Classroom as Sanctuary

(This is an excerpt from our book, <u>Talking Walls, Building Classroom Environments</u> to Support Student Achievement)

The best classrooms are learning sanctuaries. They provide refuge, a safe place for all kinds of thinkers, learners, and producers. To do this well, the sanctuary must place value on all who enter and underscore that differences are accepted. We always recommend that every student should be known by name within the first week of school and that the teacher should strive to have at least one personal fact about the student stored away from those first interactions. Writing positive personal notes home to parents during the first three

weeks of school will create a prosocial connection between school and home that will withstand most crises. From this connection, teachers can gain important cooperation for attendance, homework, and academic supports.

Anyone walking into the classroom should know what kind of teacher guides the students; what the students are learning and why; and how the students feel about their learning experiences. The classroom walls should introduce us to how the classroom operates.

The classroom needs to be comfortable but must remain a learning environment. One of the ways to ensure this happens is to teach the students about cultural differences, silence norms, and help for the problem many have about telling others that they disagree or perceive something differently. Agreements for interaction need to be established for an effective classroom to be managed. One of the ways to quickly establish norms is to take the classroom through the "perfect classroom" debriefing.

For example, ask the students what the "perfect classroom" would look like, sound like, or feel like. Chart the responses. Then ask, "What would it take to create the conditions in the classroom to make these things happen?" "Are any of these things similar?" "Can any be collapsed together?"

Distill about five agreements that will lead to the "perfect classroom." Challenge the students to agree. When they do agree, post the agreements and use them daily for all process-oriented events. Make them a part of all decisionmaking procedures and protocol. When a disruption occurs, use the rules to describe what went wrong, or call out what you are seeing before a problem occurs. For example, "I am seeing people fail to take turns talking. Let's honor our agreements."





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