

The Compassionate Classroom

Relationship Based Teaching and Learning

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Chapter 1

Creating Safety and Trust

What *do* teachers and students need and want? Students we talked to often told us that teachers don't listen to them and that all that teachers want is for students to be quiet and to turn in their homework on time. In short, what students say they want most is for teachers and other adults to listen to them, respect their ideas, and consider their needs.

Teachers want students to take more responsibility for their behavior and learning. They want to have more time to give attention to individual learning needs and to see more engaged learning taking place in their classrooms. They want school policies that are more respectful of students and that would encourage more respectful interactions between students. For themselves, they would like to have more respectful interactions with administrators and other policy makers.

To meet the needs of both students and teachers we suggest placing relationships at the center of classroom concern. In a "relationship based" classroom, safety, trust, student needs, teacher needs, and modes of communication are considerations as important as history, language arts, science, or other academic subjects. Teachers may think that these new considerations require more work for them. However, we hope to show that time spent creating safety and trust, meeting individual needs, and improving communication skills actually creates what educators want most—a compassionate learning community where engaged learning flourishes.

Kids learn in communion. They listen to people who matter to them and to whom they matter.

Nel Noddings

Fear in whatever form prevents the understanding of ourselves and of our relationship to all things.

J. Krishnamurti

The Case for Safety First

Alfie Kohn points out in his book *No Contest* that if we want learning to take place, students need the emotional safety provided by “an environment built upon support, nurturing, consideration, mutual contribution, a sense of belonging, protection, acceptance, encouragement, and understanding”¹—in other words, a relationship based classroom where needs of students and teachers are respected. In such a classroom there is safety and trust. And where there is safety and trust, there are the seeds for compassion and engaged learning.

When teachers consciously create caring relationships and teach relationship skills, they build a strong foundation of safety and trust. Studies show that this increased safety and trust result in more cooperation, less conflict, and fewer verbal put downs in the classroom. Students are more sensitive to the needs of others, and empathy increases between teachers and students as well as between students. In addition, better scores on standardized achievement tests and improved ability to acquire skills have been reported.²

Results of a year long study of the effects of teaching NVC to elementary school age children showed improved relationships between students and teacher, reduction of conflicts, increased confidence in communication skills, and, in general, more harmony and cooperation in the school community.³

In spite of the evidence showing the importance of safe, trusting relationships, we know that many students and teachers do not feel safe at school. From pressure and stress in classrooms to playground conflicts, there is much about school life that contributes to anxiety and fear. Physical violence on school campuses is the most obvious sign that there is a lack of safety for students. The fear that these incidents engender has profound effects for students and their families.

Many parents we have spoken to are afraid to send their children to schools and are choosing to homeschool them. A guidance counselor in a Southern California junior high school told us that, for the first time in her twenty-five-year career, she is working with students who are so

fearful about their physical safety at school that they refuse to attend. This phenomenon is taking place in schools throughout the United States. The National Education Association reports that 160,000 students stay home from school every day due to fear of attack or intimidation.

While acts of physical violence cause general alarm and concern for the safety of our children, there are less dramatic daily occurrences at school that induce fear in students by undermining their *emotional* safety. As a result of the compulsory nature of one-size-fits-all curricula, methods, and school policies, many fourth, fifth, and sixth grade students realize that school is not a place where they will be able to get their needs for understanding, contributing, and learning met. Out of their sense of hopelessness and frustration, some lash out with name calling, verbal put downs, taunting, or other aggressive behaviors. These are counter-productive strategies for meeting fundamental needs. However, bullying in one form or another is a common occurrence in most schools. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report that approximately 75 percent of students say they have been bullied at school.

Bullying creates a climate of fear and dread that threatens the physical and emotional safety of all students. It is very difficult to stay focused on studies when you are trying to recover from the altercation you just had or when you are anticipating the next one.

As James Garbarino and Ellen deLara have shown, “Many schools inadvertently support and enable hostile and emotionally violent environments.”⁴ Although teachers feel discouraged by the daily round of bullying, put downs, taunting, teasing, blaming and cliquish behavior, and recognize the cost to themselves and students, they don’t know what to do about it. And all too often they don’t even know that they are contributing to it.

Marshall Rosenberg tells the story of a school principal he visited who was looking out at the school playground from his office window. The principal saw a big boy hit a smaller boy. He ran from his office, swatted the bigger boy, and gave him a lecture. When he got back to his office, the principal said, “I taught that fellow not to hit people who are smaller

than he is.” Dr. Rosenberg said: “I’m not so sure that’s what you did. I think that you taught him not to do it while you’re looking.” The principal did not see that he was modeling the very behavior that he was trying to stop.

Other ways that teachers, often unknowingly, stimulate fear in students include: using labels and comparisons, criticizing, making demands, and threatening punishment. These have become part of the daily climate of school life and are therefore taken for granted. Unrecognized and unchallenged, they provide powerful modeling of behaviors that students will mimic in their interactions. These practices stimulate fear and contribute to excessive stress, under-performance, a wide range of violent behaviors, and high dropout rates in later years.⁵

Whether students act aggressively toward one another or teachers habitually use aggressive practices to control students, the effects are the same. Fear inducing behaviors of all kinds erode safety and trust, and thus inhibit learning.

