

Love Can Heal Urban Education

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Abstract

The challenge of educating urban students within the context of poverty, trauma, abuse, and other socio-economic factors that contribute to students' lives can be overwhelming and seemingly impossible for urban educators and school administrators. Research from the ACE (Adverse Childhood Experiences) studies demonstrates, however, that urban students are at significantly higher risks for negative health factors as adults because they lack resiliency fostered in safe, loving environments. With proper support from school leaders, teachers in urban schools can create a loving environment that can serve to break the cycle of poverty, trauma, and abuse.

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“Every year, millions of unloved and traumatized youth enter adulthood with damaged brains and hearts. They are highly predisposed to die from self-destructive behaviors, and highly likely to continue the cycle of abuse.”

Eric Jensen, *Teaching with Poverty in Mind*

The Power of Hopelessness

I have witnessed the horror of this cycle first hand. In 2007, my two-year old neighbor girl, Darisabel Baez, was beaten to death with an XBOX controller by her mother’s boyfriend, Harve Johnson. Harve now sits on death row, receiving justice. However, justice has not changed the reality that Darisabel is not with her 5th grade classmates, playing dress-up with mismatched clothes and sporting funky hair for Wacky Wednesday during Spirit Week at school.

During Harve’s sentencing, his mother testified, pleading for her son’s life. She told the court about how Harve had also been severely abused as a child; the abuser had also been abused. This broken little boy grew into the monster that stole the life of a beautiful little girl; the cycle of abuse sustained.

One critical element was missing from Harve’s childhood: love. What kind of man might Harve have become if he had known the warmth of an embrace, or a gentle kiss at bedtime instead of the continual lash of a belt? What if Harve’s school experience was one in which he was surrounded by the loving warmth and safety of

protective relationships so that he built resiliency to survive the trauma he was experiencing at home?

There are thousands of Harve Johnsons walking the halls of our schools. Their repetitive trauma is a plague on urban schools. Educating them can seem hopeless.

Hopelessness is powerful. It insists that urban schools cannot be reformed. City schools, and the communities they represent, are racked with high dropout rates, low student attendance, senseless violence, and economic and racial segregation. Research confirms that urban schools are swarming with traumatized kids.

Cynicism tempts us to believe that the cycle of poverty is unbreakable. A high-quality education is critical to ending the cycle of poverty, but its delivery can be a challenge. Poverty and childhood trauma are a potent concoction that make teacher-student relationships a struggle.

It seems easier to pity hurting students who live in poverty than to love them. Any decent educator knows though, that trust and respect are fundamental to a healthy teacher-student relationship. The people we ourselves trust and respect are typically those we know love and care about us. Loving students that are hurting, and thereby developing their trust and respect, is not an easy task.

Referring to this challenge, Jensen (2009) writes,

“Children raised in poverty rarely choose to behave differently, but they are faced daily with overwhelming challenges that affluent children never have to confront, and their brains have adapted to suboptimal conditions in ways that undermine good school performance.” (p. 14)

Absent protective relationships, adverse experiences overwhelm students’ brains with toxic levels of stress that generate dangerously high doses of adrenaline and cortisol (ACEs science). This is one of the reasons traumatized students are constantly in “fight or flight” mode, making the development of trusting, respectful, loving relationships feel impossible.

Can teachers develop relationships of love, trust, and respect with traumatized students? Can we heal what plagues urban education?

The ACE Studies

Research is uncovering what many parents and teachers know intuitively: love plays a crucial role in the healthy development of children’s brains. In 1998, the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study (Felitti & Anda, 1998) was conducted by a group of researchers on 9,508 adults at Kaiser Permanente’s San Diego Health Appraisal Clinic. This study was composed of primarily white, middle-class, and highly educated individuals. A similar ACE study was conducted on 1,784 adults in

Philadelphia in 2012 that focused on an urban community with broader social, economic, and racial diversity (Public Health Management Group, 2013).

