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HEROES: Creating Classroom Environments, Presentations, and Activities that Positively
Affect Student Motivation, Inclusion, and Retention

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Abstract

To help students of diverse needs learn, retain what they learn, collaborate in problem-solving, see value with inclusion, and grow in a desire to learn, teachers need to create environments conducive to active learning and filled with hope. Environments emerge from the time a student stands in the doorway of a classroom and continue through every element on display and encountered in interactions. Educators who understand they affect the environment will set the tone, present inclusively, provide meaningful activities, and do a heroic job of leading students. This article presents heroes with classic values in schools and communities through the lives of teachers who have attributes of high expectations, respect, openness, engagement, hope, and sociability, that motivates and retains students.

Keywords: expectations, inclusion, respect, openness, engagement, sociability, hope, heroes

HEROES: Creating Classroom Environments, Presentations, and Activities that Positively Effect Student Motivation and Retention

The Grammy nominated song, Hero, (1995) has brought acclaim to the writer and singer around the world. In 2001, Carey performed, Hero, at the special benefit concert, *America: A Tribute to Heroes*, and the song presented renewed hope that any person could have heroic attributes, could rise in the face of hardships and disasters; any individual might become a hero or experience rescue through the altruistic actions of an everyday hero. Attributes for heroes in 21st century western culture have changed according to Afarini (2012). Classic heroes showed power with self-control, and seemed motivated by generosity to use wise judgment, ideals with traditional values, trustworthiness with cautious reflection, and dignity with humility. Post-modern heroes seem much more like non-heroes with weaknesses, confusion, shallowness, egocentric desires, offensive humor, and even dishonesty. Hutchins (2011) traced a national change in heroes featured in school texts in the United States reflecting the multi-cultural heritages in America; though backgrounds of 2013 heroes in school texts reveal diversity of life experiences and goals, traditional values of classic heroes appear in the featured individuals. This paper will show that heroes with classic values appear in schools through the lives of teachers who have attributes of high expectations, respect, openness, engagement, and sociability; these qualities contribute to motivating and retaining students.

Background

McCourt stands as one highly effective communicator, an immigrant from Ireland and now retired from teaching, had openness to search and learn as described by Austenfeld (2009). *Teacher Man*,(2005) McCourt's memoirs of teaching in the mid and late twentieth century show the need for an educator to self-reflect, examine motives, values, abilities, presentations, and

possibilities for engaging the interest of students with the hopes of increasing motivation to learn and keep students in school. From the late 20th century into the 21st century, a cross cultural immigrant teacher like Jaime Escalante exhibited zeal, inspirational actions, and high expectations (Shouse, 2009). However, as Escalante's principal and main support in the educational renewal efforts, Gradillas (Gradillas & Jesness, 2010) described, Escalante struggled with consistently communicating with respect and a sociability suited to the educational community. Still, Escalante's heroic extra efforts on behalf of motivating and retaining disenfranchised and at-risk students drew a line for teachers to employ in personal measure of commitment and effectiveness in education young people; from students to teachers to the President of the United States, people recognized the heroism in Escalante's efforts with young people (Matthews, 2010).

Research of Williams, Sullivan, and Kohn (2012) showed elementary, middle, and secondary school students had no concern what federal or state guidelines used to determined, "highly qualified," status for a teacher. The students' perception of a teacher's effectiveness stood on: (a) care for the whole class, (b)exciting lessons, (c) fun activities, (d) listening, (e) personable, (f) teach to appeal to different learning needs so everyone can succeed, (g) knowledgeable, (h) makes lessons connect to life, (i) passionate about their subject and others, (j) able to teach more than one subject, (k)gives and expects respect in the classroom, (l) has a sense of humor, (m) express sincere interest in the lives and goals of students. People who read or view stories of effective teachers see the qualities from this list in action; the positive attributes motivate students and help to retain their interest in learning.

