

Peter Brunn on bullying, school climate, and student achievement

Categories: Uncategorized

In *The Lesson Planning Handbook*, Peter Brunn reacts to the terrifying statistical prevalence of bullying and violence at one urban elementary school. "Does anyone think for a minute that students' thinking and in-school behavior are not affected by this climate?" he asks. He goes on to explain the implications and to describe the critical role community and relationship building play in students' learning and in the life of a school:

In 2008, the San Francisco Chronicle ran a story about a first grader who was reportedly victimized at an Oakland elementary school. It was a disturbing account of bullying and violence at the school. According to the article, a first grader got into an altercation with a fifth grader and ended up in intensive care (Asimov, 2008). The same day, the Oakland Tribune shared some disturbing statistics from the school. "The school, with 344 students, had 312 suspensions last year, 97 of which were for violent incidents, according to the CDE report" (Bender, 2008). These numbers are staggering. How does this happen? I have spent the past few weeks haunted by the numbers, trying to understand the implications so many suspensions might have on a school.

Let's say for the sake of argument that for each act of violence that caused a suspension there had to be at least two students involved: the one suspended and another against whom the violent act was committed. That means that, at a minimum, 194 of the school's 344 students were involved in acts of violence that required suspension that year. If I add into the equation the number of kids who witnessed the events, who, one might argue, are also victims, the number jumps even higher. Finally, I thought about the number of nonviolent acts of bullying and teasing that may have occurred on the playground, in the hallways, and in the classrooms that go unreported, and my head started spinning. How are those students going to come into classrooms and do the thinking they need to be successful? What kind of after-effects do these events have on teaching and learning? Ask yourself what kind of impact this might have on a school. Does anyone think for a minute that students' thinking and in-school behavior are not affected by this climate? The Learning First Alliance reports, "Nationwide, 27 percent of teachers say that student misbehavior keeps them from teaching a fair amount to a great deal of the time" (p. A1, 2001).

Thoughtful, engaged learning occurs in classrooms and schools that support safety and community. To build community, we have to plan for it. It does not happen by accident. It is not easy to do. There is no magic formula for creating a safe and caring place. It begins the first day and requires attention every day until school is out. Relationships in our schools and classrooms are no different than other relationships in the world. If they are not consistently maintained, they can break down. None of the activities in this

chapter, alone, will build the kind of classrooms we dream about. It is the combination of them that works together to create a caring place for children and adults. We can't expect students to take risks and dig deep in their souls to learn together if they do not care about one another. Throughout this book, I have talked a great deal about the need to be intentional-about our academic objectives as well as our social ones. These intentional steps make the difference between lessons that shine with the brilliance of student thinking and ones that are void of imagination. It is our choice. We do make the difference.

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To learn more about creating a classroom environment that promotes academic success, get your copy of *The Lesson Planning Handbook*, or connect with Peter and other like-minded educators on Facebook.