Where Do We Go from Here?: Responding to Carla Shalaby's Troublemakers

Eliot Graham
University of Montana

Introduction

I deeply enjoyed reading Carla Shalaby’s Troublemakers: Lessons in Freedom from Young Children in School. Her portraits of four young children who are positioned as “troublemakers” are engaging and vivid, offering an honest and complex look at who they are and how they interact with school norms and expectations. From these four portraits, she offers an insightful critique of schooling as a system, one that tends to operate in particular ways even when educators are skillful and well-intentioned. Ultimately, she takes an ethical and humanizing stance, pushing us to consider what we want from our schools and for our children. This sort of scholarship is tremendously important given the extent to which educational discourse and policy continue to be focused on standardized practices and measurable outcomes, neglecting the intricate realities of human lives.

As this book makes clear, even well-run schools with experienced and thoughtful teachers perpetrate an alarming amount of harm on children. However, while research has offered some documentation of the problems with common discipline and classroom management practices, we know little about what a more equitable and supportive approach would look like and even less about how to prepare new teachers to implement such an approach. In this essay, I respond to three aspects of Troublemakers that I found particularly noteworthy: Shalaby’s focus on behavior and classroom management, the balance she strikes between individual and structural analyses of children’s behavior, and the question of what role adult authority should play in children’s school lives.¹ Each of these three aspects offers us an important glimpse not only of where we are now, but also of where we need to go if we are to better understand the myriad impacts of classroom management practices on children and especially if we are to translate that understanding into real changes in teaching and schooling practice.

¹ There are many critiques of the term “classroom management,” and some scholars eschew its use entirely (e.g. Brantlinger & Danforth, 2011; Toshalis, 2010). Though I agree with many of these critiques, I choose to retain the term as a commonly recognized way of referring to the behavioral and relational aspects of teaching and classroom life.

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The Significance of Classroom Management

Shalaby is one of few researchers to focus on classroom management (Evertson & Weinstein, 2011) and one of even fewer to do so using a qualitative lens (for a notable exception to this pattern see Ferguson, 2001). While there are numerous quantitative studies of school discipline (e.g. Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002), scholarship on how teachers structure and respond to day-to-day behavior within the classroom tends to be focused on the “effectiveness” of various techniques or systems (e.g. Simonsen, Fairbanks, Briesch, Myers & Sugai, 2008), neglecting the ways that meanings are constructed and identities are shaped. Perhaps reflecting this situation, classroom management also receives little attention in university-based teacher preparation programs (Hammerness, 2011; Jones, 2011; Stough, 2011).

This lack of attention to classroom management in both research and teacher education is concerning for several reasons. First, classroom management practices impact students’ and teachers’ experiences of classroom life at a fundamental level. As illustrated in Troublemakers, teachers’ responses to perceived breaches of behavioral norms have a profound influence on students’ identities and on their relationships with teachers and classmates. For teachers, classroom management difficulties are a major source of stress and even burnout (Friedman, 2011; Hastings & Bham, 2003). Classroom management is also entangled with the academic curriculum, enabling or inhibiting different types of learning and perhaps even learning itself (Graham, 2017). In a meta-analysis of the literature, Wang, Haertel and Walberg (1990) identified classroom management as the school- or classroom-level variable that most impacts student learning. Shalaby vividly illustrates how students’ abilities to get their needs met interrupts their academic work, either because they are distracted or because teachers respond to their behavior by sending them away from the group or out of the classroom. Finally, classroom management practices arguably have implications that, as Shalaby puts it, “are neither solely individual nor solely economic,” but have an impact on our ability “to create the free country human beings deserve” (p. xxxvi). Her assertion is supported by my own work examining the civic implications of no-excuses behavior management, which revealed how such practices encourage students to develop passive, compliant, and individualistic relationships to societal institutions (Graham, 2017). At a broader level, these findings position classroom management as an implicit or “hidden” curriculum (Jackson, 1968/1990) that teaches academic, social-emotional, and civic lessons.

If our schools are to have any responsibility for creating a more just world, or even simply for preparing young people for democracy, classroom management practices must become a more central concern of researchers and teacher-educators. In Troublemakers, Shalaby both offers a valuable contribution to this body of knowledge and illustrates the need for continued work in this area.

