'It's not about punitive' : Exploring how early-career teachers in high-poverty schools respond to critical incidents

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Abstract

This article explores how early career teachers working in high poverty schools in Australia account for their decision-making during critical classroom incidents. Classroom management solutions are problematized by investigating how two teachers take up particular positions, make decisions, and enact what they believe to be 'quality teaching' in context. Through a combination of interviews and observations of teachers 'in situ', we examine what these teachers do, why they do it, what informs their decisions, and how they reflect on their actions. The complexity of teachers' work in schools located in high poverty areas is highlighted. We argue that both early career teachers prefer to position themselves within 'pastoral', in contrast to 'disciplinarian', discourses, as part of constituting the school as a site of possibility and teachers who advocate for youth growing up in poverty.

Keywords

Introduction

Teachers regularly make what at first glance appear to be *instinctive* decisions, especially in response to critical incidents. While Tripp (1993) describes these as "commonplace events that occur in the everyday life of a classroom" (p. 24), for many teachers they refer to 'low-level frequent disruptions' (UK Department for Education, 2012, p. 36). The idea that teachers often act on instinct is pervasive and teachers themselves often believe this

to be the case (Moore Johnson et al., 2014). However, such apparently instinctive responses are not neutral, and do not come out of a void. Teachers may be better understood as enacting 'disciplined improvisation because [the choices they make] always occur within broad structures and frameworks' (Sawyer, 2004, p. 13).

Early career teachers, generally defined as in their first three to five years of teaching, experience stresses and burnout known to be unique to their novice status (Johnson et. al, 2015), draw on a range of skills, knowledge, and attributes to inform their decisions (Cochran-Smith et al., 2012; Stronge, 2007) and are also influenced by seven key factors:

- what they learned most recently in their teacher education courses

- the pressures put on them by schools, policy, and pedagogical frameworks

- their sense of themselves as caring, 'good' people (Kaur, 2012)

- others' expectations of them to be 'quality teachers'

- transmitted knowledge, gained, for instance, in the staff room

- their personal histories (Tripp, 1994), and

- whether they see themselves as 'compliant' or 'non-compliant' [non-compliant teachers often consciously teach 'against the grain' (Cochran-Smith et. al, 2012) as a way to make a difference in their students' lives].

Amongst other things, early career teachers are constantly responding, consciously and unconsciously, to a myriad of 'confusing and contradictory demands' (Beckett, 2014, p. 789). Consequently, their decisions are also based on regularly fluctuating demands of such things as school leadership and national and school-based policies.

This is the 'practical-pedagogical work' (Beckett, 2014) that results in teachers attending to some things, such as developing relationships with students and families,

over others, such as managing behaviour, as they reflect both on themselves and the contexts in which they teach (Zeichner & Liston, 2014). While it does not always overtly play itself out in practice, the two early career teachers, whose practices are discussed in this paper, orient themselves towards, or are disposed towards, social justice, believing that quality education involves providing empowering opportunities for their students. Following Kumashiro (2012), we do not hold these teachers up as having the answers; however, as one of the many things that influence their practice, both teachers were part of a special Initial Teacher Education program[1]. This program emphasised critical reflection as a key component in preparing them for work in high poverty schools. While reflection is a required element of all Initial Teacher Education programs, participants in this program are asked to reflect on specific social justice theory as it relates to their Professional Experience placements (i.e. to examine their own practice through the lens of Bourdieu or Nancy Fraser). They keep reflective journals, participate in online discussions, and have regular one-on-one de-briefings where they unpack their experiences in high poverty schools. Each of these opportunities for reflecting are understood as challenges, not merely to improve practice, but to revisit beliefs, attitudes and theory that might impact on young people who experience socio-economic disadvantage. In these reflective sessions taken-for-granted beliefs (for instance, assumptions about some families not caring about their children's education) are questioned. We mention their specific teacher preparation because we argue that a reflective teacher recognises the source of their beliefs, which is an important first step in changing what might prove to be harmful or non-productive ways of thinking.

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[1] The NETDS program has been preparing pre-service teachers since 2009 and is now offered in seven Initial Teacher Education programs across Australia.

This article focuses on case studies of two early career teachers, both of whom work in high poverty schools, a context in which 'behaviour' is often assumed to be a problem. These two teachers are selected because their teaching contexts have key similarities and differences. Both teachers work with high school students, one in a large urban school, and the other, in a small rural school. At the time of the interviews, they were each in their third year of teaching. As in all schools the teachers' work is neither merely technical nor purely instinctive. It is much more complex, making it important and timely to capture and render detailed individual accounts of what teachers say they want to do, what they actually do and how they reflect on their actions.

