

# It's the little things that count!

Maureen Douglas (retired teacher and principal)

Whenever I spoke to students, especially when things were a bit off track, I would say at the conclusion of our conversation that what I was offering was advice but it was their decision what happened next. Please treat these suggestions in the same way; my hope is they will be helpful.

## You're a beginner – be proud of it

Successful teaching is highly complex and it takes time to learn and understand the complexities, so be gentle on yourself. Don't expect to know it all, take every opportunity to observe, trial, ask, practise and read in order to learn to teach. You may also find that having your own class is very different to being a pre-service teacher.

## Getting to know the school

As soon as you have secured your appointment, spend time getting to know the school. First impressions can make a difference to your start, so find out about the dress code, and the codes of conduct. Ask for key curriculum and policy documents, spend time in the school, watch interactions between teachers and students. These will tell you something about the culture of the school. Introduce yourself to your mentor and organise a time to meet. See if there are school events you could attend such as fetes, school productions or staff gatherings. Find out about planning meetings and access to the school over the Christmas break so that you have time to set up your classroom.

## Your focus

The students in your class are most important so dedicate plenty of time to know them, their names, their likes and dislikes, their friends, the students they find challenging, their parents and carers. Spend time observing them, listening to them, talking to them, providing a rich range of activities and experiences that take in their creative and physical development. Find out what they know and can do.

Students will want to find out about you, so think about what you want them to know.

## Classroom Culture

Establishing a safe and predictable learning environment makes a difference to students' sense of community, belonging and their capacity to learn and you are the leader. Make sure you have an understanding of the school culture so that your messages are consistent. It's important to have clear boundaries between you and the students; it's possible to be friendly without being a friend. It can be your biggest challenge as a beginning teacher.

- Be fair and consistent
- Be clear about what you expect
- Engage students in the process and be prepared to listen to them
- Focus on the behaviours you want
- Make the learning experiences relevant to the students

## Teaching is more than content

At university a lot of time is spent making sure you know and understand curriculum and that's important. But teaching is so much more than delivering the curriculum content. It's important to:

- Establish classroom routines and behavioural expectations with the students
- Consider when planning, the needs of individuals and the needs of the class community
- Know that students learn in different ways and at different rates
- Give students time to learn
- Recognise that relationships between students can be complex and time consuming for the teacher
- Student engagement varies and being flexible helps; there's a place for spontaneity
- Learning is not linear so be prepared for surprises and disappointments
- It's often difficult to judge how long an activity will take so be flexible
- Having fun is important.

## A fantastic resource

If you don't know Brian Cambourne's work then I suggest you get to know it. His "conditions of learning" will give you an invaluable framework and insight into successful teaching and learning.

## Finally ~

I quote Haim Ginott:

"I've come to the frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It's my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher, I possess a tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humour, hurt or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated and a child humanized or de-humanized."

## References

Cambourne, Brian (1988) *The Whole Story: Natural learning and the acquisition of literacy in the classroom*. Sydney: Ashton Scholastic.

Ginott, Haim (1972) *Teacher and Child: A book for parents and teachers*. New York: Macmillan.