

## Believing in Students: The Power to Make a Difference

After a morning [Discipline With Dignity](#) training, the high school principal and I walked to the cafeteria to eat lunch. He said, "I love your session, but it's not practical." I responded with my view that it was practical because it works -- but it's just not easy.

He pointed to a girl sitting alone at a table and said, "Do you think it would work with her?" She looked like she was a character from the Mad Max movies. She had just been released from federal prison. Her look was extreme (maybe not so much today) with spiked orange and purple hair, tattoos, all black makeup including black lipstick and black rouge, and severe body piercings. The principal looked at me and said, "So what would you do?" I asked back, "What about you? How do you handle her?" He said that he would draw a line and tell her she'd better not cross it. I responded, "What if she says, 'I'll kill you?' Which one of you will be more afraid, her because she crossed the line you drew, or you because she threatened you with death?" The truth is that if she's been to prison, nothing that can be done in a school would frighten her. Detention? Calling her mother?

So he again asked what I would do. I said, "Talk to her." And he invited me to go over and try it right then. So I did. Dressed in my three-piece suit, I sat down at her table. She looked at me for a minute and said, "Who the f\*\*k are you, a\*\*\*ole?" I was a little stunned and didn't have time to read a book or check my notes. So I relied on two strategies I had just taught the teachers in my morning session: meet the real needs of students and use challenge instead of threat.

I said, "I'm someone writing a book on teenage violence, and I think you know better about it than me. If you have the courage to tell the truth and answer one question (challenge), I'll put your name in my book (need to be noticed)." She asked what the question was, so I replied, "Are there any teachers who you listen to, follow directions, show respect and learn from?" She said she had one like that, and I asked her what made that teacher different from the others.

Her answer is one that I will never forget and has been one of the constants in my work ever since. It's a movie scene that replays over and over in my mind. Right before my eyes, her answer transformed her from a tough, hardened criminal to a frightened little girl.

*Because she's stupid. She thinks I can get a job someday, that I may even be able to go to college, or be a good mother because I know all the things not to do.*

Then she started crying. The tears streaked down her black make-up and made her look like a zebra with black drops falling on her white top.

*I ain't going to college and I ain't getting a job. I'll never be a mother. I'm a dead girl. In prison when they write your name on the wall, you die, and my name is there. I know I'm going back. But that teacher believes in me, and man, it really, really matters.*

Later I put her name, Roxanne, in my book and tried to find her to give her a copy, but nobody knew where she was or how to find her.

Sometime later, I traveled the country doing trainings. I asked administrators if I could meet with about ten of their most troubled students. I did this for grades K-12, in urban, rural and all economic areas. I did it on two Indian reservations. I asked two questions: "Who is your favorite teacher and why?" I expected most to say they had no teacher who was a favorite. But they all did. Among the top reasons was, "They believe in me."

## **Five Ways to Reach Out**

Believing in students is not simply telling them that you believe in them. These words matter only if they are true and if you demonstrate them by your actions. There is no way to fake it, because kids have built in crap detectors (a phrase taken from Neil Postman, and Charles Weingartner, in *Teaching As a Subversive Activity*), and they can tell if you don't mean it. Here are some ways to express it.

### ***1. Stop Using Rewards***

Rewards are not needed if you believe in a student. The reward implies to them that they only way you can get them to do something is to pay them. That is the opposite of believing.

### ***2. Encourage Effort More Than Achievement***

Not every child can meet the unrealistic goals of a test-mad curriculum. Every child can try to do his or her best. Ironically, the harder students are encouraged to try, the better they do on our crazy high-stakes testing.

### ***3. Give Second, Third and Fourth Chances***

In many states, the law says, "Three strikes and you're out." In most schools, the most troubled kids get only one strike. The message is, "Be the way we want or we don't want you." School is for all children and mistakes are part of the learning process, not just for academics, but also for behavior. Rather than strike them out, teach them the skills they need to overcome their deficiencies.

### ***4. Don't Say "You Failed" - Say "You Haven't Done It Yet"***

Encourage hope by letting students know that, no matter what they do, they can still do better. Safety always comes first in a school environment, of course. Sometimes safety concerns override points 3 and 4, but not as often as we think.

### ***5. Increase Opportunities to Learn***

The children who need recess the most are the first ones to lose it. Being removed from field trips, the cafeteria, library and all other learning opportunities only makes students less able to handle them in the future. No one would say to a basketball player, "You missed too many foul shots. You can't practice until you get better." It is time to stop giving more opportunities to those who have already proven they are successful while denying opportunities to those who need them the most.

If we can start reaching kids like Roxanne sooner rather than later, who knows how many lives could change?

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