

Outstanding Effective Classrooms

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What makes an outstanding effective classroom, a place in which students, regardless of their family background, are unusually enthusiastic, responsible, and independent — unusually willing and able to use literacy skills as a means of communication? We all know about such classrooms. Yet creating such a situation is viewed by many as something so extraordinarily difficult as to be beyond the reach of most, something which “just happens” as the effect of some undefinable, almost mystical, quality the teacher brings to the situation.

The results of a study I have recently conducted suggests that there is nothing mysterious about an outstanding effective classroom. Rather, it is a carefully structured environment which rests on the foundation of the teacher’s belief that *all students can and want to learn and that they learn best by being actively engaged in work of interest to them*. Those basic beliefs, it appears, generate a feeling of responsibility on the part of the teacher for helping *all students grow*, and thus, a commitment to meet the needs and interests of individual students. Given that commitment, the teacher sets out to acquire alternative classroom strategies (through workshops, conferences, visits to other classrooms, etc.). While not knowing ahead of time precisely what will evolve, the teacher ultimately creates a system of classroom management and organization in which responsibility and control are shared with students.

In the classrooms I studied, the teachers had established such a system by 1) designing their own activity-based curriculum (with sequential writing activities at the core) and 2) building into the environment various strategies for ensuring that students knew how to proceed independently, were accountable for accomplishing what was expected of them, and could be readily monitored and guided as they progressed. I came to think of the environment thus established as a system of “remote control.” The system allowed the teacher to guide

all the students indirectly while working in-depth with those whose needs were the greatest on a given day. As I observed and interviewed students, it became apparent that it was the close match to student needs and interests, coupled with the opportunity to make many of the minute-by-minute decisions regarding their daily work, which favorably affected student willingness and ability to use their skills.

I will elaborate on my findings and conclusions following a brief description of how the study was conducted.

How the study was conducted

A three-phase process was implemented to select classrooms for study. First, nominations were solicited of classrooms thought to be "outstanding" on the basis of reputation for an unusual degree of student willingness and ability to use literacy skills both in school and at home. Then, nominated classrooms were screened for effectiveness on the basis of strong achievement test scores relative to students with similar backgrounds. Finally, the nominated classrooms which also had strong test scores were visited to select those in which the most evidence could be found that students were both willing and able to use their literacy skills as a means of communication. Factors looked at included, for example, to what extent students' writing reflected their drawings or what they had read and to what degree students' informal conversations reflected an interest in and understanding of their work. Care was taken not to focus on methods, but rather, on the effect the environment was having on student enthusiasm, responsibility, self-reliance, and the ability to use their skills creatively.

Three classrooms were selected which will be referred to here as "outstanding" effective classrooms. A fourth classroom was included in the study, one which did not have a particularly strong reputation for student enthusiasm and in which students scored well but did not exhibit the same high degree of willingness to use their skills as in the others. That classroom, which will be referred to here as the "fourth classroom," served as a means of comparison and validation of the importance of what was found in the other three.

Each of the classrooms had approximately 30 students (the exact count fluctuated during the study). The grade levels in the outstanding classrooms were as follows: K-1; 2-3; and

K,1,2,3. The children in the fourth classroom were all in first grade. Special education students were mainstreamed into the three outstanding classrooms (but not in the fourth), and one included two students with Downe's syndrome.

The study spanned a 5-month period, with approximately 30 hours spent in each classroom for observation and interview of participants. Comparisons of findings between classrooms were made following each day's visit. Differences triggered reinvestigation, followed by more comparison, etc., until a plausible explanation could be made of how the situation in the outstanding classrooms was having such a positive effect on students.

Findings from the study

Early on in the study, it was obvious that the classrooms had several general features in common: students were active, allowed to work independently (approximately 65% to 85% of each morning was spent in an independent work period), and provided with individual help as the need arose. Further, the atmosphere in the classrooms was one of high expectations and mutual respect.

As the study progressed and it was possible to analyze what the participants were saying and doing within the workshop-like atmosphere, it was revealed that the teachers held similar beliefs and perceived their role in a similar light. Also, while specific practices looked different between classrooms, they were serving common functions, thus creating a system of classroom organization and management which was strikingly similar from one classroom to the next. What follows is a description first of the psychological properties the teachers held in common, and then, the four-component system of classroom management and organization they had established.

The psychological properties of the teacher

The teachers held remarkably similar views of students and of what they hoped to accomplish with them. Two basic beliefs seemed to be at the heart of the way they perceived students: 1) beliefs about the nature of intelligence and 2) beliefs regarding the nature of man. Specifically, each teacher expressed the belief that intelligence is dynamic, that is, that all children can grow (learn), that none should be "written off"

because of home environment or specific characteristics, even severe handicaps. They also held a multi-faceted view of intelligence, looking beyond the way a child used language to other qualities and talents for an indication of native abilities they could foster.

