

Creating a Positive and Engaging Learning Environment

Observations

In our fourth period AVID classroom with Sam Miller, her students talked about their reactions to the drunk driving simulation and the four D's of dangerous driving (distracted, drowsy, drunk, and drugged). The students were very open and candid about their experiences discussing their personal experiences with each of the four D's. Some of them even admitted to having parents that drove them while texting or under the influence of alcohol. Despite trying to advocate for their safety in the car, their parents chose to yell at them for speaking up. These parents would threaten their kids to not speak to them or try to convince them that they were fine to drive. Though the students were concerned for their safety in the car (more so than driving with their friends), they didn't regret speaking up to their parents. A couple of students proudly admitted that these tough conversations are the reason that they don't stay in contact with some of their parents.

Analysis and Questions

There weren't really any specific classroom management strategies being implemented during this discussion. The only real strategy that Mrs. Miller used was listening openly and objectively to her students comments. Each of her students also raised their hands and spoke in turn, respecting the communal atmosphere and giving each other a chance to be heard. Mrs. Miller didn't really add too many comments to the students' stories besides complimenting them on speaking up. She mainly remained open-minded, objectively responsive, and emotionally neutral. Tristan offered to talk about his high school classmates' deaths related to the four D's in the car, which also drilled the important point across. I thought that keeping the tone objective and neutral in response to the students' stories was a smart move because it held space for the students to process their feelings. There are students in her class that are very expressive and slightly overdramatic, so keeping a calm tone made the classroom feel safe and gave the introverted students a chance to speak up. I think this management strategy would've been appropriate in any other classroom setting given the situation at hand. That said, some teachers would probably be more emotionally neutral while others would be visually empathetic with the students.

The only question I have for this section would be about what specific kind of classroom management strategy would've been used in this kind of situation? I could see "See Think Wonder" or "Think Pair Share" working well. Even a "Do Now" could've worked to give students a chance to write about their feelings without sharing them with the rest of the class. RAFT letters would've been good for that too. I would imagine that any strategy involving love and logic would be perfect.

Reflection and Application

I was pretty shocked to hear each students' stories about their parents and their drunk/distracted driving. I kind of expected the stories to be about peer pressure with their friends, not pressure from their parents. I also admired that the students for being able to openly share what their struggles are with their families. It made me sad that they tried to advocate for themselves and cared about their safety, only to have their parents criticize their requests. What we encouraged them to do was to keep at it and set an example. Their actions are very powerful. This discussion reminded me of my last conversation with Melissa and her classroom management. It makes sense why she values having a more relaxed classroom atmosphere that honors students feeling emotionally safe.

I think these kinds of social discussions are very powerful and important to have. I've made lesson plans that encourage students to talk about serious social issues that they deal with as teenagers (such as bullying, race/gender prejudice, and academic pressure), and I facilitate discussions about them with empathetic psychological approaches. When students are able to express themselves through art in this way, they are more likely to feel empowered and spoken up about their story. I also hope that these kinds of projects can help them see each other in a more open-minded way. These conversations make students feel safe and they impact how they feel connected as a school community. I think it's important for teachers to cultivate that.