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Developing the Mindset of Effective Students

In the last chapter we outlined the key characteristics of the mindset of effective educators. We emphasized that educators possess different mindsets or assumptions about themselves and their students that significantly influence their expectations, teaching practices, and relationship with students (Brooks, 2001 a,b; Brooks & Goldstein, 2001, 2003, 2004).

We noted in Chapter Two that just as effective educators possess a mindset upon which their success is rooted, so too do successful students possess assumptions that contribute to their achievements in school. It is essential that educators understand the mindset of effective learners in order that they incorporate strategies within their teaching practice for reinforcing this mindset in all students. Obviously, the mindset of effective teachers and effective students intersect and become a dynamic force for nurturing a positive classroom environment.

Similar to our observations about teachers, students typically do not pause to consider those assumptions about learning and motivation that impact on their success in school. For example, a student struggling to learn math concepts may believe that a high test score he received on a math test was based on luck. The belief that luck was the determining factor in producing this accomplishment will preclude confidence for future success since luck is assumed to be beyond one's control and, and is an inconsistent and capricious variable at best. In contrast, another student also struggling with math, may interpret a good test score in that subject as an indication that the tutoring she has received and the extra studying she has done are resulting in her becoming a more proficient math student. Thus, she credits her success to factors within her control such as effort, a belief that reinforces confidence for continued achievement. Each of these students will confront the next math test with different mindsets and expectations that will influence their probable success.

The Mindset of Effective Students

As we did in the last chapter, prior to describing strategies for nurturing a positive mindset in students, it will be helpful to review briefly the characteristics of this mindset as outlined in Chapter Two. In many ways they parallel the characteristics or goals associated with the mindset of successful educators. Effective students, those who are motivated to actively engage in the learning process:

--Believe that whether they learn or not is based in great part on their own motivation, perseverance, and effort. They feel a sense of ownership for their own education.

--Recognize that making mistakes is part of the learning process and thus, do not view mistakes as sources of humiliation or indications that they are incompetent as learners. Rather mistakes are perceived as opportunities for learning, a belief that will motivate students to persevere with demanding academic tasks.

--Perceive the teacher as a supportive adult. When confronted with academic or nonacademic challenges, they feel comfortable in taking the initiative and seeking assistance from the teacher.

--Understand their unique learning style, learning strengths, and learning vulnerabilities. This understanding permits them to develop with the input of their teacher strategies that will help them to learn more proficiently.

--Interact with their classmates with respect, avoiding teasing and bullying. They recognize that such negative behaviors work against developing and sustaining a positive school climate in which learning thrives.

Two Frameworks to Nurture the Mindset of Effective Students

There are two frameworks that can serve as helpful guides for teachers as they apply interventions for reinforcing a positive mindset in students. Both frameworks, which are reviewed below, resonate with the concepts of self-esteem, ownership, motivation, and resilience.

Attribution Theory

One framework was originally proposed by psychologist Bernard Weiner and given the name “attribution theory” (Weiner, 1974). This theory highlights that youngsters attribute their accomplishments or failures to different reasons, a dynamic we witnessed earlier in this chapter with the two students who did well on math tests but possessed contrasting assumptions (mindsets) about the reasons for their success.

In terms of success experiences, research indicates that children who are hopeful and resilient and who are guided by a positive mindset about learning, believe that their successes are determined in large measure by their own efforts, resources, and abilities. These youngsters assume realistic credit for their accomplishments and feel a genuine sense of control over events in their lives. They are motivated to face new challenges and more demanding learning tasks (Brooks, 1991; Canino, 1981; Licht, 1983).

In contrast, students with a negative mindset are more likely to interpret their achievements as predicated on luck, chance, or fate, that is, on variables outside of their sphere of control, thus weakening their confidence for future success.

Children also have varying attributions for their mistakes and failure, which are linked to their self-esteem and resilience. As an example, two students in the same third grade class fail a spelling test. One child thinks, “I can do better than this. Maybe I have to study more or ask the teacher for extra help.” The mindset of the second child offers a very different explanation, “The teacher stinks. He never told us these words would be on the test. It’s his fault I failed.”

