

## Celebrate: The Classroom as Family

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**Perspective:** As a teacher, what is your perspective on your students, on your role as their instructor, on classroom behavior and upon your relationship with your students? We have all seen many teachers in our years of schooling. Which ones stand out as exemplars of love, care, knowledge, and responsiveness? I'm guessing that of the many teachers you had, most of them fade into the background of your consciousness, but those who were great and those who were horrible stand out in stark contrast. My second-grade teacher, Mrs. Bernstraw, stands first in my Teacher's Hall of Fame, as someone who honestly cared about me and what I learned. A long-term substitute teacher in 10th grade English made Charles Dicken's Tale of Two Cities come alive as if we were experiencing the French Revolution first hand. Then there was Mr. Shepe in high school Biology. Her insatiable joyful drive toward student success explains in large part, why I went on to study Biology at UC Irvine.

In the Teacher's Hall of Shame comes my 10th-grade math teacher. Fortunately, I do not remember his name, but I remember his class as being horrible enough that I went to my counselor requesting to be transferred to another teacher. The counselor didn't hesitate to change me, reinforcing my belief that the teacher did not belong in education at all. Then there was my high school chemistry class with Mr. Quartucci,

who would teach us a concept, and regularly comment, “but there are some exceptions.” What he did not go back to teach as the exceptions, were those things I struggled with during Freshman college general chemistry. Mr. Q was a good guy, but just a bit incomplete in his presentation of content.

What was it about the good teachers that made them stand out so much? Cabello & Terrell (1994), in their research paper entitled *Making Students Feel Like Family: How Teachers Create Warm and Caring Classroom Climates*, studied ten teachers in two inner-city elementary schools, looking for ways teachers interact positively with students to create warm and safe classrooms, providing social and emotional supports to students. “In the words of one student, these teachers ‘make us feel like family’” (Cabello & Terrell, 1994). “Connell (1990) finds that students in classrooms in which they have a sense of belonging and “relatedness,” yield higher scores on measures of perceived academic control. Students who feel emotionally secure with classmates and teachers are more likely to be active participants in the class and to exert more effort in their work thus maintaining their academic achievement” (Connell & Wellborn, 1990, p 30). “Li (1992) concludes that an important component of positive classroom climate is positive and supportive peer interaction. To develop supportive peer interaction, however, requires that teachers actively teach students how to engage in positive social interactions within a classroom setting. She also finds that little research has been done on how teachers can address this aspect of classroom climate. The work of Hansen, Connell, Wellborn, Li, and others confirms the notion

that some classrooms provide more social and emotional support for students than others. Their work also suggests that teachers use several different strategies to foster that support.” (Cabello & Terrell, 1994.) A teacher’s perspective is, “A coordinated set of ideas and actions a person uses in dealing with some problematic situation, to refer to a person's ordinary way of thinking and feeling about and acting on such a situation. These thoughts and actions are coordinated in the sense that the actions flow reasonably, from the actor's point of view, from the ideas contained in the perspective (Tabachnick & And Others, 1982).

**Atmosphere:** Teachers who invest time and energy to create a safe and supportive atmosphere in their classrooms, will be rewarded many times over in respect, hard work, joy and laughter from and with their students. “The Quantum Learning classroom atmosphere relies strongly on the emotional learning system as it plays a significant role in the affective domain of learning. In a positive classroom atmosphere:

- ♣ Students feel safe and supported;
- ♣ There is a strong sense of belonging;
- ♣ The classroom tone is down to business, yet comfortable and motivating;
- ♣ Character-building life skills promote respect and rapport between the teacher and the students and among students; and
- ♣ Effort is acknowledged – learning and achievements are celebrated”

(Given, 2015).

This positive and supportive atmosphere reminds me of the atmosphere of a good family, with every member being of equal value, yet having a leadership and decision-making structure to ensure safety and growth. Children need structure in their lives to feel safe and confident. “Adults provide the structure children need to feel basically secure, with the comfort that the world is not a chaotic and meaningless place. Adults impose external discipline, the necessary first step towards developing inner discipline --- a quality that children will need to face later challenges in life, and contribute to a civilized society” (Given, 2015).