Stories of young people who follow a dream to care for others in situations that require sacrifice to include those denied opportunities present teaching as a valuable inspirational career

choice. Even when the person takes a road far less followed, like Davis chose in teaching and adopting children, young people from pre-adolescent to adult age take notice, feel challenged, and wonder who they might include and help (Davis and Clark, 2012). Derrick Brown also took a road less traveled in combining the love for education from generations of teachers and librarians in his family with his own passion to include others in the joy of creating with words. Brown operates a non-profit for young poets, contributes as a member of the DC Creative Writing Workshops, and encourages poetry presentations that give voice to young minority poets who have not moved fluently in the mainstream. The process, Brown claims, has similarity to the emergence of wisdom teeth (Brown, 2004).

Heroes have had role models, and in education, theorists and practitioners have contributed to equipping teachers with ideals, ideas, and ideologies. Bandura's (2003, 2006, 2008) ideas on self-efficacy led to teachers understanding the importance of choices and students taking responsibility in learning. Bethune's goals of structuring lessons to connect thinking, practical skills, and emotions, equipped impoverished minority students for life's challenges and nurtured their spirits (McCluskey & Smith, 1999; McKissack, 1985; Mary Bethune Academy, 2010).

Bloom (1976, 1978, 1980) caused educators to acknowledge there were strong and weak learners, with different learning needs, but affirmed that with time and help students could all reach understanding of subjects and necessary proficiency. Coles (1989, 1990, 2004, 2010) learned and shared insights into the courage of young people, leading teachers to commit to consider and respect each student's story and to attend to providing stories to raise the spirits of students. deBono's (1985, 1994) cognitive research and contributions to encouraging creative problem solving have effected learners from elementary to professional ranks of fortune 500

companies; patterns help people to learn, but often can trap people in thinking ruts. Gardner (1995, 2004, 2006) in his worldwide fame for enlightening educators about learning styles, creativity, and ethics of education advocates a dedication to learning and inspiring students. No matter where one lives or teaches, Gardner encourages diverse and engaging approaches around the world (Chen, Moran, and Gardner, 2009).

The ruts of current educational practices emerge from institutional thinking and pressures based on high stakes testing in public schools. Orwellian commands to teachers control attempts at improvisation and creativity and narrow the scope of student activities and explorations. Gee (2013) had the audacity to suggest 21st century education should learn how to instruct based on games, yet people often forget Plato also suggested that to find the natural inclinations of students a teacher should use games (Rouse, 1999).

Heroic teachers who refuse to stay in ruts, to work like automatons, or to be squashed by bureaucracy, teachers like Clark (2005, 2012), Esquith (2007, 2009), Gruwell (2008a, 2010), Johnson (2011, 2012), Kozol (1991, 2012) offer hope to students amidst systemic failures. Resistance to the efforts of heroes can arise from even those close to heroes due to guilt, fear, frustration, jealousy, and envy. When Esquith wrote, *There are No Shortcuts*, it was a message for all members of the educational community, not just students. When Clark literally took a young man out of a trash can where a long time teacher had told the young man to stand, he was not just rescuing the self-esteem of the child. When Gruwell, Johnson, and Kozol went to authorities about disenfranchising young people, they highlighted flaws in the educational system. Like classic heroes who often found themselves alone in confrontations, teachers committed to empowering and enlivening life for all their students can find the challenges more

difficult with coworkers. Teachers who choose to stay in the ruts and use the practices of impersonal bureaucratic systems lack motivational behavior.

Educators who claim, I'm no hero, need to think again of the position they hold and the life changing potential in the profession. Socrates matter-of-factly observed he would gain little of personal riches from teaching, yet taught with honesty, readiness, affection, and an eagerness to continue learning (Xenophon, 2011). Confucius exerted efforts to show students that learning and behavior had practical outcomes in a society, and healthy societies prized learning. The teacher has a major role in causing people to value education. (Kang and Li, 2005). In the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus reminded, if anyone causes a young person to turn away from one is right, it would be better for that person to have a mill stone tied around the neck and be thrown into a sea. Mahatma Gandhi critiqued the changes in education as those leading to measuring the value of education as one would of land or some piece of merchandise; Gandhi proposed education have value most of all for how it enlightened the mind and could improve character (Burke, 2012).

