

The Power of the Relationship and Theories of Mindset

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Many of my past September articles have been devoted to themes related to education and school climate. A major catalyst for this choice is that almost all of my presentations during August and the beginning of September are for staff, faculty, and administrators in schools or school districts as they prepare for the new school year (also, this summer I enjoyed speaking with a very welcoming faculty at Lewis and Clark Community College in Godfrey, Illinois). Although I present at educational settings throughout the year, there is a greater concentration during this five-week period.

A benefit for me at these presentations is that I have an opportunity to hear directly from teachers and administrators about the issues that are at the forefront of their interests and concerns. Since almost all of my invitations to speak come from educators who are aware of my writings on such topics as mindsets, motivation, resilience, and teacher-student relationships, it is not surprising that I am often asked to address these subjects during my talks.

Invariably I am requested to highlight the importance of the teacher-student relationship and the need to enrich social-emotional skills in the classroom. Several who heard my keynote at this past February's Learning & the Brain conference about mindsets—a keynote that I titled “Beyond Academics: Nurturing Mindsets for Connections, Caring, and Purpose in Students”—specifically requested that I provide a similar presentation at their schools.

One school administrator said to me, “It’s difficult to develop positive mindsets in students unless we first develop positive relationships with our students.” Another referred to my April, 2015 article in which I discussed Working Paper #13 issued by the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child that examined why some children who face childhood trauma “adapt and overcome, while others bear lifelong scars that flatten their potential.” Their answer? “Every child who winds up doing well has had at least one stable and committed relationship with a supportive adult.”

Many of my readers are aware that this conclusion parallels findings from other research about resilience, including that offered by the late Julius Segal, whom I have

cited on numerous occasions. Segal wrote that children who overcome adversity have at least one “charismatic adult” in their lives, defined as an “adult from whom children gather strength.” He added that in many instances that adult turns out to be a teacher.

A Mindset Belief: “I Belong in this Academic Community”

As one teacher commented after I outlined several well-known theories that fall within the rubric of *mindsets* (including Bernard Weiner’s attribution theory, Carol Dweck’s concepts of fixed and growth mindsets that I should note have many roots in attribution theory, Martin Seligman’s notions of learned helplessness and learned optimism, Albert Bandura’s theory of self-efficacy, and Angela Duckworth’s concept of grit), “It’s difficult to help a student adopt a growth mindset or become more hopeful or optimistic or develop grit in the absence of a trusting, caring relationship.”

Similarly, Camille Farrington from the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago, in outlining the components of an “academic mindset,” positioned as the first belief, “I belong in this academic community.” She emphasizes, “In an academic setting, this refers to students’ sense of connectedness to peers and adults in their classes and their school. Belonging is particularly important in an educational context because human learning is socially constructed. . . . Feeling part of a community of learners is a powerful motivator.”

Farrington paints a picture of what occurs when students do not experience a sense of belonging. “They tend to withdraw from interaction with their peers; to the extent that they associate academic work with their sense of alienation from the school community, they are likely to put forth little effort to learn.” Obviously, this feeling of alienation will serve as a major obstacle to students developing a mindset and accompanying behaviors that embody growth and perseverance.

I enthusiastically support Farrington’s emphasis on the importance of a sense of belonging as well as the teacher’s observation about the necessity to have a “trusting, caring relationship” as precursors to learning. I believe most teachers and school administrators would concur with their viewpoints. However, occasionally I hear such comments as, “I wish I would have more time to focus on social-emotional factors, but I can barely get through the assigned curriculum” or “I have to spend so much of the day preparing my students for state-wide tests; if they don’t do well on these tests, it will be

seen as a reflection of my lack of teaching ability” or as one teacher told me this past month, “I really am not prepared to deal with a student’s emotional life.”

The Myth of “Extracurricular”

I increasingly address these concerns in my presentations. As I noted in one of my website articles last year, my position has been and continues to be that nurturing the social-emotional well-being of students is not an extracurricular activity that drains precious time from teaching academic material. If anything, there is a body of research that indicates that strategies to enrich the emotional and physical well-being of students as well as their relationship with teachers do not take time from teaching subject content but actually improve the behavior of students and their capacity for learning.

In addition, based on responses to questionnaires I have administered to educators, these strategies are often simple gestures that can become part of a teacher’s daily repertoire—gestures that communicate a welcoming and caring attitude towards students. As Shawn Achor describes in his book *The Happiness Advantage*, “We become more successful when we are happier and more positive.” Studies demonstrate that it is not success that leads to happiness but rather happiness, which Achor defines as positive emotions together with a sense of purpose and meaning, that creates a climate for success. To focus initially on creating positive emotions in a classroom should not be interpreted as downplaying academics but rather as establishing an environment in which students will be primed and motivated to learn.

To illustrate the power of the relationship I often ask teachers and administrators at my workshops to reflect on classes they had as students in which they felt comfortable, in which they sensed how much their teacher enjoyed teaching and cared about them. Invariably, as they consider those positive classroom experiences, they report they felt more secure and safe, were less concerned about making a mistake, and were more receptive to participating and learning. As one teacher told me in describing a very supportive teacher he had, “I never worried about making a mistake or feeling foolish in her classroom. The way she treated all of us made it easier to learn. I try to model my own behavior with my students after her.”

In contrast, when I request educators to think about classes they attended as students that lacked a positive climate, they describe teachers who “were not very

welcoming or encouraging,” “blamed students if they had difficulty learning the material,” “didn’t smile,” “were sarcastic,” and “didn’t seem to enjoy teaching or like the students.” One elementary school teacher described her fourth grade teacher’s response to her missing the entire second week of class because of being ill. “When I came back she didn’t even ask how I felt. Instead, she told me that I would have to catch up on the work I missed. Can you imagine that?”

In continuing with this exercise, I emphasize that just as all of us have words to describe the teachers we had as students (for some of us decades earlier), our students will have words to describe us in the present and in the years ahead. They will have stories to tell about us just as we recount stories, both positive and negative, about our teachers. I ask:

“What words do you hope your students use to describe you?”

“What stories do you hope they will tell about you in years ahead?”

“What do you say and do with your students today so that they are likely to describe you with words you hope they will use?”

“If years from now someone asked your students about some of their best memories of their teachers, would they immediately recall experiences they had in your classroom?”

“If any of your students become teachers themselves, would they strive to model their behavior after yours?”

Or, as one teacher reported with palpable emotion, “I had a teacher who was sarcastic and belittling to me and other students. When I think about her class I make certain that I don’t say things to my students that she said to us.”

Educators have told me that when I raise these kinds of questions at my presentations, they elicit memories filled with strong emotions. The reaction to these questions should remind us that we have the capacity to create a classroom atmosphere filled with feelings of caring, respect, safety, and security in which learning, excitement, and fun thrive. Or, we can also generate feelings very different from these that serve as obstacles to social-emotional growth and academic success.

A Hope and an Observation

It is my hope that as we consider how best to nurture positive mindsets and learning in our students, we examine our own mindsets and recognize that a primary task is to foster a sense of belonging, caring, and connectedness with all of our students. In this regard I am reminded of the late teacher and psychologist Haim Ginott's often quoted observation:

I've come to a frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It's my personal approach that creates the climate. It's my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher, I possess a tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or deescalated and a child humanized or dehumanized.

Words well-worth keeping in the forefront of our thinking and practices.

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