

## CHAPTER TWO

### BUILDING A POSITIVE CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

Building a positive learning environment in the classroom is the foundation of Learner-Centred Teaching. It is based on the understanding that positive reinforcement and support is essential for student success in school and life. As Doug Lemov notes in *Teach Like a Champion*, “People are motivated by the positive far more than the negative. Seeking success and happiness will spur stronger action than seeking to avoid punishment” (2010, p. 204).

LCT is built on the belief that creating a positive, supportive learning environment is essential for improving student achievement, encouraging critical thinking and helping young people succeed in school. Vavrus points out in the Teaching Action workshops that, “Although we cannot control how our colleagues teach, we can become role models for school-wide change by doing small things in our interactions with students that motivate them to want to learn for the joy of learning rather than to avoid punishment” (2014). In this chapter we look at the attitudes, beliefs, characteristics, and practices of teachers that help create a positive learning climate in the classroom.

#### **\*\* Technique #1      Teach With Enthusiasm**

There is nothing more infectious and effective than a teacher who is passionate about teaching and learning. Good teachers bring a joyful, creative and positive attitude to their classrooms. This passion can take different forms, but it inspires, motivates and encourages students to learn. As social beings, we learn a lot by observing others. If a teacher comes to class on time (or early), has a lot of energy, speaks in a clear, loud (but not shouting) voice with a joyful or enthusiastic tone, then students are much more likely to be enthusiastic about the subject, too. In contrast, when teachers frequently come to class late, appear bored or angry, or put forward very little energy when teaching, students learn non-verbally that this subject is not very interesting or important. Teachers must model the behaviors, emotional responses and attitudes they want their students to learn. One way to promote enthusiasm for teaching is to remind ourselves each and every day about the importance of the work we do to educate the next generation. You might say to yourself before you walk into the classroom, “I’m educating the nation” or “I am proud to be a teacher.” You can also start to reflect each day on your practice as other professionals do, asking yourself whether you arrived on time for each of your classes; smiled and used an enthusiastic tone with your students; and

spoke in clear and encouraging way to your students. If you did not today, you can work on improving in this area tomorrow until it feels natural to teach with enthusiasm.

### **\*\* Technique #2      Build On The Positive**

Students respond far better to praise than punishment, and humiliation is a particularly difficult form of punishment for adolescents—students between 13-19 years of age—because this is the period when their sense of self-identity is forming. The opinions of their peers are important, which is why teasing or other forms of harassment can be especially devastating for secondary school students, leading many to drop out of school rather than face being called “stupid” or “dull” in front of others. One way to assume the best in your students is to begin correcting students’ answers or behavior without giving the names of the students making mistakes. For example, you could simply say, “Class, I need everyone to be quiet before I pass out the equipment,” instead of “Robert and Godbless, stop being so loud.” If there is still too much talking, you could say, “Some people are still not ready to do our experiment. I am waiting until everyone is ready to learn.” If, however, Robert and Godbless are still causing a disturbance, you could call them to the front of the room, speak to them quietly about the problem, and move them to separate corners of the room. The same technique can be applied when students have done poorly on an assignment or exam: Adolescents, in particular, are more likely to feel you care about their learning if you speak to them privately about their mistakes rather than if you announce to the class that they got the lowest score or if you cane those who did not pass a test. We should keep in mind that low scores on assignments or bad behavior in class may be due to many factors: a student’s learning disability; problems in his/her home; or our own ineffective teaching.

### **\*\* Technique #3      Express High Expectations**

Many successful people attribute their accomplishments to the confidence of one teacher in their ability to succeed. When students come from families or communities with low expectations for them, as is sometimes the case for girls, physically disabled students, or students from minority groups, then one teacher with high expectations and confidence in them can make a big difference. However, these high expectations need to be matched by teachers’ actions that help students succeed. High expectations can also be demonstrated through posters on the wall in the classroom or signs around the school with pictures of national universities or good technical colleges, or encouraging phrases on the door to the school laboratory, such as “Quiet please, scientists at work.” Displaying high-quality student work on the walls

or on a bulletin board is also a way to show the students you have high expectations for them and are proud of their good work.

#### **\*\*Technique #4 All Students Can Learn**

Students bring a wide range of aptitudes, abilities, and interests to school. Some students are quick learners and others need lots of support to learn. Learner-centred teachers believe that all children can learn. This belief is critical. Some teachers are quick to write off certain students as slow or unable or unwilling to learn. Learner-centred teachers take the opposite approach. They strive to engage even the reluctant or challenging students. If a student is not learning something as quickly as you expect, you can meet with him after school and do a simple assessment to determine whether he has a physical problem that may be affecting his learning, such as a visual impairment. If there is no special education teacher at your school, you can do some simple assessments. For example have the student go to the back of the room and close his eyes while you write five random letters on the board. Ask him to open his eyes and read them to you. If he cannot, he may need glasses or may have a visual processing problem like dyslexia. You can also do something similar to test the student for hearing loss. You can get more information from Dyslexia International, including free courses about dyslexia for teachers (<http://www.dyslexia-international.org/our-approach/>) and from the World Health Organization ([http://www.who.int/blindness/Vision2020\\_report.pdf](http://www.who.int/blindness/Vision2020_report.pdf) and [http://www.who.int/pbd/deafness/world-hearing-day/WHD2016\\_Brochure\\_EN\\_2.pdf](http://www.who.int/pbd/deafness/world-hearing-day/WHD2016_Brochure_EN_2.pdf)).

#### **\*\*Technique #5 Celebrate Success**

Another way to create a positive learning environment is to celebrate student success. This can take the form of “shout outs” where the teacher recognizes a student and shares his or her accomplishment with the entire class. Teachers should create time during the week or month to recognize each and every student for something they have accomplished. It is most effective when a teacher recognizes a student for a specific accomplishment. For example: *Joseph wrote his best essay ever and included a topic sentence, detail sentences, and a strong concluding sentence.* General praise like “nice job, Joseph” is less effective than specific praise because it doesn’t let the student or the class know what was accomplished. Other ways to celebrate success are to display student work and to ask students to recognize each other’s success when working in small groups or with a partner. For example: Students can share a piece of work or writing with one another and say what they liked best about it.