Classroom Environments for Talented Kids in a Wired World

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Strategies Facilitated During Our Confratute Strand

Little Known Facts

Opening Day of School: Daniel Henderson and Linda McNair

Business Cards

Wanted Posters

Avatars

Word Clouds

Marjorie Frank’s Poetry Techniques

Interest Inventories

Photo Elicitation

“This I Believe”

Social Action Campaigns

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“Car Wash”

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Guiding Students Using Literature

Biography 101

Guided Viewing of Film

Mentoring – Big Brother Big Sister Partnerships

Heavy Bags

Stress Busters

Strategies to Address Perfectionism
Books that Inspire and Guide: Tom’s Top 10 Favorites!

*Odd Velvet* by Tara Calahan King & Mary Whitcomb (1998)
Key Issue(s): image management; creativity; being alone; peer relationships
Description: Velvet doesn’t exactly fit in, but soon she is able to show her classmates just how empowering it can be to simply be yourself.

*Weslandia* by Paul Fleischman (2002)
Key Issue(s): being labeled “different”; creativity; image management; heightened sensitivity; individuality;
Description: Entrepreneurial, creative Wesley stays true to himself when others want him to fit in. Eventually his teasers and tormenters realize that conformity may not be the best way to go.

*Tomas and the Library Lady* by Pat Mora (2000)
Key Issue(s): culturally diverse learners; positive role models; creativity
Description: Tomas, the young child in a family of migrant workers, develops a meaningful relationship with the librarian as he falls in love with books.

Key Issue(s): image management; gender role expectations; individuality
Description: Elizabeth, a strong-willed young princess, fights off a dragon and decides not to marry the arrogant, shallow-minded Prince Ronald.

*The Big Orange Splot* by Daniel Pinkwater (1999)
Key Issue(s): creativity; identity development
Description: Mr. Plumbean lived on a street where all the houses were identical. When a seagull drops a big splot of orange paint on the top of Mr. Plumbean’s home, he decides to paint his house to represent his life dreams. When his neighbors resist his ideas, he succeeds in slowly convincing them to do the same and the neighborhood becomes a far more interesting place where people are comfortable expressing their individuality.

*Thank You, Mr. Falker* by Patricia Polacco (2001)
Key Issue(s): gifted/learning disabled; relationships with others; perseverance; artistic giftedness
Description: An autobiographical account of an artistic fifth grader’s struggle to learn to read.

*Ish* by Peter Reynolds (2004)
Key Issue(s): individuality, creativity
Description: A single reckless comment from an older brother turns a young boy’s artistic expressions into painful struggles. A younger sister helps him to recognize and appreciate the unique quality in his creativity.
**Testing the Ice** by Sharon Robinson (2009)
Key Issue(s): facing one’s fears
Description: As a testament to his courage, Jackie Robinson’s daughter shares memories of him, from his baseball career to the day he tests the ice for her, her brothers, and their friends.

**An Angel for Solomon Singer** by Cynthia Rylant (1996)
Key Issue(s): being alone; image management; relationships with others
Description: Homesick for the Midwest, Solomon Singer spends his days in New York City unhappy and dreaming of a happier life. One night he strolls into a special diner and eventually realizes that, once you find a friend, everything else tends to fall into place.

**The Boy Who Grew Flowers** by Jen Wojtowicz (2005)
Key Issue(s): being labeled “different”; empathy in gifted children
Description: A young boy is shunned at school because he sprouts flowers every full moon. He makes a distinctive pair of shoes for a classmate who appreciates his special abilities.

**A Quiet Place** by Douglas Wood (2005)
Key Issue(s): being alone; identity development; creativity
Description: A vivid description of the special places that a child can go to be quiet, to be alone, and to imagine.
More Strategies to Take Home!

Ball of Yarn

With your students, form a large circle, shoulder to shoulder. Gently toss a large continuous ball of yarn around the circle to form a colorful web. With each toss, students are to call out the name of the person they are throwing to and say something they admire about the receiver. When the web is created, participants spend time reflecting on the experience in a class discussion.

