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ABSTRACT

Academic achievement is increasing in schools, but so is the dropout rate. Excellence in schools must be defined more broadly than the scores students earn on achievement tests. Concerns such as equity must be a part of the definition of excellence in education. It is essential that for some programs with disproportionate enrollments, educators must actively work to reduce and eliminate, whenever possible, the barriers that prevent students from entering programs. These barriers exist in the form of discrimination, bias, and stereotyping. It is clear that disproportionate dropout rates occur for minority, handicapped, disadvantaged, and nontraditional students. It is just as clear that the dropout problem is closely associated with student self-image. The concern for excellence in education tends to focus upon student achievement scores, yet the concern of equity is to ensure excellence for all students, regardless of their test scores. The excellence movement cannot achieve its intended purpose unless it responds appropriately to these needs. Ten strategies to achieve educational excellence include: (1) make student feel important; (2) make students feel invited; (3) deal with needed changes in others from a positive point of view; (4) learn to make appropriate nonverbal cues; (5) get to know each student personally; (6) learn to empathize; (7) establish parameters; (8) use student-centered instruction; (9) learn to know and understand the difference between discipline and punishment; and (10) be enthusiastic about teaching. (ABL)

MONOGRAPH

EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE AND EQUITY

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INTRODUCTION

With the recent attention given to education at the national level, many schools, and in fact whole states, have begun a process to upgrade their academic standards. This movement has often focused on the concept of "back to the basics." Additional requirements in math, English, science, foreign language, and other subjects have been seen as the answer to the concerns raised about students' educational performance (Adler, 1982). Although these concerns represent real feelings about the status of schools and the performance of students, an overreaction to such concerns may lead to greater difficulties than those currently faced. Historically, education has tended to be a bit faddish, so care must be taken not to move too far in response to the obvious pressures regarding greater achievement.

It would appear that if schools are really interested in educational excellence, which surely includes more than just test scores, they must be interested in a total school environment that encourages learning in all areas by all students. The purpose of this monograph is to provide ten strategies that will help educators develop such an environment.

Before beginning a discussion, it should be noted that two basic psychological theories underlie all of these ten strategies. The first theory is the Pygmalion effect, or the self-fulfilling prophecy. Basically, this concept holds that people tend to live up to what others expect of them. Robert Rosenthal, a social psychologist at Harvard, conducted a research study in this area, which has been repeated numerous times with similar results. Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) convinced a number of teachers that a test they had designed could predict which students were about to experience a sudden burst in learning without any extra effort on the students' part. After this test was administered, one fifth of the students' names were secretly selected at random and were given to the teachers as representing the "educational bloomers" identified by the test.

Eight months later, when all of the students were tested again, it was found that the identified students had actually "bloomed." They had gained an average of four IQ points above the control group. The real difference between the two groups of students rested primarily in their teachers' perceptions. This example clearly illustrates the concept of the self-fulfilling prophecy. Although Rosenthal's study had been severely challenged because of methodological concerns, Good and Brophy (1984) and Purkey (1978) have conducted similar studies that yielded the same results. It appears that this concept is accurate and meaningful.

Notice the impact of such a concept when dealing with issues like bias, stereotyping, and discrimination. For the person who is "different," the self-fulfilling prophecy can have a great impact. A haunting question that may arise is "Am I being treated the way I am because I can't do the job or because I'm a woman (or a minority)?" The confusion such a question creates for the nontraditional person is real and, like it or not, tends to push that person toward the fulfillment of the stereotyped prophecy.

The second basic psychological theory deals with self-concept and self-esteem. How students perceive themselves influences their behavior as well as their achievement. If students see themselves as productive, valuable, and worthwhile, they tend to behave accordingly. On the other hand, if students perceive themselves as lazy, incapable, and dumb, their actions will reflect this attitude. Purkey (1973) suggests that a student's self-concept may be as strong an indicator of academic success, if not stronger, than any other variable.

Research on self-image reflects that people who feel "different" tend to have a lower self-esteem (Purkey, 1970). In a research study conducted at The Ohio State University several years ago (Knight, Henderson, & Reis, 1980), it was found that two students with similar backgrounds and experiences, but of different genders, would often enter programs with very different self-concepts. The traditional student lacked confidence, and the non-

traditional student felt incompetent. Differing self-concepts have a major impact on how students perform and on whether or not they stay in a program. For years, nontraditional students have dropped out of programs at disproportionately higher rates than have traditional students. Clearly, this issue of retention is largely an issue of self-concept.

