Relating to at risk youth: What teachers can do to combat the impact of isolation, alienation and rejection among students

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INTRODUCTORY INFORMATION

• OVERVIEW OF PRESENTATION
• DESCRIPTION

• Schools are responsible for the positive…or negative school climates that students experience.
• Youth with little ability to connect with others are highly vulnerable to peers.
• At risk students are likely to have a cluster of problems (delinquency, drug use, promiscuity, school failure).
CURRICULUM DEFICIT DISORDER???

Instead of diagnosing students with such labels as ADD, PTSD, ODD, etc., maybe we should diagnose schools with curriculum deficit disorder. An appropriate curriculum (and employing teachers who teach to the whole child) goes a long way toward providing students with academic success.
TEACHERS ARE STRUGGLING

“Teachers are struggling daily with students who come to school flooded by painful reality problems such as alcoholism, drugs, suicidal thoughts, gang warfare, rape, physical and psychological abuse, crime, parental neglect, and abandonment”
Today, people are asking schools to do what they used to ask God to do.
Like most of their toys, children arrive with considerable assembly required.
DISAPPEARING IN THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

When students fail to establish strong bonds with peers and teachers, they tend to disappear in and/or become alienated from the educational system.
PERCEPTIONS

• A simple, yet difficult idea to internalize is that of perceptual difference.
• Do NOT assume that everyone perceives the world in the same manner.
• In fact, do ASSUME that everyone perceives the world differently.
In today’s classrooms, the issue of respect, or more accurately “disrespect,” is a prominent disruptive force. Teachers can counter student perceptions of disrespect via their commitment and understanding, as well as the use of nonjudgmental attitude and genuine warmth toward their students.
DIVERSITY

When common educational goals are based on democracy, human dignity, and individuality rather than the comfort level of the educator, success is more likely to be achieved.
VALUE SYSTEMS CAN CLASH WITH ISOLATED CHILDREN AND YOUTH

A major problem in educating at-risk children and youth has been and continues to be the impact of middle-class values.
As educators, we have the power to CREATE, ENHANCE, and SUSTAIN. A school climate that is healthy for students by CONNECTING with them PERSONALLY, ACADEMICALLY, And SOCIALLY (Blum, McNeely, & Rinehart, 2002; Mendler, 2002).
CREATING THE POSITIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

• Every child is a learner.
• Give the child the dignity of the expectation to learn.
• Don’t ask if the child is ready to learn; ask if the classroom will facilitate teaching/learning.
• Think in small steps.
• Think sequentially.
TEACHERS SHOULD HAVE A PLAN

• What do I expect my students to do?
• How do I expect them to treat one another?
• Am I creating the very best conditions possible for learning?
All students can learn and succeed, but not on the same day and in the same way.
ISOLATION, ALIENATION, REJECTION DEFINED

• Isolation is the withholding or withdrawal of social support by significant others in a person’s life.

• Alienation occurs when a person lacks a sense of belonging; e.g. when youth feel they do not belong in a particular social environment.

• Rejection is based on a perceived withdrawal of love and affection.
TEEN ALIENATION

Many teens feel alienated sometimes, but few feel so alienated from school that there is little sense of belonging to the school.
ADULT APATHY

When adult apathy is mixed with alienation and rejection, we have the ingredients for violence.
IT TAKES A VILLAGE TO RAISE A CHILD...BUT NOT IN MY VILLAGE

...until they learn to behave (conform?)
...until they can get the help they need
OUR PURPOSE

• To enhance an understanding of the affects of alienation and rejection as risk factors for students, and

• To elaborate on teacher strategies to counteract the effects of these experiences
WHICH STUDENTS CAN BE CONSIDERED ISOLATED, ALIENATED, AND/OR REJECTED?

- Affluent white youth no longer escape
- Gay and lesbian youth may be most isolated, etc.
- Minority groups...not just race; e.g. Jewish kids attending Catholic school
- Gothic, nerds, etc.
WHAT ROLE DOES THE BRAIN PLAY?

