PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS AND CLASSROOM AUTHORITY

AUTHORS

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the classroom practices of five pre-service teachers from three secondary schools in a large southeastern state. Through classroom observations, survey responses, reviews of reflection logs, and focus-group interview responses, we centered on the issue of developing classroom authority as a means to effective classroom management. Max Weber’s three types of authority were used as the conceptual framework. Although the literature indicated Weber’s legal/rational authority development was preferable as a means to establish authority within a sociological capacity, these student-teachers frequently employed traditional or charismatic authority in their classrooms, often resulting in mismanagement of classroom behavior and an unproductive learning environment. Throughout their student-teaching experience, the participants utilized some management skill recalled from college coursework, advice from mentor teachers, and the university supervisor. However, all participants invariably returned to traditional or charismatic authority as a primary component of classroom authority.

INTRODUCTION

Typically, pre-service teachers in traditional teacher-education programs enter a semester of student teaching with a fair amount of trepidation. Many of us have shared this experience. To take the learned concepts, strategies, methodologies and content and put them to effective use is challenging. To add to it, these pre-service teachers must employ their knowledge and skills
into a dynamic environment that is the classroom (Huntly, 2008). The most massive hurdle to climb is often only tangentially related to content or even disciplinary methodology; classroom management and the exertion of authority within that classroom (Morales, 1980). The means and the extent to which the pre-service teacher (and his mentor) desires to exert authority are often overlooked in the weeks leading up to the time in which the student-teacher is expected to take over full responsibility of his classes.

Pre-service teachers often attempt to emulate their mentors regarding classroom management as the recency of their involvement provides considerable influence (Armstrong, 1976). They may develop management plans that hearken back to their limited college coursework that addressed management extensively (Seeman, 1994). For some, their preparation is inadequate and many of them fall into the trap of eschewing the knowledge gained from college preparation and from mentors in favor of taking on the role of the friendly or “cool” teacher with the hope that being liked by students will translate into getting respect which in turn might develop into an effective management plan. Those who do find mentors willing to provide practical strategies are often confronted with a style that may favor more traditional, teacher-centered means of classroom authority.

Many pre-service teachers also tend to fluctuate in their management and authority style (Putman, 2009). Finding an appropriate style, which fits the development of a productive classroom and one’s management disposition, is something often not realized until well into the student-teaching experience. Experienced teachers know a lack of focus on developing effective classroom authority will likely lead to frustration and minimal student achievement. Frustration will come from the pre-service teacher who will not be able to gain focus of his students when necessary to teach. Frustration will also come from his mentor teacher who sees her class disengaged and intellectually stagnant. Moreover, the university supervisor will see a teacher not prepared to face the challenges of teaching.

**Conceptual Framework**

Creating a healthy learning environment is of paramount concern to most pre-service teachers (Morales, 1980), and appropriate development of that environment is a challenge faced during student-teaching. This study aimed to examine, through the experiences of five pre-service secondary social studies teachers, the challenges of establishing classroom authority in order to attain a healthy learning environment. Max Weber’s investigations on authority provided a framework for this study.
Traditional, Legal/Rational and Charismatic Authority

Weber’s three basic origins of authority include: traditional authority, legal/rational authority, and charismatic authority (Weber, 1947). According to Weber, traditional authority involves power derived from obligations of personal loyalty. As such, a teacher might possess traditional authority if students follow her management plan out of loyalty based on cultural mores or learned behavior that the teacher’s authority is absolute. Hansen (2006) cited an example of traditional authority when describing a new teacher entering his class and saying, “Good morning! Everyone please stand up!” Soon after he continued, “OK, please sit down.” (p. 175) All students complied without knowing the teacher; an example of adherence to traditional authority. But experienced educators know that this type of compliance is unsustainable. Traditional authority is only limited by resistance by the students in a classroom and would be of limited use in most twenty-first century classrooms where traditional deference to a teacher has not been the norm for a generation or more (Haywood-Metz, 2006). Additionally, traditional authority, if employed, is easily abused because it requires that all power be in the hands of the teacher (Bushman, 1985).

Legal/rational authority establishes authority based on rational values and established rules. Obedience is not owed to the individual, but rather the impersonal order instead (Weber, 1947). Students experiencing this type of authority would find a teacher with prior training in establishment of rules based on age-appropriate rational behavior. Further, authority based on legal/rational would include written established rules including the right to due process and airing of grievances (Weber, 1947).

