Sharing Control in the Classroom

Avoiding classroom chaos is one of the chief concerns of teachers as the new school year begins. The best way to avoid an out-of-control classroom, some experts advise, is to share control judiciously with the students.

The biggest concern of new teachers is, “Can I control these kids?” says Carol Myers, who teaches 5th grade at Edison Elementary School in St. Joseph, Mo. Teachers have nightmares in which students openly defy their authority, she says. “We work ourselves up into thinking that control is the ultimate—that we’ve got to have it. And yet I’m finding as I grow as an educator that the more control you give away, the more it comes back to you.”

Rheta DeVries of the University of Northwestern Iowa believes in sharing control in the classroom, and she advises teachers to give some of their power to students. “Now, that’s not to say that the classroom becomes permissive or that children just do whatever they like,” DeVries emphasizes. “There are limits. But children participate in setting those limits, and that includes making the rules be which they will live together in the classroom community.”

Teachers at Edison Elementary put this idea into practice. We talk to students and get their ideas of what they think good behaviors are, and we talk about above-the-line and below-the-line behaviors,” explains Kathleen Virgo, who teaches at Edison. Teachers and students also discuss ways to address behavior problems that might arise during the year. The shared decision making gives students a stake in classroom rules, Virgo says. “They feel like they have ownership of their classroom environment.”

Another way teachers can share control with students is by giving them a voice in curriculum decisions, DeVries says. “Even very young children can say what they want to learn about, and the teacher can take that idea and elaborate it into something that is worthwhile for everyone to know,” she says. By letting students influence the curriculum, “the teacher gives up power but gains a lot more in terms of children’s real investment in what they’re doing in the classroom because they care about, they’ve been consulted, and they are following their own interests.”

A Collaborative Relationship

Sharing control makes classroom management easier at the high school level as well, educators say. One secondary school that believes in empowering students is New Vista High School in Boulder, Colo.

“New Vista’s not a highly structured, military-looking, orderly environment. There is, on the surface, quite a bit of disorder,” says Rona Wilensky, the school’s principal. “Kids wear their hats, kids listen to their earphones.”

By granting students a certain amount of control, educators at New Vista gain a more collaborative relationship with students. “By allowing them to be teenagers and allowing them to be themselves, we eliminate major battles,” Wilensky says. “I don’t care if a kid has a hat on. Fighting with kids over that stuff just sets up an ‘authority versus kids’ relationship.”

“We find that not fighting with kids about ways in which they express themselves allows them to trust us more, and for us to get more out of them” in terms of working hard at academics, Wilensky says.

This tolerance does not mean that anything goes, however; the school still upholds standards for respectful behavior. “If students are rude to me, then we deal with it,” she notes.

“But we set up a relationship that’s about partnering. And partners don’t fight about all the little things that are different between them.”

Teachers don’t need to act in authoritarian ways, says John Zola, who teaches at New Vista. “Relationships that are based on power and strict control are likely to breed situations where kids will misbehave, because you’ve set up an adversarial relationship and kids are going to try to win,” Zola says. “They’ll lose in the long run, because teachers always win power struggles. But the biggest loss is that students find themselves disengaged from learning, they see teachers as adversaries, and they continue the behaviors that get in the way of productive learning.”

Rather than insisting on “blind obedience,” teachers should work with students “to negotiate the learning space together,” Zola believes. Yet it’s the teacher’s responsibility, he says, to establish “norms, procedures, and rules for how the students are going to interact with one another, with the teacher, and—most importantly—with the curriculum.”

Yielding some control—by allowing students to wear hats if they choose, for example—may help avoid major battles and keep the focus on academics.

“My advice would be to begin the school year by creating engaging activities for students for the first couple of days,” Zola says. “Spend time on activities that will teach students what your classroom processes are going to be. If you’re going to value small-group activities, then teach kids how to do small-group activities. Reinforce those behaviors; spend time helping students understand how the class is going to work.”

Less Coercion

Sharing control with students pays rich dividends in student cooperation, whereas hoarding control is likely to backfire on teachers, these experts contend. Children who feel they have little control are likely to rebel.

Therefore, teachers should make every effort not to coerce children, DeVries says. “Some coercion is necessary,” she acknowledges. “I mean, you do sometimes have to ask children to do things. But you can do it with an explanation” rather than with an authoritarian attitude.

“A teacher should carry around a sort of recording in her mind that says: ‘Is this coercion necessary?’” DeVries advises. “The principle is to minimize—as much as practical and possible—the unnecessary coercion of children. And when the teacher does that, it avoids a lot of problems.”

—Scott Willis

The educators quoted in this article are featured in an upcoming ASCD video-based staff development program on classroom management, which will be available in January 1998.