



Series II - Step 1 - The Use of Positive Restructuring With Children

Adapted from the book, *Creating Confident Children in the Classroom: The Use of Positive Restructuring*

Pierangelo/Giuliani: Research Press

Introduction

Many theories of learning usually take into account the function of the brain and how information is processed. Further, most theories of learning assume that there is a existing foundation on which to build. While the success of human learning is a result of many factors coming together at one time, there is a major factor required upon which all learning needs to be built; namely confidence.

What is confidence?

Confidence is nothing magical or difficult to understand. Put simply, it is merely the result of repeated successful experiences. If we think back to our confidence level the first time we rode a bicycle versus the 50th time, we see that experience and more importantly, success, increased our confidence. Likewise, our confidence the first day of a new job verses the 50th, the first time we met someone verses the 50th and so on. Without successful experiences on which to draw, children will not believe that they are capable. Telling children they are bright, special, unique, and capable and so on, without their having actual experiences to validate the words really has no meaning. Children only build upon that which they can see, which in turn affects that which they can feel.

When it comes to building confidence in the classroom in America's schools, we often tend to let children down.

Many times it is not children who fail, but rather schools failing children. The problem in many classrooms is that the students are never presented with enough repeated successful experiences to build this necessary foundation of success required for confidence. In many classrooms, students are presented with a wide variety of tasks, which used one way, can create self doubt, and used another way can create a sense of confidence. Many teaching styles actually devalue students and prevent the development of repeated successful experiences. Some actual examples are:

- Mrs. L is a fifth grade teacher who believes that students learn best by doing a great deal of work. As a result, Mrs. L gives 3 hours of homework a night. Many of the parents of students in Mrs. L's class see this as an indication of how much their child is learning. However, many of these parents have to work along with their children, finish assignments for them or get into serious and upsetting arguments about homework in order to meet Mrs. L's expectations.
- Mr. D believes that his third graders need to be prepared for life at the age of 9. Mr. D. provides this guidance with criticism, intimidation, very hard tests, and threats. Many of his students get sick in the morning, have trouble falling asleep, hide bad grades from their parents and lie.
- Mrs. W feels that public humiliation is a good motivation technique for children to become stronger. So she asks children to stand up in front of the class for several minutes if they failed a test or did not do their homework.
- Mrs. T never smiles and sees 1st grade as a serious matter. She teaches the same way she has for 24 years and makes learning stressful. Her children are always on edge because they are afraid to make a mistake.
- Mr. M gives very hard tests from the first day of school to let his students know who is the boss. He requires that students memorize a great deal and tests them often, frequently humiliating them in public if they forget a part. He brags that he accepts a certain amount of failures and that he is preparing his students for the real world. Mr. M is a second grade teacher.

If we assume that confidence is a crucial basis for success, then confidence in the classroom should be the basis for success. However, many teachers rarely provide enough repeated successful experiences in a controlled and orderly fashion to allow confidence to even get going. While this may work for the children already coming into school with confidence, it fails the children who never developed their own foundation of success. Many teaching styles limit the amount or exposure to repeated successful experiences on a typical school day, thus frustrating the development of confidence. Attempting to add to the knowledge base of children who have not yet developed the foundation of success is like building a house on water.

The teaching styles of teachers who promote confidence is very different, and takes into account the need for the student to first feel good about him/herself. Examples of this include:

- Mrs. S is a fifth grade teacher with a great sense of humor. She is not afraid to joke with her students because she feels confident about maintaining control. Mrs. S provides numerous positive experiences a day for her children and structures assignments and projects for success. She is keenly aware of every student's individual needs and abilities

and always gears her requirements to their abilities. As a result the children love school and the parents experience positive feelings about their children's school performance.

- Mr. C is a teacher who treats his classroom like his home. He treats his students like guests and never makes them feel unwelcome or inadequate. He treats his students with respect and provides assistance so that all students feel good about themselves. His attitude is reflected in the positive way the students treat each other.
- Mrs. T is a first grade teacher who loves children. She realizes how fragile children are at this level and prepares lessons and experiences that rarely result in failure. She constructs her assignments on many levels so that everyone gets to the end with success. She is more interested in her students feeling good than her need to be the authority.

