

Preservice Teachers' Perceptions of Peer Support Groups for Enhancing Classroom Management Skills

Percepciones de docentes en formación acerca de los grupos de apoyo entre pares para mejorar las habilidades de manejo de clase

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This article reports the results of a qualitative exploratory study with the objective of inquiring about the perceptions of a group of preservice teachers regarding the analysis of classroom incidents through peer support groups as a strategy for enhancing their classroom management skills in an English teacher education program at a Colombian university. The data gathered included one-on-one and focus group interviews as well as the researchers' field notes. Findings indicated that the selected strategy helped participants reflect on their own and others' experiences, feel better prepared to respond to similar future situations, and raise awareness about the complexity of teaching and identity construction. The participants also acknowledged the relevance and usefulness of peer support groups for teacher education.

Keywords: classroom management, initial teacher education, peer support groups

Este artículo presenta los resultados de un estudio cualitativo exploratorio que investigó las percepciones de un grupo de docentes en formación sobre el análisis de incidentes del aula mediante grupos de apoyo entre pares como estrategia para mejorar las habilidades de manejo de clase en un programa formador de docentes de inglés de una universidad colombiana. La información recopilada incluyó entrevistas individuales, grupos focales y notas de campo. Se encontró que tal estrategia ayudó a los participantes a reflexionar sobre experiencias propias y de otros, a sentirse mejor preparados para enfrentar situaciones similares futuras, y a concientizarse sobre la complejidad del proceso de enseñanza y su construcción de identidad. Los participantes también concedieron relevancia y utilidad a la estrategia de grupos de apoyo entre pares para la formación docente.

Palabras clave: formación inicial docente, grupos de apoyo entre pares, manejo de clase

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How to cite this article (APA, 7th ed.): Macías, D. F., Muñoz, C. A., & Losada-Rivas, J. J. (2025). Preservice teachers' perceptions of peer support groups for enhancing classroom management skills. *Profile: Issues in Teachers' Professional Development*, 27(2), 173–188. <https://doi.org/10.15446/profile.v27n2.114061>

This article was received on April 23, 2024 and accepted on October 22, 2024.

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Introduction

When prospective teachers start their teaching practicum as part of their teacher education program, they encounter issues that are likely to shape and transform their professional teaching practices. Fritz and Miller (2003, as cited in Çakmak, 2008) point out that preservice teachers “experience concerns related to teaching during their teaching career, [which] might be more intense during the student teaching and the initial years” (p. 58). One such concern, primarily for beginning teachers at the primary and secondary school levels, relates to classroom management. Many teachers often struggle with implementing effective classroom management techniques, leading to a range of behavioral and learning challenges, including overcrowded classrooms, insufficient resources, students’ unwillingness to participate, disruptive talking, excessive noise, and students’ low proficiency level (Macías & Sánchez, 2015; Sariçoban, 2010). Despite claims that these issues should be addressed in teacher education programs, many preservice teachers face dilemmas that often remain unresolved in formal teacher preparation programs. Thus, once they start professional teaching, they find themselves in situations “where much of their energy is often transferred to learning how to survive in a new school culture” (Farrell, 2006, p. 212), while others often feel persistent frustration due to limited assistance and preparation in managing student behavior (Halford, 1998; Lane et al., 2005).

Aiming to understand how teachers with varying experience backgrounds cope with these major challenges, multiple studies have inquired into teachers’ cognition and decision-making during classroom management events. While a few of these studies have centered on analyzing teachers’ identification of these events in controlled environments (Stahnke & Blömeke, 2021; Wolff et al., 2015), others have explored the interactive cognitive processes that simultaneously occur in the exercise of teaching (Stollman et al., 2019; van Driel et al., 2022). Several authors (Allen, 2010; Chesley & Jordan, 2012) similarly highlight teachers’ insufficient

preservice training on classroom management and call for teacher education programs to address teachers’ appropriate reactions to class disruptions. There is also little doubt that many classroom management concerns often “lead to the collapse of the lesson plans prepared by the pre-service teachers,” who experience a “sense of fear of helplessness and loneliness in front of the whole class with a failed lesson plan in hand” (Merç, 2011, p. 85). In response to those scenarios, initiatives such as mentoring and induction programs “may be useful in supporting new teachers as they gain experience early in their careers” (Ferguson et al., 2012, p. 39).

Taken together, the previous ideas justify the need to think of concrete actions that can help preservice English teachers alleviate the impact of classroom management incidents in their teaching practice. Consequently, the present study aimed to explore the perceptions of a group of preservice teachers regarding the analysis of classroom incidents through peer support groups as a strategy to enhance the development of their classroom management skills in an English teacher education program at a public university in Colombia.