In times of threat or crisis, the AMYGDALA (brain danger detector) takes charge and activates the fight or flight mechanism. When fear or danger is extreme, the AMYGDALA is kindled and regions of the brain that handle reasoning and positive emotions shut down. When a youth has this experience, that youth is NOT ready to solve problems.
DIFFERENTIAL TREATMENT OF AT RISK STUDENTS

• They are provided fewer opportunities to respond.
• They are given less praise and reinforcement for appropriate behaviors.
• They receive more reprimands than others in the same class.
• Teachers are generally unaware of their behavior and its potential long-term impact.
CHARACTERISTICS OF AT RISK YOUTH MAY INCLUDE…

✓ Previous referral for special education
✓ ID as followers rather than leaders
✓ Being underachievers
✓ Having poor interpersonal skills
✓ Rejection
✓ Poor self-concept
✓ Low tolerance for frustration
✓ Depression
✓ Obvious mood swings
✓ Altered sleeping/eating patterns
✓ Increased physical/verbal aggression
✓ Aggression when previously there was none
There is evidence that many children may cope with one or two risk factors. It appears to be the accumulation of risks that jeopardize normal development. For instance, intelligence scores of children have been found to remain stable in the context of one risk factor, however, scores dropped when three factors were added.
When four or more risk factors occur, risk increases tenfold. Those children who experience neglect or abuse are 67 times more likely to engage in delinquent acts BEFORE their teen years.
RESILIENT “AT RISK” YOUTH

There are also “resilient youth” those youth who, despite their adversity and risks, thrive. Many at risk children and youth, however,

- Believe adults do not care about them, thus are angry
- Externalize blame
- Lack skill in understanding how their behavior influences themselves and others
- Are poor problem solvers
DO YOU HAVE ANY STUDENTS YOU PERCEIVE TO BE AT RISK?
ASK YOURSELF THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS

1) Do you have a student in your classroom (or building) who fits YOUR description of “at-risk?” If so, provide 3-5 descriptors of that child.

2) Is this student the most aggressive student in your class or building?

3) Please explain why this student is or is not at-risk.

Continued on next page
4) Identify the specific factors that put this child at risk.

5) How often does this child receive praise or other positive reinforcement at school?

6) How often does this student receive negative consequences for his/her actions?

Continued on next page
QUESTIONS CONTINUED

7) Identify one friend this student has. Does the friend fit your description of “at risk?” Why/why not?

8) Do you have background information on each of these students relative to loss, poverty, home life, friends, interests?

9) What do you do differently with the at risk students than others in your class or building?

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10) What interventions have previously been used?

11) How about interventions you would like to use, but have not? Why not?
THE DILEMMA
IMPLICATIONS

Youth who feel isolated, alienated and rejected are at greater risk for

...thoughts of suicide and self-harm
...aggression and violence
...academic failure
...social failure
Q  Did any grown up know how much hate you had in you?
A  No.
Q  What would it have taken for a grown up to know?
A  Pay attention. Just sit down and talk to me.

Continued on next page
Q  What advice do you have for adults?
A  I think they should try to bond more with their students…talk to them…it doesn’t have to be about anything. Just have some kind of relationship with them.

Q  How would you have responded?
A  Well, it would have took some time before I’d open up. If we kept talking…I would have…said everything that was going on.
“I am not insane. I am angry. I killed because people like me are mistreated every day. I am malicious because I am miserable.”
CAN WE CHANGE STUDENT BELIEFS?

We must have the ability to convince students that their problems can be overcome; that the classroom (if not their home) can be enjoyable. At least part of our ability and willingness to convince students that their problems can be overcome is derived from our own job satisfaction. When the teaching/learning process is meaningful, motivation is provided and behavior problems are minimized.
My HATErid...a quote from Kip Kunkel, a school shooter who killed his parents, two students, and injured 25 others

“My HATErid tord humanity forced me to do what I did.”
SCHOOL VIOLENCE

• Some correlates of school violence include arbitrary leadership, severe disciplinary actions, school size, and crowding

• School violence has been traced to bullying and peer harassment

• School violence is very contagious and is very resistant to change
ROLE OF HUMILIATION

When a youth has suffered a loss or humiliation of some sort, it is potentially a very dangerous time...especially for those youth who have not been taught...or who have not learned appropriate coping or conflict resolution skills.
WHO IS HUMILIATED IN THIS SCENARIO?

