

Helping children put their best foot forward
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At the beginning of the year, most teachers encounter children who do not behave and achieve as we might wish for them (or for us), who behave in ways that make it difficult for others enjoy their company or to learn with them. These children often find themselves going down the hall for one reason or another so that they miss important parts of classroom community life. This compounds the problem. They are not positioned in ways that will help them put their best foot forward. This session is about changing their lives (and everyone else's).

Changing these children's lives requires changing:

- 1) *The way we frame the problem.* Rather than locating the problem solely in the child, we locate it in the community (which includes us). We assume that the child has not yet learned the necessary behaviors and how to generate and sustain productive relationships.
- 2) *Community relational skills and identity.* At the same time as we work to help the child become part of the community, we work on the community to ensure that they welcome and provide support to the child. This means actively addressing children's relationships – how they think about and support one another, who they think they are as a class, what they think their role is, and how the way they behave towards others affects the community. In part we do this by expanding their social imaginations and linking that understanding to their behaviors. We also do not avoid the hard parts of classroom social life. We use those problems to think through alternative ways to solve them.
- 3) *What we notice and reflect back to the child (and the rest of the community).* When children do not seem to put their best foot forward, it is easiest to see the worst in them. We need to assiduously notice those behaviors that are productive (or almost productive, no matter how small) and attribute good intentions. They will grow into the intentions. In effect, we are doing what Jo Worthy calls “restorying” – creating a new narrative for them (and their classmates) to live into. New stories require new character identities.
- 4) *The language we use.* To establish growth theorizing in the classroom, we avoid using fixed frame language - person-oriented praise or negative feedback – such as “I’m disappointed in you,” “good boy,” “that’s what good readers do,” and “you’re always doing...” Instead, we turn children’s attention toward strategic and decision-making behaviors and their consequences (how could/did you do x) rather than traits (you’re so smart) as causal narratives. We value trying and persisting. We normalize change and counter children’s “can’t” with “can’t yet.” We normalize problems and errors as indicators of learning and challenge, not of ability, and we build flexibility (how else could you...).
- 5) *The extent to which children are heard.* We make sure we listen to the children and show them that we are doing so. We help them listen to each other by organizing for it, assisting them (e.g., in turn and talks), by helping them to

become interesting to each other (especially by working on different projects and reading different books and by showing them how different perspectives are helpful to them. We create dialogic classrooms.

- 6) *The emphasis on meaningful engagement.* Above all, we recognize that when children are meaningfully engaged, many problematic behaviors disappear. When children are not engaged in productive activity, some of them will appear to be not who we had hoped for.

Some Principles to Remember

- A. Children grow into the intellectual life around them (Lev Vygotsky). Our job is to help arrange for a productive intellectual life.
- B. Individuals become the autobiographical narratives by which they tell about their lives (Catherine Riessman). Peter's corollary: The narratives children tell about themselves, are shaped by those that are made available to them and the ways they are positioned in classroom life. For some children the narratives are negative and the characters have permanent negative characteristics.
- C. Children must have their psychological needs met:
 - i) a sense of autonomy/agency
 - ii) a sense of competence
 - iii) a sense of belonging
 - iv) meaningful engagement

A Simple Context for Engagement

Making books. Satisfying these conditions most easily requires a literate community that views literacy in terms of complex, personally meaningful social practices that hinge on individuals' decision-making and that are made richer through diversity. A good example of this is when children are invited to make books, as suggested by Katie Wood Ray, Lisa Cleaveland, Matt Glover and others. Children enter school, are read some illustrated children's books in a context of conversations about a) the things children find meaningful, b) the things they notice about the books, and c) the decisions the authors and illustrators made and the positive consequences of those decisions. The teacher invites children to make some books if they wish. When they do, the children's constructions are addressed in exactly the same terms as the adult authors. Parallel links are made: "You put your name on the cover just like Joy Cowley," and "I notice that Mem Fox decided to make the words really big on this part so that we'll read it really loudly. You could decide to do that in your book too." Lisa Cleaveland in her book *More about the Authors* summarizes the book making cycle approximately as follows (this is adapted from the book):

- Refer to books as things made by interesting people – always use the author's/illustrator's name and read the dedications, author notes, etc.
- Notice something about how a text is composed
- Talk towards understanding it in terms of intentional moves by those interesting people

- Name it using the relevant technical terms
- Imagine using a similar move in a student book
- Invite children to try it
- Celebrate when someone tries it, name it, and talk about it in exactly the same terms as you talk about the adult authors they are familiar with, and make the mentoring connection

The idea is that the children come to identify themselves and their peers as authors and illustrators who do meaningful things and make meaningful decisions just as adult authors and illustrators do.