Conceptual Framework

Classroom Management

Classroom management can be defined as “the actions taken to create and maintain a learning environment conducive to successful instruction” (Brophy, 1996, p. 5) where four areas often overlap: “establishing and reinforcing rules and procedures, carrying out disciplinary actions, maintaining effective teacher and student relationships, and maintaining an appropriate mental set for management” (Marzano, 2003, p. 88). For Sánchez Solarte (2019), classroom management embraces “teachers’ dynamic decision-making about learning, and their emotionally-mediated reactions towards disruptive situations in the classroom” (p. 182), a task that requires careful planning rather than mere intuition.

Various studies have investigated the phenomenon of classroom management in language teacher education. For instance, Merç (2011) identified classroom management as a source of anxiety for a group of Turkish preservice teachers who claimed that “they were highly anxious about students’ indifference in their lessons despite the colorful handouts, and their efforts in front of the board” (p. 85), while Dicke et al. (2014) found that emotional exhaustion and stress are a direct consequence to teachers who usually experience difficulties in dealing with classroom disruptions, therefore suggesting that teacher education programs need to be more closely matched to preservice teachers’ needs. In a study on EFL students’ perspectives of their teachers’ classroom discipline strategy use, Rahimi and Hosseini (2012) found that teachers turn to recognition and reward more frequently and to punishment and aggression less often when coping with students’ misbehavior in the classroom. In another study, Stoughton (2007) noted that preservice teachers identified classroom management “as a subject about which there is a fairly wide disparity between what is taught in university classes and seminars and the theoretical construct upon which many behavioral plans are based” (p. 1026). This disparity may reinforce the view that the conceptions and strategies that preservice teachers gain in formal education are replaced by the harsh reality they must face in actual school settings (Farrell, 2006).

Sullivan et al. (2014) investigated the extent to which student behavior constitutes a concern for school teachers. The authors found that low-level disruptive and disengaged behaviors are common and challenging for teachers to manage, whereas aggressive and antisocial behaviors are rare. Teachers typically rely on strategies to manage unproductive behaviors that “locate the problem within individual students” (p. 45). The study suggests that teachers who engage and reason with the students are more likely to adopt proactive classroom management techniques, such as setting clear expectations and building positive

student–teacher relationships, rather than relying solely on punitive measures.

Díaz et al. (2023) inquired about the challenges that hindered effective teaching practices in a group of 15 Colombian in-service teachers from a public university. Their findings suggested that classroom size, lack of experience, poor mentoring in the practicum, and difficulties with lesson planning were all aspects that greatly affected teachers’ classroom management practices. In connection with this, Sánchez Solarte (2019) acknowledges that while teaching is a complex endeavor, it has negative consequences, including a lack of motivation, involvement, and ultimately, learning, often derived from struggling with classroom management. Thus, she adds, it is pivotal to support novice L2 teachers in this process, as it has a direct impact on the construction of their identity and professional practice.

In sum, there is a salient necessity to further inquire about the role that teacher education programs should play in equipping preservice teachers with effective classroom management strategies during their teaching practice.

Peer Support Groups

In the context of language teacher education, peer support groups began to be implemented as a strategy aimed at collectively supporting and providing feedback on teaching and learning. Conceptually speaking, peer mentoring is regarded “as a process whereby teachers/ more capable teachers help each other to learn by providing . . . professional and emotional support” (Nguyen, 2017, p. 29). Grounded in the foundations of social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978), reflective practice in teacher education (Dewey, 1938), and cooperative learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1994), peer support groups emphasize the value of the psychological, emotional, social, and academic support that students and teachers often require in the exercise of teaching. In practical terms, peer support groups involve a group of teachers coming together to analyze class situations and offer

mutual support, rooted in their knowledge base and past experiences, for the benefit of their teaching. As documented in the literature, peer support groups are bound to offer more reciprocity, as peers tend to share equal status compared to other traditional methods, such as teacher support, that often involve a more authoritative approach (Cauce et al., 1982).

Several studies have documented the use of peer support groups in language teacher education. Nguyen (2013), for example, looked at the impact of peer mentoring on the perceptions of preservice EFL teachers concerning psychosocial support during the teaching practicum. Findings revealed that participants from the treatment group who had been involved in a set of peer mentoring sessions received and performed more psychosocial support than teachers from the control group. Similarly, Castañeda-Londoño (2017) reported the results of a qualitative descriptive study that involved implementing a peer coaching activity with three teachers from a private university language center in Colombia. After partaking in said peer coaching sessions, the participants expressed evolving views about their teaching selves, claiming that having a peer observe and comment on their classes was a way to analyze their praxis and further develop their own teaching identities.