Arguing with an adolescent is like mud wrestling with a pig...you both get dirty and the kid loves it.
“What is the difference between a troubled kid and one who is about to explode?
IMPORTANCE OF CONNECTING

Many teachers, and other adults, fail to realize that when children who have experienced patterns of rejection are at their worst behaviorally...these same children need to experience “claiming behaviors” rather than abandonment behaviors. They need to hear “I am not giving up on you,” as opposed to “that is it! You are not going on the field trip.”
“Being connected to the community is a commonly missing developmental piece in the life of a high-risk adolescent.
POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS DO NOT JUST HAPPEN

Relationships skills must be taught and modeled. This is our road map as teachers.
IMPORTANCE OF FEELING CARED FOR

“When middle and high school students feel cared for by people at their school and when they feel like they are part of the school, they are less likely to engage in unhealthy behaviors. When they feel connected to school, they also report higher levels of emotional well-being.”
We need to communicate to our students that their input is valued.
GOOD NEWS

A recent survey of 7-12th grade students in the U.S. revealed that the mean level of “connectedness” was 3.6 (scale of 1-5)

31% of the students who did not feel “connected” at school were more likely to engage in risky behavior such as smoking cigarettes, having early sexual intercourse, and/or engaging in violent behavior with weapons.
Former president Clinton was quoted…

”Every parent, every teacher, every person has to somehow find a way to reach these kids before it is too late.”
ROLE OF THE BRAIN

Relationships in the classroom impact on achievement because the brain does not naturally separate emotions from cognition. Hence, we need to provide meaningful participatory opportunities for at risk children and youth such as cooperative learning, peer tutoring, and being physically/psychologically safe in the classroom setting.
One of the greatest challenges is developing the ability to connect with the children who hate by staying with them in their simultaneous longing for love…and resistance to it. To create that quality of relationship, we truly need to know both ourselves and the children we teach.
“In exchange for paying less and less personal attention to children’s developmental needs, we are earning increasing doses of disrespectful and incompetent behavior”
FORMING RELATIONSHIPS

• What we need to do to promote healthy, caring relationships:
  * treat students with dignity and respect
  * model good coping skills via interactions with students
  * teach problem solving skills, but do not solve problems for students
  * set and consistently apply limits
RELATIONSHIP-DRIVEN TEACHING

• Students must feel safe from both physical danger and embarrassment.

• Students must perceive what they are doing as having value.

• Students must feel success in their educational efforts. Students should be involved by giving them meaningful choices in content and evaluation.

• Students want to feel valued, cared about, and part of a group.

• Teachers must seek out best practices.
STRATEGIES FOR ESTABLISHING POSITIVE, TRUSTING, AND HELPING RELATIONSHIPS

1) Empathy
2) Trust and respect
3) Credibility
4) Significance
5) Affective regulation
1. EMPATHY

It means understanding people from their point of reference rather than your own, hence it is critical in relationship building.
EMPATHY MAY BE CONVEYED THROUGH WORDS AND ACTIONS

• Show the desire to comprehend.
• Discuss what is important to youth.
• Use nonverbal behaviors to demonstrate empathy.
2. TRUST AND RESPECT

• If trust and respect are not a normal part of each school day, the door is open to depersonalization which, when present, provide unlimited possibilities for violence.

• Build trust and respect…
  * Be authentic
  * Match your behavior to your verbal statements
  * Be consistent
  * Be a “claiming” teacher
I chose my behavior to fit the circumstances. Sometimes, I sulked and withdrew; other times, I was angry and explosive. Most of the time, I was sneaky. If it served my purposes, I could even be compliant. It was all a big game. In many ways, I felt I was above consequences. Short of killing me, there was nothing anybody could do to me that was as devastating as what had already happened.
INTER-RELATED SKILLS

It is difficult to separate relationship skills from trust, caring, commitment, and/or friendship. They are inter-related skills.
3. CREDIBILITY

• The more credible the adult, the more likely that at-risk students will connect with and accept information from the adult.

• When middle school students feel cared for by people at their school and when they feel like they are part of their school, they are less likely to engage in unhealthy behaviors. When they feel connected to school, they also report higher levels of emotional well-being. (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2003).
TR to talk about how educators can go about the task of making connections with kids.
4. SIGNIFICANCE

For a child, significance is found in the acceptance, attention, and affection of others. Glasser maintains that individuals need to belong. When families and schools do not, gangs do. For youth at risk, lack of significance is equated to rejection, being ignored, and not belonging (alienation).
THE CIRCLE OF COURAGE

• Fostering self-esteem is a primary goal in socializing children and youth at risk for failure.