Balancing Individual and Structural Analyses

In addition to being one of very few qualitative studies, Shalaby’s examination of classroom management contributes something unique in its attention to the individual
qualities of her child participants and to how those individual qualities interacted with school structures to produce trouble-making. Shalaby’s emphasis is on structure; as she explains, she made a number of choices, including purposely selecting schools and teachers that are exceptional rather than typical, in order to reveal “the systemic, cultural, and often invisible workings of school, as an institution” (p. 153). She offers powerful illustrations of the ways that unexamined school norms impact students, pointing out, for example, that although attention is a fundamental need of developing children, the crowded and increasingly sterile nature of schools often result in them being places “in which children are expected to pay attention, not get attention” (p. 112). She suggests, “If adults were better at bearing their responsibility to see and hear children, the need for children to rely on disruption as a strategy for visibility might decrease” (p. 168).

However, her emphasis on structure does not result in her ignoring or glossing over the individual characteristics and circumstances of the children she profiles. We understand, for example, that Lucas has a “particular nature,” including “a strong desire to meet his own needs over the needs of others” (p. 66), and that this desire makes it especially difficult for him to adjust to an environment in which activities are shared and everyone’s needs must be considered. Shalaby’s account interweaves consideration of individual and structural factors, clearly illustrating how “the everyday life of classrooms undoubtedly exacerbated [Lucas’s] more challenging qualities” (p. 66-67), as well as the challenges and differences of the other children.

Critical scholars are often skeptical of analyses that include consideration of individual characteristics, and for good reason. Talk of individuals has far too easily and far too often lapsed into deficit-based explanations that place the blame for structural inequalities entirely on the supposed failings of individuals or communities. Given the ongoing emphasis on educational interventions relying on “choice” and remediation, interrogating and confronting such narratives is tremendously important. Simultaneously, the reality in schools is that teachers face classrooms of individuals, with unique personalities, experiences, strengths, and challenges. If educational research has an obligation not only to envision the sort of sweeping changes to schools we know are needed, but also to support pre- and in-service teachers in understanding and supporting their students today, we must be able to offer narratives that interweave consideration of structure with consideration of the individual.

To offer one example, an issue that clearly illustrates the need for such interweaving is that of trauma in schools. Undoubtedly, many traumas are created by structural conditions that deprive whole communities of access to health care, education, adequate employment, and safe housing (Berliner, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Rothstein, 2014), while others arise in more financially and socially stable (or even privileged) families and neighborhoods. Schools need to be structured in ways that better account for the particular needs and strengths of such students. Simultaneously, children who have experienced or are experiencing trauma are going to face some struggles regardless of how their school environment is structured, and will need supports that are individual as well as structural.
In discussing this example, my intention is not to imply that all the differences that contribute to children’s struggles in school are negative or undesirable. To return to Shalaby’s book, we might wish that Marcus didn’t have to experience the pain of his father going to prison, but we should recognize his preference for interconnectedness over self-sufficiency as a value that has much to offer our classroom cultures. My point is that in understanding structure and individual difference as entangled and interacting, rather than prioritizing one above the other, we gain a richer understanding of children and classrooms. Such an understanding is sorely needed if research is to connect meaningfully with practice and practitioners.

Questions of Adult Authority

The central point of Troublemakers is to draw our attention to the unnatural and arguably extreme restrictiveness of the school environment, which requires children to stay still for extended periods of time, to do what they’re told instead of following their own interests, to listen instead of speaking, to prioritize academics above relationships. Shalaby notes that a significant proportion of kindergarteners and first-graders struggle to adjust to such expectations, and asserts, “[s]uch stringent limits on human freedom are bound to be fraught with trouble” (p. 153). Furthermore, as I discussed above and as Shalaby vividly describes, the implications of our approach to regulating and responding to classroom behavior extend far beyond immediate issues of order or disorder, to teaching children potentially harmful lessons about themselves or others, and even compromising our ability to create a just society.

