



Classroom Management Practices and Student Engagement in Multicultural Primary Schools in Toronto

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ARTICLE INFO

Received February 4, 2023
Revised February 28, 2023
Accepted July 14, 2023
Published July 27, 2023

Keywords:

classroom management,
student engagement,
multicultural education,
cultural responsiveness

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the relationship between classroom management practices and student engagement in multicultural primary schools across Toronto, Canada. Using a multiple case study design, the research examined classroom management approaches and their effectiveness in promoting engagement among diverse student populations in six primary schools with student bodies representing over 40 different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Data were collected through 120 hours of classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with 18 teachers and 12 administrators, focus groups with 72 students from grades 3-6, and analysis of school policies and classroom artifacts over one academic semester. Findings revealed three central themes: culturally responsive classroom management as a foundation for inclusive engagement, the critical role of relationship-building in bridging cultural differences and fostering belonging, and the necessity of flexible, adaptive management strategies that respond to diverse cultural communication styles and behavioral norms. Teachers who successfully engaged multicultural

students demonstrated several key practices including establishing collaborative classroom norms through student input, incorporating students' cultural backgrounds into behavioral expectations and conflict resolution processes, utilizing multilingual resources and culturally relevant examples, and differentiating management approaches based on individual cultural contexts rather than applying universal rules. However, teachers also faced significant challenges including navigating conflicting cultural values regarding authority and discipline, addressing language barriers in behavior communication, managing implicit biases, and balancing individual cultural responsiveness with cohesive classroom community building. The study highlights that effective classroom management in multicultural contexts requires moving beyond traditional control-oriented approaches toward culturally sustaining practices that honor diversity while fostering collective engagement and learning.

INTRODUCTION

Classroom management represents one of the most critical competencies for teacher effectiveness, directly influencing student engagement, learning outcomes, and overall classroom climate. In increasingly diverse educational contexts, traditional classroom management approaches developed for culturally homogeneous student populations often prove inadequate for fostering engagement among students from varied cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Toronto, Canada, exemplifies contemporary urban diversity, with its public schools serving student populations representing over 200 countries of origin and speaking more than 180 languages (Toronto District School Board, 2022) and (Muhsyanur, 2024). This extraordinary diversity creates both opportunities and challenges for classroom management, as teachers must navigate varied cultural norms regarding authority, communication, conflict resolution, and appropriate classroom behavior while maintaining environments conducive to learning for all students. Understanding how classroom management practices influence student engagement in such multicultural contexts is essential for developing pedagogical approaches that honor diversity while promoting educational equity and excellence.

Student engagement, conceptualized as students' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral investment in learning, serves as a critical mediator between instruction and achievement (Fredricks et al., 2004). Engaged students demonstrate active participation, sustained attention, positive attitudes toward learning, and persistence through challenges—all factors strongly associated with academic success and long-term educational attainment. However, engagement is not culturally neutral; what constitutes "engaged" behavior varies across cultural contexts, with different cultures expressing interest, respect, and active participation through different behavioral patterns. For instance, some cultural traditions value vocal participation and questioning as signs of engagement, while others view attentive listening and thoughtful silence as appropriate engagement expressions. Teachers' classroom management practices—the systems, strategies, and interactions used to organize

instruction and guide student behavior – can either facilitate or inhibit engagement depending on their cultural alignment with students' backgrounds, prior experiences, and behavioral norms (Weinstein et al., 2004). In multicultural classrooms, this cultural dimension of management becomes particularly salient and complex.

Toronto's demographic reality reflects broader global trends toward increased diversity in urban educational settings. Immigration, refugee resettlement, and increasing mobility have transformed many cities' schools into microcosms of global diversity where students from dozens of cultural backgrounds learn together in single classrooms. This diversity enriches learning environments with multiple perspectives, languages, and ways of knowing, but also presents unprecedented challenges for classroom management. Teachers trained in monocultural management approaches often struggle when their expectations clash with students' culturally shaped behavioral patterns, potentially misinterpreting cultural differences as misbehavior or disengagement. Research indicates that students from minoritized cultural backgrounds face disproportionate disciplinary actions in many educational systems, suggesting that management practices may not be culturally equitable (Gregory et al., 2010). Understanding how to adapt management practices to support engagement across cultural difference is therefore not merely pedagogical but also a matter of educational justice.