Both studies required participants to complete a questionnaire that reported their experience of adverse childhood experiences. These included suffering psychological, physical, or sexual abuse; witnessing violence against one's mother; and living with household members who were substance abusers, mentally ill or suicidal, or who had been imprisoned. The Philadelphia study included additional adverse experiences associated with living in urban communities, such as residing in unsafe neighborhoods, suffering bullying, witnessing violence, experiencing racism, and living in foster care (Public Health Management Group, 2013).

Researchers studied the correlation between adverse childhood experiences and negative adult health risk factors that had been identified as the leading causes of morbidity and mortality in the United States. These negative adult health risk factors included the following:

- Smoking
- Severe obesity
- Physical inactivity
- Any drug use
- Alcoholism
- Depressed mood
- Suicide attempts

- A high lifetime number of sexual partners(>50)
- Sexually transmitted disease

The results of both studies were staggering. Researchers found a graded relationship between the number of categories of adverse childhood experiences and the adult health risk behaviors and diseases. Children who experienced *four or more* adverse childhood experiences grew up to become adults who were significantly susceptible to the negative adult health risk factors listed above.

The data is clear: children who endure childhood trauma develop unhealthy coping mechanisms that can lead to devastating adult health outcomes.

Coming to Grips

The ACE studies uncover why urban educators face more significant challenges than their suburban counterparts. The Kaiser study found that 6.2% of respondents had experienced greater than four adverse childhood experiences. Meanwhile, the more socioeconomically diverse Philadelphia study, found that 37% of respondents had experienced four or more adverse childhood experiences.

A student's physical, psychological, emotional, social, and spiritual development cannot be solely addressed at the school. Certain aspects of human development should be the concern of the family, faith communities, and the broader community as well. However, our schools must come to grips with the implications of the ACE

studies: in many cases, school is the only opportunity students have for holistic development. Traumatized students need places where they can feel safe and loved and our schools represent tremendous places of healing.

Love CAN Heal Urban Education

We cannot afford to overlook the healing, transformative power that just one loving, compassionate teacher can have in the life of a traumatized child. The documentary film *Paper Tigers* highlighted the transformation of Lincoln Intermediate High School in Walla Walla, Washington, into a Trauma-Informed Community, sensitive to the implications of adverse childhood experiences. The film demonstrates that teachers who persistently and tirelessly love obstinate, broken, hurting teens are making a difference in their lives.

Teachers in the film make it a priority to love students. Faculty meetings focus on social and emotional needs of students in addition to academic ones. Teachers weep over students, remind them regularly that they love them, and do all they can to go the extra mile in caring for students. The school also incorporates holistic care of students on site that extends beyond the typical academic concerns to include student's social, health, and emotional well-being. The documentary notes, "With this shifting paradigm comes the promise of great improvements in many of the society's costly ills: less crime, less illness, less teen pregnancy, abuse, rape, divorce. Simply put, it is cheaper to heal than to punish" (KPJR Films, n.d.)

Students who have been subjected to adverse childhood experiences are not doomed. Healthy social interactions can help build resiliency and serve to heal damaged brains and hearts. Benard (n.d.) writes:

The major implication from resiliency research for practice is that if we hope to create socially competent people who have a sense of their own identity and efficacy, who are able to make decisions, set goals, and believe in their future, then meeting their basic human needs for caring, connectedness, respect, challenge, power, and meaning must be the primary focus of any prevention, education, and youth development effort.

Benard (n.d.) quotes a former gang member, who characterizes resiliency research: “Kids can walk around trouble, if there is some place to walk to, and someone to walk with.” Schools can be that place for kids to walk to in order to avoid trouble, and classroom teachers may be the only ones who can offer a positive, consistent “walk” for children during their formative years.

Getting Started

Imagine the transformation of a school culture if love were the priority, and if it were the priority *from the beginning of a student’s education*. The following steps can keep this task from overwhelming teachers and schools.

1. Love must be considered the ground of a high quality education

We can shift how we perceive education contributes to childhood development. Students are not blank hard drives that can be filled with academic data, but are more like seedlings planted in a garden where love is the ground. Teachers can choose to see the social and emotional baggage students bring into class as a deterrent to learning, or view student struggles as an opportunity to nurture the whole child.

