To Control or Not Control: Preservice Teacher Preconceptions of Classroom Management.

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Abstract

This paper reports on the impact of a preservice undergraduate unit and school experience on the preconceptions of classroom management and discipline of 2nd year preservice teachers. During the first year of their course, the preservice teachers' preconceptions of the teaching role in general were tracked. One construct identified during this 12 months was the need for teachers to be 'in control'. Using data collected through self reporting procedures preconceptions of control held by the preservice teachers were identified.

Results confirmed that preservice teachers entered the second year of the course with "traditional" constructions of teacher control, associated commonly with relatively high levels of teacher power. Following the semester long unit and integrated school experience different control conceptions developed that were less traditional. They reported that teachers developed control through relationships with students, mutual respect, using specific teaching skills and in organising learning experiences and classrooms, rather than through coercion and domination. This paper reports on the preconceptions and categories of control that preservice teachers entered the 2nd year of their course with, and the conceptions and categories that changed following the unit and school experience.

Introduction

Research and debate about how pre-service teachers construct their own knowledge about classroom management has matured over the past twenty years or so (Doyle, 1986; Jones, 1995). The research findings clearly demonstrate that classrooms are complex organisational settings and that teachers’ prevailing beliefs, values and preconceptions inform and impact on classroom management practices (Clark & Peterson, 1986; Whitaker, 1995). As Marland (1993) succinctly argues:

Central to this (view) is acknowledgment that teaching is problematic because classroom life itself is not predictable or rule-governed. Rather, classroom life is characterised, at least to some extent, by uncertainty, volatility and capriciousness.
If the uncertainty that characterises teaching is problematic for teachers, then learning to teach, and in particular learning to manage student behaviour, must equally be problematic. For the prospective teacher placed in the practicum for the first time the feeling of being overwhelmed is quite common (Lanier and Little, 1986). They tend to place classroom management at the centre of their practice, often at the expense of student learning (Hoy and Rees, 1977). Even though they are often aware of preventative classroom management strategies, it is common for student teachers to demonstrate a tendency to focus on using authoritarian disciplinary styles of management. Tomlinson (1995) maintains that student teachers have conceptions of teaching, learning and management that are separate, non integrated entities. As a result, they separate the management of behaviour from the promotion of learning, desire total control over their classes and believe that simple secrets exist to fixing the quite complex problems they face in classrooms (Tomlinson, 1995).

Researchers studying this phenomena have developed a number of different theories to explain how it is that student teachers adopt a control orientation with their teaching. These theories differ as to how they attribute the reasons that student teachers seek to use controlling teaching practices and whether these practices develop as a result of socialisation into the teaching profession, or from the experiences that student teachers themselves had as school students.

Hoy and Rees (1977) believe that it is the nature of practicum experiences that move student teachers from being relatively more democratic in nature in the classroom to being relatively more custodial. Student teachers in seeking to be accepted as a "teacher" by teachers, "fit in" by doing as teachers do, or doing what they are told by teachers to do. These experiences during practicum with supervising teachers are believed responsible for the movement towards more authoritarian teacher strategies. As such, student teachers are seen as passive learners of teaching. Teachers are the interpreters of classroom life, tell student teachers what to do based on these interpretations, and then assess if student teachers are able to follow these directions. Learning to teach becomes part of a process where student teachers are expected to conform, and as a result be socialised, to desired practices of teaching.

Zeichner and Grant (1981) question the validity of these findings. Following a study of forty student teachers, Zeichner and Grant (1981) found that student teachers had in place, before school experience began, "highly custodial views of pupil control and retained these views at the end of the experience". Silvernail and Costello (1983) support these findings. They maintain that, regardless of the type of
school experience, "preservice teachers who exhibit a basic custodial pupil control ideology initially do not change this perspective". Martin and Baldwin (1995) found when comparing the classroom management beliefs of student teachers to those of expert teachers, that student teachers beliefs are more control oriented than expert teachers. They suggest that "student teachers' perceptions of classroom management may be influenced by their own experiences as students more than their pre-service training programs" (Martin and Baldwin, 1995).

This apparent link between the preconceptions of teaching and teacher's work has been noted by Feiman-Nemser, McDiarmid, Melnick & Parker, (1989). Student teachers, they suggest, enter preservice courses with a range of preconceptions about teaching and these conceptions are developed from the experiences that student teachers have themselves as students at school. These initial schemas constructed by beginning teachers of classroom management are remarkably resistant to change (Feiman-Nemser et al., 1989).

Learning during teacher preparation is an interaction between the conceptions they (student teachers) bring and the knowledge and experiences they encounter. Unless teacher educators help their students surface and examine initial beliefs and assumptions, these taken-for-granted ideas may distort the lessons taught and learned during teacher preparation. (Feiman-Nemser et al., 1989)

Dunkin, Precians & Nettle (1994) maintain that undergraduate teacher preparation courses are able impact on and change specific student teacher cognitions. This needs to occur, Salomon (1992) among many others, argues, through integrating theories of learning with the processes of learning to teach, making each interdependent on the other. This allows student teachers to develop a range of cognitive reflective skills and knowledge to draw upon to understand and interpret accurately classroom life (Kauffman, Hallahan, Mostert, Trent & Nuttycombe, 1993).

