



Just for the ASKing!

by Bruce Oliver

December 2008
Volume V
Issue XII

Just for the ASKing! is a monthly column 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 creating a safe and secure learning environment for all students.

Social Security



Bruce facilitating the Leading the Learning workshop.

In our work with educators, the focus is always on practices that will make a difference in student learning. Together we explore topics related to the best approaches in planning, instruction, and assessment. Participants have the opportunity to discuss the importance of establishing a learner-centered classroom, meeting the needs of all students, and creating school cultures in which student achievement is the top priority. Inevitably, with remarkable consistency, someone in the training session will publicly share a thought that can best be summarized in the following statement: “I don’t think any of these practices can occur until the teacher establishes a positive relationship with students.” This public pronouncement is usually followed by a series of affirmative head nods or side comments which acknowledge agreement with the statement. Dr. James Comer, Yale professor and childhood development specialist, summed it up best when he stated, “No significant learning occurs without significant relationships.”

Today’s classroom represents one of the clearest examples of a diverse social environment. There are representatives of different racial, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds. Students come from different family configurations with distinct religious beliefs and core values. Despite the many differences our students bring to our classrooms, they also exemplify many commonalities. As they enter our schools at a very young age, children come with an earnest desire to learn and achieve. They yearn for a predictable and orderly learning environment where they will feel accepted and experience a sense of belonging. Over 60 years ago, Abraham Maslow provided us with a hierarchy of human needs that still holds true today. Beyond satisfying our physiological needs, all humans have a strong desire for safety, love and belonging, and personal accomplishment.

Pivotal in the lives of all students is the teacher they see each day. Teachers possess the power to make a student’s experience fulfilling and maybe even joyful. My personal experience and the sincere opinions and validations of fellow educators lead me to one incontrovertible conclusion: **Students must feel secure in their classroom environment in order to increase learning and grow academically.**

A close examination of the following routine classroom practices can provide greater insights as to how a teacher can provide a more secure social setting for students.

It Begins at the Door

A teacher can set the tone for the learning that will follow by greeting students as they enter the classroom each day. It seems like such a simple event and yet the warm greeting and visible smile on the part of the teacher can convey such a positive message to students. It starts things off on the right foot. The message is simple but important: “I am glad you are here.”

A Learner-Centered Environment

Researchers from the past such as Glasser, Dewey, and Piaget concluded that when certain conditions exist in the classroom, more learning will occur. Modern researchers have affirmed these previous findings and made connections to the effects on the brain. When teachers provide *meaningful, active learning experiences* coupled with timely, appropriate feedback on student work, learners will be more likely to make greater academic progress. Another important component that will promote greater brain function is the teacher’s ability to provide *varied sources of input* as they plan and carry out their lessons. Transcending these three important practices is the need for a *safe, non-threatening environment*. Children must feel physically and psychologically safe before their minds open up to new learning. The importance of this safe feeling cannot be minimized.

A Sense of Community

Students must feel they are part of a greater whole rather than see themselves as a lost or forgotten cipher in a large and impersonal system. University of Virginia Professor Carol Tomlinson states, “It’s important in any classroom to create a sense of community. It’s awfully hard to imagine why students would want to learn in a place where they feel unwelcome or rejected or seem odd or inconvenient.” When students feel they truly belong, their trust level rises significantly. Once the sense of trust is established, there may be no limit to what can be accomplished.

Encourage, Don’t Discourage

Some students reject what their teachers have to offer when they become irretrievably discouraged and lose hope in their ability to learn. It must be remembered that **all children can learn**. It all depends on how a teacher conveys a “can do” attitude to his or her students. It’s not simply a pep talk or empty praise but substantive feedback to students which enables them to continue their learning. The developmental-based model of achievement theorizes that student **achievement** is directly correlated to the amount of **effort** students invest in their learning. A third component in the model is what the teacher brings to the learning formula: the ability to instill **confidence** in the student. The power of a teacher’s encouraging words is essential for establishing students’ belief in their ability to learn.