Background

These case studies are part of a larger research project[2] that draws on aspects of Smyth's (2006) multi-sited ethnography. The project traces how quality teaching discourses are enacted in the everyday practices of a group of early career teachers in high poverty schools in Australia. Social exclusion, in Australia is measured by 'relative' rather than 'absolute' poverty with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, Pacifika families and refugees being amongst those at most risk of long-term, persistent and chronic disadvantage. While many Australians imagine poverty to exist almost exclusively in remote locations, in reality an estimated 13.3% of all Australians are living below the internationally accepted poverty line (ACOSS, 2016). Participating schools in this research project were defined by their publically available score on an Index of

Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA)[3]. While this scale is somewhat contentious, it is clear that the two schools discussed in this paper are located of some of the most disadvantaged communities in the country.

The aim of the project is to better understand how these early career teachers are striving to make a positive difference in these schools. To uncover this, we investigated what teachers *do* in their classrooms, mapping our observations of practice against what they have reported in earlier interviews as their understandings of *quality* teaching. The research employs qualitative ethnographic case-study methods including interviews, classroom observations, and analysis of classroom artefacts, texts, and school-based policies.

Phase 1

We began the project by interviewing four groups of stakeholders (teacher educators, departmental staff, principals, and teachers) about quality teaching in general. We engaged the stakeholders in 'purposeful conversations' (Burgess, 1988) to explore their understanding of quality teaching. This phase included interviews with 43 participants, including teacher educators (n=7), education department staff (n= 7), principals (n=12), and early career teachers (n=17), to gain an overall picture of how they understood quality teaching. During these interviews, predictable themes, such as classroom management, were reiterated and seen as a key aspect of quality teaching specific to high poverty schools. Participants frequently stated mantra-like beliefs about the importance of maintaining high expectations in the face of continual behavioural challenges.

Phase 2

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[3] The ICSEA scale allows for 'fair and reasonable' comparisons among schools with similar/like students.

In this phase, we observed 17 early career teachers at work (teaching and engaging in other school activities). All early career teachers interviewed in Phase 1were work-shadowed over a two-day period to get a sense of the ways in which they attempted to enact their understandings of quality pedagogy. We sought to document and record micro-level details of how classroom discourses and pedagogies related to key themes emerging from the interviews. We then invited these early career teachers to identify key events and practices they believed made a positive difference to their classrooms.

Phase 3

This was the debriefing stage, which took place at the end of the second day of the observations. We recorded reflexive interviews with the 17 teachers, reviewed selected segments of lessons with them, and invited them to interpret aspects of their own teaching.

Case studies

Although broader data were collected across the three phases, here we narrow the focus to two early career teachers, Sally and Carol. Both teachers had graduated from an Australian nationally recognised teacher education program and, significantly, through participating in this program they were provided with reflective tools for *reading* their own practice.

Through these case studies, which allowed us to investigate the phenomenon of quality teaching within a real-life context (Yin, 2002), we have combined and analysed three groups of rich data: the teachers' initial perceptions of quality teaching and quality classroom management, our observations of their actions, and their reflections on their practices and, in particular, the choices they made during the observed critical incidents.

We explore how the two early career teachers in low SES classrooms responded to critical incidents. Drawing on the initial interviews, our classroom observations, and the two teachers' critical reflections, we attempt to gain a deeper understanding of how these early career teachers, both in high poverty settings, make what at first appear to be *instinctive* decisions when confronted with students who dominate their time, demand their focus (for a range of reasons), or require special attention. We explore their perspectives, narratives, decision-making and the language they use to tell their stories and describe their teaching. As Comber (2016, p.413) reminds us: 'Critical incidents between students and teachers, uncovered in research, still need to be told, not to make teachers the objects of blame, but to understand how interactive trouble is produced in situ.' In order to make a positive difference in low-SES school communities we need to understand what gets in the way of student learning and teachers teaching.

Before examining the case studies, we briefly discuss classroom management and its common conflation with the management of behaviour in low SES schools.

