

The Alienation of America's Youth

We so rightfully address the criminal assault of physical abuse across the nation, yet have become inoculated to the stream of verbal sewerage cascading onto our youth on a daily basis. As abhorrent the idea of child molestation, it does not hold a candle to the insidious impact which a culture of emotional abuse and neglect has on human choice, on human development, on human "being."

Important as they are, if we focus on symptoms of the culture, we'll likely miss the root of what it means to be a youth immersed in the environs of today. Amidst the pressures of poverty, violence and drugs rests a more encompassing, deeper seated, pervasive, undulating social phenomenon. We too often downplay the emotional impact of which daily encounters with others, adults and peers, provide for life's context for becoming.

Littleton, Sloan, and other towns bear witness. But to focus on these extreme expressions of alienation and rejection would be to miss the central issue afflicting many too many of our school age population. As Dr. Gary Phillips (1) of the National School Improvement Project suggests, "If the fish are sick, don't blame the fish... change the water." It is not the act of doing or not doing schoolwork which puts us at risk. Nor is it the preference of learning style vs sports vs fine arts vs. video games vs. academics vs. single parent home vs. television. The search for who or what is at fault is distracting... a part of the overall problem. When we're done exercising our grief in what Dr. Phillips (1) calls the "blame frame," we're still facing the same world, one full of academics, athletes, technocrats, performers ... people.

Is there a bottom line? We think so. It lies in the stability and development achieved on the most basic level of human need and existence; nurturing, acknowledgment, and emotional competence.

Learning is an emotional response attaching value to that which enters our brain. All learning is emotional (2). Simply put, a shortage of emotion puts at risk all long term, stored, transferable, meaningful learning. This learning requirement is not suggesting outbursts, chaos and unchecked behaviors stemming from emotional overtures. Rather it is a simple, yet essential connection with personal meaning within the learner. The basis of how one perceives the level of relevance or importance of something is a critical element within the learning process.

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Patrick Levitt (3)(4), neurobiologist at Pitt suggests that "all learning is contextual," that at a cellular level, it is the context in which the cell exists which causes consequence to its development. If a cell is stimulated in a frequently consistent manner i.e. a context of saline, music, math, cocaine, video, touch, ... etc.) it responds by developing a sensitivity to "firing" in a pathway preferential to that stimulus. This is physiologically what learning really is at the cellular level! For example, if a cell is immersed in saline while a certain stimulus occurs, it reacts in a certain, predictable manner. If the same cell were immersed in alcohol, it would respond to the same stimulus, but in a different manner. If either were done frequently over time then, at the cellular level, the pathways become more and more "learned." This is called automaticity or habituation.

If an individual's disposition toward information (a lesson, an experience) is "not important," then little or no meaning is present. That which impacts learners as little as this-can, by definition, have no significant emotional base for retention. Drs. Salovey and Mayer (5) articulate the role of emotions saying, "We view emotions as organized responses, crossing the boundaries of many psychological subsystems, including the physiological, cognitive, motivational and experiential systems."

If emotions are integrated in all we do AND they develop as organized responses, then it follows that

they are the basis for our general disposition and the decisions that emanate from that foundation. Nature a la genetics plays a role in our ultimate construction. So does nurture. Nurture is the context upon which those original cells are placed, the world they experience. If we place cells in a rich environment, full of healthy stimulation, we might produce reasonable outcomes within expected parameters. If we bombard the same cells with hostility, verbal rebuff, and alienation, what might you then expect? It may not require a neurobiologist to conclude that little which is desirable will come from such a diet of negative acknowledgments.

