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Feelings: Actions, Methods, and Strategies to Prepare Students for Learning by Creating an
Environment Considerate of Affective Needs

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Abstract

This article examines two critical questions for building trust to provide learners in communities that have experienced violence with the ability to participate with hope in classroom settings: (1) After the many recent alarming and violent events that have occurred in our society, how can educators best meet the affective needs of students to create a positive environment for learning? (2) Are there strategies and methods that any educator can use to help students feel interested in learning and ready to learn in spite of the repeated upsetting events in the news and in their communities? The answer is yes. Johnson's (2011) research showed that students need faith in one another and the system that proposes to educate them. Given the dizzying, frightening, and sometimes dreadful events confronting students in their communities and in the news, educators need to promote affective skills for guidance in cross-racial dialogues, in emotional situations to acknowledge injustice, in validating feelings, and in building positive ideas toward knowledge and the future. Acknowledging and analyzing structural racism, sexism, and classism prevent the hiding and smothering of students' needs. It takes more than knowledge of a hierarchy of needs, or cases requiring social justice, for educators to develop an environment of trust, mutual respect, and hope in the classroom.

Keywords: students, trust, respect, hope, feelings, stories, Critical Race Theory, dialogue

**Feelings: Actions, Methods, and Strategies to Prepare Students for Learning by Creating
an Environment Considerate of Affective Needs**

People around the world of different ages, economic levels, education, experiences, religions, and ethnicities understand the importance of a sense of welcome and safety. Creating a welcoming, caring environment for students seems like a logical priority, but globally, classrooms have not, in this century or others, organized around the premise of creating a space that says, “Welcome. You matter here, you belong, and your feelings, questions, ideas, and life experiences are valued.” Exceptions exist, but traditionally, schools in the west and east evolved from a teacher with students or disciples to a hierarchical environment modeled on industry and oriented to measurable outcomes. In 2015, students as early as kindergarten age from the United States to China have less play and more testing. With an interconnected world, students from all continents have discovered that a college degree is not a guarantee to a desirable job suited to one’s ideal career path nor does it guarantee the relationships people need to navigate through life.

As schools developed connections with the community and government for guidance and funding, such elements as frameworks, curriculum content, standards, and assessments changed. With loud and insistent cries for measurable results in any area of study, high-stakes testing has taken priority place over affective needs, meandering explorations, and experimentation. With such a disconnect between government expectations and students’ classroom needs, teachers play a crucial role in keeping students engaged and hopeful in the processes of learning.

Unfortunately, an educator’s poor knowledge of local culture contributes to setting a negative affective tone, such as a well-meaning teacher who proclaims in a local school that has

experienced trauma in the community, “Now we’re going to focus on our subject and not talk about all the upsetting news outside our classroom,” or an American teacher of English in Thailand who pats young students on the head, or a teacher of predominantly Mexican students who gives a short, polite nod to welcome students. Whether in Baltimore, Chiang Mai, Monterrey, or elsewhere in the world, educators need to research and learn about the culture and the local language. Educators also need to recognize that, in many locales, losing one’s temper, criticism, sarcasm, or complaining results in negative reactions and harms one’s reputation.

In addition to researching the local culture, how can educators create an environment that meets the affective needs of students? What can educators in the United States do in such communities as Baltimore, Missouri, New York, South Carolina, Texas, Florida, and California where school districts have faced injustice, anger, frustration, depression, violence, pain, and fear for decades? The school effectiveness review used in Baltimore City Public Schools in 2014–2015, as well as in numerous other city public school accountability offices, emphasized protocols for checking the effectiveness of education in terms of academics, lesson plans, varied teaching methods, higher-level thinking skills demonstrated in classroom discussions, and curriculum content (Baltimore City Public Schools, 2015). What about the effectiveness of actual positive connections among educators, students, and the community? This paper will show how a focus on the feelings of students, shared stories, counter-stories, Critical Race Theory, dialogues, and daily recognition of society’s diverse racial prejudices affect lives. Teachers can create an environment that helps students to face, examine, deconstruct, hope, respect, listen, and engage with learning.

