Establishing a Positive Teaching and Learning Environment

Module 10

Thomas Monaghan, MS Ed

Old Dominion University

Series Editors

Irene Walker-Bolton
Virginia Department of Education
Richmond, VA

Robert A. Gable
Old Dominion University
Norfolk, VA

Stephen W. Tonelson
Old Dominion University
Norfolk, VA

Pat Woolard
Old Dominion University
Norfolk, VA

Virginia Department of Education Division of Special Education and Student Services
Web site: www.doe.virginia.gov/special_ed

When Derek arrived at class Tuesday morning he barely participated in morning activities, preferring to lay his head on his desk and refusing to do what he was told. During morning independent writing, Derek balled up his paper and tossed it across the room claiming the assignment was too hard. When I told him to pick up his paper he grabbed the pencil from the student seated next to him, broke it in two, and tossed it on the floor. When I asked him to explain himself he yelled out that he hated school and everyone in it then ran out into the hallway. I spent the remainder of the day trying to calm him down and maintain order in the classroom, but I'm still at a loss to figure out what set him off.

> *"The day of opening a school is an eventful day to the young teacher. The children to the number of a half a hundred all turn their inquiring eyes to him for occupation and direction. They have come full of interest in the prospects of the new school, ready to engage cheerfully in whatever plans the teacher may have to propose; and, I was about to say, just as ready to arrange and carry into effect their own plans of disorder and misrule, if they, unhappily for him and for themselves, find he has no system to introduce"* (Page, 1858, p. 216).

Mr. Page's assertion that teacher failure to hope for the best but plan for the worse can lead to undesired consequences. A steady increase in challenging behaviors within general and special education classrooms—resulting in a subsequent rise in time spent addressing undesired behavior and anti-social tendencies—has necessitated an instructional environment that emphasizes social competence. However, before introducing any intervention to promote positive social skills and appropriate behaviors, it is essential for classroom teachers, special educators, and support personnel to establish a climate supportive to the successful learning and teaching for all students (Meadan & Monda-Amaya, 2008).

The classroom context is a significant factor regarding student behavior. The more positive the learning environment, the fewer the behavior problems; in contrast, the more aversive the learning environment, the more intense the misbehavior likely will be. The first casualty of this aversive environment is student engagement. With diminished engagement, the student-teacher relationship suffers, contributing to slowed or stalled academic progress. It is important to

understand that before changes in behavior can be initiated, changes in environmental and instructional variables must be undertaken (Sutherland, Lewis-Palmer, Stichter, & Morgan, 2008). These variables can take many forms. These forms can be physical (room arrangement), sensory (lighting and sound), social (interaction between classmates and teachers), academic (presentation and demands of instruction), events (field trips and early release), and other influences. For example, the primary means of instruction in today's schools is through oral communication, but the ability of students to "tune out" background noise is not fully developed until the teenage years (Klatte, Hellbruck, Seidel, & Leistner, 2010). The effectiveness of daily instruction is increased when teachers understand the needs of their students and adjust classroom variables accordingly.

Sometimes a teacher can disregard the classroom context when assessing problem behavior. In Derek's case, his teacher was quick to point out his misbehavior as a result of difficulty with his morning assignments. By choosing to focus on Derek's reaction to the writing assignment and not the origin of the problem, the teacher neglected a fundamental task of behavioral assessment: observing classroom variables that might have influenced his behavior. Indeed, assessment of environmental factors is one of the two significant areas of focus when conducting a functional behavioral assessment. Within this focus, behavior is deemed the result of adaptation to environmental conditions in the classroom and throughout the school (Horner & Carr, 1997). Assessing the influence of classroom variables on Derek's behavior is the first step toward devising classroom interventions that will support and promote an environment dedicated to successful teaching and learning.

Creating a supportive climate for successful teaching and learning is essential to student academic success. Even the most carefully crafted lesson plan presented with the most effective instructional strategies can fail in an environment that lacks the necessary ingredients for academic encouragement and growth. Cultivating a positive classroom climate is a multi-faceted task that extends beyond the classroom. This process involves four distinct dimensions: (1) the psychosocial dimension, (2) the physical dimension, (3) the personnel dimension, and (4) the procedural dimension (Miller, 2009). We will now explore these dimensions individually.

