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The Effects of University Faculty Coaching on Teachers' Confidence With Classroom Management

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Abstract

Improving instructional effectiveness is often a challenging task for teachers working in a struggling school. In many cases, impacting the success of effectiveness in the classrooms is the struggle or inability of teachers to effectively manage their classrooms (Marzano, Marzano, and Pickering, 2003). Instructional coaching can be an effective method to help teachers especially when provided by someone other than an evaluator. The research questions that guided this study were: 1. How receptive are elementary school teachers to accurately self-identify classroom management practices in which improvement is needed? 2. To what extent are elementary school teachers willing to accept non-evaluative coaching as a method to improve classroom management practices. 3. To what extent do teachers feel university professor coaching increased their skills in classroom management? Ten teachers volunteered to be a part of the coaching sessions with the researchers ranging from K-5th grade. Data collection included teacher surveys, observation notes, feedback notes, and researchers' debriefing notes. The data were analyzed by both researchers using axial coding for the qualitative data and pre/post survey ratings to measure perceived increase in skills development. Results from the self-rated surveys indicated that for some teachers instructional coaching was effective to develop classroom management skills while for some it was not as effective and for one not effective. The researchers' qualitative notes showed that teachers self-perception ratings were not always aligned with researchers' observations and conversations with teachers. Recommendations for practice related to instructional coaching are provided.

Keywords: instructional coaching, university partnerships, classroom management

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Introduction

Improving the quality of teaching is an ongoing effort for schools across the nation. Professional development starts in teacher preparation programs; however, because education is an ever-evolving process, the professional development of teachers should not stop with their initial programs. Teachers confront classrooms with a myriad of learning styles, behaviors, and diverse backgrounds which require them to take on many different roles simultaneously (De Vita, 2001). Perhaps one of the most challenging tasks for teachers working in a struggling school is establishing a classroom that is conducive to providing learning experiences free from disruption and behavioral issues. Teachers are expected to provide learning experiences to students that will support high academic achievement as well as prepare them for high levels of performance on

standardized assessments. Impacting the success of effectiveness in these areas is the struggle or inability to effectively manage their classrooms (Marzano, Marzano, and Pickering, 2003). Classroom management encompasses many facets including physical organization, providing appropriate resources, establishing policies and procedures, and providing learning opportunities that are motivating and engaging. Teachers who can establish this type of learning environment will have the most success in the classroom.

This study was important because lack of classroom management skills leads to ineffective teaching practices resulting in diminished learning opportunities for students. The purpose of this paper is to present the effects of University faculty's role as coaches for teachers in the classroom. The school was selected due to the number of discipline referrals written by teachers, the number of days students served in in-school suspension and the alarming statistics about the number of days students were suspended out of school. In addition, there had been frequent turnover of both school leaders and teachers, resulting in a lack of consistent expectations for both academics and behavior.

The researchers have a relationship with the school as community partners and received a request to work with teachers who self-identified as struggling with classroom management. Both researchers have numerous years of experience as school administrators and have been trained in the Marzano Teacher Observation Model (2003). In addition, the researchers provided feedback to teachers during the study based on the work of Harry Wong and Spenser Kagan. Wong focuses on the concepts of procedures, routines and monitoring consistent implementation (Wong, 2018). Kagan offers insight into the idea of understanding the causal effects of misbehavior and addressing that to enable students to demonstrate appropriate actions in the classroom (Kagan, Kyle, & Scott, 2007).

Literature Review

A well-managed classroom provides benefits for both the teacher and the students by creating positive relationships, reducing stressful interactions, and building a safe environment for learning (Mellish, 2018). According to a survey of 10,000 teachers conducted in 2012, 62% of teachers who had been at their schools for more than five years indicated that there had been a significant increase in behaviors that affect teaching and learning (Scholastic, 2012). The report released by Scholastic and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation indicated that this trend was consistent across all grade levels and across all demographic groups. The study also revealed that over 64% of teachers believed they needed additional professional development to strengthen their skills and strategies to create safer classrooms and increase instructional time.