Or, to take another example, a child who believed he was incapable of learning, resorted to hitting his classmates. In therapy he gained insight into his feelings and behavior and said, “I’d rather hit another kid and be sent to the principal’s office than have to be in the classroom where I feel like a dummy.”

Students who are motivated to seek additional help and/or work more diligently, do so because they believe that mistakes are experiences from which to learn rather than feel defeated. Such students typically attribute mistakes to factors that are within their power to modify, such as a lack of effort (especially if the task is realistically achievable) or ineffective strategies (e.g., poor study habits). In marked contrast, students who blame or attack others typically subscribe to the painful assumption, “I am a failure. I cannot change. I am incapable of succeeding in school.” They do not believe that mistakes are

the foundation for future learning. Rather, they believe that mistakes are a consequence of conditions that cannot easily be modified, such as a lack of ability or low intelligence.

A vicious cycle is set in motion when students believe they cannot learn from setbacks. Their mindset is dominated by negative thinking. Feeling hopeless and wishing to avoid further perceived humiliation, they are apt to quit, offer excuses, cast blame on others, or resort to ineffective ways of coping, such as wearing the garb of a class clown or class bully. Our attempts to teach them may be met with angry retorts such as “Leave me alone!” “I don’t care!” “It’s my life, I’ll do what I want with it!” These students care much more than they acknowledge, but overwhelmed with a sense of frustration and despair and believing they cannot change their situation, it is difficult for them to entertain the notion that things may improve. While the adults in their lives may perceive these youngsters as quitters or lacking perseverance, what may be missed is that their actions are rooted in a desperate attempt to avoid further humiliation (Brooks, 2002; Wexler, 1991). Working with these students involves helping to modify their negative attributions and mindsets (Bernstein, 1996).

As is apparent, attribution theory offers guideposts for nurturing the mindset of effective learners. Consultants can draw upon this theory and pose the following questions for school administrators and teachers to consider:

1. How do we create a school environment in which students are more likely to develop a resilient mindset, an environment that maximizes the probability that students will not only succeed, but that they will interpret their achievements as predicated in large measure on their own abilities and efforts? Or stated somewhat differently, how do we assist students to assume an increasing sense of ownership and responsibility for their learning?

2. How do we create a school environment that reinforces the belief that mistakes are not only *accepted*, but *expected*? How do we create a school milieu that lessens fears of being humiliated or embarrassed?

Edward Deci’s Approach

A second framework is based on the work of psychologist Edward Deci and his colleagues (Deci & Chandler, 1986; Deci, Hodges, Pierson, & Tomassone, 1992; Deci & Flaste, 1995). His model bears many similarities to Glasser’s (1997) “choice theory” and the work of Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern (1990). Deci suggests that students will be more motivated to engage in and persevere at school tasks when their teachers develop a school environment that satisfies particular needs. Essentially, Deci notes that when these needs are met, students will be more receptive to learn, more optimistic about succeeding in school, and more resilient.

Deci highlights three needs for educators to consider in their interactions with students. They are:

To belong and feel connected. In Chapter Nine we highlighted the lifelong impact that educators have on the motivation and resilience of students. Earlier in this chapter we noted that a key feature of the mindset of effective students is their belief that there are adults in school who believe in them and are available to help them when indicated. Deci’s research supports the importance of the relationship between students and teachers in the learning process. He observes that children and adolescents are more likely to thrive in environments in which they feel they belong and are comfortable, in which they feel they are treated with respect.

Related to this feeling of belonging is the importance of helping each student to feel welcome in school. When the second author asked more than 300 students from kindergarten through 12th grade what a teacher or school administrator could do each day to help them to feel welcome in school, the two most frequent responses were a teacher or school administrator greeting you warmly by name and smiling at you. The adage that “students don’t care what you know until they first know you care” is a powerful reminder that students will be more motivated to learn when taught by an educator whom they trust.

