

Classroom management: Teachers' skills and differentiation according to posts held at school – A research study with primary school teachers

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Abstract

Conceptual framework: The concept of *classroom management* emerges as a relevant and contemporary study area, since due to a shortage of empirical studies, there is a clear need for deeper explanatory theoretical models. Teachers use strategies for classroom management but still encounter barriers when defining conditions which may enhance the teaching and learning process. **Objective:** the present research intended to answer the following *research questions*: «How are teachers distributed according to the indicators of “classroom management skills” (CMS), in terms of low and high skills?» and «How are teachers differentiated within the parameters of “classroom management skills” (CMS) according to the posts they hold at school?». **Method:** a quantitative study was conducted with 181 teachers in the district of Lisbon, who answered to the Classroom Management Scale by Emmer & Hickman (1991), and the School Disruption Scale Inferred by Teachers by Veiga (2006). **Results and conclusions:** the results indicate that most teachers perceive their classroom management skills as high, particularly in the dimensions of behavior management and teaching management. These results also suggest that teachers holding administrative posts at school present more management skills, but only in the behavioral dimension.

Keywords: classroom management, primary school teachers, indiscipline, school administrative posts.

Resumo

Enquadramento conceptual: O conceito de *gestão da sala de aula* surge como área de estudo relevante e contemporânea, evidenciando-se, a necessidade de aprofundamento de modelos teóricos explicativos, face à escassez de investigações empíricas. Os professores utilizam estratégias na gestão da sala de aula, no entanto encontram ainda barreiras, na definição de condições que potenciem o processo do ensino e da aprendizagem. **Objetivo:** a presente investigação pretendeu responder às seguintes *questões de estudo*: «Como se distribuem os professores pelos indicadores de “competências de gestão da aula” (CGA), em termos de baixas e elevadas competências?», e «como se diferenciam os professores nos parâmetros de “competências de gestão da aula” (CGA), em função dos cargos havidos na escola? **Método:** realizou-se um estudo de natureza quantitativa, em que 181 professores do 1º ciclo do ensino básico, no distrito de Lisboa, responderam à *Escala de Gestão da Aula*, de Emmer & Hickman (1991), e à *Escala de Disrupção Escolar Inferida pelos Professores*, de Veiga (2006). **Resultados e conclusões:** os resultados indicaram que a maioria dos professores perceciona como elevadas as suas competências de gestão da aula, sobretudo nas dimensões da gestão de comportamento e gestão de ensino. Estes resultados sugerem, ainda, que os professores com cargos exercidos na escola apresentam mais competências de gestão, mas apenas na dimensão comportamental.

Palavras-chave: gestão da sala de aula, professores do 1.º ciclo, indisciplina, cargos de gestão escolar.

1. Introduction

The school we have nowadays is different from the one existing two or three decades ago. Due to students' heterogeneity and to the diversity of events simultaneously taking place within the classroom, new concerns, reflections and higher responsibilities are required from the teacher (Demir, 2009; Pacheco, 2006; Santos, 2007). School

indiscipline relates to and is part of society, since having gained a dimension and proportion which is at the top of teachers' concerns and one of the major problems at school, it also extrapolates educational institutions and hits several sectors of society (Carita, 2002; Estrela, 1996; Veiga 2013). Indiscipline might be significantly reduced if teachers are helped into becoming more effective classroom organizers (Estrela, 1992). The relevance of this study is owed to the acknowledgement of the importance of a set of classroom management (CM) practices for educational success (Amado & Freire, 2009; Veiga 2013). Since the concept of *classroom management* is quite recent, it gains relevance and value as a research subject within both initial and continuous teacher training. Therefore, there is a relevant need to collect elements which may contribute to the existence of specific teacher training aiming to promote their psychoeducational skills when building a learning environment in the classroom (Veiga, 2013).

1.1 Issue and conceptual framework

The teacher's role has evolved from being a mere conveyor of knowledge into a classroom manager in the possession of a set of skills combined with the didactic skills concerning the subject they teach, which puts them in a strategically central position, particularly as far as social development and change are concerned (Santos, 2011; Schwarzweller & Lyson, 1978). The sphere of CM comprises a set of procedures intimately connected to the organization and functioning of what is achieved in the classroom. According to Levin and Nolan's theoretical model (2000), CM aims at the conception of the conditions which are necessary to learning, but it also outlines strategies to intervene in inappropriate behavior in order to enhance discipline and facilitate CM. The management of behaviors is connected to the kind of authority exercised in the classroom by the teacher and it includes some specificities (Veiga, 2013). The impact of CM will directly fall on instructions and social interactions, which will have positive repercussions on the prevention of indiscipline and on the evolution of school learning (Amado & Freire, 2009; Santos, 2007). The importance of this study is owed to the increasing indiscipline revealed by students over the years, to the acknowledgement of a set of classroom management (CM) practices for educational success, to the shortage of research, and to some stagnation regarding teacher training, all witnessed in Portugal as far as this topic is concerned (Amado & Freire, 2009; Veiga 2013).

