

Anxiety in Students

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During a faculty meeting yesterday, our principal shared his awareness of increased anxiety among our students. At Bellevue Christian School (BCS), we have a protocol if a student should suffer a concussion, in or outside of school, and have a plan of care for them, with limited academic demands until they recover. Our principal suggested we have a similar protocol for kids suffering from anxiety, regardless of the cause. As educators, we have limited control over the factors that cause fear and anxiety in students, but there are plenty of issues we can address to make life more bearable for them, if we are just willing to raise our awareness and place ourselves in their position for a while.

Teachers, how do students respond to you and your classroom? Are they afraid to enter your room? Do you embarrass students publicly in class because of their incorrect answers, bad grades, missed assignments or poor behavior? Are you focused more on the perception of being a rigorous teacher with atmospheric expectations, than on caring for the well-being of students? What do the kids say about you in private? Would you be willing to find out?

What about your assessments? Are you looking for the stereotypical test bell curve where the bottom third of the class gets failing grades, or are you promoting the possibility of success for everyone? Are your students buried in homework? Are you considering the fact that children need exercise, time for social interactions and cherished family time for wholesome growth? If you and other teachers continue to pour on the homework, you are stealing childhood away from your students? Research shows virtually no academic benefit from homework until students are of high school age, and even then, overwhelming amounts of homework will lead to

anxiety and depression (Bennett S. & Kalish, N., 2006, page 258, Schrobsdorff, S., retrieved 10/26/2018).

Walking in Their Shoes

What we say and do in class has an enormous impact on our students. Therefore, it is only fitting to examine what happens in classrooms and view these things through the eyes of our students. Professional credentialed teaching is a second career for me, though I have taught and mentored children for decades in youth organizations. So, it was not long ago that I found myself back in the role of a student teacher. From my time in clinical practice, I remember, with much pain, an incident in a 9th grade Biology class. The “master teacher” asked a girl (in the back of the class where I was sitting) a question for which she obviously had no answer. Upon her failed attempted response, the teacher promptly made fun of her in front of the entire class. The incident was heart-wrenching, but as a student teacher, I felt I could say nothing, lest I be cited for insubordination and dismissed from the teaching program. The very next day, the teacher went back to that girl, asking another question, and predictably, her response was, “I don’t know,” which was to communicate, “You hurt me once, but I will never give you that opportunity again!” The teacher lost that student forever. He would never again be allowed to teach her anything about Biology; she had already learned the lesson to keep her mouth shut and remain safe against his gross insensitivity. This was also the class in which the teacher posted everyone’s grades in public view by their school identification numbers. Supposedly this was an anonymous way of doing things, but students are smart enough to figure out each other’s ID numbers.

In another clinical practice situation with an AP Biology class, my then master teacher asked me to observe two other science teachers in the department to see what I could learn from them. The first teacher was acceptable, though I did not take anything new away from the observation. The “conversation” with the second teacher though was stunning. I use quotes around the word conversation, because by my silence to his stilted monologue, he must have assumed my agreement. Before this high school biology class began, the teacher informed me that these kids were “just savages. They are all likely to end up in the juvenile court system and put in jail!” Was there anything appropriate to say to that? I was shocked into silence! Observing the class left me with the impression of normal group of teenagers. Following class this teacher remarked, “See what I mean?” with a sour tone of finality. There is no doubt that the students knew clearly what the teacher’s opinion of them was, and doubtlessly they stooped to accommodate his low expectations. The students felt the pressure of his demeaning attitude, and I, also a student, though at the graduate school level, was about to experience the same demeaning attitude from my master teacher.

Returning to the master teacher’s classroom, the nagging thought began penetrating my consciousness, that he would want a report on my observations. I let a couple of days go by, but he finally inquired about them. I drew up all my courage and just told him the facts of what happened without editorializing. The mere fact that I repeated the “savages” comment sent him into a furious rage, declaring “how dare you say such things about another faculty member,” and “if you were employed here, I would have you fired. That teacher gets to at least 50% of his students, and I think that’s pretty good!” This was a heavily unionized public school where the understood expectation was that you cover for each other’s faults, no matter what. Once again, there was nothing to say and silence was my only retreat, nonetheless I had told him the truth,

and he wasn't interested. It made me truly sad that the other 50% of that teacher's class had obviously been relegated to the category of "throw away" kids.

That semester of student teaching was a sad chapter in my course toward a teaching credential. The master teacher did not seem to like anything I tried with his class. He had created a rigorous curriculum in which he listed all the general concepts the students needed to know for their AP exam, but they had to research the details of the concepts themselves and figure out how they worked. The master teacher rarely taught them the subjects in class, because they needed to discover things on their own. Then, when they thought they had the answers, he would not acknowledge that they were correct or not. Once the kids got so frustrated with not knowing what was correct and what was a mistake, I started to lead them by Socratic questioning and told them when they got the correct solution. Again, he was furious with me because by helping the students to clearly understand the biological concepts, I was somehow thwarting his designs for the class, and threatened to give the students an "F" for that section because they did not discover it all themselves. At one point, he wanted them to find the five aspects of a major concept. I was personally confused by the assignment and finally asked him what he was trying to get at. He told me the five aspects he expected the students to discover, and yet, even with my bachelor's degree in Biological Sciences, I could not make the connections between the assignment and the expected answer. I put myself into the place of the students and tried an Internet search, a text search, and everything else I could think of. Nowhere could I find these five concepts linked together that could be used to answer his assignment. We were all so frustrated that I finally went to him privately and told him the results of my personal attempt to find an answer to his assignment for the students. He then tried searching himself to no avail. A shelf at the rear of the class held an odd collection of decades old science books, and in one

antique tome he finally found what he was looking for, yet we concluded that it was unreasonable to expect the students to find this one antiquated reference, so he was forced into giving a “mini-lecture” the next day to clarify the assignment.

Instructions to a New Teacher

Fear and anxiety are built into our educational system. Students are experiencing high levels of personal angst, yet little has been done to address the situation. As a student myself, going back to graduate school as a mature adult in my 60s, I experienced this same type of anxiety. There was always the pressure to perform and to keep my head low, trying to stay out of someone’s crosshairs who had authority over my success or failure in becoming a credentialed teacher. As a crowning note to our teacher education program, one of our professors passed her wisdom on to us as new graduates heading into unionized public school jobs, “Just keep your mouths shut for the next two years until you get tenured, and you’ll stay out of trouble!” Once again, I was stunned into silence.

References

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children and what we can do about it. New York: Three Rivers Press.

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