National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASET)

THE PRACTICAL TEACHER

This Month's Topic:

Tips for Calling on Students in Class

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Teachers call on students to respond to questions and participate in learning activities. However, the pattern of who is called upon is often uneven and may leave some students out of the conversation. For example, a study of questioning in elementary and middle school classrooms found that boys were called on more frequently than girls because they volunteered more often (Altermatt, Jovanovic, & Perry, 1998).

You can use a system for drawing student names to ensure you are calling on everyone in your class.

An effective method for overcoming the limitations of calling on students disproportionately is to use a method for randomly calling on students. This allows several goals to be achieved simultaneously. The most obvious is that it decreases the likelihood that some students will be overlooked. Many secondary students have perfected the ability to remain unnoticed in classrooms, sitting quietly on the fringes of the classroom, and avoiding eye contact with the teacher. While the goal of a random questioning method is not to put students on the spot, it is to encourage other voices in the classroom discourse. In addition, it gives the teacher a richer and more nuanced portrait of the level of understanding the class possesses at a moment in time. If the only students who are called on are the ones who know the answer (and are therefore more likely to volunteer), then the teacher is not aware of what may need to be retaught, and to whom.

Do not use a random-question method as a way to catch students off guard. Always announce the student's name and make sure you have his or her attention before posing the question. This is respectful and contributes positively to the relationship between the teacher and the student. The idea is to reduce student passivity in the curriculum and increase participation. There is evidence that random questioning increases the level of student engagement and attention (Bonnstetter, 1988).

CRAFT STICKS

Write student names on wooden crafts sticks and place in a can. Draw names to respond.

NAME CARDS ON A RING

Write names on index cards and punch a hole in the top left corner. Place on a 2-inch binder ring and hang on a pushpin.

PLAYING CARDS

Affix a playing card to each desk using tape and keep a matching deck for yourself. Draw cards to determine who will respond.

SEATING CHART

Keep a seating chart inside a transparent sleeve. Use an erasable overhead pen to make tick marks on the chart to keep track of your questioning patterns.

PASS IT ON

After responding, allow the student to choose the next person. Be careful that this does not become a popularity contest.

DIGITAL NAME GENERATORS

Many smartboards are equipped with a feature that can be programmed with the names of the students in your class. When activated, the student's name appears, often accompanied by a sound effect. You can then pose a question to him or her.

It is important to remember that having a system for calling on students should never become a device for intimidating them. Avoid asking a question and then drawing a student name because it fosters a defensive atmosphere in the classroom. Instead, alert the student in advance before posing the question. When teaching this procedure to your students, make sure to include a "pass" policy any child may invoke when he or she does not want to answer. The request to pass a question to another must then be greeted with respect by the teacher.

References

Altermatt, E., Jovanovic, J., & Perry, M. (1998). Bias or responsivity? Sex and achievement level effects on teachers' classroom questioning practices. Journal of Educational Psychology, 90, 516–527.

Bonnstetter, R. J. (1988). Active learning often starts with a question. Journal of College Science Teaching, 18(2), 95–97.

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