Brown-Skinner Model for Building Trust with At-Risk Students

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ABSTRACT

Building trust with at-risk students is a challenge for all educators. Taking a personal interest in each student is where educators need to begin. Creating meaningful communication with at-risk students shows caring for the students as individuals, and allows them to be more themselves. The authors propose that following, and mastering, the five steps of the Brown-Skinner model will aide the educator in building a trusting relationship with at-risk students. Trust in the education environment provides students an opportunity to take initiative in their learning.

Introduction

Rome was not built in a day, but the empire fell in one. Relationship building takes precise steps, if you do not build trust, the relationship will crumble. Educators are expected to know how to build trust with at-risk youth; however, this is not always a simple task.

Students identified as at-risk are often those who do not fit the mainstream mold; their learning styles, learning disabilities, or life experiences may be factors in low achievement or behavior considered unacceptable (Kerka, 2003).

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to give educators a model to aide in building trust with at-risk students. The authors propose the Brown-Skinner model as a tool to not only build relationships with students, but to instill a desire for lifelong learning.

Many educators share similar experiences of students that are apathetic, as well as unwilling to engage in the learning experience and ultimately fail. These students have mastered withdrawing from the classroom as a defense. Teachers deal with anywhere from 100-125 students a day, maybe more. Dealing with unpredictable situations, on top of the educational challenges, can be tiring and trying to build personal relationships may seem impossible. In a socially charged environment "it also helps to recognize that angry words, menacing looks, and apparent disregard for the subject says more about a student's on-going discouragement in school than it says about a teacher's management skill and content knowledge" (Walsh, 2006, pg. 13).

The Brown-Skinner model will guide in building trust by cultivating positive relationships in order to create what may seem impossible, a connection with at-risk students. Making a connection with these troubled students will lead to an improved learning environment, improved academic performance, and manageable behavior to name a few. "Students who are treated with respect, even while acting disrespectfully, keeps the door open for future contacts" (Walsh, 2006, pg. 14). Following the five recommendations of the Brown-Skinner model will build trust with at-risk students, and create a much more pleasant learning atmosphere.

1. <u>**Listen**</u>

Listening is the first step in building a trusting relationship with at-risk students, it "requires conscious effort and continued practice" (Thompson, Grandgenett, & Gradgenett, 1999, ¶ 8). A perceived failure to listen is often interpreted by the speaker as a sign of not caring, where as the perception that the receiver is listening is viewed by the speaker as a caring behavior (Bulach, Pickett, & Boothe, 1998). Listening to at-risk students, before trying to prescribe advice is important when building trusting relationships. Listening first helps the listener to understand what the student has said and adds value to the beginning of the relationship. Empathic listening (also called active listening or reflective listening) is a way of listening and responding to another person that improves mutual understanding and trust (Salem, 2003). This type of listening is an act of acknowledging and identifying the feelings of a speaker while relaying the facts being stated. The listener can practice this by using statements such as; "You feel _____ when you are not listened to." (State emotion.) Empathetic listening requires the listener to be able to identify the unstated feelings that the at-risk student may be unaware of or unwilling to acknowledge. This establishes effective and supportive communication for at-risk youth.

2. Validate

At-risk students' feelings should be respected and validated. Giving value to feelings lets the at-risk student know that they are esteemed. By restating to the student what was heard, in order to clarify understanding, gives the at-risk student opportunity to be expressive and transparent. Restatement of what was heard gives the signal that listening occurred; therefore, before validating a student, step one of the model (listening) must be successfully completed.

Validating a student's feelings does not mean to give freedom of inappropriate behavior, but rather, validating is neutralizing and normalizing a feeling. Educators must show consistency with all students. Educators must "maintain their authority, while staying connected" (Walsh, 2006, pg. 12). However, "it's important for children to see and feel that their ideas and answers are not being judged" (Church, 2006, ¶ 5).

3. Problem-Solve

When at-risk students present a dilemma, ask questions in order to create a problem-solving discussion. Questions help open the first line of connectable communication between the educator and at-risk student. Asking an at-risk student, "How can I help?" communicates the intention of caring. Many times an at-risk student will respond with "I don't know." Do not be discouraged by this statement and give some suggestions to lead the at-risk student in brainstorming.

Guiding at-risk students to take an active role in solving their problems provides life-long skills. Many times the difficulties at-risk students face, are difficulties they can also solve. "Because people are part of dynamic systems, they help shape solutions as much as they contribute to problems" (Robinson & Kakela, 2006, pg. 202). Having a personal working relationship with an at-risk student will lend toward an easier transition into the classroom environment. At-risk students need to be respected, when deserved, in order to be active participants in their learning. With respect to the Brown-Skinner model, steps one and two must be successfully completed.