Piaget encouraged teachers to let students explore the environment to feed their senses with whatever surrounds them; with explorations young people learned concepts and established a schema. Play and a strong language component should infuse the exploration and concept building ((Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). Vygotsky and Piaget shared a birthday and acclaim as researchers, writers, theorists, and educators, but Vygotsky had only half the life span of Piaget, half the time to contribute vital insights to education. Scaffolding stands as a primary Vygotsky (1978, 1986) concept for activities, curriculum, methods, and strategies of teaching. Scaffolding takes something known and connects it to other concepts, building, inter-connecting, expanding

knowledge and experience. The practice of chunking, breaking down large concepts or fields of study into more manageable segments also scaffolds learning (Vygotsky, 1978,1986, 1998).

In an outstanding example of overcoming gender stereotypes through education, observation, experience, and insight, Montessori's life highlights the multiple benefits of education with a caring, capable, and conscientious teacher. Montessori demonstrated the power of teachers to help students rise out of poverty into many life options, to change whole communities for the better, to communicate with words, motions, intuition, and attitudes of enthusiastic confidence (Montessori, 1964, 1967, 2007). From Montessori's first school, The Casa de Bambini in Rome, to Montessori schools around the world today, teachers with Montessori's training and philosophy base their career on respect for students and students' families because students who feel valued, unhurried, and safe will choose to learn. Ungerer, (2009) described Montessori's methods as effective for building value of the individual's inner life, a healthy mind and body, democratic values, and a blend of cognitive ideas to encourage peace.

High Expectations

The Judeo Christian tradition, as exemplified in the words of the Apostle James, cautions individuals to hesitate thoughtfully before choosing to teach. "Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly," starts the third chapter of James's epistle. The statement about expectations in the United States National Education Association (NEA) declares, "The educator recognizes the magnitude of the responsibility inherent in the teaching process. The desire for the respect and confidence of one's colleagues, of students, of parents, and of the members of the community provides the incentive to attain and maintain the highest possible degree of ethical conduct"

(NEA, 2013). According to Plato, Socrates saw the power of the education [and so the influence of the educator] so high that it carried into eternity,

since the soul has emerged as something immortal, it can have no escape or security from evil except by becoming as good or wise as it possibly can, for it takes nothing with it into the next world except its education and training; (Tarrant, 2003)

Teachers not only equip students for eternity by opening students' understanding of good and evil, possibilities and dead ends, teachers also physically can save lives.

Pelzer's horrific home life, documented in *A Child Called It*, (1993) could have ended in death if a teacher had not taken the time to write a report about suspected abuse. Freedman (2000) reported on the dedication to save and change lives for the better in the devotion and efforts of Mary Catherine Swanson who started a program in 1980 in some of California's toughest schools to lift students from conflicts and choices that could kill them to college educations leading up and out of misery and danger. Many educators mentioned as heroic educators have given the time through extra sacrificial efforts to expect life can be better for students and to lead the way to that better path.

Beyond high expectations and possibilities for teachers one sees that the expectations of teachers effect what they do and what their students do. Teachers who have high impact on student motivation, success, and retention as learners are teacher who have high expectations joined to a motivational personable interaction with students. Pringle, Lyons, and Booker (2010) studied academic performance of African American students and found the disengagement of these students connected to teachers who did not have a positive combination of high expectations for students and instructional methods that convinced students the teachers cared

about them. Cavazos (2009) found similar responses from latina/o students concerning students who did or did not feel cared about and affirmed by teachers for academic potential.