The American family has evolved into a dynamic institution where changes may occur that affect the ability of children to achieve in school. Anna Egalite (2016) discusses four variables that influence a child's success in school: family education, parental incarceration, family income and family structure. Children whose parents are incarcerated, who live in poverty or whose family lacks stability have a significantly higher risk of suspension from school or the necessity to repeat a grade. The inability of children to focus on school contributes to off task behavior resulting in classroom disruptions and resulting consequences.

Teachers in schools across our country, especially schools in impoverished areas are noting an increase in the numbers of children and families in crisis manifesting in increased misbehavior in schools with more severe consequences as frequency increases. Research suggests that frequent suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to law enforcement result in a higher risk of students being incarcerated and dropping out of school (Kamenetz, 2018).

The necessity of teachers' ability to engage all students in meaningful instruction in a safe and nurturing environment is never more critical than it is today. This study was designed to address this growing concern in a school struggling to meet the needs of its diverse population, while providing teachers with support in a low-risk coaching partnership with university professors.

Instructional coaching is a method of being a change agent and for providing support in the classroom that is job embedded and is conducive to establishing goals and objectives and provides an opportunity for mentoring to teachers in the classroom (Wolpert-Gawan, 2016). However, choosing the appropriate staff to provide the coaching is important. At times, teachers will avoid indicating they need help to administrators because they feel that if they ask for support, their annual evaluation or employment may suffer (Aguilar, 2017). Therefore, instead of seeking support from their administrative team, teachers will struggle and attempt to correct their challenges in the classroom on their own which in certain instances can lead to further ineffective practices. To support teachers in the classroom, administrators engage others to support instructional coaching. Instructional coaches can be other teachers in the school or others such as university faculty that work with adults daily in preparing them for the classroom.

The literature reflects the notion that coaching offers the systematic effort to effect change not only in classrooms but in the culture of a school (Aguilar, 2013). Traditional workshops have not been an effective model for enhancing teachers' ability to grow in their classroom management skills. The coaching model provides the opportunity to collect observational data, such as the number of engaged students, the frequency of disruptions and the effectiveness of responses to misbehavior (Knight, 2018). Feedback conversations can use this data to identify and prioritize areas for goal setting and future focus.

Methods

This study followed a qualitative model of phenomenology (van Manen, 1990) focusing on the teachers' perceived effects of a coaching cycle. Teachers rated their confidence level on the pre and post self-perception survey focusing of teachers' self confidence in defined areas of classroom management. In phenomenology studies, participants are the focus of a phenomenon, in this study, classroom management strategies use, and their personal experiences in the classroom utilizing the strategies (van Manen, 1990). Through classroom observations, feedback sessions, and researcher notes, the participants' stories were told all while participants made meaning of their story as they reflected on their experience and phenomenon (classroom management strategies) (van Manen, 1990) individually and in collaboration with the researchers. Engaging with the study through personal participation in the classroom, developed written artifacts full of notes, and discussions with teachers, it allowed "to construct a possible interpretation of the nature of a certain human experience" (van Manen, 1990, p.41).

Researchers used an axial coding of data and to identify themes. Qualitative data from the feedback sessions, observation notes, and researcher debrief meetings provided insightful information about the teachers and their classroom management practices and challenges and form relationships between researcher data and teacher self-perceived skills deficits or strengths. Analyzing the data to establish rich and thick informative thoughts to understand the survey results helped the researchers form conclusions (Cresswell, 1998).

Sample

After obtaining Institutional Review Approval (IRB) from Saint Leo University and the school district, a partnership was formed with the elementary school and a conversation informed the need for classroom management coaching for teachers. The principal acknowledged the reluctance of teachers to ask for help, the enormity of the needs of the children and the necessity for coaching that could be offered in a non-evaluative process to those teachers who volunteered to be part of the study. In addition, the principal understood the need for confidentiality and permitted the researchers the freedom to work with teachers independently.

