
Original Paper

The Teacher as Safecracker: Finding the Combination

Michael F. Shaughnessy & Wayne Marshall

Eastern New Mexico University, Portales, New Mexico

Abstract

Teachers in the current zeitgeist are confronted with a wide diversity of students and individuals with special needs. Teachers daily have to “figure out “what certain students apparently want emotionally, personally, and teachers have to attempt to relate to various students, acknowledge their differences and diversity, and attempt to “fill the gap” as to what students may need or benefit from.

This paper will address some of these issues and provide a framework for teachers to understand the complexity of the current crop of students and work with them to maximize their talents and unearth some of their potential.

Safecracker

Definition: A person who breaks open safes to rob them of their precious contents.

Origin: Americanism dating back to 1930 to 1935

It was my third year of teaching, and it was a doozy of a year! The class was made up of students who brought a myriad of issues with them to school. Broken homes, single-parent homes, emotional counseling needs, and poverty, just to name a few. As you may imagine, I was at my wit's end at the end of the day on a regular basis that year.

My wife was the one who would talk me down off the ledge once or twice a week during that year. I'd come home carrying the heavy burden of all those dear students in my 6th-grade classroom, and the conversation with my wife Keli would usually go something like this.

Me: That's it! I'm done! I'm writing my letter of resignation; in fact, I've already started it.

Keli: I think you should probably go for a bike ride, or go to the garage and lift weights. I'll have dinner ready at six.

Me: No, I can't even think about exercising right now. I'm too wound up from the day.

Keli: I know, and we'll talk about it after the kids are in bed, for now just do something active, and we'll talk later.

Me: Alright, see you in about an hour. I'm going to ride the bicycle for a while.

Later, Keli and I talked, well, mostly I talked, and she listened. Her final words to me before turning in for the night were. "I understand that you're frustrated, and if you decide to resign, I'm with you, but first, please pray about this and get a good night's sleep." That was year three, and I'm now in my 36th year as an educator.

Keli knew me well, because she had studied me, and she knew how to reach my heart with just a few words. Keli had the combination to my heart (she was a “safecracker”)

Back to my story.

So, I went for a bicycle ride. When I ride, I do some of my best thinking. As I rode up a local boulevard, I pushed my cardiovascular system in ways that most people only do during a stress test, and as the blood rushed through my veins my head began to clear and then it hit me.

"You're a safecracker!"

For a few moments, I let that thought ruminate in my grey matter as I pondered what it meant. There were 33 students in my classroom, about 8 more than the optimum number of students. Regardless of how many, that was the task.

Again the thought came...

"You're a safe cracker." Slowly, methodically and carefully, figure out the combination to each individual student's heart. Do it in a way that preserves the valuable contents of that safe. There is a precious treasure inside each of your student's hearts and it is your mission, calling, and job to crack that safe, their heart.

This was an epiphany. This was something I could press into. This was a mission worth my time and energy; it is a calling that can make a lasting difference in the life of a child!

After that day, every seemingly menial task became important to me. Names, birthdays, homework assignments, artwork, stories told during class meetings about weekends, etc., an almost endless list of details in the life of each student in my classroom, suddenly became important to me. Why? Because as I learned those details, they became the key, the combination to that student's heart.

As educators, we need to be fair. We need to be consistent. But, more importantly, we need to slowly, delicately, painstakingly, methodically and precisely, be at work, safe cracking, especially when it comes to a student's heart. Every heart is different, and they're all worth cracking.

Every head is different, and they are all worth cracking. (or finding out what makes them tick or what motivates them)

Every child is valuable and needs to be supported and nurtured, and we need to help develop their potential.

The role of teachers and teaching has evolved over the years. Teaching in the 1950s was different than the 1960s, the 1970s and 1980s

and the astute reader will "get the idea". In a sense, teachers do more than

teach- they coach, mentor, in some cases, they discipline and in some cases they motivate. Not all students need motivation nor respond to motivational interventions, and the teacher becomes a kind of detective, endeavoring to ascertain what makes this student "click" what turns on the light bulb and

where can this student excel and achieve.

Many teachers are good "detectives" They are able to ascertain whether to leave the student alone

or to encourage them in their interests and endeavors. And other teachers and principals are "safecrackers" they know exactly what to say and how to guide those students and perhaps mentor them into certain activities so that they can thrive.

Some students excel when they are encouraged to participate in sports and music. A teacher can encourage them to join the choir and try out for football, basketball or whatever sport is available. In other words- the teacher has found the magic combination for this student- they may not excel in

academics or spelling or reading or writing- but they can be part of the local sports team- they can run track

(which does not necessarily entail a good deal of brain power- running the 100 yard dash as fast as they can is much easier than quadratic equations.

