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Classroom Management through Teacher Candidates' Lenses: Transforming Learning Communities Through a Community of Practice

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Abstract

- To better prepare teacher candidates for classroom management through attention to learning communities that affirm and support diverse students, including those effected by trauma, four instructors redesigned a required, undergraduate course. This study describes findings from three teacher candidate co-authors who were enrolled in that course. One semester after completing a course on classroom management and building community, candidates were asked to review their course products and other artifacts to consider what they learned and build upon their prior knowledge. Candidates used stimulated recall to respond to prompts on *community building and relationships*, *gender and racial inclusivity*, *trauma sensitive practices*, and the *school to prison pipeline*. Their perspectives contribute to understandings about how candidates engage in sense-making regarding classroom communities and classroom management.

Keywords

Classroom management, classroom communities, action research

Cover Page Footnote

Authors

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To better prepare preservice teachers for classroom management through attention to learning communities that affirm and support diverse students, including those affected by trauma, four instructors in three departments redesigned a required, undergraduate course[1] for intentionality around gender and racial inclusivity, trauma-sensitive practices, and the school to prison pipeline using a community of practice (Lave, & Wenger, 1999), action research approach (Manfra, 2009). That is, instructors provided the format and initial content or resources around these concepts in order for candidates to negotiate and renegotiate their understandings and perspectives as they continued to engage with the initial artifacts from the course and their accumulating experiences beyond it. This study describes findings of the action research of three teacher candidates who were enrolled in that course using data they created the following semester as they revisited their initial work. Their perspectives contribute to understandings about how candidates engage in sense-making (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002; Ketelaar, Beijaard, Boshuizen, & Den Brok, 2012) regarding classroom communities and classroom management particularly with respect to the aforementioned concepts.

Background and Literature

The course, titled "Building Learning Communities," aimed to educate undergraduate candidates during their first semester in the program, on philosophies and methods for creating and managing learning communities supportive of the intellectual, academic, social-emotional, and physical needs of diverse students in classroom settings. The text *Classroom Management: Models, Applications, and Cases* (Manning & Bucher, 2013) along with supplemental readings (See Appendix A for a list of those readings) were used to support candidates' construction of course concepts related to building learning communities. These concepts include classrooms as communities, trauma-sensitive practice and strategies, classroom management, multiple intelligences and learning styles, social and interpersonal skills, and working effectively with parents/guardians. Additionally, photovoice, a was used to develop critical consciousness.

Candidates were also placed in various schools throughout the district; they were responsible for observing in their assigned classroom for at least 36 hours throughout the semester. Along with their observations, they completed research informed assignments such as a child study project (Goodwin, 2002) and a classroom analysis (Gremmen, van den Berg, Segers, & Cillessen, 2016; Marx, Fuhrer, & Hartig, 1999; Sommer, 1977; See Appendix B for a list of formal assignments).

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[1] The course is EDTP 328 Building Learning Communities. It is the required course on classroom management.

Seventeen middle and secondary certification candidates enrolled in course; by the following semester, fifteen remained in program. All fifteen were invited to continue with the community of practice created that following semester as a monthly activity. Eleven of the 15 candidates participated in the community of practice across the semester. For the study described here, three teacher candidates voluntarily committed to revisiting the concepts using the methods described as participant researchers and to work as co-authors. As mentioned, the other candidates participated in different activities of the community outside the scope of the current study, as their schedules allowed.

Classroom management, broadly defined, includes interactions between teachers and students. Furthermore, teachers' actions to create environments conducive to students' academic and socioemotional learning contribute to academic performance and school connectedness (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006). In contrast, ineffective classroom management contributes to deficit perspectives, discipline disparities, and exclusionary perspectives and practices with detrimental consequences, particularly for students of color (Losen, 2015). Teachers report inadequate preparation in classroom management from their preservice programs (Chesley & Jordan, 2012); relatedly, a review of both state accreditation policies and teacher preparation programs demonstrates gaps in the knowledge base on evidence-based practices compared to what is taught in preservice programs (Freeman, Simonsen, Briere, & MacSuga-Gage, 2014). As instructors, we want candidates, from the onset of their programs forward, to be aware of discipline disparities and evidence-based practices, develop proactive skills and perspectives, and gain increasing levels of responsibility during field placements.

