

Building Respectful Relationships in the Classroom

What is the pedagogical practice for the development of respectful relationships?

A respectful classroom can be defined as a place in which all members, i.e. teacher and students, feel physically and emotionally safe and valued. In this way, students feel confident and dare to ask questions, are not afraid of making mistakes, treat each other well and respect each other's limits and the rules of coexistence, are happy, comfortable and at ease, show interest in learning, among other aspects. If students do not feel safe and valued, it will be very difficult for them to focus on learning tasks or to develop good relationships with others (Wessler, 2003, cited in Miller & Pedro, 2006). The teacher, at the same time, feels satisfaction and pleasure in his or her work, and enjoys the interactions with his or her students. On the other hand, a teacher who feels stressed and overwhelmed will find it difficult to perform his or her job and generate an emotionally safe space for his or her students. Scientific evidence shows the importance of the relationships between teachers and their students. For example, it has been found that when a teacher has negative feelings towards a student, this significantly predicts the child's social and academic results, even years later (Jennings and Greenberg, 2009). Thus, it is essential to develop respectful relationships at all educational levels, and especially in the first levels of schooling (kindergarten education and the first years of elementary school), since it is during this period that children are building their perceptions of the school experience. A bad start can affect future relationships with peers and teachers.

To achieve a respectful classroom, it is necessary to create an emotionally safe environment. Jennings and Greenberg (2009) emphasize that for this it is essential to cultivate the emotional well-being and self-care of the teacher, so that he or she can have the social and emotional tools to set the tone in the classroom. A teacher who is emotionally well and who cultivates his or her social competencies is better able to develop positive relationships with students, prepare classes considering the strengths and abilities of his or her class, promote intrinsic motivation, appropriately moderate conflicts, foster cooperation, model proper and respectful communication, and act in a generous and prosocial manner. In this way, it is very important to "start at home" and avoid burnout. It can be useful to exercise, eat well and practice relaxation and/or meditation techniques (e.g. Mindfulness), among other self-care strategies. The important thing is to learn to listen to oneself, and to evaluate what each person needs to feel well both physically and mentally, since what is best for one person is not necessarily the best strategy for another. In case of suspected burnout, it is advisable to seek help.

Thus, it is important to emphasize that, unlike other pedagogical practices that have a high impact on learning, building respectful relationships in the classroom is not something that can be implemented only through specific strategies but requires continuous work, and implies taking care of the mental health of both students and teachers. Thus, to build respectful relationships in the classroom, at least the following conditions are needed:

✓ Personal work on the part of the teacher, avoiding burnout.

✓ Be informed and sensitive to the social and emotional development of children, to know what the needs and challenges are at different ages and develop classroom management strategies proper for each stage.

✓ Be informed and sensitive about specific characteristics of individual students, including those with special educational needs, to find ways for the whole group to feel safe, valued, and at ease in the classroom.

What it is not Building respectful relationships with students

- Becoming the "teacher friend" who does everything to make students like him or her. It is important to build a warm and respectful environment, while having clear boundaries.
- Putting learning objectives on the back burner. Concern for the well-being and respectful relationships of students is necessary but not sufficient. It is essential to be specifically concerned about the learning process of all students.

Teaching Strategies for Building Respectful Relationships with students

Prevent conflicts and resolve them promptly when they arise: A good strategy to be aware of situations that could generate or are generating conflict among students is to circulate around the room. Have a clear message that it is unacceptable for classmates to treat each other badly or to exclude any of the students. It is essential that the whole group is clear about the consequences if such a situation occurs.

Demonstrate that you care about your students: Value and show interest in their emotions and what is going on in their lives. Greet everyone at the door. When a student has been feeling bad, ask them later how they are feeling. Listen and empathize.

Admitting when you don't know something or are wrong: Students appreciate sincerity and honesty, they learn to trust the teacher and at the same time receive the message that it is normal not to know something or to be wrong.

Find proper ways to express feelings in the classroom: We all go through times when we feel frustrated and/or angry, and sometimes these emotions can be quite intense. It is important to look for the right ways of expressing these feelings that are a part of life. For example, verbally expressing to the students "I am angry, I have felt very bad because of...", keeping the voice volume normal and avoiding disqualifications or ironies towards the students.

