

This response stood out from the rest due to its details and great ideas. I did not include any of it in the summary sheets. It is presented in its entirety here.

Introductory info

What grades taught?

Until three years ago, I was our school librarian, teaching all students, averaging between 375 to 400 students annually for 39 years. This included preschoolers (age 3) through 8th graders, and with the added benefit for me that I'd see them for their entire career at our school. I also taught middle school electives ranging from writing and gardening to design-based classes such as creating rubber stamps or flexagons.

Formal management training?

I haven't had training specifically with that focus although that was integrated in my studies, particularly as part of the Life Cycle curricula at Pacific Oaks College in Pasadena for my M.A. work. Many of our teachers do like the Responsive Classroom techniques among others. I received training in, and am a fan of, the Project Zero perspective which seems to work as inherently engaging and makes most management unnecessary. I also have had training as a middle school advisor which supports the process of dialog and restorative justice.

How long teaching?

This is my 42nd year, the last three years as the Green Ombudsman for the school, including the two Green committees for activist students, K-5 and 6-8.

Thoughts

Greatest challenge?

Helping students trust in their process vs. going for product. I think this is too rarely a student's experience, especially since our culture values, and pushes us to value, results rather than the process model of learning. Indeed, I think this often causes students to disregard moments of process as of lower relevance. On a human level, it seems as if process is embarrassing or as if it should be something either private or invisible. I've been wondering if there is a correspondence to that cultural belief showing up in students as wanting to seem innately talented in their own education instead of gaining it by practice? To me, process offer a greater tool—an understanding of the important part personal process plays in one's education and how process can grow in scope and depth.

Strategies?

There are many workable ideas but, for me, having an interesting way to do things or having a hook for an assignment is the key to engagement—which avoids having to manage behavior. For National Poetry Month, for example, I'd ask students write poetry during library period. (We have an open mic at month's end.) I would spread out an array of cut-out photos for students as the starting place. This is surefire for elevated vocabulary, empathy and the emergence of details. National Geographic magazines are the very best source because they show cultural diversity and something real is going on in them, as opposed to staged advertising images. (And no rhyming, period. It is the very rare student at the elementary-middle school level whose thought is not limited to—and by—the mechanics of how to create content from words that rhyme.) The history of this ekphrastic writing is ancient, interesting, and there are several places that solicit just such work for publication, including student work. Occasionally, instead I'd get a parent musician (celloist) to visit and play a variety of pieces as a substitute for those NG photos.

The catch-them-doing-something-right perspective also works, preferable before any management has had to happen. However, teachers using it can lose credibility if they raise the appreciation level of minor things to larger notice. This can create the impression that the class is about pleasing the teacher. Or it can look like an insecure teacher grasping for legitimacy of control by praise. Or then again, that students elevated by comment are self-motivated or (pardon the language) suck-ups. Appreciations work well as a very brief notice with the possibility of a private enlargement later. Another is an unannounced email to parents with positive news. Doesn't have to be a big thing, or long note.

However, setting aside all these things which could be seen as having elements of prevention, there are times when management has to offer refocusing or remediation for behavior. I've been interested in animal cognition and behavior for a really long time. In particular I've learned much about management from socializing feral cats in preparation for their adoption. For example, as a librarian, hoping to engage a student in reading, I would comment on why I thought a particular title might be of interest to the student. I always say 'might' as the least freighted with pressure. I never sell the choice or express the slightest investment in his/her taking it. I comment, put it down, then walk away.

Feral animals when cornered shrink the sphere of self to the smallest they can tolerate. So by putting down the book and leaving, it allows a student's circle of comfort to expand again, potentially to include the location of the book. I do make a close visual note of where it is so I can later see if it actually has gotten picked up: a good sign. For most students, especially reluctant ones, being known, or known enough to sense a connection to book content, can be powerful. But saying why a book might be suitable should never involve mention of the student's attributes or interests. Instead, the invitation should only touch on the qualities of the book. Voicing knowledge of the student's perspective or abilities--to those deeply reluctant to engage--can feel invasive.

On the other hand, for eager students, speaking to their talents or past choices does create engagement. For them, invitations to create, say, a suggested reading list type of bookmark for others, annotated with the briefest of comments, may be an easy way for them to feel autonomy apart from me or the pressures of curriculum. It also can enable an entry point for other students' reading or relationships. (I always asterisked those suggested titles our library carried.)

Self-evaluation?

