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Bite-Sized Advice



October 9, 2013

Today's post was written by Monisha Karnani, Inspired Teaching's Director of Teacher Preparation Initiatives.

"Ms. Karnani, what do I need to do to pass?" was the most often asked question in my classroom.

In my third year of teaching high school mathematics in an urban school, I had a group of students who wanted to pass and would do whatever they needed to do to make that happen. For many teachers, that would be a perfect scenario. But not for me.

The students I taught were the product of over nine years in high poverty school systems in which low expectations are often the norm. They had learned what they needed to do to get by, and that's all they were willing to do. They were so focused on writing down the right answer that I couldn't get them to care about the process, despite knowing they were capable of so much more.

And then along came my mentor, Robin: an amazing educator, mathematician, and coach.

Robin often reminded me that my students would learn what I valued most. If I stopped emphasizing their grades as the most important thing and started valuing their learning and understanding, they would follow my lead.

She worked with me to ensure that my students didn't just pass Geometry; they learned Geometry. Robin offered me some of the most memorable advice I have ever received as a teacher – small, simple tips to change my classroom culture:

- Robin taught me the importance of "never saying anything a child can say." (More information on this tip and others can be found in this Steven C. Reinhart [article](#).)
- She challenged me never to touch a writing utensil in the classroom. Sounds like a little thing, but it was actually quite challenging!
- She helped me develop strategic questions during my planning process – questions that would get my students to think deeply through their experience with the math.
- She taught me never to accept questions that didn't indicate the student had tried to understand the problem. "How do you do #5?" was not acceptable.
- She encouraged me never to spend more than 30 seconds with any student before moving on to the next student – to say just enough to get each student thinking.
- She taught me how to accept wrong answers and how to shift the role of the "mighty answer-holder" from me to my students. When a student asked if her answer was correct, I would return the question: "I don't know . . . is it?"

And as soon as I had mastered one approach, Robin challenged me to implement another. And with each of her small strategies, I saw a huge difference.

The best way to ensure students are in your classroom is to make sure they are interested in learning.

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The J. Willard and Alice S. Marriott Foundation is supportive of Center for Inspired Teaching because we recognize that quality teachers result in better outcomes for students.

— Anne Gunsteens, Executive Director, J. Willard and Alice S. Marriott Foundation

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Mar 10 02:02 pm

"What can I do to make a difference for a child?" Apply to be an Inspired Teaching Fellow! Final deadline 3/15.

<https://t.co/JB2aQTRvp2>

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The language my students spoke in my classroom quickly changed. I started hearing:

"I don't want to copy your answer. How'd you get it?"

"I disagree. Prove it to me."

"This is what I tried, and now I'm stuck."

"Can you explain that to me?"

"Why?"

"How?"

"Let me explain."

"I get it!"

My students were thinking. They had transformed into active learners, taking ownership of the learning process and pride in their classroom success. My students were no longer interested in just getting the answer or the grade. They enjoyed learning for the sake of learning.

Robin's bite-sized advice – delivered thoughtfully, one piece at a time – changed my classroom culture. More importantly, it changed who I am as an educator, teaching me to value the process of learning so that my students will, too.

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