



## Tapping Innate Resilience in Today's Classrooms



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*Health Realization, evolving from Roger Mill's application of the principles of a new wellness paradigm in psychology (Psychology of Mind) to the prevention, early intervention, and community development arenas, offers perhaps the most compelling explanation of the process of tapping innate resilience. In distinction from many pathology-based paradigms, Health Realization identifies an innate capacity for understanding and well-being within every individual. While life experiences may result in burying this capacity, making it less available, Health Realization asserts it always exists and is directly accessible. Accessing this healthy thought process has been shown to provide a solid immunity to deviance and health-damaging behaviors and has led to substantial and sustained improvements at the individual, family, and community levels. For example, some of the findings from pre- and post-evaluations of the 142 families and 604 youth involved in the three-year Dade County, Florida public housing project include significantly improved parent-child relationships in 87 percent of the families, a 75 percent reduction in delinquency and school-related problem behaviors, a 65 percent decrease in drug trafficking, an 80 percent decrease in teen pregnancy, a 60 percent decrease in substance abuse (Mills, *The Health Realization Model: A Community Empowerment Primer*, 1993). The goal of Health Realization is to "reconnect people to the health in themselves and then direct them in ways to bring forth the health in others. The result is a change in people and communities which builds up from within rather than being imposed from without" (Mills, 1993).*

—Bonnie Benard

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***I am the decisive element in the classroom. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher I possess the tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. In all situations it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated, a child humanized or de-humanized."* —Hiam Ginot, 1975**

A wealth of motivational and classroom management techniques have been adopted by schools and school districts across the United States. The results of these techniques, however, are less than encouraging. Today's classrooms often have a climate that un-intentionally results in a negative impact on students. From our work in inner-city schools and communities over the last 15 years, we have found that, potentially, any young person can access a healthy outlook regardless of the youth's past, or outside conditions. We know that even the most disadvantaged, at-risk students have strong self-righting capacities. Our pilot programs demonstrate that all youth potentially have, within their psychological make-up, the capacity for an intrinsic motivation to learn, along with a genuine, unforced interest in understanding and mastering the subject at hand (Mills, 1995, Mills and Pransky, 1994; Mills, Alpert and Dunham, 1988; Peck, Law and Mills, 1988).

Our experience in training teachers who work with at-risk students in what some might define as "dysfunctional" communities has convinced us that a working understanding of how this capacity for health surfaces is a tremendous asset to a teacher in the classroom. It provides teachers with a sense of hope many have lost by now—a sense that students can potentially behave with maturity and learn in their classrooms. Our measured outcomes, in schools in New York, Miami, Oakland and Denver have demonstrated that, irrespective of how alienated a youth has become, a healthy, motivated frame of mind can be re-engaged in most youth.

The general paradigm from which our health realization model is derived is known as Psychology of Mind (POM), a name given to a new understanding of how the mind processes thought to determine perception. Psychology of Mind's application model in prevention and education is Health Realization. They clarify how a youth's acquired thoughts about learning and about one's self in learning situations, when mistaken for the truth, can separate youth from their natural curiosity and contribute to alienation. The principles of POM help us to understand how their self-righting tendencies can be triggered. They provide evidence that

- thought is the source of human experience
- all people share an innate capacity for healthy psychological functioning
- there are two modes of thought—one based on learned thoughts/ memories, the other is fresh, original and imbued with insight
- health realization interventions teach people to realize healthy psychological functioning and to recognize when their mental processes become dysfunctional

## **The Job of the Teacher**

Teachers do not have to add a whole set of techniques or structure to their already large work load to engage students' healthy states of mind. We realize the teacher's primary job is to teach, not to become a social worker or psychologist as well. Certainly, the job of a teacher becomes more difficult if given the additional task of becoming a surrogate parent or counselor.

With a practical understanding of POM and health realization, a teacher can create and model atmospheres and behaviors in a school day that can significantly enhance student motivation as

well as contribute to producing the optimal climate for learning. We have found that the process of creating and maintaining an optimal learning climate makes the job of teaching less stressful and overwhelming. Our findings consistently show that creating a positive affective climate produces a classroom of more motivated students who, overall, exhibit less resistance to learning and, therefore, absorb lessons faster and with better retention (Mills, 1995; Timm, 1992; Wehlage, 1989; Maton, 1990). This approach is not a panacea, and certainly no teacher will be able to reach every student. Yet from six years of pilot programs in some of the toughest school settings, working with teachers, counselors and administrators, we were able to reduce discipline problems, school failure rates and other classroom behavioral problems by up to 80 percent (Mills, 1993).

These findings lay a foundation of understanding that revitalizes teaching itself, making the profession satisfying and productive. This model is flexible, and one that all teachers can apply using their own creativity within their own unique situations.

