

DOMAIN 2: THE CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

The classroom environment is a critical aspect of a teacher's skill in promoting learning. Students can't concentrate on the academic content if they don't feel comfortable in the classroom. If the atmosphere is negative, if students fear ridicule, if the environment is chaotic, no one—neither students nor teacher—can focus on learning. So although Domain 2 does not deal with instructional skills, its components make the teacher's exercise of instructional skills possible.

COMPONENT 2A: CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT OF RESPECT AND RAPPORT

Rationale and Explanation

Teaching depends, fundamentally, on the quality of relationships among individuals. When teachers strive to engage students in a discussion or an activity, their interactions with them speak volumes about the extent to which they value students as people.

When adults recall their favorite or least favorite teachers years later, they tend to remember those who treated them with respect or those who demeaned them. These memories often overwhelm other memories of school, such as the teachers who really knew their subjects or who gave wonderful explanations. Depending on how old they are when they tell the story, adults may recall a single day, or even a single episode, from 30 or 40 years earlier. The memories are powerful and can have tremendous influence on individuals' sense of

themselves that becomes integral to their identities. These powerful memories relate to how one was treated; therefore, all relationships between teacher and students, and among students, should be grounded in mutual respect and trust.

An essential skill of teaching is that of managing relationships with students and ensuring that those among students are positive and supportive. Although children may be smaller than adults, they are no less human; they have feelings and aspirations, hopes and fears—and those deserve careful attention. In interviews, students consistently report that one of the characteristics they most value in their teachers is that of respecting them and their lives outside school. The out-of-school part has enormous implications, particularly for recent immigrants or for students whose home culture is different from that of the teacher. An important consequence of getting to know one's students (Component 1b) is that teachers are able to interact with their students as individuals (“How's your grandma doing?”). In addition, teachers learn to respect the wide variety of backgrounds represented by their students and learn to see the world from their students' perspectives. For some teachers, this requires significant new learning, because ways of showing respect in one culture may be offensive in another.

Teachers create an environment of respect and rapport in their classrooms by the ways they interact with students and by the interaction they encourage and cultivate among students. In a respectful environment, all students feel valued and safe. They know they will be treated with dignity, which encourages them to take intellectual risks. High levels of respect and rapport are sometimes characterized by friendliness and openness, and frequently by humor, but never by teachers forgetting their role as adults. It is essential that teachers not believe that in

order to establish good relationships with students they must be seen as a friend or a pal. This is always inappropriate and may undermine the teacher's essential role as an adult.

Some teachers convey their caring for students through a firm demeanor and businesslike atmosphere. Underneath the demeanor, however, is the essential *caring* that teachers exhibit for their students and the caring that students are encouraged to exhibit for one another. That is, students are not offended by teachers whose affect is strict, even stern. Somewhat counterintuitively, students interpret that affect for what it is—teachers caring enough about their students to insist on the highest standards of work and conduct. Parents are known to say to their children, “If I didn’t care about you, I would let you stay out all night (or go to an unsupervised party or hang out on the corner with certain friends). It’s because I care about you, and your future, that you may not do those things.” The same rationale is behind the behavior of some teachers. Students understand caring when they see it and know that it is different from permissiveness. Of course, appropriate interactions are highly dependent on context. What is suitable for kindergarten children is unusual, or even inappropriate, for high school students.

During instruction, an important challenge of a teacher's skill occurs when students offer an idea, or a response to a teacher's question, that is inadequate. How the teacher responds—and how other students are permitted to respond—sets the tone for how students are treated and therefore how they feel about themselves, both as people and as learners. If a student's effort is ridiculed by other students (if they snicker or shoot their hands up to correct the response) or if the teacher responds sarcastically, the student is unlikely to take such a risk

again. Much better is a response that recognizes the thinking that prompted the response and steers the student in another direction, such as, “That’s an interesting idea, Jimmy, but I wonder whether you have overlooked the fact that . . . ?” Such a response invites another attempt by the student and also shapes the ensuing discussion with the rest of the class.

Of course, respect for others is demonstrated through non-verbal as well as verbal means. When students roll their eyes or when teachers express exasperation in their posture, students quickly pick up the messages. And students are quick to recognize a display of favoritism by the teacher toward some students.

As noted, an important aspect of a teacher's skill in creating an environment of respect and rapport relates to how the students are permitted to treat one another. This is not a trivial matter; how students are treated by their peers can have an enormous influence on their sense of self-worth. Extreme cases of lack of respect lead to bullying, from which some students never fully recover. Furthermore, popular American culture, as reflected in television sitcoms, provides continuous models of the “humorous” put-down, the scoring of cheap points by one person over another. And as any parent knows, children are not born being nice to one another; this is a *learned* skill.

Some teachers are reluctant to have their own performance judged by an aspect of their classroom over which, they maintain, they have little control, because so many of students' patterns of interaction with other students are formulated by their patterns of behavior at home and in the larger community. On the other hand, establishing ground rules for interaction is as important as establishing standards of conduct or routines for activities such as sharpening pencils—aspects of creating a

learning community that no experienced teacher would overlook at the outset of a school year. Patterns of student interaction are critical to the overall tone of a class. So although it is true that students observe many models of how people treat one another (some of them negative), promoting positive interactions among students is a critical aspect of teaching. As Anna Quindlen put it in a commencement address in 2002: "People will forget what you said. They will forget what you did. But they will never forget how you made them feel."

Demonstration

Teachers demonstrate skill in establishing an environment of respect and rapport through their words and actions in the classroom. Occasionally, interaction with a student, or student interactions with one another, may require that a teacher offer an explanation so that an observer can fully understand the teacher's actions. Such explanations can take place in a discussion following the class. (See Figure 4.7.)

FIGURE 4.7

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Component 2a: Creating an Environment of Respect and Rapport				
Elements: Teacher interaction with students • Student interactions with other students				
ELEMENT	LEVEL OF PERFORMANCE			
	UNSATISFACTORY	BASIC	PROFICIENT	DISTINGUISHED
Teacher interaction with students	Teacher interaction with at least some students is negative, demeaning, sarcastic, or inappropriate to the age or culture of the students. Students exhibit disrespect for the teacher.	Teacher-student interactions are generally appropriate but may reflect occasional inconsistencies, favoritism, or disregard for students' cultures. Students exhibit only minimal respect for the teacher.	Teacher-student interactions are friendly and demonstrate general caring and respect. Such interactions are appropriate to the age and cultures of the students. Students exhibit respect for the teacher.	Teacher interactions with students reflect genuine respect and caring for individuals as well as groups of students. Students appear to trust the teacher with sensitive information.
Student interactions with other students	Student interactions are characterized by conflict, sarcasm, or put-downs.	Students do not demonstrate disrespect for one another.	Student interactions are generally polite and respectful.	Students demonstrate genuine caring for one another and monitor one another's treatment of peers, correcting classmates respectfully when needed.