• Significance is found in the acceptance, attention, and affection of others. To lack significance is to be rejected, ignored, and not to belong.

• Chronic failure stifles motivation.
5. AFFECTIVE REGULATION

“Educators lack of concern for social-affective problems among youth is analogous to educational neglect.”
WHAT CHILDREN AND YOUTH WANT FROM ADULTS

Children and youth want leaders; people who have hope and take action.
they want adults to leave their assumptions about teens at the door AND listen to what students are going through.
Teachers should systematically build “positive affect and hopeful expectation, utilizing self-instruction or some other procedure for promoting positive affect.”
CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Teaching young people to manage their emotions, resolve conflict nonviolently, and respect differences is just as important as teaching reading and math.
DISAPPEARING IN THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

When students fail to establish strong bonds with peers and teachers, they tend to disappear in and/or become alienated from the educational system.
“I believe they’re all boys because the way we bring up boys in America predisposes them to a sense of loneliness and disconnection and sadness. When they have additional pain, additional grievances, they are less likely to reach out and talk to someone, less likely to be listened to. Violence is the only way they start to feel they can get a result.”
“There are boys in every school who have developed a pattern of aggressive behavior, who have established an internal state in which they see themselves as victimized by peers and society, and whose emotions and moral judgments have become harnessed to their aggressive rage. These boys can make the transition to murder readily if weapons are available and they reach a crisis state.”
WHY DO STUDENTS THINK ABOUT SHOOTING THEIR CLASSMATES?

• Excessive feelings of rejection
• Low school performance and poor academic performance
• Expressions of violence in writings and drawings directed at specific individuals or groups
• Intolerance for differences and prejudicial attitudes
• Serious threats of violence

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LOCAL CHARACTERISTICS OF A KNIFE-WIELDING STUDENT

…”kind of kid you would never expect this from.”

“There was no indication of a problem.”

Withdrawn

Teased

Loner

“I always saw him by himself.”
LOSING CONTROL OF DESTINY

“Once a person assumes that he has lost control of his destiny, he has no difficulty in justifying an act because he feels no responsibility for the consequences.”
SOCIAL CONDITIONS ALONE DO NOT CAUSE YOUTH TO KILL

Other conditions include…

1) Stress and conflict
2) Unhealthy brains
3) Culture of violence
WHAT CAUSES ONE TO BE VIOLENT?

The causes of violence are many and complex. Some causes include…

✓ Biological factors
✓ Child-rearing conditions
✓ Ineffective parenting
✓ Lack of opportunity
✓ Media influences
COMMON CHARACTERISTICS SHARED BY SCHOOL SHOOTERS

• Each of the individuals PLANNED their shootings.
• Each was thought to be a threat BEFORE any crime was committed.
• There were community-based questions about their behavior BEFORE a crime was committed.
• Additionally, many were viewed as loners.
MORE CHARACTERISTICS

• Only a few of the shooters were diagnosed with a mental disorder PRIOR to the incident...though each was thought to be a threat.

• In nearly every case, the shooters had difficulty coping with a major change in a significant relationship or loss of social status PRIOR to the school shooting.

• An educator was often concerned about the shooter’s behavior PRIOR to the incident.
If I had to compare violence with a medical disease, I would compare it with cancer. Cancer can start insidiously in any part of the body. It becomes known to us through a local manifestation, but it can spread all over the body. It is deadly if not arrested in time. And, it requires all the ingenuity of science to diagnose early, to treat, and to prevent.
WHEN STUDENTS FEEL ISOLATED, ALIENATED, AND/OR REJECTED CAN WE EXPECT DIFFERENT BEHAVIORS?

• A sense of belonging in a classroom and/or school is considered necessary to school success

• Schools could increase the sense of belonging by emphasizing the role of the teacher-student relationship and involving all students in campus life.
The establishment of a positive, caring teacher-student relationship is what many young people seek from their teachers.
THE PURPOSE OF OUR BEHAVIOR

Just like the children, we have a purpose for our behavior; e.g., there is a price to pay ("product vs. cost" decision making). Better choices are made when mental health is good (when stress is low, support if provided, and a feeling of "OK" is perceived).
NONVIOLENT PEOPLE

• RESPECT and take care of themselves
• Use POWER constructively to make changes
• Are PROBLEM SOLVERS and decision makers.
• Believe in HOPE and GOOD WILL.
• ACCEPT people for who and what they are
• Are open to ideas and appreciate DIVERSITY
"When you said 'now', I didn't know you meant right away."
Adolescents tell us that friends are the best part of school.

