

How can I use Tribes activities to help my students develop attentive listening skills?



Sandra Salerno

Biography

Sandra Salerno began teaching for the Haldimand Board in the fall of 1976. She has gained experience at several schools in different teaching positions, including LRT. She loves teaching in the primary division at River Heights. Sandra trained as a Tribes teacher in 2003-04.

Abstract

The students and teacher in a Grade 2 classroom followed the Tribes process to develop attentive listening skills. As they tried a variety of Tribes activities and variations of the community circle, they became better listeners-and so much more.

The Question

How can I use Tribes activities to help my students develop attentive listening skills?

Getting Started

Grade Two classrooms are busy places. They are full of young energetic children eager to learn and laugh and play. The children have an insatiable curiosity about the world around them. This age is usually a joy to teach.

My classroom was typical in many ways: the twelve boys and twelve girls were happy, energetic and eager to learn. Although they ranged in ability from gifted students to nonreaders with Individual Education Plans (IEP), half of these students read beyond grade level. All of the students were keenly interested in the world around them. They enjoyed learning and I enjoyed teaching them.

This lively curiosity does have a drawback. In September these children walked into the door talking. They talked at their seats; they talked in the halls; they talked on the carpet, during lessons, discussions and guided reading sessions. They had a lot to offer, but did not yet realize when it was appropriate to talk and when it was appropriate to listen. If they were going to realize their potential and I was going to keep my sanity, we had to work together to learn and adopt the behaviors of an attentive listener.

As good-natured as these students are, in September they were disregarding the needs and feelings of others. I needed to begin immediately to introduce some Tribes activities to improve their listening skills to enhance their learning and their social skills.

In the Tribes manual it states:

Attentive listening is probably the most important skill to be taught and practiced by everyone in the learning community. Unfortunately, for many students (and adults) the experience of being listened to in a caring way rarely happens. (Gibbs, 2001, p. 93)

I needed to teach my students –and myself—the attributes of an attentive listener.

On the first day of school the students developed a list of classroom rules that morphed into the four Community Agreements listed in the introduction. The following day we discussed, and then wrote a chart defining the attributes of an attentive listener.

1. An attentive listener is quiet.
2. When someone else is talking we don't talk.
3. When someone else is talking we look at them.
4. We put up our hand if we have something to add.

From the first day of school we met in community circles. We participated in energizers and other activities designed to build friendship and trust. During this time we all practiced being attentive listeners. My objective was to improve the listening skills of all my students, but for the purposes of this study I decided to examine the progress of three students. I chose three chatty students: Sarah, Justin and Trevor.

Trevor was the most obvious choice for this study. He was a happy exuberant boy who was willing to try any new activity. During lessons and discussions he blurted out irrelevant comments or yelled out answers. During class discussions he tried to distract others. He was inattentive during explanations, and therefore did not understand how to complete most of the assigned tasks.

Justin was an interesting little character. He was happy, boisterous and enjoyed the company of other students. Justin had a curious nature. He was interested in learning and was beginning to develop good work habits. During lessons or discussions he usually was attuned to the topic, but blurted out comments or answers. He rarely waited his turn or raised his hand. When other children were speaking he sometimes listened, but frequently made unusual noises.

Sarah was typical of the majority of the students in this class. She was bright, articulate and inquisitive about the world. She had developed excellent work habits. During lessons she was very attentive. During discussions, news or sharing times she relaxed and chatted with nearby friends.

At the end of September I devised a very simple checklist (Figure I.) to determine when these students were inattentive and how often they were inattentive.

This simple method told me a lot about these children. For example, Trevor was inattentive for most of the day, but seemed more attentive during a story or math lesson. But no matter when and how each student was attentive, they needed to become more attentive and respectful to others. I decided to practice attentive listening during community circle times. They already understood the four agreements and the attributes of an attentive listener.

We met several times a day in the community circle to review what we had learned and relate personal experiences. We played the “Name Game” (Gibbs, 2001, p. 248) to learn the names of our classmates. We could only complete the task if we listened attentively.

We also participated in an activity called “Something Good.” (Gibbs, 2001, p. 255, Appendix II) Everyone sat in a community circle and related one positive thing that happened on the weekend. The whole class listened attentively while each child (and the teacher) took turns speaking. I did not have to interject once; I was just another member of the circle.



