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The classroom climate in drama lessons taught by teacher trainees

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Abstract

This study is a part of a large research project developing drama teacher education at Helsinki University's Department of Teacher Education. The purpose of this study is to examine the classroom climate in drama lessons taught by teacher trainees. Verbal and nonverbal interactions are studied with The Classroom Assessment Scoring System, which is a well known and proven observation instrument developed to assess classroom quality. The other objective of this study is to explore how suitable the CLASS-instrument is for studying drama lessons that differ from normal classroom teaching. Previous studies have proved that good classroom climate affects pupils' school success and self-esteem. Thus, the climate that prevails in a classroom is not insignificant. The results of this case study (N=6) indicate that even though drama teaching is sometimes challenging the pupils can still experience several positive sensations in those lessons, which can improve classroom climate and interaction skills.

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Keywords: CLASS-system; drama education; positive climate; interaction; teacher education

1. Introduction

Classroom climate is a direct result of the interaction between teachers and their pupils. The nature, content and meaning of these interactions have been studied from a variety of perspectives (Määttä, Uusiautti, 2012, 22-23). A positive classroom climate enhances the pupils' learning and prevents problems in the classroom. A positive climate results from a number of factors such as classroom management techniques, instructional pacing and especially what

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teachers expect from their students and how teachers react to their pupils' behavior (Greenberg, Domitrovich & Bumbarger 2001; Morrison & Connor 2002; Pianta 2006). Positive feedback and a calm attitude towards problematic situations will probably enhance classroom climate better than severe reprimanding or ignoring problems (Conroy, Sutherland, Snyder, Al-Hendawi & Vo, 2009, 18).

In a well-functioning classroom, there prevails an emotionally supporting climate in which the teacher takes into account the pupils' individual needs. In addition, the teacher's role as the leader of the class is important. Essentially, there should be a trusting atmosphere in the classroom and the rules should be clear to everyone. The quality of teaching is also evident in goals, interaction, feedback and the instructions given to the pupils. Moreover, the individual needs of the pupils should be recognized and taken into account. In a safe learning climate, the teacher encourages everyone to participate in conversations and the pupils do so actively (Hamre & Pianta, 2005). In addition, the pupils should have the courage to participate in shared activities and everyone should feel that they could be themselves (Rasku-Puttonen, Poikkeus, Lerkkanen, 2009, 302). Appropriately a supporting climate creates a good basis for teaching, assists in moments of adversity as well as advances the management of work-related stress (Frentzel, Goetz, Lüdtke, Pekrun & Sutton, 2009). According to Toivanen, Halkilahti & Ruismäki (2013), after the teacher, the prevailing climate in a classroom is the most important factor in successful drama education. The learning environment at school can either support or limit learning. Toivanen & al. (2013) highlighted the environment as an essential element for supporting pupil's creativity in drama learning. They concur with Craft (2005, 43), who stresses the significance of encouragement in nurturing creativity. The environment should encourage pupils to exceed their own and others' expectations and reward them when they do so. Creativity evolves in an open and safe atmosphere, whereas compulsion and discipline decrease creativity. Several researchers speak on behalf of an open and safe learning environment and an atmosphere to help children enjoy school and achieve better learning results (Craft, 2005; Jeffrey & Woods, 2003).

2. The Classroom Assessment Scoring System

In this article, the classroom climate in drama lessons taught by the teacher trainees is measured using CLASS (the Classroom Assessment Scoring System). This observation system was originally developed in order to study the quality of classroom activities from pre-school to the fourth grade level (Pianta, La Paro, Hamre, 2008). CLASS was created to represent the quality of the classroom activities with shared criteria. CLASS describes this quality using three dimensions, which can be seen in Figure 2 (Pianta, La Paro, Hamre, 2008, 1).

