

The Secret Sauce for Student Success: Building Relationships!

By Susan Ciminelli, White Waves Education Consulting

Who is this for?

Educators every day are hearing and seeing more about trauma and how their students are affected. There are many sources of trauma including physical, emotional, and sexual abuse; neglect; exposure to community violence; bullying; natural disasters; poverty; homelessness; immigration; and parental issues such as domestic violence, incarceration, death, mental illness, involvement in substance abuse, and military deployments. Such experiences undermine students' ability to learn, form relationships, and manage their feelings and behavior. These experiences and the subsequent collateral damage place students at increased risk for trauma and a range of negative academic, social, emotional, and occupational outcomes (Rossen & Hull, 2013).

What can we educators do? In this article, I give you some powerful tools to embed in your daily classroom practice and improve your own understanding of what helps.

Start Your Day and Theirs with Gratitude

If your class begins and you feel like you're herding cats in order to start, then your students pre-class mental states are getting in the way. Plan an activity at the start of class that will help students shift their "mental gears" into a more positive and receptive mental state, ready to learn. Most of us are not in the habit of resetting our attitudes and outlook on life, but it can be one of the healthiest things you could do for yourself. There are many studies on the positive effects of expressing gratitude. You can find these at The Greater Good at <http://greatergood.berkeley.edu>. A recent study from the University of Limerick found that sharing gratitude or thanking another has a long-term positive effect that doesn't occur with merely thinking or writing about it.

Start your class off with a moment to think of something good and exchange this thought with a peer. An attitude of gratitude activity each day will become a habit of thinking that will smooth the way for learning. Smaller children will readily adopt this as a routine. With older students, change up the activity often enough to keep them engaged. One day, have students write it out and exchange papers. Another day, have students draw a picture or find a partner and tell something that went well in the past 24 hours. The point is not to just think of something to be grateful for, but to share it.

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Don't Assume – Ask

We humans pick up on each other's body language. We think we know what's going on in the brain of the other person. But do we really get it right? I contend that body language does not effectively communicate and that's why cave men developed language. It's easy to be wrapped up in our own lives and to do lists, and not pick up on cues from body language.

Instead, plan to check in. Take time to speak conversationally to each of your students. Make a point to have spoken with each student - if you have the same class all day, this can be planned at a time of the day. If you have multiple classes, plan over the course of the week. The personal attention doesn't have to be a whole conversation. Even a greeting or a short positive comment can give you a stronger indication of a student's mental state. And if you pick up on a problem, don't assume, ask your student if he or she is okay. Be prepared to follow through and listen. Even if your student says nothings wrong, at least he knows you care. That goes a long way toward building trust in you.

More importantly, children and adolescents need positive relationships with consistently-stable, self-regulated adults, something that's often missing in the lives of at-risk students, victims of trauma, and children from poverty. In a long-standing study by The Search Institute, researchers identified 40 Developmental Assets that are important to the success and well-being of youth. With more than 89,000 U.S. youths surveyed in 2010 alone, the Search Institute continues to find that the more developmental assets students have, the more likely they are to be persistent in the face of challenges and adversity. Family, teachers, and other caring adults need to be proactive and make those connections and show students they are cared about and listened to.

Don't assume students have a way to get home from an after-school activity. Teachers did not imagine that any of their students were homeless or what homelessness is. Homelessness is NOT an identity. From a student – she didn't realize she was considered to be homeless. It was apparent teachers were clueless, did not have a counselor – didn't identify resources to help homeless kids because they weren't trained to be mindful of kids who may be homeless or an unaccompanied youth. School became the stable environment. Some teens are actually taking care of their parent.

I have a caveat regarding asking students within earshot of their peers. I recommend giving each student a "privacy card". It could be a tagboard "card", an index card, a circle cut from craft foam, even a plastic kwik lok tag used on bread bags – whatever it is, the point is to have a privacy agreement in your

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classroom. This means if you ask a student something that he doesn't want to answer within earshot of his peers, the student can request a private response. The student hands you his "card" and you agree to talk about this in private either now or at a convenient moment during class. This allows a student to respect your request to understand a situation and you respect the student's privacy. At the end of the conversation, the teacher returns the "privacy" card to the student. Before implementing this, be clear that this is not about secrecy but merely the opportunity to reply to a question. There are a variety of reasons to allow this for students who are homeless, taking care of a parent or sibling at home, being a homeless unaccompanied youth or living in poverty and not wanting peers to know about their personal life.

What Does the Research Say about Positive Relationships?

There are quite a few research studies about the significance of positive teacher-student relationships and its impact on learning. One such study is the "Measures of Effective Teaching Project" referred to as the MET project. Pivotal to this research study was the feedback researchers gathered from the students themselves. The survey questions measured student perceptions of seven teacher qualities associated with teacher relationships and trust with their students. The seven qualities were: Care, Control, Clarify, Challenge, Captivate, Confer, and Consolidate. The survey was designed for students to respond with true or false to statements like - "This class keeps my attention - I don't get bored." or "My teacher gives us time to explain our ideas."