Escalante's (Sanchez, 2010), Esquith's (2007, 2009), Clark (2005, 2012), Dulaine (Thompson, 2012), and Guaspari's (Petra, 2013) years in at-risk environments with high percentages of at-risk and ELL learners. Their choices and actions show how teachers can demonstrate high expectations, fairness, respect, patience, and motivational methods. Damber (2009) showed that teachers with diverse methods who held high expectations for all students expanded student learning and abilities. Students do not mind teachers who are challenging if it also seems the teacher is fair and has enthusiasm for helping students reach high goals. Loes, Saichaie, Padgett, and Pascarella (2012) determined teacher behaviors and use of varied methods in the classroom effected students' commitment to ask questions, to work to reach high goals, and lifelong learning.

Respect

Believing in a student's ability to succeed leads teachers to have respect students based on potential and not just success. Keiler (2011) reported on success in an urban summer school program where teachers showed respect toward students, taught for understanding, and used strategies to make the learning process enjoyable. Gee (2013) advocated for respecting the fact that 21st century students need to know how to learn, how to use technological tools, and how to connect and collaborate with others to have success while maintaining humanitarian values. Skills and drills, high stakes tests, and elite college lists do not promote ideas of respecting everyone's abilities in learning and contributing to improve a society. Kozol (2012) reported teachers who saw glimmers of treasure in convoluted efforts of students often led those students to have hope, to persevere, and to help others overcome difficult life circumstances. Gruwell

(2008a) demonstrated respect for student creative and communication efforts in ways that built a family atmosphere for students who lacked a safe home life.

Gee (2013) cautioned that respect for students leads educators to help students respect evidence, especially discomfiting evidence, overcome biases, reflect on self and society, work on long-term problem solving to better the world, consider contingencies, confront consequences, simulate, role-play, and engage in efforts to help others. Modeling respect by interactions in the classroom allows a teacher to bring warmth and trust into the environment. Humanizing each interaction from elementary years through interactions with adult learners occurs with the rapport building described in *Literacy Teaching Practices* (2005).

This writer's thirty seven years in teaching have confirmed students notice the tone of voice and patience that a teacher uses when answering questions reveals respect or lack of it for students. Remembering details of students' concerns, exploring student interests, and quickly learning student names also form first steps of building an atmosphere of respect in the classroom. Keiler (2011) reported students in urban summer schools remembered comments from teachers that reinforced a lack of success, and the students wanted a positive environment, one where they felt mutual respect. Gruwell, Johnson, Escalante, Esquith, Clark, Bethune, Montessori, Coles, Kozol, and other super, excellent, and good teachers would affirm students in any environment want to feel mutual respect.

Openness

Teachers named in this article, teachers who exemplify heroic efforts on behalf of students have a quality of openness to learning from and with their students, to considering viewpoints outside their life experience, and to try methods or strategies outside the norm to motivate students.

Johnson (2011) presented examples of a teacher's need to approach any difficulty or challenge

with an openness to differing perspectives; writing off a poor student who has weak reading skills as lazy or needing glasses, does not leave one open to finding out the student has a sensitivity to contrasts and needs the solution of putting a color but transparent sheet over pages so that the pages will no longer be white and black. Johnson (2011) also helps teachers understand one can choose to live as a super, excellent, or good teacher, but not as an average or poor teacher. Gruwell (2008a) fulfilling the requirements of a super and excellent teacher consistently had openness to learning from and with her students. Mitchell and Jacob (2011) highlighted the ways Gruwell's openness to sharing struggles led to the creation of a Foundation that offers scholarships and advances efforts in innovative teaching.

Opening one's analytic and evaluative eyes to see daily exciting possibilities with students requires, as Escalante (2008) described, teachers who like to teach, like the students, like to learn from mistakes, like to remember the great teachers who have touched lives, and like to discover new insights. Gruwell (2008b) even suggested teachers have openness to validating students from day one for life experiences and qualities the students have brought to the class. Clark (2012) emphasized the need to open learning to activities including singing, motions, choral response, and role-playing in any subject area, and Gardner (1995, 2006) highlighted that respect for students will lead educators to find diverse ways to open the world of learning.

