

**Education and “Charismatic” Adults:
To Touch a Student’s Heart and Mind
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In my previous newsletters I have addressed topics directed to parents, educators, and business people. Since this newsletter is being written at a time when most youngsters in the United States have recently begun a new school year, I want to place the spotlight on two issues specifically embracing education: one, the importance of so-called social-emotional factors in the learning process and two, the lifelong impact that educators have on students. I believe that these two related topics play a central role in the educational process.

As many of my readers are aware, one of my primary interests in the field of education has focused on the challenge of creating school environments that nurture the emotional and cognitive lives of students, reinforce motivation and learning, and touch both the hearts and minds of students. I have long advocated in my workshops and consultation activities that the teaching of academic skills and content will be most effective when conducted in an environment that gives more than lip service to nourishing a student’s emotional life.

Yet, there have been those who honestly and respectfully differ with this opinion. At one of my workshops a high school science teacher challenged the emphasis I was placing on social-emotional factors in the educational milieu. She contended, “I am a science teacher. I know my science and I know how to convey science facts to my students. Why should I have to spend time thinking about the student’s emotional or social life? I don’t have time to do so and it will distract me from teaching science.”

I know that there are many teachers and school administrators who would take issue with the views expressed by this science teacher, who believe as I do that focusing on a student’s social and emotional development may be as vital as teaching specific academic content. However, I am also aware that there are many educators who would concur with her opinion. I believe it is unfortunate that a dichotomy has emerged prompting some educators to perceive that nurturing a student’s emotional well-being is incompatible with the task of teaching academic skills.

I am convinced based on my own experiences as well as the feedback received from many educators that strengthening a student’s self-worth is not an “extra” curriculum; if anything, a student’s sense of belonging, security, and self-confidence in a classroom provides the scaffolding that supports the foundation for learning, motivation, self-discipline, responsibility, and the capacity to deal more effectively with mistakes.

The absence of such a scaffolding weakens the educational process and lessens the joy that should accompany learning.

Attending to the emotional life of students need not take any time away from academic tasks and, if anything, will enhance teaching. As a high school teacher told me during a refreshment break at one of my workshops, “When I took time to learn the names of my students, to greet them at the door, to think about the way I spoke with them, to smile more, to make myself more available when they were having difficulty, I actually had more time for teaching.”

This particular teacher added with obvious enjoyment, “Several of my students have gone out of their way to tell me that they knew that I really cared about them. When I was a student I worked harder for those teachers who I felt cared about me, so I try to find ways to show students I care about them. It’s amazing how a little caring on my part can go such a long way to motivate kids and decrease discipline problems.”

I have heard similar comments from many elementary and secondary school teachers and administrators. Students who feel that educators genuinely care about them and actively search for their “islands of competence” or areas of strength are less likely to misbehave and more likely to meet the demands of the classroom environment. Even with all of the technological wonders that now exist in our classrooms, we must never lose sight of the power of the personal relationship with a teacher to truly energize and motivate a student.

The second theme I wish to consider, namely, the lifelong impact that educators have on students, is closely related to this first theme of nurturing the emotional life of children and adolescents. While educators have told me that they believe they are influential in their students’ lives, I have discovered that many do not truly appreciate the extent of their impact. When I was once asked on a television show about the role of a teacher, I responded that teachers are in the “business of saving lives.” The host asked me to explain.

I answered by describing my interest for the past two decades in the topic of resilience. This interest has taken on even greater meaning this past year as I engaged in writing a book titled “Raising Resilient Children” with my close friend and colleague, Dr. Sam Goldstein. I mentioned that at the beginning of my career I focused on pathology or what is wrong with people. However, as the years passed, I re-directed my energy to examine the following question: “What helps children to deal more effectively with stress and pressure and become resilient?” I discovered that several factors contribute to resilience; I should like to describe one of the most important ones.

