

Teaching Theory and Practice: Some Mindset Shifts That Can Help

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I've been a teacher for 2 years. I remember how terrified I was when I first started out. Palms were sweaty, knees weak... you know how the rest goes. Now I go into each class with a mixture of excitement (cause we have FUN for real) and sharp eyed intensity (cause I'm not the one to play with). I'll share with ya'll how I've learned to manage my classes in such a way that we balance fun with learning, and authentic self-expression with respect.

First, we'll start out with some theory and ways to apply it in practice. In another post, I'll give ya'll some even more practical, actionable tips for lesson planning and classroom management to help your classes flow super smoothly. Take what you feel will work for you, and leave the rest.

Teaching Theory One: Stillness and Silence are Hard

Remember that every day, your students are doing something that is objectively hard and uncomfortable: sitting still for basically forever (at least that's what it feels like to them).

The truth is that it is not comfortable for our bodies to sit still for 8 hours per day. It's not comfortable for our brains to offer uninterrupted attention for that long either. As adults, even we don't typically enjoy prolonged stillness and attention. Kids have even more energy and even less control over their attentions than we do. It's giving... a recipe for disruption.

So let's say you notice that students are starting to talk in the back. Or stand up every two seconds. Or make weird noises that sound vaguely threatening as they play with some small toy in their desks. A lot of times we get caught up with the fact that we want our students to listen to us. We want them to sit down and pay attention to the material we have painstakingly prepared.

But students are already being asked a LOT just by being there.

Remembering this can help us reframe how we feel when students get disruptive. Fidgeting, standing up, and wandering attention is not an indication of disrespect. It's just an indication that your students are normal human beings— they need to move, to use up some energy. By accepting restlessness and wandering attention as natural and normal, you can work with that energy rather than against it.

Practical Tip One for Difficulty w/ Stillness and Silence

When you notice your class getting restless, take the soonest, smoothest opportunity and switch over to a physical game/activity. Get everyone up and moving, or engrossed in a game related to the material. (Now if that doesn't work and they're still being wild, by all means bring down the hammer. But give it a try first.) This requires flexibility with your lesson planning. A good rule of thumb is to plan several 15-20 minute blocks of learning/reading and several 10 minute blocks of games related to the material. Monitor the class's engagement and switch between learning and games as needed. Fidgeting and wandering attention = Game Time. Everyone having lots of fun and the high energy = Sorry Ya'll, Time to Get Back to Business.

Teaching Theory Two: Encourage All Questions

Remember that kids are learning a lot. Aside from the things you're teaching in your class like English, Mathematics, and Science, children are also about the business of learning how to BE in the world. As one of the main adults in their lives for the year you're with them, that means that students will be learning a lot of life lessons from YOU.

Sometimes, students will challenge us. They might ask questions like "Why do we have to do things this way?" I've been asked about my clothes, my hair, my nails. I've been dragged ya'll. You name it, a kid is gonna call it out. It's easy for us to dismiss these questions as a waste of class time at best. At worst, we might find these questions disrespectful or rude.

But these moments are valuable teaching opportunities. Taking a moment out of your time to address a student's concern/comment, validate it, and answer it (to the best of your ability) teaches a student several things at once. It teaches them that their concerns are valid. That it's valuable to question things. That curiosity is encouraged. And that you respect their point of view. These lessons go a long way to building confident, curious, and happy students AND small humans. Harnessing your student's natural curiosity can make classes more engaging and fun for everyone. I have laughed HARD in class with my students after some wild questions. And there will be wild questions smh...

Practical Tip Two for Encouraging All Questions

Whenever a student asks any question, I recommend pausing to address it directly. If you think it's appropriate, answer the student's question. If not, you can say something along the lines of "Hmm... I'm not sure. Teacher doesn't know everything!" Limit the time you spend to about one or two minutes. If things haven't been cleared up in that time, offer to explain it to them more after class if they want. Usually they won't take you up on the offer, but occasionally they'll surprise you and stay to ask more questions. Whatever the result, I find students really value being heard.

Teaching Theory Three: Respect Goes Both Ways

This one is simple. If you put time and effort into showing your students that you truly respect them, their feelings, and their point of view, your students will treat you with the same respect. Kids can tell when you're just humoring them and you don't really care or aren't really listening. If you want them to listen and process the information you give them, then do the same for them. No matter how wild or silly it is. And it WILL be wild and silly half the time...

Practical Tip Three: Demonstrating Respect to Your Students

I teach my students the word "compromise" early on every year. Even when my students ask for something that I immediately know I'm going to refuse, I still pause and consider if there is truly any way I can address it or meet them halfway before I respond with a firm "No." Students can tell when you really give their request some thought before you shut it down. If I'm adamant about doing something, and they're adamant about NOT doing that thing (or vice versa), I always call out "COMPROMISE!" It works every time.

Teaching is sometimes exhausting, sometimes heart-warming, and always educational for everyone involved. If you let your grips slack on the reins just a little, but not too much, you'll end up having as much fun as (if not more than) your students. I definitely do. My kids roll their eyes at me like "Teacher, this is supposed to be a game for the students..." Nah, it's OUR game. At the end of the day, you can and SHOULD have fun teaching. Whether you're roasting each other or teaching each other, playing games or taking notes, it can be a great time. And you know, sometimes it won't be, and that's ok too. Teaching is all about rolling with things as they unfold, guiding your students to meet goals where you can, and stepping back to re-evaluate when you can't.