
Reaching the Fragile Student

Sue Zapf

*Students who are battling tough odds on the home front need
a clear invitation to learn.*

If you had visited my classroom last September, you would have observed 8th and 9th grade students struggling with school in typical ways. Michael would have been straining to remember his math facts, Steven balking at getting his thoughts down on paper, Elizabeth staring out the window unaware of the assignment I'd just given her, and Amy sighing heavily in response to another failed test. Javier would have been sitting with his arms stretched across his notebook, not doing anything—and not planning to do anything soon.

Although the academic struggles of these students are typical and obvious to any observer, the nonacademic struggles each one faces are less obvious. Michael's mother had left him in the "custody" of his 16-year-old sister, and he had become homeless. Steven—who had a single parent, six siblings, and a history of violence—had been regularly harassed in his mainstream school because of his small size. Elizabeth had repeatedly used methamphetamine, Amy was three months pregnant, and Javier had been skipping school and often spending all day isolated in his room playing video games.

These portraits are composites of students in the Compass program for 8th and 9th graders at Independent School District #194's Area Learning Center, an alternative public school in Lakeville, Minnesota. For eight years, my coteacher John Cates and I have worked with

20 students each year in this alternative setting, which we designed. Administrators from the surrounding middle schools refer to Compass students with a history of academic failure and life circumstances that put them at risk. Twenty-five percent of our students are minorities, and 50 percent qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

John and I have realized one truth about the students we teach who face serious academic and life battles: A thread of emotional pain runs through each of our student's stories. Until we reach each of them at an emotional level, their academic problems will continue.

Compass: An Inviting Environment

Realizing this truth, we have forged a positive environment that nourishes, rather than depletes, each learner's spirit. Compass draws on the insights of William Purkey and John Novak (1978/1984), who maintain that many traditional teacher practices—such as punishing students or judging student work with the goal of winnowing out low performers—are “disinviting.” Often unintentionally—and sometimes even intentionally—such practices exclude struggling youth from the learning community.

A better way to reach students is to proactively cultivate “intentionally inviting” practices that welcome all students into the culture of learning. Typical inviting practices include greeting students at the classroom door or immediately acknowledging a student asking for help—even in your busiest moments—and providing assistance as soon as feasible.

When I first read Purkey and Novak more than 20 years ago, I realized that my actions as a teacher were largely *unintentionally* inviting: I was successful in motivating students, but I didn't know why my tactics were working, so I couldn't replicate them. Learning to actively welcome students into the learning process—even through simple things like asking about their interests—transformed me as a teacher.

It also served me well when I began working with fragile students who needed powerful invitations to learn.

In Compass, John and I stay with our 20 students most of the day, providing a high level of consistency regarding rules and expectations. We teach English, social studies, and a course in life skills and study skills. Specialists teach math, science, and physical education. Mike, a paraprofessional, works in our classroom part of each day, supporting both students and teachers.

Building Trust and “Ball Talks”

For the first three weeks of the school year, John and I spend a great deal of time being intentionally inviting as we build community and trust. I do things large and small that I know will send students a strong message of acceptance, such as checking in with them about personal concerns they’ve shared or keeping a supply of gum at my desk and offering students some when they get fidgety.

We talk about the “bag” each of us carries that contains our life experiences and how those experiences affect not only how we react to others, but also how we learn. We help students understand that all people are different, that each of us has a different way of thinking and a personal set of strengths and weaknesses (Levine, 2005). Students reflect on their individual strengths and deficits and on what “hot button” emotional issues may get in the way of their personal interactions and learning.

To continue building that sense of community, we host “Ball Talk” every Friday. John, Mike, and I talk among ourselves for five to seven minutes in front of the students, allowing them to eavesdrop on our conversation as we discuss how things are going (we call this “Ball Talk” because we sit on exercise balls in front of the classroom). We might comment on our delight with students’ behavior during a special presentation or our frustration with their inability to meet deadlines.

When we teachers have finished, we open up the floor for students to offer comments or suggestions. For this practice to work well, we require respect from all students and staff. A sign hangs above our classroom door: “No putdowns by anyone for any reason at any time.” We discuss this expectation at length at the beginning of the year, and students frequently repeat it to one another—and even to adults whom they consider to be guilty of put-downs.

