

## Responsive classroom management in a multicultural school context

Tsioumis Kostis  
Associate professor  
Penderi Efthymia  
Kindergarten teacher, doctoral student



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**Résumé :** *Alors que les populations scolaires deviennent de plus en plus diverses, les questions de gestion de la classe deviennent plus complexes et proéminentes dans les classes multiculturelles. Comme les valeurs sous-tendent chaque pratique éducative et que les attentes de comportement sont culturellement ancrées, des conflits sont susceptibles d'apparaître quand les questions culturelles ne sont pas traitées de façon appropriée dans la classe. Le but de cet article est d'apporter des précisions sur la construction de la gestion de la classe en se concentrant sur les défis additionnels qui surviennent dans un contexte multiculturel. Un ensemble de pratiques sensibles aux différences culturelles est proposé et examiné, selon les trois dimensions de la gestion de la classe : instructive, personnelle et comportementale.*

**Mots-clés :** *Gestion de la classe, Classe multiculturelle, Pratiques sensibles aux différences culturelles*

**Abstract:** *While school populations become more and more diverse, the issues of classroom management become more complex and prominent in the multicultural classrooms. As values underlie every educational practice and behavior expectations are culturally anchored, conflicts are likely to occur when cultural issues are not appropriately addressed in the classroom. The purpose of the article is to elaborate on the construct of classroom management focusing on the additional challenges that arise in a multicultural context. A set of culturally responsive practices is proposed and discussed with regard to the three dimensions of classroom management: instructional, personal and behavioural.*

**Key words:** *Classroom management, Multicultural classroom, Culturally responsive practices*

### Elaborating on the construct of classroom management

From an ecological perspective, classroom environment can be described as a physical niche, or context where participants, the teacher, or in some cases the teachers, and the students engage in activities which have certain educational purposes and outcomes for the students. There are several dimensions within the construct of classroom environment that determine its function and exist prior and above the participants' engagement such as (Doyle, 2006 : 97-125):

1. *Multidimensionality* - it refers to the multiple events and tasks that take place in the classroom, as well as to the participants' different starting-points (abilities, preferences, values) which frame their attempts to make use of the available resources in order to reach certain social and personal objectives.
2. *Simultaneity* - it means that many things happen at once in the classroom, placing a great deal of pressure for the participants to cope with.
3. *Immediacy* - classroom events take place in so rapid a pace that participants do not actually have enough time to reflect before acting.
4. *Unpredictability* - events are very difficult to predict as their existence and process is the result of a multiple set of factors not only related to the characteristics and the dynamics of the environment and its members.
5. *Publicness* - as classrooms involve a large number of persons, they simultaneously become participants and witnesses of the classrooms events.
6. *History* - classroom meetings take place on a daily basis and for a long period of time, with more or less the same participants. This creates a cumulative background of experiences, norms, routines and relationships that shape future activities.

These dimensions create a complex set of pressures and demands on participants as the activities are played out in the classroom environment, especially on teachers who have the professional responsibility for orchestrating these activities that constitute the origins of the task of classroom management.

Classroom management can be described as an umbrella term that includes the teachers' efforts to monitor a multitude of activities ranging from instruction and student learning to social interaction and student behaviour (Martin & Yin, 1997). It involves all factors that relate to classroom organization with the aim of creating safe and well-established learning environments for all the students. This means that classroom management is essential not only for the accomplishment of the educational objectives but also for the promotion of the students and teachers' development. Martin and Yin (Martin & Yin, 1997) identified three board dimensions within the construct of classroom management: *instructional management*, *people management* and *behaviour management*. The management of instruction has been defined as the integration of the teaching environment and the learning experiences in line with the objectives of the instruction. Teaching strategies that respond to the actual conditions in the classroom and enhance students' integration into the teaching environment constitute an influential factor in the quality of the teaching process. The people management dimension refers to the ideas that teachers have about their students as persons and includes teachers' practices to help them develop. Behavior management can be understood through the concept of behavior control and structure. Behavior control refers to conformity to social rules and expectations whereas structure includes information about expectations, guidelines and limits for behavior, operative within a certain social context.

