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## Gut reaction or rational problem-solving? Teachers' considerations when coping with classroom disruptions

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### ABSTRACT

Classroom management and coping with disruptions are a primary source of stress for teachers. However, very little is known about teachers' considerations when facing daily disruptions in their classes. To bridge this gap, seventy-one K-12 teachers were asked to recall such an incident and describe five alternate responses they considered. Did they respond emotionally or were they able to stay calm and adopt a problem-focused approach? Did they focus on the individual, the group, or both? Did they consider immediate or medium-to-long-term actions? Despite their stress, most teachers were able to adopt a problem-focused approach and refrain from expressing their anger towards disruptive students. They mostly directed their actions towards the interfering student and preferred short-term measures. An algorithm is proposed to illustrate their decision-making process and discuss its benefits for adhering to practical and social considerations.

### KEYWORDS

Decision-making; teacher's considerations; inclusion; classroom management; classroom disruptions

### Introduction

Coping with classroom disruptions has become a challenging task that requires teachers to demonstrate emotional sensitivity and ample of classroom management tools (Chen et al. 2020; Elias and Schwab 2013; Soodak and McCarthy 2006). Students' misbehaviour during lessons elicits intense negative feelings of frustration, shame, hopelessness, fatigue, and anxiety (McCarthy et al. 2009; Derryberry & Reed, 1994) and, in the long run, may have a deleterious impact on teachers' sense of wellbeing and authority (Kyriacou 2011) and may increase feelings of burnout (Friedman, 2006). Moreover, classroom management and coping with disruptions were found to elicit acute stress among teachers (Wettstein, Schneider, and La Marca 2021). According to Baumann, Sniezek, and Buerkle (2001, 139), acute stress occurs in situations 'involving high physiological arousal, the need to make multiple decisions rapidly, incomplete information on which to make these decisions (high uncertainty), and extreme consequences of failure'. High levels of stress may temporarily impair teachers' cognitive abilities and interfere with their rational decision making.

Teachers' stress and burnout have been studied intensively (García-Carmona, Marín, and Aguayo 2019). Researchers examined the deleterious impact of continuous workload, discipline problems, poor relations among staff members (Clunies-Ross, Little, and Kienhuis 2008; Hanif, Tariq, and Nadeem 2011), low student motivation, value dissonance, and time pressure (Skaalvik and Skaalvik 2017) on teachers. These intense occurrences leave teachers a short time to appraise the situation and decide how to respond. For instance, should they ignore a petty conflict among two boys that

could quickly deteriorate into a full-blown fight or should they intervene. Doyle (1986) refers to classroom management as a cognitive process that takes into account the teacher's knowledge of classroom event trajectories and how certain actions will affect a situation. The experience of a stressful situation tends to narrow the focus of attention, often resulting in overfocusing or a 'tunnel vision' effect that restricts situational awareness and drives the person to over rely on established skilful procedures.

Coping with disruptions requires teachers to utilise their attention and emotional and cognitive competencies (McCarthy, Lineback, and Reiser 2015), yet little is known about what characterises their considerations and decision processes during such incidents that occur on a daily basis (Van Mieghem et al. 2020). For example, Vanlommel et al. (2017) found that teachers tend to rely on intuitive expertise rather than using data collected purposefully to help them decide on the grade retention of their students. The current study explores the alternative actions teachers consider before they actually respond to a student's misbehaviours. The current study addressed teachers' reactive strategies once they notice a disruption. More specifically, it is confined to two broader categories of coping strategies: problem-focused and emotion-focused.

### ***Problem-focused versus emotion-focused coping***

Classroom management requires continuous navigating of instruction while responding to unexpected occurrences and disruptions (Admiraal 2020; Emmer and Stough 2001). Rapid detection and appraisal of students' conduct has been found to prevent escalation of such problems. According to Wolff, Jarodzka, and Boshuizen (2020), teachers can respond to classroom situations in either a predictive proactive manner or a reactive one. The former is based on the teacher's ability to recognise the warning signs before an event escalates into a full-blown disruptive situation. A reactive response refers to an event that has already occurred and the teacher must minimise the disruption's deleterious impact. Such an unexpected event does not leave the teacher much time to make sense of the situation. She must summon all her strength and energy to solve the problem. Dealing with such situations is time consuming and involves considerable levels of stress.