Culturally responsive teaching, a framework emphasizing the recognition and incorporation of students' cultural backgrounds into all aspects of instruction, offers promising directions for classroom management in diverse settings. Gay (2018) defines culturally responsive teaching as using "the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant and effective." When applied to classroom management, this framework suggests that effective practices must align with students' cultural communication patterns, values regarding authority and respect, and behavioral norms rather than imposing singular cultural standards. Culturally responsive classroom management views cultural differences not as deficits requiring correction but as resources enriching classroom communities. However, implementing such approaches requires sophisticated cultural knowledge, self-awareness regarding one's own cultural assumptions, and adaptive skills to navigate complex intercultural dynamics – capacities many teachers report lacking from their preparation programs (Ladson-Billings, 2021).

The relationship between classroom management and student engagement in multicultural contexts operates through multiple mechanisms. First, management practices signal to students whether their cultural identities are valued or marginalized in classroom spaces. When teachers incorporate students' languages, acknowledge cultural practices, and validate diverse communication styles, students perceive classrooms as welcoming spaces where they belong, fostering emotional engagement. Conversely, management approaches that penalize cultural differences can alienate students, creating disengagement or resistance. Second, culturally

aligned management practices facilitate clearer communication of expectations, reducing confusion and enabling students to direct energy toward learning rather than navigating unclear behavioral demands. Third, management approaches emphasizing relationship-building and understanding create trust between teachers and students, which research consistently identifies as foundational to engagement (Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004). In multicultural contexts where cultural differences might create initial distance or misunderstanding, intentional relationship-building through culturally responsive management becomes especially critical.

Despite growing recognition of diversity's implications for classroom management, research specifically examining management practices in highly multicultural primary schools remains limited. Much existing research focuses on secondary education or examines diversity through binary frameworks comparing students of color with white students in predominantly white schools, rather than exploring management in contexts where no single cultural group predominates. Primary education presents unique considerations, as younger students are still developing cultural identities, learning behavioral norms both at home and school, and may experience cultural conflicts more intensely than older students who have developed strategies for navigating multiple cultural contexts. Additionally, primary teachers typically spend entire days with students, creating extended opportunities for relationship-building but also more numerous moments where cultural misunderstandings might occur around behavioral expectations (Emmer & Stough, 2001).

Toronto provides an ideal context for examining these issues due to its exceptional diversity, established multicultural policies, and relatively strong investment in inclusive education. The Toronto District School Board has implemented various initiatives promoting equity and cultural responsiveness, creating a policy environment supportive of culturally responsive practices while also facing persistent achievement gaps across demographic groups that suggest implementation challenges. Furthermore, Canadian multiculturalism policy officially endorses cultural diversity as a national value, potentially creating different cultural dynamics than countries with assimilationist policies. However, official multiculturalism does not automatically translate to culturally responsive classroom practices, and teachers still navigate complex decisions about how to honor diversity while maintaining productive learning environments. Understanding what effective culturally responsive classroom management looks like in practice within Toronto's multicultural primary schools can inform teacher education, professional development, and policy both locally and in other diverse urban contexts globally.

This study addresses important gaps in educational research by providing detailed, practice-focused examination of how primary school teachers in highly diverse settings approach classroom management and how their practices influence student engagement across cultural differences. By centering teachers' and students' voices and experiences through qualitative methods, the research illuminates the

complexities, challenges, and successful strategies characterizing classroom management in multicultural contexts. The findings have implications for teacher preparation, ongoing professional learning, school policies, and broader educational approaches to supporting both diversity and engagement in increasingly multicultural schools worldwide. As demographic trends continue diversifying student populations globally, understanding how to create classroom environments where all students feel valued and engaged becomes an increasingly urgent educational priority with implications for individual student success and broader social cohesion in diverse democracies.

