

The Supervisor

ANNE MEEK

Teaching the Lesson But Not the Students

The school was small and rural, the main building 40 or 50 years old. The classroom was a "portable," one of those expedient add-ons. Lawrence was a career teacher in his 30s who had transferred here when an inner-city school closed. Now there were complaints from parents, whispers of disapproval from his fellow staff members, and the resulting tensions with his principal.

The complaints had begun in earnest the spring before, and I had visited his 1st grade classroom more than once to see if I could help. It had become embarrassingly clear then that the usual routines—for bathroom breaks, reading groups, lunch, and the like—were not well established: the students required prompting and direction typical of the third or fourth week of school in September. And there were only 19 students in the class.

In our conferences Lawrence explained how disruptive the transfer had been, how different this community was from the other one, and how difficult this group of children was. But I thought I saw a fundamental problem, one that required summer preparation and goals for the next year. I felt strongly that classroom routines, including behavior expectations, are the first order of business when school opens. In 1st grade, nothing is more important, because the routines are quite different from those in kindergarten and because they must be learned not merely from telling but by doing. Most teachers patiently rehearse the students, day after day, until the routines become second nature and can function as a framework for all the activities of the year.

Lawrence thought my proposed solution altogether too rigid. Well-versed in learning styles, early childhood principles, and reinforcement

strategies, in July he presented me a position paper giving his views about classroom management. Later we more or less negotiated an agreement about what to do in the fall, beginning with his developing clear written statements of his expectations for student behavior and classroom routines.

Now it was September, almost October, and the children moved about as if it were the third or fourth week of school—only this time it was. He called a reading group, and I settled down with my legal pad to take notes.

What I saw gave me an entirely new slant on the origin of his difficulties: Lawrence glanced over the group, he followed the teacher's manual, he gave directions for workbook exercises, he even said "good" at appropriate times, but he didn't look his students in the eye.

Since he didn't really look at them, he didn't pick up on the cues in their expressions, the light of understanding or the dusk of confusion in their eyes, and so didn't alter his prompts and cues back to them to remove confusion and create understanding.

Lawrence followed the teacher's manual, he even said "good" at appropriate times; but he didn't look his students in the eye.

He was teaching a reading lesson, all right, but he wasn't teaching these children.

How could I have missed something so basic? Well, I didn't miss it now. Nor did I fail to see that Lawrence's questioning techniques contributed to his failure to connect squarely with his students. He moved from question to question as if he were giving directions, as if from workbook item to workbook item, mechanically, failing to build suspense or excitement, failing to show relationships between events and ideas in the story and between the story and the lives of the children.

At the end of the lesson, I retreated to write my report. It was easy for me to write the recommendations, but I knew it was going to be hard for him to accept that he wasn't doing something as simple as looking into the eyes of his audience. Further, I was going to suggest that his approach was conveying the feeling that the children didn't matter and that the work didn't really matter, either.

It would be a challenge to try to move Lawrence's concept of teaching away from the manuals, away from the directed reading lesson, away from the Tennessee Instructional Model, to strip it of such professional preoccupations, and recast it in his heart as fundamental and vital human communication. But if Lawrence could connect with his students first as human beings, perhaps they would sense that they and their studies were worthy and important. If that happened, maybe they could be led to assume responsibility for carrying out classroom routines and so be helped to connect enduringly with the world of learning. □

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