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Developing the Mindset of Effective Teachers

In Chapter Two we outlined the key characteristics of the mindset of effective educators. We noted that the differing mindsets or assumptions that educators possess about themselves and their students play a significant role in determining their expectations, teaching practices, and relationships with students (Brooks, 2001 a,b; Brooks & Goldstein, 2001, 2003, 2004).

Even those assumptions about which we may not be aware have a way of being expressed to others. For example, a teacher may be angry with a child without fully realizing that the anger is rooted in the teacher's assumption that the child's constant asking of questions is an intentional ploy to distract the class. In addition, the teacher may not be aware that his anger is not as disguised as he believes, and is being communicated through facial expressions and tone of voice. In contrast, another teacher with the same child may assume that the child's ongoing questions represent an attempt to understand the material being presented. This teacher is less likely to express negative verbal and nonverbal messages and more likely to offer assistance, perceiving the child as feeling vulnerable rather than being oppositional.

The impact that the mindset of educators has in determining their approach to students was apparent in the following example.

Parents of a high school student, John, contacted the second author several years ago. They asked that Bob serve as a consultant to John's school program. John had been diagnosed with learning disabilities and was experiencing difficulty academically. Bob met with John's teachers and asked each to describe him. One teacher immediately responded, "John is one of the most defiant, oppositional, unmotivated, lazy, irresponsible students we have at this school."

Another teacher appeared surprised by the harshness of this assessment. In a manner that remained respectful of her colleague's opinion, she said, "I have a different view. I think John is really struggling with learning and we should figure out the best ways to teach him."

In listening to these two descriptions of the same student, one could not help but think that the teachers were offering opinions of two very different youngsters.

After this meeting Bob interviewed John and asked him to describe his teachers, not revealing what they had said about him. In describing the teacher who had portrayed him very negatively, John said with great force, "She hates me, but that's okay because I hate her. And I won't do any work in her class."

John continued, "And don't tell me that I'm only hurting myself by not doing work (he must have heard that advice on numerous occasions). What you don't understand, Dr. Brooks, is that in her eyes I am a failure. Whatever I do in her class is never going to be good enough. She doesn't expect me to pass, so why even try?" He added that from the first day of class he felt "angry vibes" from her.

“She just didn’t like me and soon I didn’t like her. I could tell she didn’t want me in her class just by the way she spoke with me. Right away she seemed so angry with me. I really don’t know why she felt that way. So after a while I knew there was no way I could succeed in her class so I just decided that I wouldn’t even try. It would just be a waste of time. She told me I was lazy, but if she was honest she would have to admit that she doesn’t think I could ever get a good grade in her class.”

John’s face lit up as he described the teacher who thought that the primary issue that should be addressed was his struggles with learning and his feelings of vulnerability. He said, “I love her. She went out of her way the first week of school to tell me something. She said that she knew I was having trouble with learning, but she thought I was smart and she had to figure out the best way to teach me. She said that one of the reasons she became a teacher was to help all students learn. She’s always there to help.”

After hearing John’s views of these two teachers, one could understand why he was a discipline problem with the first teacher but not the second. His behavior with each of them reflected what he believed were their mindset and expectations for him. We recognize that it typically takes “two to tango” and most likely at some point John bore responsibility for adding fuel to the “angry vibes,” thereby confirming the first teacher’s negative perceptions of him. However, it is important for educators to identify and modify those features of their mindset that might alienate students and set up barriers to the creation of effective teacher-student interactions.

The Mindset of Effective Educators

Prior to discussing strategies for reinforcing a positive mindset in educators, it will be helpful to review briefly the characteristics of this mindset as outlined in Chapter Two. Effective educators:

- Understand the lifelong impact they have on students, including instilling a sense of hope and resilience.

- Believe that the learning that occurs in the classroom and the behavior exhibited by students has as much, if not more, to do with the influence of teachers than what students might bring into the situation.

- Believe that all students yearn to be successful and if a student is not learning, educators must ask how they can adapt their teaching style and instructional material to meet student needs.

- Believe that attending to the social-emotional needs of students is not an “extra-curriculum” that draws time away from teaching academic subjects.

- Recognize that if educators are to relate effectively to students, they must be empathic, always attempting to perceive the world through the eyes of the student.

