

It Is More Than Just the Standards

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The Teacher

“Concerning a teacher’s influence, I have come to the 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 humor, hurt 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.”

--Haim Ginott

Introduction

Forty-nine states have now established statewide curriculum standards for the purpose of improving the quality of education for every student. It is their common hope that by defining and elevating expectations for all students the achievement of America’s school population will vastly improve. Indeed content standards that spell out what students should know and be able to do are a major step towards promoting academic excellence. However, does anyone truly believe that higher achievement levels can be met by simply marching students through a well-defined standards-based curriculum? I know of no teachers who believe it. Teachers are well aware that as Haim Ginott so aptly says, it is their “tremendous power” that determines what happens in their classrooms. Higher student achievement will occur when more emphasis is put on the training and ongoing support of classroom teachers.

In the May, 2001, issue of *Phi Delta Kappan*, Linda Darling-Hammond states that, “my research and personal experience tell me that the single most important determinant of success for a student is the knowledge and skills of that child’s teacher.” p. 629. She goes on to state that,

In my policy research, I’ve seen how hundreds of curriculum reforms have failed because, where the rubber meets the road, no curriculum reform succeeds if teachers do not have the knowledge of the content and strategies to teach it well. (Goldberg, 2001, p. 630)

The key to student achievement has always been within the teachers themselves. Perhaps it is time to move past the mountains of analytical data and turn our attention towards those teachers who have already proven to be excellent practioners. In order to distinguish factors that help make a classroom work, why not observe and talk with those who already have successful classrooms?

Teachers Who “Go Outside the Lines”

During my observations of science classroom teachers for the past nine years, I have tried to identify certain universal characteristics among those instructors whose students consistently demonstrate high achievement in the area of science. I have observed that the most

extraordinary teachers are those who seem to be able to “go outside the lines” of the traditional teacher-centered setting. They are confident in themselves, and they understand and respect their learners. They possess a deep knowledge about their subject areas, and they are able to help students construct their own meanings. They help students relate new knowledge to their own lives, and they are not afraid take risks in order to ensure student learning. My youngest son’s freshman biology teacher, Tamara Lee, is such a person. Until she moved to another city I used to go to her room and take notes on what went on there with the hope that I could communicate it to my pre-service science education students at the university.

Several Opportunities to Learn

When asked to create a metaphor about her teaching Ms. Lee answers, "It all goes back to the football coach analogy. You don't show a kid a play one time and expect them to get it perfectly! You show them again and again, let them practice, help them refine it, and work *with* them until they get it." She teaches in small bites. Toward the end of a day's lesson, she says, "Get out a scratch piece of paper. . . This is *scratch* paper, so there should be zero stress right now." She administers a short 5 question quiz: "This is review, I'm not grading this. I do not want this back." She waits until everyone finishes then goes over the answers. She asks, "How many of you did better on this quiz than you did on yesterday's quiz?" During the course of a unit she gives them opportunity after opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge. When they struggle for the correct responses she assures them that if they keep at it things will soon begin to make sense. In addressing the issue of mastery learning Ms. Lee says, "I'm able to break most lessons into small understandable parts and then help them put it all together. I want them to *learn* it, not *memorize* it!"

Students are given several opportunities to learn new material in ways best suited to them. They do hands-on activities, they see and hold models, they use the internet, they create group projects, they see film clips, they draw, they dance, they write reflectively, and they engage in all sorts of activities to learn new material. Her goal is to help students create their own knowledge. During one class she asks cooperative learning groups to create square dances to demonstrate their knowledge of cell mitosis. They write their own patter, choreograph the dance, and present their performances to a musical accompaniment. They are graded according to a predetermined rubric that she and the students have co-created. Ms. Lee is an imaginative, creative teacher who regularly attends courses and workshops, goes to conferences, searches the internet, talks with other teachers, and collaborates with students for ideas to make her science instruction more meaningful.

Connecting to the Students' Lives

Ms. Lee tells her class that a student from Louisiana Tech will be conducting a research project on the pet mice in their room during the next month. She tells them how the student is trying to determine the effects of Rogaine on pregnant mice. She ties in a discussion of male pattern baldness with their current area of study in cell biology. As she tells the guys about their chances of going bald she has their complete attention. Students actively listen. They lean forward, listen attentively, ask questions, make comments, and break into individual discussions as soon as they are given the opportunity. Later she tells parents at a Parent Night gathering that her purpose in all of this [the mice experiment] is to get students interested in real research as it happens -- to take it from the abstract to the concrete. She also tells parents about a research report which each student will be required to write: "I do request your help in picking out a topic

-- maybe a disorder or a disease that runs in your family -- something that relates to your family history." Ms. Lee says, "I always like to have a rationale other than 'because it's on the standardized test.' "

In explaining how she is able to relate subject matter to the students' lives she states, "I look at what I have to teach. I try new things, like I did with the mitosis square dance. I didn't know if that would work or not, but for the most part, it did. I'll use that again . . ." She tries to give the students analogies from their own world. A student asks for an explanation of "cytoplasm." Ms. Lee thinks a minute then tells him, "Okay, an analogy -- it's like in fruit jello -- it's the gel but not the fruit in it." On another day she relates a current topic in cell biology to the mononucleosis illness currently plaguing one of the class members.

Students in her room tell me, "She lets us do a lot of labs. We learn a lot on our own." "She lets you ask questions." "She makes learning fun." "It seems like she likes to teach and makes it fun so you learn more." About her own teaching Ms. Lee comments, "I have to make it applicable to them. That's my job, not theirs."

A Matter of Subject Knowledge

Ms. Lee has tremendous knowledge of her subject area. Because of her extensive background in all areas of science, she is able to give examples and go other directions to explain concepts. One student is having trouble understanding how something can be a chromosome and a chromatin at the same time. She is told, "Well, you can be a sister and a daughter at the same time." When asked, her students comment on how intelligent she is; several relate that her in-depth knowledge makes the class more interesting for them and makes her a better teacher. She is an admirable role model for students in that she enjoys learning, she is not afraid to try new things, and she loves to orally elaborate (think out loud) with them.

Her confidence in her own knowledge is what gives Ms. Lee the flexibility she needs to make her classroom engaging while addressing the state science standards for which her students will be accountable. She is able to guide students through their own inquiries, to manage the topics and time in her class, to provide alternative ways to show their knowledge, and to know when they have a true understanding of the concepts.

Moving Beyond the Standards

We can learn a lot by observing Tamara Lee and the hundreds of thousands of other teaching experts in our schools. By carefully reflecting on the qualities we see in exemplary teachers and closely considering the strategies they use, educators can gain tremendous understandings about what it takes to enhance student achievement. Clearly there are things that teachers are doing that have been highly effective for their students and could be utilized by others. Perhaps it is time to turn inward in our profession for insights as well as for inspiration.

Like golfers who study Tiger Woods or performers who try to emulate Elvis, why do we not acclaim and examine our stars of teaching? The standards for sports and performing arts are clearly defined, but it is the individuals who set the ideals for excellence. So it is with teaching. It is more than just the standards. It is the teachers who will make the ultimate difference.

References:

Goldberg, M.F. (2001). Balanced optimism: An interview with Linda Darling-Hammond. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 89 (9), 687-690).