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CPL Podcast: Classroom Management K-6

Host: Carly Boreland
With: Kathryn Bellach

INTRODUCTION:

You are listening to the JPL Podcast from the Centre for Professional Learning. Here's your host, Carly Boreland.

Carly Boreland:

Welcome to the JPL Podcast for the New South Wales Teachers Federation Centre for Professional Learning. I'm Carly Boreland. I'm the Editor of the JPL. Today, I'm talking with Kathryn Bellach about classroom management and effective teaching in primary school. Kathryn has been a primary school teacher and also a teacher-mentor, and at the moment, she is an AP at a primary school in South Sydney. Kathryn, welcome.

Kathryn Bellach:

Thank you. Thanks for having me.

Carly Boreland:

So Kathryn, for many teachers, classroom management is one of the things that keeps them awake at night. In a primary school, they have, often, the same group of students and they might see the same concerning behaviour day and day again and they might be worrying about "how can I make my classroom work better for all of the students in it?". And deep down, they know that this is something they want to do. They need their classroom to be working effectively. But can you tell us why it's good to have good student behaviour in the classroom, what it means and why we care so much about it?

Kathryn Bellach:

So to have management in your classroom working effectively, in a primary school, it's really crucial. Because obviously, like you said, we have those students all day every day and the benefit of that is we can actually put things in place. We can actually put things in place and develop them over time to make sure that it is working for our students. So you know, if you've got a child that is struggling, we're able to work on individual behaviour plans, we can put in reward systems for them, and we can also support the other students in the class to make sure that they're on board with the programs as well, because one of the big issues people say is why do I need to do something special for one student when the other students are all missing out. And the answer is, if one student needed help with reading, you would help them and do everything you could to get them to read.

If someone needs help to behave in the classroom and to be an effective member of our class, they need help and if that's an extra reward system, then that's fine because we need every student to be a part of the team in our classroom because that's the way we can all learn together. And if we're in a



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situation where one student is disrupting the whole time or a few students are disrupting, no one can learn. But you just need to remember that no student is misbehaving on purpose just for the sake of misbehaving, there's always something behind it, and that's when you need to really work on knowing the student and building a rapport with those students so that we can develop their sense of belonging.

Carly Boreland:

And so then, that's what makes the learning possible, and we can't do too much learning until we get to that point, and learning the behaviours is part of learning how to be in the class.

Kathryn Bellach:

Exactly. You have to explicitly teach behaviour. It's not something that just happens, we need to be able to put the right systems in place to make sure that our students can learn.

Carly Boreland:

Something that teachers, that are really effective, do and they might not even realise it, is they teach behaviour all throughout their career.

Kathryn Bellach:

Yes, that's right. There's no point just teaching it for the first week of school and oh yeah, I've done that now, tick, you need to be teaching it every day in every setting. So if you're going somewhere in the school, teach the expectations of that, where you're going to. If you're leaving the classroom, entering the classroom, every day, it's reinforcing the message. Cause students don't remember from day to day if it's not explicitly taught at the very beginning and then every day after that.

Carly Boreland:

And that consistency is so important and, probably, so challenging.

Kathryn Bellach:

It is hard but the consistency is number one. And all students want every teacher to be fair, that's what they want. They want it to be fair and they want it to be consistent. But fair doesn't mean it's the same for everybody, and that's what you need to remember. Just because it's fair for one student doesn't make it fair for another. So every student needs something different but it's whatever is fair for that student because everyone is different.

Carly Boreland:

Yeah, that's a good way to explain it as well. I can imagine that when you're speaking to someone who's five years old about fairness and what's fair and how there's different fairness for each... How do you do that?



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Kathryn Bellach:

So obviously, everyone comes with different things from home, everyone has different backgrounds, and it's just a case of working out and coming down to the kid's level and say, "you know? This is what this person needs and this is what's fair for them but you need help with this and you might be able to do something more fair and in a different way but I'm going to give you the support in the area you need and I'm going to support them in the area that they need". We need to be together as a team. Classrooms work best when everyone feels like they're part of the team and part of the end-goal. So the more you can build that team environment in your classroom, the more successful it'll be.

Carly Boreland:

So this might be different or the same, and I'm completely in your hands here, I'm a secondary teacher, so you tell me. If we're starting out and we want to be planning for effective teaching and, through that, effective classroom management, how can we do that when we're just starting out, maybe we've been teaching for five or ten years, maybe we're approaching retirement, how do we make it happen? How can we take some control over that part of our schoolwork?

