INSPIRED ISSUE BRIEF:
RELATIONSHIP-BASED DISCIPLINE

Relationship-based discipline is a student-centered approach to classroom management that depends on teacher-student collaboration to maintain a safe, positive learning environment. Relationship-based discipline, as its name suggests, relies on strong, mutually respectful, personal relationships to engage cooperation in the classroom. Teachers help students meet academic and behavioral expectations by emphasizing teacher empathy, unconditional positive regard, genuineness, encouragement, and trust. In such an environment, students behave not because they are afraid of punishment or because they seek a reward, but because they know they are valued members of the classroom community. A relationship-based approach to discipline is essential to the success of an Inspired Teacher.

Student-centered teaching is a key element of relationship-based discipline. Student-centered learning environments foster a sense of student control, giving children a prominent voice in the classroom. Students are provided with choices that pique their individual interests, capitalizing on children's innate curiosity and desire to learn. Teachers invite student cooperation and collaboration by planning instruction that allows the learning experience to be engaging and meaningful.

Although proponents of relationship-based discipline believe that engaging, student-centered instruction will prevent most of the discipline problems that typically arise in teacher-centered classrooms, they also recognize that conflict is inherent in human relationships. Teachers therefore provide students with useful, realistic ways of independently preventing and resolving their own conflicts. In a conflict-positive classroom, destructive conflicts are prevented and constructive conflicts are structured, encouraged, and utilized to improve the quality of classroom dynamics. Most importantly, tensions between teachers and students are defined as conflicts, not misbehavior—allowing teachers to focus on finding a resolution rather than an appropriate punishment.

This Inspired Issue Brief presents several sound studies that have demonstrated the positive outcomes associated with relationship-based discipline.

Students respond best to teachers that show that they care.

Students work harder when they believe their teacher cares about them. A study in a suburban middle school demonstrated that students' perception of caring from teachers was related significantly and positively to students' pursuit of social responsibility, liberality, and academic effort. 375 eighth-grade students completed questionnaires about caring teachers and about themselves. Students described a "caring" teacher as one who demonstrates democratic interaction styles, develops expectations for student behavior in light of individual differences, models a "caring" attitude toward their own work, and provides constructive feedback. Students who felt they had more caring teachers were more likely to give more effort to achieve academically, and pursue pro-social and social responsibility goals in the classroom.

> Wentzel, Kathryn R. 1997. Student Motivation in Middle School: The Role of Perceived Pedagogical Caring. *Journal of Educational Psychology* 89 (3):411-419.

Demonstrating respect for students' individuality can reduce the achievement gap. African American seventh graders in a northeastern U.S. social studies class performed better in school months after they were asked about their identity and values. 243 students were randomly assigned to one of two groups and given different writing exercises. One group was asked to read a list of values, pick the most important, and then describe why they made their choice. A control group read the same list of values, selected the least important, and then described why their choice might be important to another person. By year's end, students who were asked to reflect on their own values had better grades than the control group—and the achievement gap between African American students and their white peers was reduced by almost 40%. Students who were chosen to express their own values felt regarded as individuals, which made the classroom environment more conducive to learning. The powerful effect of this limited intervention was so surprising that the study was carefully replicated—and the results were upheld.

> Cohen, Geoffrey L., Julio Garcia, Nancy Apfel, and Allison Master. 2006. Reducing the Racial Achievement Gap: A Social-Psychological Intervention. *Science* 313 (5791):1307-1310.

Students want teachers who care about them, actively build community in the classroom, and use engaging instruction as the primary strategy for classroom management. Seventeen students in a large urban northwestern U.S. city were selected to report their perceptions and interpretations of teachers who were identified as culturally responsive to African-American students. The most frequently mentioned attribute was their teachers' willingness to care about them and bond with them. Other frequently-mentioned characteristics of effective teachers were the ability to build community and efforts to make learning interesting. This study demonstrates the links among positive student-teacher relationships, student engagement, and effective instruction.

> Howard, Tyrone. 2001. Telling their side of the story: African American students' perceptions of culturally relevant teaching. *The Urban Review* 33 (2):131-149.

Students put forth more effort in democratic classrooms.

A study involving over 3,000 adolescents found that relationship-based discipline had a positive effect on student responsibility and attitude towards schoolwork. Students in Australian junior high and high school completed two questionnaires, one reporting their teachers' discipline styles, and another reporting how responsibly they themselves behaved. Results indicated that more responsible students were in classes where teachers involved them in the decision making. The study also found that students who received more relationship-based discipline such as discussions were more interested in their learning.

> Lewis, Ramon. 2001. Classroom Discipline and Student Responsibility: The Students' View. *Teaching and Teacher Education* 17 (3):307-319.

