

Boosting the Achievement of Anxious Students through Trauma-Inform Ed

As the school year progresses, the issues surrounding educational policies continue to swirl around teacher evaluation turnaround schools, and common core education. Regrettably substantive discussions regarding how to improve student achievement are hard to find.

Insightful debates on teaching techniques that work for students from all backgrounds continue to be silent. The learning needs of students from differing demographics is rarely a focus in teacher training courses, staff development programs, or school districts despite the very slow advancement in achievement data.

The July report by Child Trends of Washington, DC, that 50% of US children have experienced trauma provides a stimulating opportunity for reframing the dialogue on how to reach and teach these challenged students. Child Trends is not an educational institution and yet they have provided critical data for motivating educators to address teaching reform. So far, that opportunity for such a timely discussion has not taken place.

Although the report did not offer any data on the distribution of trauma in children, it is common knowledge that children living in poor and troubled neighborhoods often experience chronic stress and insecurity. The effects of chronic distress on children's brain development have been strongly articulated by neuroscientists during the last decade. Specifically, the brain changes during the first years of a child's life dramatically rob them of their ability to self-regulate and ultimately follow rules when in school.

This knowledge directly explains the disturbing reports in late spring of frequent and repeated suspensions of 4 and 5 year olds. Such grievous injustice experiences in a child's first year of school can generate great confusions and aversion for classroom participation and can lead to repeated learning failures followed by more suspensions.

What apparently has been misinterpreted as misbehavior or defiance is actually a natural expression of anxiety and fear followed by automatic survival-generated behaviors. Teachers alone are not to be blamed for this injustice; our entire educational system has consistently failed to professionally integrate neurobiology into teacher training and school policies.

Children who have experienced chronic trauma automatically develop a state of anxiety when confronted by a perceived verbal threat, causing them to drop out of their thinking brain into their amygdala of their inner brain. This makes it impossible for them to think rationally or engage in the learning process, In fact when in this state, they cannot hear the words spoken by their teacher. It is reported that anxious students hear only 50% of the words spoken by their teacher on any given day according to Bruce D. Perry, MD, PhD.

Traumatized students present an acute challenge to the disciplinary policies and staffs of school districts. These students are consistently on the alert for any possible threat, verbal or physical. They are keenly attuned to the body language of adults that may be a cue to their teacher's possible loss of self-control. Such internal alarms explain the sudden and explosive student-survival behaviors that are so unsettling to school staff members and may be labeled willful defiance. In addition, they create a barrier to focusing and learning.

Anxious students require trusting relationships with predictable adults in order to engage in the learning process. Disciplinary threats are interpreted by distressed students as a shameful rejection, not a corrective intervention. For this reason, trauma-sensitive schools follow restorative discipline as opposed to traditional discipline. Restorative discipline focuses on the harm done, not the rules broken and is fully explained by Lorrain Stutzman Amstutz, in *The Little Book of Restorative Discipline for Schools*.

All students require emotional security in order to achieve. Children who have experienced trauma absolutely need to feel secure and respected. Structure and routines contribute to a sense of calm and security. However, a student's sense of security can be quite different from the understanding of safety from an adult's perspective. Sometimes absolute control over students is expected to generate security but it is interpreted by distressed children as a threat, especially if it is not accompanied by respect. Mutual respect is essential for a classroom climate that supports the learning process and emotional security.

Trauma-informed education is an alternative school policy that is designed to meet the learning and behavioral needs of stressed and anxious students. It is grounded on the latest brain research and requires no special equipment; only educators schooled in neurobiological knowledge. It is a transformative policy that is based on emotional security and mutual respect. In addition to elevated achievement, trauma-informed education can reduce aggressive outbursts while building student self-regulation and social skills because it supports a sense of belonging.

America's children, especially those who have experienced trauma, need advocates for educational equality and justice. They need adults who believe every child can achieve and become a responsible adult.

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