METHODE

This study employed a multiple case study design to explore classroom management practices and their relationship to student engagement in multicultural primary schools across Toronto. Case study methodology was selected for its capacity to provide rich, contextualized understanding of complex phenomena in real-world settings, allowing exploration of how classroom management practices function within the specific cultural, institutional, and interpersonal contexts of diverse classrooms (Yin, 2018). Six primary schools serving grades kindergarten through six were purposively selected as case sites based on criteria including high student diversity (schools where no single cultural group comprised more than 30% of the student body), representation of different Toronto neighborhoods, and willingness to participate in extensive observation. The schools collectively served student populations representing over 40 different countries of origin, with approximately 65% of students speaking languages other than English as their first language. Within these schools, 18 classroom teachers (three from each school, representing primary, junior, and intermediate grades) participated as primary research participants.

Data collection occurred over one academic semester (September through December) and incorporated multiple qualitative methods to ensure comprehensive, triangulated understanding of classroom management and engagement. Classroom observations totaling 120 hours were conducted, with each participating teacher observed for approximately six to eight hours across multiple visits to capture typical classroom interactions and management practices. Observations focused on teacher-student interactions, behavioral expectations and their communication, responses to student behavior, engagement indicators across different students, and cultural dynamics in classroom interactions. Field notes documented both descriptive details of classroom events and reflective analytical memos. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all 18 teacher participants, exploring their classroom management philosophies, specific strategies used, challenges encountered in multicultural contexts, and perceptions of what promotes engagement among diverse students. The interview protocol, adapted from Weinstein et al.'s (2004) culturally responsive classroom management framework, included questions such as "How do you establish behavioral expectations in your

multicultural classroom?" and "Can you describe a time when cultural differences influenced a classroom management situation?" Additionally, 12 school administrators (principals and vice-principals) were interviewed regarding school-level policies, support for teachers, and approaches to diversity and engagement.

To incorporate student perspectives, focus groups were conducted with 72 students across grades 3-6, with four student focus groups at each school (12-14 students per group). Focus group protocols used age-appropriate language and activities to explore students' experiences of classroom rules and expectations, what helped them feel engaged in learning, and how cultural backgrounds influenced their school experiences. Document analysis examined school policies, classroom rules, behavior management systems, and curricular materials for evidence of cultural responsiveness. Data analysis followed thematic analysis procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), beginning with data familiarization through repeated reading of transcripts and field notes, followed by systematic coding identifying patterns related to management practices, engagement, and cultural dynamics. Codes were then grouped into themes capturing essential dimensions of classroom management in multicultural contexts. Trustworthiness was established through prolonged engagement in research sites, triangulation across multiple data sources and participants, member checking with teacher participants who reviewed and validated preliminary findings, peer debriefing with colleagues experienced in multicultural education research, and maintenance of reflexive journals documenting researchers' assumptions and interpretations. Ethical approval was obtained from both university and school board research ethics committees, with informed consent from all adult participants and assent from student participants along with parental consent.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Culturally Responsive Management as Foundation for Inclusive Engagement

The most significant finding emerging from this study was that teachers who successfully engaged diverse students employed classroom management approaches grounded in culturally responsive principles that recognized, valued, and incorporated students' cultural backgrounds into behavioral systems and expectations. These teachers explicitly acknowledged cultural diversity in their classrooms, viewing it as an asset rather than challenge, and systematically designed management practices reflecting multicultural values. For example, one grade 4 teacher explained, "I don't just have a standard set of classroom rules that I impose from day one. We spend the first weeks of school building our classroom community together, with students sharing what respectful behavior means in their families and cultures, and we create expectations that honor everyone's backgrounds." This collaborative norm-building contrasted sharply with traditional approaches where teachers unilaterally establish rules reflecting dominant cultural values, then expect universal compliance regardless of cultural alignment.