After the many recent alarming and violent events that have occurred in our society, how can educators best meet the affective needs of students to create a positive environment for learning?

Literature Review

Mary McLeod Bethune was born in the 19th century to former slaves who became sharecroppers after being given freedom. Bethune had to attend high school and college classes in the north because in her home area restrictions still reigned against former slaves and their children receiving education. Upon graduation from a college in Chicago as a top student, Bethune still did not get the job she wanted, mostly due to racial prejudices. Although disappointed, she did not give up hope when confronted by racism that limited her career opportunities.

She chose to return to the south, to Florida, to start a school for African-American girls (McCluskey, 1989). When that proved a success, she started a school for African-American boys, and eventually she started colleges and advised President Franklin Delano Roosevelt on education in the United States. Mary Bethune stressed that the learning environment—indeed, every lesson for all students—should have a connection to head, heart, and hands (Mary Bethune Academy, n.d.).

That trio of head, heart, hands created a positive environment and brought her students success. The evaluation for academic learning that Mary Bethune advocated and modeled was not just about maximizing instructional time, implementing frameworks, varying methods, and data-driven plans. Bethune's approach was about maximizing hope, respect, applications, and experience (McCluskey, 1994). Bailey (2007), McCluskey and Smith (1999), McKissack (1985), and the W.E.B. DuBois Learning Center (2014) all supply evidence of Bethune's commitment to

connect with her students, lead by providing a model, become involved in the community, and teach with a blend of appeal to head, heart, and hands.

Educators must engender positive effects in public schools. Carodine (2014) affirmed that race affected attitudes and actions, especially in high-profile cases: Too many students today see and know firsthand the feelings associated with racial inequities in communities. Thomas (2012) asserted that educators need to know their communities, become involved in local concerns, and talk with the families and friends of students. Blending the head, heart, and hands approach with curricular requirements can help students face deep issues of discouragement, distrust, and distress from the moment they first come to the classroom door.

Johnson (2011) described the need for a sense of community, establishing an environment where students feel that they belong, that they matter, and that the people working with them care about them. Johnson's research shows that as concepts and paradigms have changed and shifted, it is essential for students to experience successful learning, feelings of trust, growing confidence, and effective evaluation skills. In the programs Johnson examined, emotional security evolved from acceptance, lack of stereotypical barriers, validation, helping others, sincere concern for one's feelings, speaking the truth gently, not dwelling on mistakes, peer tutoring, and the availability of counseling. Self-efficacy, problem solving, higher personal standards, and relationships grew as people studied and worked together in this freer, personalized, and encouraging environment.

Allowing people to review a story, share a story, or tell a counterstory creates an environment in which people's opinions and concerns are valued. Johnson and Rosario-Ramos (2012) advocated for more use of counterstories in classrooms to show value to individuals and communities. Blum and de la Piedra (2010) demonstrated that storytelling has transforming

attributes for individuals, classes, and communities. Delacruz and Bales (2010) suggested adding to the respect shown for a person's story or counterstory by finding visuals such as articles or personal mementos to engender richer connections to the story. Hill (2014) found that exploration of identity and experience teaches respect for identity and racial inequities and validates what is learned through personal experiences.

Bethune knew her community; she knew the stories of her students and learned about every culture in which she worked with her students. She understood their beliefs and held many of them herself. Paradise (2014) reminded those involved with Critical Race Theory (CRT) to respect the whole of a minority history and not to demean or ignore the religious grounding of communities. Thomas (2012) demonstrated that teachers could be community builders both inside and outside the classroom. Boyle (2011) asserted that living with an appreciation for daily struggles and counterstories communicates caring and affirmation for those who do not live in the mainstream of the traditional stories of the majority culture.

