Affective Education Addresses the Basics

Trained in affective methods, Philadelphia's teachers are helping students raise reading scores, improve comprehension, and feel good about learning.

Many affective education programs that played a large role in the 60s have been relegated to the sidelines now, appearing only in drug and alcohol programs or other counseling situations. Philadelphia's program has survived, however—its staying power due largely to five years of evaluation indicating positive student gains in reading and writing.

The Affective Education Program was established as an office of the Division of Curriculum and Instruction in Philadelphia in 1967. At present, the staff consists of 14 professionals who provide training, materials, and other consultative services to teachers, administrators, supportive personnel, and parents. In an average year, the program serves approximately 2,000 individuals and provides in-depth training for some 300. Service is delivered by conducting workshops, classroom observations, co-teaching demonstrations, and conferences. Recently, the program has focused on implementing schoolwide interventions.

Funding for AEP has come from Title I, other federal programs, and foundation grants. The population served is predominantly black, but the program also works with small groups of poor white and Spanish-speaking peoples. For the school year 1980-81 the total budget was $700,000.

Research by Brookover (1978), Edmonds (1979), and Rutter (1979) points significantly to the influence of classroom climate on student achievement. The AEP teacher training projects confirm those findings. In some of these projects teachers are trained in the expression of high expectations for student achievement; giving students specific and timely feedback; developing an atmosphere of shared responsibility for teaching and learning; providing students with particular methods they can use to improve their attitude about learning; and building connections between academic content and students' personal lives.

The Affective Education Program has always been concerned with improving students' academic skills and has produced evidence of basic skill progress using a variety of measures, both formal and informal. Until 1974, however, program staff believed their greatest impact was on the social and personal life of the student. They also hoped to motivate students to value learning and school attendance. These were important concerns for administrators, teachers, and parents from 1968 to 1972, a period of severe social upheaval. Absenteeism was high, student criticism of schools was rampant, and drug abuse occurred among large numbers of students. Hence, it seemed significant that the program could change students' attitudes about themselves, others, and the schooling process.

During the 1972-73 school year at the Tilden Middle School, the Affective Education Program tried for the first time to prove that its treatment could improve reading scores on standardized tests. The Silent Reading Comprehension Levels Test (Form B) was administered to one project class and one comparison class, first in November and again in May. Results indicated that the affective class improved significantly (p < .05) more in reading than did the comparison group (Gollub and Mason, 1973).

The program could not be certain, however, of the particular variable that produced this change. They knew only that the 30 students in the project class were all taught in their major subjects by teachers trained in the program.

These teachers had learned to improve classroom climate by using more active learning, by fostering student initiative and responsibility, and by valuing the responsible expression of feelings. They had learned to use techniques such as role playing, guided imagination experiences, games, simulations, and feedback at both personal and task levels. Teachers had also learned to involve students in establishing interpersonal rules and contracts for behavior as well as academic goals for achievement. Finally, all teachers shared a commitment to improve their students' reading scores. They achieved this last goal by using standard reading methods. Frequently they structured reading assignments so that students would learn from and with each other in small groups.

During the 1975-76 school year the program tried again to provide evidence of significant improvement in reading scores at the elementary level. This time, however, the program staff expanded and refined the teacher training program. Participating teachers who received 40 hours of training the previous year continued training for a second year. A special program entitled the

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Communications Network (CN) was designed for these teachers to remediate reading, writing, and other communication skills.

The Communication Network Training Program
CN teacher training had three major phases:

- Teacher reflection on personal successes and failures as learners
- Key psychological factors and strategies that transform students' histories of failure to histories of success
- Promising classroom activities that motivate students to persist and eventually to succeed in mastering communications skills.

In CN training, teachers learned that no single technique or approach can effectively change student achievement; rather, a combination or network of factors contribute to positive growth.

The first phase of CN training helps teachers understand their own histories and attitudes as learners. When teachers realize their struggle to master problematic skills or subjects such as physics, foreign languages, or the repair of household machines, they gain empathy and perspective for their students' struggles to learn. By confronting their own difficulties, teachers discover some of the psychological dynamics that seem to promote or inhibit learning. They also become more willing to attempt alternative methods for presenting a subject or skill.

In phase two, teachers examine their expectations to determine how they influence student learning. This phase of training also provides teachers with classroom strategies that reduce or remove the negative attitudes and behaviors students may feel when trying to master a basic skill. Research by Brookover and others identified a "high sense of academic futility" as a key determinant of student failure among schools with predominantly low SES and minority populations in fifth and sixth grades. Brookover believes this phenomena occurs when students "feel they have no control over their success or failure in the school system, the teachers do not care if they succeed or not, and their fellow students punish them if they do succeed" (Brookover and others, 1978, p. 314).

CN training in phase two addresses a student's "sense of academic futility." Teachers learn how to raise their own expectations by establishing high standards for all students and by increasing the quantity and quality of feedback to students. Teachers praise work that shows improvement and provide specific instruction on how to correct inaccurate work. They show a sense of involvement by listening carefully to student responses and by valuing student expression. Teachers are also encouraged to evaluate the use of instructional grouping or tracking patterns to avoid negative or stereotypical labeling of students (Sloan, 1977).