Classroom management

Classroom management is constituted and practised in particular ways within low SES schools. While classroom management strategies may include preventative measures to minimize disruptive behaviour, 'disciplining behaviour' often becomes the central focus in these schools. Thus, the conflation between 'classroom management' and 'behaviour management' is especially common. According to Gregory, Skiba and Noguera (2010), in the US, students from low SES communities are subject to a 'differential and disproportionate rate of school disciplinary sanctions, ranging from office disciplinary referrals to corporal punishment, suspension and expulsion' (p. 59). They also note the

racialized and disproportionate suspension and expulsion of students of colour (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010, p. 59). Quin and Hemphill (2012, p. 5) report that the same is true in Australia:

> in 2010, 12,273 students received a long suspension with approximately 28% of these students receiving a second long suspension. In addition, the majority of suspensions and long suspensions were given to students in Years 7 to 10. Further to this, 21% of these long suspensions were to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

In fact, many studies demonstrate that 'students from low SES backgrounds and ethnic minorities are often placed within classrooms and schools that are defined by low expectations, simplified or impoverished curricula, and a focus on classroom management rather than challenging learning' (Fenwick & Cooper, 2012, p. 351). Indeed, some social justice scholars question why students from poor backgrounds need to be 'managed' (Kumashiro, 2012) and 'from where does the need to *manage* students arise?' (Casey, Lozenski, & McManimon, 2013, p. 37). At its most extreme in schools serving poor students, classroom management (or, again conflated, behaviour management), has come to be synonymous with teaching (Casey et al., 2013).

It appears that the prevalence of focus on discipline in low SES schools is at least in part due to a *culture of poverty* discourse which assumes that poor people do not know how, cannot, or refuse, to behave *well*. Bullen and Kenway refer to the 'pernicious implications of the underclass thesis' (2005, p. 1) that has entered the popular imaginary. That is, the popular 'culture of poverty' myth that encourages the social 'main-stream' to view 'underclass' culture as dysfunctional (Bullen & Kenway, 2005, p. 51). Ruby

Payne's Poverty Framework, which has become popular as a source of professional development for teachers in both the US and Australia, has been criticised because of her 'common sense assumptions of the poor as promiscuous, young, welfare queens, and gangbanging, gun-toting drug dealers' (Redeaux, 2011, p. 96). This culture of poverty discourse is also visible in Australian Minister for Education, Simon Birmingham's funding of *Teach for Australia* as a way to train *tough* teachers who can teach Australia's 'most unruly students' (Viellaris, 2016). Such calls for tough teachers need to be examined because they are based on the highly troubling assumption that students' home lives are void of caring or relationships.

According to the caring discourse, students are poorly behaved due to their assumed needs for counselling or care, which teachers must provide in lieu of the students' own family. The characterisation of students as *unruly* or desperate for relationships with their teachers also needs interrogation.

The teachers we interviewed all expressed the strong desire to refrain from stereotyping (and a deep belief in their students' academic potential, and futures). However, they also recognised the lived effects of poverty on their students' lives, including poor health, poor housing, low literacy, and family stress. Ullucci and Howard (2015) refer to this as a 'philosophical bind' (p. 173). In many ways, teachers are constantly making choices between high expectations (as demonstrated by their students' academic outcomes) and what they perceive as their roles as proxy counsellors and stand-in parents.

Skills in classroom management focused on discipline are regularly included in the discourses of quality teaching. In the OECD (2012) report *Equity and quality in*

education: Supporting disadvantaged students and schools, we find the following statement:

> In OECD countries, 25% of 15-year-old students do not value success at school (OECD, 2011). Evidence indicates that students direct their attention away from learning when they experience negative emotions. Additional behaviours such as drug or alcohol abuse and juvenile delinquency are also associated with lower performance. (p. 21)

In addition, one report from the UK recounted that up to 25% of teachers in OECD countries estimated that they lost at least 30% of their lesson time to disruption, and 13% to maintaining order; much higher levels were estimated by the teachers in disadvantaged schools (Department for Education, 2012, p. 36).

In the Queensland College of Teachers Professional Standards (Queensland College of Teachers, 2011), classroom management is referred to under *Standard 4: Create and Maintain Supportive and Safe Learning Environments*. However, in the policy and resources that refer directly to quality or effective teaching in low SES, disadvantaged or high poverty schools, references to behaviour are much more explicit. There is an abundance of advice available to teachers on classroom management in general, but there is, predictably, much more focus instead on 'behaviour' management strategies for teachers who work in low SES schools. By focusing our discussion on classroom management rather than behaviour management, we shift the focus from the disciplinary measures taken by our participating teachers to an exploration of their overarching classroom management, in which they often chose to ignore 'bad behaviour' for larger classroom management purposes.

