

CHILDREN'S EMOTIONAL NEEDS. THE NEGLECTED LINK IN EDUCATION



by Joan Casey, IECA (MA)

Consider the statistics: One in ten public school children in Minneapolis are homeless, and more than 18 percent of children in the United States under age 17 live below the poverty line. While the national four-year graduation rate for white students is over 70 percent, for black and Hispanic males it is 56 percent and 54 percent respectively. Against these images of poverty and desperation, school leaders face budget shortfalls resulting in the reduction of social workers and support services. The problems are complex. The needs are many. Yet, is it possible to close the achievement gap and elevate failing schools if we continue to separate the emotional and educational needs of children? As if looking through a lens, the problems at first glance seem quite clear. But the image seen through the lens is never a perfect replica; it is often an aberration of reality.

When a school is underperforming, what is going on beyond its doors cannot be ignored. The crisis of poverty among children is inextricably linked with inadequate healthcare, violence, and a void in the social and emotional support so necessary to alleviating stress and promoting learning. And so under-resourced schools struggle to provide for the many needs of their students, and many fall through the cracks. Teachers and administrators begin the school year with more than sparkling windows and polished floors: they hold hope that this year will be different; that perhaps an engaging lesson along with a kind word will help even the most ambivalent of students cut through the static that engulfs their lives. But teachers need support too. And soon the hallways bear scuff marks, and the lemony smell of floor polish fades. Sometimes hope is not enough.

The neuroscientist António Damásio asserts that children are conscious of their feelings although they may choose to keep them private. Emotions, however, are unconscious and automatic and can rarely be suppressed. A child experiences an emotion and decides upon further action based on a review of his situation—the concerns he has at that moment, the presence of other people, and his immediate goals. For a child under stress in his environment, emotions can be reproduced as a lack of motivation, depression or an inability to communicate with others. Children cannot learn if they feel under threat in their classrooms. And in schools, emotion is probably the least examined aspect of a child's being.

As an advisor to high school students, making choices about post-secondary life, I work with many students who have Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD) or a learning disability. Often, the students report being misunderstood and beaten down by the burden of school over time. "I started freshman year wanting to make National Honor

Society and varsity basketball," says David, now a senior struggling to pass his courses for graduation. Despite being unable to take medication to help with his significant difficulties with attention, he worked hard to earn Bs and Cs in his first two years of high school. Sports were the motivating force to get him out of bed and off to school in the morning. Plagued by injuries, however, his athletic career was cut short. No one at school really understood the void in his life once sports were no longer an option. The demands of schoolwork increased junior year, and his grades plummeted, followed by depression. No one asked why. Soon David was binge drinking, sometimes even on school days. "I don't know how it happened," says David, the pain evident in his stiff jaw and downcast gaze.

Young people in our society are expected to be problematic. The first grader who cannot sit in the chair might enter school stimulated by all the other children, the colorful maps and letters on the walls and the stories his teacher reads. Yet a category of 'problem child' has been created for him: the deviant who cannot sit still, stay in line, and keep his voice down. French philosopher Michel Foucault argues that settings such as schools use discipline as a form of power, and that the outcome of having so many rules is the creation of more rule breakers. And thus the lively, happy child, through the course of his everyday actions and interactions, gets reproduced over time as a problem. He cannot fit into the established expectations for functioning within a confined space, a prescribed timetable, and with a limited expectation for what constitutes acceptable behavior. Within a few years he is the boy cutting class, not doing his homework, and possibly dropping out. This happens in inner-city and suburban schools alike, and officials wring their hands and ask for more standardized tests as they cut the budget for social workers, art programs, and after-school sports.

Fiscal watchdogs argue that there is not enough money to address all the societal ills that our country faces. They insist that difficult choices must be made—that competing necessities, from more police officers on the street to expanded health care, make seemingly essential cuts to educational initiatives a foregone conclusion. There is no question that the issues that schools are being asked to address are complex and seem out of the realm of responsibility of principals, teachers, and school boards. However, the problems that children bring to school cannot be separated from their being. Children bring to school their minds and brains that are products not only of their biological makeup, but also of their culture and environments. A school without attention to its students' emotional needs is a school without a soul.

The ratio of counselors to students in many urban districts is 1:600. Rather than cutting funds for emotional support structures and personnel in schools, an increase is warranted. Students returning to school from the streets, juvenile detention centers, or long-term absences due to physical or mental illness would benefit from transitional programs to help them catch up on their school work and phase back into the regular school day gradually. When counselors and social workers carry such high case loads, students are unlikely to receive help even for day-to-day problems whether it is the disappointment of being cut from the basketball team, or for failing the third math class in a row—and the feeling that they just want to give up. If not the guidance counselor or social worker, who then will look out for these children. Such problems are not insignificant and can lead to substance abuse as a way to manage stress and low self-esteem. Struggling students are more likely to fail while others will elect to drop out, and when this happens frequently the school is designated as underperforming.

Each week we read news about failing schools, violent youth, and children caught up in the cycle of poverty. Yet we are unwilling to synthesize the broader implications and realize that children bring their problems to school. By not devoting sufficient attention and resources to their emotional needs in addition to academic goals, we risk never zeroing in on the focal point of the problem. Only by shining light on the complex layers of children's lives can society begin to make sense of them and then find the solutions that are so desperately needed.

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