

**Loneliness, Self-Efficacy, and Hope:  
Often Neglected Dimensions of the Learning Process**

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I met Matt when he was a young adolescent. He was diagnosed with both learning disabilities and ADHD, was depressed, and was pessimistic about success in the future. His description of school as captured in one of his writings reminds us of the way in which many youngsters with learning problems experience school. Matt wrote:

School has been and still is something I dread profusely. Going to school has been like climbing up a tremendous, rocky mountain with steep cliffs and jagged, slippery rocks. This mountain is very grey and always covered in dark, murky, cold clouds. I step forth to take on this task of climbing this huge mountain. Each step is a battle against strong, howling, icy winds. The winds contain frigid rain that slams against my body, trying to push me down. I keep battling my way up. Sometimes I am knocked down and sometimes I have to stop to regain my strength. My body is numb. My hands shake like leaves in the wind as I claw myself up the mountainside. Not being able to open my eyes, I blindly claw myself up the steep cliff. I stop because I am in such great pain. I look up and see that my struggle has hardly begun. Sometimes I just do not want to go on any further.

In college, Matt, having discovered strategies for dealing more effectively with learning problems and feeling more self-confident, expanded on his story of “The Mountain” and noted that the mountain could become “your grave or your greatest triumph.”

Caitlin was seven years old when I first met her. She had reading and attentional problems and was referred by her parents and teacher because of a lack of confidence, frustration and disappointment about not learning to read as quickly as her peers, and headaches. In therapy I invited Caitlin to write a story about her difficulties. I told her, as I do all my patients, that I often read stories written by children at my workshops so that parents, teachers, and doctors can gain a better understanding of how children feel and can be more helpful to them.

Caitlin was motivated to write such a story with my assistance. She decided to use as a main character a dog named Hyper who had difficulty learning and concentrating, an obvious

representation of herself. The theme of discouragement and low self-esteem was evident at the beginning of the story when she wrote:

Hyper told herself that she would get over this problem some day, but she wondered if she really would. She was worried that when she grew up and her own puppies asked her something, she would not know the answer and they would wonder why their mother was not very smart. Thinking about this made Hyper feel very upset. She wasn't sure what to do about it.

Caitlin's words poignantly captured not only her low self-esteem, but also a fear expressed by many children and adolescents with learning disabilities, namely, that their condition in life will not improve. In essence, they have lost one of the most important gifts there is, the gift of hope. Fortunately, with much support and encouragement from her parents and teachers and other significant adults in her life, Caitlin persevered, eventually earning a master's degree in early education. Today she is a very respected first-grade teacher.

I interviewed Jeremy, a 10-year-old boy who, in describing his learning struggles said, "I'm the only kid at my school with these problems."

I was somewhat surprised by his observation since he was attending a school for students with a documented learning disability. I said, "But I thought all the kids at the school have problems with learning." Jeremy responded, "But none have problems like mine."

In fact, Jeremy's learning problems were not unique and, in actuality were very similar to those of many of his classmates. However, he expressed a belief that I have heard from numerous students confronted with learning struggles, namely, that they are all alone and no one can truly understand the pain and distress they experience on a daily basis.

I was reminded of the stories of Matt, Caitlin, Jeremy, and countless other children who struggle with learning by a thought-provoking, insightful article titled "Comparisons of Achievement, Effort, and Self-Perceptions Among Students with Learning Disabilities and Their Peers from Different Achievement Groups" published in the September/October, 2006 issue of *The Journal of Learning Disabilities*. The article was authored by Dr. Timothy D. Lackaye of Hunter College in New York and Malka Margalit of Tel Aviv University in Israel and drew upon research they conducted with 571 seventh-grade Israeli students, 124 of whom were diagnosed with learning disabilities and 447 who were not. They divided the non-LD group into four

groups based on their actual achievement in school.

Lackaye and Margalit examined several key variables including: (a) the link between academic achievement and effort; (b) the students' sense of self-efficacy (i.e., whether they believed they were competent to succeed at a particular task); (c) feelings of loneliness; (d) a sense of coherence defined as "a global enduring orientation that allows the individual to see the world as comprehensible, manageable, and meaningful; a strong sense of coherence is related to the availability of a wide and varied repertoire of coping strategies and to flexibility in selecting the particular coping strategy that seems most appropriate at a certain time and environmental condition"; (e) mood; and (f) hopeful thinking (hope was defined as a belief that desired goals can be reached and that there were various pathways to meet these goals).

For those of us who have worked with students with learning problems, the findings of Lackaye and Margalit's study are not surprising. They serve to reinforce the belief that if we are to assist struggling students to succeed in school, we must not only address their academic weaknesses, but, as importantly, we must intervene to lessen feelings and beliefs that serve as significant obstacles to engaging in learning tasks and achieving academically. While the results of this study are focused on those students diagnosed with learning disabilities, the implications of the research findings are relevant for all students.

Lackaye and Margalit found that students with learning disabilities "felt lonelier and more socially isolated" in school even in comparison with students who did not have learning disabilities but were low achievers. In addition, their findings highlighted that "successful students are ready to work hard and report higher levels of effort, whereas unsuccessful students need to work harder, but they are neither motivated nor ready to do so." Some may interpret this finding as a confirmation that students diagnosed with learning disabilities could be more successful if only they devoted more time and effort in their schoolwork. However, I believe that such an interpretation is faulty and it would be more accurate to assume that it is difficult for students to invest energy in learning when they are burdened by the negative mindset that regardless of how much time and effort they expend, they will still fail. In essence, they have developed what psychologist Dr. Martin Seligman termed "learned helplessness" and they entertain little, if any, hope for future success. Students with this mindset hear exhortations to "try harder" as accusatory and judgmental remarks, hardening them from accepting any

assistance we may offer. I would contend that if we are to succeed with these students, we must first consider techniques for changing their self-defeating negative mindset.