4. Positive Regard

Showing at-risk students positive regard, unconditional caring, is the best way to create a trusting environment. "Positive regard also attempts to build a positive classroom climate where student behavior and performance are recognized and acknowledged by the teacher" (Walsh, 2006, pg. 14). At-risk students often test educators for negative reactions. At-risk students have often had their trust violated, which leads them to not trusting others. "To build trust, which increases learning, there must be honesty. People trust others who are honest" (Sommers, 2007, ¶ 2). Educators must be consistent in showing at-risk students how much they care, even during trying times. Taking a personal interest in an at-risk student's life by asking questions to determine well being encourages them to move forward as individuals and with their relationship. Building on steps one, two, and three will have convinced the at-risk student that the educator is genuine and sincere. Be careful in moving too quickly through the Brown-Skinner model, as these at-risk students are more cautious in trusting. Being patient with at-risk students is crucial in building a relationship.

Building relationships with at-risk students requires the educator to take a personal interest in the students' lives. Letting at-risk students know they are cared about when they

are pushing away is almost impossible, but it is a powerful tool to reach them. It is imperative not to take their "I don't care" attitude personally because it is not about the educator; it is usually a defense mechanism that is usually about their personal lives and hurdles.

5. <u>Hope</u>

The culmination of the Brown-Skinner model is hope. Once steps one through four have been established with the at-risk student, and a relationship has been built, hope can be fostered. At-risk students need hope; to believe that something good may happen and there is the possibility for a better future. Hope needs to be established that educators do care, and that education can be the avenue for future success. Truly believing that their situations have the opportunity to improve instills a desire to try. Educators are put in powerful positions to nurture an at-risk student's dream of a better life.

At-risk students demonstrate negative behaviors that are about their personal situations. Connecting and building relationships with at-risk students is not an easy task but it is necessary to gain "an understanding of what is occurring in the daily lives of these students" (Britt, Thomas, Blackbourn, Blackbourn, Papason, Tyler, & Williams, 2005-2006, pg. 1). Negative behavior is often times the manifestation of many personal struggles throughout the at-risk student's life.

Learning about at-risk students as individuals humanizes the educational process. It takes a daily effort to make a connection with students; an authentic educator can capture the trust of at-risk students by being honest. "Paying attention to areas of interest, emotional states, frustration levels, and behavior patterns provide access points into their (at-risk students) worlds" enabling educators to get to know their at-risk students and reengage their learning process (Walsh, 2006, pg. 7). Maintaining communication, engaging student learning, and being in a consistent environment are the underlying fundamental boundaries all students must have to take an active role in the education process. Consistency gives proof to students that dependability is a constant.

Functional Model Description

The threads connecting the outer diameter of the model represent interconnectedness through out the model culminating in the image of a shield. The combination of threads unveils a shield of hope. Through the Brown-Skinner model, an avenue can be opened for the child and educator to preserve and break through barriers that distract the success of at-risk students. The diamond represents the potential of at-risk students. Educators must begin to look at the student at-risk as a valuable unfinished product and find ways to cultivate these "diamonds in the rough" into productive members of society. In essence, each line represents interconnectedness between each step that when combined creates a shield of hope. Once a child has been successfully listened to, a connection can be made to validate. Once the child has been successfully validated, a connection can be made to problem solve. Once the child has successfully problem solved, a connection can be made for positive regard, which in turn confirms the student's feeling of being

