

3-1-2009

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### Recommended Citation

Underwood, M. (2009). The Role of Emotions in the Classroom. *Perspectives In Learning*, 10 (1). Retrieved from <http://csuepress.columbusstate.edu/pil/vol10/iss1/5>

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## **The Role of Emotions in the Classroom**

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### **Abstract**

Emotions play a large role in the classroom. However, teachers often do not consider the important role that emotions play. Student behavior is regulated by emotions. To perform effectively, students need a classroom that is safe. They need to feel free to be themselves and take risks. Students need to have a relationship with their teacher that is based on the foundation of respect and expectation. By coupling academics and emotions as the focus of a classroom, teachers will see a great improvement in both achievement and behavior.

Educators in American classrooms face many obstacles. With demanding state and national assessments becoming a popular way of judging students, teachers are faced with more pressure than ever before. Many schools are working toward developing the best curriculum possible and training teachers to teach in the most effective manner possible. However, despite these curricular efforts, students are still not performing as well as expected. Many schools and teachers are focused on the cognitive aspects of learning but leave out the emotional aspect of learning. According to Hansen and Zambo (2006), "...with so much emphasis on promoting academic achievement, the importance of emotions in the lives of children can be forgotten" (p. 274). Emotions have a larger role in the classroom than many educators might believe. Research shows just how much of a role emotions play in the classroom. Teachers across the country can benefit from a better understanding of the role of emotions in the classroom.

### **Classroom Atmosphere and Student-Teacher Interactions**

The atmosphere of a classroom and the interactions between students and teachers can have a great affect on students. Environmentally enriched classrooms have "...been shown to improve performance memory" (Pretorius, Naude, & Pretorius, 2005, p. 306). According to Bath (2005), "Neuroscience confirms that those in closest contact with the child will have the most profound influence on the nature of brain growth and development. Human connections underlie brain connections" (p. 146). This is a very important notion that has enormous implications for teachers. Students spend up to eight hours a day at school which means nearly half, or in some cases more than half, of the time a child spends awake each day is spent at school. Teachers are in direct contact with students for most of the day and Bath (2005) believes, "The most powerful effect on positive brain development comes from connections with positive, caring adults and peers" (p. 147). According to Hansen and Zambo (2006), "...positive emotions enhance learning; whereas negative ones,

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like fear or sadness, can hinder learning and success in school” (p. 274). Therefore, it is up to teachers to determine more effective ways to teach children and to create an atmosphere in their classrooms that is environmentally enriched and most conducive to learning.

### Manifestation of Emotions

Eynde and Turner (2006) state “...students’ affective processes are no longer treated as the positive or negative side-effects of learning. On the contrary, they are conceived as an integral part of learning in close interaction with conative and cognitive processes” (p. 362). This is truly powerful if we consider what role emotions play in a classroom. Every day teachers attempt to impart some form of academic wealth to students. Many times, educators focus solely on the academic portion of schooling and only see the students’ responses as responses to what is being taught. The affective part is only taken into consideration as a second thought. However, if teachers could first consider the affective part of the student, focus on the emotional aspect, and then bring the academics into learning, the possibilities for student learning could be endless. Eynde and Turner (2006) articulate this point clearly by stating “...we make the case that underneath the at first sight predominantly cognitive nature of learning, emotional processes are very much present and co-directing the learning process” (p. 363).

Eynde and Turner (2006) point out that there are four characteristics of emotions that teachers would benefit from knowing. The first characteristic of emotions is that they are “...based on students’ cognitive interpretations of the situation at hand” (Eynde & Turner, 2006, p. 368). Secondly, the cognitive interpretation of the situation is based on more than the immediate circumstances. Students’

emotions are habituated from their past experiences, their culture, their age, and many other influences. The third characteristic is that students create emotions based on the context of the situation. Lastly, one final characteristic of emotions is that they are unstable and they continue to develop over time.

Teachers need to understand that there is much more that goes into an emotion than what the immediate situation may show. A student who has negative feelings towards reading might not have negative feelings simply because he dislikes reading. There is so much more that could be causing the feelings. Therefore, if teachers consider ways to make the classroom an emotionally safe place and a place where children feel like they belong long before the children enter the classroom, then the academic possibilities are endless.

### Self-Regulation and Learning

Due to the recent advances in the field of neuroscience, scientists have been able to research how children self-regulate their emotions, attention, and behavior starting at infancy. According to Pelco and Reed-Victor (2007), “Children demonstrate individual differences in the way they regulate their reactions to the environment and these differences are evident in infancy” (p. 36). This is very useful knowledge because children who are not able to self-regulate properly can become problems in a classroom. This problem will not only affect individual students, but will also affect the entire classroom.

