

Connectedness:

The Key to Student Success

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Over the past several years, many educators have read about the concept of “connectedness” as it relates to relationships with students. The study that was instrumental in introducing this concept, at least from a health perspective, is referred to as the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health (NLSAH)¹ by Resnick, et al.

Resnick and colleagues demonstrated that when students feel connected at school, they enjoy a number of benefits. They commit fewer violent acts; tend not to use tobacco, alcohol, or marijuana; and delay first sexual intercourse longer than young people who do not feel as connected at school.²

The researchers also questioned the students about their sense of connectedness at home. Regardless of whether they were from single-parent homes, regardless of race or of ethnicity or socio-economic status, students who sensed a feeling of connectedness at home demonstrated protection from emotional distress, suicidal thoughts and attempts; cigarette, alcohol, and marijuana use; violent behavior; and early sexual activity.

By Gary L. Hopkins and Tim Gillespie

So, it's easy to conclude that students need adults in their lives with whom they can connect, both at school and at home. This very simple concept is borne out by research on re-

silience, that is, the capacity to maintain competent functioning in the face of major life stressors. Resiliency appears to develop over time in the context of environmental support. Resilient individuals are those who, despite severe hardships and the presence of risk factors, develop characteristic coping skills that enable them to succeed in life.³

Researchers have found that resilient individuals have a strong commitment to self and/or their God, and are willing to take action to deal with problems. They relate positively to their environment, have a strong sense of purpose, and develop an internal locus of control that enables them to see life's obstacles as challenges to be overcome. Resilient youth appear to be able to use their religious faith to maintain a positive vision of a meaningful life.⁴ Resiliency seems to be all about hope; it is the sense that adversity can be overcome, that there is life beyond the obstacles of today.

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Accounting for Success

Rather than focusing on the shortcomings of students who are at risk of academic failure, drug use, or other at-risk behaviors, the resilience paradigm attempts to identify factors that account for success.⁵

When one reviews the available research on what strengthens resiliency among young people, one factor emerges again and again—sincere and enduring relationships. From studies conducted around the world, researchers have identified a number of factors that enable children of misfortune to beat the odds. Supportive older adults or mentors, ranging from teachers to clergy, help young people become more resilient.⁶ An important factor turns out to be the presence in their lives of a charismatic adult—someone with whom they identify and from whom they gather strength.⁷

Relationships with adults who provide care, warmth, and unconditional love help convince young people that they can overcome the odds. Such relationships appear to provide youngsters with a sense of self-esteem and self-worth that makes successful coping more likely. One study found that resilient youngsters all had at least one person in their lives who accepted them unconditionally, regardless of temperamental idiosyncrasies, physical attractiveness, or intelligence.⁸

Thus, resiliency to the stressors of life such as drug-abusing peers, violence on TV and/or in videos, or the influence of

a less-than-ideal home appears to come through supportive relationships!

The combination of these two concepts, connectedness and resilience, will create even more positive outcomes. Both of these require that people, most often adults, get involved in young people's lives and build close relationships with them.

School as Community

A third concept, more specifically school-focused but in many ways very similar, is that of *community*. More specifically, *school as community*. Loosely defined, school as community means the fostering of quality social relationships between students, among teachers, and between staff and students. It is through such relationships that “school as community” becomes very closely related to connectedness and the predictors of resilience.

Researchers at the Developmental Studies Institute have done a great deal of work in this area. They use a 37-item questionnaire in which they ask students (usually grade-school level), to rate how much they agree or disagree with the various statements, using a four-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree).⁹ Here is a partial list:

1. People care about each other in this school.
2. Students in my class treat each other with respect.

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3. Students in this school treat each other with respect.
4. Students at this school are willing to go out of their way to help someone.
5. Students in this school really care about each other.
6. Students in my class really care about each other.
7. Students at this school work together to solve problems.
8. When I'm having a problem, some other student will help me.
9. Teachers and students treat each other with respect in this school.
10. My class is like a family.
11. In my class, the teacher and students together plan what we will do.
12. The teacher in my class asks the students to help decide what the class will do.

When students perceive their school as a community, the benefits are huge and include the following:¹⁰

Teacher Attitudes

- High expectations for student learning
- Higher belief in constructivist learning
- Higher trust in students
- Higher emphasis on teacher authority
- Higher sense of efficacy as a teacher
- Higher enjoyment of teaching

- Higher overall job satisfaction

School Climate

- Higher principal competence and supportiveness
- Higher parental support
- Higher stimulating learning environment
- More positive teacher-student relations

Academic Attitudes, Motivation, and Behavior

- Higher frequency of reading outside of school
- Greater enjoyment of reading
- Greater enjoyment of class
- Enjoy school more
- Higher task orientation
- Lower ego orientation
- Less work avoidance
- Greater preference for challenges
- Greater intrinsic academic motivation
- Higher academic self-esteem
- Greater trust in and respect for teachers
- Greater enjoyment of helping others learn
- Higher academic aspirations
- Higher educational expectations

Academic Performance

- Higher reading scores
- Higher mathematics scores
- Better reasoning skills

Social/Personal Attitudes, Motives, and Behavior

- Greater concern for others
- Greater sense of autonomy
- Greater sense of efficacy
- Higher conflict resolution skills
- Greater acceptance of outgroups
- More prosocial motivation
- Greater democratic values
- More altruistic behavior
- Higher general self-esteem

Some health benefits also result when students perceive school as a community. Battistich and Hom¹¹ found that sense of community was associated with less drug use and less delinquent behavior.

The interrelated concepts of connect- edness, resilience, and school as commu- nity demonstrate that positive things can happen when people assist and help one another. The Bible is replete with instruc- tions to love our brother. 1 Corinthians 13 makes this very clear—if we speak in all tongues but don't love, we are no more than a clanging cymbal. If we have the faith to move mountains and don't love, it's not worth anything. If we give all that we have and don't love, we are wasting our time. Applying this to the academic arena, it is clear that when students have people who care about them, they do bet- ter in school, and teachers and adminis- trators are more successful, too. Does it seem hard to believe that the simple con- cept of love could cure so many problems at once?

Think about other religious schools in your community. These schools often apply the principles of school as commu- nity very well. These often require that a parent or surrogate volunteer at the school for two or three hours each week, or their child isn't allowed to enroll. Adventist schools could profitably follow this example.

Applying the concept of school as a community requires more than the commitment of teachers, administrators, and staff. It requires the involvement of adults who get involved and care for the students in participating schools. Most commu- nities have a sizable group of retirement-age adults. They have an untapped well of life experiences we can draw from in helping create caring communities in our schools. While they may be reticent to work with certain age groups, it should still be possible to match senior citizens with young people at various developmental stages who could benefit from their experience and attention.

But that is simply one solution. The educational implica- tions of connectedness are enormous. Rather than being dri- ven by a search for the perfect curriculum or higher test scores, we must become teachers who look into the hearts of our students and build relationships. With such overwhelming evidence about the impact of relationship and community building, we cannot ignore the effect these changes will have on our students, as well as on the learning environment.

The bottom line seems to be the philosophy: "the more, the merrier." The more responsible adults with whom the stu- dents interact, the more resilient they will be to at-risk behav- ior. They will be better able to make good decisions about character and responsibility. They will grow into adults who understand how to overcome hardships. And they will do this by observing and connecting with the adults who participate in their lives.

It is our responsibility to connect with students and to connect them with adults who can serve as resources and mentors in their lives. By looking beyond the textbook and

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into the hearts of our students, we will impact their lives for eternity. ✍



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