

Creating Effective Learning Environments

Schools are opening across the nation amid high expectations and deep frustrations. The quest for the ultimate tool or strategy for improving academic achievement and maintaining school climates conducive to learning remain as allusive as ever despite great consternation.

The resolution, however, is not emerging out of educational treatises but from neurobiological research. Effectively teaching today's children requires very different strategies and skills from what may have worked a generation ago, especially for children who have not been afforded secure environments. Electronic imaging techniques clearly illustrate that brain development and processing is altered in children who are anxious, insecure, and have experienced incomplete attachments .

These neurological alterations are designed to help totally dependent young children survive in what they perceive to be unpredictable environments. Unfortunately, these mal-adaptations, which are not intentional, make it difficult for anxious students to focus, exercise self-regulation, and manage stress. Consequently, teaching today's students requires alternative teaching techniques and school policies in order to meet expectations, academically and behaviorally.

This is not an excuse for unacceptable behaviors or learning failures but offers a framework for productively addressing the dilemmas of disappointing proficiency scores, acting-out behaviors, and high drop-out rates.

One of the root causes of these imperative educational issues has its beginning during the first year of life through what is known as the attachment process. Completed attachments build the neurological scaffolding for an infant's life-long capacity for self-regulation, stress management and empathy. Unfulfilled attachments can be intergenerational as a parent tends to be unable to pass on what they have not received. This cycle can be broken, however, by having adults engage the young child in loving rituals of hand activities accompanied by concentrated eye contact and loving words. These compelling interventions work

well in all early child educational settings . They prepare youngsters for learning far better than the use of disciplinary actions or isolations which are interpreted by insecure children as rejections.

The typical student behavioral reactions to such perceived rejections generally are seen by educators as angry misbehaviors and defiance. Brain research tells us these student reactions are a presentation of fear, not anger. These fears of being shamed or of failure make learning impossible.

Emotional security is paramount for learning to take place for students of all ages who have witnessed or experienced scary and traumatic events. Their oversensitized fear-response system makes it impossible for them to deal with threats; real or perceived. The explosive outbursts when these memories are triggered by threats cause them to disengage from cortical thinking and problem-solving, making learning impossible. These troubling behaviors are not by choice or intentional but are for innate survival purposes.

Although educators are not therapists, classroom activities that make it possible for students to externalize and transform memories of terror and helplessness can provide great relief for students, especially those who will likely never see a therapist. Such activities can be integrated into the core curriculum subjects of language arts and studies through creative writing, art, or a combination of the two. Creating symbolic stories that address historical or social issues of injustices in which students determine an empowering solution of their choice permits them to relieve their stress of helplessness, the primary residue of trauma. Because these memories are imprinted deep within the brain's interior, they are not subject to words. We cannot teach anxious students out of their fears and unacceptable behaviors but we can heal them or at least begin that process in classrooms.

What can educators do to reach and teach today's anxious students? First, we can acknowledge most miss-behaviors are actually stress behaviors and fear. Second, recognize that students who engage in explosive outbursts are not doing so by choice. Third, that traditional disciplinary practices actually exacerbate the

behavioral issues and make learning unlikely. Finally, accept that emotional security is essential for learning; being safe from shaming and threats.

Reforming educational practices is not easy or comfortable and will require the support from the entire community. Schools cannot do it alone but it is more about beliefs and policies than money. Because this issue will shape our future leaders and work force, it is a fiscal as well as moral responsibility to make it possible for every student to reach their full potential.

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