A Survival Guide: Seven Practices All Beginning Teachers Should Know

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Whether you have just graduated college or entering the teaching profession from a previous career, there are seven practices that all beginning teachers come to understand. Implementing these strategies could help to prevent costly beginning teaching errors from occurring and will aid in improving one’s overall experience as a beginning teacher, whether on the K-12 level.

Rule #1: Ready, Set, Practice and Go

Nothing is more damaging to a beginning teacher’s level of job satisfaction than dealing with a disruptive class, especially when that disruptive class keeps on reappearing each class period. Students change, but the classroom environment stays the same. What is important to note is that disruptive, chaotic classrooms are a sign that the teacher of record is lacking specific skills in managing his or her classroom. The problem is that beginning teachers often times lack the skill set to thwart off such disruptive occurrences, so following these basic tips will help.

One of the essential elements to maintaining a classroom takes place before one even sees his or her students. The key is planning. Planning refers not only to planning out a lesson (which one should do in detail), but it also involves planning out ones rules and deciding how (in advance) to deal with rule breakers. Create with a plan in mind. In other words, it is very typical for teachers to come up with rules, but one’s approach at implementing the rules for first offenders, second offenders and beyond is often left to “on the spot” reaction to rule breakers or avoidance of rule enforcement altogether. What is important for beginning teachers to discern is that students are constantly watching and observing what a teacher does, or rather, what a teacher does not do (inaction). Indeed, a teacher’s inaction can severely damage the respect level students have for a teacher. Inaction (even on small things), can lead to larger problems in the classroom. Students need to see that the teacher is in charge. For instance, if one implements a class rule that reads, “Trash must be thrown out at the end of the period,” letting a student throw trash out in the middle of the class, may seem incidental at first, but it is not. The inaction was noted (by students). The key is to treat every rule that is in place with respect, and take every rule seriously (and act immediately when it is violated). If not, get rid of the rule. It is also important to involve students in rule making process and discuss why specific rules are established in the classroom. Ideally, rules should be limited in number (five to seven). Having too many rules can be unrealistic and rigid tends to lead to rule breaking going unchecked. Focus on rules that will support the learning environment you want to create, and remember, not all rules are written to stop behavior, some rules are written to promote a particular behavior (i.e., Respect others, no yelling, raise your hand, encourage others, etc.) (Brainard, 2001).

Rule #2: Managing the Classroom is Not a Public Affair

As a teacher, view yourself as the keeper of the peace. The job of a teacher is to not only deliver a quality education to students, but it is also important to protect and nurture students psychological health as well. Having said that, it is of utmost importance that, when disciplining students, avoid the crippling error some teachers make-making discipline a public affair when it is not (Spitalli, 2005). How
would you feel if your principal held a faculty meeting and during the faculty meeting he or she called out your name and admonished you for turning in your lesson plan book late or admonished you for not handling a parental complaint properly? Most, if not all of us, would resent living through an experience like this. Well, students are no different. No human being likes to be berated and rebuffed in front of his or her peers. To the instructor, it may appear to be a momentary occurrence, but such experiences can damage a child psychologically (and beyond if other students antagonize through teasing) and has no place in the classroom.

Yelling in the classroom, sarcasm and the use of profanity are never options in handling or controlling discipline (Spitalli, 2005). In fact, the use of either indicates there is a problem with the teacher’s ability to manage his or her environment. An experienced teacher can do more with just a certain look of the eye or a through body jesters then all the yelling in the world. Proximity is the key. Research suggests that students behave better based on the proximity of their teacher. Thus, instead of shouting across a room because three students are talking, it is better to move in the direction of the students and remind them to stop talking. Often times they will stop talking because they see the teacher coming.

Equally important, when disciplining students the key is to keep their esteem in tact. Avoid, at all costs, personal attacks; they are never appropriate. Indeed, nothing escalates a problem more than a personal attack. It is better to talk to students one on one in private, away from their peers.

**Rule #3: Circulate, Circulate, Circulate**

A key disciplinarian strategy is visibility. Remember, the more visible you are, the less likely you are to encounter discipline problems in your classroom. You cannot sit behind a desk and teach, and you cannot manage your classroom behind a desk either. Circulation is the key to managing discipline. The key is to watch your students and be aware of what is happening in the very class you are there to safeguard. Circulation helps in doing this a great deal. Thus, not only does it provide for a way of enforcing classroom rules, but it also deters negative actions from starting and escalating. Keep in mind that circulation is also an effective tool in providing for moreoverall involvement in one’s classroom. When one circulates, he or she tends to focus their attention on all of their students, opposed to just the ones sitting in the front with their hands up. Circulating during a lecture, discussion, group activity (etc.), draws in the attention of all students and also demonstrates to students that they are all important.

