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Veronika Chester
gchestercv@bigpond.com

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Prepare, manage and care: Reflecting on challenges and change

Veronika Chester

Retired teacher

I was a rather lonely figure standing in the empty playground wondering what lay ahead of me, as a beginning teacher in the sole-charge school. When I finally stepped into the classroom—twenty-six desks and an empty blackboard—I knew I had my work cut out to be ready for the six grades in my care.

What did my experiences teach me—from that first empty classroom, to different schools in several countries—that I would have shared with that nervous, young teacher?!. There have been challenges and changes over the years. In spite of these and above all, I would commend: Prepare, manage and care! These have been the guideposts in my teaching journey. Along the way I listened to and learned from my students who implicitly taught me: Know your 'stuff', have good classroom management and show you really care. How have these principles worked for me? How have they guided me through challenges and change?

Programs, timetables, classroom décor: Where does one begin? Preparation! I have been constantly reminded that preparation is everything. There is personal preparation of the heart—believing in one's calling and relying on God for wisdom and strength. Then there is the day-to-day planning and organisation. Planning and preparation go hand in hand. With an overall plan the individual lesson plans were easier to implement. As a pre-service (student) teacher I had become fairly adept at following a timeline for a multi-grade lesson, but in

'real life' it was another thing to keep that momentum going hour after hour, day after day. What happens when the timeline comes adrift?

I learned to have things 'up my sleeve' as backup. It was important to provide activities that were relevant and engaging for students who finished assignments, such as word games, problem solving cards, reading activities and personal projects. These became incentives for students to work well and they also helped in the challenge of classroom management. I soon learned that a forest of waving hands and a babble of queries are not conducive to a happy learning environment.

The first day of school set the tone for ongoing success and I found that the preparation for that first day was well worth the effort. Having an interesting worship and focusing on a catchy classroom motto also made for a good start. Furthermore, providing interesting activities on that first day set a positive tone for learning. I realised that making that first day special was a way to show my respect for students. This helped to engender respect from them, and laid the foundations for positive teacher-student relationships and sound classroom management.

I learned early that preparing the classroom to provide an attractive environment was also worthwhile. When teaching in a dingy little clubhouse that substituted for a classroom, on a tropical island, I asked for a small budget for some curtains. I bought material, cut it in half lengthwise to have enough for all the windows, and then sewed the curtains with a borrowed sewing machine. Soon I had them ready to hang. My efforts were well rewarded when the children arrived and a little voice beside me whispered, "O Miss, the curtains look so pretty". The curtains at least deflected attention from the rats and cockroaches that often scampered across the rafters.

Classroom management and preparation go hand in hand and I found there were many different aspects to managing students. Getting students involved in helping to set aims for the classroom was something I fine-tuned over time, but I realised that the "catch children being good" maxim, together with affirmation and encouragement as I moved about the classroom, went a long way towards having a happy classroom and helping students stay on task.

I realised that making that first day special was a way to show my respect for students



[Photograph:
Veronika Chester]

In the ‘*angst*’ of trying to do everything right I needed to be reminded that it was important to make learning fun. It isn’t just about games, though there are many ideas for games that can enhance the teaching of a subject or act as revision. Boys, especially, enjoy some classroom competition. For me it became a challenge to find ways to make school interesting and fun within the context of a positive learning environment. When meeting past students, many have reminded me that the excursions, concerts, community outreach and other fun activities still provide positive memories of their school days. I’m not sure whether the Maths and Writing activities were quite so readily remembered.

Prepare, manage and care; is there a priority? I discovered that preparation and classroom management were not quite so challenging when I focused on what was best for the students in my care. It was easy to become discouraged when there were difficult students, but it was worth the effort—taking time to listen, trying to understand and praying, when it was appropriate. True caring should be shown across the whole range of the teaching spectrum and I found that even tasks that are considered more onerous, such as playground duty, could provide opportunities to show that I cared. I am personally grateful for the help given to my own children by caring teachers who remembered birthdays, planned special times and took time to find out how they were coping; especially during the difficult adjustment of returning from overseas mission service.

Later in my teaching ministry I found that communicating through journaling was a way to understand my students better and to provide written help and encouragement. Comments from students also provided some insights in improving my preparation and classroom management. I just wish I had done it sooner.

I have already alluded to changes that occurred during my teaching ministry. As that young teacher surveying that empty classroom I had no concept of future changes I would face. I knew nothing of photocopying, laminating or anything remotely related to a computer. My trusty fraction cake, Cuisenaire rods and a few counters were my “stock in trade”. It would be years before we even played calculator games to enhance our Maths lessons.

There were few colourful resources; so I drew charts on butchers’ paper. And as for the plethora of beautifully presented reading materials, they were still in the future. Janet and John had to provide the reading experience for my young readers; enhanced by what enthusiasm I could generate through discussion and questioning.

From the Gestetner to the electric typewriter, from the comptometer to the computer, from encyclopaedias to Wikipedia, these were just some of the changes in technology. With whiteboards and smart boards, laptops and iPads, my chalkboard is a thing of the past. Nevertheless, true caring involves embracing changes that can add to the growth and development of students. I had to adapt. At the little primary school for expatriate students at Sonoma College in Papua New Guinea, we embraced the ‘fledgling’ computer—a *Microbee* that was set up for the College students. Because of limited electric power it was run off two tractor batteries. My primary students were given access to the computer for Maths games, Reading activities and general quiz questions which were set up to make learning fun and to introduce them to computer technology.

I may never be a computer whizz, but I recognise how technology can benefit students with special needs, provide extension activities and complement classroom management and organisation. The challenge is not to let technology or resources take the place of a caring, engaged and enthusiastic teacher.

Much more could be said about change:

- Changes in curriculum: How often have I had to change my writing style to adapt to new curriculum directives?
- Changes in discipline: Who would believe that I was once encouraged to use the cane?
- Changes in classroom dynamics: In former times I could help a shy, anxious child learn to read while sitting on my lap. A hug was a special comfort to a hurting child!

Despite all the changes, one can still find ways to be there for one’s students, to care for their needs. Teachers can still use encouraging words, taking time to listen and share. And journaling is still an empathetic tool today, even if it occurs (within established boundaries) through email, *Facebook* or blog.

Prepare, manage and care! The pathways to positive learning may be somewhat different today but caring, effective management and ongoing preparation are still the key essentials for any teacher facing that empty classroom. And I believe, they are still valid guideposts for today’s teachers facing the new challenges and changes that lie ahead on their teaching ministry journey. **TEACH**

Endnote

¹ That young teacher is now retired. Having reflected on her teaching journey, she wants to pay tribute to her *alma mater*—Avondale College—and the professional help and preparation she received as a “trainee teacher”. With God’s help she was able to build on that foundation to value encouragement, find fulfilment and over the years ‘navigate’ through the many encountered challenges and changes.

“*The challenge is not to let technology or resources take the place of a caring, engaged and enthusiastic teacher*”