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Building A Positive School Climate

By James Knight

INTRODUCTION

With the recent attention that has been given to education on a national level, many schools and in fact whole states have begun a process to increase their academic standards. These movements have often focused on the concept of "back to the basics." More math, english, science, foreign language, etc. have been seen as the answer to the concerns raised about educational performance of the students graduating from our schools. While these concerns represent real feelings about the status of our schools and what they are doing for the students there, an over reaction to such concerns may lead to greater difficulties than those that are currently faced. Education has historically tended to be a bit faddish and if we are not careful we will find ourselves moving too far in response to the obvious pressures related to greater student achievement.

It would appear that if schools are really interested in total student achievement which includes more than just test scores, they must be interested in a total school environment that encourages learning in all areas by all students. The purpose of this article is to provide 10 strategies which will aid people in education to develop such an environment.

Before beginning a discussion of those 10 strategies, two basic psychological notions that underlie all of the points should be made. The first of those notions is the concept of the Pygmalion effect or the self-fulfilling prophecy. Basically this concept holds that people tend to live up to what others expect of them. Robert Rosenthal, a social psychologist at Harvard conducted a research study in this area which has been repeated on numerous occasions with similar results. In his research, Rosenthal convinced a number of teachers that a test he would give would predict students who were about to experience a sudden burst in learning without any extra effort on their part. After the test was administered, one-fifth of the students were selected at random. The list of names of the randomly selected students were given to the teacher as the "educational bloomers" identified by the test. Eight months later when the students were tested, it was found that the identified students had actually bloomed. They gained an average of four points in I.Q. above the control group. The real difference between the two groups of students rested primarily in the perceptions of the teachers. That is a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The second basic psychological notion deals with self concepts and self esteem. How students perceive and feel about themselves influences their behavior as well as their achievement. If students see themselves as productive, valuable and worthwhile, they tend to behave accordingly. On the other hand, if students perceive themselves as lazy, incapable and dumb, their actions will reflect that attitude. The research done in this area would suggest that the self concept a student holds may be as strong an indicator of academic success, if not stronger, than any other variable.

It should be noted that a discussion of self-fulfilling prophecies cannot be successfully undertaken without also discussing self concepts and self esteem. The reverse is also true. How students feel about themselves influence how teachers feel about them and how teachers feel about students influences how students feel about themselves. This cycle can be repeated in either a positive or negative way. Any teacher who has worked with the younger brother or sister of a "superstar" or "outlaw" has observed this process at work.

STRATEGIES

Following are 10 strategies which appear to be worth considering in establishing a positive school climate. Note how all 10 reflect back to the two major psychological notions just discussed.

1. Make students feel important. This is probably a human right. Everyone has a right to feel important since they are. In the research reported in the book "In Search of Excellence," it was noted that one of the things the very successful corporations did was to consider the clientele as important. They made them feel this way by the way they treated them, how they listened to them, and reacted to their suggestions. Schools have often taken on a very impersonal stance toward their clientele, the students. By giving appropriate responsibility, listening, and valuing the students, and following the following nine points, students will be made to feel important.
2. Make students feel invited. Not only should students be made to feel that we have a high regard for them, but they should feel that we want them in our classes. In research done by Purkey in North Carolina, students were identified as invited or disinvented by the way they were treated by the teacher as they entered the classroom. If the teacher greeted them pleasantly,

ly they were identified as invited. If, however, they were greeted with a frown or other negative behavior on the part of the teacher, they were identified as disinvited. Test scores and other variables indicated that the two groups, while different in the eyes of the teachers, were really not different in their academic ability. When asked a question they could not answer, the invited students were given an average of 3 seconds to respond before the teacher gave clues, restated the question, redirected the question, or answered the question themselves. On the other hand, the disinvited students who were just as capable, were given an average of .9 seconds to respond to questions they could not answer before the teacher reentered the picture. Now, teachers do not do these kinds of things to hurt students. In fact, the most common motive is a noble one. They want to save the student embarrassment. However, the message that comes to the student is different than was intended. The message that such students receive is that they are dumb, that the teacher does not like them, or that they are disinvited.

