



Just for the ASKing!

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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. This month's focus is on the importance of identifying the causes of resistance and reluctance in some learners and planning interventions based on those diagnoses.

Don't Jump to Conclusions



Bruce facilitating the Leading the Learning workshop.

One of the biggest challenges educators face is resistant or reluctant learners. These situations are complicated and do not have simple solutions, or for that matter, sometimes no immediately successful resolution. The challenge is determining the cause of the resistance or reluctance and planning an intervention based on that diagnosis. Jumping to the conclusion that students' reluctance to cooperate is the result of poor attitudes is over simplistic and does not lead to successful resolutions to the problems. It behooves us to dig deeper and examine alternative explanations for why students shut down.

There are many reasons that might explain students' lack of participation in the educational process. Examining the different circumstances provides new perspectives and increases the chances of successfully working with these challenging and sometimes dispassionate learners.

Students Fall Behind in Their Work

For a variety of reasons, including lack of skills, disorganization, poor time management, or too many distractions, some students dig themselves into holes by getting behind with their work. Compounding the problem is that they lack the maturity or problem-solving skills to know what to do to work their way out. In their naïve way of dealing with the problem, they quit working altogether. In some cases, it is easy to diagnose the problem because it can be observed in the student's behavior. In more complicated situations, the underlying reasons for the shut down may not be as apparent. Meeting with the student for a problem-solving session, determining a process to get the student back on track in small, step-by-step increments, and monitoring, encouraging, and praising the student's progress may lead to a successful outcome. In order for this approach to work, it may be necessary for the teacher to temporarily suspend normal grading procedures and to establish checkpoints along the way as the student begins to work.

Students Act As If They Don't Care

Students often attempt to cover up for their deficiencies. When students have fallen behind in their skill development, they become too embarrassed to admit or deal with their shortcomings. What they experience in their classrooms is alien to them so they simply sit passively hiding their frustrations and tolerating their present circumstances. The cover up often includes arrogance or pretension that diverts attention from the real problem.

In such cases there is no substitute for good, solid relationship building. By reaching out to these students, in a compassionate and patient manner, and convincing them that you will provide one-on-one support, and then following through, you can help students make measurable progress. As a result, they may be more willing to forego the false bravado and expend effective effort in the future. Enlisting the aid of fellow teachers or counselors who have pre-existing good relationships with given students may also provide a solution. It is, of course, crucial to establish a classroom that is safe, where mistakes are welcome, and where risks can be taken without recrimination.

Students Do Not See a Connection between Learning and the Future

“When are we ever going to use this stuff?” is a question often heard in many classrooms, and it is not always an easy question to answer. Some students embrace learning for the sake of learning and some even accept the premise that the content of their lessons may apply to future situations that are unforeseen at the present. Others, however, have difficulty making connections between future possibilities and their current reality. As a result, they do not see the point of doing their school work. Teachers who succeed in helping such students see connections make it a practice to build in real-life examples. Others plan simulations that enable students to supplant newly learned skills/ideas into realistic situations. Another approach is to consistently make sure that students have the opportunity to work with a peer or in small groups to process the content or to solve problems by applying the lesson content. When students are placed in a “sit and git” situation, they can become frustrated because they rarely have the chance to make connections to their learning or hear what other students are thinking about the subject matter. Finally, asking thought-provoking questions during class discussions may also help students see the relevance of the topics they are experiencing.

Students Have Personal Issues That Interfere with School

These issues include family conflicts, divorce, poverty, lengthy military deployments by a parent, foreclosures, substance abuse, or undiagnosed psychological problems. The students may become absorbed with worry and go to great lengths to keep these challenges a secret from others. Thus, they become preoccupied, cannot concentrate, and their school work suffers. There are students who become experts at covering up their true feelings so teachers have no idea what is causing the lack of engagement in school. At the first signs of academic decline, teachers should take action or begin gathering information. Talking to fellow teachers, a counselor, or an administrator is a start. Perhaps a social worker or a psychologist may provide some direction. It may also be productive to engage the student in non-instructional activities such as a lunch bunch, or an after-school setting where conversations with adults are more informal.

Peer Pressure Impacts School Performance

Never doubt the impact that peer pressure can have on a student’s academic performance. Some younger children may look up to older siblings who are not strong students and want to emulate their behavior. Older students may feel that if they work hard in school, they will be perceived by their peers in a negative way. They are conflicted and their school work begins to suffer. When student performance is negatively influenced by peer pressure, it may be necessary to look for different peers to exert some pressure. One option is to ask a student who does well academically and who is looked up to by other students to meet with or talk to less than enthusiastic peers. Another option is to seek out adults to mentor these students, especially adults who may have had similar attitudes at the same age and have turned their lives around.

Students Feel Work Is Too Easy and Not Challenging

There are students who view the work that they are asked to do in school as busy work. For some very bright students, they quickly become restless if their thinking is not stretched by the assignments they are asked to do. When faced with packets or worksheets, they can become distracted by the mundane level of the tasks and they unwittingly begin making mistakes. They often feel frustrated and, over time, their work is incomplete, flawed, or, in extreme cases, not done at all. When these bright students stop working, it may be difficult to get them

back on track, and it can impact their future educational or occupational goals. When such problems become apparent, it is important for teachers to act promptly before the problems magnify themselves. Once again, establishing a personal and honest relationship with students may be the best approach. Listening is crucial; hearing what school is like from the students' vantage points may provide important insights into their behavior. In addition, learning more about the students' interests or goals may help the teacher plan future learning experiences (including choice) that will be motivational to those students as well as other students in the class.

Students Are Angry at Life

Over my 36 years in public education, I encountered students who were either passively aggressive or acted out for reasons adults could not understand. Many of these students were bright and capable of learning at high levels. However, there was a definite disconnect between the students' work ethic and what the school was asking them to do. Many of these students saw no problem with failure, occasionally showed defiance, and went to great lengths to be uncooperative with the school personnel and their family. Working with these students is particularly frustrating and requires an immense amount of patience. They are the students who often wind up in the offices of the administrator or counselor. They are reluctant to open up and below the surface there may be an unresolved anger. Colleagues have shared different approaches to working with this type of student. One administrator learned that you never ask "why" in relation to a specific behavior because students generally do not know why they are acting the way they do. A teacher found that one of her best allies in such situations is silence; often when she stopped talking, the students share an insight. In one such situation, the student simply mumbled, "If only my dad would take me to a hockey game," which became the key to addressing a student's sense of resentment. Anger can often be diffused once it is openly addressed.

In conclusion, it is important to remember that our students are children, and, as a result, they may not yet have built the capacity to make mature decisions. As the responsible adults in their lives, we must do our best to determine the root causes of the behaviors that are impacting their learning. As an experienced educator once observed, "We don't have any throwaway kids." All children deserve our professional attention. And when you are the adult who turns a student on to learning, it is one of the most satisfying and memorable events of your entire career.

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