- Appreciate that the foundation for successful learning and a safe and secure classroom climate is the relationship that teachers forge with students.

- Recognize that students will be more motivated to learn when they feel a sense of ownership for their own education.

- Understand that one of the main functions of an educator is to be a disciplinarian in the true sense of the word, namely, to perceive discipline as a teaching process rather than as a process of intimidation and humiliation.

- Realize that one of the greatest obstacles to learning is the fear of making mistakes and feeling embarrassed or humiliated.

--Subscribe to a strength-based model, which includes identifying and reinforcing each student's "islands of competence."

--Recognize that constructive relationships with parents facilitate the learning process for students.

--Develop and maintain positive, respectful relationships with colleagues.

Nurturing the Mindset of Effective Educators

Consultants are in a unique position to assist educators to identify the assumptions that govern their teaching practices as well as their relationship with students, parents, and colleagues. This is a significant task since educators who are aware of these assumptions will be better equipped to assess and modify any features of their mindsets that serve as obstacles to creating a positive school climate.

Consultants can accomplish this task via two major formats. These include meeting with school administrators and/or providing direct in-service training or consultation for faculty and staff (with the permission of the administrators). In either option, the first step is to meet with the administrators and share thoughts about the presence and influence of mindsets in the school environment.

In their meetings with administrators they can outline specific exercises that administrators can introduce at staff meetings to highlight the themes of mindsets and effective teaching. Or, consultants can offer workshops for faculty that focus on these same themes. If the latter, it is advisable for consultants to discuss the content of the workshop in advance with the administrators. It is also beneficial if the administrators attend the workshop so that all members of the school community hear the same message at the same time; the attendance of the administrators serves to reinforce the importance of the topic being discussed.

The following are the salient points that should be addressed not only at the initial workshops, but at follow-up meetings as well. Where indicated, we offer specific suggestions for exercises to highlight and reinforce these points:

The concept of mindsets and the ways in which mindsets impact on our behaviors must be understood. A definition of mindsets can be offered. We have noted, "Mindsets are assumptions and expectations we have for ourselves and others that guide our teaching practices and our interactions with students, parents, and colleagues." The consultant (or administrator) can emphasize that we all have words to describe ourselves and these words will play a major role in our effectiveness as an educator. Teachers can be asked to write a paragraph in which they describe themselves as educators. They can be encouraged to reflect upon the ways in which their self-descriptions impact on their actions. Self-efficacy theory predicts that the words that teachers use will play a major role in determining their actual behavior.

As an example, in our workshops we recount the story of one teacher who used the following words to describe herself:

"I do not feel very adequate as a teacher."

"I do not have good behavior management skills in the classroom."

"I am afraid of my students."

When we asked what she taught, she responded, "Third grade."

We visited her classroom several days later and witnessed what might best be best characterized as "chaos." As an eraser flew by our heads, she came over and said, "See, I told you."

In contrast, another teacher who was working in a therapeutic day program with aggressive adolescents, joked, “Most of my students are bigger than I am so I wouldn’t want to get into a physical hassle with them. But I have always felt confident that if I develop a good relationship with them, if I recognize their strengths, and if I have clear-cut expectations and consequences, they will be less likely to challenge me.” A visit to her classroom confirmed her assumptions. An air of respect between teacher and students was readily apparent. The energy of the students was focused on the academic tasks and not on engaging in disruptive behaviors.

As we tell participants at our workshops, “You get what you expect.”

The concept of mindsets can be extended to include not only our self-perceptions but the ways in which we understand the behavior of students. An obvious example is that of John, the adolescent we discussed earlier in this chapter. One teacher saw him as unmotivated and lazy, while another perceived that he was struggling with learning and feeling very vulnerable in the school setting. These different views prompted markedly contrasting approaches, which led John to view one teacher as judging him to be a failure and the other as believing in him and wishing to help him. Not surprisingly, his mindset about each teacher led to very different behaviors and academic outcomes in the two classrooms.

It is essential for educators to appreciate that the assumptions they hold for themselves and their students, which are often unstated, have profound influence in determining effective teaching practices, the quality of relationships with students, and the positive or negative climate that is created in the classroom and school building.

