

How can I foster and improve attentive listening and personal responsibility within the gym?

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Biography

Heather has been a teacher for 32 years and teaches at River Heights School in Caledonia. She still loves her job and has enjoyed and struggled through good and difficult times with student behaviours.

Abstract

How can I foster and improve attentive listening and personal responsibility within the gym? Through the use of the Tribes philosophy and the Energizers which are a key component of the program. The Energizers are just what they are: energy-producing activities. The students had the tools and the author provided another venue for them to use them. The rest as they say, "is history."

The Tribes program is being used throughout the school in this year. I am a rotary teacher which means that I have many students but no homeroom. My subjects are Junior French and Primary physical education. My training in the Tribes philosophy took place during the 2004 and 2005 school year. This is important because most of the classroom teachers had already started to implement the program within their classrooms, so I was simply following their lead. My observations then might not have the depth that the regular classroom teacher would have and yet I am in a unique situation in being able to isolate specific behaviours within specific situations. The uniqueness is further emphasized because in the physical education classes it is a less-structured environment. My observations should certainly indicate to me whether the students had absorbed the philosophies of attentive listening, appreciations, the right to pass on an activity and mutual respect or whether they were simply giving them lip-service while in the classroom. I was new at trying to implement these strategies within the gym. While always trying to encourage children and letting them explore various equipment and activities my goals had been to get the students moving, give them some skills and try to have them observe safety rules and habits. It might not appear that the Tribes philosophies are very different than gym rules but the focus becomes different. So my question, "How can I foster and improve attentive listening and personal responsibility within the gym?" needed to have a plan. I decided to concentrate on the "Energizers". The "Energizers" are designed, "to facilitate the Tribes strategies. The strategies are ways to achieve the learning objectives,..." (Gibbs, 2001, page 209). The follow-up questions are equally as important to the activity as is the activity itself. The reflective nature of questions and the use of appreciations enhance those behaviours that have been good and often have children examining their own behaviour. According to the Tribes manual, "six outcomes can be achieved through the use of "Energizers":

1. The energy of the classroom is revitalized.
2. People's attention can be drawn back to the classroom after a time away.
3. Different types of academic learning activities can be bridged, renewing energy and concentration.

People can feel connected again with one another and the whole community.

4. Multiple intelligences can be reached and are engaged. They add to the fun of learning and being together.” (Gibbs,2001, page 211)

The next step in my plan to see whether the Tribes goals were being absorbed, was to pick five students to monitor throughout the year. Each of the five students in the past had frequently exhibited unkind behaviours towards peers, frequently ignored instructions and were children that others complained about. The majority of the students within the two classes chosen are ordinary, everyday types of children. Not perfect, but reasonable, and for the most part cooperative groups of kids. My expectation of attentive listening was for the students to be able to follow the directions to accomplish a task and to be responsible for their behaviour and how it impacted on the group and ability of the group to allow the task to proceed. My hopes were to see a growth in the five students to become more cooperative, accept personal responsibility within the community in the gym, and to have the groups become better listeners.

The first “energizer” was called, “I like my neighbours”. The activity was designed to encourage mutual appreciations and careful listening. It begins with one person in the middle while the other students stand in a circle. The person in the middle makes a statement such as, “I like my neighbours who are wearing running shoes”. All those people who fit this category must jump up and run to an empty spot vacated by someone who fit the category. I had marked the floor ahead of time to have only one space for each child excluding the person in the middle. The person left standing in the circle becomes the new it. The emphasis soon shifted from clothing to other qualities such as blond hair, likes cats, has a sister, etc. It was fun. All of the children participated and had a fun time. Was my expectation of attentive listening demonstrated? Yes. When bumps happened, did the person accept responsibility and apologize and try to fix the situation? Yes. Of the five monitored students, only one boy, Boy A, lost focus. Journal entry dated December 10th, 2004.