In another study, Porras et al. (2018) implemented peer coaching and reverse mentoring with two groups: a group of 10 experienced, non-licensed English teachers from a public elementary school and a group of preservice teachers from a university in Colombia. By working in pairs, the strategy initially required in-service and preservice teachers to observe each other's lessons and reflect upon their shared insights throughout the process. The findings suggested that, on the one hand, both novice (mentors) and expert (mentees) teachers strengthened their relationships due to the collaborative nature of the strategies. In fact, experienced teachers reported benefiting greatly from the observations conducted of their assigned preservice teacher, as they developed a better understanding of

how to carry out an English lesson and learned new strategies to use within their own contexts. On the other hand, preservice teachers claimed that their experienced partners helped them consolidate other areas such as school duties, pedagogical procedures, and classroom management strategies.

Other scholars have inquired about the evolution of teachers' professional identities when participating in collaborative initiatives. For example, Valle et al. (2022) analyzed feedback sessions (i.e., the reverse mentoring strategy) conducted among novice and experienced teachers who reflected on a set of classroom observations made at their institutions. They concluded that the reverse mentoring strategy enhanced the transformation of teachers' beliefs about teaching and fostered better and more informed practices originating from the observations and discussions held among participants. Dang (2013) also carried out a study on the development and evolution of the professional identities of two Vietnamese prospective teachers enrolled in a joint-activity system (i.e., planning and teaching as a paired activity) during their teaching practicum. Through the analysis of classroom observations, lesson video recordings, and semi-structured interviews, the author found that, throughout the implementation of the joint-activity system, prospective teachers dealt with contradictions that reflected the constant changes in their identities as college students and preservice teachers about pedagogical aspects such as lesson planning and classroom performance. In Dang's words, "[such] differences created discomfort and tensions for the teachers at times but were conducive for *[sic]* teacher learning" (p. 56).

In sum, peer support groups and other equivalent alternatives appear to have proved effective in supporting teachers' professional development. Thus, the current study relies on preservice teachers' own documented experiences, in the form of classroom incidents derived from their practicum, as the primary input for developing peer support sessions with a focus on enhancing participants' classroom management

skills. The strategy at hand challenges the traditional practicum supervision experiences and encourages preservice and in-service teachers to become reflective practitioners who contribute to developing more effective classroom management abilities.

Method

This exploratory study employed a qualitative research design. The study focused on exploring participants' perceived benefits of analyzing classroom incidents through the strategy of peer support groups, aiming to enhance the development of their classroom management skills. Peer support groups included preservice teachers, cooperating teachers, and practicum supervisors who collaboratively analyzed and reflected on the classroom management incidents reported by the preservice teachers from their practicum experiences.

Context and Participants

We conducted this study in the context of an undergraduate English teacher education program at a public university in southern Colombia. The participants included nine preservice teachers doing their first or second teaching practicum in either a primary or a secondary urban public school. The teaching practicums in the teacher education program serve as the culmination of a series of coursework (e.g., Introduction to Teaching Settings, Second Language Learning Theories and Teaching Methods, Course Design and Assessment, Language Skills Teaching, etc.) that provides them with the theoretical and methodological tools for teaching. The study also included the participation of six cooperating English teachers from five of the various public schools where preservice teachers often complete their teaching practice, as well as the involvement of six practicum supervisors, who are typically designated by the teacher education program to supervise preservice teachers. Cooperating teachers and practicum supervisors were selected based on their experience hosting preservice teachers in their schools and classrooms, in

