

# Thoughts On Building a Joyful Classroom

Elise Wilder - August 2012

## *Before the school year starts*

Know how to build joy and practice quiet in your own life. Start the year refreshed, ready to enjoy the lives God has newly placed within your circle of influence. Know that you will grow through the year with them, and be ready to let God shine through you.

As you prepare for the first day of school, don't get too busy with assignments, papers and bulletin boards. Keep your mind at rest, don't look through cumulative files, report cards, or notes from last year's teacher. These are new creatures coming to you. Although they come with prior experiences, who they are in your classroom will also be determined by your vision. Will you see them through those special glasses that let you know who God made them to be? Look especially for those children who are the most troubled. There you will find young people who ache to know how God sees them. They yearn to be seen as the wonderful creature they were made to be.

## *The first day: community building*

There is nothing more important on the first day of school than relationship building. Many students start the year nervous about what the year holds for them. What kind of relationship will they have with their teacher? Will they be with old friends or make new ones? Will it be a place of safety, physically and emotionally? They have just been ushered into a room with a new boss (you) and 30 workmates they will spend the next 10 months with. Will there be joy in it for them? Will their unique character be appreciated? Will they be treated with respect by the teacher and classmates? Will somebody see the person God made them to be (even if they don't know it). Will they be a number, a test score, a problem, what or who will they be?

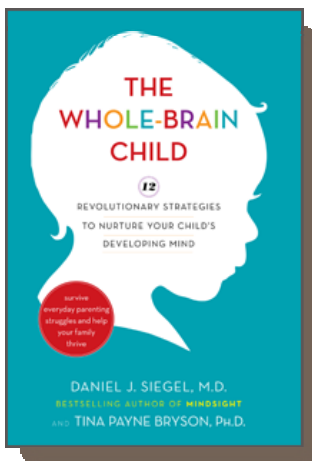
On this first day of school, a new organism is being formed – it can be a living, thriving, growing community. May each student who enters, depart on day 180 having grown in character, capacity, and in the knowledge of who they are, the person God made them to be. On that first day, make sure each person knows that you SEE them – you see the person that they are – make a personal connection with each one.

Make Day One big on relationship building; look into their eyes, smile, learn something about each one. On Day One they are the curriculum and you are the student. Plan for activity, playfulness, joyful interaction, all carefully structured not to overwhelm. Start the day with a name game. Plan for a frequent change of pace. Play a game with silly actions. One game my students, both primary and elementary, always enjoy, is “Activate and Relax”. Where there is space for everyone to move around, have them start in a relaxed position. I tell them that all of their muscles should be limp. They are silent. After a short time name an action, for instance, “gorilla walk”. When you say, “Activate,” they begin moving around the room, quiet, alert, and listening for, “Relax.” Alternate action and relaxation for 5 minutes.

Build in practice that will teach them how each person is to be appreciated and treated with respect. Bring volunteers up to the front of the room to model how to greet you and each other with a smile. A

smile can be a morning ritual, but students must be taught just how to do it. Smile as you say, “Good morning Jeremy!” Jeremy smiles back at you, shakes your hand or gives a high five and repeats the greeting. When students move to their desk, they learn to greet the students around them in the same way. Younger children will learn this quickly, older ones will be more hesitant, but just as needy. If you place lessons in respectful and joyful communication in your daily plans the first week, you will reap the benefits all year. When students are relaxed and happy at school, when they feel safe and respected, their brains will be open to learning beyond expectations.

Throughout the day, alternate academic activities with games and brain friendly exercises. Plan writing activities that help you get to know your students. Give each child an opportunity to share personal information and teach them to respond positively and respectfully when others share. Model a positive response and asking questions that draw out the other person. The message to each child is, “You are an important person in this community. You have the capacity to share good things with others.” Let them go home happy to be part of this new community. Let them go home confident that they will be known, that their community will be led by a strong and wise leader, and that they will be appreciated and protected.



In the early weeks of each school year, I teach about the brain, its structure and how it works, what causes it to work well, what leads to growth and what causes it to shut down. Teach students about the upper and lower parts of the brain and help them recognize when which part of their brain is in control at any given time. Brain study is very personal and memorable to the children. We refer to the parts of the brain and how it works throughout the school year as we notice how we learn, what feels good, and as we celebrate our growth. Books like Daniel Siegel’s *The Whole-Brain Child* provide resources for your lessons.

On Day One the soil is tilled, the seeds are carefully planted and watered. From then on, each day as the children enter the classroom, each one is seen, acknowledged, and welcomed with a smile. There will be interaction throughout each day. Each subject is taught in relationship. Because you know each child, you know how to bring out the best in each one. Children grow when they belong, when they are known, and when great things are expected of them.

Don't be frightened by thick textbooks, volumes of standards, and masses of requirements. Know that when children are known, when they see that their teacher knows who they REALLY are (who God made them to be, and that is always a wonderful thing) they will drink at the trough that you set out for them, and they will slurp up the soup that you have so thoughtfully prepared for them. Their brains, in relational mode, will learn far and above what they might do in a mechanical classroom, where curriculum is served up dry and sterile. Do not underestimate the capacity of the brain to change and grow in a nourishing culture. And then be ready with staunch servings of information, lessons well seasoned and hearty, and challenging assignments that give your students a chance to show who they are.

#### Ten Ingredients for a Living Classroom:

1. Enthusiasm – don't wait for kids to accomplish something big – celebrate every accomplishment and teach them to celebrate each other's growth.
2. Movement – students love to play *Activate and Relax*, and other games that involve starting and

stopping, silly and calm. Let there be fun mixed with peacefulness. You may find that many of your students are experienced in intensity, but few in calm. Breathing exercises, slow, focused movement exercises, and a lot determination on your part will be needed to teach children this invaluable skill.

3. Eye contact – with you and with each other. Greet each child with a smile as they come in the door. Make eye contact as much as possible throughout the day.
4. Responsiveness – teaching is alive – it is not a carefully planned lesson precisely delivered, it is a give and take, an ebb and flow – know the children's needs and meet them there
5. Smile – teaching them to share smiles is easy in the primary grades. Make it a daily requirement to find 3 people to share a smile with. Teach children to face each other and hold a mutual smile for one minute. This works really well with first graders.
6. Be aware – be the student's observer – let them know that you notice when they are feeling good or having an off day.
7. Slow down – set aside the pacing guide, teach the child, not the curriculum.
8. Build imagination into every day.
9. Gentle stretching and balancing, exercises that require a calm focus.
10. Amplify joy – practice increasing levels of joy, and practice quieting together. Again, this can be done through games, exciting activities followed by calm focused exercises or a quiet read-aloud.

---

Recommended resources:

[http://drdansiegel.com/books/the\\_whole\\_brain\\_child/](http://drdansiegel.com/books/the_whole_brain_child/)