A number of challenges for teacher educators emerge from these findings. It is clear that teacher educators need to examine the ways in which student teachers learn about teaching and in particular, their preconceptions of teaching. It is evident that conceptions of teacher roles and student learning emanate, and are impacted, from broad conceptions of teaching (Salomon, 1992).

Yet, despite these understandings, Kauffman et.al (1993) claim, that the preparation of both pre-service and in-service teachers in classroom management and discipline has not changed. Typically, delivery occurs through "expository style of textbooks and the typical
lecture-discussion format" (Kauffman et.al, 1993:vii). Such approaches, do not adequately prepare teachers to understand and respond to the complexities of behaviour and classroom life. Teachers need instead to develop a range of problem solving and reflective analysis skills (Kauffman et.al, 1993).

What is evident, if teacher educators are to assist preservice and inservice teachers develop effective skills in classroom management is; a clear understanding of the conceptions that teachers and student teachers have in the area, skills and understandings that allow for the reconstruction of these conceptions, processes that acknowledge the vulnerability of learning new skills and understandings, and support for the development of skills and understandings in teaching contexts.

Methodology.

Data for this study was collected over a two year period. Preservice teachers, in their first two years of a four year B Ed program at the University of Tasmania, were participants in the study. In the first year of their course all student teachers (N=144) participated in a study that replicated the research of Feiman-Nemser et. al (1989) and Burgess, Briscoe and Williamson (1994). Written responses were collected from the cohort, before a ten-day school experience, to the question "What is teaching?" Following the school experience the group again were again asked to make a written response to the same question, and a second question, "How have your ideas about teaching changed, and what influences those changes?"

Results gained from the first phase of the study were generally similar to those in the study of Burgess, Briscoe and Williamson (1994). In particular, that one essential function identified by student teachers was that teachers need to discipline and be in control. To elicit further student teachers' preconceptions of classroom management and control, additional questions were developed to survey students in the second year of the course. These questions were;

- What is it that teachers do to indicate to students that they are 'in control'?
- If students misbehave how should teachers be 'in control' in the situation?

Written responses to these questions were collected from the student teacher cohort (N= 120) on three occasions during the second year of their program; mid way through semester 1, at the end of semester 1 (following a unit on classroom management and discipline), and at the beginning of the next teaching semester (following a practice teaching block). Written responses were coded around four conceptual areas derived from the data; teacher actions, teacher roles and expectations,
teacher thinking and decision making, and classroom management strategies (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

Comparisons between the results of the three surveys on responses to the first question "What is it that teachers do to indicate they are in control?" were undertaken. Similarities and differences in the concepts and constructions of "being in control" were identified from the data between survey 1 and survey 2, and survey 2 and survey 3.

Findings
Survey 1
In the initial survey undertaken during Semester 1, analysis of the written responses identified 10 constructs that student teachers use to conceptualise the notion of teacher control. These ten areas related to:

- teacher communication;
- teacher behaviour;
- teacher decision making;
- teaching role;
- teacher functions (what teachers need to establish);
- physical position;
- teacher imperatives;
- classroom management strategies; and
- purpose.

The ten areas were further broken down into the four category areas. These were: teacher actions, teacher roles and expectations, teacher thinking and decision making, and classroom management strategies.

Prior to completing the coursework component on classroom management, student teachers perceived teacher control to be a mixture of teacher centred and dominated practices. See Figure 1.

Figure 1- Initial Preconceptions of Being in Control

Being in control was a construction of teachers fulfilling roles of domination and intimidation. Notions of the all powerful teacher with significant teacher authority were central to student teacher preconceptions. Teachers need to give students messages that; "I am the teacher", "I am not impressed", "I am strong"' and "I am in power".

The teacher's role is to "direct", "call the shots", be the "friendly policeman" and make decisions about "what is said and done", "what students call teachers", "what is good and bad behaviour" and "what is reinforced and how". It is an imperative that teachers have authority, student attention, a quiet class, respect and power.
To be in control, teachers were expected to yell, speak loudly to students, shout and tell students what to do and were able to give detentions, humiliate students, use sarcasm, reprimand and use negative reinforcement.

Student teachers did identify a range of teacher behaviours and conceptions of teaching that were relatively less domineering and controlling.

This later group of skills and conceptions of teaching, whilst being relative few in number if survey 1, became the core set of skills and conceptions in survey 2 (see Figure 2). After delivery of coursework on classroom management, student teachers indicated changes in how they understood the construct of "being in control". Two major changes occurred.

Figure 2- Post Coursework Conceptions of Being in Control

Firstly, the level of and need for dominating teacher control lessened considerably. Whilst it was important for teachers to establish and have power and authority, there was not present in responses a need for teachers to dominate all events in the classroom. Teachers could establish control through effective planning, the use of planned consequences, having clear learning goals and classroom procedures and routines, and by being assertive. How teachers communicated in the classroom changed as well. There was an increased recognition of the need for teachers to use effectively their voice and eye-contact with children.

