

A Therapeutic Environment Called School

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During the past few weeks I have spoken at a number of schools and school districts prior to the commencement of the new school year. A palpable excitement is evident at these events, an excitement rooted in colleagues seeing each other for the first time in several months, sharing stories of what has transpired during the summer, and planning for the arrival of students. The audiences at several of my presentations have included not only faculty and administrators but also support staff such as secretaries, custodians, bus drivers, and buildings and operations personnel. Logistically, it is often very difficult to have most of those who work in the district attend. I am delighted when they are able to do so. It affords me the opportunity to recognize the ways in which each adult in the school setting may have a lifelong impact on students.

This recognition is important since at times I have heard such comments as: “I’m just a secretary” or “I’m just a cafeteria worker.” Some staff fail to appreciate that regardless of their position or responsibility in the school setting they can have a significant influence on students. I inform all of my audiences of the late psychologist Julius Segal’s notion of a “charismatic adult,” an adult from whom a child or adolescent “gathers strength” and who assists that child to become more hopeful and resilient. I also emphasize that many individuals in schools serve in that capacity but are not even aware that they are doing so.

A favorite story I share at a number of my presentations involves a child I will call Sarah, an elementary school girl I was seeing in therapy. She struggled with her social skills as well as with academic demands. A school conference was planned and when I asked Sarah which school staff she would suggest attend the meeting, she quickly said, “Mr. Smith.” I knew the names of Sarah’s teachers, the school principal, and school counselor, but had not heard of Mr. Smith.

I asked Sarah, “Who is Mr. Smith?”

Sarah smiled, “He’s my bus driver. He always says hello when I get on the bus and treats me nice. Once a couple of kids were teasing me and he told them that we don’t

tease on his bus and they stopped. He makes me feel so good right at the beginning of the day.”

Mr. Smith was informed of Sarah’s request that he attend the meeting. He was surprised to learn about the role he assumed in her life and the way in which he made her transition to school more comfortable each morning. He was very pleased to attend and contribute his observations to Sarah’s school conference.

I recall a struggling high school boy whose anxiety about attending school was lessened when he was enlisted to assist the secretary in the main office each morning with different responsibilities. This boy not only relished the relationship he developed with the secretary but also benefited from being involved in activities that contributed to the welfare of the school. These activities served to nurture responsibility and resilience. The secretary represented a major positive figure for this boy as he gained confidence in school.

Indelible Memories of School

In the workshops I provide for schools I am constantly reminded of the lifelong impact that educators have on students by the eagerness with which staff and faculty are willing to share their memories of their teachers. Many of the stories are positive but there are some that involve situations in which as students they experienced emotional abuse on the part of teachers. One teacher poignantly asked me, “If there are ‘charismatic adults’ in this world are there also ‘anti-charismatic adults,’ people who suck the energy from you and lessen your self-esteem and dignity?”

Unfortunately, the answer to this question is yes. An “anti-charismatic adult” I readily think of was my fifth grade teacher who I believe relished in putting students down with sarcastic comments. Fortunately, my sixth grade teacher, Mr. Mannato, whom I described in my January, 2011 article, helped to offset the negative emotions triggered from my experience the prior year.

When time permits at my workshops I invite teachers to share with their colleagues stories about both “charismatic” and “anti-charismatic teachers” from their past. Some of the situations they describe occurred decades ago, but it is obvious from the strong emotions that emerge that it is as if the events transpired more recently. In a

journal article I authored many years ago, I labeled these experiences, whether positive or negative, as “indelible memories of school.”

While engaged in recalling these memories, some teachers are surprised by the intensity of the feelings that are aroused. One teacher described the humiliation she felt as a first grader when she failed to make it to the bathroom and wet her panties. She was horrified. When she approached her teacher for support, the latter told her to go behind the desk and remove her wet panties. The girl did so believing the teacher was going to put the panties in a bag so that none of her classmates would realize what had occurred. Instead, the teacher held up the panties in front of the class and said, “See, this is what happens when you forget to go to the bathroom.” The woman began to cry as she told this story, adding, “I can’t believe I’m still so upset about it. It happened 40 years ago and yet it seems like yesterday. I promised myself when I became a teacher I would make certain that no child ever felt embarrassed or humiliated in my classroom.”

This last comment captures one of the reasons I request educators to recall their own positive and negative memories of school. In my presentations I note, “Just as we all have lifelong positive and negative memories of our teachers, our current students will form memories of the time they spend with us. What do you hope these memories will be and what are you doing on a daily basis to create the memories you want them to have of you?”

