



Building Affective School Environment

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Abstract

One of the most important factors that should be fostered in a good school is students' self-esteem, as this is the key of their success further in life. Research shows that low self-esteem is often the reason for antisocial behaviours such as drug and alcohol abuse, bullying, aggressiveness, and that supporting healthy self-esteem can be a protective factor in working with youth.

The Institute R.O.K. started to implement the Building Affective School Environment (BASE) program in Slovenia in 1999. To implement the program we trained over 1.000 mentors: teachers, counselors, social and health workers etc. The program produced impressive results in increasing students responsibility and motivation for learning, improving interpersonal skills, decreasing antisocial behavior and violence in schools.

Mentors, using the program with over 20.000 pupils in Slovenia, report:

- *less discipline and social problems – 47%*
- *improved interpersonal relationship among peers – 68%*
- *increased willingness for cooperation among students – 74%*
- *increased motivation for learning – 84%*
- *the school climate improved, which was followed by improvement of staff self-esteem*

The program is designed to be implemented on the school wide level and includes didactical materials for systematic work with students, parents and teachers. With over 30 years of research behind it, the program provides manuals and teaching materials for elementary and secondary school students, with supplementary materials for teachers, administrators and parents. Assessment instruments also accompany the program.

The results of the program implementation after 10 years showed improvement in all aspects of school activities: student interest in school and after school activities rose, less discipline and social problems were registered and the number of students at risk dropped for 50%; the school climate in general improved which was also followed by the improvement of staff/teachers self-esteem.

Presently this program is being implemented by mentors throughout the country.

We expect to bring new information and examples of good practice to your conference.

A Strategy for Creating Schools without Failures

Parents and communities today have very different expectations for schools than they did just a few years ago. It wasn't so long ago that educators and communities accepted the fact that a high percentage of students would never finish school or continue on with their education. Today, however, schools are expected to create conditions where every child completes his education and becomes a life-long learner. Furthermore, schools are expected to achieve this objective without reducing educational standards! This means that major changes will need to be made in our schools and instructional practices.



Today's youth face a far different and far more competitive world than their parents and grandparents. With unlimited information at their fingertips and extraordinary opportunities waiting to be tapped, they must possess a body of knowledge that is both broad and deep. They must know how to think critically, to solve complex problems, to work in teams and adapt to rapidly changing technology. They must be lifelong learners to keep up with the body of knowledge which now doubles every two or three years. This requires individuals who possess healthy, high self-esteem. The major criterion for judging schools use to be based solely on the achievement level of their students. Today, however, schools are being asked to take on a much greater responsibility—creating productive citizens who achieve their full potential and contribute in positive ways to their community.

Society has always valued the qualities of initiative, self-motivation, self-confidence, self-worth, and feelings of competence, qualities essential to effective human functioning, so this is not new. What is new is that we now know that individuals are not born with those qualities—they are developed when certain conditions are established at home and at school.

Thirty-five years ago a project was initiated to create such schools—schools where students felt good enough about themselves that they were motivated to achieve their full potential rather than engage in deviant behaviors. The result was a successful model found to significantly reduce discipline problems and other deviant behaviors. This program, Building Self-Esteem in Elementary and Secondary Schools, has now had over 25 years of research behind it and is being implemented throughout the world in a variety of countries and cultures.

This comprehensive model is designed to meet children's social and emotional needs by addressing the need for a sense of security, a sense of identity, a sense of belonging, a sense of purpose, and a sense of personal competence. Research has documented that when children's basic needs are met, there is little need to act out for attention, power, revenge or frustration. By creating schools that meet these social and emotional needs schools can reduce the incidence of truancy, discipline problems, teenage pregnancies, dropouts, drug and alcohol abuse, stress and depression and the percentage of students achieving success in school.

The sense of security is fostered by treating young people with respect and establishing environments where individuals know what is expected of them and where they feel safe and protected. This means having clear rules, regulations and expectations and enforcing them in a consistent manner without intimidating or degrading students. Students are led to understand the consequences for their actions to encourage them to take responsibility for the decisions they make. Students also identify those situations that cause them to feel fearful or insecure and brainstorm ways of dealing with those situations. This is all done in a supportive rather than a punitive environment.