It should be noted that a discussion of the self-fulfilling prophecy cannot successfully undertaken without also discussing the topics of self-concept and self-esteem. The reverse is also true. How students feel about themselves influences how teachers feel about them, and how teachers feel about students influences how students feel about themselves. This cycle can be repeated in either a positive or a negative way. Any teacher who has worked with the younger brother or sister of a "superstar" or an "outlaw" has observed this process at work.

STRATEGIES

The following ten strategies are worth considering when establishing educational excellence. Note how all ten reflect the two major psychological theories.

1. **Make students feel important.** Everyone has a right to feel important. Research shows that all successful corporations consider their clientele important, treat them with respect, listen to them, and react to their suggestions (Peters & Waterman, 1982; Deal & Kennedy, 1982). Women often report that they are not taken seriously when they discuss or participate in traditionally male activities. Schools have often taken a very impersonal stance toward their clientele—the students. For nontraditional students, such a posture tends to be perceived as negative. Dropouts often report, "The teacher didn't like me." Teachers are just as often puzzled by this reaction. They comment, "I just don't understand. I treated that student just like I treat everyone else." This presents an important lesson. Because of differing self-concepts, students may respond differently to the same treatment. By giving appropriate responsibility, by listening, by valuing each student, and by following the other points listed here, educators can help all students feel important.

2. **Make students feel invited.** Not only should students feel highly regarded, they should also feel wanted in class. In research done by Purkey (1978), students were identified as being invited or "disinvited," by the way they were treated by the teacher as they entered the classroom. If the teacher greeted them pleasantly, they were identified as invited. If, however, they were greeted with a frown or other negative behavior on the teacher's part, they were identified as "disinvited." Test scores and other variables indicated that the two groups, although different in the eyes of the teachers, were really not different in their academic ability. When asked a question they could not answer, the invited students were given an average of three seconds to respond before the teacher gave clues, restated the question, redirected the question, or answered the question. On the other hand, the "disinvited" students, who were just as capable, were given an average of .9 of a second to respond to questions they could not answer before the teacher reentered the picture. Now, teachers do not do these things to hurt students. In fact, the most common motive is a noble one and is referred to in related literature as an "unintended, well intentioned behavior." Teachers want to save the students from embarrassment. However, the message that comes to the students is different from what was intended. The message such students receive is that they are dumb, that the teacher does not like them, or that they are "disinvited." A common perception reported by nontraditional students is that they do not feel they belong.

Teachers who want to make students feel invited might be well-advised to visit some lower elementary classes (K-3) to get some good ideas on how to make classrooms inviting places. The observer should note the warmth of the colors, the methods of evaluation, and the voice tones—all methods to make students feel more invited.

3. **Deal with needed changes in others from a positive point of view.** Research done by Rosenshine and Furst (1971) revealed that positive reinforcement and appropriate praise were positively correlated with learning. They also found that criticism was negatively correlated with learning. These findings suggest that if teachers are really interested in learning, they should be looking for, and using, more positive approaches to evaluation as well as to everyday behavior. In other words, teachers should be looking for what is right, not what is wrong (Peters & Austin, 1985). When grading papers, for example, teachers may want to consider checking the correct responses and adding points instead of checking incorrect responses and subtracting points.

Teachers may want to consider putting up a sign in the teachers' lounge that says, "Here, we will not speak ill of others!" and then live by it. This does not mean that problems cannot be dealt with in the teachers' lounge, but simply that it will not be a place where people come to complain about others.

Goodlad's (1984) research indicated that an extremely small amount of time is generally spent by teachers in positive behavior toward students. Dunkin and Biddle (1974) suggest that people are more influenced by negative information about others than they are by positive. Therefore, teachers will have to consciously and overtly work to change their behavior if this particular strategy is to be accomplished.

Although this strategy, like all the others provided in this monograph, is important for all students, it should be noted that a more positive approach can offer added benefits to the nontraditional student, who almost surely has a less-than-positive self-concept.