Culturally responsive management practices observed in this study took multiple forms. Teachers incorporated multilingual resources and signage, posted classroom rules in multiple languages represented in their classes, and used students' home languages strategically during management interactions to ensure comprehension and demonstrate linguistic validation. They integrated cultural holidays, communication styles, and conflict resolution approaches from students' backgrounds into classroom practices. Several teachers had established "cultural sharing" routines where students taught classmates about behavioral norms from their cultures, building intercultural awareness and understanding. One grade 3 teacher maintained a "respect looks different" chart where students added examples of how respect is shown in different cultures—bowing versus handshaking, direct versus indirect eye contact, verbal affirmation versus quiet attention—helping students recognize behavioral diversity as normal rather than deviant. These practices align with Gay's (2018) culturally responsive teaching framework and appeared to significantly enhance engagement by signaling to students that their cultural identities were welcome in classroom spaces.

The impact on student engagement was evident across multiple indicators. Students in culturally responsive classrooms demonstrated higher levels of participation, more positive affect during learning activities, stronger peer collaboration across cultural groups, and fewer behavioral disruptions compared to classrooms employing more traditional management approaches. Focus group data revealed that students acutely perceived whether their cultures were valued, with one student noting, "My teacher knows about Diwali and lets me share about it. She asked my mom about how we show respect at home so she could understand me better. That makes me feel like I belong here." This sense of belonging, fostered through culturally validating management practices, appeared to mediate engagement by creating psychological safety that enabled students to take intellectual risks, participate actively, and invest energy in learning. Conversely, students in less culturally responsive classrooms described feeling confused about expectations, worried about being punished for cultural differences, or resentful of management approaches that felt culturally dismissive, factors that inhibited engagement.

However, implementing culturally responsive management presented significant challenges. Teachers reported difficulty acquiring deep knowledge about dozens of different cultural backgrounds represented in their classrooms, particularly when students' cultures were distant from their own experiences. They worried about stereotyping when trying to accommodate cultural differences and struggled to determine when to adapt expectations for cultural contexts versus maintaining consistent standards. As one teacher explained, "I want to be culturally responsive, but I also can't have completely different rules for every student. How do I honor cultural differences while still having a functional classroom community?" This tension between cultural responsiveness and consistency represents a central dilemma in multicultural management, requiring what Ladson-

Billings (2021) describes as "cultural dexterity"—the ability to flexibly navigate cultural complexities rather than applying rigid rules. Teachers who managed this tension most successfully emphasized core values (respect, responsibility, safety) while allowing flexibility in how those values were expressed and achieved, recognizing that behavioral manifestations of shared values could differ across cultural contexts while underlying principles remained consistent.

Relationship-Building as Bridge Across Cultural Differences

The second major theme revealed relationship-building as central to effective classroom management and engagement in multicultural contexts. Teachers who successfully engaged diverse students invested substantial time and effort developing personal relationships with each student, learning about their backgrounds, interests, families, and experiences. This relational foundation created trust that buffered against cultural misunderstandings, provided teachers with cultural knowledge informing management decisions, and communicated care that motivated student cooperation and engagement. One particularly effective grade 5 teacher described her approach: "I make it my mission to really know each kid—not just as a student but as a whole person with a culture, family, and life outside school. When I understand where they're coming from, I can manage the classroom in ways that work for them, and they engage because they know I care about them as individuals." This relationship-centered approach reflects research by Pianta and Stuhlman (2004) emphasizing teacher-student relationships as foundational to classroom management effectiveness.

Relationship-building practices observed included learning key phrases in students' home languages and using them during personal interactions, attending community cultural events to understand students' backgrounds, conducting home visits or having extensive family conversations to learn about cultural values and expectations, incorporating students' interests into instruction and management systems, and consistently demonstrating personal interest in students' lives and wellbeing. Teachers maintained detailed notes about each student's cultural background, family structure, and individual characteristics, referring to these notes when making management decisions. Several teachers had established regular "circle time" or "morning meetings" focused explicitly on building classroom community and interpersonal relationships, using these structures to help students connect across cultural differences and develop shared understanding despite diverse backgrounds. These practices required significant time investment, particularly early in the school year, but teachers reported that this investment paid substantial dividends through smoother classroom management and higher engagement throughout the year.

