

Love

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There must be the generating force of love behind every effort that is to be successful.

Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862)

Love may seem a strange choice for inclusion in a vocabulary for teachers. It may seem too strong a word for what teachers feel for their students or may carry connotations of romantic love. I mean it, however, in the context of respect—a sort of ultimate liking of every student. Students must feel that their teacher has an unconditional positive regard for them as human beings.

It is not enough for teachers to say they love each student. They must act on it to create an environment in which students know that they are loved and cared for, and that their best interests are considered. Even when the teacher cannot abide certain behaviors, the teacher must separate the behavior from the person. An exasperated teacher might say in a difficult situation, “I don’t know what I’m going to about you, Jon, but somehow we’re going to find a way to get past this.” This gives assurance to the student that the teacher believes in the student in spite of the student’s actions. It also more likely leads to a change in behavior. Students want to live up to the expectations of people who like them and who believe in them.

I am reminded of the researchers who, on following a group of boys into adulthood classified as having serious behavior problems, found that a number of the boys had become well-adjusted adults. Tracing those boys’ backgrounds, the researchers found that most had come from a certain teacher. They located and interviewed the teacher to ask about her methods of teaching. Then, very old and in a nursing home, she said, “Well, I guess it was that I just loved those boys.”

I speak of love not as an abstract concept. For the human brain to reach its maximum potential, learning must take place in a safe and secure setting. Otherwise, the brain downshifts in some way and excessively filters incoming information for threat, thereby remaining on anxious alert. This lessens openness to higher order learning.

The teacher who truly loves students makes certain that each feels safe and secure by being aware of interfering factors such as grades, learning styles that do not fit standard educational practices, home conditions, and peer relations. Successful schools and teachers use a variety of approaches to ensure that these factors do not impede learning.

There is little hope of reaching every student if teachers do not like certain types of students. They must love every single one, including those a friend termed “hateable.” The teacher who likes or loves only one race or gender or who dislikes “dirty” or “fumbling” students cannot conceal this. At some level of consciousness, students will know. Love means reaching out to all students, making sure every child is treated with courtesy and made to feel welcome and special—even prized.

At a deeper level, teachers must love themselves, for it is hard to feel charitable toward others if you are unable to forgive yourself. The bitter or tormented teacher has little charity to spread to students. This means teacher preparation programs and staff development programs must address the mental health and well-being of teachers. Even the well-balanced teacher needs reminders of the importance of believing in every student. All teachers need strategies to address the enormous range of their students’ conditions: out-of-school factors, self-regarding attitudes, peer pressures, academic ability, learning styles, and multiple intelligences. It is not enough to know your subject matter well. Teaching involves three crucial factors: knowledge of the topic, instructional methods, and relationships. Like a three-legged stool, if one of these is missing the stool will not stand.

Love means also that schools must root out practices that demean students. Schools that love children do not use procedures that harm them. Consider the student whose learning style and interests do not match a school’s heavy emphasis on classical subject matter mastery. There are many such students who then receive a steady diet of low grades and experience the disappointment of their parents. These students come to dislike school because they believe, probably at an unconscious level, that they are disliked at school. We cannot say in such a school that every student is loved. Such practices border on abuse and cause harm to student psyches even when the school is a kindly and relaxed place.

Schools where teachers love students are places of dignity, meaning, and community. Classrooms are characterized by energy, enthusiasm, and learning by all. In such schools, students believe in themselves and grow into responsible citizens, productive workers, lifelong learners, and creative, healthy individuals.