There are some students with special needs- visually impaired with glasses, hearing impaired with a hearing aid, that has to be checked by the teacher on occasion- but they can be given some duties or

obligations or responsibilities that challenge them while taking recognition of their special needs. They may need:

Approval - They seek the approval of the teacher.

Affiliation - to be part of a team or even part of the classroom. The student who sits alone in the cafeteria may want to be part of a clique and need that acceptance.

Achievement - To score well on tests, to do well on assignments, and to be recognized for these things

Attention - they may feel neglected

Acknowledgement - Many students need to be acknowledged as getting up in the morning getting breakfast and finding their cell phone is a task unto itself- and some students revel in the fact that at the end of the year they have 100% attendance- an accomplishment in and of itself.

Autonomy - They may want to demonstrate that they can achieve independently and that their thick glasses are not an impediment to their success

Assistance - Some do need assistance in certain areas. They may or may not recognize it - but they may need emotional support as they are from a single-parent family and the mother is an on-call nurse and not always emotionally available to their child or children.

“Atta Boy” or “Atta Girl” or whatever the current praise words are!

The teachers of students with special needs have to be keenly aware of the challenges that these students face. They have been getting “messages” for years from parents and peers.

Recognition: Many students care for younger siblings or have accomplished something on the track or cross-country team. But other times it is simply a new shirt that seems to accentuate the student's hair or eyes or whatever.

For the gifted students, teachers need to be safecrackers, and open venues for these students that they can explore. Asking a simple question can be the combination of things that will encourage students.

Asking them if they have ever been to Paris or Rome or Vienna can result in a quizzical look but with Google Maps and Google Earth, Paris London, and Rome are just a click away and a gifted student can delve into whatever place in the world that they want to explore and this opens up the entire world for these gifted students.

Teachers can be detectives and then safecrackers in terms of simple questions as to what students ARE reading and what they plan to read if anything. When a detective/safecracker sees a student reading Don Quixote and or The Three Musketeers they can then suggest other books that have impacted them.

When the student is reading Harry Potter, students can be reminded that much of Harry Potter is actually Charles Dickens- but not Tale of Two Cities- but rather “Great Expectations” and “The Little Old Curiosity Shop”

For “gifted readers,” the trick is to determine the combination of books that the student might enjoy.

Gifted Students may enjoy Ayn Rand- although this author may not be in the school library or the student may be uplifted by “Man’s Search for Meaning” by Viktor Frankl (which is almost required reading on many college campuses)

The “clinical safecracker” is keenly aware that some students are contemplating suicide. The first author and a colleague have listed the various signs and symptoms of pending suicide (Shaughnessy and Johnson, 2024)

The “clinical safecracker” (or teacher) notices a great many trips to the bathroom or a student who at 3:15 pm on a Friday, wants to know if the teacher believes in an afterlife. Perhaps the student hands the teacher an envelope for the teacher to open and read on Monday-

The “clinical safecracker” refuses to wait until Monday and if the letter explains why they took their own lives the “clinical safecracker” walks them to the guidance office or principal or school nurse or social worker or whoever is competent to guide and assist the student.:

The safecracker knows that the more exact, specific, and precise the plan to “end it all”, the more they have to be concerned that the student WILL follow through with whatever they have planned in the note.

The Safecracker is keenly aware that some students have very specific learning preferences. The safecracker intuitively knows that this student is an abstract thinker or a concrete learner, and they need a specific example about the concept of subtraction. The safecracker figures out that the student is a

visual learner or an auditory learner or a hands-on learner or a sequential (a,b,c or 1,2,3) - the student needs step by step instructions and once they clearly understand that is requested or required or then- they are “off and running”.

Head or Heart- Feelings and emotions or Thinking

Boys and girls are different. This seems simple to say but with their different emotional needs with their different perspectives- and needs- the safecracker needs to find just the right recipe for each middle school or high school student

Sensitivity to bodily changes may be difficult for some. The good safecracker is sensitive to what is going on in the current zeitgeist- be it vaping or some other thing that appears ridiculous to us adults but is paramount to the student.

The safecracker has the empathy to reach out and warn about cyberbullying and alert girls to be careful not to share pictures or give out their phone numbers or emails. The safecracker has already discerned those to be bullies who have way too much time on their hands and are roaming the halls of the school just looking for some stimulation.

The clinical, “safecracker” has figured out the combination for some students who seem to want to be challenged and have a debate a discussion, and or a heated argument so as to exercise their intellectual muscles- because in their current class, the teacher is dull and boring and the safecracker needs to figure out exactly how intelligent this student may be and how insightful they are and then perhaps they need to be switched from one teacher (Mr. Wilson) to another teacher who is now working on their doctorate and are ready and willing and able to do an Oxford University debate with the student for a few hours (that the safecracker does not have)

Like the schools of Horace (written by Ted Sizer) life goes on with pep rallies and assemblies and the safecracker knows that the combination of all of the events does result in a well-rounded albeit somewhat bored student. (if you have not read about Horace and the issues that confronted him as a teacher this is good weekend or summer reading.) One of the points of the Ted Sizer Horace books is that for some teachers (and some students) school is a daily grind. But we also have to acknowledge that each daily day is like a brick supporting another brick in the wall. The safecracker knows just when to “switch gears” to stimulate and keep students interested in what they are learning on those 2-3 days before Thanksgiving or Christmas.

