Affect Attunement

Why Is This Strategy Useful?

Research has proven that there is a strong relationship between academic achievement and social-emotional skills. In addition, the lack of social-emotional skills may limit academic success. Educators should focus on the social skills necessary for relationships to the extent that those skills enhance cognitive development and learning. “Affect Attunement” is one strategy educators may consider in order to create a learning environment in which students build an emotional attachment to their learning material, often with use of drama techniques. Essentially, “Affect Attunement” is a process through which teachers focus closely on the level of emotional engagement of students; the instructional result is the variation of intensity, timing, and topic focus in response to students’ affect. Fostering affect attunement is a strategy teachers can utilize with elementary students of all ability levels.

Description of Strategy

Attunement in the classroom is promoted by recognizing that teaching is an emotional activity, creating opportunities for free emotional expression, encouraging emotions that are appropriate for the material being studied, being sensitive to individual students’ needs, becoming emotionally involved with students, reducing power differences, and varying activities that balance emotional and cognitive involvement. Teachers should use affect attunement activities to promote a comfort level between teacher and students. Affect attunement activities should encourage freedom of movement and the elicitation of emotions so that spontaneous focusing on one another can occur. Teachers can use drama techniques to accomplish that task. For example, students may move their desks to the side and used the open area for kinesthetically and affectively based role playing, pretend, and creative activities. Also, students may be asked to invent activities using materials from the textbook to engage with the teacher and one another in a playful manner, role playing improvised scenarios given to them by the teacher. During affect attunement instruction times, there should be no written assignments; instead teachers should try to create an emotional attachment to the content material.

Research Evidence

At least one quasi-experimental design study supports this strategy. The purposes of the study were (a) to examine the effect of teacher-student attunement in the classroom on students’ academic achievement and (b) to determine whether this attunement differentially affects the academic performances of students with and without learning disabilities. Participants were 31 students with learning disabilities and 147 students without learning disabilities in the 4th grade. In the non-attuned condition, students were exposed to a traditional approach to teaching that emphasized cognitive and general classroom involvement with the materials. That is, they read the information in textbooks and watched videos, talked about the subject in class and in groups, and wrote about it on worksheets or in journals. Students sat at their desks for a majority of the lesson. In contrast, the attuned condition occurred in a situation that was non-stressful and would elicit low levels of anxiety. It was designed to allow mirroring and empathic responding, safety in expressing emotions, and emotional involvement with the teacher and materials. Results indicated that drama techniques do facilitate teacher-student attunement and that this attuned teaching has a considerably greater impact on academic performance than on traditional teaching. Also proven was the greater the frequency of attunement a student experienced with the teacher, the greater the improvement in academic performance.
Sample Studies Supporting this Strategy


The effect of teacher-student attunement on the academic performance of students with and without learning disabilities was examined in this study. Participants were 178 4th grade students (matched on age and gender). They were systematically exposed to 2 teaching approaches-attuned vs. non-attuned (traditional) at different times using different academic contents (mathematics and social studies). Teaching transpired within 8 naturally occurring classrooms; students were given pre- and posttests to assess their learning. A manipulation check indicated that the attuned teaching resulted in significantly more teacher-student attunement than did the non-attuned condition. The attuned teaching condition significantly improved academic performance over non-attuned teaching. When exposed to attuned teaching, girls without learning disabilities exhibited significantly greater improvement than did girls with learning disabilities. The findings were consistent with the suggestions of several writers, researchers, and educators who suggested that emotional connection to the teacher and materials through promoting active student emotional involvement and creativity can improve academic performance.

Additional Resources