Further, the teachers expressed a positive view of the nature of man. That is, they felt that all children want to grow, that none are inherently lazy, or need to be coerced into learning. Closely associated with this positive view was the belief that learning was best promoted, *not by doing something to* the child, but *by giving the child something to do* which had meaning and purpose for him. In other words, they believed that, given the proper environment, students would seek out constructive activity and would learn by engaging in that activity, with intervention by the teacher only when needed.

Beginning with the assumption that all children can and want to learn and that they can learn best independently by actively engaging in work of interest to them, the teachers formulated *high expectations for themselves*. They expected themselves to provide an environment which would foster independence and growth in all students and expressed a strong feeling of responsibility for doing so.

The system of classroom organization and management

Given what they expected themselves to accomplish, the teachers had begun, several years prior to the time the study began, to seek out ways of achieving a dual purpose. They sought to develop 1) activities which would hold the children's interest while promoting the development of their literacy skills and 2) strategies which would free them of the role of constant surveillance over the entire group and thus provide the time required to work with individuals. To that end, they had worked through years of trial and error, developing various processes, rules, routines, and procedures which ultimately evolved into a four-component system of classroom organization and management. The system consisted of: 1) processes for developing literacy skills, 2) strategies for ensuring student accountability, 3) strategies for monitoring and guiding growth, and 4) a supportive environment of resources. Each component will be described briefly here.

1. *Processes for Developing Literacy Skills*. The teachers, rather than follow a set of commercially published materials,

had designed their own curriculum. At the core of the curriculum, in each case, was a series of sequential writing activities through which students developed literacy skills while at the same time producing something of interest to them. Following is an example taken from one of the classrooms:

Example of sequential writing activities

Stage 1

- 1) Child makes a picture.
- 2) Child tells adult about the picture.
- 3) Adult writes verbatim in wide yellow pen on unlined paper.
- 4) Child traces over yellow with pencil.

Stage 2

- 1) and 2) as above.
- 3) Adult writes in black fine line pen.
- 4) Child copies below in pencil.

Stage 3

- 1) Child makes a picture.
- 2) Child writes own sentence(s).
- 3) Adults supply spelling needed by writing in child's individual dictionary upon request.

Stage 4

- 1) Child makes a picture.
- 2) Adult helps child make a "cluster" of words which represent the basic ideas in the story (a one-word main idea written within a circle, with descriptive words attached to it).

Stage 5

Child proceeds independently through same steps as in Stage 4.

Each child wrote daily, and each progressed through the stages at his own rate, some taking months, others years, to reach the independent stage. Meanwhile, the teachers watched for signs that a child was beginning to read. For, as they explained, they perceived reading as "emerging" from the child's engagement in both the writing process and the oral language development activities which were a part of the daily routine. (Students were called together as a total group once or twice each morning to sing, recite poetry, listen to stories, etc. In addition, they were encouraged to converse freely throughout the day.)

Once a child was beginning to read, he was shown how to select his own reading material from the numerous children's books stored in the class library. He then conferred individually with the teacher, usually one or two times a week. Conferences centered around the self-selected material, with emphasis on the information the child was gaining or on what he was enjoying about the book.

As a student progressed, he began to produce "projects" which required him to read or interview others to gain information. He would then write and further illustrate what he had learned by making graphs, collages, three-dimensional models, or scrapbooks, etc. Such student products were shared with the class as a whole and put on display or presented to others outside the classroom. (Having an audience appeared to heighten student interest in producing work of high quality.)

2. *Strategies for Ensuring Student Accountability.* To support the teacher designed activities, and especially to give themselves time to work in-depth with individuals, teachers established strategies for ensuring that students would be held accountable for the use of their time. The main strategy was to require that each student, regardless of the level of difficulty of his work, complete the following 5-step "work cycle" with each of his tasks.

The child's work cycle

1) find his book(s) or paper(s) from the central location. (All the children's books or papers for a particular subject were kept together so the teacher could readily check through every child's work each day outside of class time.)

2) Complete the task. (The child could ask for help from other children, the aide, tutors, or the teacher.)

3) Have the work checked and dated by an adult.

4) Indicate on a "check-off" chart that the task is finished. (This step was omitted in one of the classrooms but seemed very effective in helping children come to closure on a task.)

5) Begin the next task until all are complete. (Kindergartners were only required to do the writing activity prescribed for their stage; older children also had math, reading, and other tasks to complete.)

The students were held accountable at the end of the day for having completed the work cycle with each of the required

tasks. The teachers did not keep them under constant surveillance, did not coax or even remind them to complete their work but checked with them at the end of the allotted time to see how they were doing.

