

Reluctant Teachers, Reluctant Learners

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The key to helping seemingly unmotivated students may be in the teacher's hands.

How would students teach someone who doesn't want to learn? Here's what a few 9th graders we talked with at South High School in Minneapolis, Minnesota, had to say:

"I don't believe that there are kids who 'don't want to learn.' I do believe though, that some kids have trouble learning or don't understand what the teacher is saying or teaching."

"I think what motivates kids to learn is different for each individual student."

"Well, first of all, I'd address the problem in a good way and find out the reason they don't want to learn."

As teachers, there are many things we can't control: district budgets, state legislatures' attitudes toward education and financing, No Child Left Behind and how it's interpreted, and inequality of wealth and educational privilege. But these 9th graders mentioned some things teachers can control. By focusing on what we *can* do, we can reach many learners who appear to have given up. But first we need to reframe the problem.

Who Is Really Reluctant?

The discussion about reluctant learners seems to imply that students alone must become more involved in the schooling process. To reframe the conversation about the reluctant learner, we must also consider the "reluctant teacher."

Reluctant teachers often avoid students who do not look, act, or talk like them. They may categorize such students as being at risk, having behavior problems, or being unteachable. Ladson-Billings (2006) indicates that teachers who define students in such terms create a classroom environment that is no longer a place of learning and high expectations, but rather a place rooted in control and management. Such conditions will not help the reluctant learner become successful.

Just as all reluctant learners have the potential to become star students and contributors to our human family, all is not lost with the reluctant teacher. To succeed, the reluctant teacher must adopt attitudes and practices that reach every learner, particularly those who seem turned off to school.

Motivation in the Face of Difficulty

Those who become teachers want to make a difference in the world. They love and care about children. They also want a fulfilling job. Unfortunately, the reality of teaching today often does not

match these expectations. Large class sizes, standardized testing, mandated curriculum, behavior issues, and school bureaucracy can make teaching more stressful than fulfilling. New teachers often comment that teaching is much more difficult than their training prepared them for. Second-career teachers say that teaching is the hardest job they have ever had. One study found that around one-quarter of new hires leave teaching within five years. In schools that serve low-income urban areas, the retention rate dips to 50 percent within the first five years (Hare, Heap, & Raack, 2001).

How can teachers stay motivated when so many factors make teaching so difficult? First, educators can create a network of peers to rely on when times are tough. They can eat lunch with supportive colleagues, take time out of a prep hour to chat with others, or go out and have fun with colleagues after work.

Second, teachers need to grab on to those small and all-too-rare expressions of gratitude they receive from students, parents, and administrators. All of us have experienced such welcome expressions as classroom teachers. Tiffany, for example, tucked away this note, left on her desk after she taught a unit on global warming to her social studies students at South High School in Minneapolis, Minnesota: Thank you for teaching me about how I can have an impact on my world. After you taught me about global warming, I went home and turned off all the lights we weren't using and rode my bike to the store rather than have my brother drive me in his car.

Tiffany had no idea the student had taken their class discussions to heart. That note reminded her of her influence on not only this one student, but also the entire planet.

Cultural Competence

For many learners, the school door represents a barrier that disconnects the classroom from their real life. The reluctant learner may feel isolated and turned off from school, be it because of family problems, cultural differences, language, dialect, or economic difficulties. His or her teachers often are more well off, speak differently, dress differently, and have a different color skin. Students who have had little prior exposure to the language and culture of schools can feel lost. Such students may resist the school environment and become apathetic, angry, restless, or disruptive, depending on their temperaments.

One avenue toward making the life of the classroom more accessible for students is for teachers to daily recognize the students' world outside the classroom. For example, posting a poem, quote, joke, song, or picture of a famous person from the students' culture demonstrates an awareness of and respect for students' backgrounds.

Becoming culturally competent means experiencing a culture that is not your own—and suspending judgment of that culture. Specifically, it may mean going to community meetings and

shopping where students' families shop. It certainly means learning about the different basic facts, concepts, holidays, and economics of the cultures in your school.

Relationships with Students

Positive, caring relationships are vital for all students, especially those who seem hesitant. Students want teachers to understand that they have problems outside the classroom. They appreciate teachers who are willing to listen and guide them. Unfortunately, just as students can be disengaged from learning, many teachers can be disengaged from their students. This is not to say that they don't care about the students, but the students may not *feel* that caring (Kuykendall, 2004).

So how can teachers show students that they do care? They can begin by establishing a positive atmosphere on the first day of school. Some teachers may ask students to write pieces about themselves and share them with the class. Teachers can also have students guess the teacher's age or try to figure out where the teacher is from. This leads to lots of laughter and discussion about first impressions and stereotypes.

Teachers can maintain these positive relationships throughout the year by greeting students at the door and asking them how they are doing. These conversations only take a few minutes, and they ensure that, even in large classes, each student has been acknowledged in some way. This builds the trust that is vitally important for reaching reluctant students.

Many teachers, worrying about the curriculum they have to cover, don't want to lose instructional days by laying the groundwork for building community. Yet these relationships can actually make it easier to cover the curriculum efficiently because students feel invested in the classroom. The time required to develop relationships with students may be substantial. However, without this time, the reluctant learner may never become engaged in learning.

Connection to Families

Over the years, we have seen numerous teachers attempting to build relationships with students. Although many efforts have been sincere and well intentioned, too often they are disconnected from the students' families.

Robert discovered the value of connecting with families when, at the end of a long day, the father of one of his 8th grade science students at Elmdale Conservatory for the Visual and Performing Arts in Detroit, Michigan, stopped by to invite him to their home for dinner. Never one to turn down a home-cooked meal, Robert packed his things and headed to their home. This was not the first time that he had broken bread with a family, but it was the first time that he had dinner with *this* family. This student was in his 5th period class and was working with him on a science fair project, yet they had

never connected beyond the usual good morning and afternoon.