According to the Transactional Models (Kyriacou and Sutcliffe 1977; Lazarus and Folkman 1984), stressful situations may drive teachers to adopt either *problem-focused* coping strategies that are directed towards the stressor (e.g., stopping the student's misbehaviour) or *emotion-focused* coping measures that are directed towards the emotions generated by the stressful event (e.g., feeling angry, agitated, frustrated, etc.). McCarthy, Lineback, and Reiser (2015, 313) proposed the following model that combines both strategies, as seen in Figure 1.

*Problem-focused coping* is directed at managing, altering, or addressing the student's misbehaviour. Although empirical studies support foundational strategies such as developing clear expectations and routines, providing specific feedback, and having many opportunities to respond, these are often lacking in educators' repertoires (Mitchell, Hirn, and Lewis 2017). Moreover, studies show (Aldrup et al. 2018; Clunies-Ross, Little, and Kienhuis 2008) that teachers spend much of their time conducting behaviour management, with reactive strategies being significantly correlated with elevated stress among teachers and decreased time for students to complete their tasks.

Teachers who face student disruptions are likely to experience anger and stress (Sutton, Mudrey-Camino, and Knight 2009; Aulén et al. 2021; Wang, Lee, and Hall 2022). In such situations they replace productive techniques (such as discussing the problem with the student) with emotion-focused coping measures that are aimed to alleviate these negative feelings. Teachers may adopt emotional regulating strategies such as antecedent-focused regulation (Gross 1998; Gross and Thompson 2007; McRae and Gross 2020): selection and modification of situations, attention deployment, and cognitive change. They may also modulate their response by suppressing their feelings (e.g., taking deep breaths). On the negative side, they may express their anger loudly – shout and yell at their students. Teachers who tend to blame their students for improper conduct rarely take responsibility (Miller 2006). Excessive use of authoritative and disciplinary

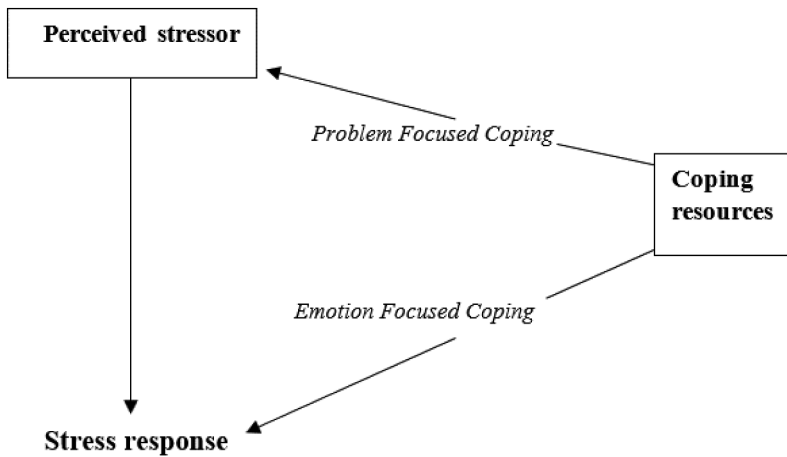


Figure 1. Hypothesised model of coping processes (based on McCarthy, Lineback, and Reiser 2015, 313).

measures by teachers inhibits the development of responsibility among the students and distracts them from their schoolwork (Lewis 2001; Montuoro and Lewis 2015). Moreover, shouting at students harms the mutual relationships that are necessary for maintaining classroom control and drives students to increase their expression of anger and dissatisfaction (Sutton, Mudrey-Camino, and Knight 2009; Wang, Hall, and Taxer 2019).