***As teachers become aware of thought-created sources of stress and alienation for students and themselves, they are able to deal with root causes of problems in the classroom and in the school.***

A healthy, enthusiastic, insightful mental state-what we call "free flow mode thinking" is a state where motivation and learning are natural, and it is catching. Every teacher and every student has this mode of thinking and perception "built in"-even though it may be deeply buried and seemingly inaccessible. But when teachers can access this mental state in themselves and, as a result, exhibit positive, encouraging attributes consistently, through a healthy mental perspective, they are more likely to engage their students' healthier states of mind.

As teachers become aware of thought-created sources of stress and alienation for students and themselves, they are able to deal with root causes of problems in the classroom and in the school. The more teachers learn about their own mental workings, the more excitement and job satisfaction they will discover in their classroom. Finally, understanding how to maintain their own healthy perspective, will help create a classroom atmosphere which consistently promotes cooperation, motivation, creativity, and learning. This is not a dream, for we have seen even skeptical teachers do this again and again, and with hopeful and happy results.

Simply stated, we all can be master teachers when we are in the right frame of mind. We are all poorer teachers when we are in the wrong frame of mind. (And you have probably noticed that you switch between the two to some extent.) No single teaching style appears to bind exceptional teachers. Some are traditional and some are non-traditional in their approaches. Educational theorists have found that two teachers using almost diametrically opposed techniques can encourage the same amount of learning in their students (Peck, Law and Mills, 1989). There must be another variable involved in good teaching.

No matter how alienated students are, their natural mental health, in the form of a healthy, motivated outlook, is buoyant. When adults around children are themselves secure and happy,

loving, fair and consistent, when they guide with clarity, are firm and yet non-judgmental, most children will re-engage their own natural capacity to function from their state of mental health. Conversely, children's negative, insecure thoughts, and behaviors are more likely to be triggered when insecurity, judgement, anger and other negative feelings arise in their environment. When an interaction triggers their anxieties, youth have difficulties with self-esteem and feel less of a desire to learn.

Young people are impressionable. When teachers experiences stress, they begin thinking in ways which contribute to low moods. As a result of the mood, the teacher becomes more blaming, inconsistent, angry or, depending on personality, displays other negative traits when dealing with students. The students, in turn, exhibit symptoms of insecurity. Learning, rather than being natural and enjoyable, becomes stressful and aversive.

***Imposing harsh penalties or being punitive demonstrates a lack of respect. It communicates that we do not expect them to be able to learn or to understand how to act in a mature way. There are creative ways to maintain a calm classroom atmosphere.***

Working with the Health Realization model, we've found we cannot create the changes we would like to see in our students by trying to change external situations in schools or even the behavior of teachers and students. (And what a job that would be!) There is a deeper source of the problem and a simpler, direct solution. The solution is within our control and is as simple as noticing and, eventually, taking charge of our own state of mind. If we're to make a real and lasting change in any teacher's ability to invoke the joy of learning, creativity, and motivation in students, we must direct attention to the state of mind of the teacher.

By learning how to function from higher levels of mental health more consistently, educators empower themselves. They empower themselves to alleviate their own stress; to recapture fulfillment in their work; to creatively deal with difficult students, parents and co-workers; and to see the potential in each and every student. They are empowered to create a learning environment that is challenging and inspiring; where the self-esteem and dignity of each student is enhanced; where the natural motivation and intelligence of every student is fostered; and finally, where the joy of learning is a reality.

### **Positive Steps Toward an Optimal Affective Climate**

The following down-to-earth guidelines are based on the criteria of Health Realization and outcome data from pilot programs and our work in inner-city schools over the last fifteen years. They are geared toward helping teachers create a learning climate which brings out the best in their students.

## **1. Be climate oriented versus task oriented**

If the teacher isn't in the state of mind to teach and the student isn't in the state of mind to learn, all the best lesson plans are in vain. On the other hand, in the "teachable moment" a surprising amount of teaching and learning can take place in very little time. Creating a positive affective climate isn't as big a job as most of us have imagined. One of the main things we are really talking about is simply taking better care of yourself. This is done by understanding the source of students' behavior (in their thinking) and tending to your own level of well being.

## **2. Don't take it personally**

One of the keys to maintaining our own sanity when dealing with other people is to remember that human beings are always doing the best they can given how things look to them. People act the way they do because of what they are thinking and perceiving according to their own view of reality. Insecure kids often don't see any other option but to act up and cause trouble. They do it because they don't know what else to do. From our frame of reference, it may look intentional and malicious but remember, it's just us making our own meaning out of their behavior. Whenever we become angry or frustrated with another person's behavior it is because we have interpreted it in a way that makes it seem personal to us.

