

Field Experience
Kasey Watanabe
National University

Abstract

This paper is based on the academic and behavioral observations of two different classrooms at West Ranch High School in Stevenson Ranch, California. The special education classroom I visited belonged to Jennifer Ryan (JRyan@hartdistrict.org), a seven-year veteran SC7 special education teacher with an intimate class of six students. This was a tenth grade, basic English class. Rachel Grothe's (RGrothe@hartdistrict.org) general education classroom with thirty-three students was also observed. She teaches eleventh grade American Literature. The focus of both observations were classroom and behavior management. After each observation, the two teachers answered a few questions about their best practices and offered some advice to future teachers. Effective classroom management is crucial. This field experience demonstrated some effective as well as non-effective strategies.

Field Experience

Ms. Ryan's SPED SC7, basic English class was the first stop of the day. She has an intimate class of six students. Students in the SC7 program are generally diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome or high functioning Autism. Students may present with emotional or behavioral difficulties, which interfere with their ability to learn and/or maintain peer relationships. The overall classroom feel was positive, nurturing, and engaging. The six students moved their desks to form a circle and Ms. Ryan sat with them asking many open-ended questions about vocabulary and the article the students were reading. She students were engaged and actively participating. A couple students often were looking around the room or fiddling with the fingers. Ms. Ryan would gently remind them to focus by saying, "Judy, look at the picture", "Do you understand, Robert?", "Listen to my words." The students felt comfortable in the classroom and with their peers. Their group discussion was continuous and free flowing. Each student offered some type of commentary or questions along with Ms. Ryan's prompting. All six students were well mannered and respectful of the environment. After the observation Ms. Ryan answered a few questions regarding guiding principles to establish her classroom management plan. Ms. Ryan really stresses the priority of her student's well-being. Her plan is designed to attempt to meet the needs of the students who happen to be in the class in any given situation. She attempts to answer questions and scaffold as needed while also addressing behaviors in the room which may be preventing other students from learning or causing them stress or anxiety. Ms. Ryan has rules and procedures lists on the walls of her classroom, which is tremendously important for the SC7 population. This group enjoys the boundaries of rules and usually follows them religiously. Rewards are extremely important in this classroom in the forms of verbal praise, positive emails to parents and case managers, and earning free time.

Consequences are listed, but Ms. Ryan does not usually go beyond a warning or a threat to call home. The special education program has many different group and components. Ms. Ryan's class was small, excited to learn, and well behaved.

Ms. Grothe's GenEd, eleventh grade American Literature class was the next classroom observation. This actual classroom structure was smaller than the first, but with more students. Thirty-three students filled the classroom and with their desks in groups, the room felt crowded. Although this is a GenEd class, there were four students with an IEP in her class. The class was discussing The Great Gatsby led by Ms. Grothe. Chatter and angst mixed with boredom made up the ambiance. A few students were actively engaged and participating, some were distracted (doodling, drinking coffee) and some other were having side conversations. As an observer, the class seemed disinterested with the book and Ms. Grothe was only teaching to those who were listening. She would often repeat herself or say, "Guys, come on." Most students seemed respectful, but some were not. Many kept having their side conversations about cars, prom, or The Avengers even after a verbal warning. Ms. Grothe uses "Star Bucks" as part of her classroom management plan. The Star Bucks can be used for bathroom passes or homework passes. If a student has remaining points at the end of the semester, they can turn them in for extra points to boost their grade. Consequences were posted on the wall, however, based on today's observation, she does not follow them. Ms. Grothe gave verbal warnings over and over to the same students and their behavior did not change for the better. Overall, this classroom was tough to watch. It is evident Ms. Grothe knows the material and is excited to teach; unfortunately, it is also evident that she is inconsistent with her management which leads to a somewhat chaotic classroom.

The two classes observed has a couple similarities: a positive, excited teacher and a reward program enticing to their students. Both Ms. Ryan and Ms. Grothe took pride in their jobs. It was evident based on their classroom décor, positive attitude, and responses during instruction. The difference between these teachers is how they earned the trust and respect of their students. Ms. Ryan guides her students with compassion and fairness. She is very understanding but will not let any students take advantage of her kindness. For example, when her students started to daze off, she asked them if they'd like a break to stretch or take a drink of water. This break was exactly two minutes. Ms. Ryan let their minds breathe for a second, but then restarted the engagement quickly before she lost control. The second a student was looking away or not following along, Ms. Ryan immediately asked them to refocus. Her voice was calm but firm. Ms. Grothe is an energetic, happy teacher, and unfortunately, her students take advantage of her kindness. She verbally asks one group of four students to "come back to the discussion." They listen for about two minutes then start getting off task again. Ms. Grothe did not address them again. Another group had all their book closed even though they were supposed to be open to the beginning of chapter two. Ms. Grothe called on one of them to read, but the girl said she did not feel comfortable. Ms. Grothe decided to read the passage aloud herself. The managing differences were interesting. They both spoke about similar strategies, but Ms. Ryan was much more effective than Ms. Grothe.