Charismatic authority is most often wielded by one who has personal qualifications which establish authority over followers based on irrational means (Weber, 1947). Unlike Weber’s other two types of authority, Charismatic authority relies on personal devotion to the figure that possesses the qualities exalted by the followers. As such, the fundamental problem for one who possesses only Charismatic authority is the transition from an engaging figure to one who can carry out routine duties once the charisma diminishes (Weber, 1947).

Authority in Contemporary Classrooms

Establishing Charismatic authority is often less demanding than legal/rational authority for student teachers because many have certain natural circumstances which lend themselves to such authority. Many student-teachers are youthful, and in a secondary situation, this can mean minimal age difference between the pre-service teacher and the student. Therefore, these
student-teachers may have qualities useful in employing charismatic authority. Although they would not claim supernatural powers or qualities, as Weber stated, it is more from the perspective of the disciples (students) that the charisma derives. The qualities of relating to teenage culture through music, movies, gaming and other media as well as some shared social experiences enables these student teachers to establish charismatic authority.

Traditional authority may come less easily to pre-service teachers. As previously stated, such obedience based solely on a teacher’s position is becoming less common. For novice teachers who are viewed by most students as temporary and not supreme authority in the classroom, establishing traditional authority may prove difficult. For examples, many times during this research, students looked to the mentor teacher for direction and permission even while the student-teacher was in charge of the lesson, illustrating perhaps challenges faced in establishing authority in another’s classroom.

Established tenets of a democratic society would be better served with respect for legal/rational authority as Weber viewed it. Legal rational authority establishes democratic principles beneficial to emerging adults such as rational bases for rules, right to redress of grievances, demonstration that prior training is required to gain a leadership position, and importance of obedience to a rationally developed rule rather than to the person. In the experiences of these pre-service social studies teachers, this was often lost in favor of other, less democratic forms of authority.

The pre-service teachers in this study experienced varying degrees of success in establishing authority in their classrooms. All teachers demonstrated multiple methods to deal with student behavior. Additionally, Weber’s authority model is situational and it must be noted that the myriad situations encountered daily in a classroom require teachers to utilize many tools to maintain a healthy learning environment. The findings below represent an in-depth examination of predominant characteristics of these teachers based on Weber’s models of authority.

**Review of Literature**

**The Development of Authority**

Although the term authority has fallen out of favor recently with perceived connotations of cruel and condescending behavior on the part of the teacher toward his students, teachers must exhibit some form of authority to develop a productive learning environment (Haywood-Metz, 2006; Pace & Hemmings, 2006). Authority may relate to the relationship between the teacher and students in terms of obedience to classroom rules and behavioral expectations. It does not preclude a friendly relationship between
teachers and students. In fact, effective classroom authority necessitates a friendly and mutually respectful relationship (Fried, 2003; Seeman, 1994). Authority may also include the interaction of stakeholders outside the classroom, including school administration and parents (Pace & Hemmings, 2006). The influence of these outside stakeholders on teachers is significant and affects the learning environment of the classroom (Hansen, 2006). The importance of these intersecting relationships is the nexus of what shapes the classroom environment (Pace & Hemmings, 2006). And the classroom environment largely determines student achievement (Burden, 2006; Nelson, Lott, & Glenn, 2000).

Pre-service teachers are put into a classroom in order to gain experience in developing an effective learning environment under the watchful eye of a mentor teacher and university supervisor (Morales, 1980). Part of their experience includes developing effective lessons and activities related to content. Implementation of such lessons and activities is always contingent on the students’ engagement in the process. Therefore a most basic element of successful teaching is establishment of a relationship between a teacher and his students, which inevitably comes from classroom authority in its various forms Weber (1947).

**Authority in an Effective Learning Environment**

More broadly, classroom authority is related to the aforementioned general purpose of schooling. In a democratic society the purpose of schooling is often debated yet preparing young people for adult social and economic life surely ranks as a broad yet important purpose (Goodlad, 1984). Part of preparation for adult life must include teaching responsibility and independence (Cummings, 2000). Dewey (1916) viewed education less as preparation with a series of rewards and punishments on the path to achievement, but rather a spectrum of growth grounded in present experiences which in turn “make individuals better fitted to cope with later requirements” (p. 56). Public interest scholar and administrator, John W. Gardner claimed that “(t)he ultimate goal of the educational system is to shift to the individual the burden of pursuits his education” (Birnbaum, 2004). Types of authority exhibited by teachers affect students and their perceptions of hierarchical relationships. It is with appropriate development of authority that teachers put their students in position to achieve academically and socially.

