

The MCATA Math Conference on Motivation

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On October 28th and 29th, I attended the Annual Mathematics Conference held on the campus of the University of Calgary. Speakers included Gordon Elhard, Associate Superintendent of the Calgary Board of Education, whose topic was "Motivating the Math Student."

The thrust of his speech was that if we have a one-to-one relationship with the student, most of our problems will go away. Some of the points he made were: (a) Treat each student as an individual, (b) Address each student by name, (c) Always establish eye contact, (d) Get each student to like you, (e) Find some time to have an informal chat with each student, (f) Never compare two students, (g) Never put down a student, no matter how stupid he or she might be, (h) Listen well to each student, and (i) Never ridicule a student. He said we should not see teaching as a job, because it is not: it is a way of life that we have chosen.

Another session I attended that I found very informative and interesting was presented by Dr. Robert E. Franken, Professor of Psychology at the University of Calgary. His topic was "Why We Give Up--Motivation for Persistence." The main point of his address was the apparent shift in the way we discipline students. He advised teachers not to seek respect from students. What teachers should do is seek a working relationship with students, whether respect is an important part of that relationship or not.

Teachers should find a way to motivate students, to make them want to work and enjoy learning. Teachers should clearly define their goals for each student, and not teach them all the same way. Most students are not going to be academic successes, so we should be teaching them accordingly. We should set students up for success, not for failure. If a student feels within him or herself that he or she is doing great, the teacher is a success. Sometimes a teacher goes away from the classroom feeling that he or she taught a great lesson. He or she should ask the question "Did the student learn?" Unless the student decides to learn, the teacher teaches in vain. A teacher should create a teaching situation in order to effect a learning experience.

Finally, he pointed out that teachers in Canada are learning from the American experience that the way to discipline in the schools will have to change. In the U.S.A., many good things came out of racial integration efforts in the schools. In order to handle discipline, leaders of the ethnic groups or gangs were encouraged to form a council which set up the rules and regulations regarding discipline in the schools. When these were approved by the school administration, they became rules that all students must abide by. A violator could choose to be disciplined by the principal or by the council. This method has been working very effectively in the U.S.A. and has brought discipline in the schools to a manageable level.

All in all, I enjoyed the conference. It was very worthwhile.