

The Kotter Key to Educating Disadvantaged Students

Richard R. Benedict

Real teachers who teach like Mr. Kotter are successful with the real Horshacks, Barbarinos, Epsteins, and Washingtons.

In the past few years millions of Americans enjoyed watching ABC's *Welcome Back, Kotter*. With their playful antics Kotter's "sweathogs" endeared themselves to the sympathetic Kotter. At the same time, they frustrated those of his colleagues who held more inflexible expectations for proper student behavior.

The students portrayed by the actors and actresses of the "Kotter" stage are enrolled in every high school in America, constituting maybe 10 percent of the enrollments in rural schools, 15-20 percent of the enrollments in suburban schools, and 25-75 percent of the enrollments in our urban high schools. Educating these students, labeled "educationally disadvantaged" in jargonese, is a challenging, difficult, and essential task. What teacher behaviors are associated with successfully accomplishing this mission? Did the stage behavior of Gabriel Kaplan resemble the behavior of teachers who are actually successful with the real Horshacks, Barbarinos,

Epsteins, and Washingtons of this world?

A study utilizing the behavioral categories "Consideration" and "Structure" borrowed from the Ohio State University leadership studies of the 1950s suggests that there is a "most" and "least" effective teaching style for those engaged in the task of schooling disadvantaged learners and that Kotter's behavior may be exemplary of that most effective style.

The Study

In a suburban high school on the outskirts of Kalamazoo, Michigan, 25 of the school's 149 disadvantaged students were randomly selected to participate in this study. Each was asked to name the teacher who contributed the most and the least to his or her education. In addition the students responded to the statement, "I chose this teacher because in his or her class: (a) I learned a lot (didn't learn much); or (b) I felt (didn't feel) like I mattered to the

teacher." Students could choose either, both, or neither response.

The students identified teachers who contributed either the most or the least to their education. There were no teachers placed in both groups. This suggests that students shared similar placement criteria and perceptions of their teachers.

The 50 teachers these students identified were then surveyed. Their agreement or disagreement with two statements—"I have affection for even the most troublesome students" and "I find myself disgusted with those students who are unwilling to take advantage of their educational opportunities"—was taken as an indication of their Consideration posture.

One measure of teachers' structure behavior is the degree of detail with which they elaborated their curricular expectations of students. Surveyed teachers placed themselves on a curriculum planning continuum that included having written or acquired: (a) a purpose statement for the course; (b) several goals of instruction; (c) behavioral objectives leading to student mastery of goals; (d) a listing of discrete learning steps leading to student mastery of objectives; and (e) a resource guide linking discrete learning steps with appropriate instructional material. Teachers provided evidence to support their claims made relative to placement on this scale.

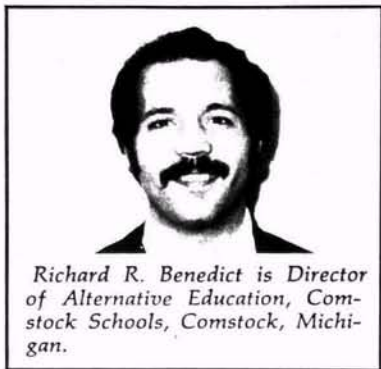
A second indicator of their Structure behavior was the degree to which teachers individualized instruction. Teachers placed themselves on a delivery continuum that included whole class presentations, presentations to homogeneous groupings of students, and individualized presentations as the first, third, and fifth steps on that five point scale. As with planning, evidence was provided to support claims made relative to placement on this continuum.

The Results

Consideration. In 44 of these 50 cases teachers claimed affection for even the most troublesome students. Telling of disgust for those rascals who are apathetic or antagonistic toward teaching was apparently an easier admission—32 of 50 admitted disgust. Twenty-one of these 32 teachers were named by students to the "least contributing" group. Of the 18 teachers who claimed lack of disgust, 14 were named to the "most contributing" group.

As it occurred in this study, all teachers who claimed lack of disgust likewise professed possession of affection for even the rascals of their classrooms. Carl Rogers uses the term *unconditional positive regard* to name this caring attitude that is offered without contingency, regardless of the imperfections of those who are the object of the esteem. The data collected in this investigation enabled us to conclude with considerable certainty that this unconditionally positive posture toward disadvantaged students facilitates their movement toward meaningful educational outcomes.

Structure. The degree to which teachers individualize instruction appears to have little, if any, influence on the students' decision to place teachers in the most or least contributing groups. For this sample, the correlation between these two variables is very nearly zero.



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Perhaps the most controversial and difficult finding to interpret is the one that shows detailed curriculum planning to be correlated negatively with student placement of teachers in different groups. Of 28 detailed planners, 22 were from the least contributing group. Nineteen of the 22 general planners came from the most contributing group.

Does the way teachers behave with respect to the Consideration dimension predict the way they will behave with respect to the Structure dimension? The data collected in this study answers no. Therefore, Structure and Consideration can be viewed as relatively independent dimensions of teacher behavior that influence the educational outcomes of disadvantaged learners.

Combinations of high Consideration and low Structure behaviors should result in meaningful educational outcomes for disadvantaged students and the opposite combination in less desirable outcomes. The data collected in this study overwhelmingly support this hypothesis. All of the high Consideration-low Structure combinations came from the most contributing group. Eighteen of the 21 low Consideration-high Structure combinations came from the least contributing group.

Student Motives

Student reasons for placing teachers in the most or least contributing group were that they "learned a lot" or "didn't learn much," as the case may be. Their feelings that they did or did not matter to teachers had little influence on their conscious motives for teacher placement decisions.

What they learned in the classes of their "most contributing" teachers and how the importance of what they had learned compares to the educational systems' conception of what was im-

portant for them to learn are questions for further investigation.

In a nutshell, we witness the phenomenon of students who have a history of a curricular disappointment finding relevance and value in classrooms where the teachers are caring and accepting and where curriculums are more generally than rigorously predetermined. In classrooms where teachers are simultaneously considerate and less structured, success of the disadvantaged student is the rule.

Conversely these students are disappointed in classrooms where teachers hold them in low esteem or offer conditional esteem at best, and where their performance expectations are more rigorously predetermined. In classrooms where teachers display both less consideration and more structure, the success of the disadvantaged student is the rare exception.

Revisiting Kotter's classroom, we envision an example of the highly considerate teacher who holds students in esteem despite their imperfections and chooses lessons for learning from their relevant experiences and immediate needs. That the disadvantaged students in this study felt they had acquired personally meaningful cognitions in classrooms where teachers behaved in this highly considerate, less structured fashion and didn't value the outcomes of their experiences in classrooms of teachers whose teaching styles are polarly dissimilar, is sufficient reason to consider emulating Kotter in our attempts to educate disadvantaged students. EJ

References

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