

Teachers Who Heal (and Those That Don't)

Gary Phillips and Christopher Wagner

After a careful study of North Carolina teachers, we came up with a number of findings. We designed a profile of K-12 teachers who succeed with so-called “at-risk” or “sick” students. The students were referred to as “children of poverty” but not meaning financial poverty.

Children of Poverty: Characteristics

1. **Poverty of the spirit.** They no longer believe they can succeed.
2. **Poverty of intimate access to adults.** We learn to be adults by spending time with adults.
3. **Poverty of rich, varied life experiences.** We make cognitive meaning by drawing on remembered life experiences. When such experiences are missing, we get distortion or no dendrite connections.
4. **Poverty of hope.** Schools should offer hope or we can't teach some students. He who has a “why” will always find a “how.”

We called effective teachers, “healing teachers.” **We found that ineffective teachers work harder than healing teachers.** Why? When ineffective teachers find what they're doing is not working, they do it longer and harder. They become co-dependent with the “sick” students who then become sicker and demand more teacher attention. Healing teachers find a comfortable professional flow: **more learning, teaching and optimal productivity, minimal effort.**

Healing Teachers

1. When something is not working, they borrow an idea from a colleague or invent a new strategy.
2. They see childhood and adolescence as a journey and treat students with a journey view: “Who I am is not necessarily who I will become.”
3. They treat students “as if” they are improving. Healing teachers see the healing before it happens—as self-fulfilling.
4. They are unconsciously competent. They see emotion as the vehicle that makes them effective and provide the missing emotion for the student: hope, joy, intimacy, feeling special.
5. They look for improvement not perfection and find it, even before it happens.
6. They use metaphors (stories) to help students find meaning.
7. They accommodate kinesthetic learners with peer teams, drama, simulations, projects, etc.
8. They help students develop talents and gifts. This helps students feel special. Every student should be an expert at something of their choosing.
9. They are dream-makers. You can't teach a student who doesn't have a dream.
10. They do “with” not “to” students thus building capacity and ownership, not dependence. If a student fails, who owns the failure?
11. They predict, anticipate and prevent most problems.
12. They concentrate on the art of communication as much as the content recognizing that 55% of a message is facial expression and posture, and that 38% is voice tone and inflection.

Ineffective Teachers

1. They repeat what they have been doing and blame the victim and shoot the wounded. They blame the school board, administration, parents and the community.
2. See students as they are and treat them as they are and become more dependent and unconsciously make sick students sicker.
3. They see problems and try a fix-it approach.
4. They look for perfection and find deficiencies and miss improvement even when it happens.
5. They are unconsciously incompetent. Students sense: **“I may not remember what you said. I may not remember what you did, but I will not forget how you made me feel!”** Ineffective teachers make students more bored, more put down and more despaired.
6. They use reward punishment which works with some students and not at all with others.
7. They rely on auditory and seat-work methods.
8. They are gatherers of deficiencies, not gifts. They make students defensive.
9. Students who feel like ding-a-lings act that way. Teachers need to do what it is they do that makes students feel stupid and act stupid.
10. They do “to” not “with” students thus increasing student resistance to authority. **Without ownership, there is no purpose. Without purpose, there is no perseverance.**
11. They operate out of a react-repair mode or find-a-problem and fix is much easier to predict and prevent than to react and repair.
12. They rely on the content of the message and ignore the art of saying it effectively. **No one has taught unless someone has learned!**

(over)

*Childhood ought to be a time when every child finds their “song.” We find our song when we find our gift and our passion. Some students come to school from homes where adults are addicted to finding deficiencies and imperfections. **Resolved: No student should leave your classroom or school without finding gifts they didn’t know they had.***

Effective teachers are keepers of the vision. They organize rituals to celebrate improvements and to offer hope and energy toward pursuit of a common vision. They ask, “What is the best we can imagine here? What will our lives be like when this problem is solved?”

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