2. Methodology

A quantitative methodology was chosen as, through a rigorous collection of information, it enables data treatment and statistical analysis (Carmo & Ferreira, 2008), which makes it possible to analyze the research questions formulated (Tuckman, 2012). Hereafter follows the presentation of the research questions, the description of the sample and the presentation of the tools.

2.1 Research questions

The general aim of this study was to identify the characteristics of CM behaviors perceived by primary school teachers and to understand the connection between the classroom management parameters according to the administrative posts held by teachers at school. Such aims led us to raise the following research questions: «How are teachers distributed according to the indicators of “classroom management skills” (CMS), in terms of low and high skills?» and «How are teachers differentiated within the parameters of “classroom management skills” (CMS) according to the posts they hold at school?».

2.2 Subjects and procedures

The sample consisted of 181 primary school teachers of both genders (150 female and 31 male), performing their job in the district of Lisbon, teaching in the public and in the private sector, and aged between 23 and 58 years old. After conducting the survey – which included the tools specified below – a selection was made of the data found relevant to the issue under study. This data was then analyzed with the SPSS computer program.

2.3 Tools

The tools resulted from the application of the survey through questionnaire conceived within the research *Teacher Efficacy in Classroom Management and Discipline* by Emmer and Hickman (1991). The data was collected by using the tools: *Scale for measuring teacher efficacy in classroom management and discipline* by Emmer and Hickman (1991), translated and adapted to Portugal (Veiga, in press) as a questionnaire on CM; the *School Disruption Scale Inferred by Teachers* by Veiga (2006); and the collection of sociodemographic data with elements characterizing the teachers.

The questionnaire comprised 36 items corresponding to classroom management, distributed among three subscales: teachers' perception of the influences external to the classroom (PerInf), behavior management (BehMan) and teaching management (TeachMan).

As far as the *School Disruption Scale Inferred by Teachers* (SDSIT) is concerned, the respondents answered according to what happens in their lessons regarding their students' behavior. The SDSIT presents the following factors: distraction-transgression (DTI); aggression to classmates (ACI); aggression to school authority (AAI). Both scales present good coefficients of internal consistency and external validity.

Bearing in mind that the tests of differences enable the exploration of the existence of differences between independent groups, and considering the independent variable as the one which defines the groups under comparison, we considered in this differential analysis the values regarding the mean, standard deviation, t-student and significance of the data concerning the CM items according to the following variables: "posts held at school" – not holding a post (NHP) vs holding a post (HP).

3. Results

We will now present the results obtained considering the research questions of this study. With regard to **research question number 1 (Q1)**: «How are teachers distributed according to the indicators of "classroom management skills" (CMS), in terms of low and high skills?», we determined the percentage of teachers who, in each item of the scale, answered by disagreeing with the item (1 to 3) or agreeing (4

to 6), creating a subgroup of disagreement with the content of the item (D) in the first case, and a subgroup of agreement (A) in the other. For methodological reasons, the results obtained were therefore organized in two subgroups. In Table 1 column D, we can find the percentages of answers regarding disagreement with the content of the item, and in column C are the percentages of answers regarding agreement with the content of the item.

We now present the results concerning the distribution of teachers according to the indicators of “classroom management skills” (CMS) in terms of low and high skills and the relationship between the “classroom management skills” (CMS). As observed in Table 1, the general trend of the sample subjects’ answers was towards agreement, indicating that they perceive their CMS as high.

Table 1. Distribution of the indicators of “classroom management skills” (CMS), in terms of disagreement (D) vs agreement (A) with the content of the item, in an agreement (A) decreasing order.

