

Letter to a New Teacher (And a Short Reminder to a Seasoned Veteran, Part 2)

Categories: Uncategorized

In part 1 of this letter, I listed the attributes that are important in running an effective classroom—attributes that are each expanded upon in my blog series, *Engaging the Disengaged*. Upon reflection of my writing, I realize something crucial is missing.

There is nothing about telling a group of wonderful but rowdy young middle schoolers to “move it; quickly!” Yes. Tough love. How do we teach young teachers to be firm and kind at the same time? How do we show them that when they ask students to get to work, that they must convey that this is non-negotiable? How do we teach them to say, “Move it!” and get kids to do so without any hurt feelings, fuss, or nonsense?

Paul Houston shares a story in one of my favorite teaching books, *Giving Wings to Children's Dreams: Making Our Schools Worthy of our Children*. His anecdote talks about being a first-year principal at the age of 25. The year before becoming the principal, he had been a teacher in the same school and he taught with a woman named Mrs. Dunn. “Mrs. Dunn was an African American lady of indeterminate age and incalculable weight. And all the kids in school were scared to death of her. Truth be told, so were the teachers.” He goes on to share how the biggest and roughest bully in his class returned from the bathroom one day “with terror etched in his face.” When asked what the problem was, this young man said that he had poked his head into Mrs. Dunn’s classroom and she had told him that if “I didn’t get my face out of her door she was going to rip off my arm and beat me to death with it.” Obviously Mr. Houston entered his first principalship with several concerns about working with Mrs. Dunn. His biggest worry was not how to get her to “tone it down”, his biggest worry was what he would do “if she tried to rip off my arm and beat me to death with it.”

But, as with many teachers who teach outside of the box, Paul found that her students simply adored her. She was given the absolute toughest, poorest, and lowest students and worked miracles with them. He soon learned that her class was always engaged and achieved higher than other students in the school. Upon asking Mrs. Dunn how she improved the behavior of one particularly troubled child, she simply said, “She knows I love her and will take care of her. If she’s hungry, I feed her. If she needs money, I give it to her. And if she needs a hug, she gets it. She knows I love her and will do anything for her. But she also knows that if she steps out of line, I’ll get her good.” (Houston, 2010, page 16)

Reading Mrs. Dunn’s time-honored wisdom makes me aware of something that is outlined in more detail in my blog post *Teacher Talk Part Two: How We Talk Matters*. Immediately after reprimanding a child’s misdeed, I make sure to say something positive about the person. For instance, last week, immediately after asking a sixth grade student to move away from the peer he was scuffling with, I said, “Wow. Thanks for doing what I asked so quickly. I knew you were a great kid the minute I walked into this classroom. Thanks.”

So how do we teach new teachers or help seasoned ones to convey with every ounce of their being that they love their kids and they love them enough to “get them good if they step out of line” or, if they ask them to get to work, they mean NOW? I think the answer, my dear reader, lies in all that has been mentioned in this letter. The answer lies in having an active, student-centered classroom in

which relationships are positive; ensuring that students understand why they are doing the work they are doing and that this work is authentic; making sure students are working at appropriate levels with many choices; emphasizing strengths; honoring student thoughts and ideas; giving students time to reflect on and discuss their classroom community; using a consistent signal to call for attention; and when a child needs to be reprimanded, the teacher has tried silence or proximity before tackling the behavior and never the child.

So please, my dear readers, try some of the ideas mentioned in this blog, and create a classroom that matters for the rest of your student's lives.

To learn more, check out [Inside the Collaborative Classroom](#) and read more about the [Core Principles of a Collaborative Classroom](#).