

## CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT: DE-CODING THE YOUNG ONES OF ROOM 1202

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### A Prologue

*An iatrogenic loop:*

*We find here, a terrible, heartbreaking loop, where the attempts to ameliorate our troubled situation are suddenly seen to be its causes. Fear of arising leads to panic setting in, and once panic sets in, procedures, rubrics, mandates, and methodologies rush in, in good-hearted attempts to save the day, further foreclosing on future quickenings and further confirming the fear of arising that set this sequence in motion in the first place... We not only no longer know how to sing. We not only no longer know why singing might help. We've come to believe that singing is the cause of our suffering... In other words, the loop and its insides are experienced to be all there is, and the promises to "fix" education with this or that skitter and skip across consciousness like stones on water. (Jardine, 2015, p. 115-116)*

And so, a few small hopes from a first-year teacher:

I hope to re-encounter and re-story the complex relationships between teachers, administrators and students through hermeneutic and poetic ways of knowing.

I hope to speak back to the iatrogenic loop of instrumental and formulaic solutions to so-called "behaviour problems" in classrooms.

I hope to re-visit the dominant ways that these "behaviour problems" of students are storied through gender, ethnic background, ability, interest, and other ways of being on the margins.

I hope to deconstruct and re-interpret what are commonly perceived as individualized “behaviour problems” in classrooms, but that are often rooted in much deeper kyriarchal issues of privilege, power and control.

I hope to build trusting, caring and critically-minded relationships in the classroom oriented towards love and justice.

### **Transgressions in Classroom Management: De-Coding the Young Ones of Room 1202**

Today, or was it last week?  
I scoured the bookshelf in my office.  
Where was it?  
It’s been there for years, sitting there,  
his last name, “Thomas,”  
there, in bold capital letters  
inked neatly on the spine.

*“Classroom Management for Dummies.”*

Each chapter a well-orchestrated script  
for tuning them up  
to sing like sparrows.  
Yup,  
a self-confessed dummy, I was.  
And to this very day, I also confess,  
I am slightly tone-deaf.

*What is worthwhile?  
Only you will be able to understand the answer  
to that question.  
Just know that what is worthwhile will  
sometimes feel  
dangerous, risky, rebellious,  
and, at the extreme,  
foolhardy.  
(Lawson, 2016, p. 124)*

Ten years ago, or so.  
Temporary contract,  
High school Social Studies.  
Freshly minted teacher,  
bubbling with possibilities,  
terrified of the potential  
accumulated between my ears:  
six years and  
two degrees' worth  
of higher education.

I had been waiting, oh, just my entire life for this,  
ever since I first lined up my teddy bears  
and younger sister  
in the living room,  
with our magnetic alphabet letters  
and those thin little beginner Hilroy exercise books.  
Those little 50-pagers with the bottom half of the page  
decked out in two extra-wide lines,  
separated by the dotted line  
down the middle.  
Top half blank;  
apparently, the top was where  
imaginations ran wild.  
The Hilroys for high school were 200 pages,  
divided by subject,  
much narrower lines...

*What are we doing together in schools?  
What are public school teachers,  
and scholars, and youths  
doing together in Canadian schools?  
Who are we becoming together?  
(Lapthorne & Lomheim, 2012, p. 220)*

No blank spaces.

## **“Classroom Management for Dummies.”**

### **Rule #1: Get to know your students.**

I got my schedule and high school class lists  
the week before classes began.

Room 1202.

Two classes of Social Studies 23,  
and one class of Social Studies 13.

The “non-academic” classes, polite whispered code for  
the stream that doesn’t flow so fast, or so strong.

That sounded about right for a typical rookie teacher.

At least I had a continuing contract...

At least there was that.

Not every new teacher should be so lucky.

*In a world of students with proper names...  
(the teacher) knows their uniqueness from  
having lived daily with them.  
And she knows that their uniqueness disappears  
into the shadow  
when they are spoken of in the prosaically abstract language  
of the external curriculum players who are,  
in a sense,  
condemned to plan for faceless people.  
(Aoki, 1986/1991, p. 160).*

I started with the grade tens.

I did the expected thing and pored over the class list,

whispering the names to myself

like a mantra,

seeing faces

hearing voices,

exhaling personalities into each one,

holding my breath at the names that sounded like trouble,

guessing nationalities

and personalities,

mentally drawing up my first seating plan,

of course with a perfectly perfect mix  
of all the possible variables.  
Next, through their files,  
for these new grade tens  
fresh out of junior high.  
Sifting through,  
to better anticipate every possible need  
before the symptoms even had a chance to fester.