There is a distinct connection between poor self-regulation and poor academic performance. According to research, “...children who have difficulty regulating their emotions and behavior experience more conflict in relationships with parents, teachers, and peers and show lower academic achievement than do their

more regulated peers” (Pelco & Reed-Victor, 2007, p. 37). One study conducted with 200 kindergarten students over the span of a school year “...found that students’ behaviors early in the year (i.e., negative emotionality and poor self-regulation) impacted the types of relationships they formed with classmates and peers and..these classroom-based interpersonal relationships predicted the students’ end-of-year achievement levels on standardized tests” (Pelco & Reed-Victor, 2007, p. 37).

Due to the correlation between low self-regulation and low academic performance, it is important to understand that children can be taught how to self-regulate. Many times, students do not handle and control their emotions because they are unaware of how to do so. Teachers can teach students how to regulate their emotions. However, Schutz, Hong, Cross, and Osbon (2006) believe that for teachers to be able to effectively educate students on emotional regulation, teachers need to be aware of what emotions are exactly (p. 345). First, teachers need to know that emotions are “...socially constructed [and] personally enacted” (Schutz et al., 2006, p. 345). This means that emotions do not happen merely within a person. Emotions are a response to something happening in the environment. The environment that students are in is the classroom. Emotions that happen in the classroom are “...defined by who is present and available, what they are doing and why, and where and when they are doing it” (Schutz et al., 2006, p. 345). This has a great impact on teachers because if emotions are a result of the environment, then teachers have a great responsibility on their hands to create an environment suitable for positive emotions.

Second, teachers need to know that emotions are ways of being. Schutz et al. (2006) believe that there are two parts to an emotion. First, an emotion engulfs a person

and takes control of the body completely. Second, the emotion has a cooling off period where students are able to identify the emotion and label it. Some questions students should ask about emotions include “What is occurring?”, “What might come next?”, or “What should I be doing?” (Schutz et al., 2006, p. 345). Because students are able to do this, they should be able to regulate their emotions to some extent.

Finally, it is important for teachers to understand what is important to students. If students deem something as unimportant, they are less likely to have an emotional response. The more important something is, the more chance there will be to have an emotional response. This is important for teachers to understand because there are definite predictable situations which will ultimately elicit an emotional response from students. Tests, group work, and reading in front of the class are just some examples of situations that evoke emotions in students.

Self-regulation occurs when students are taught to speak about and explore their emotions through a process known as co-regulation. According to Bath (2008), “Neuroscience shows that humans develop their abilities for emotional self-regulation through connections with reliable caregivers who soothe and model in a process called ‘co-regulation’” (p. 44). Co-regulation is a type of support that teachers, or any adult, can offer students to guide them in regulating their emotions. The first step in co-regulation is for the adult to “...focus on the emotions driving the behavior rather than the behavior itself” (Bath, 2008, p. 45). Teachers need to look beyond what the child is doing at that moment and attempt to determine what is causing the child to react this way. The second step in co-regulation is for the adult to have interactions that involve “...warmth, a soothing tone of voice, communication that acknowledges the

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young person's distress, supportive silence, and an invitation to reflective problem-solving" (Bath, 2008, p. 45). This type of interaction promotes a student's self-worth and a strong bond between the student and teacher.

There are certain circumstances that inhibit emotional regulation which have little to do with students' previous knowledge of regulation strategies. Many students have experienced numerous traumatic events in their lives and because of these traumatic experiences, students lose the ability to control their emotions. According to Bath (2008), "...the stress activation systems of traumatized children have become overly 'sensitized,' detecting threat and triggering fight or flight responses when these are not needed" (p. 45). Unfortunately, as these students become disruptive in class, the teacher's first response is usually to correct the child with some form of discipline or punishment. Sometimes the action of the student might cause teachers' emotions to become emotionally aligned with the student's behavior. For example, if the student is screaming and using profanity, the teacher might be enraged and get angry as well. This, however, is not what is recommended by Bath. Bath (2008) believes that this type of interaction between adults and children does nothing except "...generate resistance and resentment and poison relationships" (p. 44). Therefore, it is important for the teacher to always remain calm and try to diffuse the situation to create as little harm as possible. After the student has calmed down, the situation can be handled in a less emotional setting.

Teachers can help children learn about their emotions by using books. Books can be used to foster a caring and understanding environment in the classroom. Teachers can share books with the class that deal with emotions and then

allow the students to explore the emotions found in the story. Extension activities such as painting, writing, and reading can be used to further develop and promote positive emotions. As children begin to associate positive feelings in the classroom, they will grow to view school as non-threatening which will enable them to feel safe and happy, thus promoting higher learning.

