



Just for the ASKing!

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November 2013

Volume X

Issue XI

Just for the ASKing! is a monthly e-newsletter that addresses the needs of all those who strive to be instructional leaders. This month's issue provides insight into what we could hear in the minds and hearts of students who benefit from the positive interactions with teachers that occur each day.

In the Minds and Hearts of Children



Bruce facilitating the Leading the Learning workshop

Some readers might remember the popular TV game show called *The \$25,000 Pyramid*. The premise of the show paired teams of two players and the object of the game was to have your partner name a category displayed on the pyramid by giving clues that matched the exposed topic. The show's format was the inspiration for this month's newsletter. Having spent considerable time in classrooms during my career, both as a teacher and administrator, I often found myself watching students and wondering what they were thinking. I have also observed the interactions between teachers and students, most of which were inspiring and positive in nature. As I watched, I searched for words that students might say to their teachers but rarely did because of age, maturity, peer pressure, or the inability to express themselves. Returning to the pyramid format, the topic for this newsletter is "Things Teachers Wished They'd Hear Their Students Say." Below you will see a series of thoughts and feelings children may have along with corresponding actions or work that resulted in the student's revelation.

"I just got engaged."

Every teacher has the sincere desire to inspire students to become totally immersed in the subject matter they are studying. We long for enthusiastic responses, excited voices, contrasting opinions, and even laughter as students embrace new ideas that are presented to them. Teachers take their teaching and learning responsibilities seriously and work very hard to keep the ennui or apathy from seeping into their classrooms. I see it in the intriguing questions teachers ask, the unexpected props they use, the visual clips they show, and the passion they show for their subject. Although kids may not say the words above, it is evident that they are feeling them.

"I think I finally got it."

In many instances, I see teachers spend one-on-one time with individual students trying to help them grasp a concept or a process. Despite students' struggles, the teacher demonstrates an indefatigable "I won't give up on you" attitude with a calm and friendly demeanor. The students are never made to feel incompetent since the teacher has publicly let her class know that not all of us learn at the same rate and it is all right to take more time. "You deserve the right to learn" is the teacher's message. When the breakthroughs occur, the words may not be spoken but the smiles and quiet celebration are evidence when students have experienced success.

"Your feedback worked!"

It is no secret that a necessary component of the teaching and learning process is providing growth-producing feedback to students. Learning and growth does not occur when we put a grade on top of an assignment and return it to students with no opportunity for them to review their work, receive oral or written feedback, make

corrections, and resubmit their assignment for a second look by their teacher. In the world beyond school, feedback is constant either through human or technological contact. Workers are expected to get better, increase their knowledge, and make fewer mistakes in the future. Children deserve the same treatment. In education's dark ages, feedback was not necessarily a normal process between teacher and student. In today's classroom, it should be considered a non-negotiable. The satisfaction gained from seeing improved work based on the feedback is the teacher's ultimate reward.

“I’m tired, I’m hungry, and I’m scared.”

One of the greatest challenges an educator might face is the unresponsive child who sits quietly in class, puts forth little effort, and generally seems uninterested in learning. These individuals become a lingering conundrum to the teacher as she strives to figure out what is going on. When teachers look closely at their students, there may be a subliminal message that students will never verbalize. Perhaps it is written on their faces, evident in their dress, or portrayed in their inability to focus or concentrate. In reality, these behaviors are actually the result of poverty, which research by the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) has shown is the “single greatest threat to children’s well-being.” According to the NCCP, “More than 16 million children in the United States – 22% of all children – live in families with incomes below the federal poverty level - \$23,550 a year for a family of four. Research shows that, on average, families need an income of about twice that level to cover basic expenses. Using this standard, 45% of children live in low-income families.” As a result of poverty, children are more likely to exhibit social, emotional, and behavioral problems. I know that this is no secret to educators who work with these children every day. To combat this insidious situation, teachers must have empathy, patience, perseverance, and inner strength as they help these innocent victims find a safe harbor in their school.

“I didn’t mean it.”