The observant safecracker may notice a student with a scapula or a rosary or cross that they are wearing and simply acknowledge this. It makes a difference.

The observant safecrackers sees the student who has just returned to school after a 2-week absence.

They observant safecracker knows when to probe and if given the right combination of information- they may be able to welcome the student back or inquire as to their health. The “combination “here may be the fact that the teacher meets with the school nurse or guidance counselor or, better yet the school secretary who knows everything about everybody.

The mentoring safecracker knows which students need that extra push. The average high schooler may not know about West Point or Annapolis or even the fact that they can join the Air Force, Army, Navy and the student can be told that the local recruiters are looking “ for a few good men and women”

The verbal safecrackers knows that for some students the way to their hearts is thru sports or music or the peer group.

The authoritarian safecracker knows when to be a martinet and when to provide a joke or a story or an anecdote that will send a message- much like a parable.

Even though people may think it is infantile, the story of the tortoise and the rabbit is still relevant today.

Understanding that sometimes consistency is king so to speak that simply showing up and working on algebra or whatever pays off in the long run,

Reaching out to Parents

Some parents are very involved with their children and the books that they read and they too want some embellishment to nurture their students. The safecracker opens his or her vault so to speak and provides just the right book to nurture the student with special needs as well as the gifted student or those who will be high achievers. If every parent could be given Waitley's book (1983) the lives of millions of students (and teachers) would be improved.

Teachers Need Motivation Too!

For many teachers, the school year is full of exasperation, frustrations, frustrations

and exasperations. Each morning, teachers are faced with many challenges and need to be up lifted so to speak. Josh Oldenburg is an individual who appears frequently on social media and greets his followers with a soft greeting and indicates to them that he "brought them a cup of coffee" Very briefly, he indicates that he is aware that his listeners are going through a different time and facing

challenges. He attempts to provide some support with his calm, soft tender demure smile and encouragement.

Teachers who need a refreshing "uplift" can go to his home page and avail themselves of a few YouTube presentations of encouragement. The idea of a daily uplift is part of the safecrackers' "code ". Josh Oldenburger provides very brief uplifts to those who log on for his insights.

<https://www.youtube.com/@josh.oldenburger>

Teachers cannot offer students a cup of coffee, but can give them 7 seconds of care and concern, and compassion

The Skills of the "Safecracker"

- 1) He or she listens and maintains eye contact.
- 2) He or she knows a it about the student and their parents and home life
- 3) He or she is sensitive to their feelings and their "triggers"- what upsets them.
- 4) He or she is observant- notices when the student is tired, angry, upset or just "out of it "
- 5) He or she knows what is "developmentally appropriate "and the issues of adolescence
- 6) He or she is sensitive to male-female differences and sensitive to racial, ethnic, and cultural issues that may be going on.
- 7) He or she knows their limitations- when to refer a student for clinical evaluation.
- 8) He or she is sensitive to personality issues.

Principals can be "safecrackers "too"

A good principal is able to discern which teachers need more intervention or supervision. Some teachers are self-starters and self-encouragers, and some are not- they need assistance

Some beginning teachers know the basics of their subject matter, but are weak in the classroom.

Often, the principal can spot a weakness- perhaps in classroom management or parent-to-teacher interaction

Summary and Conclusions

This paper has attempted to address a key skill needed by teachers- and that is to "figure out" what motivates students, what keeps them motivated and what are the key elements of a successful teacher. The idea of the teacher as "safecracker" provides some insight into the cognitive processes by which a teacher determines the motivational forces behind their students and the tricks which will propel them to success.

References

<https://www.youtube.com/@josh.oldenburger>

Shaughnessy, M. F., & Johnson, A. (2019). Depression and Suicide: The Need for Awareness of Signs of Suicidal Cognitions and Lethality. *Journal of Advances in Medicine and Medical Research*, 29(8), 1-8. <https://doi.org/10.9734/jammr/2019/v29i830109>

Sizer, T. (1984). *Horace's School: Redesigning the American High School*. Harper NY.

Sizer, T. (1997). *Horace's Hope: What Works for the American High School*. Harper NY.

Sizer, T. (2004). *Horace's Compromise: The Dilemma of the American High School*. Harper NY.

Waitley, D. (1983). *Seeds of Greatness* Revell New Jersey.