However, concerns with limits on human freedom should not lead us to shy away entirely from discussion of the role of adult authority in schools. Shalaby’s work, focused as it is on the creation of trouble, offers few if any examples of young people’s need for adult leadership and guidance. While educational research has given us good reason to worry about how adults exercise authority in schools, we also have some evidence that, when exercised with care and compassion, adult authority plays an important role for students. Walker’s (2009) study, for example, found that students were most engaged and had the strongest academic outcomes if they had an authoritative, rather than either an authoritarian or a permissive, teacher. The “warm demanders” literature, which describes the practices of effective educators of African American children, emphasizes teacher authority as a critical support for student success, and criticizes teachers who are unwilling or unable to exercise authority in the classroom (Bondy, Ross, Gallingane, & Hambacher, 2007; Delpit, 1995; Ware, 2006). Beyond academics, we know that children and youth experience multiple forms of emotional and physical violence at school, often at the hands of their peers (Hill & Kearl, 2011; Kosciw, Greytak, Giga, Villenas, & Danischewski, 2016); teachers and other school staff have a central role to play in preventing and responding to such treatment. The sixth-grade participants in my own research, despite their numerous insightful critiques of their strict schooling environment, also repeatedly articulated a desire for teachers to insist upon behaviors that were kind, respectful, and conducive to learning, and they criticized teachers who failed to do this. Teachers’ responsibility to guide and protect the young people in their classrooms requires that they are able to effectively exercise authority.
Thus, I often found myself wondering what it would mean for schools and teachers to better care for Zora, Lucas, Sean, and Marcus (and so many other children). What is the role of adult authority in, as Shalaby puts it, “teaching love and learning freedom?” *Troublemakers*, through its honest and intricate portraits of children, illustrates that there are no easy answers to this question. For example, how should a teacher respond when Sean continually interrupts the game his class is playing, ultimately ruining it for everyone? Shalaby beautifully frames misbehavior as “one language children speak” (p. 168), a strategy for being seen and heard, and a way to get their needs met. As she argues, a classroom community in which children had more opportunities to be seen, heard, and included would likely significantly decrease “the need for children to rely on disruption as a strategy” (p. 168); however, it seems unlikely to eliminate disruptive behavior entirely. Children bring anger, sadness and unmet needs from other parts of their lives; additionally, they are (and should be) engaged in a process of learning boundaries and testing limits. This means that an important and inevitable part of being a teacher is responding to moments of inappropriate behavior.

In exploring this question, we must also consider how adult authority might also leave room for—or even better, encourage and support—student authority. Many children get in trouble in school because they are confident, critical, and independent-minded, and thus unlikely to readily comply with others’ directives. As Shalaby points out, these are leadership qualities that deserve to be recognized and cultivated rather than suppressed. Comparing Zora to her teacher, Ms. Beverly, she notes that they butt heads partially because they share many of these characteristics, and that unfortunately, “the classroom is too small to permit the authority of both of them” (p. 156). However, I do not believe this is an inevitable outcome. In contrast, it may be that strong teacher authority can support and enable student authority when exercised appropriately (Graham, in press). Goodman (2010) argues that schools with strong, clear missions are better able to both exercise authority *and* distribute authority to students, and this principle may apply to individual classrooms as well as to schools. A teacher I interviewed for a pilot study described her classroom management style as “strict,” but also offered multiple examples of sharing authority with students and cultivating student leadership. Despite her own strong personality, she valued and viewed as resources those students whose equally strong and charismatic personalities made them natural leaders among their peers. We urgently need educational research that can better address these complex questions of student and teacher authority.

**Conclusion**

The problems with traditional approaches to classroom management are becoming increasingly clear. Shalaby’s work, in particular, offers invaluable insight into how these approaches impact children. Describing her four “troublemakers” as “canaries in the coal mine,” she offers us a way of seeing how their unique struggles point to harms that impact *all* children. Her findings highlight the need for us to examine the behavioral norms we ask children to follow in school, to consider what adherence to such norms is achieving, and to interrogate which ones are really necessary. Particularly chilling is the reality that all of
four focal children were medicated by the end of her study. She concludes: “The extent of our willingness to change children, coupled with the extent of our unwillingness to change schools, must awaken our collective moral conscience toward a new imagination and approach” (p. 159-160).

Our task now is to construct that new imagination and approach in the face of schooling practices that can seem intractable. There has been much discussion of the disconnect between research and practice in education; Oakes (1992) argues that while educational research has “made the problems quite visible,” it has yet to address questions needed for change, including offering clear examples of alternative practices and dealing with normative and political resistance. Though she is discussing academic tracking, the same argument could be made in relationship to many schooling practices, including discipline and classroom management. Making real change in this area will require scholarship that offers us a view of schools and teachers that are closer to teaching love and learning freedom. It will require collaboration with educators and thoughtful attention to teacher education. Perhaps most of all, it will require carefully listening to the needs, experiences and perspectives of the young people who populate our classrooms.

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**Author**

**ELIOT GRAHAM** earned his Ph.D. in Education from Rutgers University, and is currently a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Montana as well as an Adjunct Lecturer in Harvard’s Teacher Education Program. A former classroom teacher who taught in widely divergent settings, he is broadly interested in educational equity, particularly for low-income youth of color. Current research interests include classroom authority relationships, no-excuses charter schools, students’ civic development, and Participatory Action Research.

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