reached and then creates the shield of hope. Hope is a covenant that allows the child to be their best selves.
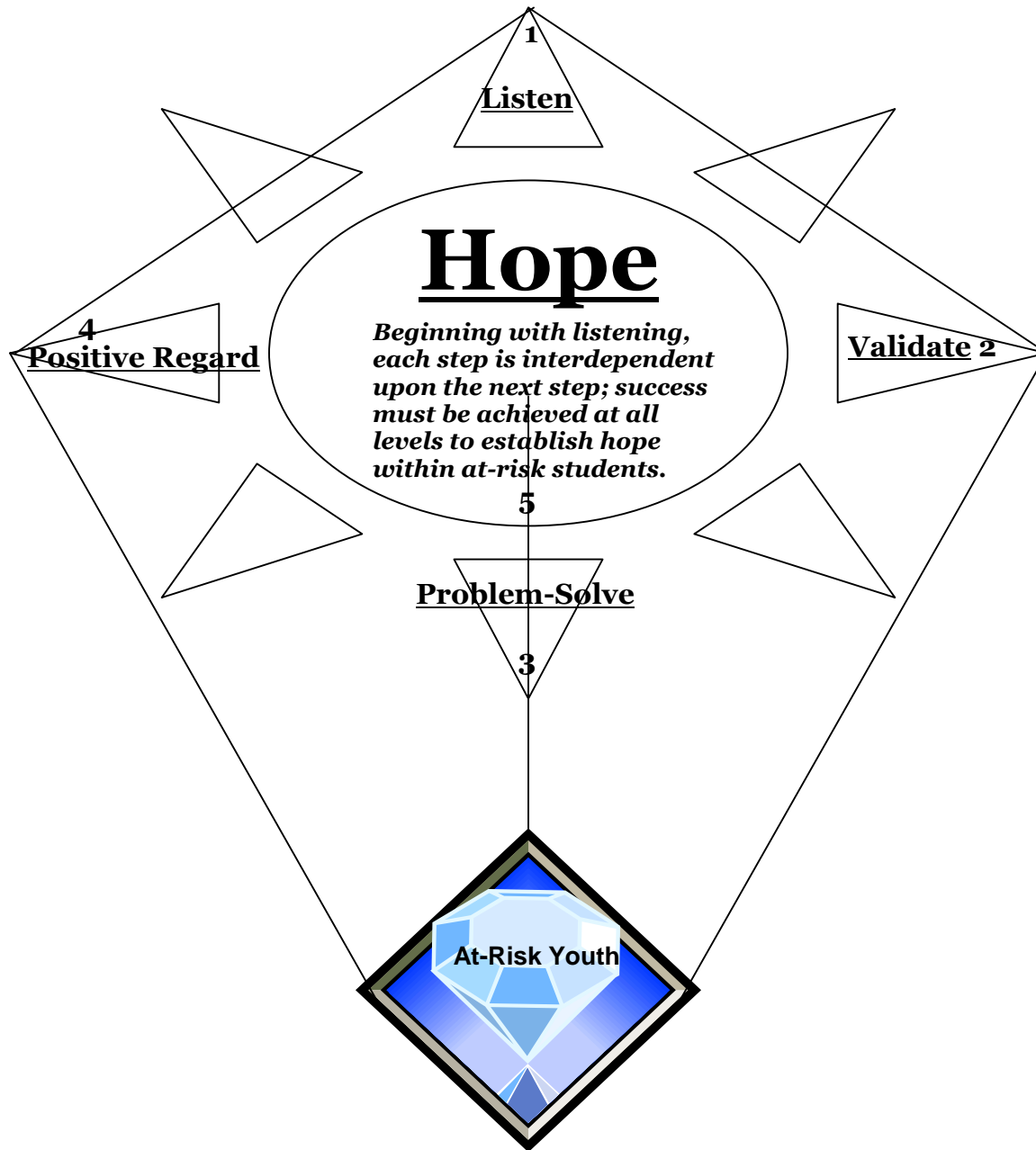
Model in Action

For example, an at-risk student comes to you with disheartening information and you are not sure what to do - this is an excellent time to put Brown-Skinner's Building Trust with at-risk student's model to work. The first step the educator would take is to **listen**. By listening empathetically you acknowledge the student's plea for help. You instantly move to the next step of **validation**, which shows the student that you truly care and value their feelings/emotions. This step propels both student and teacher into the third step **problem solve**, which provides the educator and student with tools to address the issue at hand. The problem solve step creates a seamless connection to step four, **positive regard**. This step instills the last step of **hope** in the mind and heart of the student at-risk. Fostering a sense of hope gives the students a chance to live a better life for themselves and completes the five-step process. All students deserve a chance and with Brown-Skinner's model educators and people around the world can achieve what once seemed impossible, possible.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, building trust with at-risk students is a necessary step towards improving their experience in the educational environment. As educators we must find ways to cement gaps and help improve the lives of students. "It is imperative that educators find more satisfactory ways of instilling a desire for lifelong learning". (Britt, Thomas, Blackbourn, Blackbourn, Papason, Tyler, & Williams, 2005-2006, pg. 2). One way of instilling a desire for learning is to build a relationship of trust between the educator and the at-risk student. Brown-Skinner's model effectively identifies the basic elements of trust and bridges the gap between trust building and instilling other positive elements, such as hope, that provide a solid foundation for improving communication during the learning experience. For educators to truly make a difference in the lives of children, especially those at-risk, one of the most important things we can do is lend them an ear; sometimes it may be necessary for us to demonstrate that we "hear them" before they hear us.

Brown-Skinner Model for Building Trust with At-Risk Students

1

Listen

Hope

Beginning with listening, each step is interdependent upon the next step; success must be achieved at all levels to establish hope within at-risk students.

4
Positive Regard

Validate 2

5

Problem-Solve

3

At-Risk Youth

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