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Building a Culture of Hope for Youth At Risk: Supporting Learners with Optimism, Place, Pride, and Purpose

Abstract

A Culture of Hope provides a blueprint for schools wanting to meet the social/emotional needs of youth placed at risk. While the importance of meeting students' social/emotional needs is clearly supported in the literature and in the media, teachers and administrators may need help in determining where and how to start. This essay introduces the Culture of Hope, provides an overview of the four Seeds of Hope, and shares links to student and staff surveys as well as methods for analyzing surveys to reveal student and staff needs.

Keywords

hope, optimism, resiliency, learned helplessness, external locus of control, belonging

Building a Culture of Hope for Youth At Risk: Supporting Learners with Optimism, Place, Pride, and Purpose

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The past 15 years have seen a revolution in public education that has transformed expectations for students living in poverty, and we are currently witnessing an important new chapter in that revolution. With all its flaws and difficulties, the No Child Left Behind legislation motivated a dramatic scramble to find more effective ways to reach and teach learners placed at risk. During this time, a number of researchers examined high-poverty/high-performing schools to determine *what* they were doing that proved so successful, and exactly *how* they were doing it. Today, the solid base of research on high-poverty/high-performing schools includes a large number of highly effective school practices, leadership methods, and classroom strategies. Yet in spite of great gains in closing the achievement gap between poor and affluent students, troubling realizations have become more and more apparent.

“SECOND-WAVE” RESEARCH

While some schools seemed to be unusually effective in closing the achievement gap, thousands of others employed proven, effective strategies without much success. Teachers and administrators began to ask, “What else can we do? We can’t work any harder; we can’t do anymore. There must be something that we are missing.” Additionally, too many successful elementary and middle school students moved on to high school, only to

falter and fail at the secondary level. This continued failure of our education system took researchers back into high-poverty/high-performing schools for a “second wave” of research that reexamined schools’ remarkable successes through a different lens. This time, researchers looked beyond school programs, practices, and classroom instructional strategies to learn how schools were addressing social-emotional learning and social-emotional needs of students.

Value-added components. The results of this new research led to the identification of powerful school and classroom based efforts that effectively address the needs of learners who are most at risk of stumbling and failing in our nation’s schools due to their socioeconomic status, ethnicity/race, language, sexual orientation, gender identity, and other variables. High-poverty/high-performing schools provide excellent academic programs with the best of instruction, but they also provide the value-added component of addressing the human needs of all students especially those most at risk for school struggles.

Educating the whole child. Read through any national publication from the last few years, and you will begin to find articles illuminating the importance of educating the whole child through meeting learners’ cognitive as well as social and emotional needs (e.g., Crotty, 2013; Slade, 2012; Toch & Headden, 2014). According to the 2013 Gallup Poll on

the State of America's Schools, "Unless U.S. schools can better align learning strategies and objectives with fundamental aspects of human nature, they will always struggle to help students achieve their full potential" (Gallup, 2014). Increasingly, what matters in schools—and how to help students believe school matters—is motivation, hope, optimism, care, and passion (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development [ASCD], 2007; Beaumont, 2009; EdVisions, 2010; Jensen, 2009). Hope and engagement are significant predictors of student achievement, and teachers' engagement levels are directly related to student engagement (Gallup, 2014). For students with families who are struggling with daily despair and hopelessness, strategies focused on hope and optimism seem to yield powerful results. The identification of how schools are building cultures filled with optimism and hope adds significant contributions to the high-poverty/high-performing research base, providing schools with value-added strategies necessary for helping students find success in school as well as life.

Social-emotional learning and needs. The terms "social-emotional learning" and "social-emotional needs" are both used in the literature, often within the same article, but they are not interchangeable concepts. *Social-emotional learning* is defined as the acquisition and application of the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are necessary for appropriately interacting with self and others and healthily handling emotions, goals, empathy, relationships, and decisions (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2015). *Social-emotional needs* are what human beings require from their environment in order to develop to their fullest possibilities (Sparks, 2013). Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs provides a powerful framework for understanding the critical

importance of the basic physiological needs of food, water, and shelter, as well as the social-emotional needs for safety, belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization (Maslow, 2007). Social-emotional learning and social-emotional needs are often intertwined. Setting and achieving goals is a skill that can be learned, but it is best learned in an environment that provides for students' needs for belonging and purpose, with modeling, high expectations, and guidance. For the purposes of this article, *social-emotional learning* refers to skills, knowledge, and abilities that students must learn, and *social-emotional needs* refers to inherent needs learners have as human beings, which schools must provide so students can maximize their lives.