The Safety–Learning Connection

Emotional safety and the ability to learn have been correlated in contemporary educational and brain research. This research has shown that the emotional center of the brain is so powerful that negative emotions such as hostility, anger, fear, and anxiety automatically “downshift” the brain to basic, survival thinking. This can make learning very difficult, if not impossible. Under such stress, the neo-cortex or reasoning center of the brain shuts down. In his book *Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman calls this an “emotional hijacking.” Goleman shows that in the presence of strong negative emotions stress hormones are secreted in preparation for fight or flight. The fight or flight response has been understood for a long time, but insight into the effect it has on a student’s ability to concentrate, to memorize, and to recall information is relatively new.⁶

Since many students don’t experience emotional safety at home, they come to school already stressed and in a “downshifted” state. If they have hostile, discouraging, or otherwise negative interactions with teachers, some students remain in an almost constant state of fight or flight. The brain is so

Our first question should be, “What do children need?” . . . followed immediately by “How can we meet those needs?”

From this point of departure we will end up in a very different place than if we had begun by asking, “How do I get children to do what I want?”

Alfie Kohn

thoroughly preoccupied with survival needs that these students are literally unavailable for the complex activities of the mind that learning requires. Tragically, their curiosity, wonder, and awe have been usurped by a state of heightened vigilance and an immediate need for protection and security.

In addition, as Joseph Chilton Pearce points out, the emotional state that we are in at the moment learning takes place is imprinted as part of that learning and negatively influences recall at a later time.⁷ Perhaps you have noticed that some children feel afraid when they are learning the multiplication tables or when they are asked to write something. This fear can block the memory of learning that occurred the day before. Some students we have met suffered such fear and discouragement about writing in early grades of school that they refuse to write for months or sometimes years. Many adults we know still have intense emotions that arise when they are asked to write, to do math problems, or to read aloud.

Doc Lew Childre says, “Fear is beneficial if we are in real danger and need to react fast; but fear limits perception, communication, and learning if we are not in danger.”⁸ The remainder of this book explores alternatives to fear inducing practices such as: punishment, reward, threats, bribes, moralistic judgments, and comparisons, that are the norm in many schools and families. This book introduces and emphasizes *relationship based* practices and structures that help students and teachers learn “relational power”⁹ or *power with* others.

Two Primary Ways to Create Safety and Trust in the Classroom

1. Focus on the Needs of Students and Teachers

Relationships in a classroom are essentially the interplay of needs—needs of the students and needs of the teacher. What needs do students have? What needs do teachers have? According to William Glasser the basic human needs are for survival, power, belonging, freedom, and fun.¹⁰ According to Abraham Maslow they are survival, protection/safety, belonging, competence/learning, and autonomy or self-actualization.¹¹

Nonviolent Communication greatly expands the vocabulary of needs. The subject of needs and NVC’s unique way of accessing them through feelings are developed at length in Chapters 3 and 4. No matter how we categorize needs, learning is not the *only* need that students bring to

In general, only a child who feels safe dares to grow forward healthily. His safety needs must be gratified. He can't be pushed ahead, because the ungratified safety needs will remain forever underground, always calling for satisfaction.

Abraham Maslow

school. They bring their needs for belonging, fun, freedom, competence, and autonomy as well. A teacher in a relationship based classroom knows this and treats all of these needs as important. Indeed, unless these needs are acknowledged and met to their satisfaction, students will not feel safe enough to fully engage in the learning process.

William Glasser asks the provocative question, “What if we change the focus [in schools] from disciplining students to meeting needs?” He goes on to say that “students who seem to be very different from each other in academic standing are suddenly the same, since they all have the same needs.”¹² The trust level rises markedly when students realize that a relationship based classroom teacher is supporting their common needs rather than ranking their academic differences.

2. Learn and Practice a Language of Giving and Receiving

Virginia Satir once said, “I see communication as a huge umbrella that covers and affects all that goes on between human beings.”¹³ If this is true, why is there so little attention to the umbrella? How we communicate our needs and listen to the needs of others determines whether needs are likely to get met. In a relationship based classroom, teachers and students try to become aware of habitual ways of expressing needs and practice new ways of expressing them that are most likely to be heard. They also practice the art of empathy—of listening for their own feelings and needs and those of others. For these purposes, a relationship based classroom uses guidelines for how to communicate with one another. In order for all voices to be heard, no matter how loud or soft, and for there to be sharing without blame or criticism, teachers and students take the time to learn and practice a non-confrontive way of using language.

Members of a relationship based classroom practice skills in “relational intelligence”: guessing feelings of others from verbal and non-verbal cues; identifying values—one’s own and those of others; translating judgments into statements of feelings and needs or strategies for meeting needs; and taking responsibility for one’s own thoughts, feelings, and actions.

Without doubt, a classroom environment of emotional safety and trust is the foundation for learning to take place. To create such an environment it is vitally important to put the study of relationships at the center of the curriculum with the “core” subjects.

We move on now to show you how to turn your classroom into a “relationship based” learning community by revitalizing your thinking and your interactions with yourself, your students, and your curriculum.