

The Essence of Personalized Teaching and Learning

Franklin P. Morley



Students and teachers tell how educators have helped solve human problems.

The school was the first place that someone asked me what I wanted to be!

High School Student¹
Female, Black
Parkway Program
Philadelphia, Pa.

Warning to the reader: I am going to preach first, give a selective report of practices as seen by students and teachers, and then reassert the critical role we teachers and school administrators play in the lives of our students and communities. Only in this way is there a reasonable chance for me to separate the essence of personalized teaching and learning from the general student/teacher interactions that occur daily in our public and nonpublic schools.

Some Preachments and Assumptions

This is a bad time for fair-weather educators. This year and next will severely test the moral

mettle of our profession. One of today's tragedies is that our senses have become dulled to a proper appreciation of the moral dimension of our services.

Without apology, I begin by asserting that teaching is a moral enterprise based upon a larger moral trust. When "right" services are offered, they are those services that professional educators, parents, and taxpayers have judged will be for the mutual "good" of students and the society that nurtures them.

Further, I believe that our high-sounding, high-minded purposes are more real than anything else in our profession! We are responsible for creating and preserving a moral climate in which each individual has a *favorable* opportunity to grow and develop into a fully functioning, re-

¹ Student panel member in Thematic Session on Alternative Schools, ASCD 27th Annual Conference, March 5-8, 1972, Philadelphia, Pa.

sponsible, and self-respecting adult.² We must persist in these efforts for all students, and especially for the underdogs and handicapped. Otherwise, what is education all about?

After more than 30 years of working in the schools, I believe that the success of our schools rests ultimately upon the degree to which school staffs, students, and parents are able to create and maintain the climate for a *good* education. Being still in the trenches, I know that there are many conditions that make it harder to achieve such a climate today. Nevertheless, it is our responsibility—and our privilege.

Some Practices

Now, dropping down from my soapbox, I shall give you some data. For illustrations of exemplary personalized teaching and learning, let me draw on my recent survey of ninth-grade students. I asked them to answer the following two questions:

1. When did a teacher, counselor, or principal personally help you the most between when you started school as a child and now?

2. What was there about the way this person helped you that caused you to select this particular occasion out of all other times that help has been given to you in school?

I asked my secretary to type these responses exactly as they were written to preserve as much of the original flavor as possible.

One student response was:

"My kindergarten teacher hit me for something I did wrong and I never did it again (in school). Because it would have been very embarrassing if I had kept doing it."

The response from another student was as follows:

"In second grade my teacher helped me a lot. She explained things to us at a level we could understand and when something was wrong privately she was concerned and would talk it over with us and our parents."

The response from another student was as follows:

"A friend was making fun of my little sister, and I was crying (my sister is mentally retarded)

and my 5th grade teacher helped me realize many people would do this and taught me how to take it and she helped me a great deal."

Another student responded:

"In 6th grade my teacher in the classroom. Because she help me and cared for my accomplishment as well as mistakes. She influenced me to strive for better achievements."

One student responded as follows:

"My Home Ec. teacher helped me in 8th grade at _____ with a problem with my friends. They were giving me alot of trouble because of a problem I was haveing. They would talk behind my back and no one would talk to me except for my true friends who helped the few of them. But this teacher sat down with me and talked to me and told me to go to the people and explain what was wrong and give them the whole story and tell them the truth and after that everything was alright. She bothered to take the time to help me which other people would not do."

The response was:

"A teacher helped me when I was having some problems in my family. I went to him because he said during basket we could come to him if ever we had problems we wanted to talk about. (Any kind of problems). I felt I could take a chance and come to him and see if I could trust him. (I could)."

The next student's response was:

"A counselor once told me I should have more confidence in myself (brightness) and I could do better in school if I had motivation (that was it). I became more confident and worker harder because I wanted to."

Another student responded:

"A teacher this (9th) year helped me the most. I was beginning to get in trouble at school and things at home were going bad and this teacher took out both moduels and we went outside and sat and talked like we were good friend and not just teacher and student. I really thought alot about the things that person said, and I really think he helped me out."

² Earl C. Kelley. "The Fully Functioning Self." *Perceiving, Behaving, Becoming: A New Focus for Education*. Washington, D.C.: ASCD, 1962 Yearbook, pp. 9-33.

Still another ninth grade student answered:

"A 9th grade teacher forced me to learn the hard way to be independent and try not to rely on getting the breaks. I was very angry about something that happened because I didn't act for myself or follow directions. He (now you know it's a male) then made me realize that school wasn't really for grades, but to learn things that help you in life, and in the world—not just school."

Before we go on, let me drop in a sobering note. Out of approximately 300 student responses I received, 21 returned sad and/or vindictive statements, which jolted me. Some were simply "never," "nobody," "no one" or "no!" One student elaborated as follows:

"I can't recall ever receiving the help I really needed. The teachers and counselors and principals only listen to other teachers. They don't listen to what *you* have to say."

If we needed it, this serves as a reminder to us all of the ill effect we have on some students. The cost to those students and society is great when we fail.