Educators intuitively understand the connection between student learning and social-emotional constructs like engagement, motivation, and belonging. Research shows that teachers will teach what is measured, but the value of working with others, feeling like one is part of a group, and holding optimism for the future has often been overlooked under pressure to meet state and federal mandates. Additionally, measuring growth in social-emotional learning is more challenging than measuring academic gains (Nichols & Berliner, 2007). Newer, comprehensive standards, such as the Common Core, College and Career Readiness, and Next Generation Science standards, reinforce the value of social-emotional learning (Adams, 2013) by requiring classrooms that are safe environments where students can collaborate, explain their thinking strategies, and defend reasoned arguments. Greater emphasis on college-career readiness amplifies the call for schools to address social-emotional needs because preparing for college careers means students need to not only stay in school and survive, but also thrive. Attending school is not enough.

Simply going through the motions to “pass” is not enough. To achieve effectively in school and in life, students must become engaged and overcome feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. Students must come to understand and believe that they can fulfill their dreams.

A CULTURE OF HOPE

Integrating social-emotional learning and needs. Relationships and connections with others are what keep students in school when they are struggling in or out of school. It is that teacher who never stops “bugging” them about doing homework and coming to class, but is also concerned about their life and family; it is the bus driver who asks about biology and cares when students are sick; it is the classmate who needs help in art class or wants to learn to play the guitar during lunch break. Educators in successful schools with high populations of learners at risk understand: “Until you make your school the best part of a student’s day, you will struggle with student attendance, achievement, and graduation rates” (Jensen, 2013, p. 4). Schools must meet the social-emotional needs of all learners, but especially those who are at risk of failing and dropping out of school. Ensuring that students feel good about school is not a “touchy-feely” idea that schools “might want to address” if they have the time. It is essential. Students’ optimism and hope provide more of an achievement boost than IQ (Jensen, 2011).

How do schools infuse the social-emotional aspects of learning into daily studies, without it seeming like an add-on that can easily be dropped as funding or time runs short? Research shows that seamless integration into the operation of the school is the best way to effect learning with social-emotional strategies (Barr & Gibson, 2013). It is not an addition *to* academics, because it is part *of* academics. Successful schools act on the belief that learning cannot be called

learning unless students can describe the purpose, explain what they are doing and why they are doing it, and take pride in their accomplishment. Additionally, social-emotional needs are met more fully when a school has a shared vision and school-wide agreement on what truly matters (Barr & Gibson, 2013; Barr & Parrett, 2007). While there are many ways to integrate social-emotional learning and needs into schools and classrooms, it may be helpful to have a blueprint for approaching the task. The Culture of Hope (Barr & Gibson, 2013) provides such a blueprint, along with a strategy for assessing current levels of social-emotional needs, coming to consensus on areas for focus, and determining strategies for improvement.

The seeds of hope. Academics being equal, what are successful schools doing differently? The authors of *Building a Culture of Hope* (Barr & Gibson, 2013) spent over 10 years looking at high-poverty/high-performing schools across the United States—interviewing educators, parents, and students; observing in schools; and sifting through school data. This research revealed what may seem like common sense: there are no quick fixes; the answer is not found by simply holding a book study, listening to a nationally acclaimed author, or adopting the best curriculum. As Jensen (2013) explained, “Having a high-achieving school is no accident. It is the result of purposeful, engaged teaching over time” (p. 4). The differences between high-performing and low-performing schools are best illustrated by how students feel *at* school and how students feel *about* school. These differences can be coalesced into four “Seeds of Hope” which address the social-emotional needs of all learners but especially the needs of youth placed at risk.