Kathryn Bellach:

OK. So when you're doing your planning, the number one key is to make sure you plan around what your students are interested in because if you've got a student that's interested in something, they're more likely to engage with it and learn in that area. So obviously, the syllabus documents give you the content, they don't actually give you the way you can teach it in terms of the subject areas or the background information. So for example, I had a year six class once and it was 24 boys and only six girls. The class was very interested in sport. So I built my whole maths program for a term around the NRL Table and the NRL scoring system.

You could do the means and standard deviations and all of those things built around the interests of the students, and that term, they were so engaged in maths because they were actually interested in it and they learnt all the concepts through that program. So if you can find what your students are interested in, use that to program as your starting point, but also, try not to reinvent the wheel. There are so many things online and through all different websites now that you can use, make sure you manipulate it to make it fit your class and your setting but don't start everything from scratch because otherwise, you're going to burn yourself out. That's a real problem at the moment. We need to be working smarter and not always harder.

Carly Boreland:

And I can imagine there must be... if you're trying to make things fit your school, your context, your class, you might have colleagues who've taught these students before or who are teaching the same stage as you and things like that so you could be sharing resources and then modifying them for your class.



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Kathryn Bellach:

Yeah, of course. Schools are collaborative places and we need to be collaborative, we need to be open to sharing our ideas and our resources because otherwise, everyone is going to be doing the same thing but probably not as well as each other. So share as much as you can but also make sure you plan your units of work around the school planner and the school timetable. There's no point making a ten-week unit for something and then you realise you only get to week eight of it because you've missed things because of excursions or assemblies or whatever else. And usually, a lot of the great lessons come towards the end once you've got all the knowledge in and then you start doing the practical, but if you don't get to the practical part and the stuff you are interested in doing, there's no point in planning that far ahead.

Carly Boreland:

And what does that mean for student behaviour in your classroom and how you manage your class? If you're planning for your lessons and your sequence of lessons is maybe a bit rushed or disrupted, does that have a consequence for student behaviour as well?

Kathryn Bellach:

It can. It depends on what units you're talking about. So if I was working on literacy, on numeracy, I generally will only plan one week in advance because you never know what your students are going to learn and where they're going to be at, and that's obviously the importance of formative assessment and assessing as you're going and assessing on the run because there's no point in moving to the next concept if they haven't got the first one.

But areas like history and geography, they're things that you might be able to plan further in advance 'cause they might have an excursion built around it and so, obviously, then you need to be doing the build-up to the excursion and, obviously, after the excursion. But even in those cases, behaviour management can be affected by how engaging your unit of work is.

You don't want to just have the same type of lesson day after day. So if you're doing history, you might want to get in some different resources and different artefacts and build your lessons around them. We don't want to just be doing the same type of lesson all the time. The other thing you need to be careful of when you're working on programming and planning is to use the Department's resources that are there. So there are interactive continuums, interactive resources. And make sure you always incorporate the assessment throughout the whole unit. Don't just wait till the end and go, "Oh yeah, I can do a test now", because that doesn't actually tell you if your teaching is effective throughout.

You need to make sure that the behaviour matches the teaching and learning you're doing. So if you're doing some hands-on stuff, you need to make sure that you've taught them what that means, what they can do with the resources that you're giving them. Can they touch them? Can they not? Can they pull things apart and put them back together? But that has to be explicitly taught to start with so that you



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don't just give them something new and suddenly, "Oh! It's all around the classroom." You need to be very clear with your expectations when you're doing hands-on based lessons.

Carly Boreland:

So teachers will be really keen to hear from you some tips and approaches that have worked, and I suppose we should couch this a little bit in saying not everything will work for everyone and you need to find something that suits your personality and suits your school and style. We've talked already about being consistent. Whatever you do, the students need to trust that the teacher is going to be the one who's setting the standard in being consistent all the time.

Can you tell us something about how to stop it going all wrong or how to fix it when it's going wrong? (LAUGHTER) Can you help us there, please?

Kathryn Bellach:

So the first thing when you're setting up your classroom is you need to make sure it's a welcoming environment. Students want to be somewhere where they feel welcome and where they feel part of it. So that might mean you need to move furniture, you might need to get rid of furniture. If you've inherited a classroom, you need to make sure it's yours. So you need to put everything around that will make students feel comfortable and welcome because the more they want to be part of it, the less behaviour you will probably have to deal with. But in terms of actual behaviour management, there is a group of students that will always need an individual behaviour plan. They will need help with their behaviour just like you would put in place if someone was struggling with any of the subjects. Behaviour is another one of those things. So they will need individual behaviour plans. But you need to work as part of a team.

