

Creating Community and Confidence in the Classroom

Tony Sturgeon

If an outsider decided to study the current state of American education, what would he find? What would he take away as the focus of our policy makers and school systems? To anyone currently working in our schools the answer should come as no surprise. In today's educational climate the focus is on collecting data and increasing test scores. However, do we work for publishing companies and testing consortiums? Talk to any teacher and he or she will tell you that the real "clients" are those sitting in the desks, and the only real purpose a teacher holds is to ensure that those students truly learn in the time they spend in the classroom. But before the skills are introduced, standards are addressed, and tests are taken the most significant factor to a student's learning must occur. The teacher must build a relational bridge to the child.

Middle School Students are Unique

"No significant learning occurs without a significant relationship." (Comer, 2001) The teacher's connection with a student will lead to a connection to the school. This connection will lead to the students establishing an identity as a student. Once the student has found his or her identity in the classroom and the school true intrinsic learning is possible. Nowhere is this occurrence more important than in the middle school classroom. It is no surprise to anyone who remembers the middle school metamorphosis, that students experience numerous changes during this time. The adolescent brain is growing in ways that affects all aspects of a middle school student's school life. (Lorain, 2011). It is during this crucial time that we cannot forget the five basic needs that every student has: survival, belonging, power, freedom, and fun (Glasser,

1998). If we, as teachers, address these needs, then a natural relationship will occur with the students and true learning can take place.

My informal observations of teachers have highlighted the common purpose that successful middle school teachers possess. First they have a true burning desire to teach and reach their students. They are not simply interested in teaching subject content and disseminating information; these teachers place love of kids above love of subject. Don't make the assumption that a middle school teacher cannot be passionate about his or her material and subject matter, but the successful ones realize that most of the students sitting in the room will not share that passion of subject before coming into the classroom. These teachers also have a desire to motivate their students and to push them into areas that others could not. Along with the motivation to expand their subject interest, the teachers desire to increase the child's interest in school. Many of us will tell you that the middle school years are viewed as "make or break" for our students. These are the first years of secondary school and the habits formed will follow them for quite some time. Because of the numerous changes taking place in an adolescent during this time, the perfect opportunity is at hand for the teacher to make a true, significant, and long-lasting impact on the kids. The final commonality that I have observed is that most middle school teachers want to have fun with their students and their teaching. However, this is more than simply playing games with the kids. The teacher must show that the process of learning can be fun.

None of these aforementioned aspects of middle school classrooms, teachers, and students are going to be able to be addressed with one sweeping mandate, or a new trend that is making its way through the field, or even with one good day of professional development. These are elements of our profession that take time. Schools must understand the needs, teachers must recognize their weaknesses, and students must be made to understand their importance. In other words, the culture of a classroom, building, and maybe even district must

be in sync. I have seen numerous schools and teachers looking for the one thing that is going to get their school or classroom on track. But the reality is, one thing cannot have a great impact on a system as complicated as a school. There is not one golden solution. The goal is that when a teacher is asked, "Why does your school work so well?" the answer is simply, "We just expect it to."

Developing a Classroom Culture

Obviously the entire culture of a building is key to the success of every student; however, as many teachers will tell you, what goes on behind the closed classroom door is what truly matters. And most importantly, the culture of the classroom can still be what a teacher desires even if the building culture is not what it should be. Over the past seventeen years, my colleagues and I have identified seven key factors of a successful classroom culture: developing a common jargon, creating shared experiences, providing unique conversation pieces, fulfilling the need to belong, developing an academic culture within the larger classroom one, playing to our individual strengths, and taking an interest in the students. While some may seem more simplistic than others, all are necessary to create an impactful experience for those students in the classroom.

1. Common Classroom Jargon

Most teachers have a catch phrase or two that the students begin to identify with that teacher. My daughter recently shared that one of her teachers says the classic line, "The bell does not dismiss you, I do," every day before they leave. Unfortunately for that teacher, the students don't see this as a fun saying, but rather one that has become annoying since the teacher says it regardless of the classroom circumstances. The common jargon I am referring to are those expressions that would not be understood by most unless the person had spent time in your classroom. The phrases and expressions should all serve a purpose in the overall

function of the classroom. Some will be more obvious than others, such as using “Ladies and Gentlemen” to get the attention of the large group. Some may come directly from the materials you use in class. Because I teach both *The Outsiders* and *Dead Poets Society*, my students understand the power behind me telling them to “Stay gold” or “Carpe diem”. I am also very fortunate that I have been on the same team as my social studies teaching partner for seventeen straight years, and we have been able to build a common jargon together, so our students hear some expressions multiple times a day.