The relationship-building approach proved particularly powerful for bridging cultural differences in behavioral expectations and conflict resolution (Muhsyanur, 2022). When behavioral issues arose, teachers with strong student relationships could draw on cultural understanding to interpret behavior contextually rather than

punitively. For instance, one teacher described a situation where a student from a culture valuing indirect communication repeatedly avoided eye contact during conversations about behavior, which teachers might typically interpret as disrespect or defiance. However, because this teacher had built a relationship with the student and family, she understood that indirect eye contact reflected cultural norms of deference to authority rather than disrespect. This cultural knowledge allowed her to address the behavioral concern effectively without imposing culturally inappropriate expectations about eye contact, preserving the relationship and the student's engagement. Students across focus groups consistently emphasized that they engaged more in classes where teachers "really know us" and "care about us as people, not just students," highlighting how personal relationships mediated engagement.

However, intensive relationship-building in diverse classrooms presented challenges. Teachers described emotional exhaustion from attempting to develop deep relationships with 25-30 students from vastly different backgrounds while managing full teaching responsibilities. Some teachers felt they lacked skills for cross-cultural relationship-building, particularly when language barriers complicated communication. Time constraints limited opportunities for the extended conversations and interactions that relationships require. Additionally, some teachers worried that close relationships might lead to favoritism or inconsistent management across students. Despite these challenges, data clearly indicated that relationship-building distinguished teachers who successfully engaged multicultural students from those who struggled, suggesting that teacher preparation and professional development should emphasize relational competencies alongside pedagogical and content knowledge. As Ladson-Billings (2021) argues, culturally responsive teaching is fundamentally relational work requiring teachers to see students as whole people embedded in cultural contexts rather than as abstract learners receiving standardized instruction.

Adaptive and Flexible Management Strategies

The third central theme identified adaptive, flexible management strategies as essential for engaging students across cultural differences. Rather than implementing rigid, universal behavior systems, effective teachers in multicultural contexts employed management approaches characterized by flexibility, responsiveness to individual and cultural contexts, and continuous adjustment based on student needs and classroom dynamics. These teachers maintained core expectations while differentiating how expectations were communicated, implemented, and reinforced based on cultural considerations. One grade 6 teacher explained, "I've learned that what works for one student or cultural group doesn't necessarily work for another. I have to read the room constantly, adjust my approach, and have multiple strategies ready rather than one-size-fits-all management." This adaptive mindset contrasts with traditional management training that often emphasizes consistency and predictability as management ideals,

without acknowledging that cultural responsiveness may require differential approaches.

Table 1: Adaptive Classroom Management Strategies in Multicultural Contexts

Management Domain	Traditional Approach	Culturally Adaptive Approach
Rule Establishment	Teacher-imposed universal rules	Collaborative, culturally-informed norms
Communication Style	Direct, explicit verbal instructions	Multiple communication modes (verbal, visual, gestural); culturally adapted directness
Behavioral Correction	Public, immediate consequences	Private conversations; restorative approaches; culturally appropriate timing
Reward Systems	Individual recognition and competition	Balance of individual and collective rewards; culturally appropriate recognition forms
Conflict Resolution	Adult-mediated; emphasis on apology	Varied approaches including peer mediation, family involvement, indirect resolution
Authority Structures	Clear teacher authority; student compliance	Negotiated authority; respect for cultural authority norms
Space Arrangement	Fixed seating; teacher-centered	Flexible arrangements; culturally responsive spatial norms
Time Management	Strict schedules; punctuality emphasis	Flexible time frames; acknowledgment of cultural time orientations

Specific adaptive strategies included differentiating communication of expectations using multiple modalities (verbal, visual, demonstrative) to accommodate varied learning styles and language proficiencies, adjusting behavioral correction approaches based on cultural norms about public versus private feedback, implementing both individual and collective reward systems to honor cultures valuing individual achievement and those emphasizing group success, incorporating varied conflict resolution approaches reflecting different cultural traditions, and maintaining flexible time expectations recognizing that cultures differ in time orientation and punctuality norms. Teachers described constantly "reading" classroom dynamics and adjusting management approaches in real-time based on student responses, cultural contexts, and situational factors. This adaptability required sophisticated observational skills, cultural knowledge, and large repertoires of management strategies.