Dimensions	CM items	D (%)	A (%)
BehMan	7. I can communicate to students that I am serious about getting appropriate behavior.	1.1	98.9
BehMan	5. I know what routines are needed to keep activities running efficiently.	3.9	96.1
TeachMan	8. If one of my students couldn't do an assignment, I would be able to accurately assess whether it was at the correct level of difficulty.	3.9	96.1
BehMan	28. If students stop working in class, I can usually find a way to get them back on track.	4.4	95.6
BehMan	9. I know what kinds of rewards to use to keep students involved.	4.4	95.6
BehMan	35. I am confident of my ability to begin the year so that students will learn to behave well.	6.1	93.9
TeachMan	13. I am usually able to adjust the level of difficulty of the assignment to the student.	6.6	93.4
BehMan	4. I find it easy to make my expectations clear to students.	6.6	93.4
PeInf	27. My work with students would be more effective if parents also valued what I do.	7.7	92.3
TeachMan	14. I consider myself to be a good teacher because of the way I teach.	8.3	91.7

TeachMan	22. When the grades of my students improve, it is usually because I found more effective teaching approaches.	8.8	91.2
TeachMan	29. If a student did not remember information I gave in a previous lesson, I would know how to increase his or her retention in the next lesson.	9.9	90.1
BehMan	11. There are very few students that I don't know how to handle.	11.6	88.4
PeInf	30. Home and peer influences are mainly responsible for student behavior in school.	11.6	88.4
PeInf	33. Even a teacher with good teaching abilities may not reach many students.	14.4	85.6
BehMan	2. If a student in my class becomes disruptive and noisy, I feel assured that I know some techniques to redirect him quickly.	18.2	81.8
PeInf	31. Teachers have little effect on stopping misbehavior when parents don't cooperate.	18.8	81.2
BehMan	18. When I really try, I can get through to most difficult students.	19.3	80.7
TeachMan	1. When a student does better than usual, many times it is because I exerted a little extra effort.	19.9	80.1
TeachMan	16. When a student gets a better grade than usual, it is probably because I found better ways of teaching that student.	20.4	79.6
BehMan	26. I can keep a few problem students from ruining an entire class.	20.4	79.6
TeachMan	32. The influences of a student's home experiences can be overcome by good teaching.	21.0	79.0
TeachMan	24. If a student masters a new concept quickly, this might be because I knew the necessary steps in teaching the concept.	23.2	76.8
PeInf	25. The amount that a student can learn is primarily related to family background.	28.7	71.3
PeInf	3. The hours in my class have little influence on students compared to the influence of their home environment.	29.3	70.7
PeInf	6. There are some students who won't behave, no matter what I do.	32.6	67.4
PeInf	20. A teacher is very limited in what can be achieved because a student's home environment is a large influence on achievement.	37.0	63.0
PeInf	10. If students aren't disciplined at home, they aren't likely to accept it at school.	38.1	61.9
PeInf	21. I find some students impossible to discipline effectively.	42.0	58.0
PeInf	15. Student behavior in classrooms is more influenced by peers than by the teacher.	49.7	50.3

BehMan	17. I don't always know how to keep track of several activities at once.	50.3	49.7
PeInf	34. Compared to other influences on student behavior, teacher's effects are very small.	56.9	43.1
BehMan	23. Sometimes I am not sure what rules are appropriate for my students.	70.7	29.3
PeInf	12. If a student doesn't feel like behaving, there's not a lot teachers can do about it.	73.5	26.5
BehMan	19. I am unsure how to respond to defiant students.	82.9	17.1

Legend: D = disagree; A = agree; PeInf = perception of influences; BehMan = behavior management skills; TeachMan = teaching management skills

According to the statements defining each one of the dimensions of the scale, the dimensions showing more expressive results are the behavior management and the teaching management ones, with a predominance of the behavioral dimension. With regard to behavior management, and considering the teachers who express high agreement with these items indicating CM skills, we highlight the high percentage of agreement with the specific skill of behavior management, showing figures ranging from 98.9% to 93.9%. In a decreasing order of expression, these percentages were observed in the following items: item 7 "I can communicate to students that I am serious about getting appropriate behavior" (98.9%); item 5 "I know what routines are needed to keep activities running efficiently" (96.1%); item 28 "If students stop working in class, I can usually find a way to get them back on track" (95.6%); item 9 "I know what kinds of rewards to use to keep students involved" (95.6%); and item 35 "I am confident of my ability to begin the year so that students will learn to behave well" (93.9%). The item that stands out with an intermediate level of agreement is item 26 "I can keep a few problem students from ruining an entire class" (79.6%). The item with the lowest level of agreement is item 17 "I don't always know how to keep track of several activities at once" (49.7%).

