

Positive Emotions and Purpose in the Classroom

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I feel very fortunate to have the opportunity each year to share my thoughts about education and school climate with thousands of teachers and school administrators and in turn to learn from their insights and experiences—to hear about the joys and purpose that are associated with teaching as well as the many frustrations that are part of the educational scene in today’s world. Although I speak at schools and/or school districts throughout the year, I especially do so during the month of August and the first week or two of September prior to the beginning of the new school year.

In the past few weeks my presentations have emphasized themes I have addressed for a number of years, namely, the mindset and practices of educators who truly touch the hearts and minds of students. I have highlighted the lifelong impact that teachers have on students, on their hopes and dreams, their motivation to learn, and their capacity to confront setbacks and challenges and become resilient. To illustrate this impact I ask teachers to recall images of their own teachers when they were students and the influence these teachers had on their lives. I ask them to consider the words they would use to describe teachers who cared about and respected them as well as those teachers who were perceived negatively.

This exercise often evokes strong emotions from participants in my workshops, regardless of how many years have passed since they were students. I remind my audience that just as they have words and images to describe their teachers, their students have words and images to describe them. I ask, “What words do you hope your students will use to describe you? What do you actually say or do so that your students will use these words? What words do you think they will actually use?” One purpose in asking these questions is to reinforce the message that we must never underestimate the incredible influence of an educator to change the course of a student’s life either in a positive or negative direction.

Feeling Disempowered in the Classroom

In today’s atmosphere of high-stakes testing and what many teachers perceive to be an ongoing criticism of their effectiveness, it is disheartening to hear from educators

who feel disempowered, disillusioned, and in many instances, disrespected. They believe their voices are not being heard. One frustrated teacher who has been in the profession for more than 20 years told me that he increasingly feels that he has less and less latitude over what and how he teaches in his own classroom. Another teacher observed, “I feel that what I am doing in the classroom today is being dictated by someone in the State Department of Education who has not been in a classroom in years.”

While many teachers may not have experienced the frustrations that these teachers have, I have discovered that others have. As one example, phrases such as “teaching to the test rather than the child” are used by a number of educators to describe what seems to be an all-consuming emphasis on ensuring that students achieve high test scores as a criterion for teacher effectiveness. As one teacher bemoaned, “So many factors are involved in test scores, but many of us feel that lower scores are always attributed to a lack of competency in teachers.”

When teachers harbor any of these negative thoughts and emotions, when they feel disempowered, when they feel burdened by educational requirements dictated by others, it can be emotionally and physically exhausting. I have heard from dedicated teachers that the increased demands they face on a daily basis have left them less able to attend to what is often referred to as the “whole” child, a concept that includes both social-emotional and academic needs. I can empathize with this view, while offering the following perspective.

A Focus on the “Whole” Child: An Extra Curriculum?

I believe that addressing the needs of the “whole” child can actually contribute to an atmosphere in which learning is facilitated and students display greater motivation, self-discipline, and responsibility. I also believe that as teachers create such an atmosphere they will gain a greater appreciation of the impact they have on their students that goes far beyond the teaching of a particular academic subject. It is unfortunate that in certain quarters a dichotomy has emerged in education, housed in the assumption that a focus on enriching the social and emotional well-being of students diverts time from teaching academic subjects and preparing students to obtain high scores on the many tests they will take.

My position has been and continues to be that nurturing the social-emotional welfare of students is not an extra curriculum that lessens time for teaching; if anything, it enhances academic instruction. Years ago I heard the following observation, “Students don’t care what you know until they first know you care.” Learning at any age is most effective in an environment in which students feel safe, secure, and respected.

When teachers question to what extent they can create such an environment, when they feel what one teacher recently described as “disenfranchised,” I refer to an article I read years ago. The author acknowledged that while teachers may not have as much input as they would desire in determining the curriculum, teaching methods, and educational requirements in their own classroom, they should not lose sight of their “wiggle room,” namely, what classroom factors they can control.

“Wiggle Room”

The image of “wiggle room” resonated with a theme I have proposed in my views about stress and resilience, namely, that “we are the authors of our own lives.” Without minimizing the frustrations that many teachers face, I encourage them to embrace the goal of expanding their wiggle room and appreciate that they have control over a significant dynamic in the classroom, namely, the attitudes and behaviors they choose to adopt and display. This extent of one’s “personal control” may not always be as great as teachers would prefer, but they can still choose to maintain a positive attitude rather than succumbing to a negative or pessimistic outlook. Teachers can choose to relate to students in a manner that conveys the message, “We care about you and will do our best to help you to learn and to succeed.”

The positive attitude required to create a caring and stimulating learning environment parallels the views expressed by Shawn Achor in his thought-provoking, bestselling book *The Happiness Advantage*. Achor defines happiness “as the experience of positive emotions—pleasure combined with deeper feelings of meaning and purpose. Happiness implies a positive mood in the present and a positive outlook for the future.”

