

COMMUNICATION ISSUES IN THE MOVIE “HIGH SCHOOL HIGH”

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ABSTRACT

This paper will explore the movie “High School High” (1996) written by David Zucker and Robert LoCash, and the communication aspects found within the movie. Individuals, especially those teaching in a diverse community, may carry their own biases and beliefs of different cultures into the classroom. As a result, the way they approach their relationships and teaching may not reach all of their students. There are three main areas of communication that will be covered in depth. These three will be communication and culture, listening skills, and nonverbal communication. All too often, there will be students that are misunderstood and go unnoticed in schools. They are overlooked for various reasons, and one of the main reasons is the teacher’s ability or inability to listen, and to communicate. One of the most important aspects of communication and one reason that students and people are misunderstood is because of nonverbal communication. People can tell how you are doing by the way you are standing, your body posture, or by facial expressions. There are many different aspects to effective communication, and these are just three areas that are important and are prevalent in the movie “High School High” and which will be examined and explored here.

Keywords: *High School High, communication, issues*

INTRODUCTION

The movie “High School High” is intended to be a comedy, and at the same time it portrays a reality that is all too real in our society. One can see the difference between the two schools portrayed in the movie. In the movie, we have the very prestigious school (Wellington Academy) in the beginning where the students had everything, and had disrespect for authority. The disrespect was due to the culture and beliefs that the students were entitled, and basically ran everything. In the second school (Barry High School), the students had disrespect for authority that was due to the students not being treated as contributing members of society, but as a holding ground for the students. The principal, Mrs. Doyle, stated, “our primary job here is to warehouse these delinquents, until such time as they can be released into the general population or sent to a real jail”. All too often, this is a common misconception in education. A contributing factor is the lack of communication and/or misunderstanding of human communication.

COMMUNICATION AND CULTURE

We define culture as the language, values, beliefs, traditions, and customs people share and learn. In education, the factors that contribute to classroom communication behaviors include culture and learning abilities (Brown, 2016). Classroom diversity extends beyond learning ability, technology, ethnicity, and culture. Each student has social and personal needs to fulfill and communicates these needs in different ways. The differences between the two schools in the movie are evident in the diversity, and culture that an instructor will face. Powell and Harville (1990) acknowledge that the expectations and exhibition of communication behavior of individuals from cultural backgrounds vary.

In the beginning, the father of Richard Clark has become accustomed to getting what he wants, and when Richard told his father that he had taking a job at Barry High School (poor socioeconomic school) his father told him that he would fail. It is evident that Richard did not feel like he belonged to the “elite” at the Wellington Academy. There is evidence that the students and faculty at the academy did not respect Richard. Martinez (2004) examined the communication of respect as part of the classroom communicative process. He found that students perceived respect through verbal and non-verbal communication. One can see the difference between the two schools when it comes to the culture of each. At the academy, the students did not respect the instructors. It is apparent by not only their actions (putting a sign on the back of Mr. Clark that said “Bite Me”) and by how, and what, they said to him.

When he got to Berry High School, there was a degree of disrespect from the beginning (a student flips him off and another threatens to cut his throat). The cultural differences between the schools have a large part to do with the socioeconomic status of the students from each school. At this school, the students are not expected to graduate. The principal at the school (Mrs. Doyle) would be a great example of this not only to the teachers, but also toward the staff. This is evident in the correspondence between Doyle and Clark “How long have you been teaching here? Twenty minutes! I’ve been here over 20 years” and “Every bad kid in the city is dumped into our laps”.

LISTENING

From the time that Clark entered the school, the authority figures did not listen to the students and tried to run the school like a prison. With the metal detectors and the actor that was searching the students when they entered the building, to the attitude of the other staff members, the importance of listening, was absent. It is stated that the proximity that results from listening to and accompanying early adolescents in day-to day activities, and comprehending the issues, presents an opportunity to professionals to better grasp how to become trusted and legitimate in the eyes of young people, thereby facilitating entry into their sphere (Merriam, 2009).

When you listen, not all listeners receive the same message. The physiological factors, social roles, cultural background, personal interests, and

needs all shape and distort the raw data we hear into uniquely different messages (Adler, Rodman, and du Pre 2014). This is a key point in the movie from the time that Clark enters Berry High School. It is evident when he states "I will pretend for the moment that you meant that in a nice way" and "now, I want you boys to shake hands". The look on the student's face was one which I have never encountered before and is rarely seen in real life. At this school, the cultural differences are enormous. When Griff and Clark were at the club, this fact was made more apparent when "who do you think is watching my little brothers and sisters while my mom is working?" and Clark responds with "you remind me a lot of myself when I was your age except I was white and had both parents and lived in the suburbs....". Clark follows the relational listening for the most part in this movie along with supportive listening. He is not trying to control the students, but instead trying to understand them and help them succeed and achieve. When Griff states that he wants to go to college, this is a great example of this positive communication.

NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

Nonverbal communication played a large part in making this movie from the beginning with the academy, to the main parts at the high school. Over the course of the movie, one can see that when the students were walking around the school one gets the idea that they were "hard" or tough, and that no one should mess with them.

And toward the end of the movie this had changed to "understood students that were not scared". It is stated that they have to want to learn and Clark states "that's exactly my point. And I think that Griff is the key.

"He seems to be a leader". They clearly had a leader in class and that would have been Griff. When Clark wanted the students to do something, they all looked at Griff. Without saying a word, they followed his example. At first, he would just put his headphones on and the rest of the class did what they wanted. In the end, when Clark wanted them to open their textbooks they looked at Griff and when he opened his book they all followed suit. This is a great example of nonverbal communication.

Most communication scholars agree that social factors have more influence than biology does in shaping how men and women behave (Adler, Rodman, and du Pre 2014). In the beginning of the movie, the students were dressed like "gangsters" and not very appropriate. As the movie continued and the students starting believing Clark, their appearances changed. They went from wearing dark colors (gangster) to sweaters and collared shirts and longer dresses for the girls. The message was that someone believes in us and we have a chance to succeed.

Instructional communication supports the clarity of academic messages. In the break room the other instructors were showing that they were there just to get paid. When Clark asked one of the teachers "what department do you teach in?" The reply was "I don't know. Something on the third floor". The students pick up on whether a teacher wants to be there or not, by the way in which the teacher uses body language (nonverbal communication). When Clark walked into class the

students did not show respect for him and as the movie went on it was noticed that the students started to respect Mr. Clark.

This was due mainly to his nonverbal communication. He believes that there is no such thing as a bad kid, and that he is going to get through to the kids.

CONCLUSION

High School High, although it was meant as a comedy, portrays real life application that we can learn from. There are differences in cultures that need attention in all the schools in America, and they need the same attention. Every school has cultural differences based on the area in which they are located, and the communication between the teachers and students differs from school to school. In a school that is in a poor socioeconomic area, certain things are often forgotten. They are often not listened to, and as a result, they are labeled as trouble makers. The communication and culture, listening, and nonverbal communication play a large part in education. If a teacher is unwilling to be a student, as well as a teacher, then they will not be able to become an effective communicator. The principal (Mrs. Doyle) did not do this well at all. In the movie, she portrays an authoritative figure that communicated by telling the students what to do. And her body language showed that she was in charge and not to question her authority. This is not a way to reach young adults or mold them. If you learn to listen like Mr. Clark, then the outcome will be different. The same can be said in the "real world" when it comes to education. By being an effective listener and communicator, teachers will reach more students. One needs to be aware of the cultural differences, be an active listener, and show positive nonverbal communication.

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