Establishing a Positive Teaching and Learning Environment

At the start of the year, Derek's teacher took proactive steps to understand and prepare for the needs of his students. Prior to the first day of school, he reached out to the parents of his students and reviewed each student's IEP. He jotted down notes as he progressed, making certain to review the accommodations and services required for his students. He even prepared a special questionnaire with questions about their likes, dislikes, and other relevant personal facts that students' filled out on the first day of class. He collected data on his students' interactions with each other and observed their personalities and reactions to instruction. Based on this information, he attempted to accommodate the needs of his students within the classroom and was convinced his efforts would suffice. Unfortunately, as the days and weeks progressed—and the workload both inside and outside the classroom grew—his reliance upon this information diminished.

On Tuesday morning, Derek's teacher arrived late to school. He remembered to bring the materials for the faculty meeting later in the day but left his revised lesson plans on the kitchen table. Before he walked into the classroom he was already stressed. The morning exercises seemed contrived, disorganized, and presented haphazardly. By independent writing time, most students were confused and frustrated.. He offered minimal effort toward keeping order in the classroom, even allowing his students to choose their own seats. Bill, a notorious passive-aggressive pencil-tapper, sat down beside Derek. Bill, who enjoyed getting a reaction out of Derek, tapped his pencil on his desk whenever he thought the teacher wasn't watching, which was often since the teacher was occupied with reviewing his notes for the faculty meeting. With no clear directions and a virtual absence of supervision, the students paid little attention to their writing assignment. Aggravated with Bill's incessant tapping—as well as all the other distractions throughout the classroom—Derek could take no more and lashed out.

The Psychosocial Dimension

One of the most effective means for teachers to create and maintain a positive environment for promoting desirable behavior is to cultivate a supportive and sustainable relationship with their students. A student who perceives a supportive relationship with adults as essential to personal growth will endeavor to be successful. In fact, relationships, care, and respect are three attributes identified by students as essential for a supportive classroom environment. When either one or several of these attributes is not present, students tend not to reciprocate. That is, a student who perceives his teacher as disrespectful will show disrespect in return (Mihalas, Morse, Allsopp, & McHatton, 2009).

There are many strategies teachers can use to improve the psychosocial dimension in their classrooms. Teachers can begin by maintaining a positive atmosphere. It is an easy tendency to reflect upon the negatives within the classroom when an emphasis on positives will render more desired results. Building strong, meaningful, and positive relationships has clearly demonstrated an increase in student acceptable behavior, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and academic performance so it is important to cultivate an environment that rewards success (Brown, 2005). To monitor the effectiveness of instruction, teachers might tape a lesson for later review or have a co-teacher or paraeducator take notes on your presentation. By doing so, teachers will have a clearer understanding of instructional methods and be more aware of how often to give positive support and feedback to students (Yell, Meadows, Drasgow, & Shriner, 2009).

For healthy psychosocial growth and maintenance, it is essential for students to feel accepted and an important participant in classroom activities. The student who feels accepted within the classroom and also is actively engaged shows notable progress behaviorally and academically over his fellow classmates who do not (Ding & Hall, 2009). The teacher can help make this happen by using community-building techniques, such as having the students take on responsibilities and work on assignments in groups or as a community. Teachers can foster a classroom work ethic in which the teacher and students forge a partnership to ensure that all students receive the instruction they deserve, perform at their best, are appreciated for their contributions, take responsibility for the well-being and progress of their fellow classmates, and

contribute to maintaining the classroom as a safe place for everyone (Vernon, Deshler, & Schumaker, 2000).

Teachers can implement any number of evidence-based practices to maintain a culture of support and success with their classrooms. These methods can be categorized into low-intensity, medium-intensity, or high-intensity techniques.

Low-Intensity Techniques

Establish clear, concise, and strictly-enforced class rules. These rules should be limited in number (no more than five), stated positively, aligned with activity goals, and displayed in an easily accessible location. Class rules not only promote order in the classroom and student responsibility, but also allow teachers to use praise statements as a positive means of enforcing the class rules.

Implement planned ignoring as a behavior intervention. Planned ignoring should be reserved for those students who desire attention as their primary motivator for unacceptable behavior. By eliminating the reinforcement these students seek (attention) they eventually will realize the behavior will no longer be worth the effort. However, the teacher must be prepared for an initial increase in number and intensity of the problem behavior shortly after the implementation of a planned ignoring.