Teachers who want to make students feel invited might be well advised to visit some lower elementary classes (K-3) to get some good ideas on how to make classrooms inviting places to be. One should note the personal way teachers deal with students. Note the warmth of the colors used, how students are evaluated, and the voice tones. Again, these are ways to make students feel invited.

3. Deal with needed changes in others from a positive point of view. Research done by Rosenshine and Furst found that positive reinforcement and appropriate praise were positively correlated to learning. They also found that criticism was negatively correlated to learning. These findings suggest that if teachers are really interested in learning, they should be looking for and using more positive approaches to evaluation as well as to every day behavior. In other words, teachers should probably be looking for what is right, not what is wrong. When grading papers, for example, teachers may want to consider checking the correct responses and adding points as opposed to checking what is wrong and taking away points.

Teachers may want to consider putting up a sign in the teachers' lounge that says, "WE WILL NOT SPEAK ILL OF OTHERS HERE," and then live by it. This does not mean that problems cannot be dealt with in the teachers' lounge but that it simply will not be a place where people come to "bad mouth" others.

Goodlad's research indicated that an extremely small amount of time is generally spent by teachers in positive behaviors toward students. Research also suggest that people are more influenced by negative information about others than they are by positive. Therefore, this means that teachers will have to consciously work to change their behavior if this particular strategy is to be accomplished.

4. Learn to make appropriate nonverbal cues.

Research indicates that about 70 percent of what we learn comes through our eyes, not our ears. A smile, a nod, a wink and/or a pat on the back have tremendous power related to the climate of schools. How teachers and students use space, the physical arrangement of the classroom, the tone of the voice, gestures, and even dress are clues which send powerful messages about how teachers feel about the students, the school, their work and themselves. The old statement that we have all heard many times is absolutely true in school, "Your actions speak so loud I can't hear a word you are saying."

5. Get to know each student personally. Perhaps the single most effective way to go about this is to make home visits. In agricultural education this technique has been used for years as a mechanism to work with the student and their supervised occupational experience program. However, any teacher who has had much experience with home visits will note the advantages of knowing the students' home situations, their families and their cultural behaviors. For the teacher, this kind of knowledge is extremely valuable when it comes to such concerns as student behavior and other related concerns. For the student, the personal interest expressed by the teacher is a strong signal as to the value the teacher places upon the student. The results all over America speak for themselves. In fact, this particular strategy is being adopted by many schools as a way of doing business for all teachers. For those who do not make home visits, other means can be found to accomplish this purpose. The point is that this particular strategy will most likely occur outside the confines of the classroom. The obvious implication for the teachers is that they will have to exert extra effort if they are to attain a personal knowledge of each student.

6. Learn to empathize. Of course, the first step to learning to empathize with students is to get to know them personally. Empathy is the ability to understand the feelings of another person. One of the traps that has been laid for students and teachers is an over generalization of the concept of consistency. Clearly the most important law in education is fairness and the only way one can be fair is to be able to empathize.

Consistency is generally related to the exhibited behaviors. For example when students are tardy or misbehave we have certain steps we take. Little or no consideration is given to the circumstances that caused the behavior. Therefore, in schools, we generally treat symptoms and the lack of positive results speak for themselves. If we truly want more productive behavior on the part of students we must be interested in the causes. We must be fair. The only way to achieve fairness is to learn to empathize.

7. Establish parameters. One of the most devastating blows that has ever been dealt to education came in the late 60's and early 70's in the name of "Do your own thing." For many students that often meant do nothing. People

generally have a need for some structure. This structure need not be physical, although that often helps, but must be emotional. Research on learning indicates that clarity, task orientation, time on task, letting students learn the criterion material, and structuring are all positively correlated to learning. Note how each of these variables is related somehow to the boundaries that exist in a school, classroom or a lesson.