The Seeds of Hope are a Sense of Optimism and Hope; a Sense of Place and Belonging; a Sense of Pride, Self-Esteem, and Self-

Confidence; and a Sense of Purpose. These seeds provide an action plan for addressing the learned helplessness and external locus of control often exhibited by learners who are at risk for school failure. Schools with strong academic programs may still fail to increase the achievement of learners placed at risk, because, without optimism, place, pride, and purpose, struggling students may find it difficult to work hard and stay in school. Resiliency, or the ability to continue in the face of adversity and solve problems, can be taught, but it is not found directly in algebraic formulas, the lens of a microscope, or the paragraphs of an informational essay (Henderson & Milstein, 1996). Rather, resiliency is taught through social interaction during the context of challenging experiences. When a student learns knowledge and skills, belongs to a group, feels pride in real accomplishments, and has motivating purpose for an assignment, that student is more likely to persevere with difficult tasks. “Based on research and observation, no approach seems as powerful or has as much potential to help the children of poverty remain and thrive in school as developing and enriching a Culture of Hope in every district, school, and classroom” (Barr & Gibson, 2013, p. 227). The following sections provide a brief glimpse into how each seed can influence learners’ engagement and motivation.

A SENSE OF OPTIMISM AND HOPE

Near the end of his eleventh grade year, a student meets with his school counselor and learns that he still needs to complete a required class for graduation. Unfortunately, the class is only offered every other year, and it will not be offered during his twelfth grade year. Up to this point, he has done well in school. He relies on himself for transportation, makes time for homework, and takes care of his own laundry. He has a tentative plan of finding a construction job after high school

and getting his own place. Though he exhibits signs of resiliency and self-motivation, he has little support outside of school. Thus, the level of support and optimism provided by his school strongly influences how this student handles bumps in the road. He looks at the school counselor and asks, “What do I do now?” A counselor at a Culture of Hope school might show him a list of classes at the community college that would fulfill the requirement, help him find an online class that would meet the course objectives, or even set him up with the independent study teacher to design his own class. The counselor would look in the student’s eyes and promise, “Do not worry, we will work this out. We will find a way not to just fix this problem, but turn it into a better opportunity for you.” However, if the school fails to partner with him in developing a plan for handling this obstacle, his feeling of an external locus of control may get triggered, plunging him into hopelessness. He may even drop out, believing there is nothing he can do. In 2014 interviews with Job Corps Program students in Oregon conducted by Robert Barr, all described how they had dropped out of school; not because they were unable to pass their school work, but due to their schools’ insensitivity to health or family issues or to mistakes made in the counselors’ offices.

Students need optimism and hope for the future. A sense of optimism is firmly based in our belief that we have input and control over our circumstances. Research suggests the brain may be hardwired for optimism (Henderson & Milstein, 1996), and that optimism and hope can be taught (Newell & Van Ryzin, 2007). Furthermore, optimism and hope pave the way for resiliency and motivation (Henderson & Milstein, 1996). For many youth at risk, schools may be the most important vehicle for instilling human hope and optimism and overcoming negative influences. Schools can increase hope and optimism in students

through creating a school culture that includes a welcoming atmosphere, respect, safety, an emphasis on success and progress, and regular classroom, school, community celebrations, and what some call “full service schools” (e.g., Comer, Joyner, & Ben-Avie, 2004). The goal is to surround students with “can-do” attitudes from every staff member. A focus on the positive does not mean glossing over problems, or pasting on a smile as things go from bad to worse. Instead, it means looking realistically at what needs improvement while acknowledging the daily triumphs or tiny steps of progress. School staffs have a tendency to focus on what is wrong in order to fix it, but as one problem is resolved their attention shifts to the next issue before recognizing the accomplishment. This can create a negative atmosphere in which teachers and students feel nothing they do is good enough. When superintendents, principals, school boards, and teachers first acknowledge and celebrate what is going well before discussing the next area for improvement, the school’s culture begins shifting to optimism. This shift impacts everyone, young and old, for the better.

