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Take a P.A.U.S.E. for Student Success

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Abstract: Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, our middle level students and teachers have suffered both great stress and loss. This loss and stress can result in the acting out behavior of students whose emotional maturity may not be fully able to cope. One middle school cancelled in-person classes in an attempt to ameliorate behavior issues. This article will examine the causes of the anti-social behavior and offer suggestions on the social-emotional health of both students and teachers. Strategies and resources will be listed in an effort to provide support to educators.

Keywords: COVID-19, social-emotional health, strategies, resilience

Introduction

Just prior to Thanksgiving, a middle school outside of Portland, Oregon cancelled all in-person classes and sent the students home to resume virtual classes. Why would this be done when the goal is to get school operations back to normal? The cancellation was not due to an increase in COVID-19 cases, but to an increase in anti-social behavior.

While it would seem counterintuitive to send students home, thereby removing them from the opportunity to participate in social activities, it appears the school administration found it necessary to restart the school year. Was it that the staff was not prepared for the students who had one year less of socialization and maturity, or were the students themselves not prepared? Do we have a different kind of student coming back to our schools and what are the long-term implications for the missing year of socialization? The school took a pause from the normal operation to try and find out.

What was the impact of both the pandemic and the interruption of the normal flow of the academic year? What do our students and teachers need now? To understand this situation and discuss possible ways to alleviate the impact of this lost year, perhaps it is a good idea to actually take a pause (P.A.U.S.E.) as well. This article will look at ways to: (P) Plan for more social and emotional learning, (A) Accept what is happening in our schools, (U) Understand how teachers and students need to allow for their own social emotional health, (S) Strategize ways to help students learn social skills, and finally (E) Evaluate methods to help our students and teachers improve their emotional health.

Pausing to Help Our Students

Stopping academic work to help students with their social-emotional health is essential. While there is great pressure to just carry on so that lessons and assessments associated with learning can be met, it is like the proverbial telling the farmer he needs to build a fence and the farmer responds, “I can’t take time to build a fence, I am too busy chasing the cows.” We cannot change the last year and a half, and we don’t know what variations of the virus and/or school schedules await us, but we can and must help our students learn the skills to deal with our current and future situation. The superintendent of Reynolds Middle School was absolutely right in recognizing that “the time out of school has had an impact on student and staff well-being” (Miller, 2021, para 5).

Planning

Both the school and the teachers at the above-mentioned middle school recognized the changes in their students and the need to make plans to meet their social-emotional health needs. Reynolds Middle School also had concerns about school safety. The superintendent Danna Diaz says they want to make sure that the “... school had the necessary social-emotional supports and safety protocols in place to provide a safe learning environment for all students” (Miller, 2021, para 4). Their plan is to work with the staff and the union to include “... training for teachers to help students reflect on what’s going on at the school, how to change the school culture, and teaching students emotional regulation skills” (Miller, 2021, para 18).

The time away impacted teachers as well. It is important that teachers plan for their own social-emotional health, to utilize the skills that they already possess or learn new skills, and even more important, that they include social –emotional activities in their weekly lesson plans, if not their daily lesson plans. These plans should include lesson segments to help students with their social-emotional health skills that they can learn to use for the rest of their lives. Many of these suggestions and skills will be addressed in the following sections.

Accepting

It is a long- standing tradition for one entity in education to blame the other. Teachers blame previous teachers, parents, and often administrators, while administrators blame teachers and parents, and parents blame teachers and administrators. This is inherent in our system, but our current problem is actually outside the normal blame game as our students not only lost a year of normal school life, but their lives in general were drastically changed. These stress producing events can have impact on all students. While some students may have missed the entire year of in-person class, or only part of the year, the events both inside and outside the school had major

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implications for their well-being. We can't return to normal as if nothing happened. We cannot pretend that these events did not impact our middle level students or ignore that our students are coming to us missing normal development of social skills. Both teachers and students suffered stress and loss during the pandemic. According to Dr. Caitlin Stanaway (2020), the first four stages of grief are denial, anger, bargaining, and depression. The final stage of dealing with grief is accepting. In a chart Dr. Stanaway lists what acceptance can feel like and what it looks like which includes items like: "mindful behaviors, engaging with reality as it actually is, ... adapting, coping, responding skillfully." In essence, educators need to accept the reality as it is and to respond with realistic expectations and practical skills.

Understand the Situation

Taking a pause to understand the situation would help meet one of the Essential Attributes of a successful middle school which is Responsiveness. In *The Successful Middle School: This We Believe*, Bishop & Harrison (2021), advocate "using the distinctive nature and identities of young adolescents as the foundation upon which all decisions about school are made" (p. 8). And one of the most distinctive traits of young adolescents is that their brains and emotional skill sets are not done maturing. In an interview for a PBS Frontline special on the teenage brain, Jay Giedd, the neuroscientist who was one of the first to study long term changes in the development of the brain states, "It is sort of unfair to expect teens to have adult levels of maturity when their brain are not done being built" (PBS, 2002, para 6). Furthermore, one of the characteristics of a successful middle school is: "School safety is addressed proactively, justly, and thoughtfully" (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 9). Taking a pause to train teachers on understanding these new students and strategies to help them is one way to meet this characteristic.