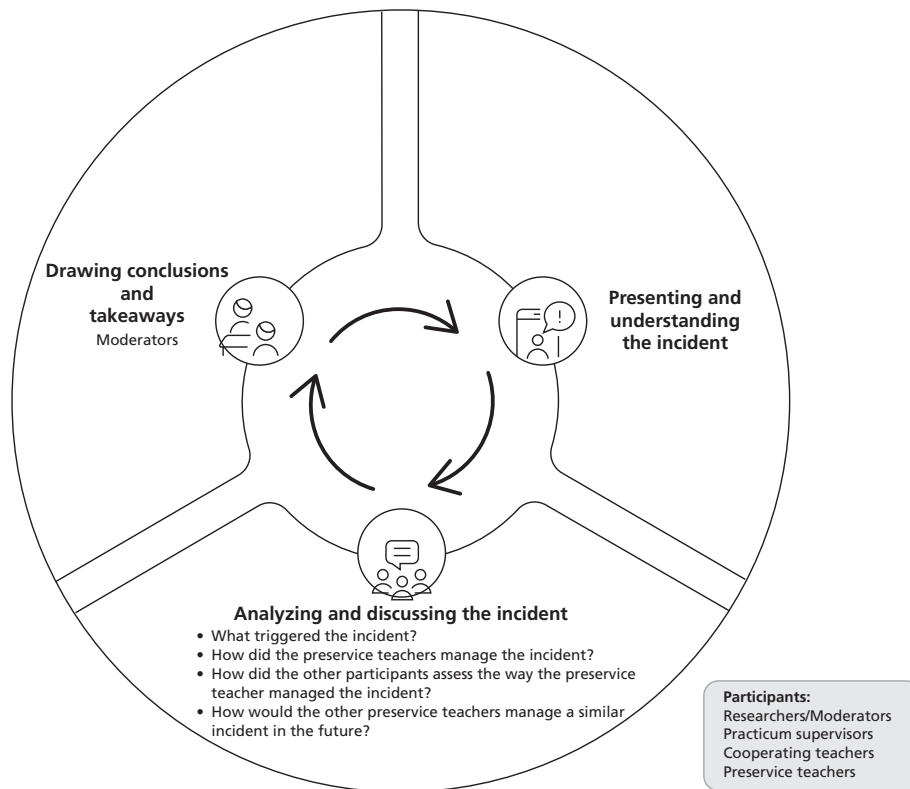
the case of the former, and supervising the practicum of preservice teachers, for the latter.

As teacher educators working for the same teacher education program, we were able to act as interpreters and to gain a deeper understanding of the intricate and subtle aspects of the participants' practicum experiences. Although some of the preservice teachers had been our students earlier in the program, we had no direct connections with them as students during the study or with the schools where they completed their practicum.

Data Collection and Procedure

Initially, we sent an online questionnaire to all 42 preservice teachers in the teacher education program, asking if they considered classroom management a concern and if they would be willing to participate in a study addressing that issue. Nearly 90% of them responded that classroom management is a concern, and they expressed a willingness to participate. Then, we invited them to a meeting to brief them on the methodology of the study and confirm their participation. Nine out of the 17 preservice teachers who attended the meeting accepted and signed a consent form and, as a first step, documented and emailed to us a classroom management incident they had recently experienced in their current or previous practicum periods. A "critical" incident was introduced as "any unplanned and unanticipated event, 'vividly remembered,' which occurs during class, outside class, or any time during a teacher's career" (Farrell & Baecher, 2017, p. 2). Incidents reported revolved around issues such as sudden classroom disruptions, non-compliance or defiance of classroom rules, activity development, and teachers' resolution of class conflicts. Later, in a series of two-hour peer support group sessions, participants (preservice teachers, cooperating teachers, and practicum supervisors) analyzed the reported incidents and offered alternative ways to approach them in the future. Figure 1 illustrates the functioning of the peer support group strategy.

Figure 1. Peer Support Group Strategy



The whole strategy consisted of nine peer support group sessions, with an average of three classroom incidents per session. Right after the completion of the first three sessions, we conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews to collect preservice teachers' initial perceptions of the peer support groups (e.g., "What do you think about the procedure underlying the peer support group sessions?", "How have you felt during the development of the sessions?", "What do you think about the cooperating teachers' and practicum supervisors' comments during the peer support sessions?"), and to gather insights (e.g., "What kind of classroom management incidents should be addressed in future peer support sessions?", "What suggestions do you have in relation to the strategy development?") to refine the upcoming peer support sessions. Upon completion of the final session, we conducted a focus group interview

with the preservice teachers to inquire about the value of the strategy in question (e.g., "What are your main takeaways from the peer support groups?", "Has the strategy of peer support groups influenced your classroom management skills? If so, in what ways?", "How can this strategy benefit other preservice teachers?", "What was the relevance of the discussed classroom incidents?").

Data Analysis

We followed a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) to analyze the data. First, we transcribed the semi-structured interviews conducted after the first three peer support sessions, our field notes derived from our role as moderators, and the focus group interviews held at the end of the final peer support session. The initial coding, documented through marginal notes, revealed preliminary themes. Next, we engaged in

memo-writing to further analyze the data and codes from different perspectives. This analytical approach allowed us to identify emerging patterns through the dataset. We then proposed tentative categories by employing theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2012) to shape the preliminary themes and emerging patterns into well-defined categories. This comprehensive process resulted in the identification of 10 preliminary categories as illustrated in Table 1.