However, activities and behaviours in the classroom do not occur in a vacuum. Classrooms are a dynamic part of the school environment. Events in the classroom constitute segments of the overall school life which have an interactive and formative power over the classroom processes. Accordingly, classroom management choices and practices cannot be well established and understood

unless they are seen in the light of the overall school management policy. The shared purposes or vision, the provision of support and consideration for the teachers' knowledge and skills and the establishment of working conditions that maximize teachers motivation, commitment and capacity, are some aspects of the school management (Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2008 : 27-42) that may promote individual teacher's skills and practices with regard to classroom management. The role of the school leader, especially when students' diversity is at stake, is pivotal as it is argued that he/she can become an agent of social change by reconsidering the needs of the different populations at school, in particular those from marginalized groups, and provide support for the implementation of culturally responsive pedagogical practices (Boske, 2009 : 115-128). Intercultural issues remain important for all students as the role of school is to prepare citizens who will live in dynamically complex societies. However, if these issues are not addressed, the negative consequences are more intense for minority populations.

Despite the importance of classroom management in the educational lives of both teachers and students, it seems that knowledge about effective classroom management practices has not developed as the concern focuses on teacher subject matter knowledge and the instructional aspects of teaching. Even when there is a reform in curriculum, the aspects of classroom management often remain untouched. As McCaslin and Good (McCaslin, M., & Good, T. L. 1992 : 4-17) noted, 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). Many multicultural school reforms efforts suggest modifying curriculum goals and teaching strategies to correspond to cultural salient learning styles and content.

It is argued that values underlie any form of educational practice. In this sense, the act of teaching is conceptualized as the actualization of a values system and the difficult situations in the classroom as a cultural conflict with the values of mainstream or with the values of teacher.

### **Classroom management in culturally diverse contexts**

When teachers have to cope with multicultural classroom contexts, creating safe and productive environments with a diverse student population sets challenges that require more than the strategies recommended in the general classroom management literature. Gay (Gay, 2006 : 343-370), defines classroom management in a more culturally sensitive way arguing that apart from involving planning, facilitating and monitoring experiences that are conducive to high levels of learning for a wide variety of students, classroom management "entails creating and sustaining classroom environments that are personally comfortable, racially and ethnically inclusive and intellectually stimulating" (p. 343).

It is argued that the underlying causes for the problems teachers have in classrooms with a culturally diverse group of students are located in cultural conflicts, misunderstandings and inconsistencies between the behavioural norms of schools and the cultural socialization of ethnically diverse students (Gay, 2006:

343-370). Schools as public institutions are pervaded by the mainstream cultural values that are evident in the structures, policies, programs and practices in the classrooms. (Banks, 2001). Ogbu (Ogbu, 1982 : 290-307) suggested that although all students experience home-school discontinuities throughout their schooling experiences, such discrepancies are considered more pronounced for ethnic minority students, who are not familiar with the mainstream Western or European worldviews that are rooted in the school norms (Cummins, 1999). Schools favour more individualistic cultural values, such as independence, autonomy, assertiveness and the primacy of individual rights whereas children from ethnic minority groups hold more collectivistic patterns of behavior as a result of their home socialization, emphasizing on the interdependent self, harmonious group relations and respect for elders, sharing and caring (Greenfield et al., 2003 : 461-490). In order to delineate how these discontinuities operate in the framework of classroom management we are going to refer to Gay's (Gay, 1981 : 42-53) categorization of conflict in the classroom. *Procedural conflict* refers to the process of accomplishing something by following an established protocol. In the classroom, it describes the set of rules and regulations that determine how the students should behave in any given situation and the problems that arise when they do not respond accordingly. For example, most classroom procedures favor individual performance and competitiveness among students.

