Perspectives on Early Childhood Psychology and Education

Volume 6
Issue 1 *Surveillance, Policing, & Social Control: Rethinking Classroom Management for Democratic Possibility*

Article 1

November 2022

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Recommended Citation

Cipollone, Kristin and Brown Hoffman, Emily (2022) "Why We Are Done Talking about Classroom Management," *Perspectives on Early Childhood Psychology and Education*: Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 1.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.58948/2834-8257.1001
Available at: https://digitalcommons.pace.edu/perspectives/vol6/iss1/1

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Why We Are Done Talking about Classroom Management

Kristin Cipollone & Emily Brown Hoffman

As linguists would tell us, the words we use matter as they shape the way we come to see the world. Attention to language, then, is important, as it signals to both author and audience the range of possible interpretations within a given word, phrase, or idea. Habitually, after we have used or heard a word or phrase frequently in a specific context, we stop considering its meaning. Case in point: the term *classroom management* is one that all stakeholders in the field of education use and hear with frequency. And yet, as an educator, have you ever wondered: What does it mean to *manage*?

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, manage can mean one of several, seemingly contradictory things. The primary definition is "to handle or direct with a degree of skill," which on its own makes sense given the task of the teacher to organize and facilitate learning in a classroom. However, a deeper look at the sub meanings reveals *how* the work of directing is done and the values upon which the work is premised. These can be summarized as: control, care, and compliance. Perhaps given the contradiction inherent to the purpose and function of schools—a point we turn to below—we should not be surprised that the concept of management, so fundamental to the work of education, is imbued with this incongruence. However, many may argue that there is no incongruence. The idea that to care about someone is also linked to seeking their compliance and establishing control over them falls in line with traditional ideas about childrearing and childism (e.g., "spare the rod," "I'm punishing you for your own good," and "children should be seen and not heard." See hooks, 2018; Foster & Smith, in this issue). We, however, decidedly disagree with this premise. Further, in current educational settings, some would argue that exercising control and compliance over children is necessary to hold children accountable

to the increasingly rigorous academic expectations for our youngest students. However, we would assert the contrary. High academic expectations show care and are achieved through supporting and empowering students in developing critical thinking, analytical skills, and autonomy.

Talking about parents, hooks (2018) says:

> One of the most important social myths we must debunk if we are to become a more loving culture is the one that teaches parents that abuse and neglect can coexist with love. Abuse and neglect negate love. Care and affirmation, the opposite of abuse and humiliation, are the foundation of love. No one can rightfully claim to be loving when behaving abusively. Yet parents do this all the time in our culture. Children are told that they are loved even as they are being abused. (p.22)

We argue that hooks' assertion is equally applicable to educators. The myths that teachers "shouldn't smile," that they can't be "too nice" or children will "take advantage," endure in the field. Seemingly "nicer" forms of these views also circulate in the emphasis on the necessity of rewards and punishments, in public displays of behavior management, and even in programs of social-emotional learning, which are frequently used to enforce compliance rather than self-actualization and to support students' developmental needs. The overwhelming majority of educators believe themselves to be caring individuals, deeply invested in the lives of the children with whom they work. Yet, these self-assessments sit alongside documented incidents of harsh and exclusionary discipline practices (Nowicki, 2018), as well as the routine spirit-murdering (Love, 2019) and psychological harm done to children, further evidence of the tangled web of control, compliance, and care.

Care is essential to the work of teaching and learning. However, our vision of care differs from what we have consistently seen done in the name of care in schools. As often operationalized, particularly in racialized, inequitable school spaces wherein a majority of care work is performed by white women, care is routinely conditional and transactional (Valenzuela, 1999), concerned more with aesthetics

and being kind (e.g., PBS Teachers Lounge, 2018; see also Rolón-Dow, 2005; Toshalis, 2012), and informed by deficit ideologies that fuel savior complexes (Miller & Harris, 2018) and low expectations. The care we envision is authentic (Curry, 2016; Long et al., 2016), critical (Milner IV et al., 2018), and is political (Shalaby, 2020). It is "radically pro-kid" (Minor, 2019). It is a care that honors and affirms who children are, from where they come, and the care traditions they practice; that holds all children to high expectations; that fights for justice; and prioritizes the work of being in community and focusing upon the collective good. As Shalaby (2020) reminds us:

> Because the idea of care, much like the idea of *love*, is too often misunderstood as apolitical, our work with children and with each other must be first to establish the relationship between care and justice. Care is not about being kind or charitable; rather, care is about being and working in ways that are fair, inclusive, and in solidarity with the most vulnerable. For example, care is not just cheering for or serving free meals to essential hospital workers as they head in to treat COVID-19 patients. That is kindness, and it is important. But *care* is demanding that they have the personal protective equipment required to be as safe as possible and organizing to get them what they need in the absence of coordinated government efforts. Care is also about considering the other essential workers who keep hospitals functional, including janitorial staff, food service workers, and those who provide childcare, to name a few—and asking why these workers are less visible than doctors and nurses. Care is fighting for just treatment of the most vulnerable and most marginalized among us. Care is hard work because it requires a kind of genuine sacrifice and solidarity far beyond what is demanded by charity or kindness. (n.p.)

Care envisioned in this way cannot be about compliance and control. Instead, it must be about freedom and our shared humanity (Ayers, 2016; Shalaby, 2017). Humanity and freedom—how we come to care about one another, how we stand up and advocate for what

is right when we see something unfair and unjust, how we learn to live in community with one another—are topics in which our youngest learners are experts (Shalaby, 2017, 2020). Children are deeply empathetic and are deeply attuned to inequality and injustice (Derman-Sparks & Olsen Edwards, 2010, Pelo, 2008). Schools need educators that care not that "children are seen and not heard" but care that children's voices are actively listened to and amplified. Children need easily accessible adults who are unwavering in their belief and unrelenting in their actions to nurture children to use their power to actively advocate for a more just society, including their current schooled contexts. Unfortunately, upon entering school, too often we ask children to *unlearn* these things. We normalize compliance and control, we normalize exclusion, we normalize individualism at the expense of the collective (Milner IV, et al., 2018; Shalaby, 2020).

That our vision of care, one that is "radically pro-kid," humanizing, and rooted in justice as opposed to compliance and control, appears so contrary to what happens in school—radical even—is exactly why we offer this special issue. In our minds, there is nothing radical about establishing classroom environments that honor and affirm children. In our minds, classrooms centered in authentic, humanizing care is what the work of education is about. As a field, however, a superficial, patronizing care, coupled with pushes for control and compliance have come to dominate. Classroom management rather than community building has become the norm. Despite—or more appropriately—*because* the logics of classroom management are so deeply embedded, so taken for granted, it is imperative that we challenge its untouchable status.

Questioning the Logics of Classroom Management

Classroom management is an almost universally accepted, promoted, and enacted concept, both colloquially and formally, in educational settings from preschool to higher education and into in-service teacher professional development. The assumed importance of classroom management perpetuates a lack of criticality

when it comes to its purposes and enactment. Due to this dearth of scrutiny, we offer the following questions: *What does classroom management mean? Why do children need to be managed? Why is there an expectation that teachers can and should manage children? If control and compliance are core functions of management, what are the ramifications of classroom management for democratic possibility?* In many traditional programs of education (perhaps even among the broader US society) these are nonsensical questions. In our own undergraduate and graduate level courses, students are confounded when we pose them. Colleagues roll their eyes and sidestep the topic, assuming we seek simply to be provocative. Yet we believe these are not only legitimate questions, but *fundamental* questions in need of answering. Urgent answering. Real harm is being done to children every day in schools. Given the mounting evidence demonstrating the adverse effects of much of what counts as management, particularly for Black, Indigenous, Children of Color (BICOC) and children with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2014), the need for a new approach is vitally important.

A review of the mainstream literature in the field would seem to imply that these questions are largely settled. Management, as frequently employed in classrooms and programs of teacher preparation today, is largely envisioned as a set of strategies to influence student behavior rather than part of one's philosophy and pedagogy. While some approaches encourage educators to have students share in the rule making, the focus remains centered on individualized management of bodies (i.e., asking students "how can you make sure you sit quietly in your seat?" versus "everyone's voice needs to be heard, how can we ensure that happens?") In the currently enacted paradigm, children are largely believed to be in control of their behaviors independent of or without attention to broader societal influences or obstacles. Children's behavior is rarely seen as a logical response to an unjust, problematic, or toxic context (Shalaby, 2017); rather, it is seen as an active choice.