To address the gap in practice and contribute to research on classroom management at the preservice level, we designed the study utilizing a social justice, transdisciplinary[2] approach to learning communities. As a team of scholar-activists, practitioners, and student advocates, we drew from teacher education, social work, and the humanities to create opportunities for candidates to consider specific elements significant to inclusive learning communities. Additionally, candidates were engaged as participant researchers. They used photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1997; Wang, 2006), an action research tool including candidates' photos from their field experiences along with responses to guiding questions to raise critical consciousness and support advocacy, and stimulated recall, a research method that asks teacher candidates to recall their thinking during a specific time (Heikonen, Toom, Pyhältö, Pietarinen, & Soini, 2017) throughout both semesters.

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[2] We use our institution's definition of transdisciplinarity: **Transdisciplinary** research **integrates** the natural, social, and health sciences in a humanities context, and **transcends** their traditional boundaries to create new forms of knowledge and to center **community participation**.

Theoretical Framework

As mentioned, we utilized a social justice, transdisciplinary approach to design the study; specifically, data were analyzed from a transformative theoretical perspective (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Mertens, 2007, 2010). A transformative paradigm "provides an overarching framework for addressing issues of social justice and consequent methodological decisions" (Mertens, 2007, p. 212). Scholar-advocates posit that many children are typically underserved in public schools through a lack of high-quality instruction (Gay, 2000; Howard, 2010; Paris, 2012). Because instruction is greatly shaped by teachers' ability to create learning communities to support the complex needs of learners. Further, we intend for the findings of the study as well as the insights offered by the participant researchers to improve teaching practice. In developing their insights, participant researchers engaged in action research processes that include intentional, critical reflection and self-evaluation of their practice with emphasis on their role in next steps, decision-making, and implementation of new learning (Sales, Traver, & Garcia, 2011).

Methods

This participatory action research study addressed the following research question: What are teacher candidates' perspectives of community building, gender and racial inclusivity, trauma-sensitive practices, and the school to prison pipeline?

Participants and Setting

As mentioned, a multi-racial team of two Black female instructors from social work and the humanities along with two white female instructors from teacher education redesigned the aforementioned undergraduate course at a mid-sized urban university in the southeast. The participant researchers represented the content areas of mathematics, social studies and language arts. Additionally, they identified as a Black male, a mixed ethnicity female, and a white female.

Data Collection: Sense-making through Stimulated Recall

One semester after completing a course on classroom management and building community, three undergraduate teacher candidates, as participant researchers, reviewed their course assignments and other artifacts (e.g., photovoice discussions, course readings, personal notes) to consider what they learned and build upon their prior knowledge. Within communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1999, candidates used stimulated recall (Wear & Harris, 1994; Lyle, 2003; Heikonen, Toom, Pyhältö, Pietarinen, & Soini, 2017), responding to prompts on *community building and relationships*, *gender and racial inclusivity*, *trauma-sensitive practices*, and the *school to prison pipeline,* consistent with the foci of the course, at three different points: using writing prompts, focus group responses, and finally, during individual reflections. Next, using qualitative content analysis, the participant researchers reviewed their assignments with the

aforementioned prompts as *a priori* codes. Thus, responses were analyzed for perspectives and actions using conventional content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Specifically, participant researchers used a recursive process, reviewing their writing prompt responses as well as their discussions during the focus group. The focus group discussions were mostly student-led; however, probing questions from the instructors directed participant researchers to recall what they learned from assignments. For example, one such question asked to "…think about the assignments that we did in (EDTP) 328, and what do you remember about any of the assignments?" Later, participant researchers reviewed their work again to prepare succinct summaries of what they learned. Finally, as co-authors of this article, they continued to make sense of the concepts and, in the process, created thick descriptions and employed member-checking to establish credibility of the data (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). By triangulating across the multiple data points (e.g., photovoice discussions, course readings, personal notes) and across researchers, they established dependability (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

