EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

September 2019 | Volume **77** | Number **1**
What New Teachers Need Pages 42-48
Issue Table of Contents | Read Article Abstract

The Real Deal on Classroom Management for New Teachers

Craig Simmons

Classroom management often feels like an unscalable mountain to new teachers. Here are tips to help you reach the heights.

"Mr. Simmons, nobody cares about those stickers!" one of my students blurted as I reviewed the sticker chart rewarding good behavior I'd set up. I was stunned. How was I supposed to respond to that? The class went silent, all eyes on the student and me.

It was my first year as a "real teacher," and I was in my early twenties—a lethal combination. This was more than 15 years ago, so I don't recall what I said in response. However, considering the usual retorts I made to students during my first few years of teaching, I probably responded in a way that set off a verbal tennis match between the student and me, with the class as spectators. How much I've learned about classroom management since then!

An Indelible Year

Indelible is the best word to describe my first-year teaching experience. I began teaching 5th grade in the middle of a school year, just after students returned from Christmas break. The assigned teacher was an uncertified long-term substitute, and I would be serving as a certified long-term substitute until the full-time teaching position became available (at the time, the district had a hiring freeze).

On my first morning, the school's principal escorted me to my classroom, walked me to the desk where the current substitute was sitting, and said, "This is Mr. Simmons. He'll be taking over the class for the remainder of the school year." The sub gathered her things, and they left—leaving me to fend for myself.

Thankfully, because of my I have-to-get-this-right attitude (and because I had had some experience teaching on my own during an unexpectedly unsupervised student teaching assignment), I was able to quickly think of an engaging activity. And I made it through that semester. But when I reflect on my first half-year of teaching, I recall regularly facing what felt like insurmountable challenges. I made so many mistakes, especially in classroom management.

Every new teacher will inevitably experience such steep challenges, with classroom management being one of the slopes that feels insurmountable. So let me share what I wish I'd known as a new teacher about managing disruptive behaviors and assure new teachers that—with a growth mindset and a love of teaching and learning—things *will* get better with time. While these ideas can be modified and applied to all grade levels, this advice is geared toward elementary and middle school teachers.

In Like a Lamb?

The first thing to know: You may have to adjust how strict or gentle your demeanor is depending on your situation and temperament. I began my first weeks as a teacher by introducing myself, implementing activities that yielded information about my students' learning profiles, and teaching routines and procedures, as I'd read was recommended (Denton & Kriete, 2015). I introduced a positive-reinforcement system that I'd seen employed: the infamous sticker chart. The students in my student-teaching class had loved that chart. Sometimes they'd cry if they didn't get a sticker for exhibiting appropriate hallway behavior or using an inside voice.

But when I put this practice into place in my own classroom, it was a complete failure. My students, as I've mentioned, thought it was a joke. I tweaked this strategy—but the revised system didn't work either.

I now realize that the problem was that I'd introduced myself as a lamb when, coming in as a new teacher in the middle of the year, I should've started out as a lion.

A lamb is thought of as gentle, innocent, and pure. This is how I presented myself to my class because, at the time, that's how I was. I was a first-year teacher with very little experience. I didn't know what to expect or how to react; I didn't have a toolbox of strategies to defend myself. And I looked youthful—like one of my students' teenage brothers. The students also saw me as a "lamb" because of my actions when giving directives: I didn't use a "teacher voice," didn't put my shoulders back and stand still, and didn't use eye contact. I didn't act like I expected them to follow my directions.

I'd read about the typical "mean teacher" who starts off the year by peering over her glasses as students enter the room. I was *not* going to be that teacher. In this situation, however, especially as a novice, I needed to be less of a lamb and more of a lion, an animal known for strength, courage, and ferocity. Had I begun as a lion, I would have exuded confidence through my voice, body language, and follow-through. Veteran teachers often say that it's easier to start off stern and become nice than to start off nice and try to become "mean." I concur.

But let me be clear: Being a lion doesn't equate to being mean or disrespectful. It has to do with your presence and approach; it's about establishing your authority. It's also about showing students you care enough about them to hold them to high standards. Students must understand that you are the teacher and you make the final decisions. A new teacher can exhibit the characteristics of a lion by:

- Speaking with authority (say what you mean, mean what you say).
- Standing still and making eye contact when giving directions.
- Holding each student accountable for everything they do or say that isn't aligned to classroom norms.
- Following through with consequences.
- Being uncompromising about students meeting your expectations.