It is human nature to make mistakes, and some children might make more than others. Their mistakes are not exclusively in their work but also in their behavior. It may manifest itself in a variety of ways including backtalk, inappropriate language, outbursts, or even physical encounters with other students. When these misbehaviors occur, a teacher’s first instinct might be to punish or penalize the student; that response might at best, resolve the problem, or, at worst, exacerbate the situation. Some students might feel repentant while others may seem unfazed. Most children will recognize the “error of their ways” and truly want to not repeat their past transgressions. They may even want their teacher to know that they are sorry and that they have all good intentions of improving their behavior, despite the fact that they do not always take the time to express their feelings in words. It is the teacher’s role to reach out to students in a positive way, recognize their efforts to improve, and praise their corrected department when it occurs.

“I don’t know where to start.”

A typical scenario in a classroom is that the teacher presents a new lesson, asks clarifying questions to determine if the students grasp the new content, and then gives the students a follow-up assignment. As the students get busy, the teacher circulates around the room checking on progress or answering questions that occur. Some students, with pencil in hand, look like they are busy doing their assignment, but upon closer inspection, are simply pretending to work. They clearly did not follow the teacher’s explanation, and are too embarrassed to ask for help. Their reluctance to ask for help can be because they do not want to “feel stupid” in the eyes of their teacher or peers, or that they feel their teacher will be mad at them for “not paying attention.” Vigilant and astute teachers regularly watch for these “teachable moments.” They quietly take a seat beside the struggling student, and in whispered tones, they provide the one-on-one assistance the student might need. They are never critical of students who are lost, and instead understand that different students need different approaches in order to learn.

“I feel welcome and safe in this classroom.”

It is the human condition to want to feel safe. Children, maybe more than adults, want the reassurance that their environment is welcoming, secure, and risk-free. Maslow’s hierarchy tells us that once our physical and safety needs are met, humans have a need for belonging and esteem which is best realized when the important adults in their lives speak to them in kind voices, make them feel their efforts are worthwhile and moving in the right

direction, and help them truly understand and believe that they are special, unique, and cared for. The reassurance that a teacher can provide by reaching out to children is immeasurable. Simple gestures like a welcoming smile, an arm around a shoulder, or a kind word, can make a world of difference to someone who may be feeling insecure or unaccepted. As Maya Angelou has written, “People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

“I can tell I’m getting better.”

Knowing when you have mastered a concept, added a new skill, applied a new idea, developed a deeper understanding of a principle, connected new learning to the real world, or added a whole new way of thinking to your repertoire of possibilities is what school is all about. Every child should be able to tell when he is growing academically and intellectually. Progress is not determined simply by a grade on a test or an essay but by being able to reflect on one’s learning experiences and definitively knowing that you are making headway. For some, advancement is made in small steps while, in others, stretching their minds can happen more quickly. However it may occur, children should be able to see themselves in a new light and get excited when they experience the feeling of true advancement.

“I’ll always remember you.”

There can be no greater reward to an educator than to know that they have impacted the life of a child in a significant and life-changing way. It may be that they have made a breakthrough in learning that has caused great angst in the past; or, the teacher has inspired a student to find a new area of interest that will provide a potential occupation or area of study for the future; or, the teacher has uncovered a difficult blockade to achievement that has haunted the student for multiple years. I recall one such situation where a student was repeatedly punished for violating school rules that resulted in time spent in in-school suspension. The teacher assigned to monitor the students took the time to befriend the troubled individual who, through his tears, admitted that he did not know how to read. As a result, the teacher met with the administrator, explained what she had learned, and both concluded that punishment was not the proper response. Instead, the young man was assigned to a small reading class where he received the assistance that had long been neglected. Having learned to trust an adult for the first time, the young man returned to the teacher’s room again and again to thank her as his life began to change in many positive ways. He will remember his advocate for many years to come.

Most educators choose their profession because they have an affinity for children and because they want to make a difference in the lives of young people. Children do not always verbalize their thoughts or feelings. However, if little bubbles could magically appear above the heads of our students, there might be some special words that they want to say but do not have the wherewithal to express themselves. The words are there even though they are only in their hearts and minds.

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