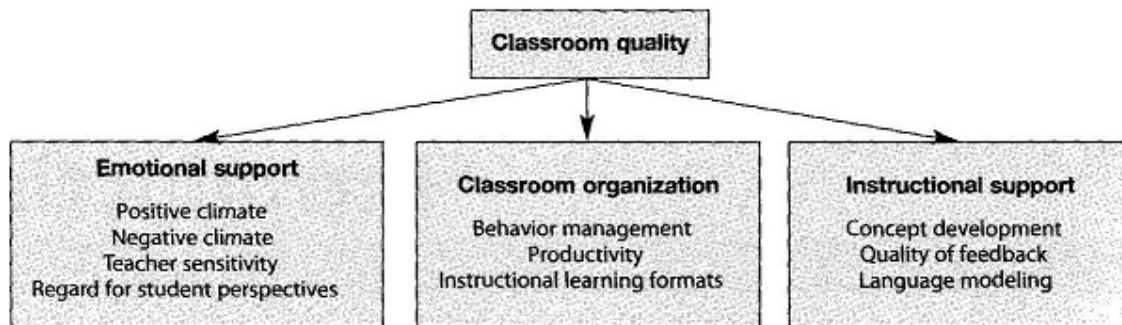


Table 1. Overview of the CLASS domains and dimensions (Piantta & al. 2008, 2)

This study concentrates on one of the three dimensions: emotional support. Moreover, the general suitability of CLASS to drama education is scrutinized. The two other dimensions are studied in the follow-up research.

Teachers' emotional support is visible in their openness to the needs of the children as well as in the consideration of their ages and interests. Teachers should also be warm and easily approachable (Pianta ym. 2008). In previous studies, there has been a clear correlation between teachers' abilities to offer emotional support and their pupils'

development of social skills and learning abilities (Pianta 2006). Pupils with difficulties in adjusting to the school environment benefit more from their teachers’ emotional support than strict teaching methods (Hamre & Pianta, 2005, 961-962). Thus, emotional support has an important role in classroom climate, learning and the development of children.

Table 2. provides additional information about Positive Climate dimension of the CLASS observation tool. The table is an overview of the dimensions with a concise description of the low-, middle and high-range indicators of positive climate used in this study.

Table 2. Positive Climate (Pianta & al 2008, 23)

Verbal and Non verbal interaction	Low (1, 2)	Mid (3,4,5)	High (6,7)
Relationships <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical proximity • Shared activities • Peer assistance • Matched affect • Social conversation 	There are few, if any, indications that the teacher and students enjoy warm, supportive relationships with one another	There are some indications that the teacher and students enjoy warm, supportive relationships with one another.	There are many indications that the teacher and students enjoy warm, supportive relationships with one another.
Positive affect <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Smiling • Laughter • Enthusiasm 	There are no or few displays of positive affect by the teacher and/or students.	There are sometimes displays of positive affect by the teacher and/or students.	There are frequent displays of positive affect by the teacher and/or students.
Positive communication <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Verbal affection • Physical affection • Positive expectations 	There are rarely positive communications, verbal or physical, between teachers and students.	There are sometimes positive communications, verbal or physical, between teachers and students.	There are frequently positive communications, verbal or physical, between teachers and students.

Respect <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eye contact • Warm, calm voice • Respectful language • Cooperation and/or sharing 	The teacher and students rarely, if ever, demonstrate respect for one another.	The teacher and students sometimes demonstrate respect for one another.	<i>The teacher and students show frequent demonstrates of respect for one another.</i>
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3. Study design

This study consists of six videotaped drama lessons, which were given by class teacher trainees who were performing their first teaching practice for Helsinki University's teacher training school (in Spring 2011 and 2012). All the teacher trainees were specializing in drama education. The selected lessons included process drama. These lessons contained a variety of drama techniques. The drama lessons (see Pianta & al 2008) were analyzed using CLASS (The Classroom Assessment Scoring System). This study included only one part of CLASS; positive climate.

The research questions are:

- 1) What kind of atmosphere is dominant in the drama lessons taught by the teacher trainees? To which level of positive climate can the drama lessons be placed? Which approaches work best in drama lessons?
- 2) How suitable is the CLASS- positive climate model for analyzing drama lessons?

The purpose of this study is to examine the positive climate in drama lessons through verbal and nonverbal interaction. Secondly, the differences between varied phases and exercises in drama lessons are examined. One objective is also to explore CLASS's suitability for analyzing drama lessons.

A positive climate was observed through positive expressions, teacher-pupil and pupil-pupil relationships, positive communication and respect towards one another. The research classes varied from first grade to third grade as CLASS is designed to observe classroom effectiveness from preschool to the fourth grade.