During dinner, the parents commented on the number of times that Robert had called home to share positive information about their son. Their son was never a demonstrative student, so he appeared to Robert to be a reluctant learner. The parents believed that Robert's commitment to sharing good news fostered a sense of pride in their son. The student's participation in the science fair project was a by-product of Robert's proactive approach in contacting the parents.

Connection to Communities

Service learning projects give students an opportunity to connect what they learn in school with the communities in which they live. Several years ago, Robert and his 8th grade science students started a service learning project by discussing their Detroit community. The school's neighborhood had many vacant lots, burned-out homes, and trash on the streets and sidewalks. The students and Robert developed a list of 10 problems they wanted to address. One student, Jamal, was adamant about placing mattresses on the list. A shy student who did not often participate, Jamal was alive with energy about this topic. Robert was unclear about why mattresses needed to be on the list, but service learning is about community needs, and this was Jamal's community.

In his service learning project, Jamal began a journey from reluctant learner to outspoken advocate for community awareness to award-winning science student. To support the science requirement for the project, Jamal cut out a piece of a mattress lying in a vacant lot and contacted a local company to help him analyze the contents. The bacteria and other particles contained in that small piece would turn anyone's stomach.

This project helped Jamal become much more engaged in class, and his grades began to improve. Projects in which students connect school with their communities can engage the most reluctant of learners.

Student Input

D. W., a South High 9th grader, offers this suggestion for teaching students who don't seem interested in learning:

I would simply ask them what their favorite things are and use these things as examples to teach these students.

Reluctant learners need to feel that they are heard, that *their* stories, *their* voices, *their* questions, and *their* contributions matter. The best teachers make student voices the center of the class. Sometimes they build whole themes and activities around student interests and concerns. One teacher, for example, created a science, history, music, and literary curriculum centered on hairstyles and the history of

fashion (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002).

Although No Child Left Behind may make such an imaginative approach difficult, teachers can modify subject and class assignments by incorporating such engaging activities as surveys, free-writing exercises, and storytelling. Small-group work, time before and after class to talk with teachers, or even organized after-school study sessions can also make reluctant learners feel connected.

The most important way to nurture students and keep them in school is to create opportunities for them to determine for themselves what will go on in the classroom. Contracts that give students choices, discussions or projects related to issues that pique students' interest, and classroom strategy meetings with students who seem to be drifting send a message to the young man who is sleeping in the back row or the young woman who has been skipping school: "Your voice, your thoughts, your concerns are important here."

Classroom Management

Nothing alienates students more than threatening them, and nothing creates more reluctant learners than force. Unfortunately, too many teachers begin their career without a tool kit full of strategies for managing student learning. Therefore, they end up disciplining students with force and threats.

A strong, well-planned lesson that has enough work to fill a class period from bell to bell can go a long way toward keeping students involved. The minute students walk into the classroom, there should be an activity to engage them: a warm-up journal topic; a crazy question about science (Do fish sleep?); or a puzzle to solve. Writing the learning objective and agenda for the class on the board each day—with specific directions—helps students transition from one activity to the next. Students also remain focused when they have a concrete outcome due at the end of the class period. If they have "until tomorrow" to finish an assignment, students will put off doing the work.

Another proactive strategy is to have a set of classroom guidelines and procedures that students (and parents) have agreed on. Once students know the rules and consequences and see that they will be enforced, they are less likely to argue. Creating a procedure and a place in the classroom for turning in work and for obtaining and storing supplies can add to the order of a classroom. Students who come from chaotic or disorganized homes or who feel intimidated by school generally welcome this predictability.

Even the teacher with the best relationship with students, the most organized classroom, and the best-planned lesson will face days when students do not want to participate. To keep students on task on such days, teachers must maintain an attitude of "with-it-ness," stopping to survey the class every couple of minutes. Students notice how "with-it" a teacher is and act accordingly.

When students are disruptive, the teacher can often simply "stop and stare" or move closer to the student who is misbehaving, giving no verbal attention to the problem. If this doesn't work, then the teacher should simply say the student's name and "please stop." If the student doesn't stop, the teacher may, if it's feasible, ask the student to move into the hall for a talk. Some teachers are brilliant at student hall talks. They speak quietly, get the student to tell what is happening, and then discuss what can be done. The calmer the teacher remains, the more students will respect the rules. This is especially true for students who need to feel they are being heard.

Self-Reflection

No matter how experienced, the best teachers are willing to change. Reflective teachers admit mistakes and create open conversations with students and colleagues in order to improve. They ask themselves whether their students are learning, and when they don't like the answer, they immediately change how they are teaching.

Some educators reflect and learn by writing down their thoughts and observations daily. Some attend workshops on areas where they need support. Others find a mentor to bounce ideas off of. Some learn from their students by giving surveys, asking students to write in a journal, or having an open class discussion about topics of teacher concern. Whatever their approach to learning, they remain open to new ideas and always seek new ways to ensure that all students are learning.

What We Can Do

Zoe, a South High 9th grader, says that teachers should "try to inspire [students]. Try to work with them, not against them. Try to make the class interesting."

Individual teachers can't control tax structures or national trends. We can't fix broken homes. We can't revamp our economic system to make things more equitable. However, we can do what Zoe suggests:

We can inspire students with our own fire, motivation, research, and ideas. We can give students confidence in their ability and their future. And we can create classrooms that are so vibrant, so full of life and laughter, with such high expectations and such a clear connection to the world, that even the most reluctant learner will be tempted to join in.

The reluctant learner creates a thin veneer of resistance to cover his or her yearning. This veneer is penetrable by teachers who take the time—who themselves are not reluctant to teach and learn from all students.

References

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