Offer direct and specific praise statements. As noted earlier, praise is a powerful reinforcer. Praise should be reserved for appropriate behavior and delivered in a sincere manner. Teachers should take particular care to refer to the appropriate behavior in their praise statements and vary their statements so as not to dilute the value of a particular statement because of overuse.

Medium-Intensity Techniques

Establish a contingency contract with the students in regard to acceptable behavior within the classroom. By employing the "Premack Principle" (Homme, deBacha, Devine, Steinhorst & Richert, 1963) teachers can pair preferred activities with non-preferred activities—such as computer time for listening quietly to the teacher—as a means to maintain order within the classroom. These contracts should include the desired behavior, terms of the agreement (duration of desired behavior, time frame of the contract, etc.), statement of reinforcer (the student's preferred activity), and signatures of both the student and teacher. A significant advantage of contracts is that they are easy to understand and can be easily adapted to different behavioral contexts.

Teachers can also implement a self-management strategy by presenting students with a tally sheet or other recording device to keep track of a particular behavior. In this way, students can maintain a record of their behavior that shows the frequency of the behavior. Students can then share this information with their teacher as a basis for rewards for behavioral progress or necessary adjustments based upon past behavior patterns. Self-monitoring helps students to

develop responsibility through emphasis on self-evaluation, self-monitoring, and self-reinforcement. However, it is important for teachers to decide which methods will work best for their students. Teachers should first select the target behavior and then the recording method best suited to monitoring the behavior. Next, provide the student with an appropriate tally sheet or other recording method. Develop a system for self-evaluation and self-reinforcement then talk with the student to select an appropriate reinforcer. Teach how to self-monitor, self-evaluate, and self-reinforce and give the student ample time to practice prior to implementation of the program. Begin the program and adapt the program to increase compliance, accuracy, and the integrity of the program. Discontinue the program when the student has mastered the desired behavior without the aid of the program. Self-management strategies are easily adaptable to a wide array of contexts, are suitable for students with multiple disorders and abilities, promote generalization of desired behaviors, and increase independence (McConnell, 1999).

High Intensity Techniques

When low- and medium-intensity techniques do not eliminate inappropriate student behavior, it may be necessary for the teacher to implement more extreme methods of intervention. Teachers should be cautioned that these high-intensity techniques—a school-wide management system and the Progress Program—are highly structured methods that are designed to involve more than one individual. They also require more time, planning, and resources but are more effective at improving desired behavior.

A school-wide management system involves providing support and guidance for all students. Within this system, all school personnel adopt the same strategies and procedures to ensure fair and consistent implementation of the system. A school-wide management system can be a complex technique to implement since it involves multiple variables: (1) the compliance of the entire school staff and faculty, (2) clearly defined and explicit rules and expectations for student behavior, (3) clearly defined and explicit rules for misbehavior, (4) integration of social skills training, and (5) adequate supports for students with chronic behavioral difficulties. Establishing this system is a long-term commitment that requires ongoing monitoring, training, and dedication from the entire school staff (Miller, 2009).

One final technique is the Progress Program—another high-intensity method that emphasizes the improvement and maintenance of academic progress and appropriate social skills within the classroom environment. It involves the use of awarding “home privileges” based upon a “daily report card” that contains a check list of desired behaviors and rules that the teacher marks down if the student performs as directed. Then the daily report card is taken home each day for parental review and for points to be are awarded by parents based on the teacher’s comments on the report card. Students who collect enough points may redeem them in much the same manner as a token economy system.

The Personnel Dimension

The second essential element of a supportive classroom climate for successful teaching and learning is the personnel dimension. Instruction cannot happen without qualified personnel—general education teachers, special education teachers, and paraeducators—who provide the necessary guidance, support, and encouragement for students to succeed. This process begins with training and assigning qualified personnel to provide appropriate methods of instruction. Within the personnel dimension the two typical professional collaborations observed are the coteaching model and the paraeducator model.

Coteaching is instruction presented by two or more education professionals to a single group of diverse students. Within the context of the coteaching model, four components are necessary: (1) at least two education professionals, typically a general educator and a special educator, (2) the implementation of joint instruction, (3) an inclusive (heterogeneous) group of students, and (4) a single classroom environment. Furthermore, several distinct variations of coteaching have emerged: leading and assisting (one teacher acts as instructor while the other assists), station teaching (the teachers divide the students into smaller groups based on content), parallel teaching (the teachers divide the students into smaller groups and teach the same content), alternative teaching (one teacher provides different instruction to a smaller group), and team teaching (both teachers instruct together by relying upon each others strengths for the most effective presentation). Studies have shown no particular version of the coteaching method produces the best results, but the trust, planning, and collaboration between teachers in a coteaching relationship strengthen instructional methods (Cook & Friend, 1995).