One of our favorites to use with the kids is 80-10-10. We explain this by saying that 80 percent of the students will do a certain level of work, and while the work may be good, it is nothing that sets the student apart from others. If their work is described as 80-10, then they have added some element that goes above and beyond the normal expectations. 80-10-10 work is work that only the rare do. If a student is told that his or her project, essay, poem, etc. is 80-10-10, then they know they have done something truly special.

Casual observers of my classroom may be shocked to hear me tell my students that they are dumb. But the point of the common jargon is that only those of us in the classroom are privy to the true meaning. On the second day of school, I have my students read and excerpt from Mark Bauerlein’s book *The Dumbest Generation*. In an effort to motivate them to improve, and to make it okay to struggle at the start of the year, I constantly tell them they probably won’t be able to complete a task I have given because they are dumb. I quickly follow this up with, “It’s not my fault. A guy wrote a book.” When they succeed, I stress to them that they are one step closer to not being “dumb”.

We also refer to our students as lions and lambs. As with many great practices, this came about in a moment of spontaneity. My teaching partner was frustrated with his students’ efforts one day and he just so happened to have a stack of notecards by him. He decided to give a notecard to each kid, whereupon they were told to write, “I am a lamb.” Once he had

these notecards he wasn't sure what to do with them, until he spotted an empty box sitting near him. Building off the classic expression "think outside the box", he threw the cards into the box and told the kids they are in there because their thinking was mediocre (not 80-10-10). As students began to improve he would pulled their cards out of the box as a reward, and they were told they were no longer lambs, but lions. The lion has now become a symbol for our team and this spontaneous idea not only created another piece to our common jargon, but also a shared experience for our students.

This aspect of the classroom culture is easy to implement, but the phrases and expressions should be an organic part of the teaching. If a teacher tries to force an expression upon the students, it probably won't take. Simply look at things you already say and use, and find more ways to integrate them. Post them on your walls. Speak them in front of others. Force your students to explain them to those that don't understand. They will take pride in knowing something that others don't. For example, aren't you curious in how the expressions "akrasia", "liquid learning", "bump, bump, bump", and "push on the pull door" are used in some of the classrooms in my building?

2. Shared Experiences

As teachers we know what we say can leave a lasting impact, but what we do matters even more. Therefore, creating unique experiences for the students is key to developing a strong culture. And unique is the key word. If all of the English teachers in the building are doing the exact same thing, then the students won't see anything special in their classroom activities, no matter how strong they may be. Teachers must look for ways to create events that only their students will understand or be able to explain. The events don't have to be earth-shattering or overly complicated; they just need to be something that other teachers are not doing.

One of my most talked about is my poetry notebook and coffee house. The notebook is an assignment that I am sure thousands of teachers have done in some form or another. The students write and collect various poems, illustrate each poem in some way, and write a reflective paragraph about each. The books are typically reflections of the students themselves, or they are themed around a topic of their choosing which still provides individual ownership of the collection. I use the assignment more as a lesson on organization, and the dangers of procrastination, than I do as a lesson on poetry, but regardless of the skills involved, the kids remember the weeks we spend together working on it. For many it becomes a labor of love that I often see displayed six years later at graduation open houses. To celebrate the completion of the notebook, I, along with some of my students, transform my room into a coffee house decorated with Christmas lights, lava lamps, a stage, and a wide variety of other items brought in by the kids. Each student performs a poem from his or her poetry notebook while everyone else is munching on snacks or sipping coffee (decaf of course!)

Another experience that my students share is strict and loose day. While in the middle of a unit that includes examining education, we read a story in which a classroom teacher is replaced with a long-term substitute who is more strict in her methods. This leads us to a discussion about the best way for a teacher to run his or her classroom. Subsequently, I run my classroom in an extremely loose manner one day and extremely strict the following day. There are lessons taught both days and work that is to be accomplished both days, but the loose day inevitably ends up with kids singing, dancing, throwing paper, and generally wasting their time, while the strict day is tense, quiet, and sometimes referred to as "scary day". It really is difficult to explain in the written word, *and that is the entire point of these shared experiences*. When past students find out that a kid has me for a teacher, they may ask them, "Have you done the hindrances yet? Have you had strict day? Have you screamed in the parking lot?" or a variety of other questions. If they have done the activity then it creates a connection between these

students, and if they haven't it becomes the greatest anticipatory set a teacher can ask for. Other teachers' students will ask about what we are doing, and my kids will try to explain, but many times end up saying, "You just had to be there," or "It's a Globetrotter thing, you wouldn't understand." That is when I know that our classroom culture is strong.

