Taming the lions

Avoiding certain activities because you can’t trust your class to behave? You’re not the only one...

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The scenario

Meet Rosie. “My class are a nightmare. From the first moment to the last, they are a pain in the proverbial. The only time they’re quiet is when I read to them, but even then one of them will ruin it by chatting or calling out. Try to get them to do anything else and it doesn’t go very well. They come in noisy, they go noisy, they’re noisy when they should be working. If I ask them questions they don’t answer properly. They shout out, ‘Pick me! Pick me! Me, Miss, me!’. It’s like being one of those lion tamers, except I reckon they’ve got more control over their lions than I do this bunch. There’s so many different activities I can’t do because I can’t trust them to behave properly. I just don’t get it. I’m no pushover, but their behaviour is so difficult to control. It’s chaos and it’s getting me down.”

If you’ve been teaching for more than five minutes, chances are you’ll have seen or experienced some or all of the above. So, what’s a teacher to do? Luckily for Rosie, advice is at hand from her three imaginary colleagues.

Teacher A: Do As You’re Doing

Rosie, the problem isn’t the students, it’s your perspective. Because you define the students’ behaviour as chaotic, that’s what you see.

Teacher B: Do As I Say

Rosie, you’re right: you have a chaotic class. But, not to worry, there’s a surprisingly simple solution. It’s called ‘rules’.

Here’s four that work very well:

- We are quiet when the teacher is talking
- We follow instructions right away
- We let others get on with their work
- We respect each other

The verdict

Five great rules, with the last being the most important of all. Rule five is a high expectation rule. By sticking to it you’re telling your students that you have extremely high expectations of their behaviour and that they’re fully capable of meeting them. But if you don’t stick to it, then you’re saying the opposite. Either way, the message is powerful and self-fulfilling – so be careful which you communicate.

Teacher C: Do As I Do

You’ve got chaos because you don’t have any routines in place. All the problematic behaviour you’ve listed (how the students enter the classroom, how they put
their hands up, how they get your attention) can be solved by getting routines right.

So how do you get routines right? Use the ‘do as I do’ method. It comes in three parts: Firstly, you model. Simply put, you model the behaviour that you want to see. Take the routine of entering the classroom, for instance. You literally show the students how to wait in the corridor, enter the classroom, walk to their desk, sit down and get ready for learning. Secondly, ask some students to model. Get a small group to do exactly as you’ve just done. And as they’re doing it, give them high expectation feedback. If a student doesn’t do it exactly as you modelled it, get them to do it again. Be sure to keep it on the light side of serious, praising effort and focus along the way. Finally, everyone has a go. As before, aim for perfection.

The verdict
A routine is a behaviour that’s carried out automatically and efficiently – at least it is if you embed it. The way to do that is to insist and persist, and to keep on doing so until you make the routine, well, routine.

So there you have it; advice from three different teachers. You need to ignore Teacher A (students should not do as they please) and do exactly what B and C suggest. With rules and routines in place – together with a big dollop of care and kindness – classroom chaos will quickly become a thing of the past. But only when you stick to those rules and routines. In fact, when you do, two remarkable things will happen. You’ll be able to teach and the students will be able to learn. TP

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