The impact of adaptive management on engagement was substantial. Students in flexibly managed classrooms demonstrated sustained attention, active participation, and positive behavioral patterns, whereas students in rigidly managed classrooms showed more disengagement, particularly among those whose cultural backgrounds diverged significantly from the teacher's management approach (Muhsyanur et al., 2021). Observational data revealed that adaptive teachers successfully maintained productive learning environments despite diversity, with smooth transitions, minimal disruption, and high levels of time-on-task. Student focus groups indicated that flexibility communicated respect and understanding, with one student noting, "My teacher doesn't treat everyone exactly the same, but she's fair because she understands that we're all different and need different things." This quote captures an important distinction between equal treatment (same approach for all) and equitable treatment (differentiated approaches ensuring fair outcomes), reflecting principles from critical pedagogy emphasizing equity over uniformity (Sleeter, 2012).

Nevertheless, adaptive management required sophisticated professional judgment and raised questions about boundaries of appropriate differentiation. Teachers worried about accusations of favoritism or inconsistency when employing differentiated management approaches. Some struggled to determine which cultural accommodations were appropriate versus which might lower expectations inappropriately. The cognitive demands of continuously assessing and adjusting management across multiple cultural contexts sometimes led to decision fatigue, particularly for less experienced teachers. Additionally, some students and families from dominant cultural backgrounds sometimes perceived culturally adaptive practices as "special treatment" for others, creating tensions requiring careful navigation. These challenges highlight that culturally responsive management is complex professional practice requiring extensive cultural knowledge, pedagogical skill, reflective capacity, and institutional support—capacities often underdeveloped in teacher preparation. As Weinstein et al. (2004) argue, preparing teachers for effective management in diverse classrooms requires moving beyond generic management strategies toward culturally grounded approaches acknowledging diversity's implications for every aspect of classroom interaction and organization.

CONCLUSION

This study illuminates the complex, multifaceted relationship between classroom management practices and student engagement in multicultural primary schools, demonstrating that effective management in diverse contexts requires fundamentally different approaches than traditional models developed for culturally homogeneous classrooms. The findings reveal that culturally responsive management practices—those that recognize, value, and incorporate students' cultural backgrounds—create inclusive classroom environments where diverse students feel they belong, understand expectations, and engage meaningfully in learning. Relationship-building emerged as the foundation enabling teachers to

navigate cultural differences effectively, providing the trust and cultural knowledge necessary for appropriate management decisions. Adaptive, flexible management strategies that differentiate approaches based on cultural contexts while maintaining core values proved essential for engaging students across difference. Together, these elements constitute a culturally responsive management framework that promotes both diversity and engagement, moving beyond false dichotomies between cultural responsiveness and classroom order.

The study's findings have significant implications for teacher education, professional development, and school policies. Teacher preparation programs must move beyond generic management training to develop teachers' cultural competence, relationship-building skills, and adaptive capacities necessary for effective management in diverse contexts. This preparation should include explicit attention to cultural dimensions of behavior, communication, authority, and conflict resolution, combined with opportunities to practice culturally responsive management in diverse field placements with skilled mentoring. Professional development for practicing teachers should provide ongoing support for culturally responsive practice, including collaborative inquiry into cultural dynamics in management, sharing of effective strategies, and structured reflection on cultural assumptions influencing management decisions. Schools should establish policies supporting culturally responsive management, including diverse representation in disciplinary decision-making, data monitoring for cultural equity in discipline, and resource allocation for relationship-building time and cultural learning opportunities for teachers.

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