Some of the personal insights that may evolve from the group:

- We are all connected.
- We can create beautiful things if we work together.
- It is very pleasant to hear someone unexpected say nice things about you.
- It may be more fun to work together than to work alone.
- The joy on people’s faces as they were complimented made me happy as well.
- I felt that I was with a special group of people.

Canfield & Wells (1994)

The “I Can’t” Funeral

Canfield and Wells (1994) shared a creative strategy they discovered from a teacher. The following excerpts will give you the idea. It’s a great example of high quality teaching, incorporating cognitive, emotional, and kinesthetic learning.

The teacher began by instructing the students to make a list of all the things they could think of that they thought they couldn’t do - their own list of “I can’t”s. For example:

“I can’t hit a home run over the fence.”
“I can’t do long division.”
“I can’t write creative stories.”

The teacher, at the same time, wrote her list of “I can’t”s: “I can’t lose weight, no matter how hard I try.” Several students filled an entire page with “I can’t”s and proceeded with a second page. When the children had finished, the teacher instructed them to fold their papers in half and bring them to the front of the room where she placed all of their “I can’t” statements into an empty shoebox. When all of the students’ papers were collected, the teacher added hers. She placed the lid on the box, tucked it under her arm and headed out the door and down the hall. The students followed the teacher.

Halfway down the hall the procession stopped. The teacher entered the custodian’s room, rummaged around, and came out with a shovel. Shovel in one hand, shoebox in the other, the teacher marched the students out of the school to the farthest corner of the playground. There they began to dig.
They were going to bury their “I Can’t’s”! The digging took over ten minutes because most of the fourth graders wanted a turn. When the hole approached four feet deep, the digging ended. The box of “I Can’t’s” was placed in position at the bottom of the hole and quickly covered with dirt.

At this point, the teacher announced, “Boys and girls, please join hands and bow your heads.” The students complied. They quickly formed a circle around the grave, creating a bond with the hands. They lowered their heads and waited. The teacher delivered the eulogy.

Friends, we gather today to honor the memory of “I Can’t.” While he was with us on earth, he touched the lives of everyone, some more than others. His name, unfortunately, has been spoken in every public building - schools, city halls, state capitals, and yes, even the White House. We have provided “I Can’t” with a final resting place and a headstone that contains his epitaph. He is survived by his brothers and sister, “I Can,” “I Will,” and “I’m Going to Right Away.” They are not as well known as their famous relative and are certainly not as strong and powerful yet. Perhaps some day, with our help, they will make an even bigger mark on the world. May “I Can’t” rest in peace, and may everyone present pick up their lives and move forward in his absence. Amen.

At the conclusion of the eulogy, the teacher turned the students around, marched them back into their classroom and held a wake. They celebrated the passing of “I Can’t” with cookies, popcorn, and fruit juices. As part of the celebration, the teacher cut out a large tombstone from butcher paper. She wrote the words “I Can’t” at the top and put RIP in the middle. The date was added at the bottom.

**Going to Boston**

This activity is a variation of an old memory game called “Going to Boston.” In this variation, the first student says, “I’m going to Boston with my suitcase and in it I have my smile (here the student offers some characteristic or competency that is treasured).” The next student then says, “I’m going to Boston and in my suitcase I have Juan’s smile and my skills at computer games.” The third person says, “I’m going to Boston and in my suitcase I’m carrying Juan’s smile, Sally’s skills at computer games and my liking for other people.” Continue until every group member has had an opportunity to insert a treasured characteristic.

Before beginning this activity it might be helpful to have each student pretend to “pack a suitcase” or trunk with self-perceived positive qualities and to draw a picture of the trunk with the qualities in it. Older students could symbolically represent the qualities with their drawings. For example, a heart represents love, a joystick could represent skills at computer games, and so on. You could ask them to discuss the following question: What is the biggest “item” in the trunk - that is, the most treasured quality?

Another variation: Pack the trunk with successes. Ask students to identify their biggest success to date. Teenagers can play the “Going to Boston” game using their successes. For example, “I’m going to Boston with my suitcase and in it I have straight A’s on my report card.”

Dr. Lillian Stover Wells
in Canfield & Wells (1994)
The Six O’Clock News

Have participants write a TV news report beginning with a dateline and telling something that the writer might do in the future. In other words, the six o’clock news becomes a kind of “hoped for” autobiography. The newscast should elaborate briefly on the major events of the writer’s “proposed” life.

