program. But the educational experiences they encountered in this program that could be used to scaffold beginning teaching were not the same. Certainly, we can make the case that no two students will ever have the same teacher education experiences. The influence of students’ prior conceptions, including apprenticeship of observation, on their education and future practice is well documented. Hannah, Stephanie, and Charles all had vastly different life experiences and prior knowledge that affected how they experienced the program and the knowledge they gained from it. Elsewhere my colleagues and I have documented the different conceptions that these prospective teachers gained from their literacy coursework (Grossman et al., 1999). For example, Charles appropriated strong understandings of the concept of scaffolded instruction from coursework. This concept is not even mentioned by Hannah until near the end of her second year of teaching. Instead her beginning teaching reflects emphasis on understanding of her role as empowering students.

Similarly, their student teaching experiences also were distinctly unique. Charles had a placement that afforded him support, a good deal of practice in assuming classroom responsibility, and congruence with his teacher’s ideas about literacy instruction and classroom interactions. Stephanie and Hannah were not so fortunate. Stephanie was sometimes interrupted when she was at the front of the class by her cooperating teacher, diminishing the degree to which she experienced command of the situation. Hannah had a very difficult placement. She perceived her cooperating teacher as “overbearing” in his interaction with students. The heavy-handed management of this teacher provided no model that Hannah could respect. She said she was once feeling frenzied because a student was standing up during an art work time and she knew the teacher would not like it.

Yet, despite all these unique differences, at the end of the teacher education program Stephanie, the typical young, white, female, middle-class beginning teacher, shared four common

conceptions with Charles, an ex-Marine, with a strong Asian-American identity, who grew up in the low-income neighborhood in which he taught.

#### 4.7. *Role of management course*

The connection for their shared conceptions can be traced specifically to a course on classroom management. Stephanie and Charles both directly attributed knowledge of the four conceptions to this class. They emphatically mentioned this course numerous times across 3 years as significant to their development. Often, they used the same vocabulary and told the same exact story in which the instructor talking about what “pushed his buttons”. While Hannah, who had not had a course on classroom management, voiced the typical novice teacher complaint of “not enough classroom management”, Stephanie and Charles both cited management as one thing they felt confident about as they faced the prospect of teaching. For example, 6 weeks into teaching when asked what important things he had learned in teacher education that he was using in the classroom Charles said:

The management class. I use that stuff every-day—task analysis, teaching social skills, doing explicit instruction. Every day stuff he [the instructor] told me comes to mind.

#### 4.8. *Nature of management course processes*

The significance of this course to Stephanie and Charles’ early teaching goes beyond the tools and resources these conceptions provided them, however. The course also provided them with an opportunity to examine an array of perspectives on management and their underlying assumptions before they were confronted with the need to act and react in classrooms as social settings. Stephanie talked about the nature of the course and how it allowed her to begin constructing her own understandings of classroom management and her role in it:

What I liked was that it gave us all sorts of backgrounds so we weren’t working from ground zero, but it also didn’t say you have to

adopt one of these models. You need to come up with your own and justify why you’re taking pieces from which one.

Stephanie and Charles cited and utilized information they gained from this course in their classroom management portfolio entries.

Hannah did not have this background information. In her management entry she stated that much of what she believed “actually came from my own personal experiences using various methods”. Instead of the broad readings and specific learning activities aimed at preparing classroom teachers that Stephanie and Charles drew on, Hannah cited knowledge that she brought from an undergraduate course on child development. The one book on classroom management that she had read on her own and cited in her portfolio was *Beyond Discipline: Compliance to Community* (Kohn, 1996). In his book, Alfie Kohn, critically concerned with the issues of power in the classroom, focuses on student empowerment. He, however, does not address how novice teachers can develop ability and confidence in their authority and responsibility for children’s learning to begin with. The experiences of the teachers in this study suggest that empowerment of students develops from a foundation of teachers’ confidence and understanding in their own power and responsibility.

Nowhere in her teacher education program was Hannah afforded adequate opportunity to examine her incoming assumptions about children, her role of teacher as social manager, and issues of power and responsibility in the classroom as they connect to learning and specific instructional approaches for literacy. In part, Hannah’s difficulties could be attributed to the lack of opportunity to confront her prior conceptions and to think about different perspectives for social management in the classroom.

## 5. **Finding balances**

Each of these three teachers enthusiastically entered their classrooms with visions of creating positive learning communities. But only Stephanie

and Charles came well prepared to their task. The discussion above illuminates many variations in the prior knowledge, experiences, and settings that might contribute to differences between their early experiences and those of Hannah. Although this study examined only three cases, striking similarities in the conceptual understandings of Charles and Stephanie give compelling evidence for the importance of these conceptions to their early successes. The direct link of these conceptions to their management course suggests two implications for teacher education: (1) the critical need to include coursework on management in teacher education programs, and (2) the nature of that coursework.