The second area of change was that student teachers identified a range of strategies and expectations that teachers could be in control through the provision of an effective teaching and learning program. The management structures that teachers use can establish order, as can clear and concise directions, providing interesting lessons and having lesson flow. What became apparent is that students began to reconceptualise the notion of control from something predominantly domineering and all powering to something related to teacher authority, classroom management and teaching strategies and the development of a sense of order through effective teaching and learning experiences.

During practicum students were expected, in addition to regular teaching requirements, to implement a teaching plan that allowed them to review the policy of the school where they were placed in the area of classroom management and develop with their teachers a teaching plan in the area to implement and trial in their class(es).

A number of changes to the conceptions student teachers of being in
control occurred during this period. These occurred in four areas; how teachers communicate, what behaviours they engage in to demonstrate control, what role teachers assume, and the types of classroom management used by teachers.

Whilst in survey 2 and survey 3 student teachers recognised the need for teachers to use their voice and use eye-contact, there was a further increase in the number of students reporting the need for skills in this area. In addition, students were able to identify more specifically other communicative skills such as teacher expressions, gestures, hand signals and monitoring of children (see Figure 3).

Figure 3- Post Practicum Conceptions of Being in Control

This level of specificity also occurred in the area of classroom management skills where a range of new skills were identified by students that were not previously identified. This included the need for teachers to; ask questions of students on the classroom rules, organise the room, keep the students on task, prevent problems, deal quickly with misbehaviour, have clear learning goals, and defuse problems. Again, the link to effective teaching and learning programs and the need for classroom order was noted by student teachers, but this also occurred at a greater level of specificity.

A number of other changes to the role of teachers and their behaviour in general was noted in this survey and not other surveys. Teachers need to be, in addition to being consistent, approachable and fair, confident, firm and comfortable. Student teachers also recognised the importance of teachers to keep calm, use student names, follow up and model appropriate behaviour.

Over the three surveys a number of trends were noticed. These were:

The need, as perceived by student teachers, for teachers to be domineering and all powerful, decreased, and in the final survey, no incidences of these behaviours were used by student teachers in their descriptions of what it is that teachers do to indicate they are in control.

Conceptually, when student teachers made this change, they often preferred to recognise that some teacher behaviours and roles were inappropriate. Often they could not be specific about what it is that teachers should do and preferred to express their understanding negatively; e.g. "don't yell", "don't use put downs", etc.

Student teachers were able following practicum to be more specific
about the skills needed to effectively manage classrooms and established a link between teaching and learning programs and classroom order. The number of teaching behaviours in this area increased over 300% between survey 1 and 3.

Some teacher behaviours and roles did not change across the three surveys. In all surveys student teachers saw that it was important for teachers to: have authority, be consistent, confident and approachable, position themselves at the front of the room, be assertive, effectively communicate, and devise and use classroom rules. However, between survey 1 and 3, there were increased reporting by students of the importance in these areas.

Many of the specific strategies identified in survey 3, especially those skills identified as new understandings in the survey, were part of the coursework delivery component, but were not identified by students in survey 2.

Discussion
What has emerged from this initial investigation is a richer understanding of how student teachers perceive the teaching role, especially as it relates to teacher control. An additional insight to the processes of learning the skills of effective classroom management has emerged.

It is clear that student teachers enter their course with preconceptions of teacher control. These preconceptions predominantly centre on the need for teachers to be domineering and all powerful. This supports the position of Feiman-Nemser (1989) that student teachers enter courses with preconceptions of the teaching role, and the position of Tomlinson (1995), that because of these preconceptions, student teachers separate student management and student learning and have a desire to be all powerful.

It is also evident that through the integration of course work and practicum, based on student learning (Salomon, 1992), that the preconceptions of student teachers can be challenged and changed. Change appears to be conceptual in nature, whereby to move from a teacher dominated approach, student teachers need opportunities during coursework to learn about the appropriateness of a range of teacher behaviours and the inappropriateness of another range, especially when it relates to student learning and classroom order. Student teachers' range of teaching options decreased as a result of course work, but only in the area of inappropriate teacher behaviours. Following practicum, the range of appropriate and specific teacher behaviours and roles increased, even though the majority of these were covered in the course content. This suggests that student teachers need time to plan, experience or observe teaching before they can reflect on the relative
merits of an approach.

Implications
This study represents the start of research project that seeks to identify the connections between learning to teach and the contexts in which this occurs, especially as it relates to the development of classroom management skills. The findings support the body of evidence that suggests that student teachers enter pre-service courses with preconceptions of teaching. The findings also support the need to integrate course work and practicum and that each have an essential role to play in learning to teach. The findings do not preclude the effects of student teacher socialisation into the profession and it is evident that future research is required to identify the effects, if any, of this.

The research has shown that there appears to be a process of student teachers learning how to be "in control". This process is conceptual, and possibly developmental, in nature and can be facilitated by experiences that allow students to integrate and reflect on their experiences of learning to teach.

References:


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