The second “energizer” was “Skin the Snake”. In this activity, one must be cooperative with the group. The directions required careful listening and cooperation. The students line up behind one another. They had to reach between their legs and with the left hand they had to grab the right hand of the person behind them. The person in front needed to reach back and grab the right hand of the person behind them. Once the chain was formed, it was set to go. The chains walked forward together and backwards. The last person lays down on his back the person in front of them backs up and straddling their body lies down behind them. It continues until all students have walked backwards and are laying down. Is this activity difficult? Yes. Was this activity successful? Yes and no. Boy T had a very difficult time with this activity. He giggled and jumped about and made it almost impossible for his group to complete the task. An element of sexuality with the hands between the legs probably set him off. Boy T is a bright young lad and he has been aware or made aware that many of his peers find his behaviour offensive, loud and not nice. With two partners (boys) Boy T was giddy. The other boys tried hard to encourage Boy T to participate. When the small groups were merged with other groups, Boy T found other boys who then followed Boy T’s lead and became giggly and unfocused. On the whole, the activity was successful. It looked chaotic, sounded loud with lots of laughter but was fairly cooperative. Lots of energy was zinging off the walls. Another of the boys I was monitoring is very, very quiet. In many of the activities, he is almost a non-participant. He hooked up with his one buddy. He focussed and cooperated with the buddy. When the group merged into a bigger group, I

noticed that Boy B and his buddy were near the middle of the chain. He looked embarrassed, he was making no sound which was curious in itself but he obviously felt secure enough to participate cooperatively with the larger group. Girl K listened and on the first glance was cooperating. She looked comfortable and she was laughing. As I watched however, she became quite physical. When walking forward she was pushing and quite rough with her partner. Another student, Girl KI is a bright girl but has a tendency to think that she could do and say anything she wanted to but no one else was allowed to say or do anything to her. Girl KI had a difficult time with this Energizer also. She is struggling with Girl K for top position within the group of girls. Frequently she likes to cause others discomfort. She tries to exert an influence on the group, even if it is negative.

In my opinion, I would say that this energizer was not successful for the five students that I was observing but successful for the majority of the students. The immaturity of the five observed students, overshadowed the Tribes philosophy and expectations that I might have had. We had a community circle at the end of the class to talk about how things went, what they were feeling, and how we could make the class better. It was very interesting. Most of the students had enjoyed the Snake energizer but only two of the five specifically observed students said that they had liked it. Girl K and Boy A said they liked it. The other three students had a difficult time articulating why they hadn't liked it but a few of the other students had mentioned them by name in their ideas of ways to make the class better. The freedom and confidence to show appreciations and show mutual respect enabled the group to comfortably tell the students that they hadn't been helpful to the group to accomplish the task had been demonstrated. Journal entry dated January 7, 2005.

Several gym classes later, I tried the third "Energizer", "the People Machine". This activity starts with one person taking a strange position and making a repetitive sound. The next person connects onto the person in some way and makes a different movement and sound. It involves creative energy, cooperation, observation skills and good listening. I picked this energizer in order to see if the students could listen carefully enough to hear the differences in sounds and observe the differences with other student's actions. Boy T excelled. He looked energized and was very loud in his sound which was unique. He appeared to be watching everyone else and was surprised that he was not the centre of attention. He was listening, and watching carefully. Boy B was hesitant. He is normally a quiet child but he was also participating. His sound was a quiet little sound that he quite happily repeated again and again. I was moving around the gym with the first class in order to hear all the individual sounds and needed to listen quite carefully to Boy B's sound. He lost a little bit of focus when the activity had gone on for about a minute after he joined the machine but when he realized that the group was still going, he joined back in and started laughing at all the commotion. Beautiful noise. Girl K has a difficult time staying on task. She kept looking to others and couldn't keep her own movement and noise going. Her movement and noise kept changing to add in pieces or sounds of her neighbours. She copied others but demonstrated no overt bullying or hurtful acts with her movement. Boy A was also distracted and found it hard to keep to his own movement and sound. Girl Ki was focussed and chanted her sound louder the longer the activity lasted. In the community circle at the end of the class when again the students were asked if they liked the activity and how they could make it better, the five students were all enthusiastic in their like of the activity. Journal entry dated February 20th, 2005. It could have been because there was really very little physical contact and it was their own sound. Cynically it could also have been that no one mentioned their names in ways to improve the activity. I would like to believe that this was an indication to the group of mutual

respect and that the five students in particular felt connected enough to participate without trying to influence others. The activity looked crazy, there didn't seem to be a direction where all the energy was going, it sounded hilarious (beautiful music because 99 percent of the group were doing their own thing.) It felt good to me because everyone had a really good laugh at their own expense and several students in the second class felt comfortable enough to tell me that I looked really, "Funny!"