**Pre-Service Teachers’ Preparedness for the Classroom**

So as we thrust student-teachers into their next experience; a classroom, will their academic preparation and mentors’ influence insure quality
teaching and development of an effective learning environment? Teacher competence is not learned as a static state of being; it is rather a dynamic relationship between teacher ability and satisfactory completion of appropriate tasks (Huntly, 2008). Classroom authority is part of that relationship, not always learned adequately in teacher preparation programs or nurtured through mentor teachers (Brouwer & Korthagen, 2005), but ignored as an integral part of teaching at our own peril.

Traditional pre-service teachers who have either majored in education or taken education courses as part of teacher preparation are at least minimally exposed to classroom management. In most cases however, experience is limited to classroom simulations with largely predictable results; far from the ever-changing environment of a classroom. Most classroom management texts express the general and nebulous notion that effective teachers must set clear boundaries within the classroom while nurturing students’ ideas of personal responsibility, thereby encouraging independence and preparation to adulthood (Burden, 2006; Cummings, 2000; Nelson et al, 2000; Seeman, 1994).

The training pre-service teachers have as they come to student-teaching is varied. Some have come with teacher education courses which addressed classroom management extensively. Others have experienced little or no effective management content. Kohl (2003) laments that his teacher training gave him little to deal with the complexities of a classroom. He luckily encountered a supervisor from which to learn, and it was these skills that led him to success and ultimately, a teaching credential. Others are not as fortunate. All who are successful in student-teaching must employ some skills to establish a learning environment in which students can learn. The environment created may come from research-based practices, prior experience, or a fortuitous arrangement with a mentor. Some may ignore these and follow intuition which tells them that being the “cool” teacher will work best for all involved; student-teacher and students. What follows is a review of one such study in which five pre-service teachers navigated the challenges of classroom authority.

**Method**

Each of the five student-teacher participants in this research was a graduating senior majoring in secondary education with a social studies concentration. Each was placed in a regional high school in the southeastern United States to experience and teach various social studies content for fourteen weeks. As is customary with these field experiences, each was expected to gradually take over classes from the mentor teacher. For five weeks, the
student-teacher was expected to “solo teach” during which time he would take over all classes, tangential duties and responsibilities. The participants were observed multiple times throughout their teaching experiences. The researcher, who also served as the university supervisor, observed each student-teacher for a minimum of five teaching hours and engaged in reflective discussion for a minimum of three additional hours. The researcher also formally communicated with each mentor teacher who observed his or her student-teacher for at least 40 hours.

Observations by the university supervisor and mentor teachers consisted of direct formal observation directed at various teaching activities related to the establishment of a productive learning environment. Included in the elements of observation were: classroom environment, management style, verbal and non-verbal communication effectiveness, and time and resource management. These components were graded on a scale of 1-4 and detailed comments were made in relation to each component. Observations were beneficial “for discovering consistencies or inconsistencies between what the teachers said in their interviews and what was observed in their practice (Jay, 2003, p. 31). Observations by the researcher and mentor teachers, as well as reflective discussions, were coupled with a one-hour focus group interview and a fourteen question survey given to all participants upon completion of their student-teaching experience. The latter methodology was included to obtain a more complete picture of these student-teachers’ dispositions as translated into skills regarding classroom authority (Kruger, 1994; Patton, 1989). Additionally, each student-teacher recorded a daily journal of classroom events. These were used to develop focus group and survey questions. The self-reflective nature of the focus group and survey was intended to allow the participants to elaborate on the teaching experience as related to development of classroom authority beyond what was observed by the university supervisor and mentor teachers.

**The Participants, Settings and Mentors**

Eric was placed in a rural high school where he taught civics and American history. The high school served almost 800 students from the entire county in which median income was well below national average. Parents and grandparents of many students attended the same school and often had the same teachers as their children. The term traditional accurately describes the community, the school and its inhabitants.