Once you establish yourself as an authority and students are consistently meeting your expectations, you can relinquish some of your fierceness and be more relaxed. Because students' behaviors are apt to change, however, you'll need to live on the continuum, switching from lion to lamb and in between. Your students will know that although you have a soft side, you can morph into an army general when needed.

Teach Routines and Procedures

Establishing, communicating, and practicing routines and procedures early in the school year is a must if you plan on having a smooth year (Murray, 2019). If you don't get the routines right during the first weeks of school, they could become the bane of your existence. Devote time to students getting them right.

Having routines and procedures in place—especially for transitional activities like going to recess—ensures that your students know what to do, how to do it, when to do it, and why that action needs to be done (Denton & Kriete, 2015). Consider everything that students will do throughout any typical day: how they enter your room, how they exit at day's end, and all that happens in between. After determining the routines and procedures you want to teach, develop a checklist of specific behaviors you want students to exhibit for each procedure—

what you'll look and listen for. Then communicate that clearly to students, and have them practice.

If students don't meet your "look and listen for" expectations while practicing, tell them to stop. Describe, specifically, what they did correctly and incorrectly. Re-explain the desired behaviors, model them if necessary, and have students repeat. You will know you've taught procedures effectively when your students can conduct themselves and run the room in your absence.

You will need to teach many procedures, and you don't want students to feel overwhelmed trying to remember all your expectations at once. So practice each procedure *in context* as opposed to practicing many back-to-back. For example, have students practice lining up when it's actually time to line up; have them practice the right way to gather their belongings at the end of the day at dismissal. For this to work, you'll have to build in time for practice; for instance, if you go to lunch at 11:30, wrap up your lesson around 11:20 so there's time to practice getting to the cafeteria.

You can also communicate and model how you want students to do things during a lesson. For instance, to decrease students blurting out answers, tell them *how* you want them to respond (such as by raising a hand or talking to an elbow partner) before you pose questions to the class.

Help Everyone Save Face

Even with airtight routines and procedures in place, you will have students who engage in inappropriate behaviors. When addressing students who disregard your expectations, always remember: If you engage in a verbal match with a student, you will never win. Regardless of how inappropriate or unnerving a student's speech is, and even if you *can* "one-up" a student, at the end of the day, you are the professional and you are expected to be a paragon of good behavior.

As the teacher (and the adult), remember that you are *teaching* children. Consequently, that is your responsibility—to teach. Students will do and say things that will make you second guess why you chose this profession. You may have ephemeral thoughts of saying inappropriate things as a result of a student's behavior. Just keep it to yourself.

To avoid turning moments of problem behavior into fight-or-flight situations, realize that everyone, including you, wants to save face. Saving face is about preserving your reputation,

but in more practical terms, it means avoiding embarrassment for you and the student. Regardless of what a student says and does, *never* say or do anything that will embarrass him or her in front of peers. This never leads to a positive outcome.

However, if a student attempts to humiliate *you*, there are steps you can take to dilute his or her power. For example, if Billy calls you out of your name or Janice tells you what she is *not* going to do, temporarily "claim it" and move on with your lesson, instead of stopping and addressing the disrespect head on. To claim it, nonchalantly say something to the effect of "That might be true" or "That's not the first time I've been called that." If you respond with phrases like "What did I say?" or "Is that all you got?" a battle will likely ensue, especially if the student has a notorious reputation.

After claiming it, continue with where you were in the lesson. After several minutes, give the class a prompt to discuss or a task to complete in small groups. While the students are engaged, walk toward the classroom door and try to make eye contact with the student who was disrespectful. If you make eye contact, gesture for him or her to follow you; otherwise, walk to wherever the student is and ask them to come with you. Disarm the student by kindly requesting that they follow you, as if nothing had happened. Then quietly address the behavior outside of your classroom, while still observing what's happening inside.

If the student doesn't follow you but shows no further disrespect, hold off talking about the incident until an upcoming "sweet spot," such as when transitioning to lunch or recess. By addressing egregious behaviors during this sweet spot, you can maximize instructional time, avoid a fight-or-flight situation, and let both you and the student save face. You can also seize a teachable moment; you show students how to respond calmly in a tough situation.