There are also many techniques such as role playing and modeling appropriate behavior that teachers can use in the classroom to help solidify self-regulating behaviors. It is important to note that self-regulation instruction is not something that can be done over a short period of time. Instruction in self-regulation techniques must be conducted over a long period of time, even for a period of several years, and should also span different settings such as the classroom, home, and other common environments (Pelco & Reed-Victor, 2007). By considering all of the aspects of emotions, teachers can work toward helping students identify emotional situations ahead of time.

### Motivation

Student motivation is of great concern to educators and schools. Many studies have been conducted in an attempt to identify the exact role of motivation in the classroom. The goal behind studies of motivation is to determine what catapults and inspires student motivation. According to Meyer and Turner (2006), "...to better inform and improve classroom teaching and learning, now more than ever before, educational researchers need to effectively and efficiently describe essential components of positive learning environments" (p. 377). Many researchers believe that emotions play a large role in student motivation. In order to really understand what drives students, teachers

need to consider how emotions affect student motivation in a classroom.

Understanding the role of emotions is crucial to understanding student motivation. Emotions affect every aspect of the day in the classroom. Teachers need to strive to create positive climates in classrooms where students feel safe and accepted. There needs to be a mutual respect between teacher and student and between the students themselves. There also needs to be an understanding that in the classroom everyone is there to achieve the same goal, and any behaviors hindering that goal will not be tolerated. Meyer and Turner (2006) believe "...engaging students in learning requires consistently positive emotional experiences, which contribute to a classroom climate that forms the foundation for teacher-student relationships and interactions necessary for motivation to learn" (p. 377). With a positive and safe atmosphere, comes positive student motivation.

Some researchers believe that emotions are "...an empowering source of information about how to influence motivational patterns" (Meyer & Turner, 2006, p. 378). With positive emotions comes motivation. Though this might be oversimplified, it is an important concept to consider. If teachers can incorporate strategies to create a positive learning environment whenever the opportunity arises, then students should be more motivated to participate fully in class. With all of the new research on emotions and motivation in the classroom, it is important that teachers no longer rely on cognitive studies alone to drive their classrooms. Meyer and Turner (2006) believe "...we need to integrate emotion, motivation, and cognition theoretically and methodologically to move our research forward" (p. 377). By integrating these three aspects of student

learning, teachers can create classrooms which are productive and efficacious.

#### Perceptions of Assessment

Assessments are at the forefront of concern in the current state of American education. Every day, teachers work towards developing new, more efficient ways to teach students so that they are able to pass the end of year assessments. In order to do this, teachers must constantly assess their students throughout the year. Assessment happens on a daily basis and students feel the pressure that goes along with these assessments. Due to the severe implications of assessments, teachers need to understand how assessments affect students.

Student success is the goal behind every lesson taught by teachers. Therefore, it is important to understand the research that goes along with assessments and student perceptions of assessments. Crossman (2007) believes "...emotions and relationships surrounding past learning and assessment contexts can influence current perceptions of assessment and learning in powerful ways" (p. 313). Emotions play a large role in cognition and learning, and Crossman believes that emotions also affect how students feel about and perform on assessments.

The relationships students have with teachers affect the assessment process. Crossman (2007) believes students who feel encouraged and have positive self-esteem are motivated to give more effort on assessments, and students with little or no positive teacher relationships are less likely to perform at their optimal level. Crossman (2007) also points out that "...[students] frequently [draw] upon previous experiences... Thus, not only do current teacher-student relationships influence learning but so do all those memories of previous relationships experienced by students" (p. 319).

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It is very important for teachers to understand that students come with baggage. Student responses to assessments might be because they had previous experiences that were not positive. The responses to assessments might also be because they have little or no relationship with the teacher. Teachers should strive to build up students and attempt to replace past experiences with new, positive experiences. With a little effort, students can be influenced in a positive way and can begin to build a better outlook on assessments.

### Implications for Educators

Educating students proves to be a tough task. However, teachers have a great deal of information at their disposal about how students learn. A large part of this information and research concerns the role of emotions in the classroom. Teachers need to be aware of the way emotions affect their students and classrooms. Kim, Baylor, and Shen (2006) offer two guidelines for teachers. The first guideline is for teachers to prove to their students that they are knowledgeable and proficient at a variety of topics. This can be done through careful planning and organization. Second, teachers need to attempt to create an environment that is as positive as possible. Research shows that students learn better in a positive environment and the teacher is the sole facilitator of the positivity. Teachers need to work to create classrooms that are safe, inviting, and help to build positive emotional experiences. If all of these things are happening, learning is sure to follow.

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