Reflecting upon the countless memories of school that I have gathered from adults at workshops and via a questionnaire, I have often thought that some of the best therapists I have met in terms of the impact they have on a child’s life don’t refer to themselves as therapists but rather as teachers. On a daily basis they touch both the hearts and minds of children and adolescents although they may not appreciate the extent of their influence. As well-known author Tracy Kidder, after having spent a year observing an elementary school classroom, eloquently observes in his impressive book *Among Schoolchildren*:

Teachers usually have no way of knowing that they have made a difference in a child’s life, even when they have made a dramatic one. But for children who are used to thinking of themselves as stupid or not worth talking to or deserving rape and beatings, a good teacher can provide an astonishing revelation. A good teacher can give a child at least a chance to feel, “*She* thinks I’m worth

something. Maybe I am.” Good teachers put snags in the river of children passing by, and over the years, they redirect hundreds of lives. Many people find it easy to imagine unseen webs of malevolent conspiracy in the world, and they are not always wrong. But there is also an innocence that conspires to hold humanity together, and it is made up of people who can never fully know the good that they have done.

While Kidder refers primarily to students who have experienced abuse and adversity, the viewpoint he conveys extends to all students, even those who come from loving, supportive homes.

Challenging Students, Positive Outcomes

The impact a teacher can have on students, even those who present with learning and behavioral challenges, was highlighted in a study conducted by Timothy Curby, Taylor Edwards, and Koraly Perez-Edgar of George Mason University and Kathleen Moritz Rudasill of the University of Louisville; it was reported in a 2011 issue of the *School Psychology Quarterly*. These investigators studied first grade children who possessed a so-called “difficult” temperament. Characteristics of such children often include: high levels of activity, low frustration tolerance, overreaction to different situations, hypersensitivities including to sound and touch, problems shifting from one activity to another, and a susceptibility to a negative mood. Not surprisingly, such attributes often contribute to a child’s poor outcome both socially and academically in school.

However, as Curby and his colleagues observe, a negative outcome for these children in the school setting is not cast in stone. They contend, “Difficult temperament alone does not produce these worse outcomes in children. Rather, children’s outcomes arise from the fit between temperament and the environment. In certain environments, children with difficult temperaments may be able to flourish just as much as, if not more than, their peers with easier temperaments.”

The concept that is highlighted in the last paragraph is known as “goodness-of-fit” between a child’s temperament and environment. It represents a more hopeful perspective, challenging adults to implement strategies that take into account the temperament of children in order to provide situations that eventuate in success. In the

study being reported the investigators were guided by the concept of “classroom quality,” a concept that embraces three domains: emotional support; classroom organization; and instructional support. The authors offer the following definitions of these domains:

Emotional support refers to the teacher’s ability to create a positive classroom climate, meet individual student needs, and provide an atmosphere that promotes student choice and responsibility; classroom organization refers to the teacher’s ability to create an atmosphere where behavioral problems do not get in the way of learning, where there is always something for students to work on, and where there are a variety of ways for students to engage in material; instructional support refers to a teacher’s ability to promote deep thinking about concepts and provide constructive feedback that helps students further engage in the material.

It is beyond the scope of this website article to review the different assessment instruments used in the Curby study to examine the correlation between “classroom quality” and academic and social success for temperamentally difficult first grade children. The authors, while identifying several limitations of their study design and offering recommendations for future research, summarize their findings by noting, “The present study suggests that higher-quality classroom environments may buffer children with more difficult temperaments from negative outcomes. Thus, interventions that promote higher-quality emotional, organizational, and instructional environments may enable teachers to provide a better fit for children with difficult temperaments. . . . Should schools find ways to increase the quality of the classroom interactions, at-risk children—including those with difficult temperaments—will reap the rewards.”

The key findings of this study support my belief that teachers and other school personnel possess the ability to “redirect,” as Kidder contends, the lives of many students. Such teachers not only address the vulnerabilities of students, but they also capitalize on their strengths and interests. As I have posited in my writings and lectures, this “redirection” need not take time away from academic demands but to the contrary can enrich the learning process for all students, thereby increasing intrinsic motivation, achievement, responsibility, and resilience, while lessening anger, frustration, pessimism, and a resistance to engaging in school tasks.

In my observations of many classrooms, I continue to be impressed by those educators who enthusiastically and purposefully accept students for who they are and identify and reinforce the strengths or islands of competence of all students. These are the teachers who are not blinded by labels such as “temperamentally difficult.” Instead, they perceive all students as being capable of succeeding at academic and social demands as long as they are provided with appropriate interventions. They are truly “charismatic adults” who create vivid positive indelible memories of school that will last a lifetime.

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