



# Teacher Reflection and Action

## Decision Making

## Values-Based Decisions

*Decision Making: A child's approach to problem solving that involves learning from others and from their own previous experiences, using their values to guide their action, and accepting responsibility for their decisions.*

Professionals who dedicate their life to educating, serving, and interacting with young people have often observed that students are acutely aware of any discrepancies between our expressed beliefs and our actions. Educators across the country feel the weight of being held accountable to the directives of their principal, district administration, and school board. But it is in the minutes and hours of daily life in the classroom that we most acutely feel the enormous weight and value of our accountability to our students.

Every decision we make (whether spoken or observed through our actions), along with how we implement and transparently evaluate them, acknowledge our mistakes, and resolve to do better, makes a lasting impression on our students. Our decisions about how we comport ourselves and appropriately self-disclose teach life lessons long remembered by the youth in our care. Our decisions about how to present ideas, how we build the climate of our classroom, and how we provide effective opportunities for joyful, engaging mastery of content very tangibly reflect the values we hold. Actions do speak louder than words.

### READ

- Read the article titled "Do Your Students Know You Care?"
- As you read, highlight lines or passages that resonate with you. Make notes to capture your ideas and connections.

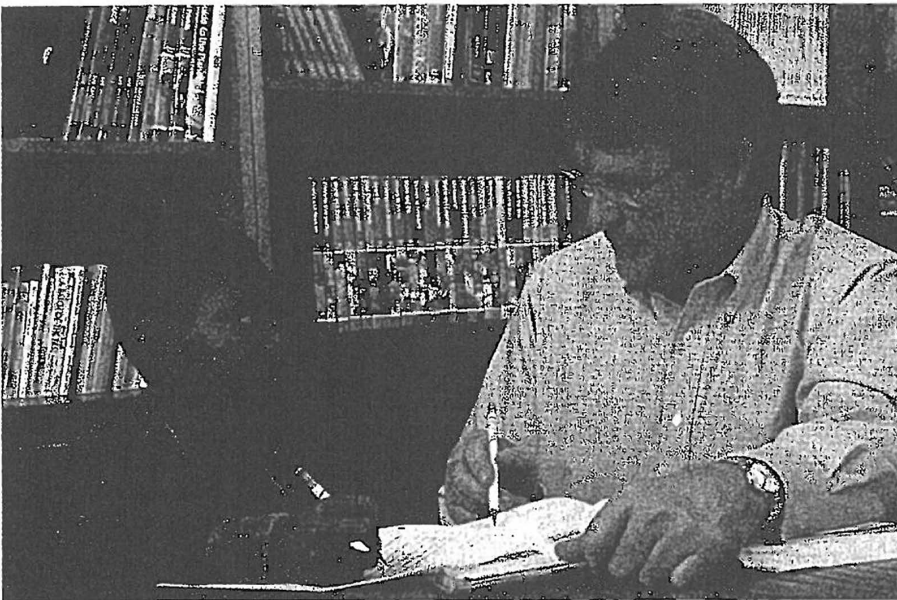
### REFLECT AND RECORD

- Write your thoughts about one or more of the questions below in your journal and/or discuss with a trusted colleague(s):
- What are three to five core values and beliefs that I hold about education in general?
- What are three to five core values and beliefs that I hold about education in my classroom?
- How congruent with my core values are the decisions I make that shape my students' school experiences?
- Which decisions do I have control over related to my ability to demonstrate my core values to my students on a regular basis?
- How have I supported my students in identifying their core life values related to education? How can I expand that?

# Do Your Students Know You Care?

*Caring is not just a way of acting; it's a way of thinking.*

Judith A. Deiro



## What Is Caring in a Teacher-Student Relationship?

As educators, we have long recognized the importance of developing caring relationships with students. Yet education literature says little about how teachers can develop appropriate caring in their relationships with students.

Caring, in and of itself, implies a relationship, but appropriate caring in teacher-student relationships is demonstrated differently from caring in other types of relationships. We can more easily determine appropriate ways to demonstrate caring in our relationships if we clarify the purpose of the relationship (Bennis, Schein, Steele, & Berlew, 1968).