It's not, "because they're in your class, they're only your responsibility". Those students can burn people out because they need so much help. But there are people within your school that should be able to help you. So there's the LST team, there's LAST Teachers, Learning and Support Teachers, EAL/D teachers. And if you're lucky enough to be in a school that has a support unit, then teachers in there have brilliant training in behaviour. So there's lots of people that you can ask for help but make sure you ask for help. Don't just rely on, "I don't know what to do", I'm going to cope day to day, "I'm not going to say anything" because that's not going to get you anywhere. So make sure you ask and also get a copy of your school's discipline policy when you first walk in and get someone to explain it for you because that's going to be your first port of call if there is a behaviour issue that's coming up. But make sure that you're always clear and consistent with your expectations.

Students need to know what they're allowed to do and what they're not allowed to do. So if you're working in a new school, make sure you've asked other teachers around you. Alternatively, if you're a casual teacher, make sure you've spoken to someone next door about what they can do to help you if necessary and if there's any students that they need to be watching out for because forewarned is forearmed and you need to be prepared if there's going to be something happening in your classroom



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so you know what the right procedures are. The other thing you need to remember, if you are giving students a positive, a lot of teachers are using Class Dojo or various reward systems, please never take it away. And I know it's very tempting, a lot of people have Class Dojo, and it has negative points, a lot of people will have different reward systems and they'll feel like, "Okay, we can take it away." But if you think about it for a minute, you'll realise that if I give someone something positive and five minutes later, they're something that's not so great, if you turn around and take that positive away that they earned five minutes ago, why would they try to get something again? Why would they try to be doing the right thing again if they know it'll just get taken?

So obviously, don't reward the next behaviour but don't take away something that they've already learnt previously. Because, you know, students want to be praised and they want to feel like they're part of your class and they want to feel like you appreciate them and you are interested in them. So that's the best way to make sure your behaviour is under control in the classroom. Build a rapport with your students and always be consistent and fair.

Carly Boreland:

So be positive and recognise where there's good and then also acknowledge where you need to keep working on the other areas.

Kathryn Bellach:

Yeah, that's right. But generally, try and only focus on one behaviour at a time. 'Cause if you're focusing on calling out, running out of the classroom and hitting other students, they're not going to be able to focus on three things at once. Focus on one area, get that to where it needs to be, give the positives when they're doing the right thing in those areas and then focus on the others once you've got one under control, because, you know, little five year old, six year old kids are not going to be able to focus on more than one thing at a time when they are trying to change their behaviour. 'Cause they often, probably, have been doing this behaviour for a long time. They're not going to be able to change it in a week and, especially, they're not going to be able to change three or four things in a week. Take little pieces, take little steps, and work towards the end goal.

Carly Boreland:

And it's noticing those really small changes, isn't it?

Kathryn Bellach:

Yeah, that's right.

Carly Boreland:

And celebrating those little successes. And sometimes, you need to do that for yourself as well because otherwise, it can feel like you're sort of fighting a losing battle sometimes but if you think more about, "well, what can I see that's worked and let's keep going there".



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Kathryn Bellach:

And if you've only got one student in your class or two students that are causing this issue, you have to remember that there's another 20 students in your class that may have learnt something brand new and have had the best day ever because they've learnt how to do something that you've taught. But you need to focus, you can't always just focus on what you need to do for one or two students, you have to remember there's a group of students out there that come to school every day because they love being in your room and they want to learn. So focus on those students as well and don't get caught up in, "I've had a really bad day with one of the other students."

Carly Boreland:

In my experience teaching in high school, the power of the group can be very, very strong. Students desire to fit in with their classmates can be one of your best allies, I think. To notice how everyone is doing a good job and praising the whole class sometimes, as well as individual students.

Kathryn Bellach:

Yeah, that's right. And when you are trying to build a reward system, an individual behaviour plan or a reward system for an individual student, always incorporate something with a buddy or something as a whole class because the whole class will try and keep that student on track and doing the right thing. So if you've got an individual student who, you know, has trouble and is always calling out, you might be able to make sure the class knows that that's what they're working on, and they'll encourage him not to call out or her not to call out. And then if that happens, the whole class might get a reward, the whole class might get to go and play sport because they're all invested in trying to keep this student doing what they need to be doing, and that's the way to build around an individual behaviour problem.