Quality teaching in high poverty schools: Talking about classroom management

In our Phase 1 interviews with education department staff, principals, and teachers, repeated statements were made concerning classroom management as either a factor of quality teaching or something that obstructs the ability of teachers to teach as they would like to in low SES schools. Our first question to the interviewees was: How do you understand quality teaching? In response, nearly half of the interviewees directly mentioned classroom management (or, what they sometimes conflated, with behaviour management).

Overall, the themes identified from comments made by all three groups were similar. Some example comments include:

Education department staff

I'm not sure how to say it politically correctly – but there is a lot more of that readily available emotion in the lower socio-economic schools.

My experience is [that] a lot of the parents I've worked with are lovely people [but] their first reaction is aggression.

Obviously, [bad behaviour] gets in the way of quality teaching. It can be an extra layer for teachers to manage.

Principals

You not only have to teach the content here – you have to teach behaviour.

You can't be slack here.

She's spending more time dealing with those behaviours than she is delivering the curriculum.

You know, suspension's not working enough and I'm not allowed to hit him, which I don't believe in anyway. So what do we do?

Teachers

It's not about punitive, it's more about recognising the positive…we don't react.

Our behaviour management is an educational process as much as a punitive one.

If they're not doing the right thing, it feeds through the rest of the class.

When you look on it at the surface you see, 'oh yeah, they're just being naughty', but usually, there's an underlying reason that's much deeper.

Behaviour management comes into it a lot…even if it's coming from food or lack of sleep; they're not learning if they're not ready.

It was very overwhelming starting at the beginning of the year; [there's] lots of things to do and learn when you're balancing challenging classroom behaviours.

You have to balance whether that behaviour is upsetting the other students or whether you can just ignore it and keep on teaching.

Noting, as previously, the conflation of classroom management with behaviour management, we see common positions taken by all three groups in that they all expressed their beliefs that disruptive behaviour is caused by underlying reasons (including implied parenting deficits) and factors they related to poverty (lack of sleep,

lack of food). However, the respondents varied in the ways in which they expressed their views. The education department staff deployed euphemism, perhaps as one mentions, in the desire to avoid being politically incorrect. For example, they speak of 'readily available emotion', 'lovely people' who resort to aggression, and an unspecified 'extra layer for teachers to manage'. In contrast, the school principals were more straightforward in their references to inappropriate behaviour and insisted on the importance of prioritising both behaviour and the curriculum. The teachers, on the other hand, made it clear that the judgements involved related to ethical decision-making regarding the rights of all the students. While 'challenging behaviour' is seen as a barrier to learning, the teachers reported striving to avoid being punitive and working towards 'a balance'. The teachers prioritise three key actions:

- understanding the lives of their students,

- developing relationships to build rapport and trust as a way of equalising power,

- transforming rigid institutionalised social arrangements that misrepresent marginalised students (Keddie, 2012, p. 266).

We now turn to two case studies, about Sally and Carol[4], to examine how early career teachers talk about and enact their decisions during critical moments. We postpone our interpretations of the interview and observational data until after each is presented in order to avoid pre-empting readers' own responses. As teacher-educators we are also aware of the rush to evaluate, jumping to judgment and/or to provide advice to early career teachers.

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[4] Both pseudonyms

Case 1: Sally and her 'high behaviour' class

Sally (White, female, mid-20s) has been teaching in a poor rural community for three years, and was quickly promoted from English teacher to Head of Department, making her one of the more senior members of the school. The school is predominantly White, though 22% of children are Indigenous. While only an hour away from the nearest regional centre, the town is unusually isolated, with many children living on what are referred to locally as 'blocks' which describes houses on small allotments of land outside of town without services such as electricity or running water.

In this first case study, we explore three different occasions when we had the opportunity to explore Sally's thoughts and classroom practices, focusing on aspects related to what she called, at one point, 'high behaviour'. We include excerpts of Sally Phase 1 interview, our field notes from the work-shadowing days, and Sally's Phase 3 interview. We hope by providing some of the rich data from these three sources, we can present a fuller picture of Sally's responses to critical incidents in her classroom, her repertoire of practices, and to the specific classes we observed.

Phase 1: interview

Sally's Phase 1 interview occurred several months prior to the work-shadowing days. In this interview, she spoke, in general terms, about her perceptions of quality teaching, and she attended to the topic of classroom management as one aspect of the work of a *quality teacher*.