For instance, we form friendships or romantic relationships for personal satisfaction or self-fulfillment. In these relationships, we expect caring to be mutual, equitably reciprocal, and intimate. These types of relationships are called *emotional-expressive* relationships (Bennis et al., 1968).

But we don't form our relationships with students for mutual satisfaction or self-fulfillment. Rather, teacher-student relationships are formed to promote learning and academic growth within students. Relationships formed for the purpose of affecting change in one party are called *influential* relationships. Appropriate caring in these relationships is demonstrated quite differently.

**W**hen you enter Ms. Bennett's 3rd grade classroom, you hear classical music playing softly. Students are sitting in small groups at round tables. Couches are arranged casually around the classroom, purposefully giving the space the ambience of a cozy home rather than a traditional learning environment. On Ms. Bennett's desk sits a jar of lemon drops from which she rewards students from time to time. Parents frequently visit the classroom to assist.

Meg is a student in Ms. Bennett's classroom. You can imagine Meg's mother's

surprise when she discovers that her daughter does not perceive Ms. Bennett as a caring teacher. Meg explains,

She thinks about us having fun, but she doesn't think about our feelings. A caring teacher is a teacher that is responsible and reliable and doesn't need to give candy or lemon drops or anything else. A caring teacher acts like we are older and more sensible and not just 8- or 9-year-olds. We are somebody.

Meg views her 2nd grade teachers as caring. She says, "My 2nd grade teachers were different. They taught us like we were a lot older than the 2nd grade."

Several key characteristics distinguish influential relationships and shape caring (Bennis et al., 1968).

First, the central concern of an influential relationship is planned change or growth. For instance, teachers intentionally plan learning activities to increase student academic growth.

Second, the successful conclusion of the relationship is termination. When the defined goal has been met, the relationship should end. For example, students should pass onto the next grade or graduate, and children should leave home and care for themselves.

Third, the power between the individuals in an influential relationship is asymmetrical. The change agent holds

students, parenting literature is rich with research that provides insights and guidance on how best to communicate caring to children. In particular, parenting research indicates that using an authoritative approach to parenting increases children's perceptions of caring and trust (Glenn & Nelsen, 1988; McNabb, 1990).

### What Do Students Perceive as Caring?

Authoritative parents establish their authority but do not require unquestioning obedience. On a continuum of permissive to authoritarian parenting styles, authoritative parenting is in the middle. With authoritative parenting

more physical power than their children, but they [parents] believe that the *rights of parents and children are reciprocal* [italics added]. (Cole & Cole, 1989, p. 383)

Reciprocity is key. Teachers who believe that students have reciprocal rights use their power respectfully and ethically.

### Observing Teachers Using Their Power

For my research on how teachers develop close and trusting relationships with students (Deiro, 1996), I observed six teachers' classrooms for one and one-half years and interviewed the teachers and their students. I chose the six teachers on the basis of a student inventory measuring the level of closeness and trust that students felt for their teachers. The teachers I observed all taught academic subjects (biology, literature, social science, and math) in either junior or senior high school. Three were male, three were female; and they had diverse ethnic backgrounds.

I was inspired by how respectfully the six teachers treated their students. They used a considerate tone of voice and a receptive manner when speaking to or about their students, and they worked to earn their students' respect. These teachers trusted that students were doing their best, given their developmental level and life circumstances. For example, Dean, an inner-city 9th grade biology teacher, made the following comment to me during lunch period one day:

These kids . . . have already made more decisions in their lives than you or I have had to. You can't treat them like kids; you treat them like adults. Take, for instance, the kid sitting up there studying. [He pointed to a small boy.] He's a gang member and has been faced with situations you or I have not dreamed of.

I observed Tom, another teacher, during a quarter when John, a retired military man, was his student teacher. I asked John what he thought Tom did that communicated caring to his students. He said,



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most of the power and is expected to know and give more than the recipient. With this asymmetrical balance of power comes a responsibility for the change agent to handle the power ethically and respectfully. The way in which teachers handle their asymmetrical power shapes and determines what students perceive as caring behavior.

