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Questions and Answers: Determining What Our Students Really Need

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Questions and Answers: Determining What Our Students Really Need

 www.edutopia.org/blog/questions-determining-what-students-need-lori-desautels

This morning I sat in two inner city middle school classrooms in Indianapolis as I do most weeks. But something struck me deeply in the center of my chest as I was observing the boredom and apathy in the detached, sleepy and seemingly sad faces of many of these seventh grade students. The teachers were cheerfully present, the standards were posted, the paperwork was almost completed, there were no overt disruptions, and compliance was at hand.



The procedures, rules and transitions were hard-wired into the brains of these middle school students and adults, but an "inner" inspiration and deep subconscious yearning for something else attached to the notion of the "purpose of school" were nowhere to be found.

The Stressors and the Stressed

There is much talk in Indiana and across the nation about the effectiveness of charters, public schools, voucher initiatives and private schools. But, in reality, our children most in need are often the first to be rejected socially and emotionally, the first to be expelled and the first to be relegated to sub-standard services where parents are uninformed, misinformed or unaware of their options, rights and responsibilities. Often, when children with learning and emotional challenges enter a charter or private school option, they're shocked to discover that the services and/or in-house systems are set up in ways that are unable to meet their legal needs, let alone their emotional, cognitive and social, and least restrictive environment needs. When we look inside the minds and hearts of troubled youth, zero tolerance policies and coercive behavior management practices administered by untrained or unaware adults are basically fighting pain-based behavior with more pain. I know this because my own students, first- and second-year teachers, are seeing this every day!

Turnaround Mantras

Turnaround schools might create mottos and class chants, encasing notions that an effective teacher can change the entire trajectory of a troubled and impoverished student's school success, but is this accurate? Is this the end point, the true marker of successful education? Have we taught our students to reach within, to listen to their hearts, to their intuitive knowledge, to live outside the walls of school? We repeat slogans such as "College or Die," and we evaluate student and teacher success on assessment scores, state-created rubrics, student growth models and curriculum development. Yet are six hours of compliance -- a tucked-in shirt, walking quietly in a straight line through a hallway while toggling through the standards -- the telltale signs of emotional engagement and passionate and question-filled learning? Are these compliant students positing the product of creative problem-searching and questioning?

The Impact of Stress

What we do know is that chronic stress intimately affects learning, long- and short-term memory, and our immune systems. We know that deep learning is held in long-term memory when it is experienced and self-assessed.

School stress levels may be getting worse. Let's start with kids. Nationwide, over 20% of 11-to-17-year-olds have some type of a stress disorder: depression, reactive attachment disorder, learned helplessness, bipolar, etc. The top three stressors for adolescents are school academic pressures, family pressure and bullying (kidshealth.org). Among kids from poverty, 60-95% have chronic stress.

Chronic stress hurts student achievement. It is well known that chronic stress contributes to over half of all school absences (Johnston-Brooks, et al. 1998). The ways to reduce this in the classroom include:

1. More physical activity, yoga or stretching
2. Greater sense of control, including decision-making and responsibility
3. Improved coping skills (For example, share everyday incidents with your students and let them suggest how they would solve the problem.)

We do know that the brain processes questions long after they have been asked. We also know that when an individual is given a question filled with optimism, a bit of hope or affirmation, or an acknowledgment that one small thing is going well, that individual's perspectives broaden. The frontal lobe of the developing brain, the seat of our higher thought processes, engages as we slowly leave the fight/flight/freeze response of our lower, more primitive brain. We know that every moment we encounter a conversation, an experience, a novel way of attempting an assignment, and the give-and-take of a relationship, the brain structurally and functionally changes!

Asking the Right Questions

So as teachers, school leaders and parents, what can we do? We begin by asking questions. "What do you need? How can I help?" We begin to inquire and take notes from a heart and mind combination. Just for a moment or two, we look beyond the behaviors we're observing and into the eyes of someone with an injured heart. We listen to understand rather than listen to respond.

My graduate students, second year teachers in the Indianapolis public schools, are doing just this. They are changing it up this semester, presenting their students with these questions in a self-assessment format. These teachers are learning about many aspects of their students' lives. One teacher reported that her adolescent student gave this frustrated response to a few of the questions on the self-assessment: "I don't like people trying to get into my heart!" Together, this teacher and student shared a moment of insight inside unknown territory and a precipice for where to begin as this relationship unfolds. We ask the questions, listen and then take those responses and sit beside our students, working together to build an "action plan of hope." We implement small steps, feedback, self-assessment and a collaborative process that begins with the courage to ask, to sit for a while with the unknown. As teachers, we open the door, and then we wait, affirm, proceed, remind, guide, show consequences . . . and learn.

Below is a list of questions that might lessen these emotional and cognitive chasms developing in this time of heated, chaotic school reform debates. These questions do not solve problems; they explore what cannot be seen with only the eyes. They propel self-reflection and social and emotional self-assessment by initiating dialogue, carrying to the surface some long held negative emotions and beliefs that have barricaded learning, blocking active school motivation while hijacking feelings of well being. Choose two or three of these questions and work with those students who trigger your emotions and leave you sleepless on many nights. These social and emotional questions have the potential to raise those test scores and close those gaps. But more importantly, they have the potential to raise the curious creative thinking patterns our brains were and are wired to hold and expand. This expansion begins when we mentor and question from the inside out.

- What do I need?
- What resources (people, activities or things) could assist me in reaching my small and larger goals?
- How can I show that I am progressing to bigger goals?
- What can my class do to assist me?
- What can my teacher do to assist me?
- How do I handle negative situations? When these situations occur, what do I typically say to myself?
- What would be a statement that would encourage me?

- Who are my heroes? What are the character traits I admire in these people that make them my heroes?
- How will I personally know I am on the right track? What will tell me if I'm straying off the track of my goals?
- What are three negative emotions I feel most often?
- What are three positive emotions I feel often or sometimes?
- How could creative visualization help me?
- How could I learn to begin again even after a day of small mistakes?
- What are three strategies that my teacher could use to assist me in moving toward my goals?
- What are two or three challenges or obstacles that prevent me from reaching small or big goals?
- What are my strengths?
- What are my challenges?
- How will I plan to focus on these strengths knowing that my thoughts and feelings drive all my behaviors and words with others?