> I think the most important part of being a quality teacher is **knowing the students and caring about the students**. Students will respond better to teachers that they get along with and they'll respect you more **if you have a good relationship with**

them. If you don't have a good relationship with them, you aren't getting anywhere with them at all, so I think that's really important.

…

I think it's difficult when you come in and you have **kids who are doing the wrong thing and they don't respond as quickly to you. And it's easy to not want anything to do with them. If you do that, then you lose them and you can't get them back.** You have to make even more of an effort to build up a relationship with kids who try [to] make it difficult for you to have that relationship.

Phase 2: field notes during work-shadowing

The following excerpt comes from the observation field notes taken while work-shadowing Sally's teaching over two days.

> The teacher's aide takes some of the disruptive kids out of the class. Three remain (two boys, one girl).

> 'Miss, are we going to watch Pitch Perfect Two?'

> Sally (teacher) laughs and says: 'Ali[5], you haven't started your assignment yet.'

> 'I have too,' Ali laughs. Ali rifles through her notes, screeches: 'It's not in my book.'

> Sally tries to help and offers to print out the assignment again – she speaks to the disruptive kids with respect – she answers both their sensible and silly questions.

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[5] Names of both teachers and students have been changed

At one point, Ali shouts out: 'You bitch! Miss, you lied, you didn't print it.'

Lots of swearing out on verandah as Ali goes to see if anything has come off the printer in another room.

Rap on door again, a sullen girl who had stormed out earlier comes back in. She sits down and looks at her phone.

One boy ('Wildcat') asks: 'Why don't you just punch them out, Miss?'

Sally replies: 'Then I wouldn't have a job, and hitting is wrong. You always ask fascinating questions, but they have nothing to do with what we are talking about in class.'

…

The classroom phone rings, Wildcat answers, puts his feet up on the desk like an executive: 'Yah, I suppose that'll be alright.'

Sally says: 'Where are you going?'

'To take [two students] to the office.'

…

At various points, as soon as Sally looks in another direction, Larry puts his hand way up the skirt of the girl beside him (his girlfriend?) – she half-heartedly flicks his hand away, but Larry's hand remains under her skirt pretty much through the

whole class. Simultaneously, Larry is looking at cars and trucks on his laptop and Wildcat is scrolling through ads for movies.

Phase 3: reflexive interview (debrief with Sally)

What follows below are some of the comments made by Sally in a reflexive interview conducted directly after the classroom teaching observation.

I guess that, well, for me, it's about **trying to minimise the disruptions for students who want to be there and who are happy to stay in the room.** So, if, the two boys with the maths class, they came in and left and they weren't disrupting…

…

Yeah, the rest of the class. So, I dealt with that at lunchtime rather than worry about it then because I had 15 other kids in the class who were all working pretty much individually on their assignments and, you know, they needed a lot of my time. **But I didn't want to give time to students who obviously didn't want to be there, or not that time anyway, because that's not fair to the kids who are trying to do the right thing**.

…

I think **that I am accomplishing quality teaching when my students are happy to come to my classes.** We've got some students here who just won't go to some of their classes because they're not getting along with their teacher. So, they're not learning anything. If I've got students who are happy to be in my class and they do have – [For example, there are] some students in particular that I know most of the other teachers are really struggling with, but they ask me every day: 'Do we

have you today?' Then when they come to class, they're happy to do the work and learn.

…

I think because I've been here a little bit longer and had **more time to build relationships with them, that that's making it easier for the kids to learn**. And that's the important thing about teaching…if they're learning something. That's what we're really here for, isn't it?

Discussion: trying to do the right thing

In the two interviews (prior to and after the classroom observation), we listened to Sally express her views on student behaviour, why she usually responds as she does, and why she responded in the particular ways she did during the lesson we observed. When the interview data is juxtaposed against the notes from the observed class, consistencies, and contradictions emerge that highlight both her strong teaching philosophy (caring, engaging students, creating a positive classroom climate) and the daily decisions she makes in light of the pressures on her to perform as a certain kind of well-liked teacher. It is clear from the data that Sally constantly weighs up her desire to build relationships with her *hardest students* against disadvantaging her *easier*, more compliant ones. She said that that coming down too hard on her misbehaving students would drive them away, which would be counter-productive. And yet, especially in her final interview, she demonstrated that she was cognisant that the time she spent building these relationships was time taken away from the compliant and less demanding students. Similar to Bullen and Kenway's (2008) observations of teachers in London, Sally's approach involved

