

Have You Ever Taught a Class.....?

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Have you ever taught a class where you said to yourself, *this is the year to hang up the old whistle?*

Have you ever taught a class who would rather *sit* with their heads under their desks where their feet are supposed to be and their legs *draped* over the backs of their chairs?"

Have you ever taught a class who would rather throw paper baseballs around the room, than match them to the paper mitt with the correct word family printed on it in your well designed Phonics center?

Have you ever taught a class you've just safely delivered to music lessons or to the library, cherishing the 30 minutes of silence you've been looking forward to, only to see, 10 minutes later, the majority of those students returning for *heads down* because of unusual behavior?

Have you ever taught a class who can spot ONE, LONELY cricket in the middle of an 8000 square foot gymnasium while running laps around the perimeter of the gym, totally ruining a perfectly planned P.E. lesson and converting it into an impromptu entomology class?

Have you ever taught a class that has driven you to your knees forcing you to ask God, *what have I ever done to deserve a stress test like this?*

Come on, be honest. You are among friends. Pull up a chair, grab a hot drink, and let us discuss it.

I just completed *one of those years*, and before I continue further, I want to apologize to any teacher who had this class before me, with whom I failed to adequately sympathize. After a year like this one, I can sincerely empathize with you and I feel it a Christian obligation to prepare and encourage future teachers of this classroom to begin praying now for the oppression they will no doubt experience during next school year.

I pride myself in maintaining a blend of order, through classroom management, as well as an atmosphere of love and mommy-care for the children. Even though this class wore my nerves quite thin at times, I did learn a valuable lesson from them, and that is, no matter how *seasoned* and experienced you may be, never treat a group of students the same as another class you may have taught in the past. As individualized as your lessons should be for each student in your class, so should your management be for each group of students that walk into your classroom.

After teaching for 20 years, one tends to feel quite invincible as far as classroom management goes. You may think, *I've never met a class yet, that has gotten to me or has 'broken me'.* I know all of the little 'tricks' and incentives, positive comments and

psychology needed to have a smooth running 'ship'. You may have been assigned to mentor young, up and coming teachers, because of your reputation as an icon, or relic, in your community. Even though you may have heard the reputation of this group of students, *YOU* feel you can handle them. And then it happens... a group of students enter your classroom and you are left to feel like the rooky you were when you first entered the teaching world.

I tried everything, from sticker charts on the wall, to ever-so-slowly filling a large jar full of marbles on my desk every time I saw *good* behavior. Actually, I reduced the size of the jar, because it would take forever to fill. I think the students figured that out. Next, we tried *earning* 5 extra minutes of extra recess in exchange for 5 minutes of complete silence (this lasted exactly 1 week, since we never could understand what silence really meant). Earning *tokens* for appropriate behavior was kind of fun and lasted longer, until I caught some students *borrowing* tokens from other student's containers.

Since *bribery* wasn't working, I then thought, *well, I will just keep them so busy they won't have TIME to misbehave*. The old photocopy machine was smoking by the time I was done creating all kinds of clever and fun *extra activity packets*. They were chocked full of crossword puzzles, word searches, hidden picture puzzles, word scrambles, dot-to-dot pictures, math problems, pictures to colour, pictures of objects that were ½ drawn and the students had to finish drawing the other ½, fill in the blanks, seasonally themed materials, etc.

Again, this lasted only a few weeks with only the academically inclined students completing the packets. The other students threw them away, took them home, or used the paper for making paper airplanes. With all the creative genius of Thomas Edison, I could not think of one more thing to interest or occupy the students and keep them on task during non-instructional time.

And then it hit me! Pray for wisdom to know how to meet the *NEEDS* of *THIS* particular group. It's not like I hadn't been praying for strength, patience, wisdom, love, and understanding prior to this revelation, it's just that I needed to personalize my prayer for the needs of this specific group, not *MY* need to manage them. All along I had been using techniques that worked in the past with other groups, not looking specifically at the peculiarities of this class.