The focus on a student’s social/emotional development and well-being is not an extra curriculum that takes time away from teaching academic skills and content. It is unfortunate that a dichotomy has arisen in many educational quarters prompting some educators to perceive that nurturing a student’s emotional and social health is mutually exclusive from the goal of teaching academic material. This dichotomy has been fueled, in part, by the emergence of high stakes testing and an emphasis on accountability. The following refrain is heard in many schools: “We barely have time to get through the assigned curriculum. We really don’t have the time to focus on anything else.”

We are not opposed to assessment or accountability. We welcome research conducted to define effective teaching practices. However, what we question is relegating a student’s emotional life to the background and not appreciating its important role in the process of learning. This attitude was captured at one of our workshops. A high school science teacher challenged our viewpoint by contending:

“I am a science teacher. I know my science and I know how to convey science facts to my students. Why should I have to spend time thinking about a student’s emotional or social life? I don’t have time to do so and it will distract me from teaching science.”

While many teachers and school administrators would take issue with the views expressed by this science teacher, others might not. We believe that strengthening a student’s feeling of well-being, self-esteem, and dignity is not an extra curriculum. If anything, a student’s sense of belonging, security, and self-confidence in the classroom provides the scaffolding that supports the foundation for enhanced learning, motivation,

self-discipline, responsibility, and the ability to deal more effectively with obstacles and mistakes (Brooks, 1991, 2004).

Consultants can highlight this point by requesting educators to reflect on their own teachers and think about those from whom they learned most effectively. It has been our experience that the teachers they select are also those who not only taught academic content but, in addition, supported the emotional well-being of students and were interested in the “whole child.” Very importantly, as educators think about their teachers as well as their own teaching practices, they can be asked to consider the following question:

“Do you believe that developing a positive relationship with your students enhances or detracts from teaching academic material? Please offer examples.”

Examples should be encouraged whether the answer is yes, no, or maybe. It is important for educators to seriously consider this question. In our experience, most educators are able to offer examples of “small gestures” on their part (or on the part of their teachers) that took little, if any, time, but communicated to students a message of respect and caring (Brooks, 1991). If teachers contend they would like to develop more meaningful relationships with students, but are unable to allot the time to do so, other educators who have been able to accomplish this task can offer specific suggestions.

Educators have a lifelong impact on students and their resilience. Closely associated with this previous point is the belief by teachers that what they say and do each day in their classroom can have a lifelong influence on their students (Brooks, 1991; Brooks & Goldstein, 2001). While most teachers appreciate that they will be influential in the lives of their students for years to come, many are not aware of the extent of their impact.

It is important for consultants and administrators to share with teaching staff research findings from the resilience literature to highlight this impact. Such knowledge will add meaning and purpose to their role as teachers and lessen disillusionment and burnout.

At our workshops we review that in the past 20 years there has been an increased effort to define those factors that help children and adolescents to deal more effectively with stress, to overcome adversity, and to become resilient (Brooks, 1994; Brooks & Goldstein, 2001, 2003; Goldstein & Brooks, 2005; Katz, 1997; Werner & Smith, 1992). We highlight that schools have been spotlighted as environments in which self-esteem, hope, and resilience can be fortified, frequently quoting the late psychologist Julius Segal (1988) who wrote:

From studies conducted around the world, researchers have distilled a number of factors that enable such children of misfortune to beat the heavy odds against them. One factor turns out to be the presence in their lives of a charismatic adult—a person with whom they can identify and from whom they gather strength. And in a surprising number of cases, that person turns out to be a teacher. (p. 3)

It is important for teachers to recognize that they are in a unique position to be a “charismatic adult” in a student’s life and that even seemingly small gestures can have a lifelong impact. A smile, a warm greeting, a note of encouragement, a few minutes taken to meet alone with a student, and an appreciation of and respect for different learning styles are but several of the activities that define a “charismatic teacher” (Brooks, 1991).

An important issue to address as a consultant is that teachers are often unaware that they are or have been “charismatic adults” in the life of a student. To emphasize this issue, consultants or administrators can ask faculty if they have ever received unexpectedly, a note from a former student thanking them for the positive impact they had on the student’s life. While many have been fortunate to be the recipient of such a note, others have not although they are equally deserving of such feedback.

We frequently ask participants at our workshops if there are teachers who had a significant influence on their lives whom they have failed to acknowledge via a note or letter. It is not unusual for many teachers to voice regret they have not thanked several such “charismatic adults.” Some have written notes to the latter following the workshop.

