

Routines and Procedures

Consider these two classrooms:

In the first, the teacher is trying to start a math lesson. She raises her voice for attention and gestures frantically as students jump out of their seats to sharpen pencils, retrieve math manipulatives, or ask friends for help. Cries of, "What are we supposed to be doing?" fill the air. The time this teacher has allotted for math is half over before the lesson begins!

Meanwhile, just across the hall, a writing workshop progresses smoothly. Circulating among small working groups, the teacher consults with some students while continuing to monitor the others. As they complete their writing, the students file their papers in their writing portfolios, then take out their library books, as previously instructed.

One teacher established routines, and enforced them; the other did not. It's obvious which is which!

Routines Help Children

Routines are the backbone of daily classroom life. They facilitate teaching and learning. That's the bottom line. Routines don't just make your life easier; they also save valuable classroom time. And what's most important, efficient routines make it easier for students to learn and achieve more.

That's not to say that teaching and learning can be routinized. Never! But procedures for turning in assignments, talking in class, lining up for lunch, getting your assistance, using the pencil sharpener, and passing out materials must be.

"Routines are the most important thing," claims Deborah Charles of New Jersey. "It doesn't matter what the routine is, as long as it becomes routine."

"Children who often have trouble organizing their time greatly benefit from routines," adds Jane Kelling of Texas.

"Routine is good for the teacher and good for the students," concurs Pamela Shannon of San Diego. "Basically, kids feel secure with a routine. They know what's expected of them. You build on this security before you go on to something new and different."

Academic routines help children learn better, concludes researcher Gaea Leinhardt of the University of Pittsburgh's Learning Research and Development Center. In her studies of mathematics teaching in elementary classrooms, she found that the major difference between expert and novice teachers was the use of well-practiced routines.

Leinhardt tells of an expert teacher who gave students guided practice after a lesson by assigning two problems and asking the children to stand when they finished. Thus, the teacher could readily see who needed help, which she would offer during the next round of problems. As Leinhardt explains, this routine enabled the teacher to pace the practice and give rapid feedback on performance to all the students.

"Academic routines are just as important as other routines," says Jane Kelling. "Starting lessons with warm-ups and ending lessons with reviews help children retain the material. And routines about homework and assignments are also extremely important for everyone to be successful."

Routines Help Teachers

Research documents the effectiveness of routines. Researcher David Berliner of Arizona State University views teachers as executives who each day make more important decisions affecting the lives of others than some chief executive officers make in a month or a year. The only way teachers can do that, he explains, is to manage by routine. Many decisions become automatic as teachers transform patterns of activities into smooth routines.

Routines differ from teacher to teacher and from class to class. Routines are an individual thing, says Barbara King-Shaver, adjunct professor at Rutgers Graduate School of Education and supervisor of English and social studies for South Brunswick (NJ) Schools. "You use what's best for you and your students."

Routines also eliminate many potential disruptions and problem situations — for example, the common problem of getting the teacher's attention and help. Typically, students who need help must raise their hands, wait to be acknowledged by the teacher, state their needs, and then receive an oral directive. This very public request for help not only may embarrass some children or be used as a controlling mechanism by others; it disrupts the entire class every single time it occurs.

Many teachers list the daily routine for students, reminding them to sharpen pencils before school begins, and directing them toward certain assignments and activities. Especially important, say veteran teachers, is the morning routine, or opening exercise. Effective

teachers have an activity posted for students to start working on as they enter the classroom. Their students know the procedure because they've been taught to follow it, and no time is wasted directing students on what to do. Not only does the morning routine establish an orderly, efficient atmosphere; it also forces students to take responsibility. They know it is their job to get right to work.

Practice Makes Perfect

Whatever procedures you decide to use in your classroom, remember to practice them with the whole class, giving children an opportunity to demonstrate that they know and understand them. This practice is critical. We can't assume that children know how we want them to behave until we've actually taught them the desired behavior, demonstrated how a child would look engaged in the behavior, and provided students the opportunity to practice.

Your job as an effective classroom manager is to develop procedures for all major classroom activities, then teach and have students practice those procedures the first few days or weeks of school until they become established routines. For new and seasoned professionals alike, the beginning of the school year is the time to teach and re-teach classroom routines. It usually takes several weeks for these to become firmly entrenched, but the initial time invested pays huge dividends throughout the year.

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