Dar (2015) showed that educators need help focusing on and practicing being an empathetic role model so that students will feel the teacher cares about class members' interests and concerns. Duchaine, Green, and Jolivette (2011) knew that students had opinions and ideas but were reluctant to speak up. Consequently, they found that response cards acted as a class-wide intervention to engage students and to decrease challenging behavior. From elementary school through college, response cards aid students in guided practice, formative assessments, and building courage and competence in giving a response.

Other classic educational theorists, practitioners, and leaders affirmed the need to connect the affective and cognitive realms for students in order to influence student actions and conative learning. Dewey (1939) stressed that hands-on, interactive experiences built positive attitudes

toward learning. Bandura (2008) revealed that learning through active and interactive processes strengthened self-efficacy in students and led them to care about interacting more with others.

Matias (2013) prodded educators to understand that silence on racial issues, incidents, and ideas inhibits learning. Park, Holloway, Arendt, Bempechat, and Li (2012) showed that engagement in classes hinged on emotional connections and engaging learning experiences. Acknowledging emotions, including race, in daily discussions allows tears and thus the possibility of wiping away tears.

I, as their teacher, acknowledged and invested in their tears, in order to find a way to wipe them away. In bearing witness to their tears, I never once felt I must save them, like the dominant narrative of missionaries or saviors in poor communities so popularized by mainstream films such as *Dangerous Minds*, *Freedom Writers*, *The Blind Side* . . . Rather, I had to support them because in their anguish, I saw myself: these were familiar tears of my own racialized past. This is the same pain I felt when I heard one of my students say, “What’s the point? I’m Black.” Embedded in that seemingly simple question is the painful result of a “colorblind” educational system that renders the double consciousness of colored beings false when, in fact, it is the conscious reality of people of color.

(Matias, 2013, p. 187)

Matias encouraged educators to learn and employ CRT to gain skill in validating counter-stories, exposing endemic racism, and managing dialogues about race.

Conversations with students must occur on many levels as students learn to dialogue and reason with the aid of role models. Choosing to eat lunch and talk with one or more students can allow more stories, counter-stories, and dialogues that will advance a young person’s concept of a teacher who cares and understands. When a person feels a sense of belonging, of value, of self-

efficacy, he or she can consciously and subconsciously make better choices, especially with a role model or mentor (Bandura, 2008). Teachers and other educational stakeholders want students to experience the energizing flow that comes from working and learning in an empowering environment (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

In thinking of race as a core value to be taught, Zalesne (2013) told law students that we do not live in a post-racial society. This overt declaration in 2013 surprised some people, but by 2015, the number of cases of racial discrimination and misjudgment leading to arrests and deaths has appeared so often that Zalesne was proved correct. Zalesne proclaimed, “the law not only creates structures of subordination, it also makes them invisible” (p. 23). Along with many others, Zalesne recommended discussions about identity, exercises to build reasoning skills, and a holistic approach to learning.

Range, Carnes-Holt, and Bruce (2013) demonstrated that middle school-age students especially need caring and engaging classroom teachers. The affective needs of middle school students are critical for developing teacher–student and student–student positive relationships. Teacher strategies can meet such student needs with meaningful authentic class activities, social-emotional discussions, and a supportive presence reinforced by kindness, generosity, empathy, and respect. Range and colleagues also found that the Caring Community Teacher Model functioned well in building relationships and engaging instructional activities both in the classroom and for out-of-class work and interactions.

Are there strategies and methods that any educator can use to help students feel interested in learning and ready to learn in spite of the repeated upsetting events in the news and in their communities?

Methods

The articles examined in the literature review on affective considerations based on CRT offer some frequently recommended strategies and methods that educators can use to create a positive affective environment for learning.

