

Connections in the Classroom: A Management System that
Works!

CEP 883- Jenna VanderSluis- Hoogstra

Michigan State University

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When one hears the words “management” or “discipline”, many mechanical and stressful images may come to mind. What about when these words are connected to a classroom? Fortunately, teachers are no longer allowed to strike students with paddles in front of the entire class and many schools now have the freedom to teach in new exciting ways. Educators such as John Dewey, Maria Montessori and Rudolf Steiner thought outside of the box and discovered ways to teach the whole child. Today, teachers do not just need to know the material they are teaching to their students, they need to know their students. When teachers accomplish that they can teach more effectively and the students generate a love of learning.

When I look back on my first year of teaching, I wish some one would have told me that what I do in the first few weeks of class really affects the rest of the school year. Vern and Louise Jones are the authors of *Comprehensive Classroom Management*. They state, “The research finding showed that the smooth functioning found throughout the school year in effective teachers’ classrooms was heavily influenced by effective planning and organization during the first few weeks of school” (11). I believe that this little bit of information would have helped me tremendously when I initially thought about how I would run my classroom.

There is so much to think about besides lesson planning. What should my classroom layout look like? It should communicate high expectations and norms to my students.

There is a lot of pressure on a teacher when you realize that “Teachers are involved daily in creating the atmosphere in which children spend approximately

one-fourth of their waking lives” (Jones and Jones, 2013, p.31). At the beginning of my first year of teaching, I just jumped right into the physical aspects of my class and thought little about each child. That was my biggest mistake. The children are the reason why I am at school and they should be the primary focus in all of my decisions in the classroom. My classroom should not only look inviting, but, it should be a “classroom environment in which *all* students feel safe and valued” (Jones and Jones, 2009, p.5). Part of this safe feeling each student should have includes a newly developed set of skills that allow them to work collaboratively and successfully with others (Jones and Jones, p. 5). Above all, my classroom should “be built on a foundation of trust and respect” (Jones and Jones, p. 20). If only I realized this three years ago.

My first year of teaching would have been a lot different if I could jump back in time and apply the following details about classroom management. Life is full of relationships and few are more important than the ones developed between students within the classroom community. The classroom needs to be a safe place to learn and grow. Jones and Jones quote Rudolf Dreikurs in their book. Dreikurs says that children need to be socially accepted (33). Teachers can use this need to their benefit in the classroom. Using buddies or setting students up in table groups can promote discussion and this collaborative work can help achievement rates go up (Jones and Jones, p. 97). When a child, or any adult for that matter, feels comfortable in a learning environment they will be less likely to act out and more likely to participate and grow. Jones and Jones also say that friendships developed at school can help children deal with many issues they have going on at home (99).

Peer relationships can also have life long positive effects. Not only do they help develop personal, cognitive skills and enhance perceptions of education, “but [they] also provide a framework for the development of lifelong social skills and positive self- esteem” (95). Peer relationships are important. Check!

Another very important classroom relationship that requires a lot of thought is the teacher’s relationship with his or her students. Most students have had a teacher that they felt did not care about them or their thoughts. It is likely that a student’s motivation to do anything in that type of classroom is setting extremely low. In the first few weeks of class the teacher has many tasks to complete, and perhaps the most daunting task is the laying of the foundations for the individual relationships that need to be developed between the teacher and each student. Some teachers believe their authority and respect with the students will be enhanced if they disclose little about their personal lives. I believe the opposite is true. Each teacher has a life outside the curriculum, and he or she should use it to connect with students. Jones and Jones quote Gregory and Ripski (2008), “Teachers who reported that they used a relational approach were more likely to have students who exhibited lower defiant behavior than those teachers who did not report using such an approach. This significant association between a relational approach and low defiant behavior was explained by student trust in teacher authority” (566). This openness creates respect and allows students to see that teachers have a life outside of school, and students can relate to that.