The behaviors of students towards other students on the surface of every school's hallways are easy to see, especially those in which students are harassed and put down. When teachers and other school personnel allow intolerance by students towards one another to exist, they are enabling that behavior (6), and the seeds of alienation are being planted. Put-downs, harassment, bullying and other low-level forms of aggressive behavior cannot be ignored; instead replacement behaviors or choices must be honored and be taught as well. We must teach young people early on about practicing empathy and respecting others... "ways to be" which are constructive, if not engaging.
Greenleaf & Levine, 2000

Empathy is the ability to vicariously feel what another person is feeling, to understand and connect to where that person is. This is a high level of human insight, for it is an "awareness that makes it possible to identify with the life process in other living beings." (7) Empathy is a skill like any other, which can be taught, practiced and applied. It is positively associated with a broad range of other prosocial behaviors such as cooperation, sociability and interpersonal competence. It is negatively associated with aggressive behavior. (8) The experiences we as educators provide for young people regarding empathy and other prosocial behaviors can have a profound impact on their emotional lives as well as on the lives of others.

As emotions are productively channeled, academics too, will be greatly enhanced. In searching for relevant and memorable learning experiences, we return to the fact that emotion is learning and when a student has an emotional response to a lesson, cognitive memory takes hold. When the circuits of the brain get organized through emotional learning experiences, they, in a sense, become programmed and the neurons respond to the frequency of similar cues.

We have found the touching real-life story of seventh grader Howard Gray portrayed in the music video /documentary "Through the Eyes of Howard Gray" to act in this way. (9)(10) The video recounts the story of a boy who is alienated and mistreated because he is different. Students of all ages respond with compassion because they can connect emotionally to Howard's plight. Once this connection has been made, meaningful dialogue about empathy and choices towards others takes place. During these learning sessions, students often respond with great compassion for those who are mistreated by others.

Excerpts from some student letters and journal entries in response to this depiction are as follows.(9)(10)

"I will always remember that song because someday that might be me."

"That Howard Gray song made me want to cry. The lesson makes me think twice about making fun of someone."

"I really understand a lot more now about people with downs syndrome. I am the person who told you about Maria. You know the one in the wheelchair, and she can only move her arms. At first I was scared of her, but then I realized she was OK. I feel really bad when other people make fun of her. I try to tell them to be quiet but they don't listen. I can understand people being afraid of her but I mean they don't have to call her names. Greenleaf & Levine, 2000

I sometimes see her crying, so I go to the back of the van and talk to her. She stopped crying and started laughing. That made me feel good. I thank you for coming in to talk to us. I will remember the song about Howard Gray. I will also remember that even though people look different you can still be their friend."

"I understand what you talked about because I get picked on because of my habits. Mainly about how much I read. I read a whole lot. I hope that the program teaches the people who tease me a lesson. I hope they write a song about me. I will always remember your song."

The first time the "Through the Eyes of Howard Gray" video was shown to a group of high school students at a leadership training in New Hampshire, a second year sophomore looked around at his peers and said "All I know is that if Howard hadn't been treated that way, he probably wouldn't have dropped out of school." He paused, took a deep breath and continued . . . "We need to be there for each other. We have to be a family and help each other." It was what we call a moment which captured the "essence of empathy," and one which was most likely a memorable one for all the people in that room.

The challenge for administrators and teachers is to promote a culture which creates a climate of empathy and compassion. A shirtsleeve definition of school culture is "the way we do things around here." Climate is, "how I feel about the way we do things around here." Ultimately, it is the climate which must show evidence of compassion and empathy. A culture of empathy is a moment by moment practice of compassion for others. It is a safe space-one in which respect and compassion are the norm and connectedness in a safe emotional environment is the outcome. It is about the intention of all school personnel in which nurturing is modeled and encouraged.

Environment is the water in which the fish swim. If the water is not healthy... the fish will suffer. Classroom (and school) environments are absolutely crucial. Climates which are good for students, are good for adults. Everybody wins... and no one gets hurt. Let's address issues at their place of origin. The symptoms of aggression and violence are rampant and clearly eroding academic progress. The problem lies at the core of every human being in the building, adult and child. Emotional well-being is prerequisite to content.

As the saying goes...

"People will forget what you said.

People will forget what you did,

But, people will never forget how you made them feel."

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