4. **Learn to make appropriate nonverbal cues.** Galloway (1974) indicates that approximately 70 percent of what people learn may come through their eyes, not their ears. A smile, a nod, a wink, and a pat on the back have tremendous power related to the learning environment in schools. The use of space, the physical arrangement of the classroom, the tone of voice, gestures, and even dress are clues that send powerful messages about how teachers feel about the students, the school, themselves, and their work. An old statement heard many times is absolutely true in school, "Your actions speak so loud I can't hear a word you are saying."

Many teachers offer few positive nonverbal cues. Un-

fortunately, nontraditional students interpret this lack of positive cues as dislike for them. This perception, which may or may not be true, probably reinforces the already low self-concept held by nontraditional students.

5. **Get to know each student personally.** Perhaps one of the most effective ways to go about this is to make home visits. Agricultural education programs have used this technique for years as a mechanism to work with students in a supervised occupational experience program. However, any teacher who has had much experience with home visits will note the advantages of knowing the students' home situations, their families, and their cultural backgrounds. To the teacher, this kind of knowledge is extremely valuable for such concerns as student behavior. For the student, especially the non traditional student, the personal interest expressed by the teacher is a strong signal of the value the teacher places upon the student. This particular strategy is being adopted by many schools as a way of doing business for all teachers (Frymier et al., 1984). For those who do not make home visits, other means can be found to accomplish this purpose. The point is that this particular strategy will most likely occur outside the confines of the classroom. The obvious implication for teachers is that they will have to exert extra effort if they are to gain a personal knowledge of *each* student.

6. **Learn to empathize.** Of course, the first step in learning to empathize with students is to get to know them personally. Empathy is the ability to understand and appreciate the feelings of another person. One of the traps that has been laid for students and teachers is an overgeneralization of the "great high law" of education—consistency. Consistency is generally related to exhibited behaviors. For example, when students are tardy or misbehave, there are certain steps to take. Little or no consideration is given to the circumstances that caused the behavior. Therefore, in schools, generally symptoms are treated and the lack of positive results speaks for itself. Clearly, consistency is important, but the "great high law" of education should really be fairness. As a teacher deals with a pregnant teenager, a displaced homemaker, a minority individual, or anyone else who may feel somewhat "different," a personal knowledge and the ability to empathize will go a long way in helping the student become successful. If teachers want more productive behavior from students, an interest in the causes of behavior must be examined. Fairness is important, and the only way to achieve fairness is to learn to empathize.

7. **Establish parameters.** One of the most devastating blows ever dealt to education came in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the name of "Do your own thing." For many students, that often meant "do nothing." People generally have a need for some structure. This structure need not be physical, although that often helps, but it must be psychological. Research on learning indicates that clarity, task orientation, time on task, letting students learn the criterion material, and structuring are all positively correlated with learning. Note how each of these variables is related somehow to the boundaries that exist within a school, in a classroom, or in a lesson.

Research on discipline and student achievement shows that students behave better and learn more in an environment that provides these types of boundaries clearly (Phi Delta Kappa Commission on Discipline, 1982, Dobson, 1973). This is not a plea for more rules, but rather a statement about where one begins and ends and about the boundaries that will determine success in a given situation.

A special need exists here for nontraditional students. Since they often come from a different environment or background, they may not know or understand the implied rules of behavior. For example, girls who enter trade areas that have traditionally been male-dominated often do not know the unstated rules of behavior. As a result, they are likely to do something unacceptable or, in other words, violate some understood rule. The consequence will be that such female will be thought of, and even accused of, being a "dumb girl," which reinforces the stereotype. The real truth is that she simply did not know the rules. By making the expectations and boundaries of behavior explicit, all students, but especially nontraditional students, will benefit.

8. **Use student-centered instruction.** Students learn more when they question and inquire, as opposed to when they are trained or coached. When instruction is student-centered, the focus is upon the individual learner, not upon the lesson to be taught. Methods and materials that are student-centered provide variability, which is positively correlated with learning.