Eric’s mentor taught American history and civics to mostly ninth graders. She had nearly ten years experience; all at the same school. Eric’s mentor teacher relied heavily on lecture and provided few group or cooperative
activities. She indicated that these types of activities often get too loud and disorderly for her comfort. She therefore favored authority and pedagogy based on traditional notions of each. Although she hoped Eric would follow her lead regarding classroom authority, she said she was very open to Eric exploring his own path in this experience. Eric was observed for a total of nine hours by the university supervisor and for over fifty hours by his mentor teacher.

Lauren was placed in the same rural school with Eric. Her mentor teacher had over thirty years of experience in the same school. And as an example of the close knit community described above, her mentor teacher mentored Eric’s mentor teacher over a decade earlier. Lauren’s mentor was also a traditionalist teacher. He rarely used any technology in class and favored lecture and note-taking as the main classroom activities. His authority in the classroom was observed to be based on his expectation that, as a teacher, he deserved and demanded respect. He often explained to Lauren that her best path to success was less about content knowledge and more about an orderly classroom. In this experience Lauren taught world geography and American government. She had many documented cases of learning disabled students, and as we will see, this shaped her beliefs about classroom authority, as her student-teacher experience progressed.

Steven and Kevin were placed in a school vastly different from that of Eric and Lauren. Both were placed in a large suburban high school where the median income surpassed the state’s average. With over 2,700 students, this school was vast, and discipline meant enacting more complex policies to deal with students from varied backgrounds in a school building.

Steven’s mentor had moved from various other high schools and had most often taught American history. At this school she taught American history with some sections of pre-Advanced Placement American history as well as an American history honors course. Her management style was far more relaxed than the previously mentioned mentors. Her classes engaged in many activities and presentations. Steven followed her lead and enacted some of his own activities. His brief lectures were filled with technology interspersed with film clips and attempts at active student engagement. At the same school, Kevin was placed with a mentor who approached classroom authority with a laissez-faire attitude. He taught senior economics and provided little instruction or advice regarding classroom management. Often during observations, the mentor teacher was interacting with students while Kevin was teaching.

Paul’s experience was in a very small, high poverty rural high school with less than 600 students in grades nine through twelve. Paul taught Amer-
ican history to sophomores and juniors. His mentor teacher was a relatively new teacher with three years of experience. She established classroom authority based on strict adherence to rules exclusively set up by the teacher. These rules focused on obedience to the teacher rather than a democratically developed rational set of rules. Paul took the opportunity during his time teaching to try other ways of enacting classroom authority.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name*</th>
<th>Courses Taught</th>
<th>School Setting</th>
<th>School Enrollment: 9-12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>Suburban School</td>
<td>2700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steven</td>
<td>American History/Pre-APUSH</td>
<td>Suburban School</td>
<td>2700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>American History/Civics</td>
<td>Rural School</td>
<td>800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>American History</td>
<td>Rural School</td>
<td>600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lauren</td>
<td>World Geography/American Government</td>
<td>Rural School</td>
<td>800</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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*All names are pseudonyms

**Analysis**

The qualitative data were analyzed in a way intended to allow topics of classroom authority to emerge. Specifically, observation data were collected for each participant and coded based on Weber’s models of authority. Explicit actions related to examples of employed classroom authority were designated as adherence to traditional, legal/rational or charismatic forms of authority. The focus-group was transcribed and coded based on statements that related to types of authority used for this study. Finally, survey responses were organized as percentile responses to each option. All data were then examined to discern emergent categories. At the culmination of the data analysis, final member checking with participants and mentor teachers reinforced the existence of the categories as they became salient themes; four of which are described below. The various data gathering methods employed in this research provided an interesting juxtaposition. Observations, survey data and focus group interview responses often conflicted. Participants often spoke of the dangers of developing a classroom environment with anything other than legal/rational means as a basis for classroom authority. Observations often showed otherwise.

**The Roles of Students and Teachers**

Attempts at developing classroom authority based on tradition were evident
in some responses from participants. Eighty percent of participants believed strongly that a teacher must be the supreme authority figure in a classroom at all times. Lauren believed that classroom management was largely a result of students understanding the roles of students and teachers. She stated, “I think my students obey me because they have to. It’s school and you do certain things.” She went on to say that she expects her students to obey simply “because I am the teacher.” Kevin and Steven reiterated Lauren’s ideas that these students ought to know their place in a classroom and being obedient is a significant part of that role. In the rural high school in which Lauren was placed, adherence to such traditional roles of teacher and student was more evident than in the larger, suburban school where Kevin and Steven taught. It was a struggle for different reasons for these participants who saw following traditional roles of teachers and students as a way to developing classroom authority.

