A Tale of Two Classrooms

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In the first hour of the day, Mr. Smith stood near the doorway to greet his seventh grade students with a smile, high-five, or words of welcome. Thirty students filed into his first hour classroom and headed to their desks, which were situated in neat rows, double wide, providing them a shoulder partner to work with. Among them, a smaller set boy with sandy blonde hair made his way to his seat in the second to last row. He was chatting non-stop his entire trip about the crazy guy who broke the world record for skydiving and for breaking the sound barrier. His arms were flailing with emphasis and a roar of laughter from his fellow classmates around him filled the classroom. Connor embraced the moment with a smile and then took his seat as Mr. Smith began to take attendance. Smith looked at his seating chart and mumbled a few names of students who were missing. He went to his laptop, inserted the names, and returned to the front of the room. During this time, the class had begun to chatter quietly in the background. Instead of directly addressing the noise, Mr. Smith began to teach the lesson as if nothing was wrong.

Students focused in on Mr. Smith as he announced that today they would be performing a play. He asked for volunteers and called on the students who were excited, but able to remain seated while politely raising their hand. Connor was among the students to join the front of the room. His face beamed with excitement as he was announced as the narrator for the play. It was evident that there was respect for the teacher in the class because as he made eye contact with disruptive students chatting loudly in the third row, they turned, without vocally addressed at all, and faced the front of the room. The simple moment where their eyes met was enough for the student to realize that what they were doing was not appropriate at that time and they tuned into the play that had begun. It was clear that the use of eye contact to focus the students was a common way to gain compliance from the students for Mr. Smith since it helped to form, as Allday (2011) mentioned in *Responsive Management: Practical Strategies for Avoiding Overreaction to Minor Misbehavior,*  “an interpersonal interaction” (p. 295). Throughout the performance, the actors began to get more involved in the skit by changing their voices and acting out what was happening. Laughter washed over the audience multiple times without interference from Mr. Smith. He remained at his desk muffling his own laughter and observing the play from a distance. It was clear he had taken the advice of Ullucci (2005) from *Picking Battles, Finding Joy: Creating Community in the “Uncontrolled” Classroom,* and determined rules he deemed to be important while disposing of the others (p. 42).

Around the room, posters hung with inspiring quotes telling students to “Seize the day” and “Live in the moment.” However, not a single poster displayed a list of rules for the class to follow. Allday (2011) mentioned that creating a safe environment “encourages positive behavior, increases the likelihood of academic and behavioral success, and decreases the likelihood of failure” (p. 293). Connor and the rest of the performers continued to thrive in this positive setting created in Mr. Smith’s room. As the play moved into the second half, Connor began to speak with a high pitched voice that was very difficult to understand. One of the students in the audience piped up and asked Connor to stop talking like that since no one could understand him. When Connor continued to talk this way, Mr. Smith turned to Connor and in a calm, collected manner asked if his voice was helping or hindering the play. Connor looked back at him and then to the ground as he mumbled that it was hindering. In remaining calm in his questioning, Mr. Smith had been able to act like an air traffic controller Mundschenk et al (2011) mentioned who must always remain in control, need something happened on the plane (p. 100).

Near the end of the period, the students began to pack their things to leave before being told to do so. Mr. Smith announced that class was not over yet, reminded them that they knew the way the class runs every day and asked if what they were doing was part of this routine. The class shook their heads and some muttered “no.” It was clear that the classroom was very community-centered and that he was definitely an authority figure for he had “an earned influence” over his class (Leriche, 1992, p. 85). The class ended and the students were dismissed. All entered into the chaos of the hallway, unlocking their lockers, talking with friends, and moving to their next hour. Connor moved out the door with the rest of the class, making sure to thank Mr. Smith on his way. As he walked to his second hour Mr. Smith just shook his head after him with a smile playing over his mouth. It was clear that the respect was mutual between the two of them.

In the second hour seventh grade room, Mrs. Baker sat at her desk grading papers. Connor entered the classroom, grabbed the warm-up worksheet at the front of the room, moved to his seat in the first row and quietly sat down. “Good morning Mrs. Baker,” he said to her. She nodded a hello and continued working. When class began, she stood and mentioned that the twenty seven students need to have their homework out on their desk, be working on the worksheet they got when they came in, and that they did not need to be so noisy while doing this work. A few of the students across the room began to chat again right after her instructions. Mrs. Baker raised her voice to address them again, mentioning that if they talked again then they would receive a detention. The girls looked surprised and a wave of fear spread over their face. All three returned to their work, but it was clear that they were unfocused on the task. When students feel at risk, they are not able to perform to their full potential. A good way to maintain a safe environment is through the establishment of rules as a class that will be referred to the rest of the year. Looking around Mrs. Baker’s classroom, rule lists composed and signed by the students were posted. Unfortunately, never once were they referenced when students were misbehaving. Mrs. Baker had turned to power to control her classroom. This power required “command and force to deal out its rewards and punishments” (Leriche, 1992, p. 85).

