

A Reflection of Me: Why My Students Disrespected Me

Andréa shares her experiences with the “bottom class” and reveals the trials and triumphs of inspiring them to become the “top class”

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Flashback to Brownsville, Brooklyn, September 13, 2004. It was still a hot day, since summer hadn't quite left the building. It was also the day I met the 22 fifth graders that would change the way I looked at myself—and teaching—forever. I was just getting back into the elementary school thing after working at SCORE! Educational Centers as the Advantage Program Director for one of their larger Brooklyn centers, and helping to ramp- up a new center in the heart of Flatbush, Brooklyn. Up until that point, I had already been working with inner city kids for six years, and thought I had it down pat. But, as I stood in front of my class, I knew that was about to change.

I was ready with my stern face, furrowed brows, and no-nonsense demeanor. I had been warned about these kids. They were the “bottom” class in the fifth grade, and half of them belonged in either the 6th or the 7th grade. Everyone lamented that they didn't know why someone had played the cruel joke of putting them all together in one class. Watching them, I could see the warning come to life as I worked to keep students in line while signaling several kids to our line who obviously found it funny that I was their teacher. “*She our teacher? Ms., you too young to be my teacher. You look like a kid!*” Let me tell you, the stern look didn't go very far with these kids. They already had other things in mind. I kept my composure and stayed in charge, but as we headed up to our classroom, my insides began to quake. I knew better than to take other people's negative comments about kids to heart, but something told me that I was about to find out for myself just what I was in for.

The beginning of the first day started out okay. Everything was set and ready to go as far as effective classroom management was concerned. There was a job chart, name tags, seating arrangement, a Do Now on the board, and clear expectations for each student. I had my arsenal in place for keeping the class under control, and I even had a new attention-grabber to use. Let me tell you, everything was fine until one of the students said—out loud—in front of the whole class, “We can make her cry.” Well, you know what happened next. At approximately 11:35 a.m. pandemonium struck and I saw a clear case of the Jekyll and Hyde syndrome rear its ugly head right before my eyes. A couple of kids started yelling across the room and banging on tables, one decided it would be a good idea to hide in the hallway, and one was on top of the desk! It was only a few students, but it was enough to rock my world. It took me a while and every trick in the book to restore order to the room. Afterwards, still as composed as I could be, I revisited the rules we had *just* created and tried to get through the rest of the day in one piece, stopping every 10 minutes to get their attention. It was the longest day in teacher history!

You know, those kids never saw me cry that day, but when I got home, I did cry—streams of tears. I had never met a group of kids like these before, so inconsiderate and ready to disrupt at any given chance, and I had thought I’d seen everything over the last six plus years. I have to admit that I certainly considered not going back. I was beginning to feel sorry for myself and I actually started believing what the other teachers had told me about those kids. Yeah, and why in the world *would* they put those kids in the same room? I never found out the reason for that, but I did find out that I was meant to be their teacher that year.

Over the next couple of weeks I had to realize that these kids were a reflection of me and how I felt about myself at that moment in my life. They could sense that I didn’t feel mentally nor emotionally prepared to handle what they had taken years to perfect. I had to realize that if I was going to change what I saw in my room on the outside, I had to get right with myself on the inside first. I had to be that confident, no-nonsense and loving teacher that I knew I was. They had to know that I was there to make them the best... and I couldn’t be afraid to commit to that. From that day on, I dedicated myself, not only to making those kids better students, but making them better people. I knew it was as much for me as it was for them, but how was I going to do it?

I stuck to all of the general classroom management techniques that I had learned over the years, but I realized early on that there was something that went beyond running a tight

ship on the surface level. With a class like I had, those things didn't work by themselves, and I knew about praise for a job well done and the "you can do it" spirit when they needed more of a push. So, what was the missing link that I hadn't been taught yet? The secret was that there was something happening on the inside of me and my students that was affecting our ability to get results in our classroom. **I realized that most of my energy was focused on keeping the class under control, because of my own assumptions and beliefs about my students – the result of what I had been told and had witnessed first hand, when what I needed to do was focus on getting them to control themselves by seeing themselves as valuable, smart, respected, and capable.** And, that was what was missing for the students.

First, I had to check myself and make sure that I saw them as valuable, smart, respected, and capable. They had little experience with teachers who could see them in that way, because so many had run the same story about them over and over again. **They felt written off and unable to achieve—or at least that is what they had learned about themselves, so they acted on it.**

So, intermingled with Math, ELA, Social Studies, and Science, **I began building their self-esteem and voraciously pointed out any little success I could find that would get them to see that they were not incompetent.** It became my mission to make my children see that they were superstars, and nothing less. Soon, many of the parents and I began to see improvement. Some who were not always doing homework, started doing it. It wasn't always right, but they did it.

Children initially challenged by reading and writing on a second and third grade level, started producing full reports and writing their own chapter books. Their writing was elementary and full of errors, but the content was excellent and showed their dedication to completing their work on their own. Soon, the behavior problems became minimal and the students were able to manage themselves to a significant degree when I was around. I couldn't believe this was the same class I'd started out with in September!

I was starting to see what it truly meant to inspire someone to success. **It wasn't about the task at all. It was about the person. It was about building their trust, and drawing out their natural strengths and abilities.**

Well, the first major test that year was the Statewide Social Studies test in November, and needless to say, we were all nervous as the test approached. I won't lie and say I wasn't

worried that they would all fail and they would have to face more evidence that they were not good enough.

Let me tell you: All of us, including the principal, were pleasantly surprised when, **my “bottom” class scored higher than even the “top” class did on that test with consistent level 3’s and high 2’s.** That solidified my belief in the power of positive motivation and a true belief in the abilities of your students, even when those abilities are hard to spot at first.

By the end of the year, those kids had been able to stretch their minds conceptually, and tackle complex math projects - even when they could hardly multiply two-digit numbers.

Did my students always all pass their tests? No. Did they all move on to the next grade with no problem? No. Did all of them always cooperate? Of course not. Did most of them make considerable, noticeable improvement from where they were in September to where they left off in June? Absolutely! That is the whole point of education! **Our goal is to move students from one level to the next both academically and personally,** and that is what we accomplished that year. I was so proud of them and they were proud of themselves. Even those who had to attend summer school were happy to go and prove that sixth grade was still within their reach, and most of them reached their goal. So, I learned many valuable lessons that year that I still utilize to this day.

What did you learn from my class that you can use in your classroom this year? Better yet, what have you learned from your own class that you can use to help them move to the next level of success?

Talk about your classroom successes in the “discussion forum on our private Facebook group at, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/myclassroomrules>, and let us know how far you’ve come and how much of an inspiration you’ve been to your students and to yourself.