The issue of feeling connected to schools has received increased attention in recent years, especially as educators and other professionals grapple with the problems of school bullying and violence. Several studies indicate when students feel adults care about them, they are less likely to engage in disruptive, angry behaviors. A report issued by the U.S. Department of Education (Dwyer, Osher, & Warger, 1998) about safe schools noted:

Research shows that a positive relationship with an adult who is available to provide support when needed is one of the most critical factors in preventing student violence. Students often look to adults in the school community for guidance, support, and direction. Some children need help overcoming feelings of isolation and support in developing connections to others. Effective schools make sure that opportunities exist for adults to spend quality, personal time with children. (pp. 3-4)

Similarly, Mulvey and Cauffman (2001) cite empirical evidence that indicates “promoting healthy relationships and environments is more effective for reducing school misconduct and crime than instituting punitive penalties. . . . Students who are committed to school, feel that they belong, and trust the administration are less likely to commit violent acts than those who are uninvolved, alienated, or distrustful (p. 800).”

We must never underestimate the power of a relationship in determining success in school.

To feel autonomous and possess and sense of self-determination. At the core of most theories of motivation, including attribution theory, is the concept of ownership and self-determination. In Chapter Nine we emphasized that a salient feature of the mindset of effective educators is their belief that ongoing input from students promotes a sense of responsibility and accountability for one’s own education. Motivation at all ages is increased when people believe that their voice is being heard and respected, when they believe they have some control over what is occurring in their lives (Brooks & Goldstein, 2004; Dicintio & Gee, 1999). If students feel they are constantly being told what to do and that their lives are being dictated by teachers, they are less likely to be enthused about engaging in learning tasks that they feel are being imposed on them. If anything, their main motivation may be to avoid or oppose the desires of others.

To feel competent. We all hope to be successful, to possess skills in our lives that help us to feel competent and accomplished, skills that generate satisfaction and pride. In the last chapter we noted that a teacher’s belief that each student has different “islands of competence” and learning styles that require identification, respect, and reinforcement is a core value of a strength-based approach to education.

Every student requires positive feedback and encouragement from educators. A focus on encouragement should never be confused with giving false praise or inflated

grades since students are quite perceptive in knowing when they are receiving undeserved positive evaluations. Positive feedback must be rooted in actual accomplishments. This requires educators to provide opportunities for children to succeed in areas judged important by themselves and others.

In addition, a focus on competencies and positive feedback is not mutually exclusive with offering feedback to correct a child's performance or behavior. However, as we have emphasized, corrective feedback must be undertaken in a nonaccusatory, nonjudgmental manner that does not humiliate or intimidate the student. Instead, in concert with a strength-based approach, corrective feedback is most effective when presented to the student as a problem to be solved.

Strategies to Nurture the Mindset of Effective Students

Attribution theory, Deci's framework, and the characteristics of the mindset of effective educators provide a rich source of information for developing and implementing interventions to nurture the mindset of students who will be effective in the school setting. In the following section we have outlined a selected group of these interventions. However, we would first like to propose the introduction of an "orientation" period at the beginning of the school year, during which time both the mindsets of teachers and students can be primed for success and accomplishment (Brooks, 2002). Consultants can outline the features of an orientation period directly with school administrators and/or through workshops they conduct with faculty. They can also note that while the ideal time for an orientation period is at the beginning of the new school year, teachers can discuss and highlight the key points with their students throughout the year.

The orientation period. We envision two phases of the orientation. The first is directed primarily at the mindset of educators and typically takes place a few days before the start of the new school year. In this phase, school administrators or consultants can use exercises to promote a positive attitude in faculty and staff. Some of these exercises were noted in the last chapter, but can specifically be applied at the beginning of the school year. School administrators or consultants can review the concept and power of mindsets, describing the mindset of both effective educators and students. They can encourage faculty to reflect upon and share with their colleagues why they became teachers (or other professionals in the school setting) as a way of emphasizing one's purpose at work. As we discovered in research related to stress hardiness, a clear sense of purpose or commitment serves to lessen feelings of disillusionment and burnout.