3. Unique Conversation Pieces

This aspect of classroom culture is probably the easiest of all to accomplish and maybe even the one that many teachers are doing right now. Use your room, or yourself, as a way to generate conversation with the students and as a way for them to get to know you. In other words, your personality should be reflected in your classroom. You never know how you are going to connect with a student, and many kids are not going to talk to you, beyond your subject matter, without a prompt to do so. Therefore, put things in your room that will lead to discussion. This is key at the start of the year, but can be continued as the year progresses.

I am a huge Star Wars fan and have quite a few displays in my room including a giant ship hanging from the ceiling, a display of action figures, and various collectables all around the room. I also have a wall of book covers of the books that I have read, along with a display of what I am currently reading. There are two couches in my room for students to sit on during reading times. I also have a display of past students that helps to show my current students the connections that I maintain with my kids. Classroom decorations are not your only way to use unique conversation pieces. I wear a t-shirt each Friday that is either connected to a topic that week, or is a mysterious pop culture reference the students will try to understand. Another teacher in my building wears a thematically linked tie Monday through Thursday and students can submit guesses as to what the theme for the week is.

None of these things are earth-shattering in the world of education. But they do provide the kids with a reason to talk to me. They also serve as a reference point when other students,

or parents, or visiting teachers come to my class. They can remember that I was the guy with the “Star Wars stuff” or whatever it is that draws their attention. Regardless of what it is, just make sure that your classroom contains personal displays and decorations, or is set-up in a way that is unique to your personality.

4. Fulfilling the Need to Belong

Remembering Glasser’s five basic needs every human being has, the need to belong in middle school is crucial because as their connection to their school decreases as they continue from elementary into high school. (Marks, 2000). This is why we see so much change in the kids during this time. They are constantly trying to find place to fit in, which is difficult with all of the changes that they and their friends are experiencing. Left unchecked, many kids may choose to belong to a group that is less than positive; therefore, our classroom culture needs to provide a sense of belonging so that kids don’t have to look elsewhere to have this need met.

The teaming of teachers in many middle schools and junior highs across the country provides a natural way to meet the need to belong. But simply saying a group of students and teachers is a team isn’t enough. You must purposely do things to show the bonds that are being made. Develop a team t-shirt each year for the students to purchase and wear. Create a team flag that hangs in the classrooms. Design a team logo that can be used from year to year. Hold competitions among the different teams to further enhance that sense of pride and belonging to a group.

At Fishers Junior High, the 7th grade teams hold the Charger Challenge at the end of each nine week grading period. Each team selects fifteen students, using a different fifteen each grading period with no repeats, to compete after school. The events change from time to time but they all involve teamwork and encouraging each other. We have done hula-hoop races, colonial dodge ball, word puzzle solving, paper plate relay races, and teamwork ball

bounce. The point of all the competitions is that anyone is capable of doing them, and the kids work together while competing. The Challenge culminates in a trivia competition, which consists of both academic and pop culture questions that have been written by the teachers. In the end, the team with the most points takes possession of the Charger Challenge trophy, each member gets an exclusive winner button, and the teams logo and member names are permanently displayed in the hallway. The event is such a success that not only do we have 8th grade students stay after school to help and to watch, but we will have high school students ask when the competition is so that they can come by and be a part of it again.

Other ways to fulfill the need to belong include creating book clubs for your students, holding special events such as a movie screening just for your kids, having a team pizza party one evening, or organizing special student vs. teacher after-school athletic events. Any of these things will give a kid a chance to participate, but as the teacher, you must also promote the events and individually target students throughout the year so that everyone has a chance to belong at some point.

5. Developing an Academic Culture

Let's face it, in this day and age we have to work the academics into most conversations in order to appease administrations and the number crunchers. I absolutely believe that if a student feels connected to the teacher and the classroom, then he or she will do just about any academic work that is placed in front of him or her. But as teachers we need to show the kids that not only is the environment unique, but so is our approach to academics. Therefore the first step is to create a culture of creative instruction. The kids need to understand that you are not going to do the same thing over and over all year. You want them to always wonder, "What's in store for me today?" They need to be excited about coming to class. All the old standbys can be used to meet this aspect of your classroom culture: multiple intelligences, differentiated

instruction, cooperative learning, etc. These have been around because they work and they matter. Just make sure to vary your methods.

The second academic necessity is to create a culture of choice. We have to be willing to give the kids some freedom, which meets another of Glasser's needs. This idea of choice for projects and other assignments is not new, but it can't be overlooked as changes are made to curriculum to meet new standards or requirements added by school districts. Teachers may even need to move beyond the typical choice, which usually involves giving the kids a list of books to pick from or list of projects that they can choose. If you want to truly be awestruck by your students, and to free them to do their best, then give them the choice to come up with their own way of showing you they learned your lesson. This negotiation of the final product will result in not only the best representation of their learning, but it may also inspire you in the creation of future lessons.

