

Abstract for 2018 Whalen Symposium

**The Role of Empathy, Dignity and Evolution in Effective Classroom Management**

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Over the last fifty years, education professionals have developed a large repertoire of effective classroom management strategies (for a perspective on the depth and proportion of current classroom management strategies within the last five decades see Marzano, R. J., Marzano J. S. & Debra Pickering, 2003). In recent years, popular classroom management programs such as Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports (PBIS) and Responsive Classroom have also found roots within pockets of certain school districts, including Ithaca, New York (more information about PBIS and Responsive Classroom can be found at [www.pbis.org](http://www.pbis.org) and [www.responsiveclassroom.org](http://www.responsiveclassroom.org)). In general, most classroom management strategies and programs align with basic principles such as the usage of empathy (connecting with students beyond the classroom), dignity (respecting students' emotions and actions as natural behaviors of being human), and evolution (using professional self-reflection consistently as opportunities for growth). However, the question for many has been, "What does effective classroom management look like?" as opposed to what may be a more relevant question, "What connects and defines the diversity of approaches to 'effective classroom management,' while still meeting the same end goal?"

The original purpose of the study was to gather information about the current conversations, practices, and policies surrounding discipline in schools, with particular interest in alternative methods to classroom management such as Restorative Justice (a theory of justice that emphasizes restoring justice through the use of thoughtful reparative means). Data was

collected over a period of four weeks in the spring of 2016 using clinical interviews with 20 educational professionals throughout the Ithaca City School District (17 public school teachers and 3 administrators). Each interview consisted of four core questions: (a) What is your philosophy of classroom management? Where does that philosophy come from? (b) What have you found to be the most effective classroom management strategies? (c) What is your perspective on school discipline practices and or policies in general (e.g. zero-tolerance, in-school suspension, and restorative justice)? (d) What classroom management/school discipline resources have you consulted or recommend? The four core questions served as guideposts within the interview, with opportunities for the participants to expand upon ideas, or go beyond the proposed topics. All participants were asked these four core questions in the same order, and with the exact wording. Participants were given a list of questions before the interviews to be able to adequately prepare thoughtful responses.

Among the many resources and programs cited—such as PBIS and Responsive Classroom—teachers and administrators also cited trial and error, constant reflection, and co-sharing between colleagues as other important factors to the development of their classroom management styles. In addition, although many of the educational professionals were able to identify the origin of specific ideologies or strategies, a distinguishable group of teachers could not adequately answer the fourth and last question of the interview. This suggests that the teachers may be engaging in a somewhat unintentional but yet still organic blend of classroom management strategies tailored specifically to meet each teacher's unique classroom needs. Furthermore, what seemed evident from the data was that despite results showing consistent and frequently shared key ideals (including: empathy, dignity, and evolution), not one “published”

classroom management program seemed to adequately encompass even one of the education professionals' management styles.

This observation points to a critical perspective that may be missing in the existing literature surrounding classroom management—that, given a set of key ideals (such as empathy, dignity and evolution), the most “effective classroom management” strategy for any given education professional will be any combination of classroom management practices and ideals that best suits the needs of that individual. The implications of this research may guide in-service and pre-service teachers to explore more authentic classroom management styles and encourage more thoughtful synthesis of management strategies, while allowing current professionals the freedom to continually renew their own interpretation of classroom management in an ever-changing and diverse environment.

## References

Marzano, R. J., Marzano J. S. and Debra Pickering, 2003. *Classroom management that works: research-based strategies for every teacher*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.