

Creating Classroom Contexts for Learning: Building a Classroom Culture that Supports all Students

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Classroom culture has a powerful effect on student learning. Building a classroom culture that fosters risk-taking and values achievement is no small task, but it is well worth the effort. In order to do this, there are several crucial elements that must be present. They include the following: 1) opportunities for students to see their self-worth and value; 2) a classroom community in which students safely experiment with new approaches and problem-solving methods, knowing that their ideas will be accepted and valued; 3) students' experiences and realities reflected in the curriculum and daily instruction; and 4) student empowerment and responsibility for learning, which leads to confidence that their actions make a difference in learning outcomes.



A teacher's language and actions can set a tone of acceptance and respect in the classroom.

Developing a Sense of Self-Worth and Personal Value

It is incredibly challenging to have students become successful academically if they believe they are incapable. Students need to experience success, which builds a sense of self-worth and value. It is our job as teachers to provide many opportunities for students to access the curriculum through the use of strategies that speak to different intelligences and learning styles. This gives students multiple opportunities to learn the material in different ways. Our responsibility as educators is not to make things easy for students or to lower our expectations, but to give students access to supports and tools they need to raise their achievement. Doing that will help them see themselves as valuable contributors to their own learning and to the classroom community. As students experience success, the tape in their head shifts from "I'm not good at math," to "I can do this. If I use that chart, I can figure out the answer," or, "If I ask my neighbor, we can work this out together," or, "I know that answer from the chant we did." Once students experience success in one area, they will find ways to be successful in others.

Establishing a Safe Environment for Risk-Taking

Students need a risk-taking space where they can freely admit they don't know something or where they can ask others for help. They need to understand and trust that they don't have to have all of the answers, that making mistakes is part of learning, and that by working together they can help each other reach proficiency. Their effort and motivation to achieve will increase as they experience success. This provides an energy push toward the teacher rather than the teacher providing all the energy toward the students. It is the difference between really wanting to do something and being made to do something.

Supporting and building this type of classroom environment means time spent talking

together about the importance of attitude and how students and teacher talk to themselves and to others. Setting a clear expectation that students will show respect to themselves, to others, and to the teacher is essential. Teachers positively reinforce and model the language students are expected to use, such as, "You almost have it. You just need to include..." "Do you need help?" "I can't quite get this. Can you help me?" Any type of put-down or dig toward one's self or another student should be addressed. Students need to see that language such as, "You're not good at math," or "How do you not know your multiplication facts?" or "C'mon, just write 5 so we can go to recess," does not support their learning. Even statements like "This is so easy," can affect the classroom culture. What is easy for one person is not easy for others. Students recognize that they can support each other so that they can all be successful.

Teachers' actions and language also model the kindness, patience, and respect expected from students. If teachers are sharp with students when they are frustrated, they cannot be surprised when students do the same to each other. Derogatory comments or a tone that communicates a lack of value for an idea or effort will

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quickly shut a student down. As Haim Ginott (1993) said, “As a person, I possess a tremendous power... I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or heal... it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated and another individual humanized or dehumanized.” Educators have a huge responsibility to students. Their—our—actions and language truly do set the tone and have the potential to be a powerful, positive influence in students’ lives.



Students are willing to discuss and ask for help when it is made clear that we learn from mistakes and are not expected to have all of the answers.

Delivering Curriculum and Instruction That Reflect Students’ Worlds and Experiences

A key characteristic of a positive classroom culture is students feeling that their voices and experiences are valued by the class and valuable to others’ learning. Capturing students’ questions and answering these throughout the unit reinforces this, as does having routines for students to talk with partners during class discussions and then share out to the group—instead of relying on a few students being called on. During goal setting, students’ voices should be loud and clear. What is helping their learning? What do they want to accomplish next? How do they see themselves using math or other content in the future? When teachers hear these responses, they can weave them into their lessons and tie examples and stories to students’ interests.

We know from research that we are more likely to remember new information if we connect it to something previously studied or experienced (Medina, 2008). Students interested in art and music can be helped to see the algebraic and geometric patterns present in these art forms. Student engagement can increase with a statement connecting what we are learning about capacity in mathematics to a book we read on water volume in the ocean or with a piece on the *Compendium* (see aim4scubed.dlenm.org) about how negative and positive numbers describe position relative to sea level. Referencing careers that students are interested in and explaining how these jobs use the concepts being studied gives a purpose to learning the material. Suddenly, students can actually see the mathematics connecting to their dream of being a vet, for example.

Making mathematics relevant to students is all about connections. As teachers, it is essential to make connections to students’ experiences, to other content areas, and to future possibilities for using math in their everyday lives and careers. Students then see themselves as valued and respected in their interests, knowledge, and potential. Their voices and experiences are reflected in the curriculum and they see themselves as valuable members of the community.

Building Empowerment

Another significant element of positive classroom culture at all grade levels is student empowerment. Students must see that they can change themselves and their situation. They need to know that they are able to contribute to their schools, families, and communities in positive ways. When teachers know their students and truly see them for all their potential, the students know that someone

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In a safe environment, students take risks by sharing ideas and asking questions.

believes in them, and this teaches them to believe in themselves, as well.

Mohandas Gandhi stated, “Be the change you wish to see in the world.” Many of our students come from difficult home situations, and some families struggle financially to provide for their children. They often receive important assistance and welfare that is meant to help, but it can also foster a sense of helplessness and resentment in students and families. When students walk into schools and classrooms, they need to find opportunities to be contributors. The message and expectation must be:

You are capable. You can achieve at high academic levels. You are valued. You are our future leaders, and you can contribute to change your lives, your communities, and your environments.

We can begin empowering students in small ways. Setting up systems and routines so that students can solve their own problems is one way to start. Giving students the responsibility to take care of a broken pencil, appropriately slip out to use the restroom, or move their seat so they can focus better begins to send a strong message that they are capable and we expect them to be responsible for their learning.

When we develop a classroom culture in which students are expected to be active participants in solving the community’s problems, students feel more invested in the classroom and each other. If many students are not bringing in homework or there are too many disruptions during class, the problem can be discussed in a class meeting and an action plan created that includes expectations and accountability for the teacher and students. When students help develop these plans, they are far more likely to follow them and encourage others to do so, as well.

Final Thoughts

Our goal is that students see themselves as responsible for their learning and understand that their actions, attitudes, and goals impact their success. Having high expectations for students and seeing them as worthy members of the classroom sends an important message that students should value themselves, as well. When teachers believe in students enough to tell them that they need to stand up and deliver, students know that they are going to do it—with support—because they are that important. And then a cultural shift takes place in the classroom, as students begin to meet high expectations and see themselves as capable, successful, and valuable individuals.

Positive Classroom Culture is one of the Key Instructional Principles in the instructional framework *Achievement Inspired Mathematics for Scaffolding Student Success* (AIM4S^{3™}). This article was adapted from AIM4S^{3™}—An instructional framework for language and content learning (Mayer & Meyer, 2014). For more information, visit aim4scubed.dlenm.org or contact Lisa Meyer, lisa@dlenm.org.

Resources

- Boykin, A., & Noguera, P. (2011). *Creating the opportunity to learn: Moving from research to practice to close the achievement gap*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
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