There are many examples in any school of destructive teaching styles and confidence building teaching styles. The luck of the draw or the political clout of some parents determines the road that any child may take. This road may have very different outcomes and may affect a child's future more than we realize. One year with a great teacher or one year with a destructive teacher can affect a child for the rest of his/her life.

The focus of all elementary schools should be confidence building the first 30-40 days of each year. Confidence Month should allow teachers to forget about curriculum, especially since most elementary children will learn the same concepts every year, and focus solely on repeated successful experiences for all children. What we are suggesting is that teachers understand that academics come after confidence. Trying to teach children who are vulnerable, frightened, negative, fearful of failure, insecure and so on is like pouring water into a glass with no bottom. Confidence is what gives that glass the ability to hold and want to hold "water".

Within the first 30 days of the school year, every teacher should restructure their classroom lessons to ensure 100 per cent success for every child. This may require many modifications, changes, limiting assignments, and changing the manner of delivery. Regardless of what needs to be done, the goal should be for every child to be and feel totally successful, and experience numerous successful experiences.

We all know that confidence changes perception. It is an accepted fact that the lower one's confidence, the more distorted things appear. Children with low confidence tend to be more rigid, more sensitive, over reactive, more insecure, more vulnerable, and so on. How do teachers expect children to absorb anything when most of their energy is going into self-protection?

There is no doubt that Positive Restructuring requires a great deal of work. However, the long term effects and benefits greatly outweigh any amount of work. Why would any teacher not want to guarantee success and develop a child's overall sense of confidence? As educators we have an obligation to question any teaching style that frustrates children, makes them feel like failures, reinforces their inadequacies, promotes negative self worth, exposes them to ego deflating experiences, and promotes teacher "ego" at the expense of student failure (belittling students in front of others).

As clinical and school psychologists, professors, and consultants to schools, parents, and children we have observed countless teaching styles. All teachers need to evaluate their promotion of confidence building experiences that they offer children on a daily basis. While

great teachers can make children feel good about themselves, it may really only be the child's response to the personality of the teacher that promotes success in that classroom. What happens many times is that the child's good feelings may be greatly reduced the next year when he/she is confronted with a different teaching style that may not be as focused on the child's successes. What we need to do is promote a consistent educational program of confidence so that we can build internal feelings of success that can carry over from year to year even when children are not exposed to the "great teacher style."

We must keep in mind that teachers are people first, and come to the classroom with their own needs and personality styles. When are we going to admit that any teaching style that penalizes a child's self-worth must be changed? Many administrators are guilty of reinforcing the "emperor's new clothes" by denying or being unwilling to confront teachers who are hurting children. Children are with teachers for 6-7 hours a day. That breaks down to either 30-35 hours of opportunities in building a child's confidence or 30-35 hours of reinforcing a child's feelings of inadequacies. Which do you feel should be our primary focus? However, the obvious choice is not always that which is followed by teachers and administrators. Some educators and administrators may see Positive Restructuring as unrealistic in the classroom. If they believe this, then what they are really saying is that it may be too much work to build a child's confidence. And that would be a very sad statement about the educational system.

In conclusion Positive Restructuring is not only a process but it requires a change in your educational mindset. The goal of this process and increasing confidence in children will be to ensure the sense of accomplishment and the sense of success. In this way we can have the best chance of helping children feel good about themselves and their school experiences.

Step I – Understanding Positive Restructuring: The Foundation for Building Confidence: An actual example

Mr. Davis is a 5th grade teacher who had been assigned to the lowest level math class. These students had all experienced consistent failure and had severe difficulty in math. They hated the subject, avoided it at all costs and felt very unsure and deflated when doing math. Mr. Davis decided that if he started to attempt building math upon their inadequate foundations of confidence he would only be repeating what they already experienced, namely continued failure.