A SENSE OF PLACE AND BELONGING

A student who speaks Spanish at home learns she has a foreign language requirement for high school. She excitedly looks forward to learning French, German, or maybe even Chinese. As she sits down with her parents to go over the course catalog, she turns to the Foreign Language section. If she attends a high school that only offers Spanish, despite the fact that half the students come from Spanish speaking families, she may look at her parents in disappointment and frustration. She moans, “¿Qué se supone que debo hacer? ¡Ya sé español!” (“What am I supposed to do? I already know Spanish!”). Her parents tell her to sign up for Spanish since it is required. This student feels it is stupid to take Spanish, and

feels like the school does not care about her. Eventually, she begins to disengage with school, and even starts to get in trouble in math and science, subjects she used to enjoy. In contrast, if she attends a high school that finds a way to offer a variety of language options through collaboration with the local community college and the use of online courses, the student looks at the list of offerings and beams with excitement as she squeals, “¡Mamá, puedo tomar el lenguaje de señas! ¡Yo no sabía que la lengua de signos era un idioma extranjero!” (“Mama, I can take Sign Language! I didn’t know Sign Language was a Foreign Language!”). As she pencils in her choice on her registration form, she begins bubbling with pride in anticipation of becoming tri-lingual.

Students need place and belonging within their school communities; they need to feel included in the fabric of their schools. A sense of place and belonging is a basic human need, which builds on and supports optimism and hope. A sense of place is centered on our knowledge that we are welcomed and important within our surrounding social circles. Students at risk are especially vulnerable to negative influences, which can also provide a sense of belonging, such as gangs and cliques, and many bullies act from a place of isolation and loneliness. Schools can contribute to students’ sense of belonging by building relationships with students and families, creating a surrogate family at school, developing students’ interests and talents, and exploring careers. Adequate counseling, peer mediation or peer conflict managers, advisory groups, and adult/student mentoring all build connection and belonging for students. Acknowledging the essential nature of place is especially critical during periods of transition, when students are most susceptible to feeling adrift (e.g., moving from elementary to middle, middle to secondary, and secondary to college/career). Early identification of students placed at risk

and the provision of interventions—which develop relationships with staff and students at the new location—dramatically reduce new students’ stress and isolation.

A SENSE OF PRIDE, SELF-ESTEEM, AND SELF-CONFIDENCE

Three eighth grade students from a nearby Lakota reservation are sent to the principal’s office for the third time in a week because they refuse to participate in a mural project for class. In discussion with the students, the vice-principal learns the class is studying the westward movement, and the students in his office are upset about how their ancestors are being portrayed. The collective “we” of the textbook ignores their perspectives as indigenous people. If the vice-principal seeks to understand the reasons for the students’ behavior, he might work with the students to create a display in the hallway depicting life in the area before white settlers came through, with quotes by important tribal leaders from the time period studied in eighth grade history. The end product would be a source of pride for these students, while also increasing the sense of place and belonging for other native students. If the vice-principal only seeks to end the students’ disruptive behavior as quickly as possible, he may fail to listen and fail to hear the reasons for their anger. He might escort them to detention hall, further supporting the students’ perception that they do not matter to the school or to greater society. The result could include failure to complete the assignment, increasing disengagement in other classes, and possibly even dropping out.

Students need pride in their heritage and culture, and the personal pride that comes from doing hard work and accomplishing goals. A sense of pride is deeply grounded in our perception that our efforts matter and that we have talents and skills that we can do

well. In the context of a Culture of Hope, pride and self-esteem include “building a student’s pride in his or her family, culture, community, or school...but the primary goal is and must be the development of each student’s sense of *personal* pride and self-esteem” (Barr & Gibson, 2013, p. 85). Every student must learn the critical lesson that success follows hard work, perseverance, and grit: “What is crucial is not how smart a student is, but how hard a student is willing to work and how much that student is willing to invest in the future” (Barr & Gibson, 2013, p. 102). Educators and administrators must understand that tapping into students’ personal pride and power is more easily accomplished when the school includes students’ own language and cultural backgrounds in curriculum, décor, and communication. It is irresponsible and irrational to expect students to care about grades, rules, or standards when they do not see similar others on the school walls, in the school newsletter, or among the school staff. Consider an African-American youth who attends a school where 90% of the students are African American but does not see a single African-American teacher during his entire 12 years of schooling—where are his models of possibility? Schools wishing to develop students’ sense of pride will provide achievable goals, gradually raising expectations as students meet the mark. When students are unable to engage with an assignment, teachers should strive to discover the source of disconnect, understanding that taking pride in personal accomplishments is an essential social-emotional need.