The school selected for this study serves children in a rural Florida community where 80% of the students are eligible for free or reduced meals. At the time the study was conducted, there were 538 students enrolled in grades pre-kindergarten through five, with 44% of the children belonging to a minority subgroup. Academically, 43% of students assessed were proficient in math while 37% of students assessed were proficient in reading. In addition, during the 2018-2019 school year, there were 992 discipline referrals resulting in 1020 in-school suspension days and 604 days of out of school suspension as consequences for student misbehavior. In the two years prior to this study, the school had a high turnover of both teachers and administrators. Due to the high turnover of teachers and administrators, along with the poor academic performance and high rate of misbehavior, it was essential that coaching be provided in areas that would support higher academic achievement, positive teacher-student relationships, and an organized classroom.

The researchers presented the study and coaching opportunity to the teachers employed at the school during a teacher professional development meeting. Researchers answered questions about the study, distributed consent forms and answered questions, and then scheduled a meeting to return and collect the informed consents. Twenty teachers grade kindergarten through 5 in various core subjects expressed their interest to participate because they perceived themselves as struggling with classroom management skills. Each of the 20 participants returned their informed consent at the second meeting. Of the 20 teachers, 9 were chosen for the first coaching cycle based on the urgency of the perceived needs. All 9 teachers were surveyed using an adaptation of Washburn's (2010) Classroom Practices Management Survey instrument prior to scheduling the first classroom observation/feedback session to establish their confidence level in 25 classroom strategies.

Teachers completed their intent to participate and the Classroom Practices Management Survey (Washburn, 2010) identifying areas in which they believed support was needed to establish pre coaching skills status. Initial participants were selected on the extent of perceived need. The researchers interviewed each participant, scheduled pre observation conferences, observations, and post conferences. The number of cycles depended on the participant's self-perceived professional growth supported by observation data collected by the researchers. As the initial participants exited

the study, new participants were invited to participate, and the process continued. Due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the school closed, and three remaining participants were unable to continue.

Data Collection

The data were collected using a Likert scale survey using a rating of 1 (not confident, I need help), 2 (fairly confident, but I want to learn more), 3 (confident, but I am open to new ideas), and 4 (completely confident, I can teach others) to each of the classroom management strategies in the survey. There were 10 main strategies and 3 of the 10 strategies included sub-strategies related to the topic. Strategies included room arrangement, expectations including classroom rules, activity transitions, student engagement (sub-strategies: teacher directed, student centered, and content interaction), informal assessment, acknowledgement of student behavior, acknowledgement of expected behavior (teacher reaction, group contingencies, behavior contracts, token systems), classroom management systems/procedures (non-verbals, proximity, anonymous correction, reteaching, using dignity and respect language), student collaboration for effective problem-solving, and student self-monitoring (self-control, self-monitoring, social skills, problem-solving strategies).

Survey responses were quantified by calculating the number of responses for each strategy in the pre-survey and comparing it to the number of responses for each strategy in the post-survey to calculate the percentages reported. The goal was to determine what strategies the teachers perceived to have mastered before the coaching cycle and then after the coaching cycles. The data from the pre and post surveys for the 9 teachers were examined against the observation notes the researchers wrote during classroom visits.

Additionally, the feedback session discussion data were used to determine if their perceptions of improvement were aligned with their classroom behaviors and teacher/coach feedback conversations. Further, the researchers met weekly to compare notes and align all data to form conclusions. A focus was on the alignment with teachers' self-perception of performance to researchers' observations of coaching sessions. Both data collection sources were designed to be a source of data to guide a discussion of the experiences with teachers. The focus was on understanding how the observations and feedback meetings to support teachers' self-perceived improvement aligned. Further, the data were used to address the research questions.

Research Questions

- How receptive are elementary school teachers to accurately self-identify classroom management practices in which improvement is needed?
- 2.To what extent are elementary school teachers willing to accept non-evaluative coaching as a method to improve classroom management practices?
- To what extent do teachers feel university professor coaching increased their skills in classroom management?