I'm pretty good at management. I do team with people for ECE science who skip over the chance for the process talk which is an aspect of management. For example, a new teacher replied to a pre-kindergarten student who said it wasn't fair that a classmate's pea plant had emerged from the soil while hers hadn't. My colleague said that it was okay: all the peas would grow. This week I asked what we could do if all the other peas didn't grow. I hoped some child would say "Try another pea," "Wait a while," or some variation of an open mindset. And they did. But had that not happened, we could still have gotten there by further questions. One savvy four-year-old even suggested that we move the pots to get more sun! That new teacher commented afterward that it was hard for him to stay silent while the children found their way to solutions, but that because he understood what was happening, he could.

Generally I prefer to talk about things rather than by dismissing or suppressing worry and non-focus as part of management. Discussion reliably can create the possibility of alternatives. I see such discussion as a way to combat notions that everyone deserves a happy ending based on outside events or people, rather than active personal problem-solving. Then too some matters or questions are better handled privately, though still with the candor appropriate to sensitivity.

Words of advice?

I've found it helpful to have a paradoxical response for some kinds of circumstances. It can be a viable alternative to the standard disciplinary responses: description of problem then explanation of disciplinary solution or step. If a class moves in the direction of chaos or disrespect, I have to decide if it will best teach them if I divert that direction, or instead allow it to cross a professionally manageable line, in order to have something to point at as the cause of consequences. I do this because a disciplinary response to a generalized tone will be rejected as unfair or invite disavowals such as I-wasn't-involved. Having something to point out usually means both the doers and those who remained silent contributed.

Continuing with that perspective, the following has only happened with middle school students. And of course, crossing that line I spoke of has to occur within the parameters of emotional and physical safety for students. When that line is crossed, I drop everything and ask for silence. After a pause long enough to be uncomfortable for them, I explain that my feelings are too strong about their behavior to be certain I can trust myself to be fair to them. Therefore I'll have to hand it off to someone else. I ask them to get out paper and pencil and to respond to the questions I've written on chart paper while they have been waiting in silence, watching what I write. The questions may be something like:

What is the role of respect in education? Please use supporting examples.

Why is two-way respect (from teachers to students and the reverse) important?

If I am given direction about what to teach, and you are in charge of your education, why is this to your advantage?

Any suggestions of how this class [meaning library] can support you in this process?

In what ways can you improve what you get from a visit to the library?

And finally, what would be your parents' advice or response upon hearing of today's events?

What do they take from this response? I have not assigned any specific blame but am asking for reflection and responsibility from the whole group. (It is harder to object when I don't hold up a blame-worthy target or deed.) In essence, they discover they have created an assignment for themselves, meaning work and thought that wasn't part of any lesson plan. When they learn it is to prepare them for a visit from the head of their division, their effort becomes more dedicated. The papers are for him as well as for me, prior to that visit. I tell them that those who duck responsibility for taking part for either actions or inaction may well discover the division head will ask them to rewrite their response with a realistic assessment of their own role.

Though I've had to do this only twice in my decades of teaching, I believe it is a benefit for them to see adult curricular questions and thought are behind events in library classes. While the infrequency may possibly be because word gets around, I rather think since it uses up all their free browsing time in writing, the possibility of similar occurrences in the future is likely the stronger deterrent.

Another point. In a sense, I have also removed myself from the role of disciplinarian and have asked them to take on the responsibility for creating the solution, which is how the division head will respond to their writing.

If this is a lower school class, I make the same explanation about lack of trust in my ability to be fair. I then walk them back to their classroom. If there is still enough time for a return to the library, in front of their teacher I say that everyone has a bad day from time to time, and everyone should have a chance for a do-over to honor the rarity of those bad days. I ask them to continue to sit at their desks until we all feel ready to start over again. Then we go back and the "Whew!" response makes them excellently focused and happy. It also make them less likely to repeat it since they know what follows.

Alternatively, if there isn't time for the above, I take them back to class, explain to the teacher why they weren't ready to visit the library this time. Since their library visit allows for a teacher's prep period, the fallen face of the teacher is genuine. After I've gone, the teachers have them each write a letter of apology, expressing their own specific action/s that contributed to skipping their visit and alternative ways to handle it. Though rare, this has occurred enough over the years that the teachers are familiar with these moments and our roles in them.

I hope this all makes sense to you, though since I am a specialty teacher, parts may not be applicable to some teaching formats or be what you are looking for. Thank you for the opportunity to think about management. Your questions gave me an opportunity to reflect on it, which I hadn't done in a while. I wish you all success in your research and exploration of classroom management.