
Creating the Conditions for Learning

Laying the Framework for the Ideal Classroom

by Lainie Holmes

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It was the end of August, only a few weeks before a new school year would begin. I was starting to plan the activities I would do with my new class during their first week back at school. In past years and for this particular year, I planned on stating the rules in my classroom. Every teacher is different, and I wanted the students to know the expectations in my room. I still had the four laminated posters that I put up on the wall each year; the posters outlined four Tribes rules: mutual respect, no put-downs, the right to pass, and active listening. But this year, posting these rules didn't make sense to me; it didn't seem right.

A few weeks earlier, I had attended a math conference in Barrie, Ontario, for three days, and had begun to change my practice as a result. But it was not the well-known, motivational speaker who inspired me to think differently, but the modelling of three classroom teachers, who facilitated our small-group sessions each day, that prompted me to question my practice.

The first morning together, the facilitators guided us through the process of creating group norms. Anonymously, we were asked to make a list of things that were important to us when working in a group. It was completely quiet in the room as 30 adults jotted down what was important to them. I wrote down: "no side conversations while others are talking" and "no texting." We were asked to hand in our sheets to the facilitators.

The facilitators came back that afternoon with our comments summarized and on chart paper. I can remember looking for my comments up on the sheet, pleased to see that they were included. We were told to read the sheet and were asked, "Is there anything on the list that you can't live with?" Some people said that they didn't mind side conversations because sometimes when someone is speaking, it sparks a thought and they want to discuss it with someone next to them. The group was asked if they were okay with keeping side conversations to a minimum, and if they did happen, to keep the discussions math related. We all agreed. We continued with the other items and after further discussion, we had fine-tuned our list and agreed to the norms.

The time that it took was well worth it. Side conversations were minimal, and as a result, we could listen to and focus on the ideas shared by others. Cell phones stayed out of sight and as a result, more people were sharing their ideas. There were days when I wanted to stay outside in the sun for just a few more minutes during our break, but I found myself really watching the time because I knew that my colleagues wanted to stay on schedule (a group norm). I wasn't following the rules of the facilitator — I was showing respect to my colleagues by considering their feelings and needs.

I thought to myself, I need to do this with my students. I want them to be more concerned about how they affect others and considerate than following my list of rules and hearing threats of consequences. I knew how it was done with adults, but what would it look like for students?

I began to think, How would I picture and describe my ideal classroom? Kids sitting together. Working together throughout the room at their desks, on the rug, stretched out on the floor. Kids excited about learning. Kids helping one another, sharing ideas and thoughts, listening to one another. A place where judgment, fear, and insecurity were left outside the classroom door.

I wondered, how will I be able to create such an environment all by myself?

Of course, I cannot. In order for this environment to be created, the students need to be a part of it. They need to help shape it. They need to have a voice. That's how I would do it: to create our group norms, we would discuss our ideal classroom.

Asking the Big Question

On the second day of school, I asked my class: "If you were to picture the best possible learning environment, how would you describe it? What would it sound like? look like? feel like? What would make our classroom ideal for you?"

With excitement, I waited for the flood of responses.

Instead, I had a room full of kids staring at me with puzzled looks on their faces. "What do you mean?" they asked.

I rephrased the question for them: "Well, if we wanted to make our classroom the best possible place to learn, what would it be like?"

After I had rephrased the question and there was more discussion, the kids quickly began to write down their thoughts. The room was silent — only the sounds of moving pencils could be heard. In nine years of teaching, I had never asked my students to share what they envisioned as an ideal place to learn. I wish it wouldn't have taken me so long to do so.

Acknowledging the Students' Ideas

After they had lots of time to think and write, I collected their sheets. I told the class I was going to summarize their responses that evening and bring them in the next day to share with everyone, so we could see what we all had in common. That night, I retyped all of their comments into Wordle, a website where text can be typed into a box and an image will be created that shows the words most often mentioned in the text. The words that are mentioned the most become larger in size, compared to those that are repeated a few times. I thought it would be a great way to show the kids what we valued as a group.

The next day I shared the Wordle by projecting it on our SMART Board. I asked the kids, "What is something that is ideal for the majority of our class? What other things are important to us?" The kids pointed out words that surprised them and began to notice themes. After our discussion, I posted a colored copy of our Wordle on our classroom door as a reminder of what was important to us.

The next day, I took the kids' initial statements and combined those that were similar so I could create a master list on chart paper. Beside each statement, I

wrote a number in brackets to show how many times it was written by students in the class. Even if only one student mentioned a particular need, it was written down. I remembered looking for my own comments when we created norms at the math conference and the feeling of acknowledgment when I did see them — I wanted the kids to feel the same sense of acknowledgment: that what they had to say was valued.

The first statement written at the top of the page reflected what was the most important to students in the class: “Respect everyone (teachers, peers, self, classroom space).” The second item that was important to the group was to “be quiet when working, when others are talking, and during independent work time.”

I posted our list in the classroom and explained to the kids what the numbers in the brackets represented. I read each statement aloud and asked them if they had any questions about what their peers had written and if they could live with everything on the list. The kids then asked for clarification and for additional comments to be added. In the end, the kids all signed the list to show that they understood what everyone wanted and needed from one another, and that they would do their best to follow it. I signed it as well.

“It’s Their Voice They’re Hearing”

Now that we had created our ideal classroom, I needed to let my students know that their list served a purpose. It wasn’t just a fun activity to do the first week back to school; it was something that would be used throughout the school year. I told my students that, as their classroom teacher, I was responsible for ensuring that they had an ideal learning environment and that the list was to remind us all of what we could do to make the classroom an ideal place to learn. In my role, I would remind them of items on the list, if need be. For example, when the volume in our room began to increase, I would simply say: “Just a reminder that 14 of your classmates, almost half of the class, mentioned that they need a quiet work environment to learn. Let’s respect their needs and bring the volume down, please.” I didn’t use the list to say, “You’re breaking this rule or you said . . .” In the end, it’s their voice they’re hearing — not mine.

It’s now the beginning of May as I write this story, and I still refer back to their list when needed. I don’t see this as a bad thing. I think it would be strange if every day for 10 months, everyone listened, worked hard, and stayed completely focused. We would be teaching robots, not humans. We need to understand that kids are kids. And if we truly value an ideal learning environment, it is something that we will continue to work on, continue to discuss, and continue to uphold.

The process of creating group norms took about a week from start to finish — maybe 30 minutes each day. Not only did the process bring us closer together as we learned more about each others’ needs, but we saw that we had things in common, we were able to work together, and the tone for the year was set — we needed to consider each others’ feelings, work together, and value one another.

Not a bad way to start off the year . . .
