

More Lessons from Laleh Ghotbi

“How Classroom Circles Help Us Build a Caring Community”

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Lesson: Students often need extra support to speak positively about themselves.

When we use our communication cubes in our community circle, one of the hardest questions for young adolescents to answer is “What is your best quality?” Most kids are shy to speak highly about themselves and community circles are the best place to build their confidence.

When this question comes up and silence follows, I ask other students, “What are some good qualities you can name about ____?” We always have at least a few students who raise their hands to share something positive about their friends. In the end, I thanked the supportive friends and tell the student who rolled the cube, “Next time this question comes up, you can use any of the comments you heard.”

This is a very positive experience for all students; they hear their friends’ supportive comments and feel valued and acknowledged, they become more eager to keep up with the good behaviors that earned them those comments, and they feel more confident to share a positive trait about themselves in future. It’s all about having a positive community in the classroom and clear ground rules for the community circle.

Lesson: Rules inside the classroom community may be different than in the schoolwide community.

We want our students to be self-sufficient and use their words to resolve conflicts. Often when one of my students comes to me to complain about his/her partner’s action, I ask, “Did you tell your partner about this?” and if the answer is no, I say, “Maybe s/he is not aware of this is bothering you.” Often they can resolve the issue among themselves and if they cannot, I talk to them. My students know the rule – if a conflict happens in the classroom, they should try to resolve it among themselves before they come to me. If they need more support, I am always there to help.

They also know that hallway or playground rules may be different. In the classroom, the teacher can always see them and be aware of what is going on, but on the playground students are less visible to adults, so if something serious happens, such as bullying of any type, they need to let the adult supervisor know immediately. They need to understand that they should not get into verbal or physical arguments and extend the problem; however, they should not hide the bullying problem because it may get worse as time passes by and causes serious emotional and physical distress to a student.

Lesson: A tattletale is not the same as a person who reports a problem.

Often kids witness a problem but are afraid to report it as they may be labeled a tattletale. Students in our classroom community are educated about the difference between the two. A tattletale says something to get someone in trouble while one who reports a problem does it to keep someone safe. The goal of a tattletale is to hurt someone, but the goal of the person who reports is to keep someone from being hurt any further.

When students know the difference, they can decide whether telling me or another adult is being a tattletale or reporting a problem. Is the reporting building the community and bringing us together or causing more problems and division within the team?

Lesson: Taking the time to truly listen to each community member can give you so much insight into each child's lived experience.

I have mixed feelings when my students share some of their life experiences in the classroom. I am proud of how resilient they are. At the same time, it breaks my heart to hear them dealing with hardship and life challenges that even adults may struggle to overcome.

I have a very diverse population of students in my classroom, as Title 1 schools often do. Being from an immigrant family adds life challenges students may experience on a daily basis. I have students who see their parents only on weekends because they work multiple low-paying shifts to provide for their families. I have students who witness their parents being verbally abused because of being a person of color or looking different.

There are students who go hungry if the school doesn't provide meals and those who are afraid of losing a family member to gang-related conflicts because they have already experienced the loss. Others have an undocumented grandparent who is sick and is terrified to go to the doctor and face deportation.

Every day our students walk into our classrooms with a load of problems on their small shoulders. If we are not sensitive to their pain and can't see them beyond the classroom, we will fail them in providing the emotional support they crave and the loving, safe place they are seeking.

Lesson: "Bad" behavior is usually a mask for traumatic experiences or fear and taking the time to listen can change everything.

Educators with strong class management skills are frequently assigned students who do not follow directions, who disturb the peaceful environment of the classroom, and even throw things and use foul language. It is easy to lose patience and consider showing them the consequences of their actions so the rest of the kids don't imitate these poor behaviors.

As I've learned from the wise school counselors I've worked with, we should always look beyond the behavior and find the cause of it. Why does a young kid, seeking his/her classmates' approval, start acting up in a way that frightens his/her classmates? Most often our students' misbehavior is a call for help; they get so emotional that they are not able to manage their feelings.

Our children need to know we love them even when they get overwhelmed with emotions. If the classroom becomes a safe place where they feel loved and cared for, they learn to self-regulate or ask for help when they cannot manage their strong emotions. When your tough kid who used to throw objects now draws a picture for you and tells you there is a special place in his heart for you, you will fall in love with your job all over again. Kids don't want to misbehave; they just need to learn how to deal with their problems and manage their emotions.