As far as the dimension teaching management is concerned, the items which stand out, in a decreasing order of expression, as having the highest levels of agreement are as follows: item 8 "If one of my students couldn't do an assignment, I would be able to accurately assess whether it was at the correct level of difficulty" (96.1%); item 13 "I am usually able to adjust the level of difficulty of the assignment to the student" (93.4%); item 14 "I consider myself to be a good teacher because of the way I teach" (91.7%); item 22 "When the grades of my students improve, it is usually because I

found more effective teaching approaches” (91.2%); and item 29 “If a student did not remember information I gave in a previous lesson, I would know how to increase his or her retention in the next lesson” (90.1%). With the lowest values in the teaching management dimension, two items stand out: item 32 “The influences of a student’s home experiences can be overcome by good teaching” (79.0%) and item 24 “If a student masters a new concept quickly, this might be because I knew the necessary steps in teaching the concept” (76.8%).

Considering the whole of the items, some items comprised in the dimension perception of the influences external to the classroom show to have the lowest levels of agreement, thus showing teachers’ low skills regarding the influence they have on their students’ behavior compared to family and external factors. Therefore, the results indicate that teachers have the perception that they possess low skills regarding the following items listed in a decreasing order of expression: item 10 “If students aren’t disciplined at home, they aren’t likely to accept it at school” (61.9%); item 21 “I find some students impossible to discipline effectively” (58.0%); item 15 “Student behavior in classrooms is more influenced by peers than by the teacher” (50.3%); item 34 “Compared to other influences on student behavior, teacher’s effects are very small” (43.1%); and item 12 “If a student doesn’t feel like behaving, there’s not a lot teachers can do about it” (73.5%). However, it is also relevant to highlight two items: item 32, according to which teachers consider that “The influences of a student’s home experiences can be overcome by good teaching” (70.9%) and item 27 “My work with students would be more effective if parents also valued what I do” (92.3%).

Hereafter we present the results regarding **research question number 2 (Q2)**: «How are teachers differentiated within the parameters of “classroom management skills” (CMS) according to the posts they hold at school?». In order to answer this research question, [“Q2: How are teachers differentiated within the parameters of “classroom management skills” (CMS) according to the posts they hold at school (not holding a post vs holding a post)?”], the first differential results under analysis correspond to the differences regarding the items of CM according to the administrative posts teachers hold at school (not holding a post vs holding a post). After conducting a t-test, we obtained the results presented in Table 2. From the values in Table 2, we conclude that the differences in the CM items according to the posts held at school are, for the most part, not significant. No significant differences were found

regarding the perception of influences and teaching management. With regard to the perception of influences and although this cannot be considered for the purpose of statistical significance, it is pertinent to mention that it borders the threshold value, with a higher mean of teachers holding a post. The dimension regarding behavior management appears to be an exception by showing statistical significance ($p < 0.01$). These results suggest that the teachers holding administrative posts at school possess more behavior management skills.

Table 2. Differences in the dimensions of classroom management (CM) according to the posts teachers hold at school (Posts) – not holding a post (NHP) vs holding a post (HP).

Dimensions	Posts	N	Mean	DP	t	Sig.
Perception of influences (PeInf)	NHP	140	41.4214	7.56085	-1.842	.067ns
	HP	41	43.9756	8.60665		
Behavior management (BehMan)	NHP	140	57.2429	6.01182	-2.828	.005**
	HP	41	60.4390	7.46341		
Teaching management (TeachMan)	NHP	140	39.8214	4.50143	-.456	.649ns
	HP	41	40.1951	4.98106		
Total teaching management skills (tmsTOT)	NHP	140	138.4857	12.11069	-2.722	.007**
	HP	41	144.6098	14.44105		

Legend: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$; ns = not significant

4. Conclusions

In the light of the results presented, it is possible to observe that teachers perceive themselves as having high CM skills, among which behavior management and teaching management skills stand out, with a predominance of the behavioral dimension. With regard to the perception of influences external to the classroom and as far as behavior is concerned, the results show that this is the dimension comprising the lowest levels of agreement, which indicates teachers' low skills regarding the influence they have on their students' behavior comparatively to external factors such as family and schoolmates.

