Prime Factors

AN INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Mid-morning winter sun streams through the southern windows of the room. It is one of those idyllic moments in the life of a classroom, the mood harmonious and full of industry. I am sitting at a table with Megan, going over the math lesson on prime factors that she missed yesterday.

The background noise is a pleasant hum—a blend of voices in carefully modulated conversation, pencils tracking across paper, and the heater's steady purr. As Megan concentrates, I take a moment to survey the room.

Chris, Leisha, Andrew, and Jon are sharing our one globe as they search it to locate and write two facts about each of the four countries mentioned in current events yesterday. A brief burst of laughter punctuates the literature group, meeting in the opposite corner of the room with Ms. W., a special needs teacher who supports our language arts work. Jenna reenters the room, moving her nametag from the bathroom hook to the wicker basket on the small shelf below. Luis is in the library corner, immersed in the latest Harry Potter fantasy.

Many things are going on in this fourth grade classroom at the same time: one-to-one instruction, teacher-facilitated small group instruction, individual independent work, and collaborative student work. The students are drawing upon many resources for their learning, including each other. It is a classroom in which many learning styles are honored and students at varying levels of proficiency are being challenged.

Luis is known for his love of reading and quick recall of details. Andrew is a mechanical wonder and the first one we all look to when the pencil sharpener jams or the cassette player won't play. Chris does pen and ink sketches with a

sophisticated perspective and artistic flair, and her classmates have begun to seek her out for this talent. In fact, first thing this morning I heard Anna consulting her about the book poster she was trying to finish for literature group: "My drawing's a mess, Chris. Can you help me make this road look right?"

I watched with satisfaction as Chris smiled a hesitant, shy smile, looked Anna almost in the eye, and responded, "Sure, but could I get my backpack off first?" Chris was new to the class in November and spent the first month trying her hardest to say little and hide often. More than once, I coaxed her from the girls' room back to class.

Although there is much activity and many materials are in use, there is a sense of order, and the adults are free to focus on instruction and observation. The room is very much in control as students function with a great deal of nine-year-old autonomy.

Prime Factors

Megan's voice ends my brief survey, and my attention returns to the math at hand. She has finished the first problem and asks, "So, did I get it? Are these the prime factors?"

The foundations for such idyllic moments of concentrated and varied learning are built in the early weeks of school each year. It is during this time that we spell out expectations, articulate rules, and establish predictable structures, all of which provide the "prime factors" which help us move toward an orderly, cooperative, and stimulating learning environment.

They help us handle the inevitable moments of upset and disorder as well. In the scene above, Andrew may spin the globe faster and faster until the rest of the group grows frustrated and Andrew stomps off in a huff. Jenna may linger in the bathroom until I find her and Amy composing an anonymous note to Courtney detailing why "no one" likes her. Jon and Jermaine may fight on the playground. The expectations, rules, and structures established during the first weeks prepare us—teachers and children—to handle these situations constructively. They become opportunities for learning.

Improving the learning environment requires asking—and answering—a critical question: What must our students know in order to be a part of a cooperative, rigorous, and supportive classroom community?

Much knowledge and many skills are required. Students must know how to leave the room without interrupting the teacher or other students, while letting the teacher know where they are at all times. They must know how loud

"indoor voices" can be. They must know what information they can find out from a globe. They must know how four people can share one globe and how to (and not to) handle it. They must know something of their classmates' strengths and fragilities. They must know how to ask each other for help. They must know how to get to literature group quickly and efficiently with the materials they will need. They must know how to put the special drawing pencils back in the art cans so that they will be there for the next student who needs them.

In a word, students need to function with autonomy: to function independently without constant adult control or direct supervision. Autonomy in a school setting means governing oneself with an awareness of the needs of the community. These needs vary—each year, each month, each week—according to the class composition, students' maturity, what our classroom space allows, and what materials we have to work with.

Even the best-behaved students do not walk in our doors in September with this autonomy. Each year, the details must be intentionally established during the first weeks, bit by specific bit, through definition and constant practice. Some students will acquire a high degree of autonomy relatively quickly; others will struggle and need support all year long.

The "ideal" classroom moment described above reflects freedoms, choices, and responsibilities which are the result of students' ability to govern themselves—to draw upon individual self-controls that will enable the whole group to function smoothly.

Intentions

Though the details differ with different age groups, with the content of the curriculum, and with the organization of the room, there are four broad aims—four prime factors—in our first six weeks curriculum.

Intentions During the First Six Weeks:

1. **Create a climate and tone of warmth and safety.**
2. **Teach the schedule and routines of the school day and our expectations for behavior in each of them.**

3. **Introduce students to the physical environment and materials of the classroom and the school, and teach students how to use and care for them.**

4. **Establish expectations about ways we will learn together in the year ahead.**

1. Create a climate and tone of warmth and safety.

Students can come to know each other and develop a sense of belonging through activities that help them define their commonality and their differences. Deliberately focusing on group-building helps create the trust essential for active, collaborative learning.