Positive open relationships help create a mutual relationship based on trust and respect. For example, teachers can tell personal stories in class or have lunch

with their students. “Elementary students who rate their school experience more positively also rate their relationships with their teacher as more positive” (Jones and Jones, p.58). These “positive teacher- student relationships are an essential factor influencing the motivation, achievement, and behavior for all students.”(Jones and Jones, p. 61). Student- teacher relationship- Check!

In the first few weeks of school a teacher must have all of the lessons planned, and his or her classroom must look “educational”. But what about a classroom management system? And what about the rules that the children must follow? “We have some concerns about using the term *rules*” (170) Jones and Jones write. They prefer the words “*behavior standards*” or “*norms*” and I would tend to agree with them. The word “rules” has so many negative connotations attached to it in today’s society. “Rules” imply excess rigidity, which can stifle learning and create unnecessary stress.

Jones and Jones and Randy Sprick, the author of *CHAMPS*, suggest that classroom norms should be developed with the students during the first few days of the school year. “Rules and procedures should be developed in conjunction with classroom teaching strategies that enhance active and meaningful student engagement in the learning process...” (Jones and Jones,p.169). By helping create the norms the students feel responsible and they have power in the classroom. Since they helped create the norms they are more likely to stick to them. This also helps create a community of learners working together.

Now that the rules are made the teacher needs to keep the students accountable and review the adopted norms daily for several weeks. If a student falls

out of line “educators need to have positive interactions with students if they want students to respond positively to adult requests for effort or modified behavior (Jones and Jones, p. 76). Teachers should praise on task behavior and not overly criticize off task behavior. For example if a student is off task a teacher should not yell at him or her but perhaps ask, “What is your job?” This way it is the student’s responsibility to solve the problem. These positive ways of interaction could affect how the children act in the future. “Research conducted at Johns Hopkins University indicates that effective classroom management techniques in first grade can have a dramatic impact on whether students will behave violently at the age of thirteen” (Jones and Jones,p.17).

To review at the beginning of the year the teacher needs to focus on creating a fun, positive and safe classroom, develop and foster both peer relationships and student- teacher relationships, and create classroom norms with the students. All of these details on top of lesson plans! Throughout the duration of this class I have had thoughts and ideas bouncing around in my head about how I can incorporate all of these details about relationships and positive classroom environment into my classroom next year. Below is my plan for an effective and productive classroom.

During the first day of school I am going to make sure that my classroom is set up with unit based pictures on the wall. All of the desks will be in groups of four in order to “allow easy access from any part of the room to any other part of the room, making it easy to circulate among the students” (Sprink, 2009, p. 72). All of their cubbies will be clean and folders, pencils and erasers will be in neat piles ready to be distributed.

Based on the reading, I will have the children help me compile a list of norms for the classroom. The norms will be positive. In order to help my students remember the norms, I think it would be fun to have them act out, create a poster for our wall and create a story about the norms and present them to the rest of the class (Jones and Jones, p. 184-185).

In the past I have waited too long to open up communications with parents Sprick suggests that teachers send home a letter (see appendix) the first day of school introducing themselves and the goals of the year (52-55). I think that this will set a positive tone for the parents and hopefully they will feel free to contact me with any questions.

In the first few days I will also explain some of the guidelines and routines to the students. Sprick also suggests that teachers have a signal for their student when they need silence. My school uses a bell (76).

1. Once the bell is rung, expect attention- swiftly correct inattention (“ Billy, what is your job when you hear the bell? That’s right- Stop, Look, Listen!”)
2. Give a brief, orderly directives-*When I ring the bell again I would like you to do three jobs:*
 1. Job 1- Put everything away and take out your books.
 2. Job 2- you may write down any thoughts you may have while you are reading, but there is no talking unless you are asking me a question.
 3. Job 3- You may move anywhere in the room as long as you are not next to a friend you may be tempted to talk to.
3. Have the students repeat what the jobs are:
 1. Linda- What is Job #1?
 2. Riley- Job #2?
 3. Laura- What is the final instruction? That’s right! Does anyone not know their job? Ok Let’s go!
4. Ring the bell twice and the students should go right to their jobs of getting ready for silent reading time.
5. If there is a child not doing his or her job, ask “Tom what is your job? Are you doing your job? What do you need to do? That’s right! Good work!