Influential relationships define the connection between change agents and their recipients, as in doctor-patient and lawyer-client relationships. The most prominent influential relationship is parent-child. Although education literature has little to say about how teachers develop healthy relationships with

strategies, parents treat children firmly, with dignity and respect (Baumrind, 1971, 1980; Glenn, 1982; Glenn & Nelsen, 1988). Treating children with dignity means honoring their position and their abilities, and seeing them as worthy of esteem. Treating children with respect means showing regard for their basic human right to expression and believing in their growing abilities to manage their own lives successfully. Respect requires listening and sincerely considering what children are saying. The authoritative parenting approach takes for granted that parents

have more knowledge and skill, control more resources, and have

I think it comes down to respect. There is a definite two-way respect in this classroom. You know, a lot of teachers expect the kids to respect them . . . but it's not reciprocated.

This reciprocal respect is demonstrated in how these teachers discipline.

### Disciplining with Respect

When disciplining students, these teachers did not give up their power; they simply wielded that power in a different way. For example, Gail called students up to the podium to talk to them individually. When I asked her what she said to the students, she responded,

It is usually something that you don't want to say out loud. Even praise—some students don't like you to praise them in front of their friends because they will be seen as teacher's pet. So I kind of do it quietly.

The six teachers extended to students the opportunity to make their own mistakes and live with the consequences without harsh judgment. They approached discipline as an opportunity to teach rather than punish. For example, John, Tom's student teacher, described what happened one day when the class had a substitute teacher:

The kids ate [the substitute] alive. It was pathetic. The kids were on a feeding frenzy! Early the next morning, I mentioned it to Tom. He was furious! Tom doesn't like his class acting like that. He confronted the class with the information I had shared, but he did it in an interesting way. He didn't tell them I told him. He said, "I hear there were some problems yesterday. What were they?" The kids immediately started confessing. And it wasn't Jimmy telling on Susie or Susie telling on Bobby. The kids who had been the problem students said, "I did this."

Tom handled the entire discipline situation respectfully. He calmly and clearly expressed his disappointment and asked John to express his embarrassment as a student teacher observing the class behave so discourteously. Then, together, Tom and his students worked out a plan to ensure that the

problem would not recur. He treated the students like adults and taught them problem-solving skills. Tom's disappointment was enough punishment to amend the behavior of his students.

None of these caring teachers was *nicie-nice*. Being permissive, sweet, warm, or gentle is not the prerequisite of caring. Caring teachers can be stern and strict. They can even appear detached and aloof. But they must be respectful to be perceived as caring.

## A teacher's respect and an ethical use of power are key to students' perceptions of caring.

### Student Responses to Respectful Treatment

The deep level of respect held by the six teachers for their students communicated genuine caring. And students reciprocated with respect. A student in Dean's biology class comments on how respect for the teacher improves student behavior:

Well, everyone respects [him]. Like, if people don't respect the teacher, and the teacher tells you to do [something], [we] will just talk back and then the teacher will have to make us leave or something . . . and we won't care.

Annette, a student in Dale's math class, talks about the respect that Dale gave her, despite her behavior:

After being suspended for a while, you come back and it's like totally weird being in school again. And you know, I walked into Mr. Smith's classroom and he's like, "Hey Annette! You're back! Congratulations, you made it! Have a seat. Come on. We're waiting for you." He welcomed me.

In response to that respectful treatment, Annette admitted to trying harder and doing better in Dale's classes; instead of *Ds*, she's now getting *Bs*.

A teacher's respect and an ethical use of power are key to students' perceptions of caring. With respect, teachers can communicate caring to students when disciplining them, correcting their assignments, lecturing, or playing with them. In the opening vignette, we see that Meg, in the words of a 9-year-old, was simply asking to be treated respectfully. She does not want lemon drops or to be treated like a baby. She wants to be treated as capable, significant, and influential. Such respectful treatment can go a long way toward creating a caring learning environment, promoting the academic growth of students, and enhancing a teacher's ability to make a difference in students' lives. ■

### References

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# Teacher Reflection and Action

## A Practical Framework

*"Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space lies our freedom and power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and freedom."* –Viktor Frankl

Healthy, effective decision making is an end result. It's the product of understanding and practicing other aspects of social-emotional learning. Our ability to make wise decisions, even in difficult or exciting times, depends on our ability to cultivate Frankl's "space" which the lesson **"What Matters Most"** refers to as "Pause Power." For adults and students alike, building a habit of pausing, evaluating options, and intentionally making decisions that are aligned with the core of what really matters to us, is key.