Faculty can also begin a dialogue to consider what factors they believe are most critical in creating a positive school climate and what steps can be taken to achieve this climate. They can be asked to describe teachers they liked and disliked when they were students and then make a list of the words they hoped their students would use to describe them during the upcoming year. As these words are listed, faculty can reflect upon their behavior with students and design activities to maximize the likelihood that students will describe them in the ways in which they would like to be described.

Another exercise mentioned in Chapter Nine can be offered during the first phase of the orientation. Faculty can share their most positive and negative memories of school from their childhood and ask themselves, "What memories do I hope my students take from my classroom and what am I going to do to increase the likelihood that they will have these memories?"

These and similar activities can evoke a more positive mindset in faculty and staff accompanied with specific, constructive strategies for reinforcing a mindset in students conducive for learning.

The second phase can be implemented during the initial day or two of school, but its activities can be modified and reinforced throughout the year. It is important that teachers not feel bound to introduce academic content during this phase but instead use the time to plant the seeds for a classroom climate in which attitudes of success and responsibility among students will thrive.

Some educators have questioned if downplaying academic work for the first couple of days of school might be a waste of precious classroom teaching time. We believe that devoting the initial days to address the mindset of students is invaluable. Teachers can use the time to develop and enrich their relationship with students so that students will be more motivated to learn, more involved with their own education, more capable of managing frustration and mistakes, more self-disciplined, and more compassionate and caring.

As we outline strategies for nurturing a mindset in students that promotes learning, we will offer examples of how several of these strategies can be initiated as an integral part of the second phase of the orientation period.

Develop realistic expectations and goals and make accommodations when necessary. If students are to perceive a teacher as supportive and if they are to understand their strengths and weaknesses as a learner, it is imperative that teachers become acquainted with the research that highlights that students have different temperaments (Chess & Thomas, 1996; Keogh, 2003), possess different learning styles (Levine, 2002; Rief & Heimburge, 1996), and that there are “multiple intelligences” distributed among children (Gardner, 1983). If lip service is given to accepting children for who they are and we expect the same rate of learning and performance from all students, we are, in essence, prescribing failure for a number of students. They will fail not because they cannot learn but because we teach them in ways that are not in keeping with the ways in which they learn best.

The topic of accommodations often elicits the question of “fairness.” It is not unusual to hear, “If I make accommodations for this student, what will the other students feel? Will they feel that I am not being fair?” It is our position that if children learn differently, if they have different learning styles, then the least fair thing we can do is to treat them as if they all learn the same. If we do not teach students in the ways that fit with their learning style, we will continue to have many youngsters who feel ill-at-ease and discouraged in the school milieu.

We advocate that during the second phase of the orientation period teachers discuss openly with students the question of fairness. To minimize the possibility of students feeling a teacher is not fair because some children may be doing more reading or homework than others, the teacher can discuss with the class how each one of them is different, how some students can read more quickly than others, that some can solve math problems more efficiently, that some can run a certain distance in less time than others. The teacher can say that in light of these differences, there will be different expectations of the amount and kind of work that is done by each student.

Next, the teacher can emphasize, “Since I will treat each of you somewhat differently because you are different, one of my concerns is if you begin to feel I am not

being fair. If that occurs it will interfere with how you feel about me and how you learn. So, if at any time during the year you feel I am not being fair, I want you to tell me so that we can discuss it.” Feedback we have received indicates that when a teacher initiates a dialogue about fairness before it emerges as an issue, it becomes a non-issue and allows teachers to accommodate to each student’s unique style without negative feelings emerging from classmates.

Most accommodations do not require major modifications in a student’s program nor do they demand that a teacher have markedly different educational plans for each student in the classroom. Accommodations will be most effective when students, teachers, and parents work together to define learning strengths and weaknesses and appropriate interventions. Accommodations such as a maximum time devoted for homework even if all of the work is not completed, or untimed tests, or having a peer check to insure that a struggling student has written down the correct homework assignment are but several illustrations of relatively small accommodations with noteworthy outcomes.