Following an exhaustive analysis of the data, we noted that preliminary categories 1 and 2 on the one hand, and 5 and 6 on the other hand, could be merged into final categories 1 and 3, respectively, as these involved complementary elements. Similarly, we decided to merge preliminary categories 3, 4, and

7 into final category 2 due to overlapping ideas that would be repetitive if presented separately. Similarly, we chose to combine preliminary categories 8, 9, and 10 into final category 4 to capture the relevance and usefulness of the strategy for the field of formal teacher education.

We relied on member checking (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to validate the data. Accordingly, we asked four of the preservice teachers to comment on an initial draft of the findings regarding their perceptions of peer support groups as a strategy to enhance the development of their classroom management skills. These participants suggested some fine-tuning in the use of certain verbs and clarified the meaning of some previous responses.

Table 1. Preliminary and Final Categories

Aim of the study:	
To explore preservice teachers' perceptions of analyzing classroom incidents through peer support groups as a strategy to enhance the development of their classroom management skills.	
Preliminary categories	Final categories
1. Resonating with earlier experiences	1. Reflecting on one's and others' experiences
2. Recognizing the relevance of reflection	2. Feeling prepared to face similar situations in the future
3. Anticipating potential classroom management problems	3. Raising awareness about the complexity of teaching and identity construction
4. Gaining a stronger sense of authority in the classroom	4. Acknowledging the relevance and usefulness of the strategy for teacher education
5. Teaching involving more than just delivering content	
6. Growing awareness of their teacher identity construction	
7. Feelings of progress and confidence in managing the classroom	
8. Bridging the gap between theoretical and practical concerns through the program coursework	
9. Reacting positively to the strategy	
10. Feelings of relevance and connection of the topics of the incidents with the immediate context	

Findings and Discussion

Reflecting on One's and Others' Experiences

The joint discussion and analysis of classroom management incidents through peer support groups provided preservice teachers with the opportunity to reflect on their own classroom experiences, as triggered by the comments of cooperating teachers and practicum supervisors during the group sessions. The preservice teachers acknowledged the value of experienced teachers' views regarding the incidents, as such views were grounded on the expertise that they had developed over the years. In this regard, Andrés¹ claimed that "one of the main contributions we had was precisely the experience of the [cooperating] teachers who had been working in the institutions for many years" (Interview). The involvement of in-service teachers and practicum supervisors helped the preservice teachers weigh each perspective, translate it into their own current experiences, and reflect on the best course of action if similar situations arose in their teaching. As Luisa similarly put it:

One of the [cooperating] teachers calmly took a particular route...and so I felt that that was more in line with what I would do in class. Then, what another cooperating teacher suggested may be useful for some of my peers, but not for me. It's like identifying and connecting with the teachers who were there, with what they said. (Interview)

The preservice teachers valued the chance of analyzing the incidents from different perspectives including those of their own, of their fellow preservice teachers, of the cooperating teachers, and of the practicum supervisors, even when such discussions sometimes led to sharing contradicting views on how to properly act and make decisions in the classroom (Dang, 2013). Lina, for

example, indicated that "having different teachers in each session allowed us to reflect on different points of view. It was like seeing the same incident from various angles" (Focus group). As Laura also commented:

Apart from listening to the experienced teachers, it was also good to get the perspective of our fellow student teachers, who, despite being in the same stage of development, sometimes had a perspective that complemented ours or that helped us to reflect on the problem from another point of view. (Interview)

As they reflected on their own and others' experiences and reactions to the classroom incidents, the preservice teachers felt that they were not alone and that similar experiences and courses of action converged, even though they were completing their teaching practicum in different settings. In this regard, José stated:

It is not only a personal reflection, but also a collective one with our fellow prospective teachers, as well as with the teachers that work in the schools. It helped us to reflect and connect with the classroom, you know, to say "I witness it, I recognize it, and then it becomes automatic." As we reflected on the incident from different perspectives, it was almost as though I already knew what I could do if a problem like that happened to me. (Focus group)

In short, the strategy of peer support groups triggered participants' reflections on their own and others' experiences, particularly those coming from the practical wisdom of cooperating teachers and practicum supervisors. By analyzing the incidents from multiple viewpoints, the participants gained a more nuanced understanding of potentially effective classroom management strategies. The present finding is reassuring in at least two major respects. First, it highlights the need for teachers to permanently engage in reflective practice (Farrell, 2014), and second, it underscores the commitment of teachers to provide each other with mutual support (Ferguson et al., 2012; Nguyen,

¹ Pseudonyms will be used throughout this article to protect participant confidentiality, in accordance with ethical research guidelines.

2017) often required when looking for ways to sort out classroom management challenges.