*Substantive conflict* in the classroom relates to the content of instruction and describes the problems that occur when the academic goals and expectations of teachers and students do not meet. In a meta-analysis of studies concerning teacher expectations, referrals and speech patterns towards ethnically diverse students, Tenenbaum and Ruck (Tenenbaum and Ruck, 2007 : 253-273) found that teachers had lower expectations for culturally diverse students than for their counterparts belonging to the majority group. Minority students were given fewer response opportunities and less positive feedback. Such behaviors may have negative ramifications for students' learning and contribute to the development of negative beliefs about their teachers' expectations.

*Interpersonal conflict* in the classroom stems from different values, beliefs and attitudes that frame interactions between teachers and students. We would like to refer to an incident that happened a few years ago in a Greek kindergarten classroom with a number of children from different cultural backgrounds. The children wanted to play a game in groups and the teacher found it a good opportunity to use a song and "teach" children a counting-out game to help them form groups without fighting. She explained the process to the children and started singing the song pointing to the circle of the children. The end of the song would give the leadership to the last pointed child. When the teacher finished the song, George a 5 year old boy whose parents, both Greeks, came to Greece some years ago from the Soviet Union, explode in anger, shouting at the teacher that she was unfair. He quitted the game and refused to play. George's behavior could be regarded as provocative and offensive to the teacher. However, George knew from his grandmother another version of the song with many more lyrics and he assumed that the teacher wanted to favour his last pointed classmate and did not sing the whole song. This incident shows that lack of communication of the different aspects of culture within social

interactions in the classroom can cause tensions and conflicts that restrict positive relationships and learning.

### **Towards a culturally responsive classroom management, implications for practice**

Let us elaborate on the aforementioned incident with George, in the kindergarten classroom. The teacher made use of a real communicative situation in the classroom to “teach” children a counting-out game using a well known Greek relevant song. Although, she focused on children’s needs and tried to “built” on the situation in the classroom that was of their interest, a child-centred approach, she failed to “built” on what they already knew and create, according to Gay (Gay, 2006 : 343-370), “a personally comfortable and culturally inclusive” context for the children because she was not sensitive enough to their cultural background. Focusing on the surface impression of George’s behavior as indication of disrespect towards the teacher and lack of discipline, would lead the teacher to use some punitive or restrictive reactive strategies with negative consequences for the child and his relationship with the teacher. On the other hand, a sensitive approach on cultural issues and a deeper understanding of the differences in the socialization patterns among the children could provide the teacher with the potential to have a different look on the child’s behavior, which was culturally anchored and functionally incorporate the different knowledge and produce knew knowledge. She could invite children to share their own experiences of counting-games and choose some of them or create a new one to use in the classroom. That would have been a culturally enriching and intellectually stimulating experience for the whole class, providing each child with an opportunity to apply their home culture and feel proud and included in the classroom context.

The misunderstandings between teachers and students with different socio-cultural backgrounds are referred as one of the biggest challenges that teachers have to manage in the multicultural classroom (van Tartwijk et al., 2009 : 453-460). Research concerning cultural considerations in the process of interpreting student behavior indicates that teachers who understand their own ethnocentrism along with their students’ cultural background are less likely to misinterpret cultural behaviour for misbehaviour (Pane, in press). This line of thought is congruent with Weinstein and associates’ (Weinstein and associates, 2004 : 25-38) proposal of five principals with regard to culturally responsive classroom management: (a) recognition of one’s own ethnocentrism, (b) knowledge of students’ cultural backgrounds, (c) understanding of the broader social, economic, and political context of our educational system, (d) ability and willingness to use culturally appropriate management strategies and (e) commitment to building caring classrooms. These principles regard all the three dimensions, instructional, people and behavior, of classroom management.