We use these exercises to suggest that while we may not receive formal confirmation that we have worn the garb of “charismatic adults,” if we approach each day with the belief that today may be the day we say or do something that directs a student’s life in a more positive path, we will be more optimistic about our role, and our students will be the beneficiaries of more realistic, hopeful expectations.

All students wish to learn and to succeed and if they seem unmotivated or unengaged, they may believe they lack the ability to achieve in school. We often hear teachers refer to students as lazy or unmotivated. As we have noted, once these accusatory labels are used and a negative mindset dominates, educators are more likely to respond to these students with annoyance. The mindset of an effective educator constantly echoes, “I believe that all students come to school desiring to learn. If they are disinterested and feel defeated, we must figure out how best to reach and teach them.”

Subscribing to this view has a profound impact on the ways in which we respond to students, especially those who are struggling. When students lose faith in their ability to learn and when feelings of hopelessness pervade their psyche, they are vulnerable to engaging in counterproductive or self-defeating ways of coping. They may quit at tasks, clown around, pick on other students, or expend little time and effort in academic requirements. When a student feels that failure is a foregone conclusion, it is difficult to muster the energy to consider alternative ways of mastering learning demands.

Teachers who observe such counterproductive behaviors may easily reach the conclusion that the student is unmotivated or lazy, or not caring about school. As negative assumptions and mindsets dominate, teachers are less likely to consider more productive strategies for reaching the student. Instead, thoughts turn to punitive actions; e.g., what punishments would finally get through to the student. However, if educators subscribe to the belief that each student wishes to succeed, negative assumptions are less likely to prevail.

A shift in perspective was obvious in a consultation Bob did about Sarah, a problematic high school student. One of her teachers began by asking, “Don’t you think it’s okay for a 16 1/2-year-old to drop out of school?” The agenda was clear. These teachers, who typically displayed a caring and encouraging attitude, were very frustrated and angry with Sarah to the extent of wishing her to drop out of school.

The teachers elaborated that Sarah was a student who “sabotaged” all of their efforts. “Even if Sarah agrees to do something, she doesn’t follow through. It’s obvious that she dislikes school and she’s disruptive and disrespectful. She couldn’t care less about how she does in school.”

As we shall see, Sarah cared a great deal about wanting to achieve in school, but entertained little hope for doing so. It was only when her teachers truly accepted that each student desperately wants to succeed that a positive mindset emerged, which permitted them to consider new solutions.

A turning point occurred when Bob empathized with the teachers about their frustration but then asked, “Can anyone tell me how you think Sarah feels each day when she enters the school building?”

After several moments of silence, one teacher responded, “How Sarah feels. I never really thought about that before.”

Another teacher followed, “I never really thought about that before either, but as I’m doing so now, only one word comes to mind, defeated. I think everyday when Sarah comes in to the school building she feels defeated.”

As this teacher shared her observation, the shift in mindset that permeated the room was palpable, highlighted by one teacher asking Bob, “You’ve written a lot about helping kids be more confident and resilient in the school setting. So what can we do to help a student who feels defeated begin to feel less defeated?”

A lively, creative discussion ensued, filled with ideas that had not been considered previously, including having Sarah, who relished being helpful, assist in the office. The teachers also shifted their focus from what punitive action to take to a desire to “get to know” Sarah, not via a tense, confrontational meeting but rather by having lunch with her.

This new approach prompted Sarah to be more responsible and a positive cycle was set in motion. The catalyst for this new cycle was when her teachers shifted their mindset, no longer viewing Sarah’s behaviors as oppositional, but rather as a reflection of the despair and defeatism she experienced. They adopted the assumption that students wish to succeed, but at times obstacles appear on the road to success—obstacles that teachers working in concert with students could remove.

If our strategies are not effective, we must ask, “What is it that I can do differently?” rather than continuing to wait for the student to change first. A basic underpinning of resilience is the belief of “personal control,” namely, that we are the “authors of our own lives” and it makes little sense to continue to do the same thing repeatedly if our actions are not leading to positive results (Brooks & Goldstein, 2004). While many educators and others say they subscribe to this assumption, their actions frequently belie their assertion. For example, it is not unusual to hear the following statements offered by educators at consultations we have conducted:

“This student is unmotivated to change. She just won’t take responsibility for her behavior.”