Feeling Prepared to Face Similar Situations in the Future

The preservice teachers also developed a sense of being better prepared to face similar classroom management situations in the future, while highlighting the relevance of the topics of the incidents for their teaching. Lina remarked:

The topics of the incidents are going to be relevant for my teaching, especially because I will soon immerse myself in the world of teaching, so I think that each topic we addressed here may be adapted at some point to the context where I'll work. (Interview)

Consistent with the literature (Porrás et al., 2018), we found that the peer support sessions provided participants with tools and strategies to manage or better respond to aspects of their teaching. Susana commented that "it was a meaningful experience which gave us tools and a lot of advice now that we are about to enter the field" (Focus group). Some of these tools included strategies for managing one's voice, ways to recapture students' attention, and procedures to establish boundaries for students in the classroom. As Andrés put it, "managing my voice so that I don't have to shout but rather use an adequate tone of voice so that the students can listen to and follow my instructions, especially in terms of discipline" (Focus group). Laura similarly emphasized regaining students' attention: "It's like getting their attention, that is, when they are dispersed, looking for a way to capture their attention" (Interview), while Valentina reported on establishing boundaries and "making it clear that I am the one in charge, that it all goes well depending on the clarity of my instructions" (Interview).

Another related aspect involved the preservice teachers' increased awareness of the procedures and protocols for responding to classroom management situations.

They [in the teacher education program] never tell you: "If this happens, there is this route; if this other thing happens, there is this other route." I had never been told what to do if a child has an accident in the classroom, if a child gets hurt, who to turn to. I feel that this was like a manual for practice. (Valentina, Focus group)

Laura also added that she now knew what she could or should do if she had a problem like the one reported by one of her peers, whereas Luisa provided further evidence on the protocols to manage classroom management situations:

The school protocols, the advice that some teachers gave us in terms of what to do or where to go if something happens. For example, if someone gets hurt, you shouldn't leave the classroom, you shouldn't let other students gather around the student, you must keep a written record of the incident because the students may take advantage of some situations. (Focus group)

The topics discussed through the peer support groups laid the groundwork for analyzing upcoming teaching events. In fact, participants highlighted positive changes in their praxis, ranging from developing a greater sense of authority to boosting their confidence as teachers. Despite claims that they did not have proper strategies for group control and behavioral modeling at the beginning of their practicum, the preservice teachers began to exercise their agency and build a stricter style of teaching whenever required, as the following excerpt illustrates:

I believe that there was a change in my authority because I was afraid to be too demanding and strict with my students, because I don't identify myself with being bossy...yelling at them and all that. I don't like to be like that, but I learned that in certain cases it is necessary. (José, Focus group)

This finding further supports the idea that, as teachers become more experienced, they tend to be

more controlling in their lessons (Unal & Unal, 2009), depending on the circumstances.

The preservice teachers also developed insights into managing student misbehavior and working with special learners. As Susana claimed, “the discussion of incidents through the group sessions constituted the only place where I found a guide on how to proceed or how to work with children with special needs. It was very helpful” (Interview). Laura, in contrast, shared ideas on ways to respond to student misbehavior that she gained from the peer support sessions:

There is always a student who doesn't want to do anything, who often promotes indiscipline. There are also children who finish quickly, who finish first, who know the topic, so I remember that we talked about putting them to work with students who were a little behind for different reasons. Approaching and analyzing cases like these caught my attention because I saw them reflected in what I was doing in my practice. (Interview)

The previous gains resulting from the strategy of peer support groups are likely to contribute to mitigating the reported lack of support for dealing with classroom management issues (Lane et al., 2005) and the apparent sense of helplessness (Merç, 2011) that beginning teachers often experience.

The preservice teachers similarly reported feeling a sense of progress and increased confidence in their classroom management skills through the peer support sessions. Luisa pointed out that she was not the same person after her first teaching practice, as she was afraid of stopping and regaining control of the class when the students were misbehaving:

I used to let my cooperating teacher handle the discipline of the class. Now I feel that I should have the ability to manage any type of classroom. So, I feel that little by little we learn from our mistakes and those of others. (Interview)

The preservice teachers also noted that the peer support groups helped them develop other skills, such as

adaptability and the transferability of knowledge, which aimed to support their decision-making in classroom management situations. In fact, the preservice teachers showed interest in adopting the pattern or scheme of the group sessions (Figure 1) as a framework for analyzing classroom management issues in the future. In this sense, Susana remarked: “If we listen to one another as we talk about [an incident], that remains in one's mind! We do not often forget something that has happened to us or something we can relate to in our lives” (Focus group). Valentina also claimed that when she started her practicum, she “observed a problem or issue and tried to avoid it,” but thanks to the strategy of peer support groups, she now tries to identify what triggered it, and “how my colleagues have reacted, and how I can react or deal with it in a better way, that is, not to avoid it but to give it a prompt solution” (Interview).

