

The Impact of PGDs in Schools

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Many of my past September articles have addressed themes related to education and school climate, especially since the end of summer ushers in the start of a new school year. It is also a period during which I have had the pleasure of being the opening day speaker at a number of schools and school districts. A sense of excitement and anticipation always permeates these events as teachers, administrators, and other school staff see each other for the first time in months, welcome new staff, and prepare for the arrival of students.

During my presentations I emphasize the importance of creating a “motivating environment” in which all members of the school community feel welcome and safe. When these feelings exist, they provide a climate for effective teaching and learning that goes beyond academics and embrace the reinforcement of such attributes as empathy, caring, and altruism. As I have emphasized in previous writings, the presence of positive emotions in the school setting impacts on motivation, learning, self-discipline, and resilience.

In this article I will highlight one variable that I consider to be essential in generating positive emotions in schools—namely, a student’s sense of belonging and connectedness. Not only does this variable serve as a source of enrichment in the lives of students, but I believe it can also lessen stress and possible burnout in school staff.

To Feel Welcome

A number of years ago I read an article in which an educator advised that teachers should spend less time at the beginning of the school year reviewing rules and regulations and more time asking, “What can I do to help each student feel welcome in my presence?” While I am certain this teacher valued the importance of rules to ensure a safe and secure environment, what she was essentially advocating was that equal, if not greater, attention should be afforded to reinforcing a sense of connection with students.

Her message about feeling welcome resonated with a question I am frequently asked, namely, what do I consider to be the most effective form of discipline? My answer? “Discipline is most effective in the context of a good relationship.” I have been

impressed—including during my position as the principal of a school in a locked door unit for children and adolescents in a psychiatric hospital—that when teachers, administrators, and other school staff focus on developing a positive relationship with students, discipline problems will be reduced and easier to manage. I believe that the establishment of a secure relationship with teachers is a significant determinant of the behavior displayed by students.

Relatedly, a number of psychologists and educators such as Edward Deci at the University of Rochester and Camille Farrington at the University of Chicago have cited a feeling of belonging in schools, together with strong connections with teachers and other staff as crucial sources of motivation and learning.

Positive Greetings

Various strategies are available to facilitate a sense of belonging and connectedness. I have asked students of all ages what might a teacher, administrator, or other staff member say or do on a regular basis to help them feel welcome at school. The two most frequent responses I've received were “greet me by name” and “smile.”

Such simple but powerful advice. And there is research to back up the wisdom of this advice. As an example, an article written by Youki Terada titled “Welcoming Students with a Smile” and posted on the edutopia.org website, reported the benefits to both students and teachers when teachers greeted students at the door.

Terada cited a study conducted by Clayton Cook, on the faculty of the University of Minnesota, and his colleagues that involved more than 200 middle school students in 10 classrooms. The study examined the impact of Positive Greetings at the Door (PGD). PGDs included the following behaviors on the part of teachers who stood at the doors to their classrooms as students entered:

Say the student's name.

Make eye contact.

Use a friendly nonverbal greeting, such as a handshake, high five, or thumbs-up.

Give a few words of encouragement.

Ask how their day is going.

Teachers reported that the PGD strategy was realistic and reasonable given the many daily demands they face. The results of applying PGDs were very encouraging.

Terada noted, “Greeting students at the door sets a positive tone and can increase engagement and reduce disruptive behavior. Spending a few moments welcoming students promotes a sense of belonging giving them social and emotional support that helps them feel invested in their learning.”

The introduction of teachers using PGDs led to a 20% increase in student engagement, while disruptive behavior decreased by 9%, which potentially could result in “an additional hour of engagement over the course of a five-hour instructional day.” In discussing the measures of engagement and disruptive behavior, Terada observed, “Both measures improved in classrooms where teachers greeted their students, confirming what many teachers already know. Meeting students’ emotional needs is just as important as meeting their academic needs.”

I believe that most educators would agree with this last conclusion. However, in this age of high stakes testing in which many teachers have told me that they are overwhelmed by the amount of academic material they must cover, an unfortunate belief has emerged, namely, that expending time and energy on addressing the social-emotional needs of students will divert precious time from teaching academic content. A common refrain I have heard is, “I wish I could pay more attention to the social-emotional lives of my students, but I don’t have the time to do so.”

An “Extra” Curriculum?

I am convinced from my own experiences as well as from feedback I have received from numerous educators that reinforcing a student’s sense of belonging and security is not an “extra” curriculum that siphons time from teaching academics; if anything, concentrating on these variables represents a proactive approach that provides the foundation for enhanced motivation and learning.

Conclusions reached by Cook and his colleagues support this viewpoint. They noted, “The results from this study suggest that teachers who spend time on the front end to implement strategies such as the PGD will eventually save more time on the back end by spending less time reacting to problem behavior and more time on instruction.”

These researchers examined the question of why seemingly small positive greetings have such a noticeable impact on students. They concluded that PGDs create a “sense of connection and belonging and this is particularly important considering the

research demonstrating that achievement motivation is often a by-product of social learning.” They also observed that if teachers focus primarily on the punishment of disruptive behaviors rather than on the prevention of such behaviors, the punishment meted out often backfires. In the absence of a positive relationship with teachers, students are more likely to display disruptive behavior and resist attempts to stop such behavior.

I have long advocated the adoption of a preventive over a reactive approach. Thus, I was delighted to read in Terada’s piece the following advice: “So instead of asking, ‘How can I fix misbehavior?’ teachers could ask, ‘How can I create a classroom environment that discourages misbehavior in the first place?’” Creating a sense of belonging and developing positive relations are basic foundations of a proactive stance.

A Benefit to Teachers

Terada reported that not surprisingly the existence of a welcoming classroom benefits not only students but teachers as well. A study conducted by Anna Sullivan and her colleagues at the University of South Australia found that 53 percent of teachers felt stressed by student disengagement and disruptive behavior. Studies have shown that issues of classroom management represent the most pressing worries of teachers and frequently eventuated in job dissatisfaction and burnout—a problem that can be eased by PGDs.

It’s noteworthy that the practice of PGDs takes relatively little time to initiate and can significantly improve student learning and classroom behavior and lessen stress in teachers. In addition, the very act of engaging in welcoming behaviors improves the mood of teachers, which is likely to “rub off” on students, prompting a positive cycle.

When teachers see that small gestures or actions on their part can have such a noticeable impact on students, it also reinforces a belief in what I have called “personal control.” They feel empowered, recognizing that there are realistic strategies they can apply to improve their relationship with students and the climate in their classroom. The belief in personal control lessens stress and pessimism and reinforces a sense of ownership, optimism, and resilience.

One final comment. We all want to feel welcome in the settings in which we work. I strongly recommend that all staff in schools consider ways to be welcoming not only to students but to their colleagues as well.

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