Or, “We’ve been using this strategy with this student for five months. He’s still not responding. He’s resistant and oppositional.”

We believe in perseverance, but if a staff has been employing the same approach for five months without any positive outcome, one can ask, “Who are the resistant ones here?”

As one perceptive teacher emphasized, “Asking what is it that I can do differently should not be interpreted as blaming ourselves but rather as a source of empowerment.” She continued, “Isn’t it better to focus on what we can do differently rather than continue

to wait for someone else to change first? We may have to wait forever and continue to be frustrated and unhappy.”

This same teacher summarized her belief with the statement, “If the horse is dead, get off.” We have found that there are many dead horses strewn on the grounds of a school.

The assumption of personal control should be addressed directly at workshops and meetings. Consultants must emphasize with teachers that a change in strategy is not the equivalent of “giving in” (this is a belief that often crops up), but rather as a sign that we are seeking a more productive intervention. If change on a teacher’s part is experienced as acquiescing to the student, any new strategy will be tainted by feelings of resentment.

A helpful exercise to illustrate the power of personal control and the need to change “negative scripts” that exist in our lives is to ask educators to think about one or two instances when they changed their usual script and to consider what resulted as a consequence of their new script. Many educators, such as those involved with Sarah, are able to describe very positive results. Unfortunately, others report less satisfactory results, often reinforcing the belief that they had gone out of their way for students, but the students did not reciprocate. When the outcome of a change in script is not positive, a problem-solving attitude should be introduced by asking, “With hindsight, is there anything you would do differently today to lessen the probability of an unfavorable result?”

The possibility that a modification of a script may not eventuate in a positive outcome should be addressed. Consultants can recommend that when a new script is implemented, educators should have one or two back-up scripts in mind should the first prove ineffective. This suggestion conveys the positive message that a strategy that sounds promising in our office may not yield the results we wish; however, rather than feeling defeated, we should learn from the experience and be prepared with alternative actions. We must keep in mind that a new script may create the conditions that encourage students to change their behaviors.

Empathy is an essential skill for effective teaching and relationships with students as well as parents and colleagues. Empathic educators are able to place themselves inside the shoes of their students and others and perceive the world through their eyes, just as Sarah’s teachers attempted to do, eventually understanding that she felt defeated. Goleman (1995) highlights empathy as a major component of emotional intelligence.

Being empathic invites educators to ask, “Would I want anyone to say or do to me what I have just said or done to this student (or parent or colleague)?” or “Whenever I say or do things with students (parents or colleagues), what is my goal and am I saying or doing these things in a way that my students will be most likely to hear and respond constructively to my message?”

As an example, a teacher may attempt to motivate a student who is not performing adequately by exhorting the student to “try harder.” While the teacher may be well-intentioned, the comment is based on the assumption that the student is not willing to expend the time and energy necessary to succeed. Thus, such a remark is frequently experienced as accusatory and judgmental. When students feel accused, they are less prone to be cooperative. Consequently, the teacher’s comment is not likely to

lead to the desired results, which, in turn, may reinforce the teacher's belief that the student is unmotivated and not interested in "trying."

In contrast, an empathic teacher might wonder, "If I were struggling in my role as a teacher, would I want another teacher or my principal to say to me, 'If you just tried a little harder you wouldn't have this problem?'" When we have offered this question at workshops, many teachers laugh and say they would be very annoyed if they were accused of not trying. The question prompts them to reflect upon how their statements are interpreted by their students.

There are several exercises that can be introduced at workshops to reinforce empathy. A favorite is to have teachers think of a teacher they liked and one that they did not like when they were students and then to describe each in several words. Next, they can be reminded, "Just as you have words to describe your teachers, your students have words to describe you." They can then consider the following questions:

"What words would you hope your students used to describe you?"

"What have you done in the past month so they are likely to use these words?"

"What words would they actually use to describe you?"

"How close would the words you hope they use parallel the words they would actually use?" (One teacher jokingly said, "I would love my students to use the word 'calm,' but I don't think they would since I feel I have been raising my voice a great deal the past month or two and not showing much patience.")