Connectedness, Sincerity, and Passion

Teaching is an art. How instruction is delivered is serious business and should not be carried out in a haphazard manner. With multiple eyes on the teacher at all times, it is critical that a teacher be aware not only of the content that is being conveyed but the manner in which the teaching is being carried out. Communication coach Nick Morgan tells us that one’s body language and nonverbal messages often outweigh the spoken word. When a teacher’s passion for his or her subject is genuine, and when the teacher connects with students in a sincere manner, the learners will be more engaged, listen more intently, and be less likely to tune out during instructional delivery. In short, verbal and nonverbal communication will enable a teacher to “sell” students on the importance of their learning.

Clarity Is Essential

There are no substitutes for clear directions, clear explanations, and clear messages about how learning will unfold in the classroom. Paula Rutherford, in her books, has identified this essential process as “framing the learning.” When teachers clearly explain what learning objectives will be included in the new unit, how the planned activities will help students master the content, and how student learning will be assessed, the

students' state of mind will be more at ease and open to new experiences because they see learning as not just possible but probable. They feel secure and optimistic because their teacher has transmitted the message that "we're in this together."

Be a Little Unpredictable

Much has been written about the importance of establishing standard procedures and predictable routines that students can rely on. On the other hand, when teachers are a little unpredictable in their behavior by surprising their students with unorthodox, attention-getting learning experiences, the students may "tune in" because they view their teacher as being especially interested in their learning. Catching the students off guard with a humorous or even flamboyant approach to learning will surprise students and even allow them to see that learning does not have to be an arduous and difficult process. When teachers show their human side along with a sense of humor, their students may become less uptight, and more receptive to learning.

Above All, Show Respect

Surveys of student attitudes toward their school experiences conclude that students want to feel respected by their teachers. The respect can be conveyed in different ways. For some students, it is as simple as calling them by their name or saying hello in the hallways. For others, it may be recognition of their talents beyond the academic realm. Still, other students want their teacher to realize that they are not "stupid" but may simply not be able to grasp the current content under investigation. It is critical to many students not to be embarrassed in the presence of their peers. Surveys also conclude that students want their teachers to accept them where they are in the learning continuum rather than to assume that they possess prior knowledge or skills. It all boils down to a student's need to be treated with dignity and respect that will bolster self-assuredness and lead to greater effort.

Beyond the Comfort Level

It is important to understand that providing a safe and secure learning environment is not synonymous with a lax or laissez faire attitude. In recent years, some educators focused their attention on increasing students' self-esteem. The results from this kind of thinking did not elicit improved student achievement results. A student's self-concept will improve when he or she has specific data to show that learning is occurring. Once trust has been established between teacher and students, it is essential that the teacher maintains high expectations for student achievement. In a supportive environment where students truly believe that their teacher will not give up on them, will provide the necessary support for learning to occur, and where good will is the hallmark of the classroom, there may be little or no hesitation on the part of students to become active participants in the learning process.

Wrapping It Up

One of my favorite pages from Paula Rutherford's extensive work is entitled **A Good Place to Learn is....** I have it posted near my computer and I find myself returning to it frequently for inspiration. Because that page is a perfect companion piece for this month's ***Just for the ASKing!*** e-newsletter it is included as an attachment. By incorporating the ideas in these two documents, educators may be able to recapture in the words of Barack Obama "the audacity of hope," not just for some, but for all students.

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A Good Place to Learn Is...

- a classroom where students' basic emotional and academic needs are met
- a classroom where students are taught at the level at which they can learn, where they receive encouragement and recognition for the progress they are making
- a place where people are courteous and where laughter springs from joy brought about by involvement with caring people involved in learning
- one where communication is practiced and not preached, where teachers and students talk with, not at, each other
- one that has reasonable rules which everyone agrees to because they are beneficial to individuals and to the group - rules that both teachers and students have a democratic stake in because everyone has a say in making and changing the rules as the need arises
- a place where students feel accepted as persons with dignity who are asked to evaluate their own behavior and take responsibility for better behavior or suffer the natural consequences for their actions
- a place where every effort is made to let each learner know that the expectations are that they will meet high standards of learning and every effort is made to ensure that each learner has a reasonable chance of success - that is, a place that lets all students know that they "belong," that they have a stake in what goes on here and that we expect them to succeed and to be responsible
- a place where all learners know what excellence looks and sounds like and all are engaged in the pursuit of that excellence.

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