

## Creating a Safe Classroom Environment

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### Abstract

*Safe classroom environment is a precondition of good teaching. Today it has become rather difficult as it involves more and more aspects. Social justice, feeling that success in school/university leads to employment, ability to solve not only educational, but also life problems, avoiding gender and other kinds of discrimination, teacher attention not only to most talented students, responsibility for taking timely measures against alcoholism, drug addiction, child abuse, etc. – this is a far from complete list of problems that school teachers and university lecturers have to deal with. Changing of the family model also contributes to risk factors in education. Teacher/student relation type is another important component providing student security.*

### Introduction

Our children's safety is the most (together with their health) important thing for all people. As children spend about half of active time at school, children's safety and security is something that worries us all. However, it is not the goal of my paper to speak about guards who should not let total strangers into school buildings, floors which should not be slippery, corners that should not be sharp, etc. These issues are very important, but have nothing to do with educational science. I will speak about psychological security of children in class which is essential for child's personal development and education.

### Factors providing a safe classroom environment

What kind of classroom environment is safe? What factors influence it? What can help a student feel in class like at home and not in a stressful place which it, unfortunately, often is?

I believe these factors are:

- Type of relations that exist between teacher and students and between students
- Teacher attention to all students, not only to most talented ones, as, unfortunately, often happens today
- Support of students' desire to learn, experiment, express opinion, solve problems, etc.
- Justice in grades, praise and punishment, correspondingly no favoritism and discrimination based on ethnic origin, gender, culture, social class etc.
- Patience/tolerance towards errors and lack of comprehension
- Feeling that success in school/university leads to something more lasting, such as future employment



- Emphasis on gaining knowledge and not on grades, certificates, etc. (internal versus external motivation, formative vs. summative assessment).

- Involving students in cognition as an enjoyable activity which can fill the emptiness much better than drugs and alcohol.

**Teacher/student relations**

Let us view each factor in more detail. Teacher/student relations, analogously to parent/child relations, can develop in the following styles:

- Authoritarian
- Authoritative
- Permissive
- Uninvolved.

Transforming Eggen and Kauck's (2004, Chapter 3. p. 78-113) table, I received characteristics which develop in a student as result of certain type of relationships with a teacher.

*Teacher/student relations styles and patterns of personal development*

Interaction style	teacher characteristics	student characteristics
authoritative	are firm but caring, explain reasons for rules, and are consistent; have <b>high expectations</b> , create conditions for student self-realization	has high self-esteem, is confident , resilient and secure, is willing to take risks and is successful at school, is a divergent thinker
authoritarian	stress student conformity; stress convergent thinking (answer offered by the teacher is the only true answer) are detached, don't explain rules, do not encourage verbal give-and-take, have <b>high demands</b>	are withdrawn, worry more about pleasing teacher than solving problems; lack social skills
permissive	give children total freedom, have <b>limited expectations</b> and make few <b>demands</b> on children	are immature, impulsive, and unmotivated; lack self-control
uninvolved	have little interest in their child's life; hold <b>few expectations</b>	lack self-control and long-term goals, are easily frustrated and disobedient

Authoritative teachers tend to support students in their endeavour, risk-taking, even when it produces mistakes. Thinking and seeking for strategies is essential for them. That is why their students are resilient, they keep trying till they find the right solution. This idea is also supported by Expectancy x Value theory (Atkinson, Feather, 1966), which suggests that people are motivated to engage in an activity to the extent that they expect to succeed times the value they place on the success (i.e. if they expect to succeed and value the success, they are motivated to engage in activity). Expectancy x Value theory would explain why many students with a history of low achievement handicap themselves by not trying.

Besides relation style, caring (most often demonstrated by authoritative teachers and never demonstrated by uninvolved ones) matters. Caring refers to a teacher's ability to empathize with and invest in the protection and development of young people. Although the ways to communicate caring are individual, there are two most common ways: giving time and showing respect.

Teacher's expectations for a student – whether high or low – can serve as a self-fulfilling prophecy (Wilkins, 1976), a phenomenon in which a person tends to perform in certain ways that result from and confirm beliefs about the person's abilities (if a teacher demonstrates to the learner that he / she views him / her as a clever / stupid one, this may finally become true).

Equitable distribution is a questioning strategy in which all students in a class are called on as equally as possible. Students are not books or movies which we may read or not read, watch or not watch, according to our taste and prejudices, they are all talented in their own way people, and they should feel that teacher attitude is like parent's attitude: there are no “good” or “bad” children, they are all ours and beloved.

### **Student/student relations**

As students spend time in classrooms, they get feelings about whether or not the classroom is a desirable place for them to learn. The feelings evoked by the classroom environment create the classroom climate. In a “healthy” or “warm” climate, teacher and classroom characteristics promote students' feelings of safety and security, together with a sense of success, challenge, and understanding. Teacher also supports cooperative relationships between students, s/he stops efforts of mocking each other's mistakes, pulling the blanket (provides equity in calling up students), etc.

Teacher sets the tone for order and safety by modeling respect and courtesy (s/he should be this model: treat students with respect and courtesy, then students will treat each other and the teacher the same way). Students who are criticized for venturing personal or creative thoughts about a topic will not feel safe – and will be unlikely to take the risk a second time. Thus, an authoritative (or just a wise teacher) will always let students make mistakes if this way finally brings to new findings.

Fairness, equity, absence of bias and favouritism, etc.

Assessments that students view as punitive detract from intrinsic motivation, whereas assessments that provide information about increasing competence can stimulate the growth of intrinsic motivation. To use assessments effectively, teachers should:

- provide clear expectations for students,
- assess frequently and thoroughly,
- provide detailed feedback about responses to assessments,
- avoid social comparisons in communicating assessment results.

Learning-focused environments emphasize learning goals, whereas performance-focused environments concentrate on performance goals. Today, unfortunately, parents, teachers, whole society is performance-focused. This is a very dangerous trend, which leads, paraphrasing Theodore Dreiser's book's title, “American Tragedies” – disappointment in life, cynicism, etc. Teacher has to demonstrate respect to student's knowledge (especially, beyond the program and textbook) and stimulate it by giving creative tasks. It is teacher's task to bring to student's mind that a diploma with high grades may even help to get a job, but cannot help maintain it. It is knowledge that finally matters.

We may (and we have to!) fight a lot against alcohol and drug abuse, but if there is no spiritual interest towards life, this gap will be filled with something evil. If learning is something a student likes, there is no better bliss or euphoria than gaining new knowledge. And this natural curiosity, in-born attitude towards knowledge-seeking, should be maintained through a secure classroom environment.

### **Conclusion**

Classroom safety isn't just a legal term dealing with lack of physical danger. It also to a high degree involves our care about the student's mental, psychical and personal development.

### **References**

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