Another exercise that educators have found useful in reinforcing empathy revolves around our own memories of school. Teachers can be requested at workshops to share with their colleagues their response to the following questions:

"Of all of the memories you have as a student, what is one of your favorite ones, something that a teacher or school administrator said or did that boosted your motivation and self-dignity?"

"Of all of the memories you have as a student, what is one of your worst ones, something that a teacher or school administrator said or did that lessened your motivation and self-dignity?"

"As you reflect upon both your positive and negative memories of school, what did you learn from both and do you use these memories to guide what you are doing with your students today?"

Recounting one's own positive and negative memories of school with one's colleagues often proves very emotional and leads teachers to ask:

"What memories are my students taking from their interactions with me?"

"Are they the memories I would like them to take?"

"If not, what must I change so that the memories they will take will be in accord with the memories I hope they take?"

These exercises to nurture empathy often prompt teachers to consider how best to obtain feedback from students to gain a realistic picture of how they are perceived. We will address this question in the next point.

Ongoing feedback and input from students enhances empathy and promotes a sense of responsibility and ownership in students. Effective teachers not only welcome the input of students, but they appreciate that such input must be incorporated on a regular basis. When students feel their voice is being heard, they are more likely to work cooperatively with teachers and more motivated to meet academic challenges.

Eliciting student opinion reinforces a feeling of personal control and responsibility—essential ingredients of a positive school climate.

Suggestions can be offered to educators for promoting student feedback and input. For instance, teachers can request anonymous feedback from students. One high school teacher asked students to draw him, describe him, list what they liked about his teaching style and the class, and what they would recommend he change. While one of his colleagues scoffed at this practice, contending that such feedback was not important and took valuable time from teaching, the outcome of the exercise proved the colleague wrong. The exercise actually increased achievement scores and cooperation; this was not surprising since the students felt respected.

Another teacher requested that students complete a one-page report card about him whenever he filled out report cards on them. He asked students to rate him on such dimensions as discipline style, response to student questions, teaching style, and fairness towards all students. Recommendations for change were elicited.

As will be reviewed in Chapter Ten, responsibility and ownership in students can also be reinforced by engaging students in a discussion about the benefits or drawbacks of educational practices that are typically seen as “givens,” including such activities as tests, reports, and homework. In addition, educators can strengthen a feeling of student ownership by incorporating a variety of choices in the classroom, none of which diminishes a teacher’s authority but rather empowers students to feel a sense of control over their own education.

Choice and ownership can also be applied to disciplinary practices by asking students to consider such questions as:

“What rules do you think we need in this classroom for all students to feel comfortable and learn best?” (Teachers often report that the rules recommended by students often parallel those of the teacher.)

“Even as your teacher I may forget a rule. If I do, this is how I would like you to remind me. (Teachers can then list one or two ways they would like to be reminded.) Now that I have mentioned how I would like to be reminded, how would you like me to remind you?” (When students inform teachers how they would like to be reminded should they forget a rule, they are less likely to experience the reminder as a form of nagging and more likely to hear what the teacher has to say. It is easier for students to consider ways of being reminded if teachers first serve as models by offering how they would like to be reminded.)

“What should the consequences be if we forget a rule?” (We have heard teachers report, especially when asking these questions to angry students, that the consequences suggested by the students are more severe than any teacher would use.)

These questions related to disciplinary practices encourage a sense of ownership for rules and consequences, thereby promoting responsibility and self-discipline in students.

Each student has different “islands of competence” and learning styles that must be identified, respected, and reinforced. This belief is at the core of a strength-based approach to education and overlaps with all of the other points reviewed in this chapter. Effective teachers appreciate that one must move beyond a philosophy that fixates on a student’s problems and vulnerabilities and affords equal, if not greater space, to strengths and competencies.

Researchers and clinicians have emphasized the significance of recruiting selected areas of strength or “islands of competence” in building self-confidence, motivation, and resilience (Deci & Flaste, 1995; Katz, 1994; Rutter, 1985). Rutter (1985), in describing resilient individuals, observed, “Experiences of success in one arena of life led to enhanced self-esteem and a feeling of self-efficacy, enabling them to cope more successfully with the subsequent life challenges and adaptations” (p. 604). Katz (1994) noted, “Being able to showcase our talents, and to have them valued by important people in our lives, helps us to define our identities around that which we do best” (p. 10).