The sense of identity is stressed because we all tend to behave in ways that are consistent with how we see ourselves. Efforts to develop a positive identity require that students feel secure and accepted or loved by those adults with whom they work. They need to feel that they are worthy of respect so having a teacher, a parent or grandparent, or someone that really cares is important in developing that sense of personal significance and worth. Those who receive constant criticism or rejection tend to see themselves as not lovable and are apt to alienate or reject others before they themselves are rejected. Unfortunately, research documents that we tend to provide three times as much criticism as we do positive feedback. As a result, students find ways to criticize and put others down to bolster their own self-image. This is the basic cause of teasing, put-downs, anti-social behavior and classroom disruptions.

In the identity component students receive honest feedback based on reality to enable them to identify their strengths and weaknesses and consider how they might capitalize on their strengths. Positive recognition or praise is important, but it needs to be earned and not given out lavishly without justification. Major emphasis is given in this component to the development of communication skills by sharing personal feelings, learning how to listen, and expressing oneself effectively. The object is not to have them feel they are better than others, for that is egotism, but to achieve a realistic acceptance of themselves.

The sense of belonging or connectedness is the third element, for there is a basic human need to feel that we belong, to feel accepted and supported by others. This sense of belonging is of great significance since feeling rejected by others is perhaps the greatest detriment to self-esteem, especially for adolescents. We all want to feel that we belong, to feel accepted and supported by others. We need to feel that we are part of a group of peers or an organization that is larger than



ourselves. Being a member of a winning team or a special organization is one way of providing this feeling. Studies of adolescents who commit violence to their classmates indicate that one common factor is that all of these individuals felt alienated from their peers. Hence, schools need to provide opportunities for students to understand and connect with others. Students need to be taught the social skills that enable them to work cooperatively and in harmony with others. Many educators have found that providing students with opportunities to be of service to others is not only a great way for them to feel valued and appreciated, but it also tends to result in higher motivation and achievement.

The fourth element of this model involves building a sense of purpose. Having a sense of purpose or intention comes about when one's effort is directed to what is perceived to be significant or important. Thus, young people need to see the relevance of what they are studying and direct their efforts to achieve specific goals. This has proven to be one of the major reasons for lack of student motivation and a primary reason for dropping out of school. Most have no vision of the future that they are willing to work towards. Parents and teachers can contribute to this sense of purpose by helping young people create visions of what they want to achieve or what kind of person they wish to become. It is here that parents can contribute significantly to the process by helping their children develop a set of personal values to live by. A sense of integrity develops when individuals are clear about their values and see the value of behaving in ways that are consistent with those values.

The fifth element is developing the sense of personal competence. This is a critical aspect of self-esteem and motivation. Personal competence comes about as individuals make progress toward their goals. Teachers can assist in this step by pointing out options and possible ways of achieving the goals that have been set and allowing students to select the means they feel would be most effective for them. As they begin to make decisions for themselves and learn how to use resources available to them to achieve their goals and successfully accomplish what they set out to do, they grow in the sense of personal competence. Throughout this process the teacher's role is to help students evaluate the choices they have made, provide encouragement, support and feedback.

An important aspect of achieving feelings of personal competence is taking time to celebrate success and giving recognition to what individuals have accomplished. When they can acknowledge what they have achieved and the growth they have made individuals grow in personal effectiveness and self-esteem. This creates the opportunity to repeat the process for they are apt to feel more secure; their sense of identity becomes more positive, and they become more open to tackle new challenges and the stimulation of worthwhile goals. They thus become more internally motivated, see multiple ways of solving problems, and become less dependent upon others to solve problems for them. They typically demonstrate more initiative in taking command and control of their lives and become self-actualized, productive individuals, able to work harmoniously with others.

This Building Self-Esteem program, founded on these principles, has proven to be highly successful model in enabling both students and adults to achieve at remarkably high levels of functioning. Research studies have documented that schools following this model have increased attendance and academic achievement, and have reduced teenage pregnancies, drug abuse, motivated students to become lifelong learners, and reduced discipline problems by 30-50%, proving that we can make a difference in how individuals function.

Schools introducing this model need to become warm, caring inviting places to be—places where both students and staff feel supported by one another. This requires that administrators model the same kinds of behavior with staff that teachers are expected to model with their students. It cannot be achieved if the school is administrated under an atmosphere of fear and lack of respect. This then often requires training not only of the staff but of the administrator. Consultant training and classroom materials are available to facilitate this training and instruction through the Institute for Developing Personal Quality in Slovenia. Assessment instruments for students and staff can also be provided.

References

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