

# Department of Education

## Creating a Positive Workplace for Students

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The theme for this issue of the Quarterly is the application of IPNB in the workplace. A school is obviously the teacher's workplace and metaphorically the student's. All workplace settings have situational and contextual factors that affect the emotional climate and, in turn, the performance of the individuals. There is a long history of research on the positive and negative effects of contextual variables that begins in the 1920s with the discovery of The Hawthorn Effect (Prince, 2003). In this classic study, the researchers at the Western Electric Hawthorn Plant were studying the effect of changing various working conditions. They started with improving the lighting and moved on to improve other conditions in the plant. Everything they changed improved worker performance. They then changed everything back to the way it was and that, too, improved performance. The Hawthorn Effect suggests that the attention paid to the workers by the researchers and the positive emotional climate it created was what improved worker performance, not the changed physical working conditions.

Another classic experiment shows the effect of a negative emotional climate - Phil Zimbardo's famous Stanford Prison experiment. During the summer of 1971, a group of Stanford college students, after completing extensive testing to show they had no psychological difficulties, were randomly assigned the role of prisoner or guard and placed in a mock prison constructed in the basement of a classroom building. The experimenters used contextual variables to create a negative emotional climate. For example, the "guards" wore identical dehumanizing uniforms and only referred to the prisoners by their number. The prisoners wore dehumanizing uniforms and

could only refer to themselves by the number printed on their uniform (a white smock). In the "prison," the volunteer "guards" became so sadistic and the volunteer "prisoners" so stressed that the two-week experiment had to be halted after only six days. (The experiment is described in detail on the web site [www.prisonexp.org](http://www.prisonexp.org).)

In a recent address and book, Dr. Zimbardo (2008, 2009) emphasized that the powerful effect of contextual forces on emotional climate and on individuals is often minimized. As an example, he offered a dramatic multimedia description of his role on the defense team of one of the soldiers at Abu Ghraib prison. He showed pictures from the Stanford experiment and from Abu Ghraib that were essentially identical. However, his testimony did not change the verdict: "The prosecutor and judge refused to consider any idea that situational forces could influence individual behavior. Theirs was the standard individualism conception that is shared by most people in our culture. It is the idea that the fault was entirely 'dispositional,' all the consequence of Sgt. Chip Frederick's freely chosen rational decision to engage in evil."

These powerful examples lead us to the conclusion that contextual and situational factors are especially important to consider within a school. The emotional climate necessary for new learning to take place requires emotional safety, support for curiosity and creativity, acceptance of the student that is not dependent on performance, and, on the part of teachers, positive expectations for the students' capacity to learn. The absence of a negative emotional environment is equally important since fear, judgment, performance-based approval, anger, and rigidity shut down the brain's

receptivity to learning. Neuroscience research shows that once the amygdala is activated by frightening stimuli, the fight-flight-freeze system comes online, narrowing focus to handle the perceived threat. An individual's thinking becomes defensive and black-and-white, making new learning difficult (Siegel, 1999).

One simple yet profound way to create a positive emotional climate in a school setting is a daily focus on student and staff strengths. To understand the implications, the reader is asked to briefly reminisce about high school and imagine a report card with all A's and one F. Then ask yourself: What would my parents and teachers focus on, the A's or the F? Typically, they would focus on the F with the intention of motivating you to improve the grade, and, by implication, mitigate a weakness. They might offer extra help or tutoring in the weak area to bring up the bad grade. This is a common approach in education from kindergarten through graduate school, but it has the unintended consequence of increasing the time a student spends focusing on areas of weakness to the detriment of time spent on strengths.

If the reader remembers Hebb's axiom (neurons that fire together wire together), then s/he can imagine a tightly wired pattern of neurons that hold the "improve weakness" belief. I have found this neuronal pattern evident when I first ask students about their strengths and talents. I always

encounter puzzled faces and long delays before they speak. As students hesitantly describe their strengths, they usually minimize them. Our culture not only emphasizes correcting weaknesses, but also often leads children to believe that focusing on their strengths means they are self-centered. Changing this dual mindset and developing a new neural net that is "strength focused" takes more than teaching a lesson in a classroom; it involves changing a school's emotional climate so students



will experience receptivity to a "strength focus" in all aspects of their day. And that involves helping teachers change their own inner worlds to make room for perceiving strengths with clarity. So many of us grew up in homes with the "improve weakness" and "don't brag" engrained states of mind, so we have implicit

perceptual biases that want to pull our behavior and our words in that direction. As in any work environment, change flows down from the top, and always flows more smoothly if the change agents themselves embody the new mental model they seek to foster.

If the researchers in the Stanford Prison Experiment can "accidentally" create a profoundly negative effect on the emotional climate of a "prison," and the researchers at the Western Electric Hawthorn plant can "accidentally" have a positive impact on workers, then it would seem that educators can purposefully create a positive emotional climate within themselves and their schools that is conducive to new learning.

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