Engagement

Teachers need the observation and social skills to understand when the topic, lesson plan, and curriculum does not connect to student experience, comprehension, or needs. Gruwell (2008b) could laugh in retrospect at having her syllabi tossed back at her in the shape of a paper airplane just seconds after giving them out to the class, but when it happened she was adrift in confusion and ignorance. She was a student teacher and her mentor teacher had left the room not to return

for the rest of the day, week, and semester. The heroic efforts of teachers who went far beyond an extra mile show the diverse threats to inhibit learning and teaching: poverty, lack of supplies, poor role models, vandalism, passivity, despair, grief, depression, prejudice, isolation, aggressive behavior, students who knew little English, had little hope, fear of gangs, or who had gang memberships, alcoholic parents, imprisoned parents, abusive parents, probation, bureaucracy, and undermining by coworkers or administrators who resented anyone daring to take on all the challenges to try to teach. Jimmy Santiago Baca, gang member, and in prison, learned to read and write in prison and currently works to encourage others excluded from the mainstream, disaffected, discouraged, and denied a voice. As Baca gained a voice and reached out to others he became a teacher, role model, and to some a hero as he rescues individuals from drowning in the pits of failure and exclusion (Baca, 2001; Stapleton, 2006).

Gee (2013) reviewed the essential steps in engagement for human learning: (1) prior experiences, (2) mentoring, (3) clear goals, (4) action in problem solving, (5) having some stake in the process. Gee also highlighted that school work often emphasizes learning information that one has read about or heard about-yet these modes of information sharing connect poorly to student experience, practical knowledge, action, and reflection. Teachers need understanding of developmental theories, active methods, varied strategies, layers of scaffolding, and current student interests to engage the students in learning.

A primary form of engagement involves story-telling, a human learning tool since prehistoric times. Whether one finds a way to have students tell their stories, imagine being in a story, analyze a story, or change a story, one can use the story framework to teach any skills, content, patterns, analyses, correlations, and meanings. Coles (2010) emphasized stories as a way to build empathy and understanding. Every class has and can create its own story. Every lesson

has elements or characters with vivid stories. Clark (2012) has students listen to stories, sing stories, rap stories, share stories, listen to stories, collect stories, analyze stories, evaluate and enjoy stories.

Esquith (2007, 2009) and Escalante take students back in time via stories that let the students know the past has given them a future (Gradillas and Jesness, 2010; Escalante, 2008). Gruwell (2008a) captivated students with the stories of heroic efforts to hide and protect people from the Nazis and from other historical efforts at murdering entire ethnic groups. The stories of the endangered people connected to the lives of students who faced every day possibilities of physical attacks and offered examples of people who came through such years of torment with the best qualities of humanity still intact.

Sociability

In Novac's (2010) study of success in managing school and classrooms, the managers, teachers, leaders who experience highest levels of motivated students actively engaged in learning are the individuals who have strong social skills: perception, observation, presentation, interaction, reflection, activation, appreciation, affirmation, and confidence. The notable and outstanding educators appeared to have an agreeability level that matched their reliability level. Even sociability increases in mathematics classes led to higher student interest, motivation, and skill, and the increase in social level connected to the amount of dialogue used in teaching (New, 2003). From early childhood through adult learners, the level of interaction effects the learning environment. In Bloom's (1980) work one sees that teaching students how they learn, showing steps, stages, and strategies can and a playful game element increasing discussion, interactions, interesting new blends of activities, and success.

Teachers who use and model self-talk, demonstrate methods for success via sociable strategies, and Bandura (1997, 2003, 2006) showed that engaging in social aspects of learning increased students' confidence, ability to visualize, and resiliency. Strengthening communication skills existed as one of Bethune's (2010) passions in goals to equip young people and to activate their head and heart connected to life choices and career paths (McCluskey and Smith, 1999). Lord and Baskivar (2007) emphasized the need to move students from memorizing to active and interactive learning.