Further, there is significant evidence to suggest that the values and norms that traditional approaches to management seek to

inculcate are not neutral. While presented as universal, norms are in fact culturally influenced, imbued with the values that dominant elements in a culture prioritize. In the United States, notions of what constitutes right and wrong, what are appropriate ways of speaking and being, and so on are executed through a white, middle class lens (Kendi, 2016). Children whose families adhere to a different set of normative practices are frequently punished upon entering school, seen as disruptive and in need of being taught the "right" way to act.

Moreover, classroom management as currently conceived is not just enacted through repetition of norms, but actively taught as factual and legitimate to future and current educators, wherein examination of behavioral norms through a cultural lens appears to be absent. Classroom management courses are a staple of teacher preparation programs, the expectation of their presence encoded in the accreditation standards of organizations like Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP). Privately funded reform-oriented organizations like the National Council for Teacher Quality (NCTQ) go further to push a particular vision of what classroom management should be, going so far as to rank programs of teacher preparation publicly using five criteria derived from the *What Works Clearinghouse* (our own institution receives an A by their standards). These criteria are consistent with traditional and behaviorist interpretations of management, reinforcing the mainstream idea that classroom management is about control and compliance: establishing rules and routines, maximizing instructional time, reinforcing positive behavior, redirecting off-task behavior, and addressing serious misbehavior with "appropriate consequences" (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2020).

Inequitable Classroom Management within Inequitable Public Schools

Consideration of the above prompts more questions worthy of interrogation, principal among them: What is the purpose of public education in the United States? It is no secret that schools have contributed to the perpetuation and maintenance of "savage inequalities" (Kozol, 1991).

Yet, the contentious question remains: Are schools intended to maintain the status quo and promote social control or to further the democratic project? This rather complicated question, one rife with contradiction, is as complicated as the people who are credited with most strongly influencing the creation of our public school system (e.g., people like Thomas Jefferson and Horace Mann). While there are perhaps as many answers to this question as there are people living in this country, generally speaking, public education is charged with two primary tasks: to develop and nurture individuals and to develop and nurture the collective good (Hochschild & Scrovronick, 2004). While an examination of public education would demonstrate a history born from a desire to instantiate compliance and a set of shared values, a concurrent and paradoxical strain sees education as an emancipatory and equitizing force.

Schools, as critical social institutions, have long been in the business of shaping student behavior and inculcating cultural norms. The US system of public education was advanced to create a "common culture" and mitigate social and political discord as new populations of people with divergent beliefs, values, and practices came into contact (Labaree, 2010; Spring, 2004). Of course, this process was never a neutral one; rather, it was driven by a set of white, protestant values that sought to assimilate (forcibly or otherwise) children from non-dominant backgrounds (in terms of race, ethnicity, culture, religion, social class, and other social categories) into this norm. Borrowing from both Prussian models of social control (Herbst, 2002) and the specialized (imperialist) field of management science—honed on plantations and in factories—the field of classroom management was born (Casey, et al., 2013).

The origin of classroom management, in and of itself, should trouble us all. Moreover, considering what is known about *how* management is taken up—that its consequences are disproportionately enacted upon BICOC and children with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014)—should shake anyone who calls themselves an educator to the core. It is in schools serving

BICOC that children are heavily surveilled (Harper & Temkin, 2018). It is in schools serving BICOC where we see increasing urgency for student compliance (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014). It is in schools serving BICOC where we see increased use of policing and other forms of harsh and exclusionary discipline (Gopalan & Nelson, 2019). It is also in schools serving BICOC where, we are told, there is a greater need for social and emotional learning (SEL) because "these" children lack such awareness and skills (Blad, 2015). There is not a comparable ramping up of surveillance, compliance, and harsh discipline in schools serving white, affluent children and families. And while calls for increased SEL have been directed to all schools—particularly amidst concerns about social dislocation in a global pandemic—white affluent children are not positioned as lacking in social-emotional skills in the same ways as their BICOC peers.