'constant, arguably disproportionate affirmation and reward of…particular boys whenever they were not evidently misbehaving' (p. 166). From an observer standpoint, and as teacher educators, it may appear that Sally was letting a great deal of 'high behaviour' go unremarked. However from Sally's viewpoint, the few minutes she got some 'real' teaching in (i.e. one-on-one Maths content) were worth ignoring the constant disruptions with inappropriate behaviour

Sally's actions (or inaction) are intended to reduce inequality in the larger sense, rather than just making the problem go away. What looked at first glance like Sally being oblivious or side-tracked, or like students being out of control, appears to be part of a more deliberate set of decisions to pick her battles. Building relationships *trumped* continual in-class discipline. As Sally said: 'You could see how that affects them a lot more…'. 'You have kids who are doing the wrong thing and they don't respond as quickly to you. And it's easy to not want anything to do with them.'

A recurring theme of our analysis is the question of if it is possible to read Sally's actions in ignoring interruptions and disruptive behaviour as a conscious decision on her behalf to teach for social justice? What if creating a safe space for Wildcat and his friends demonstrated not inexperience or lack of control on Sally's part, but a robust, flexible teaching style that keeps students 'in' rather than shutting them 'out'. Sally's decisions can be alternatively read as based on an understanding of the micro-politics of her classroom (an understanding that, if pushed too far, some may never return to class) and a fine balancing of power relationships (being fair to everyone, while not losing anyone in the process).

Like the other teachers we observed, Sally expressed a strong desire to build relationships with her students. Often this includes making time – inside and outside of class – to listen to students, encouraging them to talk to her, something that can be interpreted as 'according a voice to marginalized groups' (Keddie, 2012, p. 269). This belief that all students, and maybe even especially those who are disruptive, should be heard, is central to her teaching philosophy and has a large impact on her pedagogic practices, including her disciplinary methods.

The shift from, on one hand, the deficit, stereotyped idea that low SES students need strict discipline (the dubious 'no excuses' schools criticised by Golann, 2015), to, on the other hand, the idea that relationship comes first, represents a more radical position than it initially appears. Casey et al. (2013) found that many pre-service teachers 'especially those looking to teach in low-income, urban schools with ethnically diverse populations, feel as though they must control unwieldy students before they can teach their lesson' (p. 50). But Sally tells a different story: not that teachers must control students before they attempt to teach, but that they must connect with them. Sally is more like the teachers Casey et al. (2013) identify as oriented towards social justice: teachers who

> …of course, at times…interrupt important conversations to shift the class or the discussion…ask [students] to arrive and stay for certain amounts of time, and so on. But these practices are not part of managing them, as if they are merely pawns to be pushed and moved in certain ways, but rather pedagogical efforts to better understand [students'] reality and society in the struggle to transform it. (p. 54)

Thus, Sally's decisions, including how she enacts her classroom management practices, evolve from conscious decisions developed over time and from a range of sources as she develops her teaching philosophy. To an external observer, her classroom seemed well-meaning and casual, with a warm environment, but also somewhat random and chaotic. However, viewed alongside her post-teaching interviews, Sally's decision-making is not random at all, but carefully, though not always consistently, reflected through her own understanding of teaching in a complex school.

Case 2: Carol and her 'overwhelmed', 'aggressive' class

Carol is a White teacher in her late 20s who teaches Mathematics and English in a large urban government or state high school near Brisbane, Australia. Approximately sixty percent of families in the school are located bottom quarter on the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) scale of relative disadvantage. Interestingly this is the very high school Carol attended as a student.

In the second case study, we draw on the same three data sets as with Sally: the earlier interview with a focus on quality teaching, our classroom observations during work-shadowing, and the subsequent reflexive debriefing. Again, we postpone our interpretations till after presenting key excerpts from the data.

Phase 1: interview

This interview occurred several months prior to us visiting the school for the work shadowing component of data collection. As with all interviews Phase 1 interviews, the focus of discussion centred on Carol's understanding and perceptions of quality teaching.

Even though their behaviour can be a bit of an issue – and for some students, it's a massive problem and **we have support systems to deal with that.** But again, it all comes back to that idea that sometimes the barrier or the reason for the behaviour can be **because of a lack of relationship between teacher and student. If there's no relationship there, and you tell the student to be quiet and they don't like you, they're not going to be quiet**. Why should I? I don't respect you. [For] **this group of students in our school, respect is something that you have to earn. It's not something that is given freely.**

Phase 2: field notes during work-shadowing

The following excerpts comes from our observation notes both inside Carol's classes and also during our time in the school. These observations occurred over a 2-day period.