*The sickness out there is left in place  
and students who continue to be restless become in need  
of specialized intervention (an assembly “sub-line”  
like a “special needs” classroom  
or an Individualized Program Plan [IPP]  
where fragmented tasks are designer-made  
to suit the particular pathology of restlessness.  
(Jardine, 2012, p. 83)*

I had to print off one of those top-secret decoder documents  
to keep pace with the list of codes:

CODE 53 (learning disability)  
CODE 54 (mild social/emotional challenges)  
CODE 42 (severe behaviour)  
CODE 42 (severe behaviour again, oh my)  
CODE 54 English Language Learner (ELL) #1  
CODE 54 #2  
CODE 54 #3  
CODE 54 #4  
CODE 54 #5 (combined with a CODE 53 for good measure)  
CODE 46 (What did “legally” blind mean, exactly?)...

Sixteen coded students in a class of thirty-two, ranging from mild learning disabilities and English Language Learners, to severe ADHD, to one gifted young Code 42 lad who was in his second time through the course, and who at age 15 had an intimate and special relationship with the local law enforcement team...

You know, just between us,  
I dearly wish  
that I could come clean right now  
and admit that I am exaggerating  
to prove a point.

**Rule #2: Establish clear rules and enforce them fairly and consistently.**

On the first day of school,  
I marched into class  
armed with my set of class rules  
and a perfect lesson plan  
for orchestrating a conversation around expectations  
for appropriate behaviour.  
The exercise was designed to build community  
provide students with a sense of agency.  
It would culminate in the Big Reveal:  
a laminated poster of rules, that,  
if the discussion was properly  
manipulated  
and supplemented  
by the teacher,  
would match closely enough  
with the student-generated list of rules  
so as to pass  
for the real thing.

*My students have codes  
Special education codes  
Colds, viral, pathological, easy to catch  
Codes, more serious in their grim munificence  
They linger long beyond school  
(Williamson, 2015, p. 67)*

Unfortunately  
(or perhaps thankfully),  
I had not anticipated the reality

of 16 coded students  
in a class of 32 young ones,  
including:

the half-dozen students who  
categorically refused  
to remove their headphones for the class discussion.  
Each one swore up and down that their particular genre  
of high-decibel rage  
helped them “concentrate.”

a group of Sunni students who refused  
to speak to the Shi’ite students that  
they had been placed next to  
in the seating plan.

the legally blind young lady who was saying  
she needed *total quiet* to concentrate.

the young man with ADHD who,  
without warning,  
would periodically decide to clamber up the wall  
to sit on the window ledge,  
and yell insults at his classmates  
from this safe vantage point.

the newly-merged young couple at the back of the room who  
*needed to be together*  
at all times  
for their mutual emotional stability  
and mental health.  
Preferably in a dark corner  
with no distractions.

the wispy young girl who showed me  
her counselor appointment slip  
five minutes into class  
and came back with five minutes left in class...

Every. Single. Day.

### **An invocation was**

#### **Rule #3: Build a safe and caring community.**

I tried my best.  
I really did.  
But after two weeks, or so,  
of sheer heartbreak,  
I broke down in my assistant principal's office,  
admitted my failure as a teacher  
to control this group  
of downtrodden young ones.  
Brad Thomas was a no-nonsense type  
with a no-nonsense buzz cut  
and perfectly trimmed beard.  
He wore no-nonsense pinstripe suits,  
and perfectly polished,  
practical,  
square black shoes.

*The teacher-education lexicon...  
operates "as if" everything was really quite understandable  
and "as if" all problems were simply problems of implementation  
rather than, say, events characteristic  
of a deep contradictedness inherent in human experience itself—  
a contradictedness that can't be easily dissolved  
by facile exhortations to "try this and/or that"  
as a way of remedy.  
(Smith, 1999, p. 90)*



After I gulped out my secret  
and forced myself to raise my eyes to meet his gaze,  
he squinted back  
over his black-rimmed glasses  
in intense concentration.  
I could feel the room close in  
as he formulated our plan of attack.  
He marched over to the bookshelf and pulled out the book,  
a coiled binder entitled,

*[The] promise [of] successful assimilation.*  
(Tait, 2016, p. 18).

(well, actually, it was called something completely different than...)

*Classroom Management for Dummies.*

(But that is what my mind saw on the front cover).

*One look at the offerings of many teacher handbooks,  
and it appears as though it is these kinds of  
“Monday morning ready” tips and tricks  
that teachers desperately need.*  
(Laphorne & Lomheim, 2012, p. 220)

had to establish my authority,  
he said,  
so that the students would respect me.  
Forget about group work,  
separate the students  
from each other

to  
cut  
down

the chatter.  
Read that book,

he said,  
and he would visit my class the next day, to see  
if he could be of any assistance.  
I thanked him and left,  
book in hand.

