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Collecting Data to Create a Positive Classroom Climate

1

POSITIVE CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS

Why are connections essential? The essence of human interaction is social, based on relationships. To create a fertile soil for learning, teachers and students must make daily and positive connections. Without connections, the definition of being at-risk becomes a reality.

Interviewing students in an alternative high school or a drop-out prevention program produces a litany of connections "gone bad" at critical junctures in students' lives. Students frequently report that they could go days without an adult who smiled or personally interacted with them. Hiding at school became an art form with these students. In contrast, on a recent visit to a secondary school in Colorado, an administrator noted the concerted effort of staff there to uncover and rid the school of "hiding opportunities."

To foster connections, each of the more than 1,100 students in the Colorado school was listed on a series of large charts. Staff members marked off students with whom they had frequent (daily was preferred) and personal contact. The staff then walked among the charts, and each teacher, administrator, and support member put his or her name next to two or three of the 137 students whom the data showed were getting no regular contact. The next quarter, staff reported a marked decline in both discipline

issues and the drop-out rate and an increase in attendance. While this method of analysis and data use is not new, the results tend to be well worth the time and effort of staff. Students are always worth time and effort, especially when we establish connections.

When we reviewed the “Five Theaters of the Mind” model (see Figure 0.1), we learned that the emotional, social, and physical systems of the mind are greedy for attention and will not allow the cognitive and reflective systems to function at optimal efficiency if their needs are not met. Understanding these “theaters” is one way to see how connections affect learning and, therefore, why collecting data and using it to make differentiated changes in learning environments is essential.

Caring and Support

Rachael Kessler (2000) describes deep connection as one of seven gateways to the “soul of education”:

The yearning for deep connection describes a quality of relationship that is profoundly caring, is resonant with meaning, and involves feelings of belonging, or of being truly seen and known. (p. 17)

Students need opportunities to receive care and support from adults to form deep connections. They also need developmentally appropriate opportunities for steadily increasing autonomy and choice. Competent adults who demonstrate caring and appropriate supervision are key components in developing students’ self-confidence, which results in acceptance by their peers. A sense of belonging comes about in classrooms that are consistently well managed by qualified teachers. Classrooms that are free of put-downs and harassment lead to positive behaviors that are the prerequisites for success and growth. Students enter school with a wide range of predispositions toward education. However, a classroom climate that supports students through earned autonomy can mitigate negative predispositions (McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002)

Try to picture two classrooms, one where students are frequently buffeted by a hard-to-predict adult and one where risk taking is a prized attitude. Students in both classrooms ask many questions each day at an unconscious level:

- Is this teacher my friend or enemy?
- Will I be embarrassed or feel stupid?
- What will my classmates think?
- Can I do this work?
- Where is my connection to this task?
- Am I valued?

In the classroom where students cannot predict what they will get from a teacher, the answers to these questions may cause a student to disconnect from the adult and from learning. How can we expect learning if sarcasm, capricious decisions, and lack of respect are prevalent? In the classroom where it is comfortable to risk, there is a teacher who reinforces positive approximations, invites questions, is consistent and respectful, and allows students to earn autonomy through clearly stated and enforced guidelines. From such a base, a child can grow and learn. Belonging and connection can be measured in the level of risk a child is comfortable demonstrating.

Risk Taking

A toddler risks walking further and further away from a parent but frequently looks back to see if the parent is still present. The toddler has a clear limit to the toleration of distance from the parent. Each toddler's limit is unique and depends on a wide variety of factors. Similar factors continue to dominate our risk taking throughout life. Many of the factors are not static; they change over time, ebbing and flowing with life events. This most basic of psychological principles governs the potential to learn as well. Risk taking must be predicated by positive connections with others in the learning environment. Each time a child learns something new, the delicate balance of cognitive dissonance is tipped. When they develop a healthy level of risk taking, students encounter and work through cognitive dissonance despite problems. This cycle helps students build the necessary resiliency when things get hard or complicated, both in learning and in life (Burns, 1996).

The teacher who systematically establishes a climate that supports risk taking fills the environment with opportunities for connections with students. This also satisfies the needs of the social and emotional learning systems, which crave acceptance and inclusion in a safe environment. Practices that promote this type of environment contribute to teachers' abilities to form more meaningful relationships with students—relationships that pay off in students' increased motivation, learning, and academic achievement (McCombs & Whisler, 1997). In the rest of this chapter, we will give you key factors that help establish the essential conditions for learning in the educational environment of the classroom and allow you to differentiate for diverse learners.

ASSESSING THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

In books for beginning teachers, we frequently see excellent suggestions for establishing positive learning climates. We need to use these principles regularly, not just when we begin a teaching career or a school year. There