

A Classroom With Love At The Center by Peggy Sia

The world may sound slightly dismal from certain vantage points. In the United States, a large amount of money is devoted to incarceration compared to education. California spends \$47,421 per inmate, as opposed to \$11,420 per student. The latest report from Alliance for Excellent Education states, “The nation could save as much as \$18.5 billion in annual crime costs if the high school male graduation rate increased by only 5 percentage points.” But I would like to invite you to our little world in a suburban city within the Los Angeles County. We are like a community within a community. This is our public school adventure....

Wisdom from 10-Year-Olds

I am someone who comes to life by the wisdom of others. It is not uncommon for the learning community to be showered with quotes or stories that I have come upon in this journey of life. In fact, we are now beginning a reciprocal sharing of powerful and soulful words with each other.

One morning, as we were discussing the meaning of resilience, a student recalled something his coach said to the team during a practice. “The things one chooses to do that others will not do today, will enable one to do the things that others cannot do tomorrow.”

Such powerful words coming from that of a 10 year old. This is why despite rising before the sun in a dark and sleepy house, I am able to step out and drive the one hour long commute to school daily. They, the student scholars, are my fountain of youth!

One of my greatest loves is to display my students’ personalities in every corner, every nook and cranny for all guests to see. Value is placed on every aspect, and every fiber of our being. Below are my “Big 3” practices in classroom management—techniques and experiences that inspire me to bring out deeper values amidst math equations and reading comprehension.

Teach the Whole Brain

The current framework for the 21st century learner requires not only skills in the academic area, but also emphasizes the positive development of the social emotional component of an individual. In my opinion, this is the hallmark for all students as they are given the chance to act in a socially responsible and ethical way. But, of course, that has always been our learning community.

Learning can be tough! However, learning can also slowly pull the tendrils of curiosity and creativity right out of one's soul. On the other hand, in some cases it can all be lost with just one swift punch in one's very being. For these reasons, our school utilizes Chris Biffle's Whole Brain Teaching Techniques. This form of classroom management is centralized around engagement, learning through gestures, chants, etc. Stephanie van Horn of 3rd Grade Thoughts outlines the main points of Whole Brain Teaching in a quick and convenient way for anyone to implement the strategies right away.

The key to Whole Brain Teaching is to tap into as many parts of the brain as possible while learning. It is definitely lively, loud, and fun! Learning about the parts of the brain helps students understand how they learn, and why they may feel a certain way. Students feel empowered when they are able to make these connections. More importantly, it helps to create and build positive feelings with each other.

Simultaneously, our community embraces the important seven precepts known as the 7 Habits of Happy Kids, created by Sean Covey. I bring in a lot of research and current news that justify why and how we can pursue happiness. In addition, we evaluate and analyze different models of happiness and compassion.

Last year, we read the article, "I am Malala". This courageous and inspiring story of a young girl not much older than my own students brought out profound discussions of personal responsibility, purpose, and action. It also opened their eyes of what students in America may take for granted in education for all. Most importantly, Malala's story created conversations and even debates that became meaningful. The 7 Habits provide a springboard for discussion as well as opportunities to reflect on particular habits that may just be developing. Last year, students wrote quick notes to detail briefly an action that was connected to a focused habit. This year, we are incorporating the habits within the very essence of our dialogue and activities.

Take “Brain Breaks”

During a difficult lesson or challenging time period, I use a signal to refocus our hard working brains. Class-Yes and the scoreboard are effective in helping my student scholars refocus. They keep the lesson moving in an engaging and positive manner. The students’ objective for the scoreboard would be working towards anything the students are interested in. For example, extra minutes of recess, no homework pass, brain breaks, etc. In particular, the students are excited when they are able to take a brain break after filling up with a wealth of facts and numbers.

Overall, brain breaks provide a break in the teaching moment so that students can unwind through movement, music, play, and/or imagination. It is designed to be quick, but is beneficial in that student scholars are ready to tackle the rest of a challenging lesson with positive energy.

In fact, are you feeling it at this very moment?

It seems that I have unleashed a tide of words and thoughts, and still more are barreling their way out possibly inundating you, the reader! Before that happens—let us have a brain break:

Would you rather be 3 feet tall or 8 feet tall?

Would you rather be born with an elephant trunk or a giraffe’s neck?

Would you rather be able to hear any conversation or take back anything you say?

Would you rather be forgotten or hatefully remembered?

If you were in our learning community, you would have walked to the side of the room that you identified with in each question and supported your choice with some reasons to the nearest partner. In this particular instance, it is another way for me to provide academic scholarly discussions in a non- restrictive and engaging manner. Some “Would You Rathers” are rather silly, while others are quite serious and thought provoking.

Encourage Cooperative Learning

Finally, in my trifecta of classroom management, our school also incorporated

Dr. Spencer Kagan's Cooperative Learning Structures. It provides yet another tool in my toolbox to keep students engaged and learning. An instance of this is Kagan's accountable talk through activities such as "Sage and Scribe" or "All Write Robin." All of these structures provide a reminder (and at times a coaxing) to students that every perspective and opinion is valued and that sharing our ideas enriches learning. This is what Kagan also refers to as "accountable talk," as all students must actively listen in order to be able to provide input orally or in written form throughout a lesson or activity.

In addition to group activities, the kids and I have discovered that our community circle time encourages everyone to be open and honest. So many rewards can be harvested from this moment of freely sharing whatever thoughts we have in our mind. The words they choose to share become another glimpse for me to peek inside their souls and get to know them just a bit more. The community circle promotes trust, but also teaches them of their potential to be compassionate and empathetic towards others as they express their happiness, dreams, pain, and or sorrow.

During moments that are more tender, being mindful of our own emotions as well as others, help us to figure out the best solutions in various situations. The student scholars are aware of the part of the brain that controls rational thinking (problem solving) as well as the part that is controlled by emotions. Therefore, when we speak with each other we think of speaking and acting in ways that de-escalate potentially volatile situations.

By incorporating these "Big 3" practices in classroom management, I feel that I am "power teaching" more often than not. In all honesty, I am not going to have a successful lesson every time, but I am confident that my students know that I care for them every moment. Using the "Big 3" empowers me to feel assured that while we are exploring and chiseling at standards and academics, I am also relating to my students with kindness, care, and compassion.

Together, this is what I feel is the power teaching that I summon and use throughout the day. This is the journey I am taking with my students, and I am not alone. They are with me, and teach me every day on how I can become a better person by reminding me that no matter how small my action, they receive it with great love.

I am a true believer that if we are going to lift humanity from the darkness that encircles

our world, then I must start with the education of our children.