Lauren specifically, thought of herself as tough yet rational, but observations showed otherwise. She often appealed to the students with traditional expectations of students; not to question classroom rules, procedures or academic objectives. Her mentor teacher helped her try methods that appealed to traditional authority. His long-standing tenure at this small rural school had allowed him to rely on his students to capitulate to his classroom authority based on his stature. Because he taught many of their parents and was a pillar of this small community, his practice worked well for him. For Lauren, this was more of a challenge. Students did not respect her authority on any of the bases that worked for her mentor. She often fell into the trap outlined by Ayers by becoming “authoritarian and arbitrary” (Ayers, 2003, p. 34). In one observation several students with Individualized Educational Plans (IEPs) were disruptive of Lauren’s lecture. One claimed he saw little point to the note taking activities in class. Lauren’s response was to exclaim that it was her class and her rules. The student’s role was to obey without question. The student clearly disagreed with this response and his misbehavior continued until he was moved to sit by the mentor teacher. This exertion of traditional authority, coupled with attempts at exerting charismatic authority, challenged her and the others to find appropriate roles for them and their students.

**Traditional Pedagogy and Traditional Authority**

Like the classroom authority exerted by many of the participants, the pedagogy was also traditional. And as it relates to classroom authority, data collected from observations revealed that the participants most often relied on a teacher-centered classroom in which students were largely passive and
expected to follow traditional student roles. Steven’s class was perhaps the most dynamic. His students played a more active role during his class; responding to questions while he lectured, but none of the participants felt comfortable with cooperative learning. Kevin admittedly despised student-centered classrooms and believed that “as a teacher my job is to teach them and that usually means through lecture. Group work is usually just a waste of time in my opinion.” Survey results revealed that 80% of the participants felt most comfortable in a classroom where students were quietly taking notes. This was evident during observations. However, based on survey data, 80% also claimed that their classrooms were student-centered; a claim not backed-up by observation. And 80% of participants claimed that an observer would likely find students engaged in group-work or a spirited discussion, yet observations and other responses to the survey say otherwise. Mostly their students were listening to a lecture and taking notes or expected to quietly work on worksheets or other individual work. When classroom management challenges arose, it was often the case that appeals for student respect became based on student-teacher personality rather than any legal/rational or even traditional means. While traditional authority was often expected, its failure often led to the default perception that being seen as the “cool” teacher would help re-establish control.

**Ineffectual Charismatic Authority**

Although all participants were observed relying on charismatic authority even more often than traditional authority, only one, Eric freely admitted his penchant for relying on his personality to be that “cool” teacher as primary means to develop classroom authority. Eric claimed that while a high school student himself, he worked harder for those teachers he deemed “cool.” He said, “I guess we liked them more and could relate to them more.” With teachers whose rules were more strict, Eric admitted, “we had to tow the line more.” And Eric emphatically stressed that his role, as he saw it, was to develop a role with his students in which he was like the “cool” teacher he had in high school; one whose charisma led students to follow him. Not surprisingly, Eric had by far, the most discipline problems in his classes. He likely had some students who saw him in the likeable way he intended, but many others saw his authority as ineffectual and took advantage. In addition, Eric was not the only student who relied on charisma as the main tool for developing classroom authority. All other participants, at times, depended on their personalities and youth to help them develop a classroom environment. Steven acknowledged that he was, “the ‘cool’ teacher” and “that’s what I want. I love hearing that they love me and my
class so my authority definitely comes down to charisma.” Observations of Steven’s class demonstrated respect from some students while others took advantage. In one instance Steven’s mobile phone was going around the room while students were eagerly looking for pictures and contacts. Although not malicious behavior on the part of the students, it clearly showed a situation when trying to use one’s personality as a primary management tool was detrimental to a productive learning environment and possibly dangerous to a pre-service teacher’s prospective career.

Paul, too, took pride in what he saw as effective use of his personality to establish relationships with his students. Observations, however, revealed myriad classroom management problems based on lack of respect for authority. Students in his classes often defied his authority and wandered in and out of class while he appealed for quiet and order.