All in all, the strategy of peer support groups provided preservice teachers with a sense of readiness and confidence to better respond to future teaching scenarios, thereby reducing the impact of classroom management challenges. These findings are in line with existing literature (Wei et al., 2009), which highlights the value of practical experiences in teacher preparation.

Raising Awareness About the Complexity of Teaching and Identity Construction

The analysis of incidents through the strategy of peer support groups also raised participants' awareness of the complexity of teaching and helped strengthen their identity construction. As the preservice teachers shared their beliefs, fears, and experiences in relation to the analyzed incidents, they began to consider other aspects of classroom life beyond the act of delivering content. For instance, Carmen asserted as follows:

I became aware of what happens in the classroom because, in my previous teaching practice, I dedicated myself to teaching topics and delivering lessons, while there were situations that arose in my teaching and that

often led me to lose control of the class. Consequently, I kind of left my students aside. I lost sight of them, and that caused more problems. (Focus group)

The previous excerpt illustrates a view of teaching concerned with beginning teachers initially “focus[ing] on themselves and their teaching...and then eventually on concerns that are related to student learning” (Fuller, 1969, as cited in Hammerness et al., 2005, p. 379). Carmen suggests that such a view falls short in encompassing the great complexity of teaching. Other areas, such as feedback provision, impromptu behavioral situations, and students’ lack of attention, appear to be overlooked within this initial view of teaching. Carmen reflects on how analyzing incidents through peer support groups enabled her to become more aware of other concerns that arise in her classroom.

In addition to raising their awareness of these issues, the preservice teachers also acknowledged their growing awareness of the construction of their teacher identity. As similarly reported by the participants in Macías and Sánchez (2015), Susana claimed that she did not see herself as a teacher:

Even though what I heard [the cooperating teachers] saying was happening to me, I was experiencing the construction of [my] teacher identity, and so I wondered: “Am I a teacher or am I still a student?” Since I’m still a student, I make mistakes; I don’t know everything, so I don’t feel like a teacher at all. (Interview)

Despite this dilemma, Susana reported having “gained the confidence to talk about and reaffirm the actions that [she] took in response to certain classroom management situations” (Interview).

Thus, the peer support sessions made Susana progressively aware of the ongoing construction of her teacher identity. Although she did not initially recognize herself as a teacher due to her lack of experience and the level of expertise and support offered by the cooperating

teachers and practicum supervisors, the dynamics of the discussion and the familiarity of the incidents contributed to her reflection and growth. In this sense, Sánchez Solarte (2019) contends that it is necessary to support beginning teachers in managing the classroom, as this has a direct effect on their identity construction.

Altogether, the engagement with the strategy of peer support groups enhanced the preservice teachers’ awareness of other aspects that underlie their teaching practices and their identity construction.

Acknowledging the Relevance and Usefulness of the Strategy for Teacher Education

A recurrent theme in the preservice teachers’ responses was a sense that the strategy was relevant and useful for the formal education and preparation of language teachers. They identified a strong connection between the topics of the incidents and the immediate educational context; that is, the strategy of peer support groups helped them to make explicit their own experiences and to receive practical advice, which was directly applicable to their classroom situations (Sullivan et al., 2014). Camilo, for instance, argued:

[Since] the situations we have dealt with in the peer support groups are a central part of a teacher’s daily work, it makes perfect sense to have prospective teachers in a teacher education program learn about ways of addressing such incidents in dialogue with more experienced teachers. (Focus group)

Other preservice teachers suggested that the strategy of peer support groups should be implemented early on with future cohorts of teacher learners in teacher education programs:

It would be great if students [in the teacher education program] had the opportunity to experience this strategy prior to their first practicum so that they can feel more confident about sharing reflections with in-service teachers in subsequent collective scenarios. (Lina, Focus group)

It would be convenient to have a space to analyze what happens in the language classroom and how to respond to it; a space in which we can share and see different perspectives. In fact, when I interact with other peers about classroom management situations, I often share with them the procedures and actions that I learned [in the peer support sessions]. (Valentina, Interview)

Interestingly, Andrés suggested including the analysis of classroom management incidents and practicum-related issues “as an elective course in the teacher education program with the peer support groups as the central methodological strategy so that preservice teachers can establish an ongoing dialogue with more experienced teachers” (Interview). In a related concern, the preservice teachers highlighted that the strategy of peer support groups helped them realize the need to establish a connection between theoretical insights and experiential or practical knowledge as they progressed through the program coursework. In this sense, as preservice teachers gain theoretical concepts and ideas throughout the program of study, “there should be a stronger connection between such theoretical concepts and the experiential knowledge” (Carmen, Interview) derived from their prior encounters with the reality of teaching.