Problem solving is clearly a student centered approach to learning. Perhaps the most important skill a teacher can teach is not a technical skill, for surely such will become obsolete at some future date, but an ability to solve problems. By definition and design, problem solving is student-centered. Do teachers teach math, science, English, history, art, or other such subjects? The answer to this question should be a resounding "NO!" Teachers should teach students, not subjects. Herein lies one of the major traps of the current push to add rigor to the curriculum in schools. To move from being student-centered to being subject-matter-centered would be a mistake, and would certainly insure the failure of many students because of disregard for the value of the individual. Retention of students is largely an issue of self-concept. Since nontraditional students have a self-concept that is more negative than average, they are particularly vulnerable to the increased pressures of academic achievement. This occurrence may not be intentional on the teacher's part, but it almost certainly will occur, especially if the subject matter to be taught becomes more important than the students to whom it is taught.

9. **Learn to know and understand the difference between discipline and punishment.** According to a Gallup poll, one of the most serious concerns the public has regarding education is discipline. However, once again schools have followed an incorrect path in an attempt to respond to this concern. Nearly all discipline codes deal with symptoms and punishment. Very few deal with causes and remedies. Therefore, most discipline codes are actually punishment codes.

Discipline is a learned behavior and is related to the "ounce of prevention" adage. Clearly, here is an issue in which "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." Certainly basic rules need to be enforced, but an overemphasis in this area appears to be counterproductive.

The Phi Delta Kappa Commission on Discipline (1982) has stated several important findings that teachers should

know Often students who are discipline problems have above-average intelligence and are starved for attention. Care must be taken with these students not to reinforce their behavior. In addition, most serious discipline problems do not just happen, but are mountains that at one time were molehills. Finally, teachers who have fewer discipline problems appear to solve many problems before they actually occur, by being aware of the student's perspective and capable of responding positively and productively.

10. **Be enthusiastic about teaching.** According to the research done by Rosenshine and Furst, enthusiasm is among the most highly correlated variables of student achievement. Enthusiasm can be defined in a number of ways, but certainly the idea of internal intensity should be a part of any definition. People tend to be most enthusiastic about what they know best. Therefore, the day a person decides to enter education is the day that person forever commits to being a student. As one becomes more knowledgeable about a particular subject, it is more likely that the level of enthusiasm will rise.

Students rate teachers as more enthusiastic when they ask a lot of questions; show commitment to tasks; demonstrate, by some behavior, a belief that what they are teaching is important; and show care and concern. Teaching in American schools has been described as lifeless (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Goodlad, 1984; Sizer, 1984). This generation of teachers must rethink where they stand on this important variable. What our classrooms all across America appear to need is a good healthy shot of enthusiasm. People excited about what they are doing will be absolutely critical to the success of educational programs in the future.

CONCLUSION

Academic achievement is increasing in schools, but so is the dropout rate. Is the only measure of schools' excellence the scores students earn on achievement tests? If excellence is defined that narrowly, then the answer is yes, but certainly such a narrow definition is unacceptable. Excellence must be defined in a broader sense. Concerns such as equity must be a part of the definition of excellence in education. It is not possible to have excellence without equity (Boyer, 1983).

It is essential to understand that for some programs with disproportionate enrollments, educators must actively work to reduce and eliminate, whenever possible, the barriers that prevent students from entering programs. These barriers exist in the form of discrimination, bias, and stereotyping. Educators need to be aware that although they may not be personally responsible, there are perceived barriers held by those students who feel "different." If educators will work to find out what those barriers are, real or imagined, and then go to work to remove them, they will be taking a major step closer to that elusive goal of excellence.

It is clear that disproportionate dropout rates occur for minority, handicapped, disadvantaged, and nontraditional students. It is just as clear that the dropout problem is closely associated with student self-image. In fact, students who fall into the "different" category tend to enter classes or programs with a different self-concept than those who are considered "average" students. If educators are truly concerned about remedying this situation, they must then be concerned about individuals and their feelings. Simply requiring another course to make up for a student's perceived deficiency will not improve student achievement and certainly will not stop the attrition but will most likely exacerbate it.

The concern of the excellence movement in education tends to focus upon student achievement scores, yet the concern of equity is to ensure excellence for *all* students, regardless of their test scores. To accomplish this, barriers must be removed and concern for individuals must be increased, regardless of students' diversity or difference from the norm. The excellence movement cannot achieve its intended purpose unless it responds appropriately to these needs. The ten strategies provided are steps toward achieving educational excellence and equity.

Note

1. "Disinvited" denotes being present in the classroom but sensing rejection.

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