Empirical Model

Teachers come into the profession with a desire to make a difference in students' lives. Many teachers have either had a good teacher or a good experience in an effective classroom that lights the candle to follow suit. Teachers come to the profession with an identity of their own self as a teacher; subsequently, this identity can be enhanced or reformed through their teacher preparation programs, field experiences, and expectations of society for the profession (Beltman et al., 2015). Olson (2012) found that teacher identity "is a loose, tacit consensus" and is both a "process and product" because there is more to formation of teacher identity beyond a fixed number of indicators (p. 1123). Teacher identity is an evolving phenomenon that is experienced uniquely by teachers.

Shaw (2016) developed a framework related to identify formation and construction from a study conducted with third year students in human resources and noted that professional identity is not stable but rather "a complex, personal, and shaped by contextual factors." (p. 3) The framework that helped frame this study is related to Shaw's (2012) professional identity framework that established factors in a circle related to identity formation. Specifically, there is the outer circle that considers practical strategies, professional identity in the inner circle, and identity construction in the center circle (Shaw, 2016). Collectively, the engagement with and experience in the various elements of each of the activities in the circle influences how professional identity is developed. The overarching use of the framework requires conversations revolving around the factors and activities which led to a good alignment for this study because teacher practice was the topic of the conversations.

Findings

The results in Graph 1 below represent the perceptions of twelve teachers regarding their perceived change in classroom management practices in the 25 areas noted on the survey. Teachers were surveyed before and after the coaching cycles. Reported strategy mastery were perceived to have resulted over the course of the study. Five of the 9 teachers (55%) reported that their practice improved while 4 teachers remained the same and one had no survey submitted for post survey. Teacher 3 had the most significant change in perception from the pre to post and believed that the strategies she perceived not mastered in pre survey, reduced from 17 strategies to 9 strategies resulting in mastery of 8 new strategies. Two teachers perceived that they improved on 2 additional strategies from the pretest to the posttest. One teacher saw no change in any of the 25 strategies and perceived to have remained the same during the coaching program. One teacher did not return the post survey.

Table 1 below has the list of strategies that were on the pre and post survey. This visual shows the number of teachers who perceived themselves to have grown or mastered a particular strategy after the coaching cycle. The first column is the classroom management strategy, the second column is the number of teachers reporting and the final column is the percent of that the number represents overall. There was variability among the strategies ranging from 50% of teachers feeling they improved to 100% of teachers perceiving they improved in the noted strategy. The highest perceived improvement was related to expectations and classroom rules indicating that teachers feel they are prepared to establish these in the classroom. Another area that showed 100% improvement is in the use of token systems. Four teachers feel prepared to implement and use a token system to modify behavior in the classroom. Other areas that teachers noted they improved

on and were students' content interaction, teacher reaction to misbehavior, and using dignity and respect to address their students during inappropriate behavior. Perceived areas of weakness as noted by some teachers were in the areas of informal assessment, acknowledgement of positive behaviors, anonymous corrections, reteaching, and teaching students to self-monitor so they can self-control and ability to engage in problem-solving skills.

Graph 1. Self-Perceived Pre/Post Strategies Mastered From Classroom Management Survey