Another similarity both teachers spoke about was using a reward system. Both teachers agreed that when students work towards something that benefits them, control in the classroom is easily to maintain. The way rewards are used differ in each classroom. Ms. Ryan constantly reaffirms and gives verbal praise. About a third of her verbal praise was not based on academic achievements; they were based on behavior. For example, when it was time to move their desks

into a circle for reading, Ms. Ryan thanked Judy for promptly joining the circle. She also thanked Mark for quickly turning to the correct page. All her students seemed to feel accomplished when praise was given. When Ms. Ryan gave a student praise, she solely focused on them. She turned her body toward the student and gave them eye contact. Her words were genuine and made for the whole class to hear. At the end of class Ms. Ryan thanked Sophie for her wonderful comments during discussion and asked permission to call her mom to let her know. The respect that Ms. Ryan gives her students is noticeable reciprocated. To the contrary, Ms. Grothe offers “Star Bucks” as one of her rewards. This point system allows students to earn bathroom passes and homework passes. Ms. Grothe mentioned these several times during the interview, but failed to hand any out during the discussion. The Star Bucks did not seem like a reward to the students. Two students asked to use the restroom during the observation, and it did not look like either of them “paid” for it. Ms. Grothe offered lots of verbal praise as well, however, it was on the same genuine level as Ms. Ryan. Ms. Grothe praised with phrases such as “good!”, “yes!”, “awesome!”, but she seemed rushed. She did not say the person’s name. She seemed to be going through the motions, but not making the same impact as Ms. Ryan. It is shocking how slowing down a little, direct eye contact, and personalizing the praise makes it more valuable.

Advice was offered from both teachers. Ms. Ryan’s overall advice was that “you need to love what you do”. She said some aspects get easier, but some are always challenging. She said if you’re there for the kids, you will make a difference. Be compassionate and sensitive to their needs because you do not always know who needs it. She recommends lots of positive reinforcement. Ms. Grothe said to be prepared to feel overwhelmed the first couple years. She said it’s a lot of work, but it’s rewarding if you love what you teach and the age range you’re working with. She suggested planning with other teachers as a new teacher and remember to take

time for yourself. Based on readings, videos, assignments, and past experiences their advice is accurate. Teachers can prepare their lessons as thoroughly as possible, but there will always be surprised that were not accounted for. Teachers also need to be flexible and patient.

In terms of behavioral issues, Ms. Ryan's class did not have any alarmingly issues. She mentioned the one student who needs constant prompting and handhold was absent the day of the observation. The six present students were well mannered and engaged in the reading and discussion. The only behavioral issue observed were students occasionally gazing off or spacing out. Ms. Ryan easily made them refocus by giving them direct instruction (i.e. "Judy, look at the picture"). On the other hand, Ms. Grothe's large class size was distracted. A couple students were on their phones (Ms. Grothe said she has a "phone jail", but she did not ask anyone to put their phone in jail). Many students were having side conversations. Ms. Grothe would ask them to stop, but after a minute or two the students would restart their side conversations. When the class as a whole was too loud, Ms. Grothe would ring a bell. The ringing of the bell would quiet them quickly, however, she would ring the bell again a few minutes later. In a 10- minute period, she rang the bell three times.

If students in my class were having side conversations during a class discussion, I would give them a verbal warning. If they did not stop, I would ask them the stay after class. If the students were talking during independent work, I would listen, join in for 30 seconds, then ask them to get back to work. If they did not stop, I would ask them the stay after class. The next step would be a call home and/or possibly a step if it was still a recurring problem. I would also reward those students who were exceptionally on task so others could see who is being a good example. I will not allow cell phone usage in class unless permission is asked beforehand (and it needs to be an extraneously circumstance). Texting, social media, music, etc. will not be allowed

in the classroom. If the cell phone is out, students will receive a warning. If the warning fails, I will have campus security pick up the phone and a parent will need to pick it up. Eating and drinking (other than water) will not be permitted. If a student fails to comply, he/she will be in charge of cleaning the room. I have learned from these two teachers that the method of delivery communicates more than words itself sometimes. Kids pick up on body language, tone, and sincerity. Committing to positivity in these three areas while praising can make a big difference in connecting with students.