

Why Difficult Students Need Your Unconditional Acceptance

Effective classroom management requires you to hold difficult students accountable beyond just the four walls of your classroom.

Washing your hands of misbehavior that “technically” doesn’t happen on your watch—at recess or with the art teacher, for example—sends the message that you don’t really care so long as they don’t disrupt your peaceful classroom.

Which, ironically, causes *less* peace and more misbehavior.

You see, if you’re reluctant to get involved in misbehavior that happens outside of your presence, then you’ll limit your authority and influence with difficult students and thus ability to manage their behavior *inside* your classroom.

As much as possible, you want to be there, taking an active role—even if the principal or art teacher is taking the lead.

This is standard classroom management practice, and it is indeed the right approach. But there is a downside to being omniscient. There is a downside to being involved and aware and quick to get to the bottom of it.

The Curse of Performancism

Difficult students are accustomed to being under the microscope.

Everyone on campus knows who they are and are quick to point out their transgressions. Aides, volunteers, parents, administrators, other teachers, and even fellow students are always there, watching and waiting for them to slip up.

Even when they have good intentions, difficult students are accused of sinister wrongdoing. They bump someone by accident. They take too long at the drinking fountain. They stop to help a fallen friend and are late for class.

Add to it your looming, all-knowing presence and it can feel like their every move is scrutinized; their every motive questioned—which, in turn, can cause them to begin focusing obsessively on their performance.

And living your life, hour after hour and day after day, based on how you're doing is exhausting.

Thinking too much, too often, and too critically about one's performance can cause unremitting stress and anxiety. It causes athletes to freeze up, salespeople to fumble their presentations, and teachers to dread the chiming of the morning bell.

For difficult students, the constant burden to try harder and do better can cause them to throw in the towel. It can cause an outright rejection of you and a rebellion of your rules and all the people who watch and judge and report their every move.

It can cause the belief that misbehavior is who they are and the only thing they're good at. It builds frustration upon frustration, provokes lashing out and sullen irritability, and results in even more angry, disruptive, and disrespectful behavior.

Easing the Performance Burden

An important part of your job is to ensure your students are held accountable for every true and legitimate act of misbehavior—which sometimes entails investigating, involving yourself with, and getting to the bottom of incidents you don't personally witness.

This can never change, regardless of the student. For the drumbeat of every-single-time accountability from you, the classroom teacher, forms one half of an overall strategy to turn around difficult students.

The other half is where so many teachers go wrong, why accountability alone isn't enough to change behavior, and why difficult students falter under the overwhelming pressure of performanceism.

Too often, teachers react to yet another incident from Paula or Jake or whoever with a roll of the eyes, a fierce lecture, a sarcastic remark, or a not-again sigh.

They take it personally, and in so doing heap more disappointment onto a child who already acutely feels the failure of her (or his) performance. She doesn't need you to pile on. She doesn't need you to question, scold, or force explanations from her.

Simply following your classroom management plan is enough for her to understand that she made a mistake. It's enough for her to know that she alone is accountable for her actions. And it's enough for her to begin reflecting on her poor decisions.

What she needs now more than anything is to know that, despite her misbehavior, misbehavior isn't who she is. She needs to know that her mistakes don't define her and that even if she were to mess up every single day, you would still be in her corner and on her side.

Your most difficult students need not your red-faced lectures or your bitter disappointment, but your forgiveness, your grace, and your unconditional acceptance.

When you make it known through your true and loving words, gestures, and body language that you believe in them and are with them to the end, no matter what, then the pressure of a 1000 grand piano will slide off their back.

Their shoulders will release and slacken into freedom.