When realistic accommodations are offered, it is a sign to students that they can approach teachers and that teachers genuinely care about their success in school. It also nurtures the belief in students that they are active participants in their own learning, a major feature of a positive mindset.

Reinforce responsibility by providing opportunities to contribute to the welfare of others. In Chapter Nine we noted that a significant intervention for assisting students to feel competent is to provide them with opportunities to help others. The act of contributing not only nurtures a sense of competence, but in addition, feelings of compassion, self-esteem, and self-respect, and a more comfortable classroom environment. The experience of making a positive difference in the lives of others serves as a powerful antidote to feelings of defeat, anger, and despair (Brooks, 2002). As Werner (1993) has captured in her longitudinal research about resilience:

Self-esteem and self-efficacy also grew when youngsters took on a responsible position commensurate with their ability, whether it was part-time paid work, managing the household when a parent was incapacitated, or, most often, caring for younger siblings. At some point in their young lives, usually in middle childhood and adolescence, the youngsters who grew into resilient adults were required to carry out some socially desirable task to prevent others in their family, neighborhood, or community from experiencing distress or discomfort. (p. 511)

Examples in the school setting of what we call “contributory activities” include involvement in a charity drive, tutoring peers who are experiencing academic struggles, reading to younger children, and helping to beautify the school by taking care of plants or painting murals on the walls. We are reminded of the impressive results of the Valued Youth Partnership Program reported by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (Hornbeck, 1989). The program was developed to address the large percentage of youth dropping out of school before they reached high school. It was highly successful as the Carnegie reported noted:

A rise in tutors’ self-esteem is the most noticeable effect of the program. . . . As a result, only 2 percent of all tutors have dropped out of school. This is remarkable given that all of these students had been held back twice or more and were reading at least two grade levels below their current grade placement.

Disciplinary problems have become less severe, grades have improved, and attendance of tutors has soared. (p. 47)

We recommend that educators review a list of each student at their school and next to the student's name record the contributory activity in which the student is involved. When youngsters enter the school building with the belief, "Because I am a member of this school, the school is a better place," they are demonstrating features of a mindset associated with effective students. If students are not afforded opportunities to make a positive difference, they are more likely to engage in behaviors in which they are making a negative impact.

Provide opportunities to make choices and decisions and solve problems, which reinforces a sense of ownership. Earlier in this chapter, in reviewing attribution theory and Deci's model, we emphasized the significance of possessing a feeling of ownership and control of one's life. To develop this feeling, students require experiences to learn the skills necessary to make responsible, careful choices and decisions. They also need opportunities, in keeping with their developmental level and interests, to apply and develop these skills in school (Adelman & Taylor, 1983; Deci & Flaste, 1995; Deci, Hodges, Pierson, & Tomassone, 1992; Glasser, 1997; Kohn, 1993; Shure, 1994). Educators can establish many activities to reinforce problem-solving and decision-making skills in their students.

As noted earlier, the use of choice is a powerful validation of ownership. For example, we met a group of teachers who always gave their students a choice in which homework problems to complete. If they gave eight math problems on a page, the students were informed that they had to look at all eight and then select six to do that they thought would help them to learn best. Interestingly, the teachers reported that when they instituted this practice, they received more homework on a regular basis than prior to offering choice. One teacher surmised, "They feel it's *their* homework now." Similarly, a resource room teacher found that students were more likely to write when he gave them several pens each with a different color ink and asked them which color they would most like to use that day. The selection of the pen initiated a positive attitude fused with a feeling of ownership.

The second author recalls with fondness a teacher he had in high school who was very demanding and always asked thought-provoking questions. One aspect of his teaching style was his provision of choices. He would say, "Your test is in two weeks. Let's take a vote. It's your choice. Who would like to have the test on Friday and who would like to have it after the weekend on Monday?" Choices were also offered on when to hand in a paper. "Your paper is due at the end of the month. Let's vote on whether you would like an extra weekend to turn it in. It's your choice."