In addition to Ball Talks, John and I meet individually with each student every Friday to discuss that learner’s progress and concerns. Before this meeting, students reflect on what went well that week, what did not go well, and what goals they have for the coming week. No matter what conflict arose during the week, what personal challenge each particular student faced, or what assignment the student may have neglected, John and I use this meeting to remind the student in question that the three of us are a team working toward the student’s success.

An Inviting Grading System

Two years ago, John and I realized that although we had become intentionally inviting in our relationships with students, our grading system awarding *As* through *Fs* was disinventing. Most of our students had been receiving *Fs* in school for years; when we used traditional grading, they just resigned themselves to getting *Fs* from us as well. So we changed to the “*A, B, C, or Do It Over*” system, adapted from the work of Rick Wormeli (2006). Students must keep improving any assignment until the work reaches at least *C* level.

We were hesitant to make this change, unsure how our students would respond to a demand for quality work. However, what could be more intentionally inviting than telling students that they *can’t* fail, that all of them can get *Cs* or above? John and I believe all our students can earn an *A, B, or C* on every assignment. And they do, even if it takes them seven tries, even if they miss the first and second deadlines, and even if they have to seek help outside the school day. We build in a

period in the day during which students can get extra help from teachers, and John and I stay after school two days a week to provide help to any student who requires it. When a student is late with an assignment, we have that learner complete a form that explains why the work was late, when it will be turned in, and what that learner will do if he or she misses the next deadline. When students see only *Cs* and above on their report card, they feel proud, knowing they earned those grades.

Bumps in the Road

Bumps in the road inevitably come up when working with students who have life and school histories fraught with instability. We try to look at problems as opportunities for learning rather than occasions for punishment. Our students would tell you that we try to “heal the wound, rather than put a Band-Aid on it.” For example, if two students have a verbal confrontation, we work to mediate it and repair the relationship rather than punish them for arguing. If students use inappropriate words, we remind them to use language and a tone more fitting for the setting instead of sending them to the office.

Although punishments might provide short-term solutions, creating an inviting learning situation is more likely to result in long-term changes. One of our students was an angry young man who reacted with incivility to any provocation. Brett’s stepfather was abusive, and Brett’s distress over this spilled into school. When someone in class spoke out of turn, Brett would get up and walk out without permission. He snapped back disrespectfully to even simple requests.

It would have been easy to punish these behaviors; instead, John and I taught Brett and his classmates the skill of compartmentalization, or how to keep different areas of life from competing or interfering with each other (Levine, 2005). Brett learned that if he could focus on school when he was at school and leave his home conflicts at home, he would have more success. During the two years Brett attended

Compass, his grades improved significantly, and his inappropriate behaviors decreased.

Signs of Success

The outcomes we see show us our inviting environment is working. Between September 2006 and June 2008, Compass students' grade point average (averaged among all Compass students who stayed in the program two years) increased from 1.67 to 3.20. Discipline referrals are virtually nonexistent now. The power of our approach is also evident from the reflective comments we receive on our twice-yearly surveys, such as these words from a student and a parent:

I am learning a lot, and my grades are better. At my other school, I was failing all my classes. After I saw I was failing, I just gave up and didn't do anything. Coming here was a new beginning for me.

The change in my daughter's attitude has been staggering. She has gone from having a total disregard for attending school to getting up at 4:30 a.m. . . . and facing each day with confidence. Where she once was filled with anxiety, there is now self-assurance.

John and I observe our students' increased self-assurance at our annual Deans' Day, a time when students invite the deans or counselors who recommended them to the Compass program to spend an hour with us. The students create invitations, help prepare food, explain their classes, and lead the administrators in "Are You Smarter Than a Compass Student?" as John and I watch, amazed at the transformation that has taken place in each learner.

If you visit my classroom this fall, you will see that Michael, who has moved in with a friend's family, has finally memorized his math facts. You will see Steven interact positively with peers as he revises

his writing, notice Elizabeth engaged in her work, admire Amy's social studies project, and hear Javier contributing to discussions and asking for help. And you'll hear John and me talking about the new students who have joined our community, students we trust who will accept our invitation to learn.

References

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Sue Zapf is a core teacher in the Compass program at Independent School District #194's Area Learning Center in Lakeville, Minnesota; 952-232-2080; sczapf@aol.com.

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