7 Tips for Better Classroom Management

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In my mind, the first and most basic obligation of a teacher is to see the beauty that exists within every student. Every child is infinitely precious. Period.

When we start from this vantage point, classroom management -- and its flip side, student engagement -- comes more easily. It's an outgrowth of students feeling loved and respected.

This video, shot in the first few days of my classroom in 2010, and the seven tips below will show how I try to put these ideas into practice.

1. LOVE YOUR STUDENTS
Love them -- and stand firmly against behavior that doesn't meet your expectations or reflect their inner greatness. Too many students have internalized a profound sense of their own inadequacy, and it is incumbent upon us to remind them of their infinite value and counteract the many messages that they receive to the contrary. By loving our students unconditionally, we remind them of their true worth.

Our students know how we feel about them. If we don't like them -- or if we see them as a behavior problem -- they know it. Even if we don't say it, they will know it. And then that student is justified in resenting us, for we have failed to see the beauty that exists within that child. Maya Angelou said, "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

2. ASSUME THE BEST IN YOUR STUDENTS
If a student chose not to meet one of my classroom expectations, they needed to know that I loved them but not their misbehavior. They needed to know that I cared for them and would not accept their poor choice because it would ultimately hurt them and didn't reflect how wonderful they truly are.

For instance, a minute and a half into the first day, I gave one student a verbal warning for whispering to another student as he was searching for his seat. Assuming the best in this young man, I told him, "I know you were probably talking about your seat, but you can't even talk about that, so that's your verbal warning. Go back to your seat and silently start your work." By assuming that he was trying to do the right thing -- find his assigned seat -- I affirmed that he wanted to meet the expectations. And yet I was firm with him that his choice to whisper after he had been told to silently begin his work was not OK. Similarly, at the end of class, I kept behind a student who was sighing to herself over the course of the period. By letting her know that I wouldn't accept her subtle expressions of boredom or frustration, I also let her know that I thought she was great and her expressions of negativity wouldn't fly because they'd hurt our collective learning environment -- and because they didn't square with the wonderful person I knew her to be.

3. PRAISE WHAT AND WHEN YOU CAN
Call attention to the things your students are doing that meet your expectations. The power of this is stunning for a number of reasons. Here are two:

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• It enables you to restate and reinforce the expectations for student behavior in a non-negative way. By narrating on-task behavior, you enable students who may have misheard you the first time to hear exactly what you expect of them. It’s easier for students to meet your expectations when it’s amply clear what those expectations are.

• It shows your students that you’re with it, that you’re very aware of what’s happening in the classroom. When they see and hear that you see and hear pretty much everything, they know that you mean business and that even their smallest actions matter.

4. DO SWEAT THE SMALL STUFF
In those first few minutes, hours and days in the classroom, you are essentially creating a world. And you want a world in which students do things that will keep them or put them on a path to a life replete with meaningful opportunities. Behaviors or actions that will detract from that world should be nipped in the bud. If you only "sweat" major misbehaviors, students will get the sense that minor misbehaviors are OK. If, on the other hand, you lovingly confront even the smallest misbehaviors, then it will be clear to students that, inside the four walls of your classroom, things that detract from what you’re trying to achieve – even in small ways – just don’t fly.

5. IDENTIFY YOURSELF
Tell your students about who you are and why you’re there. A classroom where each student deeply trusts the teacher has the potential to be a great environment for learning. To build that trust, tell your students who you are and why you chose to be a teacher. Tell them about your background, what you did when you were their age, and why you want to be their teacher. The more your students know about you and your intentions, the more they’ll trust you to lead them.

6. FORGE A CLASS IDENTITY
Begin the year by forging a positive, collective identity as a class. During the first few days, I often complimented my classes as a collective. For instance, I’d say something like, "Period 3, everyone I’m looking at is meeting expectations." In many instances, I praised the entire class so that they began to feel they were part of something special in that room. They began feeling a sense of pride at being members of Period 3.

Conversely, I often chose to redirect individual students rather than the whole class. Instead of saying, "Period 3, I'm tired of hearing you talking when you shouldn't be" -- which would introduce an oppositional tone, creating a divide between teacher and students -- I found more success correcting students individually.

7. HAVE A PLAN
Your lesson plans need to be crystal clear. You need to begin each day with clarity about what students should know and be able to do by the end of the class period, and every second of your day should be purposefully moving you toward that end. In addition to clarity about student knowledge and achievement, you should have a clear sense of the behavior you expect at each point in the class period. When you see them making the choice to behave as you expect them to, narrate it. And when you don’t see it, confront those misbehaviors clearly, directly and with love.

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