Unconditional Teaching (#)
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Has there even been a war, or more offensive, gap between educational rhetoric and reality that than which defies the current accountability fad? The spinning sound bites whir through the air; higher expectations, high-stakes testing, and no child left behind. Meanwhile, educational reform practices that could actually improve the quality of teaching and learning, and save our kids from the boredom, frustration, and alienation that are the byproducts of a so-called standards-based reform, are being dropped out.

Some of the results of that pressure are plainly visible to anyone who uses the schools or teaches in them – children, children appearing alienated and bored, terrible teachers quitting in disgust. But there are subtler effects. The current version of school reform is changing what we value. If the sole goal is to raise achievement (in the narrowest sense of that word), then pressures related to standards and testing, it's possible that some of our own practices also lead children to believe that we accept them only conditionally. Sometimes that acceptance seems to depend on their doing something well and sometimes it depends on their being good, let's look at each of these in turn. In short, unconditional acceptance is what kids require in order to flourish. And while it's most critical that they experience that kind of acceptance at home, what happens at school matters, too. "Unconditional Teaching" is one important study. The popular view is that children who misbehave are just "testing limits" – a phrase often used as a justification for imposing more limits, or punishments. But perhaps such children are testing something else – they may be trying to get their basic needs met.


In the course of researching a book on these issues, I discovered considerable empirical support for this theory. One summary of the research put it this way: "The more conditional the support [one experiences], the less likely the student is to identify with the group. This is the hallmark of a teacher who is only conditionally accepting their students." The next time you see a student walking into a classroom, instead of being seen as a challenge, or an opportunity for improvement, for the first time since I've been in education, teachers are seeing [him or her] as a liability" (Wilgoren, 2000). The moral here is that unconditional acceptance is not only something all children deserve; it's also a powerfully effective way to help them become successful learners.

In an illuminating passage from her recent book Learning to Trust, Watson (2003) reflects on the importance of unconditional acceptance: "When a low-performing student walks into a classroom, instead of being seen as a challenge, or an opportunity for improvement, for the first time since I've been in education, teachers are seeing [him or her] as a liability." The popular view is that children who misbehave are just "testing limits" – a phrase often used as a justification for imposing more limits, or punishments. But perhaps such children are testing something else – they may be trying to get their basic needs met.

Unconditional Teaching is about recognizing that students have basic needs, and that the way we provide the support they need can make all the difference in the world. "The popular view is that children who misbehave are just "testing limits" – a phrase often used as a justification for imposing more limits, or punishments. But perhaps such children are testing something else – they may be trying to get their basic needs met."

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