There are numerous suggestions that consultants can offer teachers for assisting students to feel more confident and competent in school. At the beginning of the school year, teachers can meet with each student for a few minutes and ask, “What are you interested in? What do you like to do? What do you think you do well?” While some students will respond eagerly, others may simply say, “I don’t know.” In that case, teachers can respond, “That’s okay, it often takes time to figure out what you’re good at. I’ll try to be of help.”

A high school teacher noted that given all of the students attending his classes, he did not have the time to meet with each individually at the beginning of the year. Instead, he devised a questionnaire that he sent out to each student a week before school began. He told them that it was not mandatory that they complete the questionnaire, but if they did it would help him to be a more effective teacher. The questionnaire focused on a number of areas, several of which asked students to list what they perceived to be their strengths and weaknesses. In the seven years in which he had sent out the questionnaire, not one student had failed to return it. This teacher found the information he obtained to be an invaluable resource in connecting with students.

One of the most obvious guideposts for assisting students to feel competent is to teach them in ways in which they can learn best. Educators must appreciate that each student has different learning styles and strengths (Gardner, 1983; Levine, 2002). This requires that teachers familiarize themselves with such topics as multiple intelligences and learning styles.

Another strategy to enhance a sense of competence is to provide students with an opportunity to help others. Students experience a more positive attachment to school and are more motivated to learn if they are encouraged to contribute to the school milieu (Brooks, 1991; Rutter, 1980; Werner, 1993). Examples include: older students with learning problems reading to younger children; a hyperactive child being asked to assume the position of “attendance monitor,” which involved walking around the halls to take attendance of teachers while the latter were taking attendance of students; and the use of cooperative learning in which students of varying abilities work together as a team bringing their own unique strengths to different projects.

One of the most powerful approaches for reinforcing a feeling of competence in students is to lessen their fear of failure. Many students equate making mistakes with feeling humiliated and consequently, will avoid learning tasks that appear very challenging. There are students who would rather be bullies or quit at tasks or say the work is dumb rather than engage in a learning activity that they feel may result in failure and embarrassment. In a desperate attempt to avoid failure, they journey down a path that takes them farther away from possible success.

The fear of making mistakes and failing permeates every classroom and if it is not actively addressed it remains an active force, compromising the joy and enthusiasm that should be part of the learning process. It is the proverbial elephant in the room and in this case, one that may be on a destructive rampage; yet it is not acknowledged.

Effective educators can begin to overcome the fear of failure by identifying this elephant in the room. The fear must be openly addressed with students. One technique for doing so is for teachers to ask their class at the beginning of the school year, “Who feels they are going to make a mistake and not understand something in class this year?” Before any of the students can respond, teachers can raise their hand as a way of initiating a discussion of how the fear of making mistakes affects learning.

It is often helpful for teachers to share some of their own anxieties and experiences about making mistakes when they were students. They can recall when they were called upon in class, when they made mistakes or when they failed a test. This openness often invites students to share some of their thoughts and feelings about making mistakes. Teachers can involve the class in problem solving by encouraging them to suggest what they can do as teachers and what the students can do as a class to minimize the fear of failure and appearing foolish. Issues of being called on and not knowing the answer can be discussed.

Effective teachers recognize that when the fear of failure and humiliation are actively addressed in the classroom, students will be more motivated to take realistic risks and to learn.

To realize that one must strive to become stress hardy rather than stressed out. At the end of one of our workshops, a teacher said, “I love your ideas, but I’m too stressed out to use them.” While the remark had a humorous tone, it also captured an important consideration.

At first glance the remark seems paradoxical since numerous educators have informed us that the strategies we advocate do not take time away from teaching, but rather help to create a classroom environment that is more conducive to learning and less stressful. Yet, we can appreciate their frustration that change requires additional time, a commodity that is not readily available. Some are hesitant to leave their “comfort zone” even when this zone is filled with stress and pressure. They would rather continue with a known situation that is less than satisfying than engage in the task of entering a new, unexplored territory that holds promise but also uncertainty.