This particular group of children consists of twice as many boys as girls. Not that this should become a stereotypical problem formula, but there is one little boy diagnosed with ADHD in this group, who is taking a low dose of Ritalin administered at home and another child that I would guarantee has ADHD since I have to *peel her off of the ceiling and walls* several times a day. Also, there are three students that have learning disabilities, mainly dyslexia, there are three ESL students - one from Korea, one from Ecuador, and one who is half Philipino/half Guatemalan, and then there are six fairly *normal* children.

Another characteristic of this group is that they are extremely tactile, their hands are on everything. Now, I know some of you are probably saying, *Oh, she's just 'Old School.* NOT SO, I have really endeavored to bend over backwards for these students, loosened the reins so to speak, but I have never seen so many children that have to touch every single thing, including each other. I have one little boy who is continually laying on someone's shoulder, sitting on their lap, sitting between their legs, stroking someone's arm, head, or shoulder. Another little girl is continually touching everything on my desk, my file cabinet, and my computer. She also manages to spend as much time rummaging through other student's desks as well as her own. If she isn't braiding her own hair it is someone else's, or pulling the hair off the stuffed animals in our worship corner just to watch the fuzz float. Perpetual motion does exist, there is just the problem of harnessing it.

Talk about tactile, I have students who would rather eat their chocolate pudding with their fingers instead of a spoon because it feels coool. I have children who eat spaghetti, noodle by noodle including the sauce, just because it feels good. This is EVERY day, not just now and then. You can imagine what my carpet looks like!

This group possesses the great bonding element of *mob* mentality. What one person does...they ALL have to do, even if the teacher has already asked that one person not to do it. When one student belches out loud and I have corrected him/her to say *excuse me*, they all have to belch out loud in order to be corrected by teacher. When one student passes gas, they all have to give it a try, even some of the girls. I even tried the *ignore it and it will go away* technique, but to no avail.

Finally, after a particularly exhausting day, I found myself in prayer, and I was left with this simple thought...*Run them till they drop.* Hey, why didn't I think of that? Mind you, I had tried the age old trick of giving the children extra recess time and we occasionally did *get the wiggles out* in the classroom with jogging in place and *touching your toes*, but that's not the same as *running them till they drop.*

The next morning, before the students were allowed into the classroom, we went out for some *wiggle time*. It started with approximately 10-15 minutes of free play on the monkey bars, jungle gym, swings, slides, etc., then, just before going in, I had the students line up for a race. They LOVE races.

We have a huge grassy field that is quite a distance from the Elementary building with a chain linked fence on the far side. The students lined up with the anticipation of little race horses waiting for the whistle. After the whistle was blown and they bolted out of their *starting gate*, I watched with amazement at their incredible energy and speed. Once the majority of the students had reached the chain linked fence, I immediately headed to the Elementary building to await their exhausted return. After being *watered and pottied* (sorry for the slang) they entered the classroom with complete relief to find their desk and chair to sit down.

I know it isn't *rocket science*, but since implementing this simple strategy, we have the most calm and uninterrupted worships and spiritual discussions. Previously, our worship was like sitting in a churning, turbulent pool of restless little bodies that did anything impulsive, especially if it involved anyone sitting by them. Now during worship, the children sit calmly and quietly, truly enjoying the peaceful, reflective time. The students are actually writing in their *Prayer Journals*, instead of drawing pictures and writing messages to each other.

Occasionally, the *racing strategy* needs to be *revisited* a few times throughout the day. At first, I worried about the lost time in class ... *what if we didn't complete our pages in Phonics or if we didn't complete our Math*, but it was amazing the results that occurred with only a few minutes of this activity. The students are more settled and are able to concentrate after their pent-up energy is drained. Slowly and gradually, these *racing exercises* have dwindled in necessity as the students become programmed to a new standard of study and behavior.

Possibly, there is someone who is blessed with a group of children something like mine, who needs an idea of what to try next. It is my hope that maybe this simple idea can help someone else caught in the same endless whirlpool I found myself in.

I thank God for this enlightenment and this little group of wonderful children that have taught me a valuable lesson of seeking out the group's needs, rather than using techniques and *gimmicks* that I had picked up from other teacher specialists and seminars. It was as if God was saying, *Not so fast, teach, we're in this together. It's not about YOUR skills or wisdom, but your sincere care and concern for the specific needs of these children.*