Teacher Replies

Some more data came from fellow staff members when I asked them about helping students. In order to conserve space I will give only excerpts from a few.

One teacher's response was:

"Convinced a grade five pupil's family to enroll their son in a Special School District classroom for children with behavior disorders. It is unusual to make such a placement at or above grade four. . . . Of critical importance here was my follow-up. I frequently visited the boy at the Special School District classroom and counseled and encouraged him. . . . The student now has a B average at junior high, is captain of the football team, and has the respect of peers. He still visits me occasionally."

Another teacher responded:

"A few years ago I had a student who . . . had missed several days of class when I was asked to send home make-up work. I learned that the boy (very bright) was extremely depressed, and would

be out of school for another month or so. I had my class send humorous cards signed by all every few days. . . . The mother informed me later that she felt we were instrumental in bringing about a quick recovery."

An English teacher found these techniques effective:

"Listening when they talk and write about personal problems—trying to make them feel unique and still to let them know that their problems have occurred to others. (This is very difficult to do.) Letting them know you care by cracking down when they slacken in their duties—I always tell my classes (a) that no one will fail "comfortably" I'll be pushing you all the way. Surprisingly, some weaker students tell me to keep saying that. They say it shows I care; (b) that no one will pass who does not turn in *every* assignment—I think it also lets them know I care for I am looking at them as individuals."

A high school math teacher's comments can serve as a good close for this section:

"The instance which first comes to my mind involves a student who had a serious problem with drugs . . . he was suspended from school. . . . I had many chances to talk with him during the conferences I had with him to help him learn the material he had missed. His concept of himself was very low, and I let him know that I felt he was a person of worth. This young man completed high school and college successfully, and I still keep in touch with him. Many similar instances have convinced me that teachers help students most by talking to them and listening to them and accepting them as they are."

Our Role

Just as cream rises (or used to) to the top of milk, so personalized teaching and learning rises in the memories of student and teachers.

The interaction might well begin with what appears to be just an instructional matter. But in a given instance the student is unusually aware that he or she needs help and the staff member feels unusually concerned about the student. Then the staff member takes the extra time, listens a few extra minutes, asks a few extra questions, and may offer some moral judgments, frequently in

the form of alternative actions they might take separately or jointly to move toward resolution of the student's problem.

When I speak of moral dimensions, I am referring to continuums in human growth and development in which youngsters move in positive directions toward adulthood: from being frightened and hesitant to being brave and confident, from being other-directed to self-motivated, from isolation to belonging, from dependence to independence, from being passively compliant to being actively responsible for self and others.

Movement upward in Maslow's hierarchy of needs would be another way to describe the ascent of an individual's development.³ Let me explain by listing the needs in their ascending order, illustrating each with a student or teacher response. Remember, the responses are typed exactly as they were written.

The physiological needs. The response from one student was as follows:

"It was in 7th grade at the beginning of the year. This person helped me get acquainted with the school and my way around school."

The safety needs. The student responded:

"Third grade, I got in a fight and punched a kid in the stomach. I got sent to the principal. He did not really get mad and give me a big lecture, he just told me what I did wrong and to be careful. He didn't give me all this bull."

Another student responded:

"6th grade my social studies teacher and I didn't get along. She accused me of doing something I hadn't done and sent me to the office. I started to cry and make a fool of myself in front of several people. My homeroom teacher took me into an empty room and calmed me down. Later she stood up for me to the principal. She trusted me enough to disagree with a fellow teacher in front of me and also argue with the principal."

The belongingness and love needs. One student responded as follows:

"5th grade teacher, I cried alot because I didn't have many friends. Teacher took me aside and told me to be nice to people even if they aren't nice to you and ignore insults and that crying only gave them more reasons for insulting. I

began to be nice to people and slowly got more friends. I never cry because of insults anymore.

"It turned everything around, when I had more friends I felt better about everything I did. I did not realize until later how much this teacher had helped me."

The esteem needs. Another answer was:

"9th grade physical education teacher help me start taking pride in what I do instead of just taking things as they are and not really caring how it turns out."

The need for self-actualization. This response from a teacher:

"The second year I taught (about 10 years ago) I had a very creative, talented student who hated school and had a low self-concept. By many small compliments, I felt I made her more comfortable with herself, and saw her blossom as a student as well. Today, as a high school student, she is doing an excellent job in the drama/arts areas."

Summary

Personalized teaching and learning is something that happens jointly to a teacher and a student within a support network that usually involves parents, other students, and other staff members. It is a mutual, moral experience in which the poor feelings and wrong behavior of a student move toward good feelings and right behavior. It is the interplay of moral judgments which is the essence of personalized teaching and learning.

³ Abraham Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, second edition. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1970. Chapter 4, pp. 35-46. See Ron Brandt, "On Leadership: also: A Conversation with James MacGregor Burns." *Educational Leadership* 36(6):384; March 1979.



Franklin P. Morley is Assistant Superintendent for Instruction, School District of the City of Ladue, St. Louis, Missouri.

Copyright © 1979 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.