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INTRODUCTION

During the past ten years, I have been working with teachers and parents all over the world discussing the issues of student achievement and learning. The more I listen and research and read and think, the more complexity I see in these two issues. Achievement in school and in life involves a kaleidoscope of strategies, plans, activities, attitudes and motivations. There is no one strategy that works with all students or in every situation.

Certain hopes and goals for children seem to be articulated to me again and again. These include wanting children to:

- ⌘ Initiate new ideas and activities.
- ⌘ Accept the responsibility for their problems without blaming others.
- ⌘ Surmount personal difficulties and problems.
- ⌘ Be independent learners who can also work collaboratively with others.
- ⌘ Set and achieve specific goals.
- ⌘ Learn to control impulsive behaviour and think before acting.
- ⌘ Decide when it is wise to keep on trying and when it is better to stop and go on to something else.
- ⌘ Know what their strengths and abilities are and how to make the most of them.
- ⌘ Complete tasks and assignments without procrastinating.
- ⌘ Follow through on commitments.

Wow! What a list for all of us to work toward throughout our lifetimes. I developed the beginnings of this list and have added to it frequently as I've listened to the concerns expressed to me over the past few years. It seems more and more to be a list for lifelong learning.

When I started writing this book I looked at the entire list and felt rather overwhelmed at the number of concerns that need to be addressed when writing about achievement and learning. Each concern could be a book of its own! As the book progressed, my ideas seemed to fall together in categories:

- ⌘ Attitudes
- ⌘ School Structures
- ⌘ Goal Setting and Organisation
- ⌘ Boys' Achievement
- ⌘ Families
- ⌘ Differentiated Curriculum
- ⌘ Independent Learning

Each of the above categories is a chapter in the book.

This book is written for teachers, administrators, other educators and parents. The strategies discussed for each issue and each category are intentionally doable and practical. Read this book for ideas, gathering the most workable ones for you and the children with whom you are concerned. Begin with one or two strategies and see how they work for you. Plan to re-read the book again in six months to pick up new suggestions and new strategies you would like to try.

I hope the book will be helpful to you as you improve the achievement and learning of your students.

IT'S YOUR ATTITUDE!

“I hate going to school each day,” complained Gracie. “There’s nothing exciting to learn, my best friend isn’t speaking to me anymore, I have too many hard assignments and I can’t see how all of this work will help me in the future! I feel like a failure and the teachers favour everyone but me. It’s not fair!”

Many of us deal with students like Gracie every day. While their academic work may be average, their attitudes are not. Negativity and an attitude which courts failure can do much to sap both enthusiasm and achievement. While teachers and parents cannot totally control a child’s attitude, developing a positive classroom climate can help. In this chapter we will look at some strategies to help students think in a more positive way about school and about life. We’ll also take a look at issues which involve dealing with failure, building self esteem, and learning positive communication skills.

EMPHASISE THE POSITIVE

Try these strategies to create a positive classroom climate:

1. START EACH DAY WITH A SLOGAN FOR POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT.

You can find these slogans in books, on calendars and even on signs you pass on your drive to school. In a culture filled with vulgarity, a positive slogan or motto will be a refreshing change. Write a new slogan on the board each morning to give your students a positive focus for the day.

2. EXPOSE YOUR STUDENTS TO POSITIVE COMMUNITY ROLE MODELS.

Use motivational speakers to show students the possibilities for achievement in adult life. Local heroes are sometimes unknown and unsung, but they can be tremendous motivators and encouragers for kids. Start a list of positive role models in your area. Ask other teachers for suggestions. While many schools occasionally bring in a motivational speaker for the entire student body, someone who will come and talk just to your class or to a small group of students within your class will usually have more impact and a longer lasting effect.

3. PLAY MUSIC WITH POSITIVE MESSAGES. ENCOURAGE STUDENTS TO WRITE POSITIVE LYRICS TO POPULAR OR WELL-KNOWN MELODIES.

In spite of the vast cultural wasteland of most pop music, songs that enlighten and inspire are still there. Look for new songs with positive messages as well as songs from the past that might appeal to your students. If your students enjoy certain popular songs but you don't like the lyrics, challenge them to write more positive and uplifting lyrics to go along with the music they like to hear. Music can have a powerful positive impact on emotion, attitude and memory.

4. AVOID COMPARISONS WITH OTHERS.

Comparing one child to another rarely has a beneficial result. Feeling positive about oneself usually does not come from being compared to others. Even if a student feels he or she is better/smarter/more popular than others, there will inevitably be the negative comparison where a person falls short. Instead of comparisons, help students recognise their own strengths, talents, skills and abilities.

5. SHOW YOUR APPROVAL.

Use words of approval as well as positive non-verbals to show students when you are pleased with what they have done. This is a built-in opportunity to shape future behaviour.

6. DESCRIBE POSITIVE ATTRIBUTES ABOUT INDIVIDUAL STUDENTS.

Be specific. Use positive words in your description. Tell the student why his or her behaviour or action was helpful to you or to others.

7. HELP THE CHILD UNDERSTAND THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BEHAVIOUR AND CONSEQUENCES, THAT IS, BETWEEN ACTIONS AND OUTCOMES.

Make sure this relationship is clear and makes sense to the child. Point out the benefit to him or her as well as the benefit for adults.

8. USE EXTERNAL REWARDS AS APPROPRIATE.

Much has been written about the positive and negative effects of giving students external rewards and motivators. Don't go overboard on this, but use this strategy sparingly. Try to find external rewards that do not cost money. Find out what the child likes for a special treat or a special thing to do. Work toward internal self motivation.

9. PRACTISE AND PRAISE GOOD SOCIAL SKILLS JUST AS YOU WOULD ACADEMIC SKILLS.

These include skills such as listening to others, having good manners, taking turns, developing a sense of humour, using appropriate words and phrases, and accepting and appreciating differences.

THE BRAIN AND LEARNING: HOW ARE THEY CONNECTED?

*“If I only had a brain!” laments the scarecrow in *The Wizard of Oz*. “My head I’d be scratching while my thoughts were busy hatching... I could tell you why the ocean’s near the shore, I could think of things I’d never think before and then I’d sit and think somemore... I’d unravel every riddle for any individual in trouble or in pain ... if I only had a brain!”*

Yes, the scarecrow knew something of the value of a brain as do the teachers quoted below. Have you ever felt like saying these words to your students?

“If you would just close your mouth and put your brain in gear you might learn something,” an exasperated teacher told an extremely talkative student.

“I can’t just open up your heads and pour the knowledge into your brains! You have to pay attention and learn it so it will sink in,” explained the year seven science teacher to her class. “How much easier teaching would be if I could do that,” she thought to herself.