Children are complex, rational, emotional, spiritual human beings with unique personalities and gifts. Research demonstrates that incorporating their emotional and social needs into literacy and cognitive instruction has the most positive impact on their development.

Students who show up to school stressed out, in fight-or-flight mode, fearful, depressed, and feeling unworthy need the security and warmth that a loving teacher and school can provide. This love, multiplied by numerous teachers and staff members over the course of 13 years, will provide the ground to give students a fighting chance at future health and success.

2. Love must be a school leadership priority

School boards, superintendents, heads of school, and principals need to prioritize love in their school's culture. Traumatized students are not served well in high-stress environments that focus solely on standardized test scores and performance.

As Head of School at Logos Academy, an independent urban school, I see the nurturing of school culture as one of my primary responsibilities. Culture cannot be created by one person, but is rather the collective result of human interaction.

School leaders are critical in modeling love and shaping the culture. Leaders need to be held accountable for creating a loving, nurturing atmosphere for all faculty, staff, and students.

3. Learning to love must be a foundational part of professional development

Teachers must be encouraged to be aware of their students' individual and family needs. Because teachers are already occupied with lesson planning, basic classroom management, parent communications, and a host of other duties, frequent training and timely reminders will be necessary to maintain the focus of love in the classroom.

Schools should expand beyond child abuse mandated reporter training to include exposure to the ACE studies, strategies that aid in building student resilience, documentaries such as *Paper Tigers*, poverty simulation exercises, and even training on healthy brain development. These exercises can aid schools in building

understanding and empathy. In addition, schools should help faculty learn to develop health and balance in their own lives that will be needed to fully present and available to support traumatized kids.

4. Develop a portrait of a graduate

The question is not simply, “What do we want students to know when they graduate?” but rather, “Who do we want them to be?” The choice is clear: Either today’s kids become unhealthy, risk-taking, abusive, dangerous adults, or they will become thriving, healthy contributors to society.

Every school should develop and use a portrait of a graduate that imagines the healthy graduate. The scope and sequence of curriculum should be mapped to this vision. This portrait can help teachers understand the contribution they are making over the long course of a child’s education.

5. Loving students requires the engagement of parents and the broader community

Schools should actively work with parents, families, faith communities, and the broader community to mold students.

At Logos Academy, teachers are required to make at least one in-home visit with the parents of each student for the purpose of developing a healthy rapport with the family. A report from the National Education Association (NEA, 2015) highlights that regardless of family income or background, students with involved parents are more likely to:

- Earn higher grades and test scores and enroll in higher-level programs
- Be promoted, pass their classes, and earn credits
- Attend school regularly
- Have better social skills, show improved behavior, and adapt well to school
- Graduate and go on to postsecondary education

Schools can also be a critical connection to community resources, such as faith communities, counseling services, healthcare, job training, crisis intervention, and food banks. These wrap-around resources can help develop in-home stability, which will support better outcomes at school.

The High Cost of Ignoring Love

Maslow (1943) proposed that once the basic physiological and safety needs have been satisfactorily met for humans, the need for love emerges as a powerful shaping force. When love is withheld from a human, it is disastrous to their development.

Maslow (1943) wrote, “In our society the thwarting of these needs [i.e. love] is the

most commonly found core in cases of maladjustment and more severe psychopathology” (p. 381).

Millions of unloved and traumatized kids are entering adulthood with damaged brains and hearts, highly predisposed to die from self-destructive behaviors, and highly likely to continue the cycle of abuse because they are unloved.

I believe most teachers entered education because they wanted to make a positive impact in the lives of students. A high-quality education can make an impact, but one that is saturated with love has the power to redeem children from a life of devastation and waste.

Love must become the foundation of our school culture and palpable in our classrooms. Students must be able to sense it, feel it, and know it from the time they enter school buildings to the time they walk across the platform at graduation.

Classroom teachers in urban schools are spending hours each day with traumatized students. They represent one of the greatest opportunities in helping these children enter adulthood, not as broken men and women, but as strong ones with healthy brains and hearts. Love can heal urban education.

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