The fourth "Energizer" that I chose was the "Snowball I-Messages". The purpose of this activity is to create community inclusion and to give practice in writing I-Messages. I needed to modify this activity for the grade one and two classes. In this Energizer, students are to create four squares on one page. In one of the squares they are to write a You-Message. An example of a You-Message would be, "You make me feel good when you tell me I am kind." They then crumple the paper into a snowball and put it into the centre of the circle. Someone else picks up a snowball, reads the message and changes it into an I-Message in another square. With the grade one and two classes, it would take days to do this activity and so I modified it by having the children simply write their name on the six pieces of recycled paper with the idea that they could say a You-Message instead of writing one. Then I divided the students on two sides of the gym. I love lines on the gym floor. This activity took place in a week of really cold wet weather. We had had several indoor recesses in a row. The students were very loud when entering the gym. I knew it was going to be crazy and it was. Louder than any gym class I've had before and crazier than any I've had since. On a whistle the children would have two minutes to throw their snowballs. Another whistle would stop the activity. We started. They threw their snowballs at the other half of the gym. They could pick up any snowballs and throw them back to the other side. The two rules were: stay on their own side of the gym and to not hit any student above the waist. The children tried to direct their snowballs downward but a few accidents did happen and of course it was specifically one of the five students I had been monitoring. The class had two minutes to throw. They were loud. Then each child collected six snowballs and returned to their own half of the gym for another round. Another two minute throwing frenzy. Upon the whistle the children collected six snowballs and we sat in a community circle with the snowballs on their laps. Each student opened their snowballs and needed to say a You-Message to the person whose name was on the paper. We went around the circle three times and for the most part, the You-Messages were positive. The students were kind to one another. Boy B had a bit of a hard time with this activity. He stayed away from the centre line and was at the back of the group. Boy T was great as were Boy A and Girl Ki. They were loud, laughing and dancing away from the incoming snowballs. They participated with glee. Each of these students demonstrated very good, kind and sportsmanlike behaviour throughout the activity. Boy A even apologized to someone he was throwing a snowball at when the student bent down to pick up a paper and he was hit in the head. Girl K had the hardest time. She was on the front line and throwing snowballs at everyone and anything. I asked her to remember the rules. In the second throw, she started to again aim at people and was hitting them above the waist. I removed her from the activity. Girl K received the most direct you should change You-Messages from the group. This activity looked wild and chaotic, but it wasn't. The children were listening for the whistle and were very surprised that I would allow an indoor snowball fight and that it could be so much fun. The sound made during this activity was good natured and not a sneering kind of sound. It felt very energetic and by the end of the second throw, all the students were huffing and certainly had an elevated heart rate. In the community circle I was very pleased with the students You-Messages towards each other. I felt this activity was successful even with the connotation of a "fight" taking

place. The students demonstrated good behaviour with the exception of one. Upon talking with Girl K while the others were in the midst of the throw, she knew exactly what she had been doing and she knew exactly the words to say to try and lessen her own irresponsible behaviour. My cynical side said that she had heard all the words before and was trying to placate me rather than being honestly responsible for her behaviour. She knew what to say to appear that she was accepting the consequences for her behaviour. Boy T and Boy A received quite complimentary You-Messages. Journal entry dated April 3, 2005.

In conclusion, I believe that attentive listening and individual responsibility to the community can be fostered and encouraged within a gym setting using the Tribes philosophy and strategies. On a personal note, the gym classes have certainly not needed the instructions to be given three or four times and I believe that I have fewer mean-spirited behaviours taking place within the activities. The children do show a more attentive and caring attitude towards their peers, sharing and helping me to get equipment ready. This could be because we have continued to have community circles and the students have an opportunity to share the good (appreciations), the bad (maybe the You-Messages) and how to make things better within the class. Of the five students that I have been monitoring specifically, four have shown greater responsibility to the group. Girl K moved. The improvements could be for many reasons: maturation, reinforcement within the classroom where the Tribes philosophy is practised; and the students are aware that there is a recognition of their good and bad behaviour within the community circle. During the community circles they do demonstrate attentive listening because they are looking for appreciations. Maybe the four children in particular like to hear good things about themselves. Journal entry May 10th, 2005.

The four students that I have been observing: Boy A is receiving much support from his classroom teacher and has probably demonstrated the most consistent changes in behaviour within the gym setting. The homeroom teacher said, "I'd just love to take him home. He has come such a long way." Girl KI has made small improvements towards the group. She will turn the rope for skipping and not try to put the person that is skipping out. Boy B is still a quiet student but does participate with more than one peer. Boy T still exhibits some of his wild behaviours but within the gym setting and the community circles, his name is mentioned with more appreciations than in the past.

References

Gibbs, Jeanne. (2001) Tribes: A New Way of Learning and Being Together. Windsor : Center Source Systems.