*As I've witnessed in many High Schools,  
there is the unuttered belief that if you let go for a minute  
of the narrowed and fenced regimes of management and control,  
quite literally,  
all Hell will break loose.  
(Jardine, 2012, p. 83)*

The next day, we had just gotten started  
when Brad marched into my classroom,  
firing from the hip  
with a low, hollow bark:

"Take off those headphones. Listen up!"

"Pull those desks apart.  
Get yourself into rows, and eyes forward.  
Things are going to be different around here from now on!"

*Do we not hear the chiseled motif  
of the striated linear instrumentalism  
deeply inscribed into our landscape?  
(Aoki, 1993, p. vii)*

"You! Get down off that windowsill! Sit in your desk, right now!"

He squared off with my little misfits,  
his snapping eyes  
raking them down  
into the floor,  
detailing every consequence for every transgression  
that I had shared with him  
the day before.

Several of them looked at me  
accusingly,  
as if I had betrayed them.

At that moment, I realized that I had.

*Complicit in a systematic,  
procedural institution  
that proliferates the status quo.  
(Laphorne & Lomheim, 2012, p. 223)*

They were *my* little young ones,  
these lovely,  
haggard,  
terrified  
young ones.

And suddenly,  
I wanted to throw my body between them  
and this towering threat,  
whom I had invited  
into our midst.

*Teachers are "trained."  
(Aoki, 1986/1991, p. 160)*

As I walked him to the door,  
I thanked him.  
Things would be much better now,  
I said.  
He said that he thought so, too,  
and had I closely observed what he had done?  
I said that I had.  
As he walked down the hallway,  
another job well done,  
I turned back in towards my students,  
smiled at them,  
closed the door behind me.

*As educators, our attentions are also  
in need of redirection.  
(Laphorne & Lomheim, 2012, p. 220)*

**Rule #4: Create an engaging and meaningful lesson plan, closely aligned with the curriculum outcomes.**

And so, we began.  
We learned  
how to be kind to one another.  
We talked about music,  
its therapeutic properties.  
Then we discussed  
when it may or may not  
be appropriate in class.  
We studied current events and history  
explored the origins  
of religious tensions  
in the Middle East,  
then we shared conversations  
around  
identity  
around  
belonging.

*One of the key responsibilities is  
to try to genuinely hear the young,  
to engage them conversationally about the affairs of life,  
in order that the world between them  
might be a truly shared one.  
(Smith, 2006, p. 93)*

we sat in a circle and shared stories,  
we talked  
respect  
we talked  
inclusion.

*Indwelling between two horizons...*

*Attuned to aliveness.*

*(Aoki, 1986/1991, p. 161-162)*

They might have done better on their final exams.

They might have done worse.

Brad never asked how I was doing,  
and I never offered.

**Rule #5: Deal with behaviour issues promptly and consistently.**

One young lady,

fourteen years old,

Could I meet with her

after school one day,

she wondered.

This young lady with the infamous temper,

This young lady took a “cool-off” walk

on a daily basis.

Cooling her heels,

biding her time.

Her trademark shiny pink hijab,

always perfectly tucked around her ears,

framed her dark-rimmed,

shiny round eyes

and her rounder,

flushed cheeks.

This day,

her whole body sagged

eyes downcast, dim

Whatever in the world could it be?

I braced myself for the unsayable,

ready to soothe and calm her.

*What are so often referred to as personal difficulties  
of students we encounter  
are in fact symptomatic of much deeper,*

*basically unresolvable,  
contradictions lying at human experience itself.  
(Smith, 1999, p. 91)*

She had seven brothers and sisters,  
she murmured,  
she was the oldest girl.  
Her parents, newly  
immigrated,  
struggling to feed their family.  
There was no room  
for her in the house.  
Not enough food.  
Sent back  
to Iraq  
to be married,  
she said.  
No, she didn't know who.  
Probably a middle-aged,  
wealthy man.  
To relieve her family's  
burden.  
No, she didn't know when.

*Life is embodied in the very stories  
and languages  
people speak and live.  
(Aoki, 1993, p. 261)*

**Rule #6: Maintain control of your classroom at all times.**

A month in to the school year,  
settled in together.  
Comfortable.  
Surviving.  
The wall-climber had learned how to sign himself out  
for quick jogs down the hallway and back,  
my repeating 15-year-old,

the smartest kid in the room,  
(or maybe the school)  
my bored to death,  
angry,  
oppositional-defiant Code 42,  
had smoothed his rough edges  
down  
to a quasi-stable emotional state.