Sarah listened attentively during the whole exercise. Justin blurted out comments twice, but stopped himself immediately. Trevor was an absolutely attentive listener. He made eye contact with the speakers and spoke only when it was his turn. During the discussion afterward, when I asked if anyone had observed similarities, Trevor raised his hand and stated that two people had participated in the same ringette tournament. I felt that we had made a breakthrough. We were ready for the next step.



I transferred the community centre idea to many subject lessons, including science. The Grade 2 science curriculum stipulates that the students will develop a thorough understanding of the states of water. Children best learn about the qualities of water when they conduct experiments. These activities involve cooperation and sharing of ideas and equipment. What a challenge for seven year olds!

Sarah was a natural leader and tried to control any small group of which she is a member. Justin enjoyed learning but he could be sidetracked by others, or be distracted by the play aspect of an activity.

Trevor faced the greatest challenge in a small group. He tended to be over-excited and inattentive to directions or the ideas of others, but he was also anxious to complete the activity, even though he did not know exactly what to do.

Before we began the series of experiments in January, I discussed the new unit in our community circle. After highlighting the interesting experiments that we would conduct, I explained the framework for the experiments. Each table of four children would conduct the experiment on their own and behave like a mini community circle. We would take turns and listen to others. We would be

attentive listeners and learners.

The success of this process amazed me each time we conducted an experiment. When the students experimented with the concept of buoyancy I observed the members of each group taking turns placing objects into their tub of water. They discussed their findings with each other and accurately filled out the Venn diagram. They were so involved in the experiment that no one noticed that I was snapping pictures. Although I observed and recorded the behaviour of all the students, I paid particular attention to the three students in my study.



Sarah still led the group, but she made it her mission to ensure that each group member took turns and experimented with an equal number of objects.

Justin appeared totally absorbed with the task. He was driven to find an object that would fit in the centre of the Venn diagram. He beamed with the pride of accomplishment when he could offer that object to his group.



Trevor was his usual boisterous self. He participated with enthusiasm. Other than reminding him to keep his voice down to a dull roar, I did not have to intervene in their activity. The other children reminded Trevor to take turns. He listened to his

peers and completed the task, as a budding young scientist should. He was very happy with his efforts and so was I!

From observing their behaviour during these experiments, I concluded that my efforts to develop attentive listeners had paid off. The community circle seemed to be a vital component in this development. The children were able to transfer the conventions they have learned in the large community circle under my supervision to smaller circles with limited supervision.

In subsequent activities I observed similar behaviours. For example, during our fairy tale unit the class read several versions of Beauty and the Beast. They also watched a movie version of the tale. In small groups they constructed a T-chart of similarities and differences between the book and movie versions. Then the group members examined their information, and through discussion arrived at a conclusion. They presented their findings to the class. Each group operated independently with little adult supervision. They even collaborated on the presentation and distributed tasks to each member. During the presentations the other groups listened attentively and raised their hands to ask

a question or offer a comment.

At the end of May I completed another checklist on these students. I also asked Heather Henderson, their gym teacher, to offer her observations.

Sarah was attentive and on task all the time. She appeared to have internalized the attributes of an attentive listener. Justin rarely interrupted or was inattentive. Whether in the gym or the classroom, he listened attentively and made an effort to control speaking out of turn. Although Trevor was still disruptive and inattentive at times, the number of incidences decreased significantly. Mrs. Henderson agreed that Trevor was much more attentive. She observed that he exhibited all the attributes of an attentive listener, but could sustain this behaviour for a shorter period of time than the other students.

At the end of this paper I have also included the observations of my student teachers for this school year. (Appendices IV and V)

My research this year has made me realize that being an attentive listener is a very important attribute. It enhances both learning and social development. Being an attentive listener is also connected to the other community agreements. By listening attentively, the children are also being respectful to each other. Because speakers have the attentive ear of their audience, they feel their contribution is appreciated.

Upon reflection, I think this growth has occurred because I have changed. I am a more attentive listener; therefore I am hearing some unique ideas from a child's perspective that I have not considered before. Because I must respect their ideas my teaching methods have become less teacher driven and more student driven. In giving up some ownership in my room it has become our room. Because the students feel it is their classroom they willingly share responsibility to achieve goals for the common good.