The researchers found that students of teachers who scored highly in the "Seven C's" made academic growth of 14.6 months compared to those in classes taught by teachers with low scores in the Seven C's where students made 10 months growth - a normal school year. For struggling students, having a teacher who is strong in building relationships with students can make a big difference in their learning.

John Hattie compiled more than 800 research studies, analyzed the findings and published them in his book "Visible Learning". More than 229 of these studies looked at the impact of teacher-student relationships on student academic growth. As part of his work, John and his team developed a way to compare what influences learning and by how much. This scale allowed him to rank all 138 influences, including teacher-student relationships and identify which had the most positive effects on student academic growth. On a scale from 0.00 to 1.00, an average school year's academic growth was between .40 and .50. Teacher-student relationships ranked a powerful #11 of the 138 influences with an effect size of .72. Teachers who strengthen their relationships with their

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students, using the Seven C's as a guide, will have new super powers that help their students make bigger academic gains.

Emotional States are Learned from Others, especially Adults

Humans are born with only 6 innate emotional responses to their environment. These are: happy, sad, fear, surprise, disgust and anger. All other emotional responses are more nuanced and are learned from observing others, usually adults or older peers. Examples of higher-level emotions are gratitude, frustration, helplessness, optimism, confidence, and hopefulness. Children from homes where there is a lack of self-regulated adult role models often do not see the positive and more sophisticated responses. This also means these children will also have a limited range of emotions with which to respond and the verbal capacity to describe to others.

Behaviors result from the thinking that precipitated them. When children do not have an understanding of a full range of emotional responses, adults, especially those responding to poor behavior, assume the child's behavior is merely an inappropriate choice. However for low SES or student from homes where there is domestic violence, child abuse or neglect, they may benefit greatly from learning positive emotional management like mindfulness in response to stress, an attitude of gratitude, and developing a sense of humor. Teachers who embed these – gratitude, humor and mindfulness into daily classroom routines – as a part of their instruction, not only teach those more nuanced responses, but also provide a model for self-regulating the negative behaviors.

Understand Your Student's Experience to Understand Behavior

Although educators have recognized the negative impact of a student's low socio-economic status on academic performance, sometimes we don't fully understand how this directly affects the child and why it should affect learning. Circumstances with a child's home conditions and relationships with their family can contribute to a lack of physical activity and emotional release, exposure to physical hazards like toxins, poor hygiene, asthma triggers and domestic violence and other threats. In addition lack of sleep, poor nutrition and lack of access to medical care can create high levels of stress for both the child and the adult caregivers in the home. Poor relationships and a lack of positive adult role models result in poorly developed social skills, mistrust and an inability to self-regulate emotional response, especially when perceiving threats to their physical or emotional safety. This is where educators need to

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read case studies that fully reveal real life circumstances children experience. Without awareness, educators can easily misinterpret behaviors they see.

Childhood trauma is alarmingly high and teachers need to take a proactive and informed stance on trauma in order to correctly identify a child's behavior. Children respond to trauma in ways that may look to an uninformed adult like shyness, defiance, laziness or inattention while others give so few outward indicators of trauma that we are frequently caught unawares and unprepared. Teachers can easily make uninformed, inaccurate interpretations of a child's outward behaviors and the teacher's response can compound the problem by adding more stress for that child who is already having difficulty coping with trauma. Teachers may be frustrated when typical classroom interventions such as a behavior plan that includes incentives and disincentives fail to bring about improved behavior. Typical concerns like bringing completed homework into class when it's due may be virtually impossible to do for a child under traumatic stress living in a difficult environment at home, unbeknownst to the teacher. Punitive measures for lack of student compliance with homework completion have been a thorn in the sides of teachers, students and parents alike. The success of instructional innovations like "flipped classrooms" where homework is done in class and the instructions or modeling is recorded on video may be a result of recognizing the difficulties of children's home life and a reassessment of what's important. In the fall of 2016 an entire elementary school staff and their principal sent a message to parents. There will be no "homework" assigned. Instead, focus on family time together - enjoy dinner together, read a book together for fun, get a good night's sleep. No more homework - all student work will be "school work". I can't wait to learn how things went this year. I'm not a gambler, but I'll bet everyone's school year improved dramatically.