1. Know as much as possible about the students and their community/ies.
2. Consider emotional needs as important as cognitive needs.
3. Connect with stories, counter-stories, and discussions that acknowledge, accept, and respect students' experiences and opinions.
4. Elicit ideas, observations, and opinions; listen and affirm.
5. Learn CRT concepts and practice using CRT strategies.
6. Model positive values and actions whether students mimic well or not.

Know as much as possible about the students and their community/ies.

Thomas (2012) found that teachers who volunteer in the community learn about the community and the students while providing a positive role model. The options Thomas highlighted, including social engagement, volunteer efforts, philanthropic actions, or activism on behalf of a community's needs, offer a caring role model. As an involved citizen, teachers will learn more about and from their students than they could from the classroom alone.

Whether looking at a lifetime of education like Bethune's from the 20th century or Clark's (2003, 2004, 2011) from the late 20th and early 21st centuries, one sees educators succeeding as they value affective needs as much as cognitive needs. Making positive contacts early within their students' neighborhoods shows concern for personal and emotional connections. Learning about students' interests, maintaining an attitude of respect, holding students to high standards, nurturing hopes, providing opportunities for success, and expanding

possibilities for joy characterized both Bethune's and Clark's efforts. Park and colleagues (2012) demonstrated that engagement is not a fixed category. Stories, discussions, and activities that draw students back into engagement will be necessary each day. Educators who value these same affective elements in their students' lives—interests, respect, standards, hopes, opportunities, successes, possibilities, and joy—will go the extra mile to make affective learning as common as cognitive learning in a classroom.

Consider emotional needs as important as cognitive needs. Jagger (2013) asserted that increasing affective engagement with a topic facilitates advances in cognitive thought. Teachers do not automatically have or develop skills to model empathy and pro-social concerns. According to a study conducted by Dar (2015), if teachers can model empathy and social skills, they will encourage students to feel and practice more empathy for and consideration of their classmates. Dar also found that most teachers in the study did not know how to use approaches and activities that would increase a sense of caring in the classroom. Teachers who learned appropriate strategies—and then used those strategies—saw the growth of a more positive classroom environment with greater trust, respect, and caring attitudes and actions.

When an educator realizes that affective learning is just as important as cognitive gains, strategies that have influenced cognitive results become precious keys to engaging students in learning. Jagger (2013) examined a common teaching method for building student engagement in high school and college-age classes to meet student affective needs: debate. Debate in classrooms involves all levels of Bloom's Taxonomy (1956), stimulates discussion, connects familiar and important topics, and increases motivation to learn. Through debate, ethics emerge along with sensitivity to ethical issues. Discussions aimed at strengthening thinking skills and a sense of the teacher caring about what matters to students were also found to increase empathetic

responses from students. Attentiveness to student issues, community challenges in students' school districts, and modeling respect, tolerance, and understanding will actively increase student engagement, according to Jagger's research.

Connect with stories, counter-stories, and discussions that acknowledge, accept, and respect students' experiences and opinions. Blum and de la Piedra (2010) showed how stories of self and others can transcend the curriculum and help create positive environments. They also found that CRT helped students and their parents work together to see more value in their heritage and culture. Delacruz and Bales (2010) declared that human communication involves storytelling and always has. They found that scrapbooks, sketchbooks, and other visual documentation, including personal mementos, add substance to valuing one's life narrative. Where in the outcomes-based, high-stakes testing, statistical records environment does one find time and value for an individual's story that includes a repository of personal items?

Johnson and Rosario-Ramos (2012) found that storytelling that encouraged counter-stories allowed for positive examinations of injustice and inequality. Hope for change emerged as young people found their stories valued in academic environments that explored communities, institutions, and justice. Narratives and discussions connected to these topics humanized tense situations, enriched program contexts and options, and created connections between the community and the classroom.

Elicit ideas, observations, and opinions; listen and affirm. Duchaine and colleagues (2011) shared that methods for eliciting a response from even the most reluctant students can come from response cards. What other methods can teachers use when working daily with students in troubled and disenfranchised communities?