The consequence for repeated failure to do what was expected was simple: increased teacher control. That is, the student was required to sit at a designated table each morning until all tasks were complete. While movement was controlled in this manner, however, no attempt was made to control the student's decisions regarding the pace and sequence in which he carried out his tasks. The teachers also made a point, as with the other students, of not coaxing, nagging, or even reminding them to do their work.

The teachers estimated that usually two or three children each year had to have freedom curtailed in such a manner. One child, who had been restricted this way the previous year, told of finally getting tired of having to "miss out on all that stuff the other kids got to do." He decided that, "I might as well give in, because the teacher really meant it!"

3. Strategies for Monitoring and Guiding Skill Development. The teachers also had techniques for continuously assessing each student's work and establishing "attention categories" accordingly. For example, each looked through the students' work (outside of class time) to determine which of them were most in need of attention. They operated intuitively, not using the labels employed here, yet in effect they sorted students into three attention categories: primary, secondary, and minimum attention students. Primary attention students were those in need of help or correction, ready to be introduced to a new skill, or ready to be tested. Secondary attention students were those the teacher needed to "keep an eye on," because they had recently started something new, looked as if they were about ready to move on to a new stage, or had a chronic problem. Minimum attention students were those who could continue to work on their own for the time being, usually because they had recently been in the primary attention category and were comfortable with what they were doing.

At the beginning of the independent work period, the teachers spent their time with the primary attention students, while at the same time keeping an eye on those in the

secondary category. As the period progressed, they began to be more aware of others, alert for signs of difficulty or a readiness to begin something new. The requirement that each child have his work checked and dated helped to assure that no one would be overlooked, and the teachers sometimes put a child's work aside immediately upon checking it as a signal to give him special attention the next morning.

Using the two "checkpoints," i.e., checking and dating work during the independent work period and looking through all the students' work outside of class time, the teachers sorted students into the attention categories daily. With the exception of those with serious chronic difficulty (who would seldom be in the minimum attention category), students circulated through all three categories, probably not remaining in the same category for more than a few days.

4. *A Supportive Environment of Resources.* Three features were built into the classroom environment to support students as they worked. First, materials and supplies were readily accessible to the students. Shelves, drawers, and tables were full of whatever students needed to complete their daily tasks and long-term projects. Second, "on-going" activities were a permanent part of the classroom. For example, when not engaged in their assigned tasks, students could work with arts and crafts materials, blocks, or math manipulatives. They could also read books in the class library, listen to records and tapes, view filmstrips, or simply watch what another student was doing.

Finally, the teacher made sure that students could find help when needed by arranging for their aide to be working with students (rather than be doing paper work), by recruiting parent help, and by arranging for cross-age tutors to assist on a regular basis.

Rethinking two common assumptions

Finding such a carefully structured environment, one with components which could be so readily defined, gives me great hope for helping others establish such situations. I am convinced that, given the same basic beliefs as the teachers studied, any teacher can establish a classroom environment which will have a similar effect on students. What it takes for

many of us, however, in addition to a more thorough understanding of the strategies I have described here, is the rethinking of two commonly held assumptions. One is that the teacher must be in control of student learning and behavior as much of the time as possible and the other, that students should receive equal attention.

Consider first the question of control. As I stated in this same publication on a prior occasion, and as I will continue to emphasize again and again because I believe it to be the pivotal issue upon which all else in the classroom rests, the teacher must be absolutely clear on the issue of control. Control can be seen as existing on three levels: the long-term goals, short-term (daily or weekly) goals, and minute-by-minute decisions. A delicate balance must be maintained between the three. For instance, the teacher must retain exclusive control over the long-term goals, saying, in effect, "These students can become literate, and it is my responsibility to see that they do." The teacher must share control over the short-term (usually daily) goals by saying to the student, in effect, "This is what you and I have agreed that you will have accomplished by the end of this day in school. I hold you responsible for it." Then, the teacher must allow the student to assume control over and responsibility for the minute-by-minute decisions which lead to the realization of the daily goal.

Why is sharing control with students so vitally important? Obviously, shared control frees the teacher to attend to the needs and interests of individuals. However, recent work in the area of motivation suggests another powerful effect: heightened student willingness to use the skills being developed. To explain, Maehr (1976), as a result of his analysis of the literature on achievement motivation, has made a distinction between short-lived, "on task" behaviors and continuing motivation (CM). He defines CM as student willingness to continue working or take up a task in a different context (at home or at a later time in class), when relatively free from external constraint. Maehr's analysis suggests that CM is promoted by the feeling of high self-regard which follows when the student perceives that he is: 1) in control of (the cause of) his behavior, 2) competent in performing his tasks, and 3) growing to become like others he holds in high regard.