By revisiting these topics repeatedly and over time, teacher candidates engaged in sense-making (Ketelaar, 2012). Each candidate had their own way of reflecting and determining which content from the course, including personal notes, they wanted to use for this study. One participant researcher described his process, "I first started by reviewing my own classroom management plan and using it as a reflection piece; essentially, I wanted to see if any of my positions on certain things had changed after responding to the writing prompts and participating in the focus group. Also, I reviewed notes that I had taken during my observations in a high school classroom, because I felt comparing my own philosophies to what I actually saw in the classroom would help me pull out the most important concepts." Another candidate described her sense making as well, "I revisited my classroom management plan and case study and tried emphasizing the most important parts of each item. My classroom management plan provided me with a document of my own philosophies while the case study (assignments) provided me with examples." At the time of this writing, as co-presenters and coauthors now two semesters after completing the course, again, candidates continued to engage with one another in a community of practice

Findings

Findings are reported with respect to each concept from the class, including the concepts that were the focus of the course redesign- gender and racial inclusivity, trauma-sensitive practices, and the school to prison pipeline. As mentioned previously, our intent as course instructors was increase candidates' knowledge around discipline disparities and evidence-based practices, develop their proactive skills and perspectives, and support them as they gained increasing levels of responsibility in classrooms beyond the course. Thus, while meeting within

communities of practice, participant researchers revisited key concepts, culminating with responses to the aforementioned prompts. Their responses include (1) perspectives of how each contributes to the learning community and (2) teacher behaviors to ensure they are enacted. Importantly, they recognized the reciprocal nature of teacher behaviors as each contributes to the overall community as well as the intentionality required around each action.

Community Building and Relationships

Participant researchers described community building as "one of the most important things teachers do because it allows students and the teacher to become comfortable with each other." Community building supports collaboration among members, who are consequently empowered to undertake difficult tasks together. In other words, once students are comfortable, it is easier for them to participate, and they are able to support those around them. Some common methods participant researchers recalled to build community included displaying student work throughout the classroom, doing community building activities weekly, regularly mixing up the seating chart, democratically creating classroom rules, and incorporating routine student announcements and celebrations.

Likewise, relationships "are important because they provide students with a sense of belonging, build trust, and foster a caring environment." Ways to build strong relationships include implementing the previously mentioned community building activities, as well as attending school activities, offering tutoring sessions, and incorporating group work. In sum, participant researchers viewed community building and relationships through a quote attributed to John C. Maxwell that one selected to illustrate these concepts "Students don't care how much you know until they know how much you care."

Gender and Racial Inclusivity

Participant researchers acknowledged that relationships must involve intentionality around gender and racial inclusivity. In inclusive classrooms, "students learn to be more open-minded and accepting; therefore, they see themselves as being represented." Thus, differences should be acknowledged both explicitly and implicitly. Inclusive teacher actions include promoting visibility through hosting culture fairs, providing diverse literacy options, displaying diverse materials across the classroom space, and tracking student engagement. For example, as described by one participant researcher, "monitoring whom a teacher calls on can help ensure each student has equal opportunities in the classroom." Ongoing, routine teacher actions include learning and using students' preferred pronouns and learning about biases and stereotypes in order to address teachers' biases as they occur.

Trauma Sensitive Practices

Trauma-informed teaching is increasingly important, but trauma is often overlooked in teacher preparation. All teachers should be aware of the prevalence

of trauma and consequently be prepared to work with students. Participant researchers explained why this preparation is important, with one specifically naming a key reason, "teachers can recognize the signs of trauma and avoid actions that may retrigger trauma in students." Additional teacher actions include implementing policies against bullying, creating environments of trust and acceptance, and actively resisting re-traumatizing students and escalating conflicts. Instead, teachers should focus on de-escalating potentially triggering situations.

The School to Prison Pipeline

The school to prison pipeline is a trend where students, who, as a result of policies that criminalize infractions to school rules, are pushed out of schools and into the criminal justice system (Losen, 2015). Teachers must use the aforementioned practices including relationship building, inclusivity, and trauma-informed practices to build strong communities as a foundation to resist the school to prison pipeline. One participant researcher described his rationale and actions, "It is also important to deal with discipline issues in class as much as possible; this helps teachers avoid sending students out of the room." In general, students should only be sent out if they pose a serious physical or emotional threat to someone else. Additionally, "zero tolerance" policies contributing to the School to Prison Pipeline should be changed to "case by case" policies, as advocated by this participant, so that "consequences are logical and not too severe."