Creating a culture of thinking is the third and, in my opinion, most important aspect of your academic culture. Students need to realize that you are going to expect them to use their brains and that you won't simply bail them out if they aren't quite sure what to do. "I don't know" or "I can't" are not phrases that the students are allowed to use in my class. They must work through it, with me, with other students, or on their own so that they know they can do whatever it is I was asking of them. This usually leads to some struggles at the beginning of the year, but by the time they leave, they are prepared for just about anything that a future teacher may throw at them.

6. Play to Your Individual Strengths as a Teacher

The quickest way to ruining the culture of a classroom is for the teacher to be disingenuous. Therefore, you must let the kids see the real you and your personality should come through in your teaching. Over my career I have seen a wide variety of great teachers,

and in my early years I attempted to mimic those that I knew were the best. But I realized that no matter how good a lesson, classroom set up, or project idea, the success depended on my ability to connect with it. We have to take ownership of everything that we do with the kids, so it is necessary to make sure that our practices work for us.

When developing units, or selecting novels to read, teachers need to care about material. I understand that sometimes a teacher may be forced to teach a particular topic due to district requirements, but even in those cases the teacher needs to find a way to make that lesson his or her own. The kids will easily detect a teacher that does not care about the material, and if the teacher doesn't care, then why should the students? This holds true for projects that are assigned and just about every lesson given to the kids. Remember that there are multiple ways to teach the same concept so with a little bit of effort a teacher can find the one that works for his or her classroom.

7. Show a Genuine Interest in Your Students

The final and most important element of creating a classroom culture is for the teacher to build relationships with the students. This can be the easiest and the most difficult step. It is easy because of the numerous ways to build these relationships: sponsor a group/club, attend students' events both in and out of school, learn about their personal lives and interests, talk to the kids beyond classroom discussion, watch them in the hallways, and listen to them with a true ear. The difficulty comes because these will not happen accidentally. There must be a conscious effort and attempt to do any of these. Not to mention the fact that most middle school teachers have upwards of 160 kids in their classroom.

The good news is that because of the need to belong, most kids require very little in the initial stages of creating this relationship. Some of the kids will take the first step if the teacher has proven to be open, friendly, and has shared his or her interests with their students. Some

students may ask about a sports team or a recent movie. Others may connect with a hobby that has been shared or a past life experience. For those that don't initiate the conversations, you will have to be more deliberate. This is where the conversations and observations work best. For example, overhearing a student say that he listens to The Beatles, could be your starting point. Complimenting the students on an accomplishment you hear about or read about in the local paper is also a perfect way of showing the students you care. Many of these students will have never had a teacher take a genuine interest in them, so once that connection is made, it will only grow stronger.

Allowing these moments to occur naturally is ideal, but in order to make a connection with each kid, you must be deliberate. You could pick three or four kids from different classes to focus on each week. Pay even closer attention to them than normal, and deliberately put yourself in situations to talk to them. And once students see you taking a genuine interest in others, then they will be more open to being a part of your classroom culture.

Where to Go From Here

Don't expect miraculous changes overnight. Making these adjustments to yourself may take some time, but once they are a standard practice in your classroom, you will notice the difference. But don't stop there. Once you have created this strong classroom culture, move on to the larger school. Other teachers will have noticed the enthusiasm and joy coming from your room, and they will be asking you for advice. At this point you can work with other teachers to foster a larger community in our school. Create interschool competitions between teams or classrooms. Co-sponsor clubs so that one teacher is not overwhelmed. Develop common units when there is a shared interest between the teachers. This could then lead to a school-wide project or initiative. Attend events with other teachers so that there is built in company. It really doesn't matter what is done, as long as it is for the good of the kids and it comes from the heart.

The culture you create will not have the same effect on every kid. And that is not the goal. You are not trying to produce clones, but rather, well-rounded human beings. Over the course of the year, students will still have different experiences and learn different things, but if your classroom is a true community, then all of them will leave with confidence in themselves, an understanding of the roles they play in the greater community, and the abilities to succeed in secondary school and life.

Bibliography

Comer, J. P. (2001) Schools That Develop Children. *The American Prospect* 12 (7): 30-35.

Glasser, William (1998). Choice Theory- A New Psychology of Personal Freedom. New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, Inc.

Lorain, Peter (2011). Brain Development in Young Adolescents: Good News for Middle School Teachers. Retrieved from <http://www.nea.org/tools/16653.htm>

Marks, H. M. (2000). Student engagement in instructional activity: Patterns in the elementary, middle, and high school years. *American Educational Research Journal*, 37, 153-184. doi: 10.3102/00028312037001153