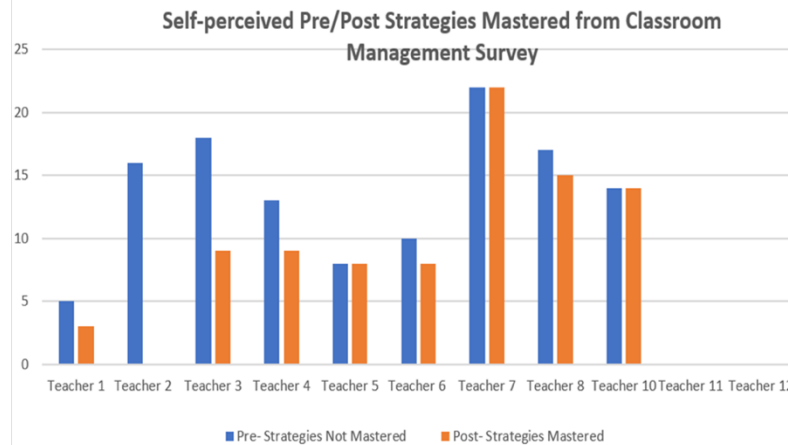


Table 1. Strategies Teachers Self-Identified as Improvement Areas

Strategies	# Teachers Self-identified	% Improvement Pre to Post
Room Arrangement	5	60%
Expectations & Classroom Rules	4	100%
Activity Transitions	8	63%
Student Engagement		
Teacher Directed	8	75%
Student Centered Instruction	8	75%
Content Interaction	10	90%
Informal Assessment	4	50%
Acknowledgement of Positive Behaviors (after rule violation)	4	50%
Acknowledgement of Expected Behaviors		
Teacher Reaction	5	80%
Group Contingencies	8	50%
Behavior Contracts	7	71%
Token Systems	4	100%
Classroom Management Systems/Procedures		
Non-Verbals	7	71%
Proximity	5	60%
Anonymous Corrections	8	50%
Reteaching	6	50%
Using Dignity and Respect	5	80%
Language		
Student Collaboration for Effective Problem-Solving	4	75%
Student Self-Monitoring		
Self-Control	9	55%
Self-Monitoring	8	50%
Social Skills	8	50%
Problem Solving Strategies	8	50%

The researchers kept copious notes during classroom observations, feedback sessions, and researcher meetings. Notes were used to document what was observed in the classroom, discussions held with teachers, and to establish preliminary observations to triangulate the data that teachers would provide through the survey. Classroom management skills were found to be a challenge for the teachers beyond those that could be addressed in this study. In some instances,

teachers were not open to having the strong conversations necessary to help them analyze their practices to improve their practice. The researchers used the data to provide recommendations for strategies to try in the classroom to mitigate the challenges the individual teachers confronted.

Data showed that although teachers perceived themselves to be effective in certain skills, they were not so confident in other while the researchers found more instances in which actionable demonstrations showed weaker ability. Common themes across all observations were the absence of established classroom procedures that students were trained to follow. There was general classroom disorganization due to lack of these procedures. Consequently, instruction was often interrupted and time on task minimized because teachers spent time redirecting students or disciplining. Common among all teachers was they felt their directives for classroom organization was affected by schoolwide discipline procedures that did not always align with their own beliefs and practice. Several teachers discussed their frustration with perceived lack of parental involvement which they felt affected what they were able to do with the students in the classroom. Often teachers noted that they had no control of what happens at home, yet they were held accountable for student performance in the classroom. Collectively, teachers felt that these factors contributed to their ability to maintain a well-managed classroom.

Research Question 1

How receptive are elementary school teachers to accurately self-identify classroom management practices in which improvement is needed?

For the most part, the data show that teachers were receptive to accepting support from the researchers and inviting them to their classrooms. Indicators of this were the voluntary participation in the study, self-reflection of skills deficit in the pre/post survey, and the welcoming of the researchers into classrooms. The participants established the time schedules and subject they wanted the observations to be conducted and researchers accommodated their schedules. Participation in the feedback sessions also demonstrate that the teachers were receptive to hearing the results of observations as well as engaging in the implementation of the strategies to mitigate classrooms challenges. Finally, receptiveness was demonstrated through demonstration of the strategies provided during subsequent classroom observations.

Research Question 2

To what extent are elementary school teachers willing to accept non-evaluative coaching as a method to improve classroom management practices?

Teachers were willing to accept non-evaluative coaching as part of the classroom observation process. In most cases, the researchers provided observation feedback that could be considered harsh and tough, yet the teachers were receptive to listening. Further, the teachers requested the researchers repeat observations and continue to recommend strategies that would help them manage the classroom effectively to affect their students' achievement and learning. The researchers held several visits and discussion sessions with all the teachers at their request. Teachers took copious notes and asked questions indicating they were committed to strengthening their practices.

Research Question 3

To what extent do teachers feel university professor coaching increased their skills in classroom management?