Making books (rather than just teaching writing) is useful because it opens more ways of being successful for a wider array of children. Since children are familiar with the books, they have ample concrete models, and they offer long-term projects for the children, which is helpful in developing attention span among other things. Turning their attention to processes and decisions - what goes on in characters' and authors' and illustrators' heads is powerful not only because it helps them see the possibilities of agency in making books, but also because it turns them away from the view that one is either a writer or one is not.

In addition, turning their attention toward what goes on in characters, authors, illustrators, and readers' heads expands children's social imaginations - their ability to imagine themselves into other's minds. Among other things, children with stronger social imaginations:

- Have more positive social skills,
- Are more socially cooperative,
- Have larger social networks,
- Are viewed more positively by peers,
- Misbehave less at home and school,
- Have fewer angry responses in personal interactions.
- Have stronger moral development
- Have better self-regulation

Opening literate activity to include illustrations and related conversations as well as print provides more points of entry into the literate community for a wider array of students. It offers more children a sense of competence. Since the children choose different personally meaningful things to make books about, they become more interesting to each other. The complexity and diversity of children's constructions also makes it less easy for children to make unproductive comparisons about each other's engagements. The conversational emphasis on the decisions and processes of book construction also minimize these comparisons. All of these dimensions make it less likely that children will adopt fixed theorizing and believe that people are permanently more or less competent. In addition, we let children know that problems and mistakes are normal when we're learning, and are indicators that we're learning, not of who we are,

A kind, caring, learning community. We often talk about building learning communities in classrooms, but what does that mean? What sort of learning community? What are its values, its identity, and how do members relate to one

another? It takes a caring community to help all children put their best foot forward, to help children want to show others more of their best side, so we work on building a caring community from the get-go. We use books to generate conversations about emotional and social life, slowing down the process so that students can notice and name emotions and moves that they might otherwise miss, and connect the moves with the emotions.

Some books that produce useful community building conversations

Peace week in Mrs. Fox's class.

The sandwich swap.

Martin's big words.

The other side.

Harvesting hope.

Ruby Bridges.

Best Friends.

Stand tall Molly Lou Mellon.

The invisible boy.

Click, clack, moo, cows that type.

The lunch thief.

Some books that produce useful conversations about kindness

One smile.

Each kindness.

Ordinary Mary's extraordinary deed.

Those shoes.

A sick day for Amos McGee

The invisible boy.

Andrea's Strategies with Damon

1. Start building a caring community – use relevant books to generate conversations building social imagination, strategies for productive interaction, and positive causal narratives.
2. 1-1 kindness study using relevant books to discuss positive interaction strategies and their emotional and relational consequences.
3. Provide preventive behavior options (break cards, notebook, hunt for bugs, supply bin, etc).
4. Help individual (and class) recognize productive interaction strategies in class and playground.
5. Document student's use of strategies and remind of these successes at the beginning of each day. Publicly recognize these events as they occur in class to change the narrative. Invite student to notice and record own positive behaviors. [Linked to book character MLK]
6. Role play scenarios from class, playground, and books to explore behavioral options and consequences.
7. Build teaching opportunities for the student.

Notice that the behavioral token-economy strategies attempted initially include non of the above dimensions. Even if they had worked, they would not have changed the classroom context in which Damon needed to live.

In the case of Spike, who was a non-participant in the group, Kathy's coaching:

- Sustained the group's ownership e.g., "Can I interject something here?"
- Described what she had observed, emphasizing the productive strategy used by a student (asking for clarification).
- Reminded the group of what they were doing (helping Spike answer his question) and invited them to construct a causal connection.
- Students then interacted in more productive ways.
- Kathy then reflected on successful strategies in comparison with previously unsuccessful strategies, helping them to construct a productive causal narrative.
- Constructed an anchor chart that also reviewed the positive strategies.
- Invited the students to use the chart to teach others what they had learned.

This work is grounded in the excellent teaching of Kathy Champeau, Merry Komar, Sarah Helmer, Laurie McCarthy, Andrea Hartwig, and Tara Krueger. It will in the not-too-distant future become a Stenhouse book with all these authors.

Recommended Readings

Ruth Charney. (2002). *Teaching children to care: Classroom management for ethical and academic growth, K-8*. Turners Falls, MA: Northeast Foundation for Children.

Lisa Cleaveland (2016). *More About the Authors*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Peter Johnston (2004). *Choice Words: How our language affects children's learning*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.

Peter Johnston (2012). *Opening minds: How classroom talk shapes children's minds and their lives*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.

Katie Wood Ray, & Matt Glover, (2008). *Already ready: Nurturing writers in preschool and kindergarten*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.