### **Focus on the individual or the group**

From the teachers' point of view, managing a lesson in a heterogeneous classroom involves simultaneous attempts to meet the needs of the individual student while navigating the lesson. They must pay attention to disruptive students while keeping an eye on the classroom dynamic. Lampert (2001) argues that teachers often face dilemmas that lack a clear-cut structure or solution. Instead, these dilemmas entail an ongoing and stressful process throughout which the teachers must juggle equally important yet opposing goals. Lampert (1985) describes an episode in one of her classes where she tried to calm down a group of 'challenging' boys and stood next to them, to ensure their understanding of the material and the proper work. Yet her prolonged assistance to the 'challenging' group took her away from the 'good' students, who began complaining that the teacher was ignoring them. In other words, in her efforts to resolve one issue, the teacher had in fact created a new one – and was then forced to choose between two non-ideal solutions.

### **The nature and length of intervention**

As they try to cope with disruptions, teachers need to estimate the amount of time and efforts they need to invest to solve a problem. Will a short superficial response suffice or is there need for a longer intervention that will take days and even weeks to address the student's deep-seated difficulties? Yariv (2010) argues that teachers reach decisions according to utilitarian principles: (a) Implementing the smallest-scale intervention that will solve the problems; (b) 'Step by step' – gradual intensification of the efforts when the initial small-scale measures fail. Indeed, saving time and energy is justified considering the teachers' hectic schedule, yet some more complex problems may need longer interventions. Here the assumption is that teachers would look for the least effortful and most effective measure to stop the disruption.

## Research questions

This study explored teachers' considerations when deciding how to respond to classroom disruptions.

The research questions are:

- (1) To what extent do teachers use problem-focused or emotion-focused coping?
- (2) Do teachers consider directing the intervention towards an individual student, the class as a whole, or both?
- (3) Do teachers consider immediate or medium-to-long-term interventions?

## Methodology

### Participants and research field

Seventy-one teachers (69 females) who attended the M.Ed. Programme for Inclusive Education in a teachers' college in northern Israel participated in the study. These teachers studied two courses on Classroom Management led by the first author. The participants included preschool (N = 13), primary school (N = 42), middle school (N = 11), and high school teachers (N = 5). Most of them were homeroom teachers (N = 58). Others were subject matter (N = 8) or remedial teachers (N = 5). Of all the participants, 10 had taught special education classes in mainstream schools.

### Instruments

The teachers were asked to recall a significant disruption that occurred in their class during the previous day. Asking about such recent a 'critical incident' (Flanagan 1954; Arble, Daugherty, and Arnetz 2019) helped them reproduce the case as accurately as possible. After providing a detailed written account they were asked to recall and write down at least five alternate responses they had considered using to solve the problem (e.g., 'Ignore his conduct'). The aim was to delve deeper into the teachers' thought processes, as initial responses are easy to recall but later ones require deeper reflection. Indeed, the participating teachers provided between three to eight responses for each incident, reflecting the complexity of the incident as well as their personality and professional experience. Although each consideration is rooted in specific circumstances, collecting several hundred such thoughts that are detached from their context provided a broad repertoire of potential responses to be used in the content analysis.

### Data analysis

Content analysis (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2011) was applied to analyse the options considered (N = 331). Coding was conducted by the authors along several stages. In the first stage, they read the data together to establish categories. Then, they separately coded the rest of the data, organising the data into clusters. In the final stage, the authors discussed cases of disagreement until a consensus was reached.

Regarding the first research question, a search was made for specific words or phrases that reflect an action or emotion-oriented consideration. Based on the conceptualisation proposed by McCarthy, Lineback, and Reiser (2015), the extent to which teachers adopt a problem-focused approach (e.g., '*I considered calling her mother*') or an emotion-focused approach (e.g., '*I considered shouting: "You haven't stopped talking since the beginning of the lesson. Stop immediately!"*') was analysed.

The second research question examined whether teachers' considerations focus on individuals or on the group. Here the options considered by teachers regarding the disruptive student (e.g., '*I considered not letting him go out for recess, so that next time he won't disrupt my class.*') or the whole class, either as innocent bystanders (e.g., '*If I gave him his phone back, what would the other students*

think?') or as active participants (e.g., *'I considered addressing the entire class about what had just happened'*) were encoded.