Further cause for concern is the fact that surveillance, exclusionary and harsh discipline, and compliance initiatives are increasingly being used with younger and younger children (e.g., Giordano et al., 2020). Previously mostly left alone to foster child growth in community-based practices, early childhood settings are now being inundated with control and compliance measures previously only reaching older children. While ClassDojo avatars might look cute and those color-coded behavior charts seem like friendly reminders, they are in fact much more insidious, as they normalize practices of policing and surveilling. Such measures facilitate public monitoring of behavior, encourage public shaming of those who do not conform, and perpetuate a punitive system of consequences—all of which serve to normalize the larger practices in our "justice" system and reinforce that people are disposable (Shalaby, 2020). This is particularly troubling when we see management practices coupled with a kindness curriculum that separates kindness from justice (Turner, 2019; Watson & Ferlazzo, 2020). As Watson and Ferlazzo (2020) argue, "kindness did not save George Floyd's life" (n.p.), but perhaps in a society raised up to understand the inextricable ties between justice

and care, and to value our shared humanity, George Floyd would still be alive, as would the countless other people who have died as a result of police brutality, and the prison-industrial complex would be far less bloated.

Moreover, the racialized dimensions of classroom management cannot be ignored. Children who conform to/assimilate into the White ways of schooling are rewarded in schools while those who don't are disciplined (Valdez, 2015). The racism embedded in both classroom management practices and their impacts have far reaching consequences for our society. For example, the school-to-prison pipeline is a well-documented phenomenon. It is also plausible to see a connection between the recent racial uprisings in the U.S. and schools. The disparate and harsh treatment of Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) at the hands of our "justice system" mirrors school practice, wherein

> We incarcerate children but describe it as "detention." We exile them from the community and refer to it as "suspension." We forcibly isolate small children and call it by the almost Orwellian of names, "time out." (Kohn, 1996, p.24).

In sum, management practices cultivated from plantation and factory efficiency models have been shown to reinforce and universalize white norms, resulting in the disproportionate punishment of BICOC. The evidence is abundantly clear: racial biases shape school practices and school outcomes are racialized. This is perhaps most evident with regard to discipline. Not only are elementary schools serving predominantly marginalized students much more likely to adopt "zero tolerance" policies for perceived misbehavior, but even within the same school, teachers and principals dole out punishments much more harshly to BICOC than white students for reasons such as "defiance" and "noncompliance"—terms well documented as stemming from racial bias (Owens & McLanahan, 2020). How much longer can a system that is both premised upon and propagative of white supremacy be engaged and endorsed by the educational community?

Rethinking Classroom Management

The articles in this special issue draw our attention to the many harmful ways that classroom management plays out in early childhood and elementary-classroom contexts. The harmful practices once enacted only in the educational contexts serving older children (e.g., high school) are now being pushed down into preschool. Zero tolerance, suspension, expulsion, even arrestation are now readily enacted in early childhood and elementary classrooms. Somehow, policies, protocols, and plans to better public schools have resulted in the exact opposite. Early childhood, once a leader in humanizing, anti-oppressive practice, is taking its cues from secondary and elementary education; there has been a loss of hindsight and foresight into what children and families want and need in educational contexts. These articles also underscore how much of the harm done to children is done in the name of good intentions. Said another way, educators are not malevolent and malicious monsters who knowingly and purposefully seek to hurt children, but rather, believe that they are caring for children and doing what is best. Nevertheless, significant harm has been and is being done and it must stop.

Three of the manuscripts in this special issue illuminate these contradictions in practice. The work of Marquita Foster and Catherine Smith, for example, demonstrates the way in which educators quickly become "educators of the system" rather than educators of children. Problematizing their own complicity in the system as former administrators prompted them to examine how schools manifest anti-child and anti-Black postures and highlight the power of Black teachers' resistance as they work to begin "unpolicing" childhood. Erica Steinitz Holyoke offers a cautionary case study that highlights the tensions teachers face as they attempt to engage a more humanizing pedagogy amidst oppressive school practices. The focal teacher prioritizes community building and institutes restorative practices like community circles alongside her use of behavior color charts and scripted curriculum, prompting us all to ask what is possible

in traditional public spaces. Molly McManus examines the ways in which social-emotional learning is taken up to approximate more traditional behaviorist interventions. We see how competing visions of children's agency (the children's and the teacher) sit alongside expectations to behave.

Two of the manuscripts critically examine two commonly used approaches to classroom management. Jade Calais and Matthew Green offer a powerful analysis of the racial implications of Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (PBIS), using the metaphor of the COVID-19 pandemic to reveal both the scope of malady and how it frequently spreads without visible symptoms. Framed from a color-evasive perspective, PBIS, Calais and Green assert, is an asymptomatic spreader of racism and white supremacy. In a similar vein, we, the co-editors, along with our colleague Maria Sciuchetti, take an in-depth look at SEL to argue that while presenting as a "nice" form of classroom management—insofar as it avoids more overtly harsh and public practices—SEL simply replaces traditional behaviorism with an updated version. Even in its "transformative" form, SEL fails to allow all children to self-actualize in ways authentic to them. A truly transformative SEL would take into account the socio-political and historical contexts within which we all operate *and* also manifest in culturally and community sustaining ways, honoring multiple ways of knowing rather than continuing to socialize students into a particular (white) way of being.