Keep Instruction Brisk

In my years as a classroom teacher and instructional coach, I've found that well-planned, fast-paced, engaging lessons are an underrecognized key to classroom management. When kids are engaged, they're less likely to do things like talk excessively, get out of their seat, or go off-task (the behaviors teachers complain about the most) (Kowalski, 2003).

Bear in mind that students are more than individuals you deliver a curriculum to; they are *children*, with disparate wants and needs. And children love to talk and move. They have lots of energy and will get it out by any means—so plan opportunities for them to do so. When planning lessons, find appropriate stopping points for brief activities that require students to move and talk (such as a turn and talk, or simulating a concept like rotation by moving their

bodies). This will minimize their attempts to have conversations or create similar distractions during a lesson.

Keep your instruction brisk—not so fast that students cannot keep up, but fast enough that they aren't "sitting and getting" for long. When delivering information, be sure to move (purposefully, of course). Encourage students to track you with their eyes; this will keep them better focused on the instruction.

Try to minimize "downtime," those times in which students aren't sure what to do next, such as when they're between tasks in a project, or when you're pausing to think of where to go next with the lesson. Most problem behaviors in a classroom setting take place during downtimes. Plan activities for what students are going to do from the time they enter your room until they exit your room for dismissal. This includes planning for what students can do while waiting for the next learning activity.

Pick Your Battles and Keep Your Cool

During your first years of teaching, you'll spend a lot of time trying to perfect your classroom management. Two things can help with this seemingly insurmountable task of fostering an engaged, respectful class: understanding the concept of inconsequential behaviors and controlling your emotions.

Inconsequential behaviors are those that don't interfere with instruction and typically dissipate quickly. Behaviors like tapping pencils, being inattentive, or chewing gum are minor; they aren't a reason to stop instruction to render a consequence. Just address them during a sweet spot. Or use proximity. Instead of telling the student to stop tapping the pencil, for instance, decrease the distance between you and that student until you get their attention. If the student doesn't notice you moving in his direction, continue moving until you are beside or behind him. Once he notices you, the behavior should stop. If it doesn't, lightly place the palm of your hand on the student's desk or make brief eye contact.

And regardless of what students do, never let them see you "sweat." If they know your triggers, they will pull them. If you remain unemotional, students will never know how to read your mood, which puts you in a better position to maintain an environment conducive to learning. If you lose control, you might exacerbate undesirable behaviors. For instance, if you escalate your voice to match students' voices, their volume will amplify. Don't mirror students' behavior; make them mirror yours.

Know Your Students!

Lastly, what's most important to strong classroom management is to know your students and their individual personalities. Just because you are a lion doesn't mean you can't build positive relationships with students. When you know what will or won't work for particular learners, you can be more strategic. You're more likely to put effective practices in place and gain the students' trust.

As a new teacher, you will need to discover your own teacher identity and approach to classroom management. You can steal from others' toolboxes, but you'll have to personalize whatever you do for it to be authentic (because students can easily discern when it's not). Whether they approach students more as a lamb or a lion, effective teachers employ certain key practices: They ensure that routines and procedures are in place, practiced, and enforced; avoid conflicts by remaining calm and addressing the wrong behaviors at the right times; and prepare for well-paced instruction. If you don't have plans for making such practices part of your repertoire, you should. Highly effective instruction cannot take place until a teacher establishes a culture of learning.

Reflect & Discuss

➛ Consider Simmons's "lion or lamb" metaphor for a teacher's style. Do you approach students as a lion or a lamb—or a bit of both?
➛ Simmons says teachers should use assertive body language when giving directions—standing still and upright, making eye contact, using a "teacher voice." Do you agree? Are you conscious of your body language with students? Might it need some modification?
➛ Think of a time when you wished you had let a disruptive student "save face," while still addressing the disruption. What might you do differently next time?

References

Denton, P., & Kriete, R. (2015). *The first six weeks of school: Strategies for teachers*. Turners Fall, MA: Center for Responsive Schools, Inc.

Kowalski, R. M. (2003). *Complaining, teasing, and other annoying behaviors*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Murray, B. P. (2019). 30 classroom procedures to head off behavior problems. New York: *Scholastic*.

Craig Simmons is a turnaround instructional coach in Atlanta Public Schools and owner of CAP Curriculum Educational Consulting and Services. Follow him on Twitter.