In this area, there were mixed results based on the conversations held with teachers and between researchers. As the data show, results in the pre/post survey results showed that teacher perceptions varied across the 9 teachers in terms of what skills they improved. Some teachers felt they improved in many skills while others perceived they improved in very few skills while others perceived they did not improve in any. Subsequent classroom observations demonstrated that for some teachers, the frustrations of disorganized classroom and inappropriate behaviors were beyond the scope of what a university professor coaching could address. Therefore, several teachers chose to exit the study. Two teachers decided they were going to a different school for the subsequent academic year and the assumption could be that they believed they would be more successful with students from a different demographic group.

Since this was a self-perception study, there was a misalignment of what the researchers observed as effective to what the participants perceived. Several of the teachers failed to understand that student engagement is directly related to having a well-managed classroom environment. As noted in the post survey, more than half of the teachers surveyed felt that they did not improve in any area of classroom management noted in the survey, while others felt they did. Consequently, the overall results show inconsistencies and do not lead to any results that are generalizable across teacher practices regarding classroom management which ultimately was not the purpose of the study.

Implications

Professional Development

Studies with self-perceived or self-rated measures should be analyzed with caution. As noted in the results section, most teachers considered themselves prepared and improved in their ability to establish classroom management strategies that modify behavior and increase student learning. In coaching sessions and teacher feedback sessions, it was clear that professional development is needed on effective strategies to engage students to minimize classroom behaviors (Wong, 2018). It is possible that teachers' beliefs of their performance are attributed to their lack of understanding of what classroom management strategies look like in context because researcher notes, and discussions led to different conclusions. Specifically, it was noted that teachers are not accustomed to working with students from poverty or trauma environments as some attributed misbehavior to factors outside of school rather than their own practice. Therefore, part of the professional development needs to incorporate trauma informed environments and their implications for school.

Non-Evaluative Coaching

Researchers noted that the teachers in the study were open and honest about the struggles they confronted daily with classroom management. In some instances, teachers became emotional because the pressure of performing instructionally while also maintaining a classroom climate that is conducive to learning and devoid of misbehavior is extremely overwhelming especially for those new to the field. Coaching that mirrors this study's technique provided by trusted school leaders

and coaches in a non-evaluative spirit would be conducive to making change (Knight, 2018). During feedback sessions with the researchers, teachers were open, honest, and expressed their challenges and struggles with classroom management and revealed they were not comfortable having conversations with their administrators, possibly because they perceive their principals as their evaluators and their performance is dependent on high ratings on their evaluation.

Peer Mentors

Mentoring beyond induction and first year teacher support would support teacher growth in classroom management. Principals would fare well to partner their effective teachers especially those with high caliber classroom management skills with their less experienced teachers. Partnerships should be for longer than the first year and designed to include opportunities for collaboration and peer observations so that areas of weakness can be a focus. Teachers may feel more confident and comfortable to have conversations of perceived failures in classroom management with their peers than with their principals. Therefore, availability of peer mentors for ongoing support and guidance would benefit teachers (Aguilar, 2013).

Conclusion

Teacher preparation programs provide education on classroom management for preservice teachers. However, the extent to which this mirrors what teachers confront in the classroom may not be accurately portrayed. Some of the teachers in this study were new teachers while others had been in the field for several years, yet collectively, the struggles and challenges that were observed in the classroom were similar. All teachers confront teacher evaluation as part of their accountability and administrators are responsible for rating their teachers in the classroom. Therefore, teachers may not feel comfortable asking for assistance or admitting their weaknesses even though it is observable. Consequently, some may continue to struggle and attempt to insinuate they have control of their classroom when they do not. Building a coaching program that includes mentoring and partnerships with effective teachers would help struggling teachers build their practice and increase student achievement while minimizing classroom management challenges.

Limitations

As with most qualitative studies, this one is not without its limitations. To generalize across a population was not the intent of this study. Self-perception or self-ratings by participants is a limitation because the participants may have reported what they believed was the appropriate results. The number of participants was low, and the time span of the coaching cycles provided to them may not have been prolonged enough to show dramatic results. Finally, the data were collected only on a pre and post survey which is not verifiable because the participants completed based on their personal observations.

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