

Engaging All Students

Teachers often fall into the habit of (unconsciously) treating students differently. Students who are perceived by the teacher to be 'high achievers' may get called on more frequently, be allowed more time to answer questions, and may receive more praise and recognition. Students who are perceived as 'weak' are often ignored, treated less courteously, and given less time to think.

Imagine you are a student in a class who is not doing well. You never have the right answer, and so you don't very often volunteer answers. When the teacher does call on you with a question (it doesn't happen very often, because he knows you won't know the answer), he doesn't look at you, and only waits a second or two before calling on someone else. He doesn't acknowledge your answer in any way, and never seems to say anything positive to you. He seldom comes anywhere near you when he's teaching.

You also notice that he asks lots of questions to the 'smart' kids, gives them lots of time to think about their answers, listens attentively to what they have to say, and praises them, even if they give a wrong answer. He spends a lot of time teaching to them.

How would you feel if you were this student?

All teachers know that what this example teacher is doing is wrong, and why. The problem is that, given human nature, it is very easy to fall into a routine where you do these things unconsciously, sometimes just to move the lesson along. It's also something that we all, and especially new teachers, need to work on.

Let's look at what the teacher did wrong, and what he should be doing.

1. All students in the room need to participate

No-one likes to feel ignored. When teaching a lesson, *all* students need to be called on for answers. Poor students need to be called on as frequently as strong students. That way everyone stays on task, the weak students feel like they really are part of the lesson, and the teacher gets a good feel for whether the lesson is being understood by everyone. No-one will leave the classroom feeling like the teacher didn't even know they were there.

2. All students need equal ‘thinking’ time when asked a question

Unconsciously, many teachers won't give weaker students long enough to think, because they know they won't be getting a correct answer, and they want the lesson to move along. But *all* students need time to think, and the weaker ones may need this time even more. By forcing them to take time to compose an answer, *any* answer, you are helping them, even if they don't get it right. That's what it's all about.

3. The teacher needs to spend equal amounts of time in proximity to weaker students

Proximity is important when you're teaching a lesson. Standing next to the weaker students will help them focus and stay on task ... and they may be more likely to volunteer an answer if you're close.

4. All students need both feedback and praise when answering questions

A teacher needs to *actively listen* to all students who answer a question. This means making eye contact and using clarifying points if necessary. For example: "*Jackie, you're saying that red and blue make purple, is that right?*"

All students need feedback and praise, even if they don't give a good answer. "*That was a good try, Mary ... I can see you really thought about that.*" or "*Good try, Nick*"). Other students can give the feedback sometimes, as long as it's courteous. "*Nice try, Kenny. Barbara, was Kenny correct?*"

Interactions with all students must *always* be courteous. Don't EVER use sarcasm.

5. No student's answer should ever be ignored

I've seen experienced teachers do this. I've had it happen to me in staff meetings and at PD events. You give an answer, but the questioner or presenter goes immediately to someone else without acknowledging that you even said something. This is just plain rude, and it makes me feel unimportant. Why should I even bother answering next time?

I'm an adult ... I can live with rude behaviour. But imagine what your students feel like when you do this to them all the time! Acknowledge their answers ... even if they're wrong.

Some teachers at WCS may recognize these suggestions as part of the training we did many years ago, and as 'best practice' techniques we should be using in our classrooms every day. It helps to be reminded. I needed to think of this often while I was teaching, so I wouldn't forget. Beginning teachers need to work on it until it becomes second nature.