Cook and Friend further identify six critical characteristics of collaborative teaching: (1) collaborative teaching is voluntary, (2) it requires participants to contribute equally, (3) the process must involve mutually established goals, (4) it requires shared responsibility for planning, participation and evaluation, (5) it requires shared resources, and (6) it requires shared accountability (Cook & Friend, 1995). This means coteachers are collaborators in every sense. Both participants must rely upon their ability to communicate effectively, support their instruction equally, problem-solve as a team, and combine their planning skills to design concise and appropriate lesson plans. Coteachers must be good listeners and be able to judge the reactions of their students to gauge their attentiveness to instruction and modify lessons accordingly. Coteachers must be able to establish concise classroom rules and routines, offer equal and specific feedback, and establish learning groups and peer-tutoring teams based on need and skill. Coteachers must also utilize engaging instructional methods such as a variety of examples, emphasizing critical features, using multimedia formats, and building upon background knowledge to support instruction (Boyle & Scanlon, 2010).

Regardless of the coteaching method, there are seven distinct steps instructors should follow. First, establish the planning team. This involves identifying who will be involved in the planning process and if it will be limited to a single class or the entire school staff. Next, define the program. This is when the parameters of the program are discussed and refined. Third, set the program goals and objectives. Here, the planners specify the needs of the participating students and the benchmarks for success. Fourth, establish a set of criteria for eligibility and select

participating students from this group based on those who would benefit most. Fifth, clearly define and assign the roles and responsibilities of the participating educators based on experience and ability. Sixth, list the services and supports to be included in the program based on the scope of the program and the needs of the students. Finally, design and implement a method of measuring the academic achievement of the participating students. This should be an ongoing process of observation and evaluation aimed at improving the effectiveness of the program, instructional delivery, and student performance (Cook & Friend, 1995).

One final important contributor to a healthy personnel dimension is the paraeductor. With the dramatic increase in students with challenging behavior in our schools over the past three decades, combined with a shortage of qualified special educators and a growing emphasis on inclusion, the paraeducator has become an important part of special education instruction. Within inclusion and self-contained classrooms, the primary responsibility of the paraeducator is to implement instructional programs developed by the special educator. Often relying on on-the-job or prior experience, paraeducators are being asked to take on ever increasing responsibilities for the education of students with disabilities; however, it is the responsibility of the special educator to coordinate and supervise the performance of the paraeducator. This requires the paraeducator and special educator to maintain a close professional relationship that includes constant communication, careful planning and coordination, and sincere trust and support (Fisher & Pleasants, 2011).

The Physical Dimension

The physical dimension, or the physical arrangement of the classroom, often is the instructional domain teachers first contemplate when creating a supportive climate for successful teaching and learning. Of all the elements that contribute to a supportive academic environment, the physical arrangement of the classroom is probably the most common in the public domain. Numerous websites are dedicated to the task (such as the National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities website at www.edfacilities.org) as well as professional publications (such as *School Planning and Management* and *Educational Facility Planner*). Despite research resulting in a large number of recommended practices, there are a few basic strategies that lend significant results.

The most obvious physical element in the classroom is the seating arrangement. Four popular options from which to choose include: traditional, semicircular or U-shaped, rows of tables faced-forward, and desk clusters. Students in a traditional seating arrangement (seats arranged in rows facing the instructor) encourage on-task behavior through means of teacher-centric instruction since the instructor provides the primary focus of attention within the classroom. The semicircular arrangement (desks aligned in a semicircular pattern facing the teacher) also offers a teacher-centric instruction; however, since students also face each other, this arrangement provides a sense of community by promoting social interaction that results in increased student participation. Cluster arrangements (two to six desks or tables clustered together with students facing each other) are usually employed in smaller classrooms and provide a student-centric learning environment. Students in a cluster arrangement are more likely to collaborate together on assignments and provide a support network for struggling students. In the rows faced-forward

arrangement student participation and teacher interaction varies depending on the row. The front and middle rows usually receive most of the teacher's attention, which the students reciprocate with increased interaction, while students in the back rows are sometimes overlooked and receive less teacher interaction (Kaya & Burgess, 2007).