### *5.1. Inclusion of coursework in teacher education programs*

Most obviously, the experiences of these three teachers indicate that coursework on classroom management should be an integral part of teacher education programs. Charles and Stephanie's participation in a course focused on the management aspects of teacher practice appears to have contributed significantly to the understandings that supported their successful transitions into teaching. Yet, despite repeated documentation of the difficulties of first year teaching and of continuing claims by preservice teachers that they are poorly prepared in the area of classroom management (Jones, 1996; Kagan, 1992; Pilarski, 1994), only 36.9% of 111 teacher education programs surveyed by (Wesley & Vocke, 1992, cited in Jones & Jones, 1998) offered separate courses in classroom management to their students. Goodlad (1990) suggests that in teacher education programs the topic of classroom management is taught as "bits and pieces of good counsel...in methods classes" (p. 248). We cannot continue to underestimate the complexity of classrooms as social environments and ignore the difficulties of novices in dealing with the immediacy of classroom interactions for the first time. As teacher educators we cannot continue to present our students with visions of socially complex instructional approaches that we frame as "best practice" without supplying them with

corresponding pedagogical tools to help them establish those practices in classrooms. Coursework on classroom/social management should be an integral part of any program that prepares teachers to create positive learning environments in their classrooms.

The prospective teachers, who followed Hannah in the teacher education program at her university, are now required to take coursework on classroom management. But simply adding a course on management is not all that these findings suggest. As I have noted, the summer workshop Hannah took before her second year of teaching did little to help her. We must also consider the nature of the course taken by Charles and Stephanie.

### *5.2. Nature of coursework on management*

Certainly, we can only speculate on how Hannah's experiences may have been different had she taken the same course as Charles and Stephanie. Nevertheless, a combination of process and content in the course provided learning opportunities for Charles and Stephanie that appear significant to their development. Below I mention only those aspects of the course that appeared to help Stephanie and Charles develop the four key concepts they discussed and demonstrated in classroom practice.

#### *5.2.1. Processes*

The course taken by Stephanie and Charles appeared to have involved them in activities stressing reflection and problem solving processes to do with management of social interactions in classroom settings. Charles and Stephanie had opportunity to examine their own prior conceptions of the role of teachers, roles of students, and issues of authority and responsibility in light of various perspectives as they crafted personal management philosophies. Furthermore, the task analysis activity appeared to have provided novice teachers opportunity to look more closely at what students know and need to know in a given classroom event. Implicit in the task analysis activity were assumptions that teacher decisions regarding social management and organization for learning are done in conjunction with specific

understandings about students. From this perspective management of learning activity is social and situated. Management is not a variety of techniques or external structures that you do *to* students. But rather, management is something accomplished *with* students in particular learning contexts.

As central as these reflective and analytic processes appeared to be in the course, the content was equally important. As suggested by this study, course content provided the substance critical for reflective practice.

### 5.2.2. *Content*

Techniques and procedures for classroom management do not appear to be the main focus of the course that Charles and Stephanie took. Instead, through course readings students were exposed to a broad array of perspectives on issues of control and care that underlie complex social interactions in classrooms. Understanding an array of perspectives appeared to aid these beginning teachers work their way through the complexities of social management in elementary classrooms.

In addition, conceptual understandings of various aspects of teachers' roles in social management appear central to the content of this course. The four conceptions Stephanie and Charles gained from this course appeared to be especially useful as they established positive learning environments for the first time: a sense of authority and responsibility for social interactions; explicit teaching of social skills; task analysis; and self-management. These ideas, as components of course content, provided Stephanie and Charles with opportunities to consider the emotional, social, and cognitive complexities of classroom management. Hannah's development of these conceptions through classroom experience further suggests the importance of these understandings to effective classroom management.

Furthermore, as in the instance of the concept of self-management, students were given vocabulary and meanings shared with others within the teaching "community of practice" (Wenger, 1998). Information was shared through casual conversation and the professor talking from his own experiences. Knowing that this was a feeling

shared by others might have lessened the isolation Hannah felt about her emotional reactions to first year teaching and validate such feelings. The professor, the "expert" member of the community, also shared his own difficulties with classroom management. Perhaps hearing professors share their own classroom difficulties with management or instruction alleviates for some of the stress of recognizing one's own shortcomings as a beginning teacher. Hannah seemed to think so. At one point she remarked about her professors: "Everyone seemed to be this perfect, 'I'm the 90's teacher'... But I think I would have learned more from someone who would be willing to share their mistakes... Then I would be able to identify with those mistakes as I did them."

Although the content I have mentioned distinguishes Charles and Stephanie's understandings from those of Hannah, we must not forget that all three teachers held common beliefs about social interactions in the classroom such as demonstrating respect for students. The management course may have included such concepts as well. Certainly, other courses in their teacher education programs provided this foundation.

In sum, through both processes and content of the course, Stephanie and Charles were prepared, not with just with tricks or techniques, but with tools that helped them successfully establish classrooms as positive learning environments. Charles and Stephanie were able to create balances between themselves, their students, and instructional approaches to literacy learning that worked well in their classrooms and fostered their continued growth as teachers.

### 5.2.3. *Postscript*

As for Hannah, who after two difficult and demoralizing years felt she was still at the beginning has grown beyond that point. In her third year of teaching she stayed at fourth grade and continued to apply what she had learned that during second difficult year—assuming responsibility for social interactions in her classroom, explicitly teaching social skills to her students, managing her emotions, and working toward literacy instructional formats that worked for her and her students. At the time I was writing this

paper, I received a phone call from Hannah. She told me that she had just moved to a public school setting and had begun her fifth year of classroom teaching. Rather than become another dropout casualty of beginning teaching, Hannah reported that she is a happy and thriving teacher.

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