



Unmotivated Students

How many of us have heard that kids don't have to like you in order for you to be an effective teacher? Or, be sure to start out tough, be strict; you can always loosen up later"? I know I was told this as a first year teacher by every veteran teacher I met! Fortunately, I took this to mean I needed to have effective classroom discipline tempered with compassion and understanding. This interpretation paid off for me because I had very few problems and my students were motivated to learn and work for me and with me.

Unfortunately for two of my first year colleagues, they took this same advice and went overboard on the tough and strict part. They were soon having problems because their students perceived them to be just plain mean. They soon ended up with a class full of angry, unruly, unmotivated students. By the time they were ready to "loosen up", it was too late. There is no "bringing them back into the fold" if they think you're mean and/or that you don't like them. They had alienated their students and alienated students are not going to learn. It doesn't mean they can't. It means they won't.

Here's a true story that is a perfect example of this. A neighborhood 7th grade girl, who I like a lot, failed 7th grade language arts. While we were talking one day, she shared with me that she failed, not because she couldn't do the work, but because she hated her teacher. She said she didn't do her work as a way of getting back at her. I explained that the only person who really got hurt was her, not the teacher. But to her, it didn't matter. And to many such students, it just doesn't matter. They will "cut off their nose to spite their face".

So what do we do so we don't have a class full of unmotivated students? We need to have excellent classroom control skills; we need to be fair and consistent in our discipline; we need to have compassion and understanding for our students; and we need to make learning fun. It's a delicate balance, and it's not easy.

I was on a team of four teachers in one school with one of them being a first year teacher who was having problems with her students. At a team meeting, she asked us for advice. I had watched her teach and realized she would be an outstanding teacher with one improvement. Her discipline came from a fear of not having control. How did I know that? Been there, done that! She sounded mean to the kids and they were responding in kind. We talked about coming from the heart. Meaning: give the same message, but in a calm manner and with care, compassion, and understanding. (I know. Sometimes easier said than done.)

At this point, she was willing to try anything. So she went back into her classroom and instead of “disciplining” with an “angry” voice, she corrected and guided with a calm voice. And you know what? It worked! At our next meeting she reported that she had changed her voice, the words she used, and her body language, and it had worked.

Not all problems in the classroom are solved so easily. And she had others challenges along the way to deal with like all of us have. However, she overcame them all that year, and I was privileged to watch her become an awesome teacher.