Carly Boreland:

So then how do whole class punishments go, like whole class detentions or whole class negative?

Kathryn Bellach:

Well, I generally will never ever, ever believe in whole class negatives or whole class punishments because every student is different and I've never, in my whole teaching career, found an entire class to be doing the wrong thing. It just doesn't happen. There might be one or two students but it's... there will be a reason for it, and that's what you need to do as a teacher is to find the reason for that individual student's behaviour.

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Carly Boreland:

Something that teachers can get really caught up in and it can rule their life or it can be something that works well for them is the rules of the class. And I've seen complicated ones with clauses and subclauses and I've seen other really simple ones that, I think, work quite well. For me, it was always kind, safe, and best. Are you being kind? Are you being safe? Are you sure that's your best? And what about in primary? Are there some things you could say about class rules?

Kathryn Bellach:

So in a lot of primary schools, there's positive behaviour for learning or PBIS, PBL, they're all very similar, but generally, there's a whole school expectation and whole school rules. In a lot of places I've been, it's about being safe, respectful, and an active learner, sometimes responsible is in there as well. But generally, under those headings, there needs to be rules that are broken down for students to understand. So if you're being safe, it's about keeping your hands and feet to yourself, it's about not... you know? Not leaving the classroom when you shouldn't be. But most schools have general expectations.

Now, when you get to your individual classroom, it's up to you to make those rules approachable or understandable to your students, so you might need to break them down further and actually show them what it looks like to explicitly teach what hands and feet to yourself means, show them, put visuals up around the room, visuals are the key especially, in kindergarten, they need to be able to see what the right thing is to be doing at all times. So use photos, put classroom rules up with the photos of what it looks like to do the right thing. But also build your reward systems around those expectations. So if you're using Class Dojo, set your Class Dojo up to have safe, respectful, active learner as the things that you can mark off so that you're using your in-class system to match the whole school system. Because you don't want to be doing something contrary to the whole class system, whole school system, you need to make sure you are part of that and using that as the guide because the whole point behind those programs is that every staff member is consistent with the language. And make sure you're building your individual class things around that. But it's really important to have the rules visible but also, reteach them regularly.

Carly Boreland:

And well, you started with an assumption, I suppose, that those standards should be high, that we should be walking into our classroom with an expectation that students will be behaving well. How much of the mindset of the teacher is classroom management connected to?

Kathryn Bellach:

There's a lot of research. I will say to you, that the mood in your class is set from your behaviour as a teacher. So in terms of if you're having a great morning, you're welcoming and you encourage everyone to come into the classroom and you're positive, the classroom will be positive. So a lot of it is based on you as a teacher and you as a person. So if you've had a bad morning or you've had a bad night, try and



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ignore it and start fresh with your class 'cause they'll appreciate that. The classroom will vibe off your vibe is probably the easiest way to put it because your students know you, they love you as a person, they love coming to school because of the way you are as a teacher and you need to make sure that they're your priority in the hours that they're there. So you need to try and forget everything else that's going on and be positive all the time. Try and make sure that you're always outwardly enthusiastic every morning when they arrive at school, whatever happened yesterday, you ignore, you forget. It's not about carrying things onto the next day, it's about starting fresh and making sure every student is welcomed into the classroom and happy to be there.

Carly Boreland:

OK. Well, thank you, Kathryn. It's been lovely chatting with you today.

Kathryn Bellach:

No worries. Thanks for having me.

Carly Boreland:

You've been listening to the JPL Podcast for the Teachers Federation's Centre for Professional Learning. I've been speaking with Kathryn Bellach, and I'm Carly Boreland. I'm the Editor of the JPL. If you'd like to find out more about podcasts or journal articles, or the Centre for Professional Learning, you can visit our website at cpl.asn.au/podcasts

CONCLUSION:

The JPL podcast is produced by the Centre for Professional Learning and the New South Wales Teachers Federation. All opinions expressed in this podcast are those of the individual speakers and do not necessarily represent the views of their employer or associated organisations. The host was Carly Boreland; technical direction by Jason Nicholas.

Kathryn Bellach is currently an Assistant Principal and she has been teaching for 11 years in a variety of schools in south western Sydney. Kathryn has taught all grades from K-6 and worked with students from a range of backgrounds and support needs. For the last 3 years Kathryn has been working as an Assistant Principal Teacher Mentor across 5 schools supporting beginning teachers to develop their practice. She has presented at numerous courses both for beginning teachers as well as on other topics.