

Building a Positive, Trusting Classroom Environment



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Believe it or not, I had a bit of a freak-out before the first day of school. All summer, I had prepared my curriculum, re-thought my lesson plans, reflected on the energies I would put out to my students, and got plenty of professional development (specifically in science and math integration). Yet, a few hours before I went to bed, I posted on Facebook, "Always nervous about the first day of school with the students. Not because I'm scared of them, but because I want to do right by them." Despite my best efforts, I always feel like I can do better. Then, on the first day, I received a text message from one of my former students saying how much she missed her teachers -- including me.

This reminded me that, despite some of my mistakes, I did a few things well last year, and these strengths continue to be the signature I leave on every class of students. Most teachers I know want to have a positive relationship with their students, but often don't know how, or believe that silence and obedience mean they're learning. Building a relationship means that you've opened a door for them to learn, making them receptive to what you have to say and giving them confidence to contribute as well.

Here are some positive trends that I've noticed:

1) Rarely Use the Word "Wrong"

Students need to know that you're not going to press a buzzer every time they make a comment or ask a question, no matter how ridiculous. Starting the year off by accepting their errors and misgivings means that you get to know them and their style of learning. Also, you get to show them the way you'll respond to questions for the rest of the year. The word "wrong" in a classroom is similar to the phrase "You can't do that" in improv. It's a non-starter and often inhibits further participation. We have so many ways to say that an answer is incorrect without using the word that keep students thinking, "I might as well *not*."

2) Take Arguments Outside

We as teachers have nothing to gain and everything to lose by going back and forth in an argument with a student in class. Even in extreme situations, having a tit-for-tat with a student for longer than a few seconds looks worse for us as adults than it does for the student. Instead, pull the student aside or outside and have the dispute there. Then, when pulled outside, let them voice their grievance. We often have no idea why they acted as they did, or if we were wrong. Once they've voiced their problem, reply with a firm and affirmative reminder of the procedure for proper classroom behavior. Once they've calmed down, let them return to the classroom, give them space, and resume your teaching.

3) On-the-Spot Affirmation Works, Too

Most people who do professional development these days tell you not to give outright positive feedback, and to an extent, I agree. No teacher wants a student who constantly needs affirmation, because they never build self-sufficiency that way. Thus, we are asked to just give a quick nod, or a statement like, "You're on the right track." Yet every so often, when a child has had a bad stretch, or has dug themselves deep into a hole of frustration, a quick "Yes, that's exactly right" or a pat on the back will return the student to the right frame of mind. As teachers, we have to read the student to know if he or she needs that extra jolt. The times I've used it with my class, it has the effect of an espresso in the morning. I'll take that.

Much of what I do as a teacher aligns with my core beliefs about how schools should function, and with my own classroom management style. You may have more suggestions for building such an environment, and you should. We as educators can do better, specifically for students who already feel like school has nothing to offer them. The best way to do that starts with the relationships with the young people we serve daily.