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Let's put caring into the Common Core

Promoting the social-emotional competence of our students is the first step toward Common Core mastery



There were more than 2,000 educators at an ASCD (formerly the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development) conference I attended last March. The keynote speaker took an informal survey of responses to these questions:

What would lead you to walk into a classroom and say that you are in the presence of an expert?

What would you want to see to make you think that this is a class you would want your own child to be in?

Despite the size of the audience, the answers were remarkably uniform and all about what the students—not the teacher—were doing: asking questions, taking ownership of learning, setting goals, coaching one another, and displaying deep engagement in small group interaction.

Her next question was this:

Thinking back on all of your time being a student, if you can remember a teacher dramatically, what happened? This can be either positive or negative.

Again, there was consensus. Teachers who were remembered positively gave encouragement, responsibility and support. On the negative side, the key word was intimidation, whether direct or indirect, whether by commission (i.e., teachers as a source of intimidation) or omission (failing to protect students from intimidation by peers, older students or bullies).

As it turns out, that keynote speaker was Charlotte Danielson, whose framework is being used, in one version or another,

by a majority of New Jersey's schools under the new statewide evaluation system.

Clearly, this portion of Danielson's address was geared toward her second domain, Classroom Environment. Her informal survey of adults reinforced that Domain #2 is the most salient to learners in both real-time and in enduring memory. Put another way, the oft-quoted adage, "People will forget what you say and do but they will not forget how you made them feel," has a corollary for teachers: "Whether or not your students will remember and put to use what you teach them depends on how they feel about you and their feelings when you are teaching them."

Of course, every model of teacher practice, from McREL to Marzano, focuses in part on classroom environment. Its connection to student achievement is often overlooked or minimized, especially in a time when test scores seem to be all that matters. Yet in our five-year Developing Safe and Civil Schools project conducted in over 200 New Jersey schools, one of our most powerful and consistent findings was that in schools where students felt respected and thought their teachers wanted to be there and cared about one another, bullying and other forms of school violence were much less prevalent.

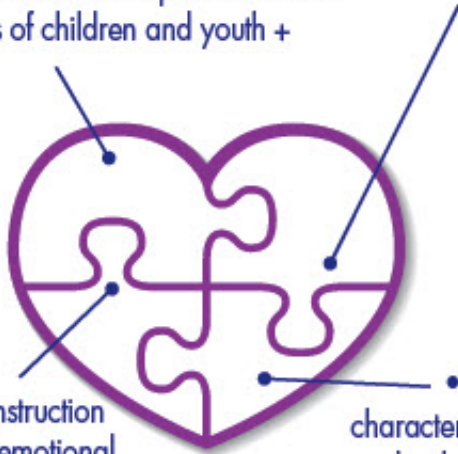
I argue, therefore, that if we really want to help our students achieve Common Core mastery, our first objective should be promoting the social-emotional competence of the young people in our care.

What is involved in getting the school and classroom environment right?

SCHOOL & STUDENT SUCCESS EQUATION

• Habits of mind and
patterns of thinking* +

• Recognition of the developmental needs
and realities of children and youth +



• Explicit instruction
in social-emotional
learning skills +

• Positive,
character-building
school climate +

=

SCHOOL & STUDENT SUCCESS

** that include curiosity, explaining their reasoning, feedback process, asking questions, defining and solving problems, and striving to communicate clearly and proudly*

If we agree with Danielson and other experts that educators must create an environment that allows the Common Core to be implemented successfully and for it to result in learning that is put to integrative and long-term use by students, the question remains: What is involved in “getting it right”? Danielson’s Domain #2 consists of five distinct but interrelated areas:

- Creating an environment of respect and rapport
- Establishing a culture for learning
- Managing classroom procedures
- Managing student behaviors
- Organizing physical space.

These areas are not equivalent. The first two areas are essential frames for how the remaining areas, and the rest of the domains, construct students’ learning processes. True academic and life success integrates the intellectual, emotional, and social facets of learning. These are inextricably interconnected. Ensuring their strong connection requires elements that are captured in the informal equation below.

The Common Core Curriculum Standards—or any revised or related set of academic standards-- cannot be met without each element of this synergistic equation also being in place.

“Did you like my lesson?”

I recently spoke with one teacher who, after getting extensive feedback about her lessons and a positive overall rating of 3.33 across the numerous dimensions in the Danielson framework, asked her principal, “I know you gave me all these

ratings, but there's still one thing I have no idea about: did you like my lesson?"



In my visits to schools, I see the same paradox repeated: teachers spending tremendous time on student growth objectives but not on the students' growth as children and learners, teachers worried about their delivery of lesson components but not the cumulative impact of these lessons on the diverse learners in their classrooms, and teachers demanding discernment, depth, and group engagement from students who have not had these competencies developed.

How can it be that we have become so focused on numbers and ratings and scores that we have forgotten that learning is a social-relational task involving children and adolescents, at various stages of maturity, interacting with one-another and a wide array of adults with whom they crave caring relationships and respect? For the majority of students, it is essential to create a school and classroom culture and climate that engenders a mindset of possibility, potential, excitement, and purpose for learning.