Lackaye and Margalit support this contention in noting, “These results demonstrated the importance of social-emotional factors and the unique contribution of hopeful thinking in understanding the functioning of students with LD. . . . Special attention should be focused on their hopeful beliefs in predicting their future.” They continue, “The educational implications of this study call for developing empowering programs for students, targeting their decreased self-beliefs, and sensitizing teachers to the critical role of self-perceptions. Students with LD need help in developing insight into their actual achievement, support in enhancing their academic self-efficacy, assistance in developing hopeful thinking through training to identify appropriate goals and alternative goals, effective strategies and alternative strategies, and help in learning skills for challenging their tendencies for negative mood and decreased expectations.”

The recommendations proposed by Lackaye and Margalit resonate with the resilience framework advanced by my colleague Dr. Sam Goldstein and myself. In examining their data, we would be more likely to ask, “How do we nurture a resilient mindset in students who feel defeated and lonely, who are dominated by pessimism and self-doubt, who feel passive and helpless when confronted with learning demands, and who are saddened by the prospect that hope is illusory?”

Lackaye and Margalit’s suggest that we develop “empowering programs for students.” In considering this recommendation I would first ask, “What steps must a teacher take to develop a relationship with a student so that the student will be receptive to accepting and engaging in empowering interventions?” As I have emphasized in countless workshops and many writings, strategies are most effective in the context of a good relationship. Too often I have witnessed educators and other professionals attempt to apply particular educational techniques without first insuring that the student perceives these adults as helpful, caring, and empathic figures.

Dr. Daniel Goleman supports this view in his most recent book *Social Intelligence*. He reports a study of 910 first-graders from a national sample representation of the entire United States. The study examined the “effect of teaching style on how well at-risk children learned.” The most favorable results occurred “when teachers (a) tuned in to the child and responded to his needs, moods, interests, and capabilities, letting them guide their interactions, (b) created an

upbeat classroom environment with pleasant conversations, lots of laughter and excitement, (c) showed warm and ‘positive regards’ toward students, and (d) had good classroom management with clear but flexible expectations and routines, so that students followed rules largely on their own.” In contrast, not surprisingly, the worst outcomes occurred when teachers were emotionally distant, often angry at students, and quick to use punitive means when disciplining their students. Very importantly, while students who were already doing well were less influenced by a distant, negative teacher, “the study found a stunning difference among the at-risk students; if they had a warm, responsive teacher, they flourished, learning as well as other kids.” Goleman notes that other studies indicate that these findings are not confined to first grade, but occur throughout the school years. He summarizes, “Whenever teachers create an empathic and responsive environment, students not only improve in their grades and test scores—they become eager learners. Even one supportive adult at school can make a difference to a student.”

Once teachers serve in this capacity (what the late Dr. Julius Segal called “charismatic adults” or adults from whom children gather strength), they will be better equipped to introduce strategies that are empowering and touch the hearts, minds, and spirits of students. Empowerment can be reinforced in many ways. Teachers can engage students in what Dr. Mel Levine refers to as “de-mystification,” that is, explaining to them both their learning strengths and vulnerabilities and helping them to realize that they are not alone. Educators can share strategies for more effective learning and in the process enlist the thoughts and insights of the student; involving students in this way lessens feelings of helplessness and hopelessness while promoting a greater sense of ownership and responsibility for their own learning. As Dr. Myrna Shure has demonstrated via her “I Can Problem Solve” program, even preschool children can be taught to become active participants in understanding and solving challenges that they face.

In addition, educators and other adults in the lives of children can prepare them for mistakes and setbacks. At the beginning of the school year teachers can actively discuss the fear of making mistakes and feeling humiliated, sharing with the class similar feelings and experiences they had when they were students. They can ask the students what each member of the class (including the teacher) can do to insure that no student ever worries about not knowing an answer or not understanding the material. Guidelines against laughing at or ridiculing a

student should be established. The mental and emotional energy required for learning, especially for those who struggle with learning, should never be sapped by feelings of loneliness and hopelessness and fears of embarrassment. It is difficult for children to learn when they are overcome with self-doubt and negative moods.

Several years ago, my colleague Rick Lavoie gave me a wonderful book titled *Unconventional Wisdom: Torah Perspectives on the Child Who Has Difficulty Learning* by Reuven Elkins. The author is a rabbi who also holds a master's degree in Education of the Learning Disabled and Neurologically Impaired from New York University. The Torah, which consists of the first five books of the Hebrew bible and the Old Testament of the Christian bible, contains significant laws and teachings of Judaism. Rabbi Elkins' application of Jewish law to children with special needs extends to other faiths as well and resonates with the theme of this article. Calling upon these laws and reacting to the biblical message to "educate the child according to his own way," Rabbi Elkins offers an observation that if followed would provide the scaffolding for boys or girls with learning problems to experience hope rather than despair, connectedness rather than isolation, and self-respect and self-efficacy rather than self-doubt. He writes:

Every child has within him hidden predispositions and abilities. We as parents and teachers must find and nurture them. In this way, even the child who has difficulty in one area or with one style of learning excels in another area or with a different educational approach. Only if we approach each child with sensitivity to his individual nature are we assured that the Torah and *hashkafa* (outlook) we have given him will continue to guide him throughout his adult life.

The application of this perspective so poignantly described by Rabbi Elkins will help youngsters such as Matt, Caitlin, Jeremy, and countless other children perceive that not only do adults appreciate their struggles with learning but they are available to provide support and encouragement. Only then will the conditions be ripe for "developing empowering programs for children" that touch the hearts and minds of all students and transform teachers into "charismatic adults" whose positive impact will be felt for a lifetime.