With reference to instructional management, cultural responsiveness could mean that the teacher is able and willing to create a physical environment, space and materials, in the classroom that corresponds to all the students’ cultural representations. For example, books written in the students’ mother tongue in

the classroom library, a corner where students could display a favourite home object to discuss about, a poster with students' family pictures, a tree with a basic instrumental vocabulary translated to all the students' mother tongue, could provide an inclusive classroom setting and enhance students' sense of belonging. Moreover, it necessitates that the teacher sets educational goals that extend beyond students' academic success and include a "holistic focus on their overall needs" (Morrison, Robbins & Rose, 2008 : 434). In order to be aware of each student's needs and potentials, the teacher should develop positive and personal relationships with the students and give them an active role in their learning by engaging them in decision making with regard to the learning processes and social interactions in the classroom. Investigating students' spheres of interest for learning and acting could help the teacher organise activities that are congruent with students' learning style and home culture and promote their motivation and engagement in the classroom. For example, the "circle time" could be incorporated in the classroom routine at the end of every week or month, during which the teacher and the students, forming a circle, share their experiences concerning i. the most important thing they learned, ii. the worst/best experience they had, iii. what they failed to learn in the classroom as well as their ideas, expectations and goals for the next period. This practice provides agents with an opportunity to reflect on the processes in the classroom, communicate different ideas and feelings, evaluate learning and behavior in an authentic way and plan activities.

Prerequisite for people management in a multicultural classroom is the teacher to focus on each student's individual knowledge, skills and talents and develop activities and practices in the classroom that help all students to develop. To achieve that the teacher should help students to examine and uncover the community and culture knowledge they bring to school and understand how it is similar to and different from school knowledge and their counterparts' cultural knowledge. This means that the teacher is able to discern and turn to advantage those students' abilities and skills that may not be part of the of the dominant cultural paradigm but could be used as the basis upon which to built new knowledge and ways of interaction that will help them "succeed in dominant social spheres" (van Tartwijk et al., 2009 : 454).

A reliable source of knowledge about students is their family. This knowledge can be acquired by consulting with family and community and promoting activities that encourage students to share their home experiences in the classroom. Opening the school doors to the community and the students' families, making home visits, sharing information with more experienced colleagues and consulting the relevant literature, may provide teachers with the appropriate content and context knowledge to organise meaningful and inclusive activities for all the students in the multicultural classroom. At the beginning of the school year, the teacher could arrange individual meetings with each student's primary caregivers (parents or others) and conduct an informal interview about the child.

Behavior management is the most salient issue in the literature of classroom management. As discussed earlier, behavior interpretation through cultural lens could preclude misunderstandings and conflicts. A clear set of rules and expectations from the teacher is important to create a safe borderline of behavior

in the classroom. Co-construction of rules with the students and discussion of their viewpoints concerning challenging situations in the classroom could enhance their self-regulation and address cultural norms and moral issues of the social interaction in the classroom. Teacher modelling behavior is essential to help students adopt positive repertoires of response in difficult situations, such as investigating for the reasons of behavior, communicating the feelings for the situation, discussing the consequences of the behavior and sharing the expectations for behavior could help both teacher and students manage their interactions and create a positive and inclusive climate in the classroom.

## Conclusion

Classroom management is an umbrella term that includes a complex set of activities orchestrated by the teacher with regard to instructional, behavioural and personal issues in the classroom. Teachers' competence in classroom management becomes one of the most salient and challenging issues with regard to creating positive and stimulating learning environments for students from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds. Differences in learning styles, communication patterns, socialization practices, expectations and home learning experiences among students provide the basis for difficult and conflictual situations in the classroom that the teacher need to address developing a repertoire of culturally responsive proactive practices.

In a sense, culturally sensitive pedagogy and culturally responsive classroom management overlap to communicate cultural differences in the classroom and promote authentic and enriching learning experiences for all the students. High expectations, personal involvement and commitment in students' learning and socialization, modelling behavior and scaffolding, promoting students' cooperation and shared responsibility in the classroom, as well as working with the family and community are only some steps that conduce to developing nurturing, supportive and culturally inclusive learning environments at schools.

Although cultural considerations on classroom management issues are gaining an important position in the relevant literature, there are still many things that we need to know. It is argued that there is a lack of reliable data from concrete studies on the topic about the types of cultural conflicts that can rise in the classroom and the practices that are most appropriate with certain types of conflict (Weinstein et al., 2004 : 25-38). We would like to raise some more issues, especially about how the different socio-cultural background and their developmental level could influence students' response to conflicts and teacher practices.

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