Having established the need for change in teacher attitude and behavior, CN training shifts its emphasis to students. Students learn how to gain a sense of control over their negative feelings toward mastering a basic skill so as to approach learning with a sense of hope and achievement. They learn how to monitor negative self-statements and to change those statements so that they feel more competent to cope. Because low achieving students are easily distracted, students learn how to increase their time on task as well as deepen their concentration. When students do not see their life interests or concerns reflected in their reading material, they often feel alienated from reading. Therefore teachers select content that generates a strong personal response from students. Opportunities are structured so that students can share their reactions with peers and the teacher through writing or discussion.

Students' negative associations about communications skills exist in a social context of peers and friendship groups. Students who are not achieving often do not wish to see others achieve and, as Brookover discovered, "punish" peers for breaking those classroom norms. To reverse this negative peer expectation, CN training shows teachers how to build a climate in the classroom in which students learn to value the ideas and feelings of peers. Explicit attention is given to small-group work. Students learn to give and receive positive and constructive feedback and to take responsibility, collectively and individually, for what they learn and do not learn. Thus, in these classes students are less likely to "put down" peers for higher achievement. They come to believe that they are all capable of learning and they are more willing to support each other.

Phase three of CN training offers a variety of classroom projects. The following sequence describes one of the activities from phase three, illustrating how teachers use affective techniques to motivate poor readers. The teacher first encourages students to relax. With all eyes closed, the teacher guides students through a fantasy in which they visualize themselves reading a book, enjoying it, and finishing it. Immediately after the imagination exercise the teacher asks students to select a book and read it silently. If students do not know the meaning of a word, they may ask the teacher for help. If students have difficulty with specific words, the words are written on the board and included in a vocabulary lesson. When the sustained silent reading period concludes, students assemble to review and share their experiences with the teacher. The teacher reinforces statements that indicate students were able to imagine themselves reading and then actually persisted in reading a book.

The training program does not necessarily intervene in the way teachers teach the mechanics of reading. Teachers are expected to use the best methods available to focus on the emotional, attitudinal, and motivational aspects of learning. If these processes operate positively, students become more open to academic skill development. Evaluation studies conducted from 1975 through 1979 confirm that students in affective classes achieve at statistically significantly higher levels on standardized reading tests than do comparison classes; they also persist longer on reading tasks and write more completely and complexly than do comparison classes (Loue, 1979).

Evaluation Findings
Evaluation of the Communications Network project since its inception has been both formative and summative. Each year the project created objectives to validate the previous year's findings; in some cases these objectives afforded a
Major evaluation activities included (1) monitoring all major staff development sessions, (2) monitoring classroom follow-up activities by the project staff, (3) administering standardized and criterion-referenced tests, and (4) using existing measures of student performance.

During 1974–75, evaluation was formative and focused on the implementation activities of teachers and parents. During the 1975–76 school year, evaluation focused primarily on the academic performance of participating children. On the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Tests, project students scored significantly higher than nonproject students in vocabulary and comprehension.

Using a measure of reading persistence, project students were able to read during a sustained silent reading period for a longer time than nonproject students. Project students also wrote more words and created stories of greater quality than did nonproject students.

During 1976–77, the project used specific tests to reflect the primary skill development focus in each teacher's classroom. These tests were not direct measures of the project's efforts—the project believed that changes in teacher behavior and classroom conditions would create the climate for specific skills to develop more readily. To test that hypothesis, the measure of reading persistence that was administered the previous year using a post-only control group design was administered during the 1976–77 year as a one-group pre-test-posttest design. The results showed that project students had significantly improved their reading persistence skills between the beginning and end of the school year (73 to 90 percent). These results, when combined with the previous year's findings, provided substantive proof of project success in the area of reading persistence.

During 1977–78, the project validated changes from beginning to end of the school year in the reading persistence of project students only. A Phonics Inventory revealed significant positive changes in the number of students achieving mastery on four of nine subtests. Informal Reading Inventory results revealed substantive growth in reading comprehension as well, as indicated by the number of students who advanced at least one or two book levels during the year.

During 1978–79, the measures of writing skills that were first administered in 1975–76 were again administered only to project students. Like the earlier results, the 1978–79 results revealed that project students wrote significantly longer stories and stories of greater quality, providing substantive proof of the project's success during that year in the area of writing.

Positive results also showed up when Informal Reading Inventory data were collected. Ninety-five percent of the project students achieved gains of at least one book level, while 70 percent gained at least two levels. These results are noteworthy when compared to the normal expectations of 80 and 50 percent for similar students in the district. And again, Phonics Inventory data revealed mixed results with significant growth on four of nine subjects.

Through the Communications Network and other projects, the Affective Education Program has increased its credibility in Philadelphia as a serious force in helping raise student achievement. In addition, the project has been able to build productive collaborative relationships with other curriculum offices—proof that the approaches AEP uses are valued by practical, skills-oriented professionals.

References


