



Just for the ASKing!

by Bruce Oliver

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Just for the ASKing! is a monthly e-newsletter that addresses the needs of instructional leaders, particularly building level administrators. Each month, this column provides information, insights, and suggestions that support administrators as they strive to be instructional leaders in schools. The focus this month is on the important role positive personal relationships and learning environments play in the learning process.

Are We Having Fun Yet?



Bruce facilitating the Leading the Learning workshop.

I often draw my inspiration for *Just for the ASKing!* from watching and listening to educators as they work with children. In recent visits to schools, I have been impressed by the friendly interactions between teachers and administrators with their students. Of particular note is the laughter and genuine fun the adults are having with children. I noted with great delight the elementary principal who high-fived (or fist-bumped) the students in the hallway calling each one by name as he greeted them. The smiles and frequent laughter from the students was evidence of the personal relationships the principal had established with the children he served. I also witnessed the beginning of a high school class as the teacher greeted each student at the door, occasionally interjecting a witty comment which resulted in amusement by individual students as they entered the room. The teacher maintained the friendly and relaxed demeanor as class began. It was evident that the students felt

comfortable and safe with their teacher and were ready to focus on learning as the class began. Then there's the middle school teacher who called students by endearing nicknames during a lively class discussion during which there was an abundance of light-hearted, but focused, banter between the teacher and his students as they discussed the content under study. As the discussion continued, more and more students joined in the conversation offering a variety of creative thoughts. In each of these scenarios it was obvious that the students felt welcomed in their schools, cared about by the adults with whom they worked, and viewed school as a place they wanted to be. The common denominator in all of these descriptors was the indisputable fun that the adults and students were having. There was an atmosphere in which both students and teachers felt safe in demonstrating their positive feelings.

As a result of my observations, I started to look into the research on the importance of learning in an environment where having fun and experiencing happiness were regular occurrences. I found study after study as well as numerous references that supported the positive benefits of and need for fun in our personal as well as public lives. Six of the references I discovered are described here.

- As I searched, I immediately found William Glasser's **Choice Theory** in which he notes that "we are driven by five genetic needs: survival, love and belonging, power, freedom, and fun."
- Many years ago, Benjamin Bloom identified the three domains of learning: cognitive, affective, and

psychomotor. He deduced that the manner in which we deal with things emotionally, such as feelings, enthusiasm, motivation, and attitude have a significant influence on learning.

- Another study concluded that laughter has a positive impact on muscle relaxation, reduces stress hormones, and is an excellent source of cardiac exercise. The study further notes that even the anticipation of laughter can be a significant stress reducer.
- A British medical journal study demonstrated that happiness spreads through social networks and has a ripple effect in social situations. (The ultimate social network is certainly the classroom.)
- Psychologists learned that humor can provide a more lighthearted perspective on new learning and help us view events as challenges instead of threats.
- Biologists have found that fun/laughter increases the level of health-enhancing hormones like endorphins and neurotransmitters, thus resulting in a stronger immune system.

Based on my Web search and readings, I readily concluded that there are irrefutable benefits from fun, laughter, and happiness and the positive effect these emotions can have on the human condition, including the school setting.

Being Accountable

There are those who would argue that in this age of accountability, it is important to take school work seriously and to impress upon our students that they must be attentive, task-oriented, focused and diligent as they pursue new learning. Whereas these qualities are important in a learning environment, it is also valuable for teachers to view the classroom from the students' perspective. When children see their classroom as a place that is full of stress and where criticism and punishment are the norm, their brains will not be receptive to new learning. Conversely, when students enter a classroom that is supportive and accepting, and a place where learning and fun can occur simultaneously, they will more readily tackle new learning challenges. In this safe setting, learning can thrive and schools will reap the benefits of measurable improvements for which they are held accountable.

Striking a Balance

In his book, *The Skillful Teacher*, Jon Saphier writes about a principle of learning called feeling tone. He explains that "...the more pleasurable the learning experience is, the more learning will take place – up to the point where the pleasure takes over and begins crowding out the learning." He further notes that too much concern can quickly turn into anxiety and block potential learning. The skill is for the teacher to "keep his or her finger on the pulse of the class" to ensure that a point of diminishing returns does not occur in either direction.

Avoiding Chaos

No one – neither students nor teachers – wants a classroom where there is a lack of discipline or which is out of control. Fun simply for the sake of fun, fun at the expense of others' feelings, fun that supersedes the learning that is supposed to occur, or fun that borders on disrespect is a lose-lose proposition. A good teacher will establish a safe, non-threatening environment where humor/fun that is connected to the lessons is a natural part of learning. In these classrooms, it is important that the teacher, in collaboration with students, establishes and enforces rules so that students know that "this is a good place to learn" but also one that has reasonable limitations.

Changing Perspectives

Included in William Glasser's **Choice Theory** is an emphasis on the relationships we build and the habits of behavior we form. In the chart below are seven caring habits which Glasser believes should replace the seven deadly habits in our behavior. As a result, he reasons that we will realize greater satisfaction and less

disconnection from others. He writes that...

- Supporting should replace criticizing
- Encouraging should replace blaming
- Listening should replace complaining
- Accepting should replace nagging
- Trusting should replace threatening
- Respecting should replace punishing
- Negotiating differences should replace bribing or rewarding

Following Glasser's reasoning, as positive behaviors replace negative actions, the level of enjoyment and positive reactions in the classroom will undoubtedly increase.

Enjoying Your Students

Some people seem to have a natural sense of humor while others take a more serious approach in their daily lives. Whether or not we have a natural inclination to be humorous, all of us can take steps to bring a touch of lightheartedness to our classrooms. Some possible steps to take include the following:

- Start outside of school. All of us need ways to relieve the natural stress that is a part of our daily lives by finding our "inner child." We often forego having fun until "important" things get addressed. Having fun can be one of the most important things we can do for ourselves. Once we increase our enjoyment outside of school by enjoying life more, we can also begin having fun with our students.
- Laugh with your students. Children are, by nature, an on-going source of fun and laughter. The things they say, the way they react, the questions they ask can provide moments of levity that we can all enjoy. When students see their teacher outwardly enjoying the spontaneous and high-spirited situations that occur in classrooms, the level of good will (and learning) will increase in the learning environment.
- Show your human side. Some educators go to great lengths to show only their serious side to their students, believing that their students will then take their learning more seriously. However, when teachers show their human side, laugh at their own mistakes, and tell stories from their past that display the lighter side of their personality, their students will feel more relaxed, open, and prepared to learn when new content is introduced.
- Check your current reality. It is important to remember that we are all born with the natural ability to have fun, but we lose track as we grow to adulthood. If you find that you have lost sight of the ability to have fun, have a good old-fashioned self talk, and take small steps to plan specific opportunities in your life to enjoy yourself more.

"***Are we having fun yet?***" is a question some people ask themselves when "things get crazy" in their personal lives or in their work environment. It is often muttered in a sarcastic way when life becomes frenetic and events seem out of control. I am proposing a new take on the question that is more sincere and forthright. If you are not having fun, both inside and outside the classroom, make yourself a promise to take the necessary steps to bring more true joy to your life. You'll only have yourself to thank.

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