

Reflecting on the impact of homework and testing

This school year (2000-2001) was the most difficult I have had in several years. It got off to a rocky start since I returned from China in the second week of school with bad jet lag and boxes stacked to the ceiling in a completely different classroom. I didn't even know which boxes contained books and which contained props and which contained teaching supplies. So I was not exactly "with it."

Then my principal raked me over the coals for giving too many "A"s and not doing "high level thinking" in my tests. His evidence was NOT one of my tests; his evidence was that if I *were* doing high-level thinking, I wouldn't give so many "A"s. I got the grades of my previous students from the high school teacher and even MORE of my kids get "A"s in high school than did in junior high! I gave him those statistics. I gave him my results from the National French Contest. (Dramatically higher performance than the rest of the nation and I had 100% of my kids take the test, not just the top half!) I told him about the reactions of UNIVERSITY professors who have watched my kids perform all four skills in French. They said things like, "Your kids write with greater grammatical accuracy than students in fourth-semester college."

He retorted that nobody else in the school gives as high a percentage of "A"s and that I give too many "A"s every year. I told him, "But my kids are that good. I give them only unannounced tests, and they have mastered everything. Even without studying for tests. They are simply that good. Look, they come out on top when compared against the rest of the nation; they are still on top when they go to the high school. They earn and deserve those "A's."

He then asked why nobody else gives that many "A"s if these kids are really that good. I told him that I have spent my life studying acquisition theory, brain theory, and books about teaching. I have met most of the top people in the nation and picked their brains, too. I have learned how to get that level of performance out of kids.

His reply, "So you think you teach better than the other people in this school? Well, you are arrogant." I took that comment personally and hurt all year long. I am still hurting from that comment.

To accommodate him, I began to give verb conjugation tests every week or so, and I began to require lots of homework (junior high kids forget homework, so they got lots of ZEROES in the grade book.). This absolutely killed the grades in my classes. I gave 3 "F"s, 4 "D"s, and my students began to say things like "French is hard."

My relationship with the kids got more strained (as compared to the preceding couple of years), I was depressed, and I probably sounded pretty "sour-puss" also. I had a miserably difficult bunch 8th period (the hockey team) and I feel bummed now that it is the end of the school year. I used to end the year feeling exhilarated.

I assume that my principal is thrilled with my grades, though.

Here is something interesting: I obtained the New York Proficiency test right at the end of the school year and my kids did GREAT on the oral! I did not have time to administer the rest of the test because it was final exam time. I looked at the reading, writing and listening parts of the test, and my kids would have done very well.

But this year's kids do not have the power of strong confidence that my other kids had in the last few years. Some of them think that they are stupid or not good in French. Not true. They simply forget to do homework. A few of them don't quite get the hang of conjugating on a test although they tend to select the correct form when writing an essay.

If you give tests (and homework) designed to find holes in your kids, everything suffers. If you give tests (and homework) that is designed to prove to them how fantastic they are, they believe in themselves and they rise to the occasion.

Nothing motivates like success.

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