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CLASSROOM DISCIPLINE :  
SOME PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS  
FOR BEGINNING TEACHERS

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My first teaching appointment to Cunnamulla Secondary Department in 1975 was indeed a humbling experience. I am constantly reminded of my frustrations experienced as a beginning teacher as I see inexperienced teachers grapple with similar problems now, at Murgon High School.

Against this background, I would like to offer some suggestions for establishing and maintaining classroom discipline. Although these suggestions are specifically directed at beginning teachers in schools with significant proportions of Aboriginal students, they may also be helpful to teachers in other settings, since they are well supported in the literature (see references).

### 1. ESTABLISH A SET OF CLASSROOM RULES WITH EACH CLASS

As early as possible in the school year, you should spend at least one lesson discussing classroom rules (the what and the why). This involves more than just announcing or publishing a rigid list of "do's" and "don'ts". The students should be encouraged to participate in the rule making process. When students are given responsibility to set their rules they will be more likely to accept responsibility for their own behaviour.

It is a good idea to explain to your class that classroom rules are essential for effective learning because students are unable to work when other students misbehave. Using this as an underlying principle, you could offer a couple of predetermined rules and invite students to discuss these and contribute their own for consideration. You'll be surprised at their conservative (or should I say, responsible) responses.

The final and refined list should be restricted to about five unambiguous, short, specific, positive and active statements.

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Some examples are:

- Come to class on time.
- Raise your hand to get permission to talk.
- Work quietly so that you don't disturb others.
- Stay in your seat unless you get permission to move.
- Keep your desk tidy.

## 2. ENFORCE THESE RULES CONSISTENTLY AND FAIRLY

During your discussion of rules you should also establish a list of reasonable and appropriate consequences that students will accept when they break a rule. For example, in relation to the first rule listed above (i.e., come to class on time) some possible consequences might be:

- Complete unfinished classwork for homework.
- make up lost time at lunch or after school.
- lose free time privileges.

Note how these are logically connected to the misbehaviour (i.e., arriving late).

Some teachers enforce a "no excuse" policy with good results. This means that whenever a student breaks a rule, the teacher hands down the consequences - no matter what.

Personally, I feel more comfortable issuing a warning to the offending student for the first (and only) infringement. In doing so, I insist that the student acknowledges the infringement, and get the student's undertaking for an improved performance. Often this is sufficient for the student to resume acceptable conduct. This action should then be followed up by reinforcing the student's acceptable behaviour with a positive remark.

Whichever method you adopt, use it consistently and be sure not to punish innocent students (e.g., keeping the class in when only a couple of students broke the rule).

## 3. THOROUGHLY PREPARE LESSONS

Beginning teachers devote a great deal of their preparation time to content. Whilst it is important to be thoroughly familiar and confident with your subject, neglecting teaching methods (e.g., teaching strategies, learning experiences, matching teaching

strategies with learning styles, motivational variables, etc.) will only invite discipline problems.

It is unlikely that your students will share your intrinsic fascination with the subject. Your goal should be to translate the subject into a meaningful and relevant course (from their perspective.)

Simply put, don't bore the kids into 'mischief' - use a variety of methods and approaches.

#### 4. BE DEFINITE AND POSITIVE IN THE CLASSROOM

Many of your students will be fun loving and active. Channelling their energy into productive learning experiences requires sharp and decisive action. It will help to make your instructions clear and check that they have been understood. Without adequate lesson preparation you are unlikely to be definite and purposeful.

Few of us, however, (even experienced teachers) are able to "stay on top of things" every lesson. Humans are just not built that way. When things just don't work out the way you planned, avoid introspective searching for blame. This will only further erode your confidence. Instead, identify your positive attributes or the things that went well. Make sure you build these successful strategies into future lessons. A trusted colleague may be helpful in identifying your strengths.

#### 5. TREAT YOUR STUDENTS WITH COURTESY AND RESPECT

Teachers demonstrate that they respect their students when they talk to students pleasantly, show an interest (by making the effort to talk to them) in extra curricular and out-of-school activities, enforce reasonable rules consistently and fairly, and display an enthusiastic and positive approach to teaching. By modelling respect in these ways, teachers help students understand what respect is (informally) and how they are expected to treat others.

Unfortunately, some teachers fall into the trap of modelling inappropriate teacher stereotypes. For example, whilst it's important to establish a "no nonsense" policy (see 1 and 2 above), some inexperienced teachers pretend to be tough by adopting a "Sergeant Major" image. Students find this act ridiculous. Similarly, "The Nice Guy" (anything goes policy), "The Screamer" (a prime candidate for a coronary occlusion) and, "The Buck Passer" (blaming someone else for their problems and thereby abdicating responsibility for

classroom management, e.g., sending students to the office for only minor infringements), fail to gain respect from students.

## CONCLUSION

I hope that the suggestions offered here will at least set the scene for establishing and maintaining effective disciplinary procedures for your classes. Experience, positive staff discussions, and further professional reading will provide essential opportunities for you to further develop classroom management skills.

Finally, I invite you to consider the implications of the recent finding, (Lewis & Lovegrove, 1983) that students perceive their *best* teachers as calm, rational people who take an active role in classroom management.

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