A SENSE OF PURPOSE

Students in two different sections of a service-learning course question the purpose of the course and express disappointment with the available projects. A number of students are interested in health care, but none of the projects involve the medical profession. In one

section, the teacher explains that the projects are the only ones available, and that the course is a graduation requirement. Further questioning or grumbling would be cause for referrals. A number of students drop the course, while others go through the motions but do not engage fully with the projects. In the other class, the teacher talks with the students about the purpose of the course. Students ask if they can design different projects, and the teacher sets a deadline for alternative project proposal submissions. While the majority of students select from the provided projects, several students create successful proposals for health care service learning, which then become part of the projects offered during the next semester, further bolstering the students' sense of pride.

Students need purpose for their hard work. A sense of purpose builds upon our wishes, dreams, interests, and talents, and depends upon our human desire to be productive and to reach milestones. "Students who have a greater sense of purpose will have greater optimism, feel they belong, and have increased pride and self-esteem" (Barr & Gibson, 2013, p. 134). Schools wishing to increase purpose will develop students' intrinsic motivations, provide engaging learning options, and help students discover and deepen their interests, talents, and passions. College/career readiness, job fairs, mentorships, service learning, and work-study programs increase students' opportunities for finding purpose. For secondary schools, the single-most important assignment for all students, and especially for learners at risk, is to require the development of a life plan as a freshman project. This plan should address questions about who the students want to become and what they want to do when they graduate. It should be regularly revisited and revised throughout students' high school years. All students are more likely to weather the storms

of life and adolescence if they have an achievable plan, which gives them purpose and a reason to keep going when they would rather give up.

NEXT STEPS: ASSESSING THE SEEDS OF HOPE

Many teachers and administrators note declining morale and optimism on their campuses after years of high-stakes testing and deficit-driven school improvement plans. In addition, the levels of optimism held by the students and staff at a given school are critical for successfully addressing the other three seeds. For these reasons, the authors suggest beginning with the Seed of Optimism. However, each school is unique; therefore, each school and district should assess the level of Optimism, Place, Pride, and Purpose held by students and staff. Assessment will uncover specific areas of need, which staff can use to form action plans.

After selecting a target seed, the first step should be to survey the students and staff, using a survey designed by a team of stakeholders [see sample surveys and a framework for working with the survey results here: <http://www.cultureofhope.com/seeds>]. The Culture of Hope's method for assessing social-emotional needs includes administering surveys, collating and discussing the results, coming to consensus on priorities, developing an action plan, implementing the plan, and periodically assessing growth with new surveys. In this way, rather than a one-time surge of activity, which quickly becomes forgotten, a focus on social-emotional learning and needs becomes woven into the fabric of the school, part of the never-ending cycle of continuous improvement within a professional learning community.

Without a sense of optimism, our youth hold less hope for things to get better. Without a sense of place and belonging, our youth feel less motivation to get up in the morning and

head to school. Without a sense of personal pride, self-esteem, and self-confidence, our youth have less reason to care what others think. Without a sense of purpose for their work, our youth experience less concern for following through on assignments. As we engage students with more challenging standards, we must be aware of the unwritten messages in curriculum, content, and instruction that can alienate and discourage students, especially students at risk for failure. We must acknowledge and eradicate the inherent prejudices within the fabric of schooling—prejudices surrounding income, race and ethnicity, physical/mental differences, language, immigration, sexual orientation, and gender identity.

The disengagement that leads to dropping out in high school often occurs much earlier, in middle or elementary school. Thus, the Seeds of Hope must be planted in students early, and nurtured throughout their years of schooling.

“Academic rigor and relevance are at the heart of education, but...the social and emotional learning celebrated in a Culture of Hope...provide the foundation of personal strength that is so necessary to keep youth travelling a pathway toward a better life.” (Barr & Gibson, 2013, p. 228)

Those who work in Culture of Hope schools recognize that students have specific social and emotional needs—the four seeds of hope—which must be met before learning can take root.

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