

# What do great classrooms look like?

*Maria Montessori "The goal of early childhood education should be to activate the child's own natural desire to learn"*

What do great classrooms look like? Does it matter if your students like you? Ask any teacher, anywhere, and you will most likely get answers split down the middle. Do I want my students to like me? Yes. I do. If they like you because you genuinely like them and show a real interest in their growth, they will also respect and work hard for you. Students do not learn because of teachers; they learn for teachers.

Improving students' relationships with their teachers has not only academic implications but social implications as well. But what does that look like? What do I look like? What do they look like? Students in classrooms with teachers they like and have a close relationship with learn more. For me, teaching students who like me makes my job easier. I have close relationships with my students, resulting in students who cooperate more, are more engaged, and are more self-directed. These little things make a big difference. When students have positive relationships with their teachers, it affects how they view school and how engaged they are. Students who have these kinds of relationships have more positive feelings about school, are more engaged, and, in turn, are often higher achievers.

I think about my classes where students perform well above expected in EAL/ESL, English Literature, Early Years and Kindergarten, and Music and Physical Education milestones. These students enjoy school; they like it. They come to class bright-eyed and happy. Their eyes focus on me, and their ears listen to me. As in many international schools, language can be a barrier, but especially in Early Childhood. I have completed HSK Unit 1 and am well into Unit 2. My Mandarin is good enough to translate important verbs and body parts. I also role model and demonstrate everything.

Again, because I work in Early Childhood, breaking a skill down to its minute parts is desperately important. And I mean breaking something down. And don't rush it. It might take two weeks to conclude a skill, where most can do it, and a few are still learning. Let me give you an example. Last week, I taught an African rock game called Obwisana (Ghanian). The first thing you do with the 3-year-olds is make a circle. Making a circle takes a 3-year-old's quite a bit of time. You start with everybody; stand up! And practice that a few times (everybody sits down. Everybody stands up! Everybody sits down. Everybody stands up!) Now, everybody takes one step back. Just one! (Mandarin: Yi). Assess student placement. Organize different students to take a step. Hannah, take one more step back! Good girl. Now, everybody holds hands! Everybody drops hands! Everybody holds hands! No pulling, we must hold hands gently. (Sing a song. Make a circle round and round, round and round, round and round!) Gently move into a lovely circle. Now, everybody sits down. Adjust the circle as necessary. Jayden, scootch in a little bit. Season, scootch out a

little bit. (Role model scootching. Mandarin: Ee dian de). Every eye and ear should be on you during this process, and students try hard to make the circle.

I have excellent relationships with my students, so they will copy me even if they don't understand me. The game then needs to have rocks. I get my teacher assistant to pass out one rock for each. I talk about the rock. Look at the rock! What do you see? Put the rock on the floor. Pick the rock up. Put the rock back on the floor. If the students are engaged, they will do exactly this. Timing is imperative. If you're too slow, the students get bored and mess around with the rock. However, if taught at the right speed, the students do exactly what they should do. Make a mistake. Instead of placing the rock on the floor, drop it. AUGH! Did Mrs Fletcher make a mistake? What did I do wrong? Normally, this results in gales of laughter. Mrs Fletcher! Do this! And somebody will mimic putting the rock on the floor. I say, Silly Mrs Fletcher! I made a mistake! Could you show me what I should do? And they do. It opens the door for them to make mistakes in a safe environment.

The same often happens with my Mandarin. The word for 'lion' and 'blind' is almost the same. I was doing a book called 'Giraffes Can't Dance.' First, I messed up the word for giraffe. It is a difficult Mandarin word directly translated as 'long neck deer'. Somehow, I said long neck dog. Everybody rolls on the floor laughing, and they correct me. This is them as teacher and me as learners, and they love it. Back to the lion. When I said 'blind,' instead of 'lion' they absolutely spun out. They could barely stop laughing. But I love it, because our roles are reversed, and they know I'm trying, and success takes time. It's an important and valuable lesson.

Back to Obwisana. Now, teach the beat of the song. Model the beat by hitting the rock against your other hand. 1-2-3-4, again 1-2-3-4. Praise constantly. Look at Ian! He knows the beat! Good job Ian. Who else can do the beat? Oh, look, David and George can do it too! Excellent! Can you say Obwisana? Let's try. Oh-Bwee-Sar-na. Who can say it? The kids start to try. Praise, praise, praise. Oh yes, Felicity, can you say that again? I'm sure you got it right! Good girl! They're ready for the next step by this time, so we introduce the song to the beat.

It's an easy song, simply; Obwisana-sa-nana Obwisana-sa. That's it. That's the whole song. Combine the beat with the song. If the children are singing, laughing, engaging, you know you've got them. The most difficult bit happens now. I want you to touch the rock on the floor on the final 'sa'. Role model. Do this very slowly. It takes a while, but everyone gets the feel with more praise and pointing out kids who are doing it correctly. Now, you challenge them by singing slightly faster. When they succeed, make a huge gesture, like WOW! And fall backward or something. My goodness, you are my best class! You learned that song! This game is great because you can take it to a new level (which I would not try with my 3-year-olds). You can have two rocks (PK and K). You can pass rocks. You can pass rocks on certain beats. You can teach left and right hand and go in different directions (K). And so on.

Students who have positive relationships with their teachers tend to be more engaged. Students who are more engaged typically are more likely to succeed. Being successful in school leads to positive educational experiences, which, in turn, creates a positive perception of school. Of course, this logic has exceptions and limitations, and not all students, teachers, and schools are the same – but the research suggests it's worth paying attention to. Teachers play a huge role because they can shift the school climate by building stronger relationships with their students. How would my students describe me? Fun, friendly, caring, interested, respectful and honest. I was hoping you could have a look at some of my classes: <https://suefletcher.me/3DKfthH>