Making friends is crucial to life adjustment.

Having at least one friend in class may provide an important source of emotional support.

Continued on next page
• Some believe that friendship has been overlooked as an intervention for children.

• Is your classroom a friendship-inducing environment?
TR to briefly explore the role of friendship in the healing process.
CREATING A SENSE OF BELONGING

Two of the most important things we should be doing in schools are...

1) Help our students to feel connected to their peers as well as significant adults.

2) Make their time in school worthwhile.
What do children and youth want from adults? They want leaders; people who have hope and take action. They want adults to leave their assumptions at the door and listen. They would like to voice their opinions, share their ideas, and build relationships.
QUESTIONS TO ASK

• What do isolated, alienated, rejected children and youth do that brings them to our attention?
• What are we doing that is working?
• What are we doing that is NOT working?
• What could we be doing differently?

Many people believe that, before problems related to “at risk” children and youth can be solved, we must

1) admit a problem exists and
2) commit to someone.
GHOST CHILDREN

Some of the most productive actions that teachers or other school personnel can take in their daily interactions with students include the following:

➢ Learn students’ names and speak with regularly.
➢ Listen to students.
➢ Help students reframe adversity as challenge.
➢ Teach students to monitor their own progress.
➢ Provide opportunities for daily success for every student.

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ROLE OF POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Positive relationships do not just “happen.” They must be taught and modeled. This is our roadmap as teachers. As educators, we need to realize that “we must be the change we want to see in this world”.
TOO MANY AT RISK STUDENT QUIT…

…if they do not know an answer immediately because they do not have the critical thinking skills to problem-solve independently. They need to be taught these skills to reduce the risk of failure and possible violence.
FIVE VARIABLES RELATED TO SUCCESSFULLY TEACHING AT RISK STUDENTS

1) Intensive intervention via 1-on-1
2) Accelerate learning via enrichment
3) Teach understanding
4) Collaborate with parents
5) Focus on positives
In 1923, Kahlil Gibran spoke eloquently regarding the need to embrace your position in life when he stated...if you cannot work with love, but only with distaste, it is better that you should leave your work and sit at the gate of the temple and take alms of those who work with joy.
THE DIFFICULT TEACHER IS ONE WHO...
RESILIENT YOUTH IS WHAT WE NEED

• Insight
• Independence
• Energy
• Ability to form and maintain relationships
• Hope
• Faith
• Friendship based on care and mutual support
• Humor and capacity to “forgive and forget”
We need to socialize students into a classroom environment conducive to learning (positive group dynamics). Establishing a peaceful, therapeutic classroom is an obvious means to that end.
PEACEFUL CLASSROOMS ARE HELPFUL

- Consistency
- Positive communication
- Active listening
- Minimizing classroom conflicts
- Emphasis on intrinsic motivation
- Appropriate modeling by adults
- Pro-social skill instruction
- Knowledge and use of student names
- Opportunities for daily success
- Support for all students
- Verbal empathy
THE CARING (PEACEFUL) CLASSROOM

• Is a safe place physically and psychologically
• Good communication skills are modeled
• Interaction with students is emphasized over reacting
• Opportunities for student choice are offered
• Students are taught how to problem-solve

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TR to relate MLK information
WHAT DO WE NEED TO DO WITH AND FOR ALL CHILDREN AND YOUTH?

- Promote health, caring relationships
- Model good coping skills
- Teach problem-solving strategies rather than solving problems for children
CONCLUSION

Finally, when working with isolated, alienated, and/or rejected children and youth try to remember when seeking strategies (best practices) that…

IF THE ONLY TOOL YOU HAVE IS A HAMMER
EVERYTHING LOOKS LIKE A NAIL.

Thank you very much for inviting me to share with you today. If you would like to communicate with me regarding the information shared today, my email is on the title page (treilly55@hotmail.com).