## **3. Know you can engage health**

Whatever their current situation or past circumstances, students' mental health is always trying to re-emerge. Just as with us, their mental well-being is also buoyant. If this is true, and in our experience it has been, there is a natural tendency for even the most alienated youths to respond over time to consistency, clarity, firmness, empathy and affection. If we see through a student's disguise, her learned role, to her genuine capacity for enthusiasm, self-worth and learning, we find it easy to feel compassion, respect and caring. We also know enough to assist the student to regain their common sense. When we clearly see how students' thoughts about their lives are keeping them in trouble we can more easily guide them out of that maze. We can offer them alternatives and perspectives that seem realistic to us without being patronizing or impatient. We can be helpful, firm, and consistent without losing our understanding of their innocence.

## **4. Model and teach mental health**

To be able to do this, we must truly believe in the health of each and every student. We must realize that negative, acting-out behavior is a sign of insecure thought taking on the appearance of reality for students. Students are very perceptive. They notice if we are practicing what we are preaching. By not taking students' behavior personally we are showing them what the feeling of unconditional self esteem, through unconditional caring, is like. By not being impressed with their attempts to get attention, we are showing them presence of mind. By consistently showing them unconditional regard, genuine concern and interest we are demonstrating that they are worthwhile human beings. By freely offering them alternative ways of viewing things, without

commiseration and without an investment in being right, we open their minds up to a healthier point of view. Treating them with respect for their ability to think things through and come to their own conclusions shows students we trust that they have this capacity within them.

## **5. Don't be a doormat**

Some teachers think treating students with respect and encouraging them to think for themselves will cause students to walk all over them, to lose respect. Health Realization doesn't work this way. Treating students with respect does not mean letting them walk all over you. Letting students get away with disrupting the classroom is a sign of a teacher's own lack of self-respect. Expecting students to be able to understand the need for rules and some order is respectful. On the other hand, imposing harsh penalties or being punitive demonstrates a lack of respect. It communicates that we do not expect them to be able to learn or to understand how to act in a mature way. There are creative ways to maintain a calm classroom atmosphere.

Teachers tell us that once they understand how students can actually mature and learn from their experiences, they involve students in discussions about rules and reasonable consequences. They know how to appeal to their common sense and, yes, compassion for their teachers, without being patronizing or phony. They find students respond best when they follow through matter-of-factly and consistently. Teachers who discipline in this manner still feel affection and empathy for each student, even while they are administering disciplinary procedures. They find it easier to give every student the chance to be different every day, to surprise teachers by becoming more responsive or grown up.

## **6. Build relationships**

The quality of relationships always improves when we are using the understanding provided by healthy functioning. When we are functioning in our own healthier states of mind, we are curious about what the other person is thinking that causes their behavior to make sense to them. When we recognize what their thinking is telling them is happening, we are always more respectful and empathic about where they are coming from. We are also better able to disengage ourselves from their thought created reality and be more helpful, in a more neutral, less threatening way.

One of the best examples of this thought process in action in relationships came out of a training we did in Denver, Colorado. One of the participants was a school counselor who had a terrible relationship with a senior faculty member. This senior teacher was influential with other teachers. She could not get his support or endorsement of her ideas about programs for helping students function in a healthier way in school. When she worked through this dynamic of her own thoughts and how they impacted her relationship with this teacher, she saw that, acting on her first impulses and thoughts she had (A) decided he was a stick in the mud, an old-line conservative teacher whose goal was to block anything she wanted to do in the school. She had assumed the worst, and approached him with (B) feelings of frustration, impatience, and resentment. Her (C) behavior as a result consisted mainly of either confronting or avoiding him. She was irritable and more likely to get quickly into a defensive mode around him, no matter

what was being discussed. On the other side of this thought cycle, she began to see that he (D) interpreted her behavior as abrupt. He perceived that she was shortshrifting his experience and knowledge. He thought she was immature and irresponsible and would allow students to abuse teachers if she had her way. As a result, he (E) felt badly misunderstood, and (F) automatically resisted her ideas without really listening.

Once she saw the innocence of both people caught in this cycle, she could let go of some of her stereotypes and attitudes and approach him in a gentler and more open-minded way. She listened better and realized he had legitimate concerns about classroom management and school security. As she addressed these with more respect for his experience, he in turn became more responsive and supportive of her ideas, and even tried some new things in his classroom.

## **7. Practice effective discipline**

Tending to your state of mind does not mean ignoring the negative behavior of others. Sometimes students need limits to their behavior. They may be so upset we can't calm them down or get through to them. At these times, it helps most to be firm and no-nonsense, but not disrespectful or judgmental. Take whatever steps necessary to maintain control and protect the teaching environment.