When these are completed, set up the room as an informal TV newscast studio with four or five of the participants, each in turn reading her autobiographical human interest item. For example:

January 6, 2013

A TV 8 Exclusive!
Yesterday, a young American woman named Maria Gonzalez was elected president of Mexico. Ms. Gonzalez is the first U.S. Citizen to be elected president of another nation and also the first non-Mexican to be elected to major office in that country.

Ms. Gonzalez’s climb from obscurity in Chicago to prominence in world politics is almost unbelievable. Her early professional career was teaching. She had taught at the high school and university levels before moving to Mexico to help develop that country’s economy. In 2000, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Canfield & Wells (1994)

The Dear Me Letter

It is important for students to integrate and find meaning in their experiences. A “Dear Me” letter at the end of an exercise or a class can serve this purpose. It can also serve as an effective means of ongoing evaluation for the teacher. Ask students to individually take time to integrate their experience by writing a letter to themselves. Incorporate them in journals. Suggest questions or statements to facilitate the writing such as:

- What was the point of the session?
- I learned that I . . .
- I felt . . .
- I relearned . . .
- What was unique about your response?
- How honest were you when you were sharing with the group?
- What about your behavior did you like most?
- What about your behavior did you like least?
- I need . . .
- I am concerned about . . .
- I wonder . . .
- This class would be better if only . . .
- If only I . . .
- I appreciated myself for . . .

Joel Goodman
in Canfield & Wells (1994)
Ten Tips for Talking to Teachers

Delisle and Galbraith (2002)

Are you having a problem with a class or an assignment? Can you see room for improvement in how a subject is taught? Do you have a better idea for a special project or term paper? Don’t just tell your friends. Talk to the teacher! Many students don’t know how to go about doing this. The following suggestions are meant to make it easier for everyone - students and teachers.

1. **Make an appointment to meet and talk.** This shows the teacher that you’re serious and you have some understanding of his or her busy schedule. Tell the teacher about how much time you’ll need, be flexible, and don’t be late.

2. **If you know other students who feel the way you do, consider approaching the teacher together.** There’s strength in numbers. If a teacher hears the same thing from four or five people, he or she is more likely to do something about it.

3. **Think through what you want to say before you go into your meeting with the teacher.** Write down your questions or concerns. Make a list of the items you want to cover. You may even want to copy your list for the teacher so both of you can consult it during your meeting. (Or consider giving it to the teacher ahead of time.)

4. **Choose your words carefully.** Example: Instead of saying, “I hate doing reports; they’re boring and a waste of time,” try “Is there some other way I could satisfy this requirement? Could I do a video instead?” Strike the word “boring” from your vocabulary. It’s a word that’s not helpful for teachers (and might even make them angry.)

5. **Don’t expect the teacher to do all of the work or propose all of the answers.** Be prepared to make suggestions, offer solutions, even recommend resources. The teacher will appreciate that you took the initiative.

6. **Be diplomatic, tactful, and respectful.** Teachers have feelings, too. And they’re more likely to be responsive if you remember that the purpose of your meeting is conversation, not confrontation.

7. **Focus on what you need, not on what you think the teacher is doing wrong.** The more the teacher learns about you, the more he or she will be able to help. The more defensive the teacher feels, the less he or she will want to help.

8. **Don’t forget to listen.** Strange but true, many students need practice in this essential skill. The purpose of your meeting isn’t just to hear yourself talk.
9. **Bring your sense of humor.** Not necessarily the joke-telling sense of humor, but the one that lets you laugh at yourself and your own misunderstandings and mistakes.

10. **If your meeting isn’t successful, get help from another adult.** “Successful” doesn’t necessarily mean that you emerged victorious. Even if the teacher denies your request, your meeting can still be judged successful. If you had a real conversation - if you communicated openly, listened carefully, and respected each other’s point of view - then congratulate yourself on a great meeting. If the air crackled with tension, the meeting fell apart, and you felt disrespected (or acted disrespectful), then it’s time to bring in another adult. Suggestions: a guidance counselor, the gifted program coordinator, or another teacher you know and trust and seems likely to support you and advocate for you. Once you’ve found help, approach your teacher and try again.