In the classrooms of all three participants who relied extensively on charismatic authority, discipline was often beyond manageable. Off-task students and disrespectful behavior often disrupted the learning process. Students were prone to ask off-topic questions and derail lesson objectives. The student-teachers were often frustrated at the lack of respect they received. They even expressed personal hurt feelings that these students who seemed to exalt their teacher at times would be so disrespectful at other times. The lack of structure in these classrooms, which instead depended on the personality of the teacher to maintain a productive learning environment, was hardly a benefit to the students or the student-teacher. As expressed previously, developing a friendly and trusting relationship with students is a significant key for an effective classroom environment, but, as demonstrated here, reliance on charisma as the principal means for attaining that goal is a recipe for substantial challenges.

**The Influence of Mentor Teachers and Pre-Service Training**

Lauren and Kevin were most influenced by their mentor teachers regarding classroom management. Both mentors had many years experience in the public schools. Lauren’s mentor influenced her in appealing to the traditional authority he employed. In observations, this was effective while the mentor teacher was present, but there was a noticeable loss of adherence to Lauren’s traditional authority in the absence of the mentor. Kevin’s mentor saw his seniors as having already “checked-out of school early in their senior year. In a discussion regarding Kevin’s classroom management, he claimed that most had already decided on college or the workforce and only needed to pass to graduate. Those going to college were sending in high school transcripts early in their senior year. They knew many colleges
were more concerned about standardized test scores than grades. He therefore saw his classes as less than important to his students. Kevin absorbed his reliance on traditional, yet lackadaisical, authority, and like Lauren he lacked the position with these students to effectively manage. As a result, his class was largely apathetic. A feeling of ennui was evident by the sleeping students, students using mobile phones in class, and students entering and exiting class without question.

In surveys and interview responses, no participants claimed to employ management skills developed in pre-service college classes. Four out of five claimed that the college classes they took which included content related to classroom management were not very useful in the real classroom experience. Evidence from observations reinforced this notion. Although the student-teachers occasionally employed strategies used by their mentor teachers, effective management plans as often developed in a college level management course were largely non-existent. After one particularly challenging class, Eric sat down with his university supervisor and mentor and discussed strategies that might be useful to re-establish authority in the classroom. Eric recalled some of the strategies suggested from his college coursework, but was only marginally interested in implementing the suggestions. His feeling was that the suggestions he learned in classes were “more theoretical” and “less practical.” Paul restated Eric’s conclusions by claiming what was learned in college related to developing a healthy learning environment was so theoretical and not applicable with real students. In the focus group, the others agreed with this statement.

**DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION**

This study reveals some of the complexities encountered by five pre-service teachers during their student-teaching experiences. It has allowed us to examine, more fully, the effect development of classroom authority has on a learning environment. Poor, short-sighted decision making by pre-service teachers regarding classroom authority is not inevitable. Ignorance of legal/rational means to develop classroom authority will likely lead to an unhealthy learning environment, stress for the teacher and for his students. The teachers who took on the idea to try to be friends with students were inevitably challenged in developing an effective learning environment. Ayers (2003) articulated the idea that this tendency often ends up with a teacher who resorts to authoritarian, distant and arbitrary leadership. In fact, the shallow parameters of such friendships are based on likeability, popularity or niceness instead of respect. Ayers (2003, p. 31) stated, “With this somewhat surface notion of friendship, it is easy to become inappropriate
with students, to lose your bearings, or to become confused about how to act. Feeling betrayed (as will inevitably come when classroom authority is employed), friends can easily turn into enemies.”

To gain a better understanding of classroom behavior and effective ways to develop a healthy learning environment, mere observation is not sufficient (Huntly, 2008). In fact, practical experiences and critical self-reflection examining the dynamic nature of how one experiences classroom situations is perhaps more crucial to acknowledging the significance of establishing classroom authority based on legal and rational means rather than relying on traditional authority paradigms or simply one’s charisma as a means to an effective classroom. Through observations, the mentor teachers and university supervisor noticed several key elements that contributed to the level of success experienced by these pre-service teachers. Some went in expecting their authority to be respected because of their position. None of the student-teachers studied attempted to establish authority based on legal/rational means. Most favored using charisma to maintain a harmonious classroom.

Even in harmony, this tenuous environment was not always a productive learning environment. Although these student-teachers were often hailed as a better, more hip version of the mentor teacher, they all found times in which this type of authority failed. Observation field notes are replete with observer comments that off-topic and irrelevant conversation dominated class time. Often the lesson proposed was disregarded when the line of authority was whitewashed from view. The learning environment was too often shaped by a teacher-centered classroom in which students were expected to take notes and absorb knowledge emitted by the teacher. Curiously this went against the ideas these student-teachers had about their classrooms. Even with Steven, whose student-centered classroom emerged occasionally, this was the case.