The work of Lauren Mims, Addison Duane, and Cierra Kaler-Jones provides an example of what affirming, culturally and community-sustaining practice could look like. By showcasing an example of an intervention with middle-school-aged Black girls, the authors theorize both what this work could look like in early childhood spaces and what the impact would be if upon entering formal schooling, all children were affirmed. Saili Kulkarni, Sunyoug Kim, and Tunette Powell offer a model for redressing the damage done by exclusionary discipline, reimagining a humanizing educational experience for BICOC with disabilities. They propose a model wherein

multiple stakeholders—children and families and educators—can "play together" to develop culturally affirming and just practices.

As we continue to examine the ways in which schooling continues to oppress, marginalize, and physically and psychologically harm children, particularly BICOC, Alexandra Aylward, Christine Garver, and Catherine Voulgarides provide a new analytical model to surmise the effects of the ecosystem of racial inequality in early childhood discipline. Combining the theoretical frameworks of geography of opportunity, ecological systems theory, and the youth control complex, their model provides a tool to analyze the nesting of multiple layers of inequality in preschool discipline practices so that racial inequality can be eradicated.

We proudly feature these scholars and their work to problematize the current approach to classroom management while imagining a humanizing approach to help us realize the democratic promise of schools.

Reclaiming Humanity and Democracy in our Schools

Given the extent of the problem and damage it has done and continues to do, tinkering with the system is not enough (Love, 2019). We need a radical overhaul of schooling as we know it, but the remedy is hardly radical. We need schools that center humanity, the humanity of us all. As David Kirkland (2015) reminds us:

> Teachers are human rights workers, and our classrooms are progressive vineyards thirsty for liberation's laborers. Classrooms are never neutral sites. They are contested spaces, where the imbrications of competing interests wrestle daily for ethical real estate. Just as they can harm, classrooms can heal. In this light, classrooms matter. Healing and humanizing classrooms matter most. They have the power to move our assumptions away from the stale and negative deficit assumptions that strip away Black humanity and toward those complex narratives of people that build humanity and nurture sensitivities toward that

> humanity in ways that abolish pre-existing internal and external contracts of bigotry and violence. In such spaces, teaching takes on a new meaning. Here, teaching means teaching the mind as well as the heart. It means teaching for justice, which is always and only about teaching (to) love. (n.p.)

Schools have the power to foster positive social change and we believe that this force can be harnessed through abolishing our control and surveillance practices and reimagining classroom spaces premised upon authentic care, community, joy, healing, and love.

Management is not separate from our pedagogy and philosophy; rather it flows from it. As Gloria Ladson-Billings reminds us, "we teach what we value" (2017). Conceived of in this way, we can see how our core values as educators shape our every action in the classroom, from our pedagogy, curriculum, and how we organize our classroom, to how we treat the young humans with whom we have the privilege to work. For far too long, the field has talked about management as if it is its own distinctive thing, a set of benign, value-free skills and strategies that can simply be taught or even forced. Instead, we must abandon our commitment to management and instead focus on building classroom community, centering our classrooms around ideas such as those illustrated in Shalaby's (2020) guiding questions:

- How will we be in genuine community together?
- How will we keep everyone safe, happy, and well?
- What will we do and practice when harm or conflict happens in our community?
- How will we take extra special care of the most vulnerable among us?

Given what we know about classroom management and its impacts, it is unconscionable to continue with schooling-as-usual (Michie, 2010). While educators take no Hippocratic Oath, we should all live

by the basic premise of "do not harm." Our practices are hurting students. There is simply no denying this. If we are to truly realize the democratic possibility of this country, we must first practice it in our schools. In this special issue, our goal, then, is to put discussions around classroom management, social and emotional learning, surveillance, and discipline into conversation with work on restorative justice and culturally sustaining pedagogies in order to rethink and reimagine current (punitive) approaches to school discipline and to help us, collectively as a field, to become a humanizing rather than harming force.

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