Assuming Maehr's point of view, shared control would heighten student willingness through the perception of self-as-

cause of behavior. Results of student interviews support that line of reasoning, for when students in the three outstanding classrooms were asked to tell why they did their work, they most frequently attributed their behavior to internal causes, saying most often that they did it because they liked it, thought it was fun, and wanted to learn. They also expressed feeling competent, specifically, the opinion that their work was "closest to the best." In contrast however, while students in the fourth classroom also expressed feeling competent, they attributed their work-related behaviors to external factors, saying most often that they did their work because the teacher told them to. Thus, differences in student willingness between classrooms was accompanied by a difference in student perception of self-as-cause.

Further, in what appeared to be a related factor, both student learning and behavior in the fourth classroom were far more directly controlled by the teacher than in the other three. For example, the teacher called students to her each morning in three groups (of longstanding membership) to receive reading instruction and gave those not working with her identical tasks to complete. She also divided the work period into three segments and told students which task to be working on during each segment. Several students regularly failed to complete their tasks, and when this occurred, the teacher attempted to directly control their behavior through reminders, rewards, threats, or punishment. Thus, differences between perceptions in the fourth classroom and the other three were accompanied by a difference in the degree to which control was shared with students.

Taken together, findings regarding control, student perceptions, and student willingness suggests how control affects student willingness. It appears that sharing control with students promotes their perception of self-as-cause, thereby fostering a feeling of high self-regard and, as a result, a heightened willingness to use the skills they are developing.

Consider now the issue of equal attention. Why should the teacher not attempt to give students equal attention? Many teachers apparently feel that they must "get around" to every student as equitably as possible and often sort students into groups, working with each an equal amount of time. Rethinking the issue, however, it seems that equal attention is not only unnecessary but a waste of teacher time which

ultimately adversely affects students. Consider, in this regard, that equal concern for the needs of children does not necessarily call for equal treatment. The same student will have different types of needs, some simple and quickly met, and others more complex and requiring more of the teacher's time. Also, serious needs will surface at different times during the year, with some children reaching a crucial stage early in the year and others somewhat later. Thus, a given student does not need the same amount of attention from one day or even one week to the next, and spending time with him when he does not require it *necessarily* limits the time available to respond fully to a student who does.

What is appropriate rather than equal attention, therefore, is *equal concern* for, and *equal consideration* of, students, along with *attention according to need*.

A break from the assumption that teacher time must be divided equally between the students also requires a shift to an elongated view of the use of time. That is, rather than see time in daily or even weekly segments, the teacher must come to evaluate the way time is divided between students in longer segments. Over the course of a few weeks and over the entire year, for instance, what appears to be very unequal distribution of attention will equal out as individuals pass through periods of great need and on to periods of relative independence.

Conclusion

I will close with a few recommendations to those who seek to establish classrooms such as the three I have described. First, notice that I have used the term "evolve" when referring to the process the teachers went through in creating such outstanding situations. Outstanding effective classrooms are not established quickly. Teachers need time to work through a process of trial and error in order to change not only strategies and techniques but some of the assumptions which underlie their behavior.

Further, their efforts must not be forced. Forced adoption of materials or techniques will not result in substantive change. Those in positions of leadership must accept that change, to be any more than cosmetic, cannot be mandated and must come from within. Teachers seeking to evolve need clear agreement

with those in a position of leadership that they are working toward something more than the quickest route to high test scores (although, as the teachers in this study demonstrated, strong test scores will be a by-product). They need encouragement to settle for no less than heightened student willingness and ability to use their skills for "real-life" purposes. They also must be given many opportunities to experience a variety of alternative strategies, through visitations within and outside of their own school, workshops, conferences, etc.

In short, administrators can support teacher efforts by establishing the same delicate balance of control with them as teachers in this study established with their students.

A final word now to "evolving" teachers. The process of evolving toward shared control can be frightening. Teachers moving in that direction find that they must withstand pressure from two sources. The first is internal; moving from where they are comfortable toward the unknown is unsettling, and the tendency to pull back to the familiar is, at times, very strong.

The second comes from outside. External pressure can feel overwhelming. I find that teachers often express feelings of defensiveness, as if they must hide what they are doing. Given the climate of our times, defensiveness is understandable. We are in an era of inordinate emphasis on test scores. Such an emphasis implies support for tight control by the teacher and a "bits-and-pieces" approach to learning.

One only need look as far as reports in the daily newspaper, however, to discover that such a narrow approach to learning is not producing the hoped-for results. Students may be scoring somewhat better, but they have difficulty thinking critically, writing, or applying their skills. As a result, leaders in education, business, and the community in general are now beginning to look for a better way — and *you* are in a position to respond.

It is you, through the experimental process you engage in daily in your own living laboratory, who are developing answers. What you can accomplish will be of benefit not only to your own students but to others who can learn from what you discover. We need your commitment to withstand whatever counter-pressure you feel in your immediate

environment. We need your commitment to keep the larger picture in mind of the direction we must go and to hold on to the courage to join others like you who are leading the way.

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