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Abstract:

When students know that their teachers genuinely care, they respond by exerting greater effort to reach their potential.

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When students know that their teachers genuinely care, they respond by exerting greater effort to reach their potential.

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Teachers teach because they care. Teaching young people is what they do best. It requires long hours, patience, and care.

—*Horace Mann (1796–1859)*

Most people can recall a favorite teacher, usually by name. If you ask what they remember most about this person, a frequent response is that this teacher genuinely cared about each student. Teacher-learner relationships are founded on the fundamental human need of knowing that another person genuinely cares. Students know when they are recognized, understood, and respected for their unique abilities and interests by their teachers.

Teachers are effective when they deeply care about the learning of each student. As Noddings (1992, 27) emphasized, "Caring is the very bedrock of all successful education." Teachers who believe in their students' abilities demonstrate that they care by placing the learners at the center of the educational process. With this focus on caring foremost, teachers engage students actively in the learning process. This engagement is essential for learning to be fun, meaningful, and enduring. The caring teacher continually reflects on and refines his or her instructional approaches to ensure that the needs of each student are met.

Believing in Students' Abilities to Achieve

The theory of the Pygmalion effect, or self-fulfilling prophecy, when applied to education posits that if teachers continuously show that they believe in students' abilities, almost all students will respond with greater effort. Pedersen, Faucher, and Eaton (1978) described the long-term impact on student learning of one remarkable first-grade teacher. The children she taught, despite their challenging life circumstances, achieved at higher levels than other students throughout their years in school. As adults, all recalled how much this teacher cared. They emphasized that her confidence in their abilities helped them believe in themselves and become productive citizens.

Caring teachers nurture relationships with students through affirming students' efforts and talents. These teachers realize that learning is much more likely to occur when positive, reinforcing comments outnumber critical comments. While teachers will, at times, provide constructive critiques of the performances of students, caring teachers persistently reward the efforts of students, their learning from mistakes, and their not giving up even though they sometimes struggle to learn. Caring teachers' expectations contribute to students' feelings that their efforts will be rewarded as learning becomes more meaningful.

A great example of a caring teacher was Anne Sullivan, who believed that Helen Keller could learn to read and write, even though others doubted this was possible for a deaf and blind person. A book of tribute by Helen Keller (1985), entitled *Teacher*, affirmed that Keller knew how much Sullivan cared. Another teacher who deeply cared was Jaime Escalante, who developed a program to help poor, ethnic minority students in East Los Angeles achieve remarkable success in mathematics (Escalante and Dirmann 1990). Escalante refused to accept the prevailing attitude that these youth could not overcome past educational deprivations. Rather, he championed that if these students were taught

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effectively by a caring teacher, they would pass advanced placement tests in preparation for college; and they did.

Anne Sullivan and Jaime Escalante personify caring teachers who put learners at the center of education, because they believe in them. When asked what they teach, caring teachers respond, "I teach children" (not a specific grade level or subject).

Learner-centered education, according to Weimer (2003), requires:

- sharing decision-making with students to expand their involvement;

- supporting students as they build knowledge and make meaning for themselves;

- creating learning environments that facilitate students' greater acceptance of responsibility for their learning;

- expanding students' knowledge base, learning skills, and self-awareness; and

- promoting self-monitoring by students of their learning.

These five concepts coalesce into teachers relinquishing some control to students, which in turn reinforces the confidence that teachers have in students' potential and abilities to excel. As students gain knowledge and understanding, they accept self-responsibility for using this information, reflect on and analyze what they are learning, and commit to building on and applying new knowledge. As students develop confidence in their abilities, learning becomes fun and engaging.

Engaging Students Actively in Learning

Shulman (2004, 36) stated, "To take *learning* seriously, we need to take *learners* seriously." His pedagogies of engagement include expecting quality in students' performances and facilitating the process for this outcome. Through active learning, students become engaged with a problem, solve

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it, and report their solution to classmates so that their learning is open for all to see and assess.

Brown, Anfara, and Roney (2004), in their comparative study of high-performing, suburban middle schools with low-performing, urban middle schools, concluded that high-performing schools had higher academic expectations for students. Bain (2004, 40) agreed that students respond "to the challenge of mastering something, getting inside a subject and trying to understand it in all its complexity."

The caring teacher uses multiple instructional approaches and provides diverse learning experiences to engage students' interest and learning (DeCastro-Ambrosetti and Cho 2005). Action-based or experiential learning teams and problem-based learning are more successful than lectures in helping students see the relevance of what they are expected to learn as well as in helping them remember and apply what they are learning (Bassis 2003; DiLisi et al. 2006; Krockover et al. 2002; McCarthy and Anderson 2000). Alvarez (2002), reporting on the establishment of a grade 6–12 charter school by the University of California–San Diego for under-represented groups at that institution, stated that the curriculum should be designed to address student motivation and engagement by focusing on teaching for understanding. That is, when students are engaged, they are more likely to learn.

Caring teachers establish clear and realistic expectations for the quality of class participation, homework assignments, individual and group projects, collaborative learning experiences, problem-solving exercises, and examinations (Cabrera, Crissman, and Bernal 2002; Colbeck, Campbell, and Bjorklund 2000). In doing so, teachers challenge students to engage with and think critically about real problems, not just memorize facts and regurgitate them on tests (Hernandez, Kaplan, and Schwartz 2006).

Students are more likely to choose to meet, and sometimes exceed, course expectations when they are actively engaged in their learning. This is especially true when new knowledge is connected to

what they already know. Bain (2004, 26) concurred when he stated, "Knowledge is constructed, not received." By connecting new information with existing knowledge, students see the relevancy of what they are expected to learn to their current and future lives.

Being a Reflective Teacher

From teachers' perspectives, believing in students and actively engaging them in their learning lead naturally to thinking about and reflecting on teaching (Escalante and Dirmann 1990). This process includes continually reexamining how and why they teach as they do, and what they can do to facilitate even greater student learning (Bain 2004). Recording reflections about how smoothly a class is organized, if content and questions are presented in coherent and understandable ways, and how actively engaged and intellectually involved students are helps teachers think critically about what is happening during their classes (Keefer 2002).

This reflective process reinforces the importance of creating a caring, learner-centered environment characterized by positive and respectful interactions with students (Taylor et al. 2002). A learner-centered teaching-learning process emphasizes getting to know students by name and on an individual basis, determining where they are in their learning, seeking to instill in them a commitment to learning, and structuring assignments and experiences inside and outside of the classroom that facilitate their learning. Bain (2004) suggested that one principle that guides what the best teachers do is starting with the students, rather than with the discipline. This author agrees that *who* (students) is more important than *what* (disciplinary content).

Closing Thoughts

Caring teachers build relationships with their students. They believe in each student's ability to achieve and shape the teaching-learning process by placing the learner at the center. Effective

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teachers actively engage students' minds while transferring to them greater responsibility for their learning. The teacher who cares is dedicated to a lifelong quest to become the best teacher possible in order to create the optimal learning environment for students.

When teachers genuinely care, students sense it and respond by optimizing their commitment to learning and putting forth greater efforts to reach their potential. Andy Baumgartner (Council of Chief State School Officers 1999), the 1999 National Teacher of the Year, shared a similar position when he suggested, "A nurturing classroom and school involve an environment where students feel safe . . . and one that encourages adventure, exploration and discovery . . . where each child's needs for understanding and attention are understood and met, where they feel loved and treasured."

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