

Teaching Lessons

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How do we help students achieve academically and socially? As a teacher, I have lofty answers. But challenges - and questions - arise when I try to translate my ideas (and ideals) into concrete lessons, delivered in 90-minute increments to a very particular set of sixth graders, each as individual and evanescent as a snowflake.

To help teachers succeed, schools offer "professional development," universally known as P.D. Like a lot of teachers, I've come to regard such training with a mix of optimism and disappointment. Over the last 20 years, I've attended more education "workshops" than I care to remember. Such courses typically lasted no more than an hour or a day, and nearly always contained valid, even vital ideas, but were too superficial, too removed from the realities of my classroom to alter my teaching very much, even when I yearned for change.

Then I started work at a school that takes P.D. seriously. This summer, my school sent me to a weeklong, intensive course for middle school teachers called Developmental Designs, which derives from a teaching approach known as Responsive Classroom.

Among its guiding principles is a belief that students who develop social skills like cooperation, assertiveness and empathy can achieve more academically. The idea is similar to the "character education" Paul Tough advocates in his new book "How Children Succeed."

I'd already watched colleagues attain enviable classroom management through this technique. Still, given my previous P.D. experience, I initially harbored skepticism. I imagined catching up on e-mail during the course's slow moments. But, it turned out, I didn't send e-mail all week. The program was a model of effective P.D. and what it can achieve.

The Responsive Classroom approach centers on several ostensibly mundane classroom practices. Each morning students form a circle, greet one another, share bits of news, engage in a brief, fun activity and review the day's agenda. The idea is to build trust, ensure a little fun (which adolescents crave) and confront small problems before they become big. Students might welcome one another with salutations from a foreign language. An activity might involve tossing several balls around a circle in rapid succession. Students share weekend plans or explore topics like bullying before lessons begin.

If this sounds obvious or intuitive, it is, but so is being loving and kind. That doesn't make it easier to achieve. Part of what makes the approach effective is that each routine is highly structured, and so replicable, but allows for student input and choice.

The fun and games have an ulterior purpose. My instructor emphasized how, at the end of each activity, we should bring the exercise back to concrete classroom skills. Tossing a ball, for example, is like the exchange of ideas, requiring students to follow a discussion's trajectory with their eyes.

Another tenet is that teachers should avoid indiscriminate praise in favor of neutral language that encourages specific behaviors so children can precisely identify and so replicate their triumphs. (The research of Carol S. Dweck, a psychology professor at Stanford, has separately come to similar conclusions.) Finding the best words, however, can be surprisingly difficult after years of crowing, "Great job!" So the course had us devise and rehearse the verbal and nonverbal cues we wanted to use.

In my classroom, the shared routines have already led to a greater sense of calm and purpose, which has led to more productive lessons. I'm not alone in enjoying concrete results from the Responsive Classroom method. In one study, presented in September, researchers looked at 24 schools randomly assigned to training in the Responsive Classroom or to a control group, which did not receive the same teacher training or support. When faithfully implemented, the approach correlated with a substantial rise - a roughly 20-point gain on average - on state standardized test scores in reading and math.

Why does Responsive Classroom work where other approaches do not? Sara E. Rimm-Kaufman, the study's lead author and an associate professor of education at the University of Virginia, theorizes it's because teachers not only received intensive training but also had follow-up coaching once they returned to their classrooms, which increased the chances that new practices would take hold. Teachers also praised the program's pacing: coaches encouraged teachers to adopt steps slowly over a sustained period, instead of trying to transform their classrooms overnight.

"The take-home message," Dr. Rimm-Kaufman says, "is that interventions that take a long time to learn and that require more resources also produce more change." The required financial investment isn't enormous, and the findings suggest

that schools and districts would do better to devote limited resources to a few sustained programs, rather than providing scattershot offerings in teacher training.

Schoolwide buy-in also appeared critical to the approach's success. Where principals and administrators supported the use of the Responsive Classroom method, gains on test scores were greatest. But, if the program was just one of many randomly tossed at teachers, then test scores remained flat or even declined.

In other words, teachers can't go it alone. They need sustained training and support using empirically tested methods in concert and collaboration with one another. This is how schools succeed.