Students who are encouraged to set their own agenda for learning show greater enthusiasm and motivation, allowing teachers to focus on instruction rather than maintaining discipline. Ninth graders who participated in a problem-based lesson were motivated, engaged, and eager to share their thoughts about the problem both inside and outside the classroom. For the task, students were asked to set their own learning agenda and decided how to pursue a solution to the given problem. One student observed that student-directed methods still require a great deal of teachers, calling it "the way to get to know your students better. You get to make sure they know what they're doing. You know if they understand."

> Savoie, Joan M. and Andrew Hughes. 1994. Problem-based Learning as Classroom Solution. *Educational Leadership,* 52(3): 54-57.

Students in child-centered classroom develop better attitudes toward school, more positive self-conceptions, and become more independent learners. In California, 32 ethnically diverse classrooms, sixteen child-centered and teacher-centered classrooms were compared to determine how each setting affected children's motivation to learn. The preschool and kindergarten students in child-centered classrooms rated their academic abilities higher, had higher expectations for success on school-like tasks, showed less dependency on adults for permission and approval, evidenced more pride in their accomplishments, and claimed to be less worried about school.

> Stipek, Deborah J., Rachelle Feiler, Denise Daniels, and Sharon Milburn. 1995. Effects of Different Instructional Approaches on Young Children's Achievement and Motivation. *Child Development* 66:209-223.

When students learn to prevent and resolve their own conflicts, they learn thinking skills as well as life skills.

In low-income Philadelphia schools, students increased their ability to keep themselves on track to meet their learning and behavior goals as a result of being placed in a conflict-positive classroom that fostered reflective thinking. Fourth- and fifth- grade students in 'Project Peace' learned to use a comprehensive, integrated, conflicted resolution program that included steps such as class meeting strategies, role play, active listening techniques, development of affective vocabulary, and group discussion strategies. When compared with a control group, the Project Peace students made greater use of positive strategies to resolve disputes as well as more meta-cognitive strategies that helped them 'stop and think' to solve all sorts of problems. The findings of this research corroborate other studies that find that as children learn conflict resolution, they also learn problem-solving skills that enhance their academic success.

> Heydenberk, Roberta Anna, and Warren R. Heydenberk. 2005. Increasing meta-cognitive competence through conflict resolution. *Education and Urban Society* 37 (4):431-452.

A conflict resolution program emphasizing reflective thinking reduced discipline problems and increased students' critical thinking skills. Kindergarten through ninth grade students in rural, suburban, and urban schools of the United States and Canada participated in a conflict resolution and peer mediation training program. Results indicated that the total number of discipline problems decreased by about 60% and referrals to administrators dropped about 90%. Additionally, participating students demonstrated a conceptual understanding of negotiation and meditation, and an increase of higher-level reasoning skills. The students used their peacemaking skills in the hallways, lunchroom, on the playground and even at home. The students maintained their conflict resolution ability months after the training had ended.

> Johnson, David W., and Roger T. Johnson. 2004. Implementing the 'Teaching Students to Be Peacemakers' program. *Theory Into Practice* 43 (1):68-79.

Student-centered teaching fosters students' intrinsic motivation, and increases performance and learning.

Tapping learners' intrinsic motivation pushes them to work harder and learn more. In the San Francisco Bay area, contextualization, personalization, and choice all produced a dramatic increase in students' motivation, engagement, and learning. Seventy-two fourth- and fifth-grade students participated in one of two versions of a computer-based lesson. Those who were exposed to engaging activities displayed higher levels of intrinsic motivation than those who were not. Engaged students became more deeply involved in the learning activity and attempted to use more complex operations for problem solving, and thereby learned more from the activities in a fixed period of time. Likewise, students who were offered choices about their learning showed greater increases in motivation and set higher academic goals for themselves.

> Cordova, Diana, and Mark R. Lepper. 1996. Intrinsic Motivation and the Process of Learning: Beneficial Effects of Contextualization, Personalization, and Choice. *Journal of Educational Psychology* 88 (4):715-730.

Resources

Beyond discipline: From compliance to community, by Alfie Kohn, challenges the traditional assumptions about classroom management and offers a fresh perspective on understanding how and why maintaining 'control' in the classroom is counterproductive. Kohn is a former teacher and has authored several other books on education and human behavior.

A Democratic Classroom, by Steven Wolk, examines the idea of a classroom as a community. Wolk also tackles the issues that surround disipline, classroom management, and student freedom.

Best Practice in Motivation and Management in the Classroom, by Dennis G. Wiseman and Gilbert Hunt, offers practical information for all teachers interested in becoming more skilled, effective, and knowledgeable in their classrooms. Wiseman and Gilbert highlight the importance of understanding students' interests, abilities, and background in order to motivate them in the classroom.

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