

3 Things Students Desire to Hear From Teachers

MAY 18, 2015



"Every child needs at least one adult who is irrationally crazy about him or her." - Urie Bronfenbrenner

A year and a half ago, I decided that I needed to return to the K-12 classrooms and really experience ground-level teaching, testing, core standards, differentiating, and emotionally connecting with children and adolescents in ways I had not for many years. I have been and still am an assistant professor in the school of education at Marian University, but the environments, experiences, and my own learning have grown and changed immensely from returning to the classroom 18 months ago.

I asked the university for a course release, taking the lectures, research, and strategies into the early adolescent grades. And three and a half semesters later, I am discovering, sometimes failing, sometimes celebrating, but always walking the walk of my graduate students and sharing these experiences with my pre-service teachers. Two mornings a week, I have entered six fifth grade classrooms in three elementary schools in Washington Township, a large Indianapolis public school district. Currently, I am co-teaching in four different seventh grade classrooms. I am learning more than I ever could have imagined, but the greatest lesson has been discovering the three key themes or words that keep showing up with the hundreds of students that I have had the privilege to teach and mentor.

I have surveyed the students and teachers with these questions in mind:

- What does your teacher say to you that feels encouraging or motivating?
- What do you want to hear from your teacher about your performance or disposition in school?

From a variety of educators and students in three large districts, four elementary and middle schools, along with undergraduates, the answers to these questions have affirmed how very significant social acceptance and feeling "felt" are inside of schools.

1. Believe

"I believe in you. You are going to be successful someday. You're going to make it! If you apply what I see in you, there is nothing holding you back!"

To believe in another is to see what cannot be seen just yet. It requires focusing on all that is going well and right, even though there will be conflicts, bad moods, ornery behaviors, and consequences for poor choices. We notice it all -- new shoes, hairstyles, kind gestures (though they may be scattered and few) -- and we build upon even the most challenging of performances that, with a perspective shift, could turn on a dime to a strength. We are detectives, looking for the missing pieces that we know exist but have been momentarily buried. We create experiences, "forced successes," that give the student an opportunity to feel capable. By this time of year, we know our students well, yet we can fall into an emotional and academic rut. So we begin to give a few more acceptable choices that are aligned to our standards and topics. We can leave affirming notes and share our personal challenges that caused us to doubt ourselves at an earlier time in our own lives.

"I believe in you! Let's make a plan together for just tomorrow. Let's choose two accomplishments that you want to see through and design a way for them to happen."

2. Purpose

"You have a purpose. I see it and feel it! Let's have fun and discover what it is. A purpose might change, and that's a good thing, but it's there!"

How do we help a student find his or her purpose? We begin with an affirmation: "You have a purpose!" We listen for interests and signs. We respect the off days and the off hours, and we try again. We share stories of others who lost a bit of hope and purpose, but tried again and again. J.K. Rowling, Bill Gates, Michael Jordan, and Walt Disney are just a few well-known individuals that defined purpose through their mistakes and failures. We talk about the gift of failing and how we can choose to respond and learn from those moments of illusory despair. We begin to create a purpose for those students at school and in our classrooms. We make a plan inviting the student to *serve another*. Maybe he tutors a younger student or helps to plan a surprise meal for the custodians and the cafeteria staff. Maybe she targets another student who is struggling, becoming a secret inspirer for a week.

Maybe we connect the class to a retirement home and Skype with another generation who has lived through these tumultuous years of adolescence and would love the companionship and communication from middle and high school students. Field trips are fewer today, and this allows us to invite community members with their own purposes and gifts into our classrooms as guests, igniting and sharing the work they are doing with homeless populations, incarcerated youth, and other service organizations that thrive on volunteerism.

3. Question Me

Listen for this unspoken request from students:

Ask me how I am. Ask me what I need. Ask me my thoughts and feelings. Ask me what my opinions are, even if my response is ridiculous because I don't want to stand out in front of my peers! Ask me in private -- always in private. Ask me to teach you anything about my world, my culture, music I love, my beliefs, and my story. I may not say a word, and it may take the entire school year for me to respond to your questions, but I hear you. I hear your interest and your compassionate concern for what I like, what I need, and what plans I would like to create.