Intentions

However, this sense of trust isn't built solely on warmth and friendliness. It is also built upon students' assurance that there are reasonable limits and boundaries for behavior and that their teacher will enforce them. They must see that their teacher will exercise vigilance and good judgment to keep everyone safe.

2. Teach the schedule and routines of the school day and our expectations for behavior in each of them.

A sense of order and predictability in daily school life is important. It enables children to relax, to focus their energy on learning, and to feel competent. When we enter a new culture, we want to know its rules so that we do not embarrass ourselves or, through ignorance or misunderstanding, hurt others.

In the first weeks of school, we name the global expectations we hold for the year: our room will be a place where people try hard, take good care of themselves and each other, and take good care of our materials and facilities. Children are then involved in applying these broad, nonnegotiable expectations to everyday situations. "How will we move through the halls if we are taking care of each other?" "What does trying hard mean during math group?" "What will clean-up time look like if we are taking good care of our room?"

3. Introduce students to the physical environment and materials of the classroom and the school, and teach students how to use and care for them.

In order for students to feel a sense of ownership for the school environment and materials, they must become familiar with them and have time to explore them.

Through school tours for young students and new students, and scavenger hunts and mapping exercises for older ones, we encourage them to get acquainted or reacquainted with the school environment and to feel comfortable in it. Using the technique of guided discoveries, we extend children's ideas about the creative use of space and materials, develop guidelines about sharing particular resources, and teach children how to care for them.

4. Establish expectations about ways we will learn together in the year ahead.

We want to generate excitement and enthusiasm about the curricula we will engage in this year—complicated new math concepts, engrossing novels full of dilemmas to explore, beautiful art materials and techniques for using them, microscopes to observe a previously invisible world. Our learning—whether we are wrestling with an ethical dilemma presented in a history lesson, deciding when to pass the soccer ball, or considering a complicated question about collecting data for an experiment about the effects of caffeine—requires participation and focused effort, thoughtful questions, and the ability to cooperate and collaborate. We pay attention to the process as well as the products of our learning and hold high standards in both areas. It is our job as teachers to help students achieve these high standards as we learn with and from each other.

Introductions

The first six weeks of school is a distinct period: it is a time of many introductions. We introduce students to the people of the classroom and school community, to the classroom and school environment, and to the expectations we hold about learning. We also introduce and establish expectations for their behavior, the limits we will set, and the ways we will enforce those limits. We introduce the routines that help them learn while taking care of each other and the environment.

We structure the first six weeks so that students will participate actively in all of these introductions. They practice the expected skills and behaviors—at first with very close teacher guidance and structure, and then, as their familiarity and competence grow, with increasing amounts of independence. We want them to consider and voice their hopes and goals for the school year and to help

articulate a set of rules that will help each one achieve their individual hopes and goals.

How long does this "first weeks" phase last? We have found that it almost always takes six weeks, though there is nothing exact or magic about the number six. Occasionally a class accomplishes the objectives of this phase in less time. Sometimes it takes longer. Paula recalls an exhausting year when "It was the first six weeks all year long." The group she had that year never stopped needing the structures and the vigilant attention to process and routine that define the first weeks.

This does not mean that academic goals are put on hold during this introductory period. Nor does the early-weeks curriculum compete with academic aims. On the contrary, these aims are intertwined and synergistic. Establishing a friendly, predictable, and orderly classroom is a prerequisite for children's academic achievement. When children are anxious, unruly, and out of control, the learning that occurs is seldom what we intend.

Introductions

We must convey, from the very first day, the important message that we will tackle challenging material and do high-quality work in our classroom. But we also must convey that we will tackle this material and do this high-quality work in an atmosphere of support and collaboration. This atmosphere will not just appear by our decree. It must be carefully constructed upon many small, but critical, building blocks.

The answers to the question posed earlier—What must our students know in order for them to achieve high-standard academic goals in an atmosphere of safety and cooperation?—are the source for these building blocks. The answers involve behavior and skills of many types and involve every aspect of the classroom environment.

For example, students must know each other's names. They must know what first-draft work looks like and what final-draft work looks like. They must know how loud their voices can be when a reading group is going on in the room. They must know that no one will laugh if their Fimo® duck is blob-like or their foot doesn't connect with the soccer ball every time. They must know what their choices are when they finish their math assignment early. They must know that a friendly "Good Morning" or a "Will you eat with me?" to a new student is noted and appreciated. They must know that a sneering response to a classmate's mispronounced vocabulary word is also noted and not appreciated.

Constructing and placing these building blocks are the focus of our curriculum for the early weeks of school. It is exhilarating and exhausting work. It is an investment that pays off all year long.