As I am walking with Carol to her class, she sees a girl who is very upset and appears to be packing up her bag in the racks outside the class. There are no other students around because they have gone to their class. Carol asks the girl why she is upset (looks like she has been crying). Girl says that one of the other girls posted something on social media about her liking a boy in her class. She says the whole class saw it and are teasing her. She's upset because it's not true – she says she doesn't even like boys and has a girlfriend. Carol asks her what she is doing and where she is going: turns out that she is going to the office to have some time out.

Carol then tells me that she took on a mentoring role recently at the school, so she has a couple of high profile student[s] to mentor on a pastoral level. She volunteered for this role and received a little bit of training.

Later, during a break, I head down to my car that is parked in front of the school to get something and two boys are walking towards the gate in the same direction.

A full-time White female liaison police officer suddenly appears and yells out at the boys: 'Hey, where are you going?'

The boys turn around and head back in.

The police officer turns to me and smiles. 'They hate it when they get caught.' She laughs.

…

John at the front [of the class] shouts out 'GO FUCK YOURSELF' to another student…

Carol simply says: 'John, would you mind not saying 'go F yourself' in this room?'…[and] continues without engaging or disciplining the student.

Lesson continues with Carol driving the conversation.

Same boy at the front once again shouts out 'FUCK YOU' and the class instinctively and collectively says 'Wooooooooh!'

…

Phase 3: reflexive interview (debrief with Carol)

The following excerpts are taken from the reflexive debriefing interview with Carol which occurred at the end of the second day of work-shadowing.

All of them have their moments, but in the end, **they're all good people that just need to be guided in right direction.**

…

He's [John's] got a lot of intelligence there and he's got a lot of capacity to do very well. But he struggles with the anger management side of things. One incident – it was last term, actually, towards block exams. I went around the corner to try and ask him to do something.

I said to him: 'Oh, by the way, the Maths Head of Department is here to see you because you didn't go to your exam yesterday.' I went: 'Oh, can you have a chat to him?'

He goes: 'Oh, what?' He punched the wall right next to my – in front of my face, and really got angry at it. It only took a split second and he'd already gone for it.

I was like: 'No, just calm down. Everything is fine.'

They're like: 'Oh man, just calm down.'

Then he'll be like: 'Shut up!' And he'll start again.

But it's more about just trying to keep him calm. Because some of the other boys, they don't tend to bounce off him, but he can rub a few up the wrong way. He is probably one of the most **capable** kids in that room…

There was a student who didn't make it into the room today, who I had to talk to outside, who has been away for just about the whole year so far. But he's still on the roll. He said he's feeling overwhelmed by it all. He is on a lot of medication and things at home for social issues and anxiety issues and for − he crushed his hand, so he had − he's on pain medication.

He said: 'I'm on 18 different pills, feeling overwhelmed right now. Can you write me a note to go to the office because I am just feeling like I can't go in the room?'

So, I had to send him out.

Discussion

In a similar fashion to Sally, there are multiple ways of reading Carol's decision-making during critical incidents. Zeichner and Liston (2014, p. 27) write of how teachers' beliefs and understandings (e.g. world-views or standpoint) inform their actual or likely practices (e.g. how a teacher's interpretation of students' outbursts can either be seen as an example of exuberance or an instance of inability to control themselves). In general, however, the vast majority of early career teachers who participated in this study, none of whom had been teaching for more than 5 years, saw outbursts as a symptom of something going on outside of the classroom.

Carol articulates a range of beliefs about her students in both her discussions of, and reactions to, disrupting behaviours. At times, she sees behaviour as 'cries for relationship', and her students in need of both counselling and civic guidance. Overall, she sees it as her role to calm things down (recognising that behaviour could escalate into something more dangerous and physical: a 'nightmare') while she earns their respect in order to prove to them that they are worthy of respect themselves. Carol, who went to the same low SES school as a high school student, sees herself somewhat in the role of the wise elder, and she is proud to have been officially appointed a school-based mentor, despite only being in her early 20s. In her interviews, Carol repeated some of the views we previously heard from Sally: in particular, the idea that it is almost impossible to teach anything at all until a relationship is built up between teacher and student. Both Sally's and Carol's decision-making challenge the traditional advice that teachers should be as strict as possible in the first few weeks of school to establish authority. Generally, the teachers we spoke to held the implicit belief that a teacher–student relationship, if strong enough, in part takes care of the undesirable behaviour. Like Kumashiro (2009), who examines the normalised notion that one cannot teach unless students are behaving in particular ways, the teachers who participated in this study questioned the idea of discipline and rule establishment before learning can occur; instead, they appeared to teach content whenever they could, while putting the building of positive relationships at the centre of their actions.