Looking at earliest forms of teaching and learning one sees the sociable elements between adult and child create engagement and a desire to learn more. Educators for students of any age who increase student interaction in a playful sociable environment will, as Russell and Shepherd (2010) found for even online students, see students advance in learning. In any discipline students can hear, learn, present, share, discuss, role-play, analyze, and evaluate stories of discoveries and achievements. Coles (2004) reflected that sharing stories led to the ability to confront and work through complexities.

Domains of learning, cognitive, affective, and psychomotor blend in sociable active environments. Dozens of skills and competence in finding information, problem solving, and knowing how to learn establish an essential foundation for 21st century learners. Gardner (2004) showed mixtures of activities address multiple needs and interests in classrooms creating positive social environments for learning. Pausch, a lecturer at Carnegie Mellon passionately emphasized the need for educators to consider all styles of learning, to build an inclusive environment, and to encourage students to pursue ideals and dreams (Mei, 2011).

There's a hero if you look inside your heart...That hero lies in you...

In an instant connections are made and lives are changed, not just in life and death situations, but in classrooms. Johnson (2011) reminded educators how quickly students will judge the teacher and class, in just moments and one major factor stand with how much they feel respected and valued in the classroom. Can a teacher be all things for all students? No. Can a teacher at least meet the learning needs of all students in the class? Probably not alone. What can the heroes in the classroom do? How do they rescue or change attitudes and lives?

Block (2003) declared the answer to a how question was yes. Educators can take an active approach to living, Yes, in the classroom; have a positive attitude, personable, patient, and person oriented. Large class sizes present bigger challenges, but attention and imagination grabbing content will enrich learning. Gardner (2006) affirmed that narratives, deductive reasoning, philosophies, the senses, and hands-on experiences will give educator and students enjoyment and success in learning.

If a person cares enough to teach, the main decision is to look at other commitments, as suggested by Johnson (2011) and determine if one will enter the Super, Excellent, or Good category of teaching. Heroes shine a light of goodness, giving, even sacrificing to improve life situations for others. Confucius taught that people can bring out the best in others, exhibit goodness, and give the young tender care (Jiyuan, 2006). To make the personable, social, and practical connections, Prensky (2010) cautioned teachers should know the daily life of their students, try refreshing new approaches, collaborate in pedagogy, and have the students actively working for hours each day on projects that will scaffold knowledge and bring personal insight.

Bain's (2004) insights on what the best teachers do showed that people who demonstrate the behavior and learning approaches that they want to see in students. In *Teach with Your Heart*, Gruwell (2008b) reminded teachers of staying true to what one would want others to do for

them, for their children, for the world. When politics, thinking stuck in a rut, budget cuts, pettiness, personal problems, and physical detriments weigh an educator down, reflecting on what is true and lasting in life can provide the energy to care and act heroically for students.

Conclusion

The self-efficacy in Bandura's ideas will lead students to see they have power over their learning and their futures. Empowering students gives them new attitude toward life possibilities and hope, a feeling that they count. Combining empowerment with Bloom's concepts for having students understand the learning process increases their potential for cognitive development. Piaget and many other educators show that play in words and actions helps students create meaning, and Vygotsky's attention to scaffolding of learning allows strengthening of levels while expanding knowledge and abilities. Bethune's choice to make sure lessons address affective, cognitive, and practical aspects of life will cause students to see important value in what they study and do. The affirmation of stories for learners and teachers provides paths to inspire and to develop a moral compass in students according to Coles. deBono's ideas for creative thinking combined with Escalante's emphasis on *ganas*, the determination to reach goals, and Gardner's encouragement to help all learners thrive provide much to equip one for heroic efforts. Clark, Gruwell, Johnson, Bain, Prensky, and Kozol provide experience based examples of living as teacher heroes, changing lives for the better. Confucius reminded educators and students that they form the society and should live what they desire to see in the society. Montessori assures teachers and learners that active, respectful, creative, healthy endeavors, done at a individualized pace can change lives and the world. Though days come when teachers and students fear and face failures, the individuals with a heart to help others will choose to continue in hope and courage as heroes.

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