Teachers and school leaders need to not only be aware and build trauma-sensitive classrooms, they also need to rethink the policies and expectations for students and parents that are based on a family structure and paradigm from the Fifties. A start to learning more could be done with awareness of current research studies such as the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study

Clues from Recent Medical Science

Recent technological developments in medical diagnostic tools allow us to "see" inside the brain. Researchers like Dr. Daniel Amen have been able to help their patients as a result of understanding what happens to our brains under a variety of conditions. Perhaps the most revealing information comes from SPECT scans of brains under toxic stress. The detrimental effect on mental performance of stress is well established scientifically. Chronic stress, also

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called “toxic stress” brings about "Survival-Oriented-Behavior" (SOB) associated with suppression of the cortical centers in the forebrain responsible for judgment, intelligence and foresight. This also affects behaviors and choices associated with ethics and empathy. In people with chronic stress, the SPECT scan reveals there are large "functional holes", in the image. These inactive regions have much less electrical and blood flow activity in the prefrontal cortex. We can see in the image, the fight or flight part of the brain - the amygdala - is getting most of the brain resources.

When you consider the detrimental effects on psychological performance as well as behavior and psychological health, it becomes apparent that chronic stress is something that needs to be addressed. A reduction of chronic stress for both children and adults in the work force would save educational, societal and business sectors very large sums through improved performance at work, improved relations and cooperation as well as decreased absenteeism.

I am a firm believer that teachers need to know how the brain functions in order to be more effective educators. Understanding the brain and the effects of chronic stress and trauma has an added benefit. Teachers will finally stop “taking it personally” when encountering student behavior that interferes with instruction. Instead, the teacher will rely on their ability to self-regulate their reactions and draw on their knowledge of the brain, trauma and the individual student’s needs to respond with an appropriate and effective intervention. Not only does a teacher’s self-regulation play a key part in the success of handling behaviors, it also helps the child see an adult model self-regulation. As I said before, children expand their own emotional vocabulary by observing nuanced responses from others, especially the adults in their lives.

Teach and Model Self-Regulation

We don’t have to wait for bad behavior to teach emotional regulation; we can also teach positive emotional vocabulary to children. Through direct instruction and embedded classroom routines, we can help reduce the stress load on our students and ourselves. One of the documented hazards of working with at-risk students is the emotional drain on our own psyche. Sometimes referred to as “compassion fatigue, teachers need to receive professional development that helps teachers build in coping techniques, monitor their own emotions and seek out appropriate support when necessary. There are many moments throughout the day that teachers can embed brief activities that release stress and teach self-regulation to students that also help everyone in the class, teachers included. Stress responds to several things – physical

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activity, social interaction, humor, music, and stillness like yoga or meditation with a focus on deep breathing. Inserting a variety of these brief moments colloquially called “brain breaks” as appropriate for the activities immediately preceding or following the “brain break” can make otherwise dull or heavy content more palatable to learners.

Teachers can take these to the next level by making the “break” an opportunity to deliver new information in small “chunks”, ideally breaking activities requiring intense focus – such as listening to the teacher - into less than 20 minutes for adults and even less duration for children depending on the age or stress load of the class.

In addition to the “brain breaks” and setting time limits on activities requiring the learners’ intense focus, teachers who tap into the brain’s natural mechanisms for all three types of memory making, have a much higher academic growth rate for their students. Teachers who learn about how the brain processes working memory, short-term memory and long-term memory have a new super-power when it comes to making the most of the time available to make learning stick.

Give Them a User’s Manual for Their Own Brain

Children as well as many adults have a fixed mindset about their own brain. Much of what we now know about the brain is recently discovered, so children may have formed their mindset about their own brain from their parents or others. It is a huge help to teach children while they are as young as Kindergarten about how their brains work. One of my favorite books for this is “Your Fantastic, Elastic Brain: Stretch it, Shape It” by Dr. JoAnn Deak. This is such a great book, I would get older students, who might not otherwise think this book was for their age, read this to a younger child. There is also a promotional video of the book, which would give you an idea how this book covers the topic. For older students – Middle School or High School age, a great book is “Fighting Invisible Tigers” by Earl Hipp from FreeSpirit Publishing. For older teens and young adults, there’s a great website <http://youth.anxietybc.com/anxiety-101>

Regardless of any or all these resources, understanding the brain is a significant antidote to misconceptions that interfere with one’s self image and beliefs regarding one’s capacity to learn. If you do nothing else, teach your students that brains grow, get stronger and better the more the brain is used.

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Serving up The Secret Sauce

The Secret Sauce should not be a secret. It should be served in every classroom to every student. This “sauce” makes learning, the kind that many students find as dry and tasteless as sawdust, a joyful and memorable. The “sauce” is what keeps students coming to your class because it the nutrition needed for our students, many of who suffer from trauma and have few consistently self-regulated adults to count on in their lives. The ingredients build kindness, hopefulness, patience, respect, understanding and self-confidence. Through the strategies I’ve shared, the teacher can establish three positive relationships – student and teacher, student and peers, and most importantly the student with himself. So pour it on liberally and make a positive difference that will last a lifetime.

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