- Use video clips to broaden knowledge and comprehension and to model applications that can stimulate analysis and evaluation.
- Share stories and counter-stories of and from the community.
- Remember that teachers who had worldwide positive effects far beyond their teaching records, such as Socrates, Jesus, and Gandhi, chose to spend time with their students over hours with peers, committees, and local or national leaders.
- Examine social media for the best and worst examples of information and story sharing.
- Try simulations to help students see events and people from different perspectives.
- Create comparison and contrast charts.
- Determine what all people in any area, situation, or challenge have in common.

Learn CRT concepts and practice using CRT strategies. Understanding CRT helps with discussions of race, class, gender, language, immigrants, and sexual orientation. The storytelling component of CRT provides emotional encouragement and engagement. Park and colleagues (2012) showed that students' feelings of autonomy, engagement, and fulfillment were beset met through emotional encouragement. Disengagement, apathy, and anxiousness lead to underachievement. Students who have positive emotional engagement in a classroom have hope of experiencing in school the flow that Csikszentmihalyi (1990) made famous as a name for optimal experiences.

Winans (2010) surmised that educators need a vocabulary to discuss emotional issues in the classroom. Without realizing it, students and other educational stakeholders approach studies with emotions informed by their own racial and ethical experiences. Hill's (2014) personal narrative disclosure helps educators to think about race, pedagogy, and individuals' experiences with injustice both in and out of the classroom. Assumptions exist in social groups, and Hill's

exploration and memories peel away layers of defensiveness about racial perceptions. Martinez (2014) contributed another narrative view on the value of looking at stories of historically white institutions and counter-stories that reveal social, scientific, and nontraditional, non-institutional perspectives.

Model positive values and actions whether students mimic well or not. Boyle (2011) showed that in almost three decades of working with young people who repeatedly made wrong choices, there came a moment when they wanted to change their paths in life. Although they had not mimicked Boyle's faithful demonstrations of love and care, they did know to go to him when they were ready to change. Hill (2014) and Martinez (2014) shared their stories for incorporating CRT to advance conversations, show respect for diversity, and validate narratives that reveal weaknesses and needs in communities and nations.

Bryant, Moss, and Zijdemans Boudreau (2015) showed teachers need dialogue about poverty and race at least starting from their time in teacher preparation. Too easily, student teachers become overwhelmed by the classroom management expectations, preparation hours required by a first year teacher, state tests for licensure and miss training and discussions on meeting the emotional needs of students through constructive dialogue. Teacher preparation programs should include readings, research, discussions, and practice dialogues about assumptions and reality of struggling students living in social and economic poverty.

Paradise (2014) revealed a danger in CRT—that of ignoring something as major as Christian tradition in the African-American experience—and encouraged CRT practitioners to model a comprehensive view of minority cultures. Paradise affirmed and explained why religious beliefs and attitudes are not incomprehensible or inconsequential to constructive discussions. Knowing both historical and current minority group leaders and their views, widely

known speeches, and activist endeavors shows students that race, justice, religion, law, education, family, and community entwine. Each strand affects daily life, choices, hope, and abilities.

Conclusion

If educators want to build an environment that welcomes students' fears, frustrations, and flaws, feelings will have to emerge each day in the students' narratives, discussions, readings, and work. Living with tensions based on prejudice, injustice, and social inequities affects students' ability to learn. Stories are humanity's oldest communicating and teaching method. In a society with historically white views and institutionalized attitudes and expectations, airing counter-stories becomes as valuable as sharing stories. Critical Race Theory can aid educators in knowing how to elicit stories and counter-stories. Dialogues, discussions, debates, and daily recognition of society's pressures and prejudices will speak to students' affective needs. The classroom can become a place of welcome, safety, acceptance, and affirmation. In such an educational environment, students can see reason to hope, to stay engaged in learning, to plan for a future, and to make positive choices that affect them, their peers, their families, the community, and society.

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