The analysis of data also showed that the participants reacted positively to the selected strategy. In their views, the peer support sessions constituted a welcoming, safe, and non-threatening environment where they could freely share their experiences without feeling judged. Despite the hierarchies among the participants involved (i.e., preservice teachers, cooperating teachers, and practicum supervisors), preservice teachers used them to their advantage and steadily nurtured their teaching persona from listening to one another, as the following quote illustrates:

At first, I felt intimidated to speak in front of the more experienced teachers. I always waited for them to say something so that I could connect or contribute. But as

the sessions went by, I understood that they were not there to say whether I was right or wrong. They appraised and welcomed my opinion. I felt quite comfortable in being able to say what I thought in relation to each incident. (Lina, Focus group)

The preservice teachers similarly associated that non-threatening environment with feelings of empathy and mutual understanding. Such mutual understanding seemed to be at least partly related to the nature of the teaching events that other stakeholders (e.g., peers, cooperating teachers) had experienced. Thus, the preservice teachers felt that others could understand what they were going through and ultimately placed them in a position to offer valuable advice. To further illustrate, Carmen commented: “Someone understands me! It doesn’t often happen to me that someone says: ‘Oh that happened to me too...and what did you do?’” (Interview). The group sessions, Carmen added, “helped us to identify problems, develop empathy, and understand that there are people who have experienced, are currently experiencing, or will experience the same things and so they probably know how to react to those situations” (Interview). Interestingly, Cauce et al. (1982) remind us that peer support is more reciprocal than teacher support, which frequently takes a more authoritative stance, because peers are more likely to have equal standing in the area.

The preservice teachers highlighted the usefulness of peer support groups as a relevant strategy for preparing prospective teachers, as they heighten the connection between the topics of the incidents and real-life classroom situations, while also promoting a non-judgmental and inclusive atmosphere through the sessions. Comparison of the findings with those of other studies (Nguyen, 2013; Porras et al., 2018; Valle et al., 2022) confirms the overall significance of strategies like peer support groups. The positive response to the strategy of peer support groups also resonates with previous research (Zeichner & Liston, 2014), which

stresses the effectiveness of reflective practices and peer support groups in teacher education.

Conclusions, Limitations, and Implications

We can initially conclude that peer support groups serve as a facilitating strategy among preservice teachers, emphasizing the inclusion of diverse perspectives and the importance of collectively addressing classroom management incidents. The findings equally underscore the significance of experiential learning and reflective practice as central aspects on the road to enhancing the readiness of prospective teachers to navigate the complexities of classroom environments (Nguyen, 2013; Porras et al., 2018; Valle et al., 2022).

The supportive and inclusive atmosphere of the peer support sessions, coupled with the exchange of experiences and advice, contributes to the strengthening of beginning teachers' identity construction, enabling them to respond more effectively to classroom management situations in professional teaching (Macías & Sánchez, 2015; Sánchez Solarte, 2019). Additionally, the participants' advocacy for the early implementation and formal integration of peer support initiatives into teacher education programs reinforces the transformative potential of collaborative learning experiences in facilitating meaningful dialogue and knowledge exchange between aspiring and experienced teachers alike.

This study highlights the benefits of peer-supported reflection on classroom incidents for enhancing classroom management skills. However, limitations include a small, potentially homogeneous sample, reliance on self-reported data, and a short study duration that restricts the evaluation of long-term effects. Additionally, variations in practicum settings and concurrent teacher education experiences could affect the findings. Future research should involve larger, more diverse samples, utilize multiple data sources to minimize bias, and explore the integration of teacher education methods for a more comprehensive view of professional development.

Future studies may also follow through preservice teachers' experiences with classroom management issues once they start professional teaching, in order to delve into the long-term effects of peer support groups. We also encourage further research on the perspectives of cooperating teachers and practicum supervisors regarding the challenges and potential benefits of implementing the peer support group strategy within the context of the practicum experience. We are confident that the previous ideas can contribute to a wider understanding of peer mentoring in the field of language teacher education.

We encourage teacher education programs to incorporate peer support groups as a strategy embedded in the development of the practicum experience, as they have proven to play a pivotal role in the personal and professional growth of prospective teachers. The analysis of classroom management incidents through peer support groups represents an excellent opportunity to promote sound discussions about teaching, where teachers' knowledge base (*knowing*), classroom practices (*doing*), and the constructed relationships (*relating*) among mentors, preservice teachers, and institutions are analyzed to potentialize teachers' undertakings (Kemmis et al., 2014; Lucero & Roncancio-Castellanos, 2019).

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