Other important components of effective Decision Making include being a flexible thinker (able to generate a variety of possible solutions in order to discover what's best), being able to exercise good judgment in deciding which of the possible solutions is right in a particular circumstance, and evaluating decisions as they are put into action.

One way that we can become more intentional in our decision making is to use a specific framework or model. Having a defined series of steps that are consistently followed can help us make better-informed and more consistent decisions. Following a reflective process can, over time, also help us become more readily skilled at making healthy, effective decisions. There are many decision making frameworks available, of which the following video is one good example.

### VIEW

Mindtool's 4-minute video on Effective Decision Making  
<http://www.mindtools.com/pages/videos/decision-making-transcript.htm>

### REFLECT AND RECORD

Write your thoughts about one or more of the questions below in your journal and/or discuss with a trusted colleague(s):

1. What feelings and thoughts came up for you as you watched the video?
2. Which steps of the decision making process do you feel most capable of incorporating in your classroom on a more regular basis?
3. How might using a defined decision making framework help refine your own decision making skills? And those of your students?
4. Which areas of the decision making framework are personal roadblocks for you at this time? How do you build time into your schedule to intentionally reflect on your decisions?
5. What impact can you imagine directly teaching decision making skills to students could have? What excites you about increasing this aspect of your daily teaching practice?



# Teacher Reflection and Action

## Executive Functioning

*“Teaching is now defined as the process of making and implementing decisions, before, during, and after instruction, to increase the probability of learning.” –Madeline Hunter*

When teachers are strong, confident decision makers, they bring a sense of safety and order to their classrooms. Educators who are self-aware understand what they are bringing to their classrooms each day, their strengths and their challenges. Educators who effectively self-manage are able to settle themselves, and are able to continually refocus and reconnect with their primary purpose and enthusiasm for teaching. The result is more thoughtful, effective, student-centered decision making.

Understanding and managing our emotions allows us to use and strengthen a set of cognitive skills known as executive functioning. These skills enable us to make decisions based on the best interests of the community of learners in our care. We are better prepared to guide the educational and social growth of our students when we can objectively observe group and individual dynamics, gauge the learning needs of our students, and make informed decisions on how to leverage strengths to address those needs and motivate learning.

The way the adults in a school make decisions often ends up being reflected in the classroom. When administration involves staff in meaningful, empowered decision making opportunities, they are more likely to engage students in a similar fashion. Working to create a more transparent, collaborative approach across the school demonstrates the power of thoughtful, consistent decision making in action.

Along with modeling our personal decision making processes, educators can support students by giving them many opportunities for making meaningful decisions in the classroom and the school community, and provide structures to evaluate how their decisions play out.

### REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Write your thoughts about one or more of the questions below in your journal and/or discuss with a trusted colleague(s):

- How are decisions made by adults in your school?
- How are you involved in that decision making? What opportunities are there for sharing your voice in the decision making process?
- What strategies do you use for sharing your thoughts and having your voice heard?
- How are students involved in decision making in your classroom? What strategies are you teaching them to support thoughtful decision making as members of your classroom community?
- How are you teaching your students respectful and effective ways to have their voices heard? (“How to Talk So People Will Listen” Lesson)
- While honoring required curriculum and standards, how do you already give your students substantive choices related to their learning, allowing them to make and self-evaluate their decisions? How could you increase the opportunities for these choices?



# Teacher Reflection and Action

## **ACTION PLAN**

Consider making an action plan related to one or more of the reflection questions, to increase your students' opportunities to have their voices heard and to make meaningful, learning-related decisions.

For many of us, sharing our action plan with a trusted colleague, and asking him/her to check in with us at an agreed-upon time in the near future to talk about progress, makes it much more likely that we'll persist and achieve our desired results.



# REFERENCES

Below is a list of resources that were referenced within this strategy document. You will find links to research and additional information that may be helpful as you continue your understanding of the content in this strategy.

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- “Do Your Students Know You Care?” by Judith A. Deiro.

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- Mindtool’s 4-minute video on Effective Decision Making  
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Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (Producer). (2012). InBrief: executive function: skills for life and learning [Video webcast]. Available from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=efCq\\_vHUMq](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=efCq_vHUMq)