Instead of the community-centered classroom Connor witnessed first hour, he was now within a knowledge-centered classroom. This classroom revolved around the actual content and placed students as the “starting point” for all things taught by keeping the material to be covered at a fairly high level of importance and building around that (Donovan & Bransford, 2005, p. 14). The class reviewed the answers for the warm-up worksheet by raising their hands and giving their answers. Connor raised his hand a couple times about things he was struggling with and quietly asked Mrs. Baker how to do them. She told him that it was something they all learned in second grade, so they might want to re-evaluate that material. Connor and the majority of the students lowered their heads as Mrs. Baker spoke and it was clear they were ashamed they did not know what to do on the warm-up. Mrs. Baker walked nearby one of her Teacher Assistants and mouthed how much Connor was driving her nuts with all his stupid questions. This “unfavorable teacher comment,” which is a quotation that does not have a positive reason for being voiced, was not the first used in this middle school classroom (Leriche, 1992, p. 86). Instead, Mrs. Baker, and many other teachers alike have moments when they say something they should refrain from saying simply because it is in the moment.

These comments and the lack of empathy exhibited by Mrs. Baker made it very difficult for students to perform at their full potential since they felt at risk. According to Leriche, self confidence can be impacted severely by the way a teacher handles a situation, especially when the student is already struggling with their self esteem (Leriche, 1992, p. 86). Connor, who in the prior hour exhibited lots of self-assurance, folded under Mrs. Baker’s authoritarian style of teaching and stopped performing to his full ability due to emotional discomfort. It was clear that because the reprimands were frequently given for the smallest reasons the students were beginning to act below their aptitude level (Allday, 2011, p. 293). Mrs. Baker continued the lesson, the class zoned out, and the notes were completed in silence and little to no discussion.

At the end of the hour, Mrs. Baker informed the class of their homework assignment consisting of book problems that was due the following day. The class was instructed to open their books and most students began working right away. Connor was among the focused students and he began meticulously recording his results on a paper he would turn in the following day. The class followed suit. Yet again, some began to chatter during the work time about the homework itself and what they were going to do that coming weekend. Mrs. Baker turned her eyes on the students and again snapped at them, emphasizing how disrespectful they were being not only to her, but those around them. Her list of rules still remained high on the wall, doing no more than serving as a collection for dust. Not once did she motion towards the rules or remind the students of what they had decided for class rules. It was clear that, as Allday (2011) predicted, scolding students repeatedly for their misbehavior was not helpful in showing the students how they should behave (p. 293).

At the end of the class period, the students rushed out the door and back into the hallway of madness. Both Mr. Smith and Mrs. Baker prepared to get another batch of students for their third hours. One waited by the door, the other by their desk. Each would go into the next session with the classroom management approach they had been using, which involved either creating a positive, encouraging environment or one that is more rigidly controlled. In comparing and contrasting the two it was apparent that students responded much better to an encouraging atmosphere than a restricted classroom. This comfort was largely due to the students’ need for respect. In the first room, the teacher followed a community-centered environment where core learning values are supported by the norms established as well as the real world applications (Donovan & Bransford, 2005, p. 17). Students in Mr. Smith’s class felt connected as a group because of the choices he made when managing the room. Mrs. Baker’s class, on the other hand, was nervous to participate and was in a much more submissive state. This restricted the amount of learning possible.

Learning was also hindered when the student felt at risk. In first hour, students were in their comfort zone and as a result troubled students did not lower their self-worth (Leriche, 1992, p. 86). The second hour of the day was silent in nature and unfortunately punishment ensued instead of consequences. This negative environment caused the students, especially Connor, to feel like “some kind of evil doer” and therefore, they retracted themselves from the class discussion and submitted to the teacher (Leriche, 1992, p. 80). To stop students from feeling as though they are not wanted or appreciated, teachers must “create a management system that is responsive to student needs and is proactive, as opposed to reactive” (Allday, 2011, p. 293). This change involves teachers really analyzing their students interests, learning styles, and special needs they may have. By looking at the needs of the students, the teacher will be able to have their instruction techniques support the students as opposed to impede upon their growth. One of the best ways to do this is to have students help identify what rules or norms have to be established within the classroom for them, as students, to be successful (Leriche, 1992, p. 79). Allowing students a chance to participate in the creation of these norms gives them some ownership for the room policies, which in turn will result in them behaving according to their determined standards.

If these standards are put onto place, it is very important that there are logical consequences when one of the rules is disobeyed. Mrs. Baker’s management went so poorly was because the rules the class and her created were never referred to and when the rules were broken the only response was scolding and punishment, neither of which were tied to the offense. When students talked out of turn, were disruptive, or were off-task, her solution was to punish them or use condescending language that left the students feeling ashamed of themselves (Leriche, 1992, p.86). Instead, it would be much more valuable to take an approach similar to Mr. Smith’s where he asked the student why they acted the way they did and then worked with them to find a solution. This consequence required the student to do some critical thinking. They had to determine what the logical consequence for their actions should be, making sure that in performing the consequence they would take responsibility for their actions, understand the ramification for their actions and identify why their action was inappropriate (Leriche, 1992, p.80).

Classrooms will always be organized in different ways and with different styles. One of the most important things to remember is to be consistent. Both Mr. Smith and Mrs. Baker have very different styles of teaching. Yet, even though Mrs. Baker’s strategy seemed to struggle at times, she could have been effective had the environment been a little more positive. With a more encouraging approach, a lesson that is taught towards the students’ strengths and the use of logical consequences when the norms established by the students were violated, she would have had a much higher level of classroom control. Connor’s actions showed the ramifications of not upholding these ideas and the positive effects when they were utilized effectively. As a student, he experienced the lessons from a different angle than teachers tend to evaluate themselves from. Teachers much take the time to evaluate how they are teaching by viewing their lessons from a student’s perspective. Taking this time to evaluate lessons, create positive environments, encourage student success, and determine logical consequences will make the classroom a place students want to be; it will make the room an environment that education is desired.

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