**Rule #4: Plan, Provide and Know**

When I was a beginning teacher, one of the hardest things I had to learn was how to plan my lessons so that I would not have left over time at the end of the day. As a high school teacher, it was very difficult. I remember clearly my 7th period class. I would always find myself (and my students) staring at the clock waiting for it to strike 2:45 p.m. (time to go). The problem was that I had not yet developed a way to utilize every minute of my time with my students. This skill is not an easy one to develop, but it is a necessary skill. Keep in mind that if you do not have plans for your students, they will find something to do on their own. And…this something, typically involves disruption and confusion.

Lesson planning should be taken seriously for it has a positive impact on learning and classroom management (Lang, 2007 and Brainard, 2001). Planning is not something one just puts on paper (you live it). It is something that one studies, improves and perfects. It is the key to better teaching and is
intrinsically linked to creating a better learning environment. In fact, the better one researches various teaching strategies and plans, the more creative one will be and the better learning experience one can provide his or her students.

**Rule #5: Contact Parents for Both Good and Bad**

Parental support can turn out to be a major factor in making your school year successful. You want parents on your side. One of the biggest mistakes that many teachers make, not just beginning teachers, is that they tend to only contact parents when something goes wrong. In fact, many parents get upset simply by receiving a message that a teacher has called home (they assume something is wrong). This trend of only calling home when something goes wrong with a student not only helps to foster poor relations with parents, but can ultimately hurt the very thing you are trying to build, a good relationship with your students and their parents.

With that in mind, it is important to find ways to contact parents for positive reasons as well. For example, why not give a parent a call when a student is performing well or participating at a high rate. Or, why not call a parent when a student’s behavior is getting better and their grades increase. Creating these Win-Win opportunities not only helps to build a sense of trust between you and the parent, but it will also help you later if you ever have to call with something more negative to report. In addition, when positive calls are made, a student’s response to the call only fuels their interest in your class and builds their cooperative spirit within your class. I once called a parent of a disruptive child, but reported that his behavior was improving (every chance I could) and invited the parent to continue to encourage his performance. It worked. In the end, he recognized that positive praise was more impacting (in his life) than negative attention. The key, I focused on what the student did right in class (on any given day) opposed to only focusing on and reporting his negative behavior.

**Rule #6: Students are Not Your Friends—Recognize the Line**

The relationship between a student and a teacher is a close one, but remember to draw the line. Students, by nature, are intrinsically interested in their teachers. They are naturally curious and want to know everything about you. Indeed, many students will come to admire their teachers greatly. However, do not mistake respect and admiration with personal friendships. Indeed, while many teachers may friendly towards students, it is “important for…students to understand that [teachers are] not their friend— or, at least, not the same way their peers are (Johnston, 2005, C1). Students are not your peers, so it is important to draw a line with them. It is important to care for the well being of students, but it is also important not to share too much information, especially as it relates to one’s personal life. Discussing one’s personal life with students or intimate details of one’s life is not appropriate. Surface information is generally safe but to discuss personal experiences (i.e., a hard divorce, psychological challenges, living situations, sexual orientation, etc…) is not appropriate and demonstrates poor professional judgment. In addition, when students are seeking advice or counsel, remember to limit personal advice and refer them to school professionals on staff. It is okay to listen (of course), but avoid providing students with a To Do List of actions they should take. Teachers are typically not licensed psychologist, psychiatrist or counselors. Therefore, do not assume that role. The role of a teacher is to teach and nurture a child’s development, but that role is limited in scope (Benton, 2004). Giving a student who is in need of professional advice, the wrong advice could not only endanger that student, but could jeopardize your career legally. So again, listen but use good judgment, and when in doubt, seek support from your administrative team. *Be mindful to report abuse or neglect allegations or*
Rule #7: Seek and You Shall Find (Support)

Most beginning teachers leave the profession within the first five years of teaching (Justice & Espinoza, 2007). This high attrition rate is due to many factors to include poor classroom management skills, lack of support, discipline issues with students, and poor induction programs. These teachers who leave the profession sadly never experience the true joy of teaching because they are leaving the profession at a time when they were in their infancy of discovering how to be an effective teacher (Brainard, 2001). Thus, beginning teachers need to understand that during their first five years in the profession, they are learning and growing into the teachers they will one day become (their ultimate joy).

With this being said, it is important for beginning teachers to take advantage of the wealth of knowledge around them. Beginning teachers should be encouraged to confide in other teachers and seek advice and mentoring from their instructional leaders. For, “to achieve a successful career, every teacher must master the fine art of classroom management (Brainard, 2001, p. 2007). Asking to observe a seasoned teacher at work in the classroom or asking a seasoned teacher to come in to a beginning teacher’s classroom are both proven practices that work. Such experiences will not only help beginning teachers to understand their strengths and weaknesses as classroom teachers, but could also improve their overall job satisfaction levels.

Conclusion

To that end, one’s decision to enter the teaching profession can be the best decision ever made by a single individual. Teaching is truly a joy, but in order to reach that state of joy, beginning teachers need to study the profession and practice some basic safeguards to better ensure their success on the job.

Works Cited


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