Coping with stressful situations with the P.A.R.E. strategy: A good strategy for coping with overwhelming situations can be the P.A.R.E. technique used to help decrease the action of the amygdala (brain organ that is activated in stressful situations). The letter P signals PAUSE. That is, when feeling stressed first take a pause (it may only be a few seconds). Then, the A is ATTENTION TO BREATHING. That is, pay attention to the respiration (it can be one, two or three breaths, or more according to need and/or possibility). R is RECOGNIZE WHAT IS HAPPENING. That is, to become aware of what is happening in our body, in our emotions and in our environment. And finally, E refers to CHOOSING HOW TO PROCEED. That is, only after the three earlier steps to choose what to do (or not to do).

Constructively correct: Accept mistakes as a normal part of the learning process. It is essential to promote an environment in which mistakes are not judged negatively, but rather are considered part of the process and even take advantage of instances of error to deepen some content. When correcting, it is fundamental to avoid the use of disqualifiers that damage the child's academic self-concept ("You are dumb" or "lazy", etc.). Rather, focus on the current state ("That answer is not the correct one, look...", "It seems to me that you are making a mistake, let's check" etc.) and show what is expected or help to find the correct answer. The above is also valid for correcting inappropriate behaviors in social interaction. That is, instead of telling a child "You are a pain, bad etc.", tell him/her "What you have just done is not appropriate, for (explain reasons)... so now you will have to (explain consequences if he/she has not complied with an established rule known to him/her, or help him/her to repair by apologizing if it is the case, etc.)". It is important that the message is that it is the behavior that is inappropriate and NOT the child, and that even though you are correcting and teaching him/her, you accept and value him/her in his/her integrity as a human being.

Have high expectations for the learning achievement of all students: One concrete way to show high expectations is to keep all students engaged. Students will get the message that the teacher expects EVERYONE to be attentive and that EVERYONE can respond and take part. Another strategy along these lines is to increase the wait time after asking a question. It has been found that teachers tend to give the best students more time to respond because they have the expectation that they know the answer. It is important to give ALL students time to respond, this communicates that you have the expectation that they can do it.

Promote a sense of pride in the work done: Some ways to do this are: reinforcing behaviors in a positive way on a regular basis, putting samples of the work in the wall diary, sharing and telling parents about the good results.

Have clear rules for respectful interaction: The rules should be established at the beginning of the school year, be developed collaboratively, and be written down in a place where everyone can see them. They should state what is expected both inside the classroom and at recess, as well as the consequences of not complying with these agreements.

Include respectful relationships as learning content: For example, include reading and/or conversation topics focused on the value of respect and showing respectful ways of interacting with peers, educational community and family. Perform tasks focused on emotional literacy, i.e., learn the meaning of concepts related to emotions and respectful treatment (e.g., respect, dignity, courtesy, individuality, personal boundaries, diversity, etc.). Use what has been learned in this type of activity

in a real context, i.e., take advantage of everyday situations to remember and reinforce what has been learned.

Promote Active Listening: Active listening is a communication skill that can be developed and is related to an attitude on the part of the listener of complete concentration and attention to what the speaker is communicating, considering both verbal and nonverbal messages. One possible activity to encourage this skill is to ask students to get together in pairs. They take turns playing the role of the listener and the speaker. The one who begins by speaking chooses an anecdote or experience to tell the partner who will listen. The listener should ONLY listen, with full attention to the story. That is, do not comment, do not interrupt, just listen very carefully (you can give nonverbal messages that show that you are listening, such as nodding your head, etc.). After about 3 minutes, the teacher asks the students who were listening to give feedback to their partner, that is, to tell him/her what they heard ("you told me that you went to your grandmother's house, and that she invited you for tea, and I thought that made you very happy. Then you helped her send an email... etc."). Then the roles change, i.e., the one who told the anecdote now listens and the one who listened now shares an experience or anecdote with his or her partner. At the end of the exercise, a conversation is held with the whole group-course in which they share how they felt listening and being listened to, receiving the full attention of their partner.

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