In numerous studies, when resilient adults were asked what they considered to be of most importance in assisting them to overcome adversity in their childhood, invariably the first response was “someone who believed in me and stood by me.” The late Julius Segal, who devoted much of his life as a psychologist to exploring what helps at-risk youngsters to survive and thrive, wrote a brief article in 1988 for the Brown University Child Behavior and Development Newsletter, in which he noted:

Researchers have distilled a number of factors that enable children of misfortune to beat the heavy odds against them. One factor turns out to be the presence of a charismatic adult—a person with whom they can identify and from whom they gather strength. And in a surprising number of cases, that person turns out to be a teacher.

Relatedly, a Massachusetts Department of Education report also captured the significant role of educators:

Possibly the most critical element to success within school is a student developing a close and nurturing relationship with at least one caring adult. Students need to feel that there is someone whom they know, to whom they can turn, and who will act as an advocate for them.

When I review in my seminars what Segal and others have written about the influence of teachers to alter the life path of students, many educators inform me that they were unaware of the resilience research. I have frequently heard the following comment from teachers, “I have a number of students who come from homes in which they are neglected or abused. What good can I do?” My response is, “For some students the only moments of safety, security, and acceptance they experience are in your classroom. Don’t let the opportunity slip by.”

How does one become a “charismatic” adult in a student’s life? It is beyond the scope of this newsletter to describe in detail all of the possible ways that youngsters can “gather strength” from us. However, as I mentioned above and as I discovered in research I conducted in which I asked educators to recall their most positive memories of school when they were students, it is often the seemingly small gestures that have the most long-lasting impact. A smile, a warm greeting, a note of encouragement, a few minutes to meet alone with a student when indicated, and an appreciation and respect for different learning styles are but several of the characteristics that define a “charismatic” teacher. These gestures are powerful demonstrations of acceptance and caring.

When I emphasize the need for educators to be the “charismatic” adults in the lives of students I am not minimizing the importance of educators being very well-versed and knowledgeable about the subject matter they are teaching. “Charismatic” teachers

possess expertise in their subject areas but they also appreciate that if students are to learn from them, they must touch their hearts as well as their minds. If as a science teacher you know your science facts, but students are not responsive to learning from you because they feel you do not care about them, are you truly an educator?

The themes I have discussed in this newsletter were vividly captured in a poem written by 13-year-old Nickolas Walker, a poem about Ms. Alex Scott, one of his eighth grade teachers. I had the opportunity to meet Nickolas in Albuquerque, New Mexico before he and his family moved to Texas in July. His mother, Tammy Solether, is also an educator. She told me about the impact that Ms. Scott had on Nickolas, a very articulate, likeable young adolescent who has struggled with learning and attentional problems. Nickolas titled the poem “The Black Sea” and he wrote a very moving dedication-- “Dedicated to Alex Scott, the teacher who saved me.”

The following is Nickolas’ poem:

Before I met you,
I lay trapped beneath the Black Sea,
Where the ordinary was mandatory.
You pulled me up—unconscious,
And waited for me to awaken.
It took me some time,
But I did pull through.
You taught me so much,
Now I must move on.
Your job, however, is not complete,
For others lie stranded
Beneath the Black Sea.
Waiting for you,
To reach them—like me.

Ms. Scott was obviously a “charismatic” adult for Nickolas, a teacher from whom he gathered strength. I believe that every educator can serve in this capacity, working closely with parents to nurture self-worth, confidence, hope, and resilience in children and adolescents.

If we are to raise children who possess the skills to meet life’s challenges, we must insure that “charismatic” adults are constantly available to them. Given the many hours our children and adolescents spend in school, it is imperative that teachers truly appreciate the influence they have and use this influence to create an environment in which all domains of a student’s life are enriched. We must remove any existing blinders

and recognize that when one domain fails to receive attention and nourishment, all domains will eventually suffer.

One final comment. For educators to be effective in achieving the status of “charismatic” adults we as a society must recognize, appreciate, and acknowledge in all possible ways the significant role that teachers play. We need more Ms. Scott’s supported by parents like Tammy Solether vitalizing education and when necessary diving in and saving students from the Black Sea. This mission represents our gift and our legacy to our children.

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