In Carol's case, we could see some 'slippage' between the classroom management discourses of the school regime – 'tough love', an overt police presence, a myriad of classroom management policies – and the relationship building she prioritised in her

classroom. 'Caring' and 'counselling' are certainly not the only discourses in the school: it has more procedural 'systems in place' and a constant and visible police presence. Among the many responses available to Carol, including punishment, calls home, detention, and expulsion, she has chosen a pastoral role that matches her view of herself as an official mentor and guide. This appears to be how she views her individual role within the collective decision-making of the school. While she is accountable ultimately to school practices, it is clear that Carol positions herself as a mediator, intervening via relationship building to avoid the delivery of more punitive responses

Conclusion

This paper does not attempt a conclusive answer to the question of quality teaching as it relates to classroom management. Instead, through Sally's and Carol's experiences, it presents the lived complexities of teaching in high poverty schools and the choices teachers make when faced with critical incidents in the classroom. In positive and informed ways, we saw Sally and Carol resist notions of their students as 'bad' or in need of punishment. Both of these early career teachers were also very careful to tell us that they did not believe in 'yelling'. They rarely used the 'reactive, controlling strategies' that Korpershoek et al. (2016, p. 645) find inconclusive in their effectiveness, and they resorted to discipline only as very last measures, refusing to 'give up on' their students, no matter their behaviour. Sally and Carol saw getting to know their students as paramount to building good relationships, and building relationships as central to their work. They expressed positivity about their work and their students, rarely despaired and prided themselves on their ability to develop mutual respect, with both students and their

families. Sally and Carol repeatedly contextualised their work in high poverty schools as one of making a difference for capable students.

Our work-shadowing observations allowed us to catch glimpses of how conceptions of classroom management are enacted and influenced by a range of factors occurring outside the classroom such leadership and the various pedagogical and policy frameworks taken up by that school. Teachers, are nonetheless also highly constituted by their own family backgrounds and experiences, their world-views, the theories they remember from their Initial Teacher Education, their dispositions towards equity and social justice, and their beliefs about their roles in low SES schools. While we noted the focus on classroom management in interviews, we became increasingly interested in the teachers' responses to critical incidents in the classrooms we observed. Importantly, many of these incidents involved the teacher ignoring behaviour, deflecting it, or 'letting it go'. While ignoring behaviour is, of course, also a pedagogical response, we wondered how this should be interpreted. We question whether it can be argued, perhaps, that when these teachers seemingly 'ignore' behaviour, they may consciously (or unconsciously) be choosing to resist the pervasive, profoundly negative stereotypes that affect, in particular, children and young people from poor backgrounds. Hence, we were increasingly interested in observing how the teachers responded to critical incidents in their attempts to support their students in overcoming barriers to learning.

We conclude this paper by suggesting a step forward. Our research tracks the shift from a discourse of discipline to the other dominant discourse, the discourse of pastoral care. The teachers we work-shadowed said that their 'pastoral' responses to critical incidents were preferable to 'disciplinarian' ones. The fact that both teachers said they

saw themselves as liberating their students by offering them an alternative to punishment is significant in itself.

Similar to Keddie's teachers, Sally and Carol see schools as a site of possibility and 'advocacy' that can transform circumstances of disadvantage and overcome 'barriers to learning' (Keddie, 2012, p. 263). The problem is, however, whether we can capitalise on the disposition of such teachers towards social justice to extend the care discourse, pushing it towards the political rather than the pastoral. Can we encourage such teachers to use their knowledge of poverty and disadvantage to replace *care* with *agency*? To this end, it would be fruitful to pursue four particular investigations. First, how discourses of relationship and care can encompass more political ideas about agency and empowerment. Second, how deeply engrained notions of gendered and racialized roles can be questioned by and with teachers and by their students. Third, how a different balance can be found so that high expectations can be enacted without reverting back to discipline. And finally, ways for teachers to see more broadly how the students in their schools are bound, often unknowingly, to longstanding beliefs about their behaviour.

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