Never once did the teacher offer the option of not taking the test or handing in the paper. Nor did he present individual options for each student, which would have been unmanageable, especially in terms of when a test was administered. As Bob reflects on this practice, he does not think these choices were a gimmick on the part of the teacher. Rather, this teacher seemed genuinely interested in providing some options within well-defined parameters. The presence of these options reinforced a feeling of ownership, while maintaining high expectations and requirements.

Teachers can incorporate some time in the class schedule to obtain the input of students about solving particular problems that exist in the classroom or the school. As

Shure (1994) has demonstrated in her “I Can Problem Solve” program, even young children can be enlisted to solve problems. Assisting students to articulate what the problem is, to think of possible solutions, and to consider the likely consequences of each solution, increases the probability of students learning not only the process of solving problems but also how best to follow through on the solutions. For example, when the second author was principal of a school in a locked door unit of a psychiatric hospital, he helped to establish a Student Council (Brooks, 1991). The opportunity and structure provided for the students to discuss their concerns and criticisms and consider solutions noticeably lessened hostility and anger while increasing more responsible, prosocial behaviors.

In a public elementary school a question was raised about whether students should be allowed to use their skateboards on school property. Wisely, the administration referred the issue to the Student Council for consideration. The students discussed what information would be necessary in order to make a sound decision, which prompted conversations with lawyers, the police, and the chairperson of the town’s Board of Selectmen to review the existing laws and the extent of the school’s liability should an accident occur. Given the data gathered by the students, they recommended that skateboards not be permitted on school grounds.

The principal of the school noted, “Some people are afraid we’re giving away our power to the kids. Others worry that, if given the chance to vote on school policy, students will abandon order and pass irresponsible rules. In fact, the opposite is true” (Brooks, 1991). The principal, who maintained veto power over the students’ recommendations, stated that he has not had to exercise this authority, observing, “So far the kids have been really great. I’m just an advisor willing to offer wisdom whenever it’s necessary.”

This principal’s actions nurtured a resilient mindset in students, a mindset well-prepared for learning and challenges.

Student ownership, feelings of competence, and student-teacher relations are enhanced when from an early age students are encouraged to be active participants in parent-teacher conferences (to be more accurate the name should be changed to parent-student-teacher conferences). An article in *Teacher Magazine* (Jacobson, 1999) titled, “Three’s Company” about parent-teacher conferences reported:

When Michelle Baker first learned that her son Colin would take part in a parent-teacher conference, she was skeptical. “I thought, this is going to be a fiasco,” she recalls. Instead the meeting turned out to be a big success: Colin. . . showed unusual insight into his academic strengths and weaknesses. “He had the opportunity to hear his teacher talk about him with him sitting there,” Baker says. “He was able to communicate and understand better when he was being judged on.” (p. 23).

It is interesting to note that Colin was only in the first grade.

Some schools have expanded the role of students in parent-student-teacher conferences by having students take responsibility for leading the meetings. This approach provides teachers an opportunity to review with students in advance the kinds of questions and issues that will be raised at the meeting. It allows students to reflect upon their learning strengths and weaknesses and interventions that may prove useful.

Obviously, the format of student-led conferences will only be successful if students are prepared in advance for their leadership role.

Ownership is also reinforced when teachers engage students in a discussion of the rationale of particular educational practices, including those that are typically seen as “givens.” In our experience, the reasons for these “givens,” which include such activities as tests, reports, and homework, are rarely, if ever, discussed in classrooms. Some may counter that a teacher should not consume valuable class time to explain to students the purpose of these basic components of education. However, we believe doing so will strengthen one’s teaching. Such explanation does not suggest abdicating responsibility for one’s classroom or allowing students to create all of the rules or decide which classroom requirements are acceptable. Rather, it means educating students about the reason for various class activities with the goal of increasing their feeling of ownership and motivation.