At this point he first met with all the parents and informed them of his "experiment". He explained the concept of confidence and the foundation that was necessary to build it. He explained that He believed that their children had no foundation of success in math on which he could build. It was not that they were not intelligent; it was just that they were not primed. He informed them that he would need their support for a period of 30 school days so that he could rebuild their confidence levels. After answering their concerns and reassuring them that he felt it would work, especially since nothing had worked up to this point, he asked them to be very supportive. The program went as follows:

1 - When the children came into class he informed them that together they were going to try to build their confidence in math. He reassured them that it would not happen overnight but they would see changes in a relatively short period of time.

2 - Then came the hard part. He told them for the next 30 days they would be taking many tests. You can imagine the responses. He let them voice their concerns, fears, resistance and then passed out the first test. It contained 10 Kindergarten type math problems. They started to laugh, joke, and some got angry that they were doing baby work. He told them that you have to crawl before you walk, and told them to complete it. Well, needless to say everyone got 100%. He scored it, and returned it immediately. Then he handed out another one, this time with Kindergarten subtraction. Again everyone got 100%. His goal was complete success at any price. That class period they took 2 tests and everyone got 100's on each test.

3 - That week, he kept up the Kindergarten math, slowly increasing the number of problems, but never increasing the difficulty. He allowed them to use any type of table, or any tool that would assist them with success. Although they started to use them at the beginning, by the end of the week, many were no longer relying on these tools. This indicated one of the factors in building confidence, that is, empowerment. Empowerment says, "It is not as important to use power, as it is to know we have it when we need it".

Having the power to use the tables gave them a sense of security, another factor of building confidence. By the end of the first week he had given 10 tests. All children had Now experienced a 100% average. What was beginning to change was hope, another factor in building confidence. All children must have hope that what they are doing will work. This hope begins to take hold as you change perception by initially ensuring success.

4 - By the second week they were on to 1st grade math, and again every child had been successful. The lowest average was 98%, and children were now getting upset because they knew the problem and made a careless mistake. Others were angry with 98% averages, something many of these children had never seen or experienced. Parents were now putting up their math papers on the refrigerator something their children had rarely seen. They were now experiencing another factor in positive restructuring: willingness to try. By the end of the 2nd week the children had 25 tests and 25 classroom activities all of which guaranteed success.

5 - By the 3rd week they were on to 3rd grade math. All the students showed a marked difference in the perception of themselves and others. Some children were now being seen as the top of the class even though everyone still had averages in the 90's. Another factor to remember here is that a lack of success in an experience is greatly softened and kept in better perspective when it is surrounded by numerous successful experiences. What happens in schools is that children may never get the opportunity to experience enough repeated successful experiences before encountering a failure experience. If that is the case, then what has been gained is quickly drained by the negative experience. It is easier to knock over a few bricks than it is to knock over a wall. Even if a wall is hit, you may lose several bricks but not the entire wall. Teachers need to build walls of confidence. This is another factor of positive restructuring, namely resiliency. Resiliency is the ability to bounce back from a setback. For all of these children there was no initial resiliency in their toolbox thanks to so many failures and therefore when they met failure they usually gave up and became avoidant and resistant.

What he also began to notice by the third week was that the defensive posture, negative remarks, self criticism, despondency, and hopelessness of many children started to dwindle. They became

more relaxed, willing to try things, and more at ease with themselves and others. This is another factor in positive restructuring, spontaneity.

6 - By the fourth week he went on to 4th grade work, and while the averages began to drop somewhat, no one had lower than a 90% average. He also noticed that they took more care in writing the answers clearly and neatness now seemed to matter. This factor of caring about one's performance is another factor in positive restructuring.

This process took just about 30 days. But what a difference 30 days made in changing the perceptions of all the children and their parents. These children were so much more self-confident and truly believed in their abilities.

Parents actually reported less tension at home and more of the natural qualities if the child were coming through. Now these children wanted to come to class, wanted to do math, and looked forward to getting back their test results. By now it was not because he was ensuring success as much as they believed they could do it and were more resilient and confident. The year went very well for the students. He finished the fifth grade curriculum and the confidence seemed to carry over to the next grade.