The research on discipline and on student achievement point out that students behave better, and learn more in an environment that provides these types of boundaries clearly. This is not a plea for more rules but rather a statement about where one begins and ends and the boundaries which will determine success in a given situation.

8. Use student centered instruction. Students learn more when they inquire into as opposed to being instructed in. Variability is positively correlated to learning. The kinds of methods and materials which are student centered tend also to provide variability.

Problem solving is clearly a student centered approach to learning. Perhaps the most important skill a teacher of vocational agriculture can provide is not a technical skill for surely such will become obsolete at some future date but an ability to solve problems. By definition and design, problem solving is student centered. Do you teach animal science, agronomy, agricultural mechanics, horticulture, or other such subjects? The answer to this question should be a resounding NO! You should be teachers of students about such subjects. Herein lies one of the major traps of the current push to add rigor to the curriculum in schools. As we move from being student centered to subject matter centered, we will certainly insure the failure of many students because of the disregard for the value of the individual person. We may not intend for such to happen but it almost certainly will.

9. Learn to know and understand the difference between discipline and punishment. According to the Phi Delta Kappa poll and the Gallup poll, the most serious concern the public has for education is discipline. However, once again the schools have continued to generally go down an incorrect path to reach a satisfactory conclusion to this concern. Nearly all discipline codes deal with symptoms and how students will be punished. Very few deal with causes and what will be done to remedy such. Therefore most discipline codes are actually punishment codes.

Discipline is a learned behavior and is related to the "ounce of prevention." Clearly here is a case where an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Certainly basic rules need to be enforced but an overemphasis in this area appears to be counterproductive.

There are some things that can be done when a serious problem occurs in a school. First, the situation should be isolated. Teachers can deal with nearly any problem one on one. It is out in front of the peers where such dealing can become hazardous. Second, the situation

should be de-escalated or defused. The louder a student talks, the softer the teacher should talk. This takes the emotion out of the situation. If a teacher is angry the situation should be halted and picked up later as the teacher "cools down." Third, know when not to hear. Sometimes students say things just to get a rise out of the teacher. Good judgement would often suggest to ignore such behavior for the moment. Fourth, know when a discipline situation is over and then forgive and forget.

Research in the area of discipline suggests several important things for teachers to know. Often students who are discipline problems are above average in intelligence and are starved for attention. We should be very careful in our dealings with such students because we may actually be reinforcing their behavior. In addition, most serious discipline problems do not just happen. They are often mountains made out of molehills. Finally, teachers who have fewer discipline problems appear to solve many problems before they actually occur. That is, they tend to know where the students are "coming from" and are able to respond in a way that is positive and productive. Note the other points of this paper.

10. Be enthusiastic about teaching. According to the research done by Rosenshine and Furst, enthusiasm is among the most highly correlated variables to student achievement. Enthusiasm can be defined in a number of ways. My definition for it is internal intensity. People tend to be most enthusiastic about that which they know best. Therefore, the day a person decides to enter education is the day that person forever commits to being a student.

Students rate teachers as more enthusiastic when they tend to ask lots of questions, are committed to the tasks, and demonstrate by some behavior that they really believe that what they are doing is important. "Nation at Risk" and a number of the other reports done on education have described teaching in American schools as "blah." This generation of teachers must rethink where they stand on this important variable. What our classrooms all across America appear to need is a good healthy shot of enthusiasm. People excited about what they are doing will be absolutely critical to the success of programs in the future.

CONCLUSION:

As one reviews the 10 strategies briefly discussed herein, it should be noted that a large share of the research cited dealt with student achievement. The point is that when taking a close look at student achievement, student discipline, school ethos and ambiance, school culture, and school climate, one is struck by the interrelatedness of these notions. In our effort to improve the schools by providing more "stuff," we may be undermining the very goal we set out to obtain. Now, the substance of what goes on in school is important but to consider it in isolation from all of the other things which go to make up a successful student, a successful teacher, and/or a successful school would be a great mistake. By working to build a positive school

climate where academic learning takes place along with the other types of learning, we should be able to build the kind of school setting that is really desired by all.

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