**Discussion: Façade, Image, and Stereotype**

Adolescents may have difficulty breaking free of an image others have of them - even when health and happiness may be at stake. The young person who is labeled “rebel,” “risk-taker,” “joker,” or “social” may feel stuck in that role. The “bubbly,” “buoyant,” “energetic” student may feel constrained from expressing sadness. “Mr. Nice Guy” may be tired of being nice. The class comedian may yearn to be taken seriously. The “brain” may wish to ask a “stupid” question, but may not feel allowed to do so. It is possible to be a prisoner of one’s image, so that other behavior seems acceptable. It takes courage not to do what’s expected of us. For the student burdened with a bad image, it can be especially difficult to escape.

Objectives:

- Students consider the image other people have of them.
- They consider the price they pay for living up to an image.
- They imagine what would happen if they didn’t live up to their image.

Suggestions:

- Introduce the discussion topic by asking the students, “What’s your image? How do other people see you?”
- Give an example from your own life experience of how a person can be imprisoned by an image.
Ask the students to think of times in their own lives when they had an image to live up to. If they need help, read aloud some of the images from the list below. Ask, “Can anyone identify with these?”

- class clown
- underachiever
- straight-A student
- winner
- loser
- someone who can handle anything
- cool
- in control
- good boy/girl
- bad boy/girl

- As students start revealing their images, ask questions like the following:
  What might you sacrifice or lose if you always live up to your image?
  What might happen if you didn’t live up to your image? Would you lose respect?
  Has your image ever caused problems for you?
- Ask students if they would like to know what other people see as their image. If some or all are willing to find out, continue. For each student who volunteers, have other students describe what they believe that student’s image to be. Then ask the student, “How did it feel to hear how others see you? Are they accurate? Does your image limit you in any way? Can you live up to your image?
- For closure, ask for a volunteer to summarize the discussion session. What about it was thought provoking?

Peterson (2008)

**Stress Inoculation**

Ask whether any students have gone to the doctor to get an inoculation (shot) to prevent mumps, chicken pox, measles, or any other disease. (Groans and head shakes.) Why do they think they got these shots? Do they always work? What about flu shots? Do they work most of the time?

Explain that stress inoculation is a technique that helps people face stressful situations that can’t be avoided, like taking a big test or going to the dentist. Point out that, like being vaccinated against a disease, using stress inoculation techniques can prevent you from having stress or keep you from suffering as much as you might. Part of stress inoculation involves making positive coping statements before, during, and after a stressful situation.

Discuss the fact that when we know a situation is going to be unpleasant, we often tell ourselves how awful or terrible it is going to be. As a result, we may actually cause the situation to be just as bad as we think it will be. Invite students to name those stressful and unavoidable situations they have experienced. From those generated, choose one situation to illustrate the use of positive coping statements. For example: Giving a 5-minute report on the USSR in class next Friday.
Positive coping statements before the situation:

- It’s only a 5-minute report, not 30 minutes.
- I don’t have to go first, so I can model my report after the good ones that come before it.
- I did OK on this last year.
- I’m not going to say negative things to myself.
- I’m going to be OK.
- I can deal with this!
- It’s OK to be nervous.

Positive coping statements during the situation:

- I’m doing my best - that’s all anyone can ask.
- I can handle this.
- Take 3 deep breaths and try to relax.
- It will be over in a minute.
- One step at a time.
- I can always look at my notes.
- I really want to share my ideas with my classmates.

Positive coping statements after the situation:

- I did it!
- I can relax now - it’s over.
- I handled the situation pretty well.
- I’m proud of myself!
- I can hardly wait to tell ______ about how I did.
- I can do this again in the future and succeed.

Have students brainstorm stressful situations they think they will face in the near future. Have the group brainstorm statements that could be used before, during, and after each situation.

Morganett (1990)
References


Delisle, J. & Galbraith, J. (2002). *When gifted kids don’t have all the answers: How to meet their social and emotional needs.* Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing.


Additional Helpful Resources


Brown, B. (2010). *The gifts of imperfection: Let go of who you think you’re supposed to be and embrace who you are.* Center City, MN: Hazelden.