The most effective discipline is impersonal, yet respectful and caring. This stance teaches students the natural consequences of their behavior. Clearly explain rules before discipline and discuss appropriate and reasonable consequences. Enforce these rules consistently and matter-of-factly, with few exceptions. All teachers know that some situations we get into with students are unique. Filter rules and consequences through your own common sense. Sometimes there are extenuating circumstances or particular students to whom the rules or consequences don't apply. Don't be afraid to bend. If you are impersonal about your discipline, you will not be defensive about your rules.

While dealing with negative, acting-out behavior, the most important thing to keep in mind is that it's not what you do but the feeling in which you do it. Again, check your state of mind, which affects your creative process. If you are acting out of a calm, secure feeling, a feeling of understanding and assistance, whatever you do will move the situation in a positive direction and toward a solution.

We had one student, for example, who was always attempting to get attention by picking on other students in class. He would pull seats out from under them as they were sitting down or otherwise try to start something. His teacher knew he was a star on the baseball team, and that the team had a big tournament coming up. The teacher approached the baseball coach after one especially trying day with this student. The coach agreed to not let the student play in this tournament, at the discretion of the teacher.

When the teacher first told him about this, the student was cynical and didn't believe his coach would take that step. He was not sorry about his behavior in the classroom. Calmly, the teacher

and the coach both told him that this was the last thing in the world they wanted to do, but felt they had no choice unless the student saw the disruptive impact he was having on the learning climate in the classroom. They stated that they realized how important the tournament was to both the school and the student. They said they would like to see this student have the same amount of respect for the classroom learning atmosphere.

As they talked, the student began to realize that they clearly meant what they said and were not going to back down. He began to rethink his perspective, appreciating that neither the teacher nor the coach wanted to keep him off the team, but both were firm in their resolve. The student regained his common sense, changed his behavior, and learned a great deal about mutual respect. He went to the tournament, in the end, because he became more cooperative and settled down in class. The teacher did not weaken and did not change her mind until she saw he had truly experienced a change of heart. She never talked down to this student but showed him the respect of acting as if he could understand the situation and the needs of others relative to his behavior.

## **8. Resist labeling your students**

In 1987, we began a series of grant-funded projects in schools in Miami, working with high-risk youth from housing projects. One of the authors remembers the day he made a presentation to the faculty of a middle school attended by many of these students. The immediate reaction was groans from teachers, and statements like, "I hope that I don't have any of those kids in my class this semester." We realized then that these youth already had two strikes against them when they walked into the classroom.

As we began training in this school, our first task was to help teachers realize that they were actually doing harm by pre-judging, categorizing, and labeling these students. By acting from preconceived ideas, the teachers gave up much of their power to engage the healthy side of each student. We encouraged them to give every student the same chance to learn. We told them that no matter how long a student had been a trouble maker, expect her to be in a healthy frame of mind when she arrives in class every day. There is no hope when hope is not allowed to surface.

A student usually acts out because he feels insecure. He feels threatened, somehow, in his world. When we are able to maintain our own good feelings, by not taking behavior personally, we teach from a more compassionate and understanding state of mind. We recognize what the student needs at that moment is to regain common sense, and to learn from the current situation in a way that permanently affects his behavior. We will not be tempted to embarrass him in front of his friends, but will devise a consequence that makes a difference to this particular student, and from which they gain a new appreciation for the need to maintain control in the classroom.

## **9. Develop rapport**

One way to develop a rapport with students who have a tendency to be disruptive is to develop a relationship based on something other than the student's problem behaviors. Discuss other topics with the student, like sports or current events. Enter an arena in which the student does not feel

threatened, or one-down. The mutual respect and caring can be used as a foundation for appropriate discipline. Rapport gained through establishing a friendly relationship between teachers and students helps students gain freedom from their conditioned thoughts about learning, performance, stress, and education.

Some teachers in Miami asked us if other students would think, as they did sometimes, that this kind of attention was unfair. They felt that they should be giving attention equally to all students. Other students are not dummies, they can see as well as we can that "problem" students are hurting more, and in need of more reassurance and personal attention. Say you're a member of a fire and rescue team at the site of a multiple car crash on the highway. Would you spend more time with people who are seriously injured, maybe bleeding from an artery, or those who had only a few bruises?

Grasping the logic of these findings increases a teacher's chance of engaging a student's healthy outlook. Teachers who learn and understand this logic are less tempted to take a student's alienated behavior to heart. They also know how to help the student reconnect to a healthier frame of mind and approach the classroom in a new way. Our own experiences have shown us that even the most miserable classroom experience can be transformed. There is hope for everyone.

*This article was adapted from an upcoming book by Roger Mills and Jeff Timm, *Mental Health in the Classroom*, published by the American Psychological Association.*

## **References**

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