

The Concept of “Letting Go”

The teacher finally has to ask a disruptive student to leave the room. He does, but on his way out he turns out the lights.

The teacher's original goal was to have the student leave the classroom so the disruption would stop. He complied, but not the way the teacher wanted him to. By turning off the light he was expressing his anger through behavior.

If the teacher rushed out of the room after the student and ordered him to return to turn the lights back on, would that student come back happily and willingly? If he was angry when he left the first time, has he calmed down while in the hallway?

An alternative to rushing after the student and ordering him to return to the classroom and turning on the light is to "let it go."

“But I have to do something!!”

Making the decision to not pursue the student is, in fact, doing something. By deciding not to deal with the issue immediately, the teacher can return to teaching. Granted, the student's behavior was disruptive and inappropriate but, by not missing a beat, turning the light back on and continuing to teach, the teacher has minimized the damage. Not only that, the teacher is continuing to give attention to those students who need and deserve it instead of further disrupting their educational time by engaging in a no-win power struggle with an emotionally charged classmate.

The concept of "letting go" is probably one of the hardest concepts to swallow. Research has identified at least four basic motivations for classroom misbehavior: avoidance of failure, attention, revenge, and power. All too often, when a student violates a rule or misbehaves, the teacher's immediate reaction is to exclude the student from the activity and/or withdraw positive attention. But the teacher should realize that there are other choices. Teachers may not be able to control the student's behavior, but can control theirs.

RESEARCH

If teachers can keep their self-control and focus on the original goal (that is, teaching the class), the cycle of conflict is halted, at least until the class has ended. The disruptive student will be dealt with, but on the teacher's terms, not his.

Perhaps the most difficult time to "let go" is when the teacher is dealing with a student who is motivated by the need for power and control. An example: A student arrives in class wearing his hat. You mind him of the rule but he continues to wear it. (Students who feel powerless over the big things in their lives will seek to control the little things.)

Power plays are a form of oppositional behavior. It is these types of situations that will elicit intense feelings of powerlessness in the teacher. The teacher will usually react to these feelings by wanting to force the student to comply. What needs to be considered is how much power the teacher gives the student if, simply by wearing a hat, he is able to bring the class to a screeching halt. In cases like this, the teacher maintains power by not allowing this to happen.

Before the student entered the room, the original goal of the teacher was most likely to get the class started on time and begin teaching the lesson. There is one student who, violating a minor rule, is trying to sidetrack the teacher from that goal.

The teacher addressed the violation when the student was reminded of the rule. The proverbial ball is now in the student's court. He either continues to wear the hat or he takes it off. It is his responsibility. If he chooses to continue to flaunt the rule, he is subject to whatever consequences there are for that action. And the teacher has to answer this question: "Do I want to get into an argument about a hat and give attention to someone who is misbehaving, or do I want to teach the lesson and give attention to those students who are behaving?" Most likely the teacher will want to continue to teach. At the end of the class, the student will be given the consequence for his behavior.

What will the other students think? If the teacher has proactively taught the class about the use of "Planned Ignoring" (the decision not to pay attention to the behavior at the time it happens) then the students know that the rules have not changed and the behavioral infraction will be addressed later.