The third research question examined whether teachers consider immediate or medium-to-long-term interventions when dealing with a disruption in class. Three categories were identified, aside from the option of ignoring the disruption: (1) Immediate actions that take seconds to minutes (e.g., *'I considered writing his name on the board as a warning'*); (2) Actions that take several hours or days (e.g., *'I considered calling his parents to report his actions, so that he would not repeat that behaviour'*); and (3) Actions that range from days to weeks (e.g., *'I considered reaching an agreement with him regarding reasonable conduct'*).

## Ethics

The study was approved by the college's ethics committee. To maintain strict privacy and anonymity of both the teachers and their students, the data was aggregated by the first author who was not involved in teaching the course or grading the assignments. In addition, the teachers were asked to omit any identifying details of themselves or their students from their written accounts.

## Results

### *Problem vs. emotion-focused coping styles*

The first research question examined to what extent teachers use problem-focused or emotion-focused coping styles. Despite the stressful experience, most teachers included measures that aimed to solve a conflict or calm down an agitated student (93.6%,  $N = 310$ ; e.g., *'I considered sending him out.'*). Very few (6.3%,  $N = 21$ ) responded with an intention to express their anger (e.g., *'I considered shouting at him and insulting him.'*). Among these, it was noticed that emotional-focused considerations were the first to surface and gradually, as the teachers overcame an initial momentary phase of panic, their considerations become more rational. Infrequently, (one of twenty) teachers mentioned more than one emotional-focused response of the five considerations they reported.

In the following paragraphs examples are given of these two distinct coping styles:

### *Problem-focused coping style*

Ron is a fifth-grade student whose parents divorced two years ago. Ever since that familial crisis he has refused to cooperate with his teachers. One morning, during a maths lesson as the teacher was explaining the subject matter, Ron complained loudly that he does not understand the material and will never do well in maths. The teacher asked him to wait a moment until she would be available to assist him. Ron did not listen and crawled under the table with a sandwich. The teacher bent down to talk to him, but he did not pay attention and refused her request to come out and take his seat. While she was guiding another group of students, Ron approached some children and complained to them that he does not understand. Recalling the incident, the teacher considered several alternative responses: (1) Ignoring his conduct although it disrupts the lesson; (2) Asking him to come out from under the table; (3) Insisting that he perform the assignment; and (4) Cutting back on the assignment, although he is fully capable of completing it; (5) Giving him a different assignment. Although the teacher considered various possibilities to help Ron calm down, she expected him to reject her suggestions. Thus, determined to keep the lesson going smoothly, the teacher ignored his conduct. Ron continued to move around throughout the lesson, begging for attention and assistance and undermining her authority in front of the entire class.

### Emotion-focused coping style

Sam (12) is a sixth-grade student. When the teacher was handing out an assignment, Sam approached her and asked to go to the toilet. When he returned, he started disrupting the lesson and making the students laugh. The teacher approached him and asked him to stop interrupting. 'I'm not interrupting! I'm just kidding', he responded and then started walking around the classroom making all the students laugh. During these tense moments the teacher considered several alternative responses: (1) Shout at him and insult him; (2) Take him out or send him to the school counsellor; (3) write him a disciplinary note; (4) demand that he copy the questions and exercises to his notebook. Finally, she decided to have a short conversation with him outside the classroom. He explained that he did not understand the text and he was afraid that others would make fun of him. She promised to reexplain the text and questions for him.

Reflecting upon her decision the teacher was satisfied with the outcome:

"At that moment I reminded myself of the quote that there is no such thing as a bad child. By the end of the lesson, he approached me and apologized. I realized that I had taken the right course of action. [My response] lowered his frustration and made him feel closer and more included."

The teacher was certainly furious and she considered four emotional-focused responses before calming down and understanding that the student's misbehaviour was a result of his distress.

### Individual versus group considerations

The second research question examined the teachers' considerations whom to engage to solve the disruption. Most of the teachers (80%, N = 264) considered to direct their efforts at the disruptive student. Only a few (11%, N = 33) expressed their concerns how the incident would affect the class and the lesson. Less teachers (9%, N = 29) considered engaging the group and use its social influence in solving the problem. Of the two latter group-focused considerations, the following sub-categories stood out: the incident as an opportunity for an educating conversation (N = 11; e.g., '*After the incident I considered discontinuing the lesson to talk to them about dignity and respect*'); students as a source of help (N = 8; e.g., '*I considered assigning another student to assist him*'). Two less favourable themes were: emotional disciplinary action (N = 6; e.g., '*I considered shouting at them angrily*') or disregard (N = 4; e.g., '*Ignore, let the group members work it out*'). As it turns out, in most cases teachers tended to approach the disruptive student and refrain from employing a comprehensive intervention that would address the needs of both individuals and the class as a whole.