As far as research question number 2 is concerned [“Q2: How are teachers differentiated within the parameters of “classroom management skills” (CMS)

according to the posts they hold at school (not holding a post vs holding a post)?”], we intended to verify whether there were any significant differences in CM according to the administrative posts teachers hold at school (not holding a post vs holding a post). The differences found were, for the most part, not significant, as there is an absence of significant differences regarding the perception of influences and teaching management. These results suggest interpretations which may be justified by the fact that teachers have acquired a set of basic management concepts and skills which alone provide some preparation for the effective management of the classroom (Arends, 1995), and also a set of psychoeducational skills which may facilitate the effectiveness of teaching and learning (Veiga, 2013). These results may be supported and reinforced by several national and international studies which highlight the effectiveness of CM associated with particular psychoeducational models of intervention in the involvement of students in school (Akar and Jildirim, 2009; Freiberg, Chris and Templeton, 2009; Kaya and Donmez, 2009; Kayikci, 2009; Poon, Tan, and Tan, 2009; Sterling, 2009; Veiga, 2007; Veiga et al., 2009). These results may also be explained by the fact that CM is related to actions developed by teachers in order to create the appropriate conditions to teaching and learning (Arends, 1995) and because all teachers inevitably have to develop CM actions which represent core elements of the teaching action itself (Santos, 2007). It is worth adding that the absence of significant differences in CM according to the perception of influences and teaching management may also be owed to the fact that the existing scientific research on this issue is more directed towards the description and prevention of events rather than towards intervention with experimentally observed effectiveness (Veiga, 2007; Woolfolk, 2011). This may, on the one hand, suggest that teachers possess management skills regardless of the posts they hold, since effective teachers also deal with behavior problems through preventive management (Arends, 1995). On the other hand, considering the lack of studies with experimentally observed effectiveness, it may suggest that this is the perception that teachers have of their own CM, although different results might be obtained if the research was conducted through direct observation by the researcher.

With regard to behavior management, we found that there was statistical significance, thus inferring that teachers holding posts at school possess more behavior management skills. The lack of studies which specifically approach the relationship between CM and teachers who hold administrative posts hinders

possible interpretations. However, it is yet possible to contextualize the results obtained by invoking that the methodology of action may be based on organizational models since CM is defined as an organizational method through which teachers aim to perform several tasks associated with several variables such as the capacity to exercise authority and responsibility. Since teachers holding administrative posts at school have to manage their own group of co-working teachers, we can also infer that these results derive from the way teachers manage groups, as such management shows to be more effective than when teachers control and discipline students individually (Kounin, 1970). Another key-element that research has ascertained is that in contexts of groups or people interaction, potential problems may be prevented through a previous planning of rules and procedures, and rules and procedures are certainly required in the classroom to coordinate important activities (Arends, 1995). Another element worth referring to is the fact that teaching in primary school follows a solo-teaching regime. Since the pedagogical rapport between teacher and student is paramount in this regime, this may reflect on the issue of appropriate behaviors (Estrela, 1986). This element may be reinforced by the research conducted by Amado (1998), where a connection was found between the frequency of indiscipline behaviors and pedagogical rapport. We can infer that an investment may be made in the relational dimension since indiscipline behaviors can be avoided or reduced through creating and maintaining the affective atmosphere of the group (Carita & Fernandes, 1997). This can be corroborated by observing the results obtained in the present study regarding teachers' perception as far as rapport with students is concerned, since the description of the sample confirms that according to the rapport they establish with their students, most teachers perceive themselves as having an understanding style. One of the things that might justify this type of rapport with students is the level of satisfaction teachers have in their job, since 51.7% claim it to be high, 45% say it is average and only 3.3% consider it low. Finally, it must be said that the interpretation of the values found in this study is close to conclusions drawn from other research studies, since an effective behavior management in the classroom requires a leadership dimension associated with each teacher's personal style. Also, since there is a high correlation between the teacher's confidence and effective classroom management (Arends, 1995), the success of such leadership depends on the degree of confidence the person shows to have as well as on the intensity with which they are able to exercise interpersonal influence.

We hope that this study may foster the creation of continuous training sessions for teachers, in order to help them acquire the skills which will enable them to build positive learning environments (Jones & Jones, 2006). Also, we hope that the results obtained from this study may be used so that teachers feel motivated towards becoming assertive and competent in the management of their classrooms, capable of intervening in their students' development, in the management of indiscipline and in the development of their own personal and professional fulfilment. With regard to future implications of this study for educational practice, we aspire to the creation of a specific CM course unit within the higher education degrees of initial teacher training.

Note:

This paper is based on a study conducted for the completion of a Master's Degree in Education – Area of Expertise in Personal and Social Training – by the first author, whose dissertation was presented at the Institute of Education of the University of Lisbon in 2015, under the title: Classroom management: Teachers' skills and differentiation according to posts held at school – A research study with primary school teachers, under the second author's supervision.

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