Teachers who employ a row seating arrangement have a higher tendency to lecture and dictate instructions, while their colleagues using circular or semicircular arrangements employ more interactivity and collaboration. The row arrangement has also been shown to increase on-task behavior and decrease misbehavior when compared to the cluster formation, which promotes a considerably higher propensity for misbehavior. Teachers also tend to offer more positive feedback in the row seating arrangement (Ridling, 1994; Wheldall & Lam, 1987). Unfortunately, there is no single arrangement that maximizes student on-task behavior, student collaboration, and teacher interaction. Teachers who know the needs and abilities of their students can derive the best arrangement based upon the advantages and disadvantages of each seating arrangement and applying the most appropriate method for effective instruction within their classrooms.

When considering seating arrangements, teachers also are advised to be aware of cultural diversity and co-morbidity considerations. For instance, students from Native American cultures value cooperation and teamwork, while those from Latino families may prefer a more fluid learning environment so clusters, semicircular, circular, and split-half configurations may be most appropriate. Seat students with a light sensitivity in areas aware from glare and bright lights and those who are hard of hearing that require lip reading in semicircular arrangements. Students using wheel chairs need to have at least 32" of width to maneuver about the classroom. Place students with escape tendencies close to the teacher or in quieter locations away from the doorway. Since some students have social skills deficiencies, ample opportunities for peer interaction are important. No matter the arrangement, the safety of the students is the most critical consideration, especially when setting up special activity areas such as: computer stations, learning centers, and reading corners. Teachers should choose the right layout that minimizes clutter, crowding, and other obstructions. Desks, tables, bookcases, and cabinets need to be away from high traffic areas such as doorways, the pencil-sharpener, and teacher's desk. Finally, in that students with behavioral difficulties benefit when they have opportunities to interact with classmates who model appropriate behavior, teachers may want to design a physical dimension that will encourage these peer-peer interactions (Miller, 2009).

The Procedural Dimension

The fourth and final critical element of a supportive classroom climate is the procedural dimension, which is a direct result of the personnel dimension within the constraints of the physical and psychosocial dimensions. Every teacher has the opportunity to set the tone, schedule, and pace of classroom activities. Without effective structure, guidance and supervision, a climate supportive to successful teaching and learning will not exist. By establishing structure and organization inside the classroom, the procedural dimension provides the foundation for the encouragement and growth of a healthy academic environment. Organization and structure begins with the teacher's skills at managing time and paperwork (Miller, 2009).

At the very heart of successful learning is Academic Learning Time (ALT): the amount of time a student is engaged in core academic skills. ALT involves three elements: allocated time (total time devoted to the activity), engaged time (actual time students participate in the activity), and student success (appropriateness of the activity). Since academic achievement is directly related to time on task, the goal is to maximize student ALT (Mulholland & Cepello, 2006). With proper planning and organization, it is possible to minimize these problems. The following are factors to consider for maximizing instructional time.

The most critical consideration when maximizing available instructional time is academic scheduling. The academic schedule not only states what will be taught, but also allocates the amount of time spent on instructional activities. Unstructured time is a major contributor to inappropriate behavior so it is important for teachers to reduce the likelihood of problem behaviors by establishing brief, concise, and easily understandable daily schedules that allot no less than 70% of available time to instructional activities (Trussell, 2008). Clearly defined and posted schedules can reduce student off-task behavior and facilitate fast paced instruction and orderly transitions. In that daily transitions between activities can consume up to 20% of available instructional time, teachers should strictly enforce lesson presentations and transitions. This requires teachers to be expert time managers not only during lessons, but transitions as well (Miller, 2009).

The first part of the equation is efficient instructional scheduling. According to Miller (2009), the most common scheduling options available to teachers are traditional scheduling and block scheduling. Traditional scheduling involves two sets of schedules: one for the whole school day and the other for individual class periods. When planning a whole-day schedule, teachers should ensure that instructional goals and student interactions are integrated into the lesson plans, difficult topics are taught when the students are most alert, and non-preferred topics are alternated with preferred topics. Teachers should post and discuss the schedule with their students and share them with their parents, so that everyone is aware of what to expect. If any changes need to be made in the schedule, students should be informed in advance. Teachers should provide time reminders for their students by using either sound cues (timers, whistles, bells, etc.) or gestures. For class scheduling, teachers can maintain student engagement by planning a series of short activities of varied interest to the students and differing lengths of time dependent on their attention and needs. Organize schedules so that preferred activities occur after non-preferred activities and are adaptable to changing academic situations. Teachers should include additional content for students who quickly master the lesson topic. For both schedule regimens, teachers should begin with an activity that is motivating to all students and plan transitions with care.