### Expected time frame of the actions considered

The third research question examined how much time and efforts teachers intend to invest in dealing with the disruption. Most of the responses (93%, N = 306) were meant to be very short ('*I thought of sending him out of the classroom*'). Ron's teacher explains her short-term goals:

"I preferred to respond to the immediate situation, asking him several times to stop talking and wandering around. This allowed me to continue teaching without creating additional distractions for other students. I was aware that if I were to use harsh measures he would begin to cry and kick the table. [Only after attending the M. Ed. Program] did I realize that I should have clarified his needs at the beginning of the lesson and addressed them. It could have halted a conflict that gradually intensified during the lesson".

Only few considerations (7%, N = 24) reflected more lengthy interventions, including disciplinary actions (N = 2; '*I considered not allowing him to participate in the trip if he continued with these behaviours*'), strengthening the student's sense of responsibility (N = 5; '*I considered developing her self-awareness regarding the need to wear her hearing aid*'); involving the student's parents (N = 16; '*I considered talking with his parents, recommending them to seek [professional] help*') or the school counsellor (N = 3; '*I considered consulting with the school counsellor on how to deal with the student*'). It seems that teachers are determined to invest their limited resources in teaching. Thus, they tend to

minimise their involvement and act to restore order and get the lesson back on track as soon as possible. Only in cases where quick actions do not lead to the expected results do they resort to lengthier measures.

## Discussion

Teachers' responses to a student's undesirable behaviour are classified by Reyna and Weiner (2001) as either utilitarian or retributive. Utilitarian considerations are aimed at solving the problem and keeping the lesson going. If the teacher attributes the cause of misbehaviour as within the student's control, she may express her frustration and anger directly. The incident of the fifth-grade teacher who chased the boy who crawled under a table is certainly one of these cases that forces teachers to consider which of the two coping approaches they should adopt. Such bumpy moments (Romano 2006) consume much of the teachers' time and energy and force them to be in a constant state of alert.

As it turns out, the teachers' considerations portrayed a calculated strategy. They preferred employing a problem-solving approach (94%), directed mainly towards the disruptive student (80%), with a clear preference for an immediate solution (93%), over a comprehensive one. McCarthy, Lineback, and Reiser (2015) argue that teachers do their utmost to avoid illegitimate aggressive responses, preferring rational ones. This line of thoughts represents a rational task-oriented *modus operandi*: searching for the smallest short-term measures, in terms of time and efforts invested, that will eliminate or solve the disruption. Although the teachers intended to direct their efforts at individual students, their goal was not to solve his or her deep-seated personal cognitive or emotional difficulties but rather to smoothly navigate the lesson.

### *The neglected ingredient*

Only seven percent of the teachers' considerations portrayed emotion-focused coping styles. Rarely did teachers mention more than one emotion-focused response and most of these considerations were mentioned initially, as the first or second of the five considerations. This may suggest that as they overcome an initial state of being emotionally overwhelmed, they regain their strengths and mission. None of the teachers mentioned an act of emotional self-regulation, a practice found critical for classroom management (Sutton, Mudrey-Camino, and Knight 2009), although it may well be that some of the teachers experienced but did not report spontaneous acts of *downregulating* their anger.

These findings raise the question of why these teachers neglect their feelings. Why do they hide these feelings from their students? Several answers come to mind, of which some are practical while others reflect teachers' norms and attitudes concerning their profession. First, the classroom as a public domain with multilevel and dynamic communication (Doyle 1986) increase the risk that disruptions would escalate beyond the teachers' control. Lampert (1985) argues that in such cases teachers tend to 'firefight' and direct their attention to the appraised source of problem. Only one-tenth of the respondents mentioned involving the class-as-a-whole. Task-oriented considerations directed at the disruptive student help teachers lower the emotional tone in the classroom and focus on resuming the lesson. The risk of a 'ripple effect' (Kounin 1970) keeps them on constant alert and drives them to respond whenever they notice signs of disarray. Ron's teacher admitted that each lesson is a test to her patience and the measures she considered were intended to preserve her authority and dignity. Within the tense situations, the teachers in the current study preferred to employ small-scale rapid interventions that could stop the disruption and make it possible to resume the lesson. Such interventions, according to Doyle (2006), can solve conflicts temporarily and superficially, but they cannot establish order when no primary vector is operating.