If educators are to be effective and if they are to apply many of the ideas described in this chapter, they must venture from their “comfort zone” by utilizing techniques for dealing with the stress and pressure that are inherent in their work. Each teacher can discover his or her own ways for managing stress. For instance, some can rely on exercise, others on relaxation or meditation techniques, all of which can be very beneficial. In addition to these approaches there has been research conducted by Kobasa and her colleagues (Holt, Fine, & Tollefson, 1987; Kobasa, Maddi, & Kahn, 1982; Martinez, 1989) under the label of “stress hardiness” that examines the characteristics or mindset of individuals who experience less stress than their colleagues while working in the same environment.

This mindset involves “3 C’s” (the first letter of each of the words of the mindset begins with the letter “C”). The three components are interrelated and when we describe

them at our workshops we encourage educators to reflect upon how they might apply this information to lessen stress and burnout.

The first C represents “commitment.” Stress hardy individuals do not lose sight of why they are doing what they are doing. They maintain a genuine passion or purpose for their work. While we may all have “down” days, it is sad to observe educators who basically say to themselves each morning in a resigned way, “I’ve got to go to school. I’ve got to see those kids.” Once a feeling of “I’ve got to” or “being forced to” pervades one’s mindset, a sense of commitment and purpose is sacrificed, replaced by feelings of stress and burnout. As an antidote to burnout, a staff meeting might be dedicated to sharing why one became a teacher, a school administrator, a counselor, a nurse, or a psychologist. Such an exercise helps staff to recall and invigorate their dreams and goals.

The second C is for “challenge.” Educators who deal more effectively with stress have developed a mindset that views difficult situations as opportunities for learning and growth rather than as stress to avoid. For example, a principal of a school faced a challenging situation. Her school was located in a neighborhood that had changed in a few short years from a middle class population with much parent involvement to a neighborhood with a lower socioeconomic make-up and less parent involvement. There were several key factors that contributed to the decrease in parent involvement, including less flexibility for many parents to leave work in order to attend a school meeting or conference as well as many parents feeling unwelcome and anxious in school based upon their own histories as children in the school environment.

Instead of bemoaning this state of affairs and becoming increasingly upset and stressed, this particular principal and her staff realized that the education of their students would be greatly enhanced if parents became active participants in the educational process; consequently, they viewed the lack of involvement as a challenge to meet rather than as a stress to avoid. Among other strategies, they scheduled several staff meetings in the late afternoon and moved the site of the meetings from the school building to a popular community house a few blocks away. These changes encouraged a number of the parents to attend the meetings since the new time was more accommodating to their schedules and the new location helped them to feel more comfortable since it was held on their “turf.” The relationship between parents and teachers was greatly enhanced and the children were the beneficiaries.

The third C is “control” or what we call “personal control” since some individuals may mistakenly view the word control as a form of controlling others. Control, as used in stress hardiness theory, implies that individuals who successfully manage stress and pressure focus their time and energy on factors over which they have influence rather than attempting to change things that are beyond their sphere of control. Although many individuals believe they engage in activities over which they have influence or control, in fact, many do not. We worked with a group of teachers who were feeling burned out. We reviewed the basic tenets of stress hardiness theory and asked if they focused their energies on factors within their domain of control. They replied in the affirmative.

We then asked them to list what would help their jobs to be less stressful. Their answers included, “If the students came from less dysfunctional families, if they came to school better prepared to learn, if they had more discipline at home.” After a few moments one of the teachers smiled and said, “We first said that we focus on what we

have control over, but everything that we are mentioning to help us feel less stressed are things over which we have little control.”

After the teacher said this, the group engaged in a lively discussion focusing on what educators might do to create classroom climates that nurtured learning even if the students came from home environments that were less than supportive of education. One teacher astutely noted, “We are expecting our students to come to school excited about learning and when they do not we get frustrated and annoyed. Instead, what I’m hearing is that we must ask, ‘What can we do differently to help motivate students who are not motivated and what can we do to help students who feel hopeless about learning to feel more hopeful.’” As the discussion continued, the teachers recognized that by focusing on what they could do differently to improve the learning environment was empowering and lessened stressful feelings. The mood of pessimism and burnout that had pervaded the room began to change.

Concluding Comment

Consultants are in an influential position to serve as a catalyst for transforming educational practices. They can do so by identifying the mindset associated with effective educators and suggesting strategies to nurture this mindset. They can be available as new scripts are initiated and assessed, offering feedback and encouragement to the faculty. The benefits of such input to both teachers and students will be noteworthy.

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