This allows for little distraction and lag time between transitions. It also allows the students to solve his or her own problems without getting in trouble.

I am going to strive to praise the good works my students do, and eliminate negative responses when they do something wrong. If a student does something outstanding or simply follows directions the first time, I will give them a WOW Clip (these are colorful paperclips.) These clips will be counted at the end of each day and each WOW Clip will cause a marble to be added to a marble jar that we will fill for a prize.

Of course, students will act out frequently and when they do they will have to get in the routine of giving themselves a “color change”. Above their backpack hooks I will place their nametags and five green stickers- one for each day of the week. If a student acts out once during a day he or she will have to change their color on that given day to blue. If he or she acts out more than once, their color changes from blue to yellow and then finally from yellow to red. If a child gets to red I will e-mail or call his or her parents. Throughout this process I will be helping the student problem solve and create good strategies to improve behavior. If the student gets to red the problem solving will include his or her parents.

This structure filled with consistent routines teaches the students a small amount of responsibility. Allowing them to change their own colors, work in small groups and even be in charge of morning calendar gives them ownership and a sense of worth in the classroom (65). The classroom becomes a safe and positive place for students to be themselves.

One other classroom management strategy that links relationships and discipline is the creation of a curriculum that applies to the students' lives and keeps them engaged at all times. The less down time they have the less they will goof off. "An essential aspect of effective classroom management involves implementing instructional methods that meet students' needs by actively engaging them in meaningful learning and assisting them in understanding the learning process and developing a sense of being a competent learner" (Jones and Jones, p.275).

There are so many different things for a teacher to think about when he or she plans for a school year. If a positive management system is forgotten or not fully developed, it may be a long year. I am looking forward to developing a more wholly rounded classroom community that starts with my students and includes a positive management system. This positive way of looking at the behavioral issues in the class will create a calm yet responsive and happy environment. That will yield a harmonious atmosphere of cheerful co-laboring and beautiful organization which allow the students to make joyful discoveries in the classroom. Each aspect of the classroom needs to be connected to the other so that the classroom can function in a positive way for student and teacher.

Appendix :

Dear Parents,

Welcome to a new school year! My name is Mrs. Jenna Hoogstra and I am your child's teacher this year. This is my fourth year teaching at Lorien Wood, but my first year teaching Form Two. I know many of you and have had one or more of your children in my class, and I am looking forward to meeting all of you.

I want you and your child to know that my major goals for this year are that each student in my class will:

- Develop his or her written expression so that they can communicate in narrative, scientific and creative formats.
- Master all basic addition and subtraction facts, as well as be exposed to geometry and manipulating fractions.
- Learn to work and cooperate in groups and sometimes take a leadership role.
- Speak and share ideas in front of groups with dignity and grace.
- Stay focused on written tasks and bring these tasks to completion.
- Find the truth, beauty and virtue in the world God has given us.

I will try to e-mail a classroom newsletter to you every week, starting next Friday. In these newsletters I will update you on the activities in the classroom and any important upcoming dates.

If you need to contact me for any reason, please don't hesitate to e-mail me at jenna.vander.sluis@lorienwood.org. I check my e-mail when I get home from school and right before I go to bed. If it is an emergency my phone number is 616-581-7894. I will also be in my classroom at 8:30am – 3:30pm most days if you just want to swing by to chat.

Please inform me about anything you feel I should know in order to better assist your child to succeed this year. I will also be e-mailing you directly if I need anything from you. Please let me know if you would prefer another form of communication.

That is all for now, and let your child know that we will have a great year in Room 202!

Blessings,

Mrs. Hoogstra
Form 2

Bibliography:

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