

Students Make the Classroom

by Laura Candler

What's Wrong With This Picture?

I had been learning about the Love and Logic method of classroom management, and I began to wonder how I could apply some of those strategies to my teaching situation. In particular I was feeling that my students had not been behaving well, yet I was continuing to give my usual 100% effort into developing fun, effective lessons for the kids. Something seemed wrong with this picture – they were having fun, but I was leaving school each day exhausted and frustrated, feeling like my day had not been productive at all. I decided to show the students that their behavior would directly influence the kind of classroom we could have. If they weren't willing to pay attention and cooperate, I was no longer going to knock myself out planning fun, hands-on activities.

What Kind of Classroom Do We Want?

I realized that my students needed to understand the “logic” in the way their behavior directly impacts our classroom learning experience. So I came up with a graphic organizer called Students Make the Classroom. (See sample.) I told my class they had the power to decide what kind of classroom we would have and that I was tired of working so hard when all they wanted to do was play around. We brainstormed the characteristics of two types of classrooms. I referred to them as Classroom A and Classroom B.

For Classroom A, we described all the



characteristics of model students - caring, cooperative, patient, helpful, self-motivated, trustworthy, etc. Then we described the kind of classroom that would result from such student behaviors. Students would have freedom to move around the room as they needed to do so, the atmosphere would be relaxed, people would be able to work in cooperative groups, the teacher could use hands-on, fun activities, etc. As I wrote their ideas on the overhead transparency, they wrote them on their own papers.

Then we talked about Classroom B, where the students were all having a bad day (unmotivated, rude, uncooperative, playing around too much, talking when supposed to be working, etc). I asked them to think about the kind of approach a teacher would need to use to deal with these behaviors. They realized that kids couldn't have freedom - they would have to stay in their seat without talking and wouldn't be able to do cooperative learning activities. They would have to work out of textbooks and wouldn't be able to do literature circles. In fact, one student said it would be like a jail.

Then I told them that as long as they were acting like Classroom A, I would be Teacher A. But when I saw them becoming Classroom B, I would give a few warnings and then I would become Teacher B for the rest of the day. They could choose what kind of class they wanted to have.

How Did It Work?

I did this activity first thing on Monday morning. Right after that, my next few lessons went really well. Then they had a bit of freedom to read with partners during a reading activity. They were quiet and productive for longer than usual, but eventually someone started goofing off. I saw them walk up behind someone else and tickle them, then run away playfully. No

big deal on the playground, but we as teachers know that when a few kids start this up during an instructional activity the next thing we have is chaos in the classroom. I looked right at the kids involved and said, "We've had a great day so far as Classroom A. Are we going to become Classroom B right now?" I was amazed at how they looked shocked and realized exactly what I was talking about - and they settled right back down again. Throughout the day I even heard kids telling other kids that they didn't want to be Classroom B!

It's now been a week and I can't believe the difference in my class. A few days ago we did some partner reading and I was involved with a group of struggling readers for 1/2 hour. Not a single kid interrupted me or bothered me - they were so self-motivated and did exactly what they were supposed to do! I was amazed! Of course I keep complimenting them on how wonderful it is to be teaching Classroom A and having so much fun at school.

Yes, I know that at some point they will not be able to help becoming Classroom B again. Kids are born to test limits, aren't they? But I have a plan, and it's a plan they won't like. I'm going to tell them I'm done teaching for the day and I'm going to list some independent assignments on the board for them to complete at their desks, on their own, without talking. No help, no cooperative learning, just work all day. Then the next day (if they have their work done) I will ask if they are ready to become Classroom A again. I'm sure they will be more than ready to become focused! and become a class that can handle freedom.