Implications for Practice

As a result of this study, participant researchers revisited concepts they encountered during a course in the initial phase of their program through sense-making around what they learned about classroom management, including how they translate these into teacher actions. Furthermore, by including specific, sustainable, consciousness-raising structures such as photovoice (an activity associated with the use of "photo interviewing methods") and teacher action research, candidates continued this sense-making of the elements of classroom community and classroom management beyond the course. They demonstrated awareness of how each element contributed to classroom management and capable of identifying specific teacher actions. We anticipate that their perspectives will continue to develop and increase in sophistication as they finish out their programs and enter the classroom. Though we recognize the significant responsibilities on teacher educators and candidates and limited time, we emphasize that the intentionality of the process of stimulated recall is replicable across programs and conditions. Thus, we urge teacher educators to include such routine opportunities within communities of practice for candidates to revisit what they learned throughout their preparation in order to build upon foundational elements from their early coursework.

Specifically, one candidate illuminated the concept of working diligently to know your students in order to better relate to them and use the appropriate classroom management techniques. However, after finishing the semester-long course and study, he realized that "knowing" your students isn't as easy it sounds. He planned on prioritizing community building because he felt it would create an open, welcoming classroom community as well as teach him more about his students. After being introduced to trauma-informed practices, he says that he realized while having individualized approaches to each student is necessary, knowing common triggers for re-traumatization is also necessary. He described how, "something as simple as raising your voice just a little when redirecting could retraumatize a student that comes from a background of verbal abuse." Realizations such as the one described serve as examples of how candidates are using course material and making sense of it. In this candidate's case, his sense-making involved incorporating new information with what he already knew and believed. In other words, he recognized the importance of his current philosophy while also accepting the "new" educational innovation (trauma-informed practices); therefore, he adapted to the ideas of trauma-informed practices and fit them into his current philosophy (Ketelaar, 2012).

Conclusion

Teacher education is fraught with research describing how candidates' eventual teaching practices do not reflect what they learned during their preparation and the challenges of maintaining teachers' stances as learners of teaching (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). While as a team of instructors and candidates, we do not know, as of yet, the extent to which these candidate's perspectives translate into teaching practice. Furthermore, as a group of three, the participant researchers are a small subgroup of their cohort, and their findings are not generalizable. That said, we do intend to continue supporting candidates' sense-making using stimulated recall around the concepts of gender and racial inclusivity, trauma-sensitive practices, and the school to prison pipeline. Likewise, because they reported that the consciousness-raising structures were helpful, we intend to continue to use these in the course and throughout the communities of practice during the following semesters. By intentionally maintaining a community of practice engaged in sense-making, candidates as participant researchers, alongside their instructors, will continue to re-engage and as they develop capacities for classroom management.

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Appendix A
Supplemental Readings

Trauma Informed Teaching

Cole, S., Greenwald O'Brien, J., & Gadd, M. G., Ristuccia, J., Wallace, D. L., & Gregory, M. (2005). *Helping traumatized children learn: Supportive school environments for children traumatized by family violence.* Boston, MA: Advocates for Children.

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Racial and Gender Equity

Pollock, M. (2017). *Schooltalk: Rethinking what we say about and to students every day*. New York, NY: The New Press.

School to Prison Pipeline

Chiariello, E. (2013). A Teacher's Guide to Rerouting the Pipeline. *Teaching Tolerance*, *52*(43), 41-43.

Appendix B
List of Assignments in the "Building Learning Communities" Course

1. Observation Questions
2. Philosophy of Education
3. Philosophy of Education Action Plan
4. Classroom Management Plan
5. Classroom Management Plan Analysis
6. *Classroom Analysis – Group & Individual Project (Field experience assignment)*
7. *Parent/Teacher Conference OR Back to School Night (Field experience assignment)*
8. *Child Study Project – Group & Individual Project (Field experience assignment)*