Misguided priorities

When we don't attend to the mindset of learners and create circumstances in which they are truly engaged in learning, the lights of learning are switched off. The vast majority of students are not motivated by standardized tests, and what is taught for the purpose of tests quickly evaporates.

In schools that are labeled as "low performing," "turnaround," "failing," and "persistently violent," both students and educators can hardly avoid getting the message that they are "second best at best." Too many of these schools are characterized by what influential urban educator and author Martin Haberman referred to as the "pedagogy of poverty," a pedagogy removed from what we know about learning capacity and preferences; it is characterized by drills, numbing routines, pessimism, and a narrowing of the curriculum to maximize time spent in high-stakes test-related subject areas. But even schools that are not low-performing suffer the subtle consequences of pressure to accelerate students' test performance and for teachers to deliver lessons that incorporate a large number of components for which they are accountable. The resulting learning process adds considerable pressure on all involved that stifles a love of learning, inquiry, and creativity.

Create a pedagogy of possibility in a climate of ongoing supports



What can educators do? Herein lies the hidden challenge of the Common Core, particularly for our students with the greatest difficulties in learning: the right school and classroom environment is essential for success and mindsets matter in getting this right. Students and educators alike must be nurtured toward success and not equate success solely with test scores. Some of the habits of mind essential for Common Core success must become exactly that: habits. These habits must be valued and mastered by students and this can only occur through a gradual process.

By attending to what we know about students' social-emotional and character development, we can create a "pedagogy of possibility" as a hallmark of school culture and climate. The orientation is not "what I cannot do," but rather, "what I can do, and what I will do next." Drawing from our school and student success formula, schools need to four key interlocking pieces school need to confidently tackle the Common Core:

1. **An Accomplishment Mindset** is for children to believe that they can and should meet the challenge of the new standards, despite the likely short-term difficulties. Children and educators need to know, explicitly, that everyone has the capacity to accomplish in ways that defy prior statistical trends. They need to understand that the Common Core is important because it will help create the habits of mind that students need for success in college and careers. Part of the science curriculum must be devoted to developmentally appropriate instruction about how the brain works and that everyone can learn with effort, a caring, supportive environment, and engaging pedagogy. Students—and educators—need to understand the effects of stress, fear, lack of safety, failure scripts, and various forms of discouragement on the ability to learn. And they need to understand that habits take time to develop and bumps in the road are to be expected.
 - **Stanford University's Carol Dweck on the Growth Mindset and Education**
 - **How to help kids find their aspirations**
2. **Social-Emotional and Character Development** is complementary to the first piece. Students must be taught the skills they need for success in a social world. Habits of mind must be linked to habits of heart and connection. Our youth require social-emotional competencies and strong prosocial values to co-exist in workplaces, communities, and families. And schools are all three.
 - **NJ Alliance for Social-Emotional and Character Development**
 - **Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning**
 - **Character Education Partnership and National Schools of Character**
3. **Supportive School Culture and Climate**, is creating an encouraging school setting. In disadvantaged communities, it means a shared belief that schools can be oases for students and for teachers. Regardless of circumstances, it requires the unshakable belief that a positive, engaging learning environment fosters connections and depth of understanding in all children, regardless of past performance. There are many existing guidelines for putting these beliefs into practice.

- **National School Climate Center**
- **Center for Supportive Schools**
- **Safe and Supportive Schools Technical Assistance Center**

4. **Rainbows in Students' Clouds** refers to poet Maya Angelou's description of the people who have helped her most during her life. She has spoken eloquently about how she was saved and guided through her most difficult times by individuals who were, as she says, "rainbows in my clouds." Positive accomplishment is addictive and highly intrinsically motivating; there are many stories of kids who are "reclaimed" after failure histories that some would see as life sentences. However, it is not up to the child alone, despite abundant motivation and effort, to reclaim him or herself. Developing a positive aspirational mindset and the strategies students can use to help them cope, problem solve, overcome obstacles, and be resilient require strong relationships with caring others who know how to inspire. Almost every teacher who has been in the field for five years or more has been a rainbow in students' clouds.

- **Maya Angelou Calls on Educators to be Somebody's Rainbow**
- **Maya Angelou speaks about those who were rainbows in her clouds**
- **Resilience: The Other 21st Century Skills**

The learner's on-switch must be activated

The Common Core cannot be effectively delivered if the learner's on-switch is off, no matter how elegantly constructed the standards may be. By focusing too narrowly on test score success and teaching activities that are less than the sum of their parts, we do our students--and educators--a deep disservice. Danielson's questions point us to where we know we must go, intuitively. Keeping the switch on in the face of the inevitable static that will be encountered requires students to have schools – and school leaders-- that actively, systematically, and continuously promote their social-emotional and character skills, a positive mindset, a pedagogy that inspires possibility and connection to attainable future aspirations, and nurturing and sustaining relationships that are rainbows in students' clouds and bathe students in the light of their own potential, not their failings.



How to be a rainbow in a student's clouds

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