Interviews revealed stark differences between students who had experienced largely identical teacher preparation. Eric, for example, reflected on the importance of his own high school experience as influential in the way he established his classroom. Being friendly and considered cool was part of the management strategy from the outset. Lauren and Kevin recognized the influence of their mentor teachers in how to establish authority in the classroom. All five student-teachers soon noticed that when one is considered “cool” by the students, many management issues disappear for awhile but inevitably reappear. With these participants, this often led to attempts to re-exert authority, often through traditional means. The variation and fluctuation of management styles in and of itself made developing a productive
and healthy learning environment difficult.

Student reflections demonstrated the complexities of being the cool teacher. Daily journals often included confusion about why students failed to comply with classroom authority. Along with general daily experiences, these reflections told of the difficulties faced as a teacher; difficulties seemingly beyond the personal experience of these student teachers as high school students. Eric, who had all along acknowledged his categorization as implementing charismatic authority, expressed in summary that when one uses charisma as the main tool for establishing a learning environment, he is prone to having days in which students are all on-board with the lesson and others when classroom management is lost. Eric stated, “Your high days are really high. Days go by fast and it’s really fun for the kids and you, but then the low days can really be (pause) when the boundaries are not drawn, it can become anarchy in class.”

As an investigation into classroom authority as experienced by these student-teachers, this study had limitations. First, only five student-teachers were involved in the investigation. Any further study seeking to contribute to the body of knowledge regarding classroom authority and pre-service teachers would perhaps include a larger population. Additionally, those involved were all secondary student-teachers concentrating in the social studies. Other content grade levels and content areas should be considered in subsequent research to provide a more broad perspective of teacher training and customary management styles in different grade levels and content areas.

Conclusion

It is inevitable that teachers must establish authority in some form, it is also essential that teachers reflect upon their behavior and the relationships developed with their students. As seen in this study, pre-service teachers are often not adequately prepared to engage in the complexities that make up the learning environment. Most teacher preparation programs are insufficient in training future educators to handle these experiences (Seeman, 1994). This fact has significant implications for the myriad stakeholders involved in teacher development. Teacher educators, practicing teachers as well as their administrators must recognize such shortcomings and assuage tendencies of ineffective development of classroom authority.

The tendency for pre-service teachers in this study to depend on traditional or charismatic authority to establish a healthy learning environment may demonstrate the lack of adequate training provided to these student teachers. As stated above, pre-service training often includes rote memorization of behavior strategies with no significant practical experience to
employ such methods in teacher education coursework prior to student-teaching. Time and time again we see how lack of effective management skills makes for difficult teaching situations. Although the intention of the field experience is to develop such skills, research such as this shows that even by the conclusion of a student-teaching experience, these future teachers lacked enough experience to develop a healthy learning environment based on reasoned rules and procedures to benefit the whole instead of authoritarian practices dictated as a means to maintain an orderly classroom that fits with one’s comfort level and experience.

Although pre-service teachers were specifically examined in this study, one can discern from the experiences of these participants certain components related more generally to classroom authority which, when present, can positively affect a learning environment. Along with pre-service teachers, practicing teachers and administrators may do well to periodically consider such components. Practicing teachers, for example, must consistently reflect on their teaching (Lester, 1988), and reflection regarding lesson delivery and student engagement would be incomplete without fundamental examination of classroom authority. A practicing teacher would also likely benefit from input of peers. Beyond semi-annual formal observations from school administrators, peer observation may allow teachers to consider specific elements of the class experience. Focus on classroom authority would allow teachers to exchange practical knowledge regarding effective elements of a positive learning environment and appropriate ways to develop classroom authority through legal/rational means. Encouragement of such reflection and peer cooperation is best established when it is supported by administration. Those administrators who seek to create a consistent teaching climate in which teachers are reminded, through professional development to establish appropriate classroom authority, are most likely to experience a more positive and harmonious school culture. In such a culture, mentor teachers can further disseminate means of effective establishment of classroom authority to the student-teachers under their direction, stressing that an effective learning environment based on legal/rational classroom authority is a necessary precursor to academic achievement, regardless of the teacher’s experience level.

REFERENCES