*Code 42s have trouble with the code of conduct  
And the code of conduct has trouble with them  
Like musicians the conductor can't get to play in time  
Like they don't conduct electricity or conduct it too much.  
(Williamson, 2015, p. 68)*

I was the first teacher  
to let him back in  
after kicking him out,  
he said.

One day, young ones sitting semi-quietly  
in table groups,  
discussing, oh, say, the levels of government.  
A knock on the door.  
A visitor,  
my teacher mentor.  
Good,  
we could show him  
how well we were doing!  
I turned to open the door. Welcome!

*I realize that so much of my talk with (pre-service teachers)  
is focused on their performance,  
such that whether things go badly or well is taken  
to be largely a function of that performance.  
(Smith, 1999, p. 90)*

And heard a yell behind me-  
a scrabbling of chairs,  
a desk scraping urgently across the floor.  
I turned back,  
flush with adrenaline.  
My young code 42 had my young wall-climber  
by the throat,  
finally  
finally pushed too far  
by his immature taunting.  
I think I yelled,  
get out!  
Or maybe I calmly hissed,  
that's enough, boys!

I don't remember.

He stalked out,  
banging down the hallway,  
punching lockers,  
daring someone  
to step in his path.  
Daring me to follow.  
My quivering, clammy hand skimmed down the emergency call list,  
past Brad's number,  
to the resident constable.  
He would handle it,  
he said.  
No Code 42 in class that day,  
or for the rest of the week.

*Rejecting is easy:  
all it takes is confusion and ignorance.  
But facing the complexity of others, their history,  
their raw humanity—  
that takes courage.  
(Okri, 1997, p. 85)*



In-school suspension...  
with Brad,  
the verdict, he said.  
He came back the next week without a word.  
And so, we tried again.

*Classrooms are crystallization centres  
for the broader tensions at work in the culture.  
(Smith, 1999, p. 91)*

I never again took my eyes off him  
not for a single second,  
not even when  
I had my back to him.

**Rule #7: There will be no exceptions to Rules #1-6**

Two months later,  
maybe two and a half,  
I brought in a set of those big blue exam dividers;  
big, portable plastic walls  
that you can set upright on each desk,  
so the students cannot see  
each other's work during tests.  
Those blue corrugated plastic squares,  
inserted into the slits on those flat,  
wooden rectangular bases.  
Marred with scrawling graffiti  
and cheat notes.  
Punctuated by those angry pencil-bullet-holes  
rimmed all around  
with angry red and black pen marks.

*This going movement of "becoming experienced"  
occurs only if you treat the work of the classroom  
as full of intellectual vigor and possibility,  
and not as full only of problems that need fixing.  
(Jardine, Clifford & Friesen, 2003, p. 7)*

Conscripted for our World War I trench warfare simulation:

Desks overturned in trenched rows,  
chairs littering No-Man's Land  
in an all-out war  
of blown-up table craters,  
skipping-rope barbed wire fences.  
Rolled-up balls of paper for bombs,  
erasers flying machine-gun style across the divide.

*all Hell will break loose...*  
(Jardine, 2012, p. 83)

Sunnis and Shiites dodging, diving,  
pulling each other  
out of harm's way.  
ADHD wall-climber  
leaping for cover,  
sweating,  
happy.

Young little lady who can't legally see  
plays an injured soldier with great conviction,  
waiting for the medic,  
wailing, moaning from her wounds.  
Maybe they had just a little too much fun  
simulating trench warfare...

I will always wonder about that.

*Here we are together today and that is all.*  
(Seidel, 2014, p. 9)

### A Brief Postscript

*Becoming experienced does not consist in the fact that someone already knows everything and knows better than anyone else. Rather, the experienced person proves to be, on the contrary, someone who... because of the many experiences he has had and the knowledge he has drawn from them, is particularly well equipped to have new experiences and to learn from them. (Gadamer, 1989, p. 355)*

And so, a few small wonderings from a first-year teacher:

What comes first, what is valued, and what will count in the lives of the students and teachers in the work of schooling? (Jardine, 2003, p. xiii)

How might I be more oriented towards more socially just and nuanced ways of living with the young ones in my classrooms?

How might I resist repressive ideologies and discriminatory assumptions about the young ones in my classrooms, as I “celebrate teaching that enables transgressions” (hooks, 1994, p. 12)?

How might I be more bold in questioning encoded, deficit-based approaches to pedagogy?

How might I challenge the dominant and divisive discourses regarding the politics and practice of “Classroom Management”?

How might I find better ways to speak the dynamic, contested and poetic languages of “lived curriculum” (Aoki, 1993, p. 261)?

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