This move from my room to our room has been liberating for me. I feel more connected with the feelings and aspirations of my students. I also share the joy of learning with them. This year we have learned and grown together in ways I could not have imagined in September.

Reference

Gibbs, J. (2001) Tribes: A New Way of Learning and Being Together. Windsor: CenterSourceSystems.

Appendix IV

My student teaching placement allowed for many opportunities to learn different teaching styles and classroom management strategies. I was lucky enough to begin my placement on the first day of school, and observe those ever-important first few days. I was unaware that Mrs. Salerno's grade two class was experiencing Tribes in their first days of school, because I myself have never heard of the Tribes program. However, I will never forget the first time the class was asked to sit in a community circle; I wrote all about it in my notebook because I thought that it was a great idea.

The community agreement and the community circle allow for a non-intimidating classroom environment. Most students love to share their work and ideas with their peers, but it is wrong to assume that every student will be willing to share. The community agreement gives you the right to pass and in my experience with Tribes just knowing you have the right to pass allows for more creativity and higher order thinking. The students are not afraid of failure or embarrassment because the option is always there to pass if they are not ready to share.

While I was planning my units and lessons I always incorporated the community circle. On the very first day of my Bats unit we sat together in a community circle and shared our feelings about bats; the lesson was entitled “What is your Bat-itude?” The students later recorded their bat-itude, and on the last day of our unit I pulled out their work and again we gathered in a community circle to discuss how our feelings had changed. It was amazing to see the difference in their attitudes towards bats and I do not believe I would have had such a great discussion with the students had we not been in our non-intimidating community circle.

I saw students change in this Tribes classroom. One boy specifically was a very shy young man and was not often willing to participate in classroom discussions. Through my seven-week placement he became very well spoken and was willing to participate more and more. It may just be my theory but I believe that the use of Tribes in this classroom created a caring community and therefore made the students feel more comfortable to share and participate.

I was unfamiliar with Tribes when I first sat down on the carpet in a community circle, but it has become an everlasting memory of my student teaching placement. Today, I use the community agreement everytime I enter a new classroom, which is often when you are an occasional teacher. The use of Tribes, in the classroom, is so beneficial in creating a community where the students feel cared for and respected, while also creating a well-managed classroom in which to teach.

Allison Gagnon

May 3, 2005

Appendix V

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing with regard to my observations and experiences with the Community Agreements used in Sandra Salerno’s Grade two class at River Heights Public School in Caledonia. During my time in this class I had the opportunity to see the benefits of using the Tribes approach. Because I was present in the class during March and April, the students were quite familiar with the Community Agreements as they had been introduced and practiced since the beginning of the school year.

I observed that building a caring environment is an on-going process based upon clear agreements for behaviour and social skills. Within the Grade two class, the students, with the teacher’s lead, reflected upon their activities and interactions while working together on classroom academics.

The Agreements that I saw practiced most frequently were: Express appreciation/no put-downs, Right to pass, Listen attentively and Mutual respect. I found that because the students knew these expectations and had access to them (they were posted), I was able to manage the students more effectively. The students knew what it meant to respect each other's opinions; this made it more manageable when students were in disagreement over a situation. The students knew what it meant to be an attentive listener, although reminders would be needed on occasion. It was great for me to be able to come into this class and not have to explain to students how and why I expect them to be respectful of others – they already knew it!

As a student teacher, I gained experience in three different classrooms during the 2004-2005 school year. The Grade two class at River Heights was the only one that used a Tribes approach. On my first observation day in this class, I noticed a difference immediately. I found that the students felt freer to express their feelings and opinions. I also found that students were less hesitant to take risks at providing incorrect answers or admitting they did not understand a concept or assignment. I would attribute this to the fact that these students had been taught to show mutual respect and to express appreciations, not put-downs, to their peers. The students knew that these positive actions and attitudes were a part of their whole day, not just a part of Community Circles. Mrs. Salerno has created an environment that allows all students to participate in a meaningful way and to feel appreciated. I expect that because of the experiences in this class, the grade two students will carry the sense of self-worth into their next year of education.

I was very impressed by the Tribes approach used in Sandra Salerno's Grade two class. I feel it greatly benefits the students. I also feel that it would be beneficial to implement this approach in as many primary classes as possible; it allows for classroom management and teaches students positive social norms.