Managing transitions effectively is the next critical element of schedule planning. According to Miller (2009), four distinct types of transitions occur during the school day: within-task transitions, activity transitions, within-class transitions, and within-school transitions. Each transition poses challenges to both teachers and students. Considering the amount of time associated with transitions, each should be managed with precision and care.

Within-task transitions happen during individual lessons. This is the transition that occurs between each step in an activity (such as between each step in a math sequence or writing

assignment). The pause between each step constitutes a brief transition. Over the course of the lesson, these brief pauses add up. As assignments progress, students tend to take extended periods of time (or breaks) between math problems or written sentences. To minimize these pauses, teachers can implement a "high-p" (high probability) intervention which presents students with a series of brief tasks with a high probability of completion followed by a task with a low probability of completion ("low-p"). Teachers using this method have seen less transition time to non-preferred tasks (Lee, 2006), especially when students can earn tokens or points for the completion of low-p tasks (Miller, 2009).

Activity transitions occur from one activity to the next. As noted earlier with class schedules, the teacher should regularly remind students about class schedules as a way to reduce transition durations. When students are aware of what's next, it takes them less time to prepare. When discussing schedules with students, it is helpful to be direct and specific. Remind students beforehand and tell them exactly how long they have between activities. Use of the "high-p" strategy at the conclusion of lessons also will ease the transition process. Finally, teachers should not forget to acknowledge students for efficiency and compliance with instructions.

Within-class transitions occur from one location in the classroom to next. This can include walking from a student's desk to the reading corner or from the teacher's desk to the word wall. Along with concise rules for transition, alarms, clocks or other timing devices can be helpful to facilitate the transition process. When the alarm goes off, have the students stand up silently and, at the teacher's signal, a student designated as the "counter" will begin counting down. Have the students walk in a prompt and orderly fashion to their next station before the "counter" is finished his count.

Another critical consideration for maintaining a supportive academic environment is the organization of instructional materials and paperwork. When selecting effective educational materials for students with diverse needs, variety is essential. Teachers should also ensure that materials are research-based and contain six important validated features: big ideas, conspicuous strategies, judicious review, mediated scaffolding, primed background knowledge, and strategic integrations. Big ideas are the core content areas (math, reading, science and social studies) and materials that include the broadest range of big idea topics are most effective. Conspicuous learning strategies are strategies that are explicitly explained within the content of the materials and provide students with low cognitive ability a guide for problem solving. Judicious review refers to instructional materials that offer students multiple opportunities for review which enhances skills for remembering content and procedures. Mediated scaffolding provides adequate supports for learning including guided practice, modeling, corrective feedback, and graduated transitions from teacher instruction to independent practice. Primed background knowledge refers to materials that include tools to assess and recall previously learned information critical to the current lesson. Finally, strategic integration involves the combination of separate elements of prior knowledge into a cohesive whole in order to learn new and more complex concepts (Coyne, Kame'enui, & Carnine, 2010).

The teacher should also establish an efficient system for collecting, grading, and distributing tests, homework, and other assignments. One strategy is to involve the students in the process. Appoint a few of the students as "zone leaders" who are responsible for the distribution and

collection of assignments and other instructional materials. Assigning students to this task not only improves responsibility skills and transition efficiency, but also allows teachers more time to transition as well. One effective grading strategy involves on-the-spot assessment. Instead of waiting until the end of the assignment to collect and grade the students' work, teachers can evaluate their progress as they walk from desk to desk. This method will allow teachers to provide guidance, supervision, and instant feedback, especially for students who need additional assistance. Another method is for students to grade their own work. This can be accomplished either by supplying students with an answer key following completion of the task or by swapping papers with another student and grading them either with an answer key or the teacher's oral responses. Teachers may wish to conduct regular 'reliability checks' regarding the accuracy of student grading.

In all, there are a wide range of strategies teachers can use to establish a positive teaching and learning environment and there is mounting evidence that such an environment contributes to improved student outcomes.

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