As an illustration, a middle school teacher reported that a student surprised her by inquiring about the purpose of homework. This teacher, rather than becoming defensive, wisely used the question as an opening to discuss her thoughts about the function of homework. She also encouraged her students to ask other questions they had about her classroom practices and her expectations.

She said, “I was so impressed with their questions that I decided that in the future I would not wait for students to ask me any questions they had about classroom requirements. I realized they might not do so since I had not structured time for such questions. Instead, I decided I would take part of the first day of class at the beginning of each new school year to review my expectations and what I saw as the purpose of homework or tests or reports. It was a good exercise for me since I was forced to think about why I gave homework or why I gave tests in certain formats.”

This teacher continued, “I would never have thought of having this kind of discussion if the student had not asked me about the purpose of homework. Yet, now I would not think of not having this kind of discussion.”

When students are afforded realistic choices, when they are encouraged to voice their opinion and they feel that these opinions are acknowledged, valued, and validated, they will demonstrate behaviors in concert with the features of a mindset poised to learn and act responsibly.

Establish self-discipline by learning to discipline effectively. Many questions posed by educators revolve around the issue of discipline. Answers should be guided by an understanding of the function of discipline. Consultants can emphasize two main purposes of discipline. The first, which most educators state immediately, is that it is important to establish rules, guidelines, and consequences in order to insure that our home and school environments are safe and that both students and staff feel secure. The second is that discipline should promote self-discipline or self-control in students. It is difficult to conceive of students developing high self-esteem, motivation, and resilience if they lack a comfortable sense of self-discipline, that is, a realistic ability to reflect upon their behavior and its impact on others, and then to change the behavior if necessary. In essence, self-discipline implies ownership for one’s own discipline and self-regulation (Brooks, 2002).

It is also important to keep in mind that discipline stems from the word “disciple” and is best understood as part of a learning process. In assisting children to develop self-

discipline, it is essential not to humiliate or intimidate them (Charney, 1991; Curwin & Mendler, 1988; Mendler, 1992). Humiliation and intimidation are more likely to result in an intensification of anger and uncooperativeness, the very feelings and behaviors that educators do not want to see emerge in the classroom. As we noted in Chapter Nine, if we want students to assume responsibility for their actions and perceive rules as justified, they must understand the purpose of the rules and participate within reason in the process of creating these rules and the consequences that follow should the rules be broken.

An assistant principal at a middle school recognized that educators must walk a tightrope when discipline is involved, maintaining a delicate balance between rigidity and flexibility, striving to blend warmth, nurturance, acceptance, and humor with realistic expectations, clearcut guidelines, and logical consequences. Similar to the role of many assistant principals, he served as the disciplinarian in the school. Students were sent to him to serve detention. As he shared his thoughts about discipline during a consultation at his school, he observed that at the beginning of his career he was a “punisher” rather than a “disciplinarian” or a “teacher.”

“Students would come in to serve detention and I would tell them to sit silently and think about what they had done wrong. They looked angry and resentful and not in a learning mood. I thought the only thing they were thinking about were ways of getting revenge against me or their teachers. I knew I had to change what I was doing. It just wasn’t working. I had to make detention a place where they could really begin to reflect on their feelings and behaviors and start handling situations more effectively.”

This assistant principal initiated a new activity in detention. Rather than have students remain silent, they were given the choice of more than 30 topics about which to write. Topics included what they would do if they ran the school, what they could do in the future to avoid detention, what were some of their best and worst experiences in school, what advice they would give a beginning teacher, what dreams they had for the future and how they would reach these dreams. He told them that if they wished he would read their essays and use the information to become a better administrator and help the school become a more comfortable place for students.

He said, “I wasn’t certain how students would respond to answering an essay question while in detention. I knew some of them didn’t even like to write. Much to my pleasant surprise, they really got into the activity. Their essays were very revealing and they wanted me to read them. I made certain I discussed what they had written. I soon realized that these discussions helped them to feel I cared. One student actually said in a half-kidding way, ‘I like talking with you. I think I’ll do something bad each day so I can come down to speak with you.’ I hadn’t anticipated that problem and I told him it would be better just to set up an appointment to see me.”

