

TEEP Classroom Climate article

Year 9. Sigh. A right royal pain in the proverbial. I had been blessed with them in year 8 when they were even more of a complete and utter pain in the proverbial, but a few permanent exclusions, set moves and talking to's later and they are somewhat less of a handful. But thanks to the powers that be I inherited them for another year. Genius. Thanks.

Seriously though, I was secretly pleased. I had worked *very* hard to get them where, pretty much, I wanted them and the pupil progress leader had been extremely supportive. In year 8 we (and I mean we, as a team – pupils, learning assistant and teacher) worked tirelessly at creating a positive classroom climate; a climate where name calling wasn't tolerated, where the pupils felt they could take risks in their learning and where ideas and views were respected.

It was a long, hard slog though. The school had just come out of special measures and there was still some residual poor behaviour from some of the more challenging pupils. One of my first ever lessons with them began with the following opening gambit from Jordan:

“Miss, Miss, Jason's just called me a” (Sorry, I balk at actually writing the word he used...not one of the most pretty in the English language). In the same lesson, Carl showered himself with Red Bull (a pupil with significant ADHD), Simon prodded Carl with a fairly sharp pencil, Sabrina and Grace fell out and flatly refused to work with each other, Jordan nicked one of my (brand new and highly coveted) sets of plasticine, oh and Stuart, bless Stuart, gave out the books.

Quite a handful. And I had to make poetry and then travel writing (yawn) something they wanted to learn about. Help.

As so often in my teaching career to date, I turned to my understanding of TEEP and my repertoire of TEEP ideas for inspiration. I knew that one of the “Effective Teacher Behaviours” was classroom climate. I was sure that this, along with absolute consistency and fairness and high expectations, was the key to kick-starting positive learning with year 8. I wanted to foster a classroom environment where it was OK to take risks, to ask questions and to be curious about learning, without being laughed at or made fun of. I decided to model it myself.

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No Put Down Zone poster



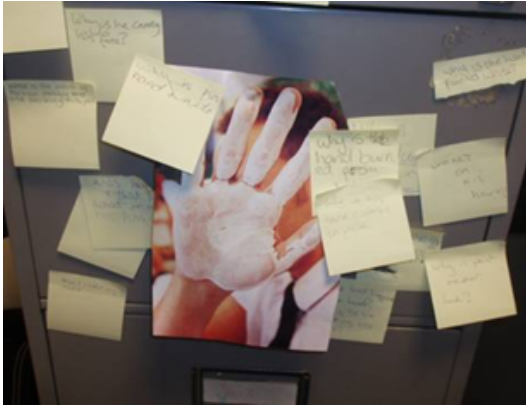
Praise prominently displayed on walls continued throughout Year 9

At the start of lessons I introduced to the class something I had been reading or looking at – for example a poem, photo, painting or occasionally an artefact that I'd bring in. I projected the picture or a quotation from the text onto the IWB. I made sure the class knew it was something I was interested in outside school that I wanted to share it with them. The text or picture always had something to do with what we were learning about in class, so I incorporated this into my Prepare for Learning section of the lesson, where I set the scene for learning and connected the students with the learning to come. The majority of the class responded well. I'd tell them I had lots of questions about the text/photo etc, but before I told them what my questions were I'd ask them what questions *they* had. This worked well, and questions were elicited verbally there and then or posted in my (specially made for year 8) Question Box, which, in a triumphant Blue Peter moment I had created out of an empty cereal box covered in red paper with a hole cut in the top. Sometimes we discussed the questions there and then; sometimes we discussed them in the Review phase. Somehow, the ritual and repetition of this worked very well with the group, and they expected an unusual quote, picture, photo or artefact at least twice a week. It wasn't difficult. I'd just get something off the BBC website, cut something out from a paper I'd been reading or photocopy something from a book or postcard I had at home. Suggesting ideas and making positive contributions slowly began to filter through into our everyday lessons, and more and more pupils began to join in.

Not all though. There was still some latent silliness from some of the more challenging boys in the group. I had to take decisive action to show, very overtly, that name-calling wasn't tolerated. As well as judiciously using the school behavioural systems and liaising with form tutors and parents, I decided to make it really explicit that name calling and put downs weren't tolerated. Hence the birth of the "No Put Down Zone" poster in my room. This was another TEEP idea that I decided to employ. I plastered the walls of my room with "This room is a No Put Down Zone" posters, one on the door, one next to the IWB for easy reference and a few more dotted around the room. I found myself referring to it every so often in lessons. The fact that the room was *my* room, and that the pupils knew they had to obey my rules, helped. I tried to be really consistent with my zero tolerance message.

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More chinks of hope appeared. Now, not just Stuart, but Jordan, willingly, gave out the books. I was gob smacked.



Prepare for Learning activities that engaged pupils from the outset



Question Box

I knew I couldn't rest on my laurels though, and that more was needed to foster a climate of positivity in my room, especially at the start of lessons. I tried to ensure I was super-organised for my lessons with year 8. It wasn't easy, as more often than not I had a group before year 8 so it there was only a very brief period of time to get things ready for them before they made a shambolic-looking line outside my room. All my learning objectives were on PowerPoints or flipcharts on my IWB, so they were easily accessible and I could immediately have them on the board ready for the start of the lesson. I had various Prepare for Learning activities pre-prepared, some of which I was able to hand to pupils immediately they entered the room. This helped to create a smoother, more focused start to lessons. I also endeavoured to be at the door, ready for the class when they arrived to welcome them into the room. It helped to foster a positive start to lessons and I was able to deal with any inappropriate behaviour before they even entered the room.

As well as this, I decided to create some "Welcome" PowerPoints that I had used with other groups, inspired by Fergus Hegarty's ideas shared in a TEEP newsletter. I found these to be extremely effective as the images were designed to connect to the learning and the personalised messages to the pupils helped to boost self-esteem through praise. I was also able to give them gentle reminders about punctuality and behaviour. Pupils responded well to them and liked looking for the messages. I was able to use the pictures as a way in to the learning for the lesson. Again, this helped to create a more ordered and well-focused start, particularly at times of the day when I knew they were going to be more boisterous.

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I combined the “Welcome” PowerPoints with praise and positive comments displayed throughout the room. We had worked on effective pupil behaviours, too, and had agreed as a group the ingredients for a “Quality Learner”. I made sure that they were praised for effective learning behaviours such as perseverance, listening skills and teamwork. This, combined with personalised praise postcards home, made a huge difference.

And so to year 9. Despite that initial sinking feeling of seeing them on my timetable, I was pleased that we were going to be able to continue the progress we had worked so hard as a team to make. And we did. They ended up being one of my favourite groups to teach – always lively, never boring. We kept up with trying to engender a really positive classroom environment and this, combined with consistently high expectations, meant that they continued to make progress in both their English skills and teamwork and listening skills. As I write this, the group is now over half way through year 10 in different sets; some making great progress, others not so; that’s the way of the world. I continue to remember them with fondness, especially the time when Jordan gave out the books.

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