Daily routines and traditions: “All students, particularly under-achievers, are continuously ego-protecting in the classroom” (Cabello & Terrell, 1994). Having established classroom routines and traditions helps to alleviate the natural fears children have of standing out as being different from others. Kids just want to fit in for the most part. My 8th-grade science classes, for example, have a musical and kinesthetic opening to every class and a song to close us out. Students take on important jobs in the classroom, including Teacher Assistant, Class Ambassador (helping others who miss class to get caught up), Disc Jockey, Notes Manager, Computer Technician and Gardener (we have plants in class). Through these jobs, students take ownership of the classroom, “Ownership” being one of the 8 Keys of Excellence in the Quantum Learning System.

**Attention & Listening - Loving /Nonjudgmental Response from Teacher:**

Children are sponges for knowledge and sponges for attention. They want to know

that you see them, are listening to them, and taking what they say seriously, yet resisting the temptation to try and “fix things.” Wise teachers learn to observe their students, to sense a change in their demeanor, facial expressions or conversations. This morning, in a crowded room of students and adults, my discernment focused on one student, simply based on her facial expressions. “OK, so what’s happening with you?” I inquired. The many months invested in building a relationship with this student led her to quickly open her heart and pour out things that were bothering her. I commiserated with her woes, prayed healing for her, but did not further attempt to apply some Band-Aid fix to her social/emotional problems.

**Vulnerability:** “Don’t get emotionally involved with your students. Keep a professional distance. You are not your students’ buddy!” We’ve heard these mantras before, and yet we are also human, not an inanimate crystal without feelings or compassion. Yes, we must be cautious here, and indeed, you are not your students’ buddy, but you can still show vulnerability to your students. Without entering inappropriate areas, you can share your students’ joys and sorrows, you can share stories from your life that might illustrate similar situations your students are experiencing. You can listen and attend, allowing the opportunity for students to be open to you and others if they choose to do so. Be a real person and you will be blessed by real students.

**School Imitating Life:** Isn’t school a real part of life? Well, yes, but it is an extension to say that school is family. Indeed, school for some children may be

considerably better than their family life. Some students know only anger and conflict at home, and coming to school is a break and relief from family stress. Either way, as teachers, we can model wholesome relationships for our students, the kind of relationships they should be seeing at home, but many are not. If they don't see positive interpersonal interactions at home, hopefully, they will see them at school and in your classroom.

**In Loco Parentis:** The term "in loco parentis," Latin for "in the place of a parent," refers to the legal responsibility of a person or organization to take on some of the functions and responsibilities of a parent" ("In loco parentis," 2018). There are many things we as teachers cannot and should not do regarding minor children under our care, but "in loco parentis," which is a common understanding in US law, places a responsibility on teachers, youth leaders, and ministerial staff to always act in the best interest of the child. Removing this concept from the harsh penalties of poor leadership of non-related minors, and looking at it from the highest benevolent perspective, teachers serve in a parental role to their students. We are given to care for them, protect them and assure they are returned safely to their parents. With this in mind, wouldn't we want them to experience all the safety and support they hopefully get at home?

In student teacher induction programs, the subject often comes up about dealing fairly and evenly with all students, regardless of their race, creed or background. Student teachers are encouraged to exam their prejudices and biases, to

root out any attitude that would cause them to treat a student unfairly. Regardless of ethnicity, religious faith or no faith at all, my students are part of my extended family. Regarding ethnicity, I am color-blind to them; they are all well-deserving of my love and attention. I show them not only my academic side but also my paternal side. I expect other adults to respect my classroom brood and my “father bear” comes out when someone messes with my kids, just as surely as what would happen if someone threatened my grandchildren. Our students need to know that we “have their back” and will protect them like family under all circumstances, while at the same time rejoicing and celebrating our successes together.

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