He then proceeded to show us boxes in his office that were filled with student essays. As we reviewed a sample of them, we were very impressed with the ability of the students to reflect upon their lives and their behaviors and to consider alternative ways of behaving in the future. This very impressive assistant principal had truly transformed his role from that of a “punisher” to that of a “disciplinarian.” In the process the negative mindset of the students was slowly being replaced by a mindset associated with more effective behaviors and more effective learning.

The disciplinary practices we are advocating, including those that encourage the input of students, can be used to address such critical issues as teasing and bullying. No

student should ever fear physical or emotional harm in the school setting (or in any setting). When educators treat students with kindness and respect, it can set a powerful tone for students to treat others with the same kindness and respect. Students are more likely to adhere to rules that prohibit teasing and bullying when they do not feel bullied or teased and when they understand the rationale for rules. Educators must keep in mind that discipline is most effective in the context of a supportive, caring relationship, a relationship that seeks the observations of students while teaching them about accountability and holding them responsible for their actions.

Assist students to deal more effectively with mistakes and failure. Both attribution theory and Deci's framework accord a prominent role to the impact that making mistakes has on the demeanor of students. In Chapter Nine we noted that effective teachers are proactive in discussing with students feelings and behaviors associated with the fear of failing and feeling humiliated. Far too many students, wishing to avoid the possibility of looking foolish, engage in self-defeating actions such as becoming a class clown or class bully or refusing to answer questions or failing to complete assignments. Lessening the fear of humiliation must be a major goal in every classroom, especially given the pernicious impact it has. If this fear dominates the mindset of students, learning will be compromised.

In the last chapter we recommended that during the first day or two of the school year (the orientation period), teachers introduce the theme of mistakes and share some of their own experiences with failure when they were students. Identifying and discussing the fear of making mistakes renders it a less potent force in the classroom.

There are other strategies that consultants can suggest to educators to address the issues of mistakes. They can indicate that students are very aware of how teachers handle their own setbacks in the classroom. If teachers display frustration and anger when challenging situations arise in the classroom, obviously they are not modeling the behaviors they would expect from students. A high school teacher noticed that she often expressed annoyance, especially when students did not appear to be interested in the class or were unable to provide the correct answer to her questions. Yet, she would tell her students that they should not be afraid to take risks or make mistakes.

"I finally realized one day that I was modeling the behaviors I did not want to see in my students. I also realized that I was too uptight and not playful enough. So I decided to take a risk and use a very different approach. I told my classes that I wasn't pleased with how I sometimes responded to setbacks and mistakes and if they ever caught me in a lousy mood they should let me know. I told them that I might even act negatively just to see if they were on their toes. I also said that I would return the favor and let them know when they seemed afraid to answer questions or offer their opinions. Saying this in a playful way worked wonders. I feel better and my students seem to feel less pressured in the classroom."

With a similar intent, an elementary school teacher gave her students rocks and stones at the beginning of the school year. She then pointed to a jar on her desk and said, "Whenever you or I make a mistake in the class, someone can place a rock or stone in the jar. As soon as the jar gets filled, we will have a party to celebrate our mistakes and I will bring in the refreshments. We were informed by a colleague of this teacher that the rocks were rather large and the jar relatively small. Thus, a celebration took place early

in the year. This teacher understood the importance of removing the fear of failure in her classroom. She accomplished this task with playfulness and celebration.

Concluding Comment

Consultants, during the process of helping teachers to identify the mindset associated with effective educators, can also define the key features of the mindset of effective students. The mindset of educators is openly displayed in their teaching attitudes and practices. These attitudes and practices heavily influence the mindset that will be reinforced in students. As we understand the ways in which our mindsets and the mindsets of our students influence the classroom environment, we will be better equipped to create an atmosphere that supports motivation, learning, cooperation, responsibility, self-discipline, hope, and resilience.

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