Second, given the strict ethical and organisational norms and regulations, teachers are aware that uncensored expression of negative emotions can be dangerous to everyone involved. Concealing



feelings of frustration and rage spares teachers the exhausting and aggravating experience of bitter confrontation with students. For example, Yariv and Goldberg (2020) found that 92% of the 64 teachers sampled who had faced a serious conflict during a lesson managed to restrain themselves. Yet, five of them admitted losing their temper, aggressively confronting students who disobeyed their authority, and insulting them. These teachers probably experienced what Goleman (1995) define as an 'emotional hijacking' syndrome, in which the amygdala bypasses the normal reasoning processes.

Third, the limited research on teachers' tendency to suppress their emotions has found that they tend to consider open expression of feelings as unprofessional, while covering up inner feelings is viewed as a sign of mature, sophisticated, and proper professional conduct (Brackett et al. 2013). The current findings probably support this general attitude among teachers to hide and manipulate their feelings (Sutton, Mudrey-Camino, and Knight 2009). Yet, such modulation of emotions, especially anger, fear, and frustration, seems to be ineffective and unhealthy. Despite their efforts, a study revealed that students are aware of the feelings that teachers try to regulate (Jiang et al. 2016). The researchers contend that antecedent-focused emotion regulation appeared more desirable than response-focused emotion regulation, and in particular, that reappraisal is more effective than suppression.

### *Limitations and future research*

The current study has several limitations. First, the sample is comprised of seasoned teachers who were attending a M.Ed. Programme for Inclusive Education. This selected group probably does not represent 'average' teachers. To increase the external validity, future studies need to explore heterogeneous populations of teachers (e.g., novice and veterans, both genders), schools (e.g., rural, inner-city), and cultures (locally and internationally) in order to provide a more rich, balanced, and accurate picture. Second, the use of self-report accounts is considered a less valid research tool (Rabbitt and Abson 1990). Future studies would benefit from triangulating the teacher's self-reports with field observations. Third, the decision-making process is only an interim stage that is followed by action. The principles outlined above are hypothetical and more research is needed to combine the teachers' thoughts with their actual deeds.

### **Conclusion**

The teachers in this study appeared to adopt utilitarian state of mind (Reyna and Weiner 2001). They prefer to limit the scope of the problem and minimise the impact of the disruption on the lesson they are teaching. This helps them contain the disruption, save their energies, and reduce the unpleasant feeling of stress they experience. Their strategy can be summarised within four hypothetical guidelines.

- (a) Never lose control. Limit the scope of the incident and reduce uncertainty involved in complicated cases.
- (b) Strive to find a small short-term practical solution that would hopefully change the situation.
- (c) Prefer step-by-step interventions, gradually intensifying the efforts when the initial small-scale measures fail. Refrain from developing a comprehensive strategy.
- (d) Never employ coercive aggressive measures. Even in extremely annoying circumstances minimise expression of negative feelings.

Although such practical strategies help teachers solve serious conflicts, this *modus operandi* has significant drawbacks. It leaves teachers with intense inner negative feelings, increases emotional attrition and burnout, and gives students wrong and inauthentic messages. Therefore, many efforts are needed to cultivate teachers' ability to utilise emotion-regulation measures during stressful

situations. To do so, we recommend incorporating social emotional learning (SEL) programmes, such as simulation-based learning (Levin and Flavian 2020; Kasperski and Crispel 2021), to foster educators' self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and responsible decision-making (see CASEL, 2020). In addition, there is a need to improve our teachers' skills in classroom management to ensure a respectful and positive classroom climate even in these extreme situations.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributors

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