This study did not follow all of CLASS's recommended procedures. Live observation was not used in the study. Instead, the observations were made on videotaped lessons, because videos analysis is widely used and accepted especially in scientific research in behavioral research. Video data as research material is suitable for the systematic analysis of a complete system of interaction in the class room (see e.g. Florez-Morris et al., 2010; Henderson et al., 2010; Dunn 2010; Cheng-Ting et al., 2011; Hilton, 2011; Jarvis et al. 2011; Jensen et al., 2012; Luff & Heath, 2012). The challenges of the video observation method were also taken into account. There are factors this study does not take into account. The observed lessons were from different times of the teaching period and this affected the trainee teachers' abilities to manage their groups. It is important to note that we observed separate lessons instead of whole teaching periods. The observations were focused only on the drama classes not for all the classes in a school day. The study does not include a comparison between the classes because the researchers were interested in Class's suitability for analyzing drama teaching.

4. Results

This case study suggests that the classroom climate in the drama lessons taught by the teacher trainees is for the most part warm and positive. By comparing the PC-values of different drama lessons, it can be seen that every lesson is at least in the middle level (3-5) and some even almost reach the upper level (6-7).

Table 3. Classes' Pc-values.

Class	PC-value
Class A I	5
Class A II	5
Class B	5.8
Class C	3.5
Class D	5.7
Class E	4.8
Average	5

This result was interesting because a parallel study with the same video material (Toivanen, Mikkola & Ruismäki 2012) showed that teacher trainees found the interactions in drama lessons challenging. They thought they had failed as drama teachers. The trainee teachers found that it difficult to interact with and control both the group and individual students. The stimulated recall interviewed trainee teachers (N=7) lacked confidence in their own actions, subject knowledge, non-verbal communication and teaching skills. The feeling of inadequacy was also connected to the management of individual students and the classes.

The differences between varied phases and exercises in drama lessons are also examined in this study (Table 4). The results from this study show that the positive climate is highest in the concentration-phase (PC = 5.25). It appears that when students are working intensively towards a shared goal, the positive climate increases. The PC-value was also quite high (5) for traditional drama techniques.

Table 4. A drama lesson's positive climate scores for different phases

Lesson's phase	PC-value
warmup games	4.6
concentration exercises	5.3
drama techniques	5
reflective actions	4.2
Total PC	4.8

Previous studies have not examined how students react to the different phases and exercises in drama lessons. Toivanen, Mikkola & Ruismäki (2012) advice that exercises should be chosen carefully so that they will not be too difficult for the students. When using drama techniques it is also important to move the lessons "manuscript" ahead. Exercises are used to pass on information or help to build up meanings. When using drama techniques, situations can

be observed and they can give participants an opportunity to observe their own thoughts, feelings and understanding in respect to other participants (Neelands & Goode 2000, 3 - 8). Different exercises make it possible to work at different times, spaces and levels (Owens & Barber, 1997, 22.) So, this highlights the importance of the kinds of exercises teachers choose for drama lessons. Drama techniques should not just be a group of different exercises that are performed mechanically but they should be used to give meaning to the intended teaching aims (emt. 22).

5. Conclusions

One objective was also to explore CLASS's suitability for examining and analysing interactions in drama. CLASS was originally designed to observe traditionally classroom teaching and its suitability for drama teaching has not been examined before. According to this study, CLASS is well suited for examining and analysing drama lessons. Verbal and nonverbal interactions found in a positive climate such as smiling, respect towards one another, style of speaking and helping one another are important parts of drama lessons and those interactions can be observed via CLASS even though drama lessons are full of action (Pianta & al. 2008, 23).

This study hints that even though drama lesson may not be perfect according to those who teach them, many good things may be experienced by the class (compare Toivanen, Mikkola & Ruismäki 2012). Laughing or solving a problem together may advance the class climate more than perfectly executed drama scenes. As previous studies have proven (Gazelle 2006; Ghaith 2003) if a class climate is good it advances everybody's well being and may help student learning. Teachers should keep in mind that even though drama lessons can be challenging they can also be very beneficial and it is possible to learn from mistakes. It can be argued that successful drama processes need adversities (Heikkinen, 2004, 165-166). This study using the CLASS system gives some new insights into drama research but further research is still required.

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