Achor writes that the definition of happiness that most resonates with his view is that proposed by Aristotle who used the word *eudaimonia*, which does not translate directly to happiness but rather to *human flourishing*. Achor emphasizes that Aristotle’s

definition “acknowledges that happiness is not all about smiley faces and rainbows. For me, happiness is the joy we feel striving after our potential.”

Happiness Precedes Success

A major tenet of Achor’s perspective is that it is not success that leads to happiness. Rather as he contends, “New research in psychology and neuroscience shows that it works the other way around: We become more successful *when* we are happier and more positive.” Achor offers many examples of this position, including “doctors put in a positive mood before making a diagnosis show almost three times more intelligence and creativity than doctors in a neutral state, and they make accurate diagnoses 19 percent faster.” He adds, “Students primed to feel happy before taking math achievement tests far outperform their neutral peers.”

Applying these research findings to the school environment indicates that an essential task for teachers at the beginning of the school year—one that I have advocated for many years—is to focus initially on creating a classroom atmosphere that supports positive emotions together with a sense of purpose and meaning. This is not to imply that the nurturance of social-emotional factors is more important than teaching academic subjects. Rather, it recognizes that without the establishment of a positive climate rooted in a caring student-teacher relationship, the learning process will be compromised and, in my experience, problems related to a lack of discipline and motivation will arise.

I am often asked what specific, realistic strategies would I recommend for creating positive emotions and a sense of purpose for students in a classroom. I reply that an excellent resource is found within ourselves, in recalling and using our own experiences as students. Similar to questions I posed earlier in this article, I ask teachers to reflect upon their student days and to consider what actions on the part of their teachers helped them to feel welcome and secure. I also encourage them to think about the actions of teachers that contributed to negative emotions such as feeling unwelcome, anxious, and alienated. I then ask them to consider how they use these positive and negative memories to guide what they do in the classroom today.

For the purpose of obtaining data for a book I authored years ago about school climate, I requested teachers and school administrators to answer the questions raised in the previous paragraph in an anonymous questionnaire. Their responses provided a

wealth of information about teacher behaviors that can either enrich or deplete the experiences of students. I often classify the positive responses I received within the heading of “the importance of the seemingly small gestures.”

Small Gestures, Lifelong Memories

What were some of these seemingly small gestures that are recalled with fondness years later? They include: a teacher greeting me by name, smiling at me, asking how I was feeling after I was out with an illness for a few days, involving the class in creating some of the rules for the classroom, remembering my dog’s name, being supportive when I made mistakes. Respondents to the questionnaire also reported how much more motivated they were to learn from teachers who displayed these behaviors compared with those teachers who were more remote, judgmental, and less connected with students.

There was a second distinct theme of positive memories that emerged in my research, one that I emphasize in all of my presentations and writings. These memories involved being asked to make a positive difference in the lives of others, including one’s classmates. Examples include: passing out the milk and straws, tutoring a younger child, being a “line monitor,” bringing messages to the office, and helping to paint a mural in the lobby of the school. These “contributory activities” add meaning to one’s life and increase a sense of belonging in the school environment. I could not help thinking of this theme as I read Achor’s definition of happiness as “pleasure combined with deeper feelings of meaning and purpose.”

I hope these examples of seemingly small gestures and contributory activities provide evidence that engaging a student’s social-emotional life need not take time from teaching academic material. Instead, positive emotions serve to reinforce motivation and learning and support Achor’s belief that happiness precedes success.

Relationships: A Source of Strength for Our Students

In ending, I hope that all teachers recognize that what they say and do in the classroom has a lifelong impact on students. If we accept that we are the “authors of our own lives,” we are a step closer to creating classrooms in which positive emotions, meaning, purpose, caring, and learning can thrive. I was reminded of the impact of teachers while reading a recent on-line article from the Harvard Graduate School of

Education written by Victoria Jones and titled, “When the Classroom Feels Hostile: How Stigma, Stereotype, and Labels Can Affect Kids with Learning Disabilities.”

The article addresses the stigma and stereotypes associated with having a particular label, but I believe the insights of Dr. Gabrielle Rappolt-Schlichtmann, Co-President and Chief Learning & Science Officer of the organization CAST, are relevant for all students. When asked by Jones, “What can educators do to recognize and help students overcome social-emotional threats (stigma and stereotypes)?” Rappolt-Schlichtmann answers:

Teachers can make a huge difference. A big key to mitigating students’ feelings of stigma is really in that relationship between teacher and student. So much of the time, as we progress up the grades, there’s less focus on teachers developing a close interpersonal relationship with the kids in their classroom. Yet having a close and supportive relationship with a teacher can make all the difference for a student who feels undervalued or stigmatized.

While students who feel vulnerable and stigmatized are especially in need of this kind of supportive relationship if they are to experience positive emotions, safety, and success in school, all students can benefit from such a relationship. It is within such a relationship that Achor’s notion of happiness will be nurtured, providing the foundation for learning and thriving in school.

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