During the pandemic our students were being isolated from friends and family members, including grandparents, but also bombarded by dire news of the pandemic. In addition, many of our students may have either had a family member who was gravely ill or passed away. In short, our students suffered a loss. Actually, they suffered many losses. They lost a year of their education, they lost a year of learning social skills, and they lost a year of normal school experience. With any loss comes grief and perhaps what we are seeing is the normal process of healing from grief. Dr. Stanaway (2020) lists anger and depression as two of the stages we all experience when dealing with loss and grief. The characteristics of the anger stage include irritability, being aggressive, and getting into argument or physical fights. Many adolescents, especially our population of early adolescents, may not have the skill set or the emotional maturity to handle these losses; we actually should not be surprised by this acting out behavior that was discussed in Reynolds Middle School.

Strategize

The human need for social encounters was restricted because of the time away from school and the shelter requirement required by governmental agencies. The social skills that the students normally learn and practice have been delayed. It is

possible that our 12 and 13 year old students are now entering the 7th grade with only 5th grade social skills. If so, we need to strategize how to bridge the gap.

Relationship building in one of the most important factors in successful schools. Jensen (2009) lists relationships as one of the five important school-wide success factors. He discusses four types of relationships: peer-to-peer, student-to-teacher, caregiver-to-student, and even staff-to-staff. School administrators should implement strategies for building strong relationships with their staff and help the staff build strong supportive relationships with their students and colleagues. One way to discuss these relationships is with TSRQ, (Teacher-Student Relationship Quality). Pastore and Luder (2021) discuss how crucial this relationship is: "Research has shown the importance of emotional aspects as a mark of quality of teacher-student relationships, recognizing them as strong predictors for better achievement, compared to professional and subject-related aspects of teaching" (para 1). Nieto and Bode (2018) also discuss TSRQ and how important it is (p. 219). They also say that an essential component in promoting student learning is an emphasis on care (p. 216). This includes three factors: Caring Relationships, Hope, and Healing.

Creating these relationships is vital and it takes time to teach the necessary skills. PBIS World suggests that if the student has poor peer-to-peer relationships that they should be taught coping skill, social skills, relationship skills, and conflict management skills.

For most of my career I have taught that a successful classroom must have three foundations: Classroom Unity, Team Spirit, and Individual Worth. Pre-service teachers, and even experienced teachers, all hope before the beginning of each school year that they have good classrooms where the students feel that they belong and there exists a sense of unity. However, simply hoping that a class will come together on its own rarely manifests itself.

There are hundreds of activities that will help build class unity through peer-to-peer and student-teacher relationships. These strategies can vary in both time and depth, and it is always best to start with quick and easy and less revealing activities and do more complicated and in-depth activities later and throughout the year. For example, calling roll is necessary but can be utilized to build class unity. Each day roll is called, students can be asked an interest question that will help them learn more about each other. Examples could include sharing one's favorite sport/team, music/musician, season, or vacation spot. Utilizing these and other interpersonal activities will build friendships and connections. These activities also allow for the teaching of differences and how students should respect and honor the likes and dislikes of their classmates. While the teacher should always model these strategies by also sharing information, a second strategy to create student-teacher relationships is through an interest survey that is shared only between teacher and student. The questions on the survey can include other inquiries on the individual student's interests. With this information the teacher can proactively

share with individuals to build stronger connections and let the student know that the teacher cares about them since the teacher is using their specific answers in interactions with each student.

The teaching of social skills is not only important, but it fulfills a vital need in our students. Jensen (2009) states that there are only six hard-wired emotion: sadness, joy, disgust, anger, surprise, and fear. All other emotions like empathy, humility, and gratitude must be explicitly taught and learned (p. 18). The T-Square strategy is a powerful technique that uses looks-like and sound-like words/phrases/image in a visual learning chart. The desired social skill is listed at the top of the T. On one side of the vertical line above the horizontal line the label “looks like” is placed and on the other side, “sounds like” is written. Students then offer what each skill or emotion should look like or sound like. For example, the ability to encourage others is a great social skill. So asking students, “What does encouragement look like?” and “What does encouragement sound like?” will provide a visual representation and reminder of what students should say and do for each other to encourage them.

Another way to teach social skills is through student teams. Simply placing students in groups does not inherently teach social skills and teachers should no longer assume that students come to class with these skills. In fact, putting students in groups without the teaching of social skills may actually reduce team spirit. Conflict can break out if students don’t have the necessary social skills to work together or the conflict management skills to solve relationship issues. Using Student Team Achievement Division teams, otherwise known as STAD teams, is a successful way to put students into cooperative/competitive teams. Research on this version of cooperative learning has consistently shown academic improvement (Slavin, 1995). This cooperative strategy was designed to break down barriers between group members and create a cohesive team atmosphere. This is a very structured strategy where the teacher assigns group members based upon the characteristics of the student population in the classroom, but more importantly after getting to know their students well, both their personality and their academic ability. The teams are balanced so they can fairly compete in non-stressful academic activities. In order to facilitate even more social skills, each team picks officers to help the team function. They establish a leader, vice-leader, recorder, and speaker, but they also choose a name for the team and design a silent cheer to be used when they finish an assignment or a competitive activity. Another important function of the STAD teams is the generation of both team and individual goals.

Evaluate

The last part of taking a pause is to evaluate ways to help improve emotional health and well-being. Daniel Goldberg first discussed the idea of Emotional Quotient a number of years ago and this is perhaps even more important in our world as it exists today. There are two aspects of emotional health in our schools, that of the emotional health of our teachers and the emotional health of our students.

There is much discussion of mindfulness and emotional health of our students, but before an educator can plan for and initiate teaching emotional skills for our students, educators should address their own emotional health. The very same factors that are facing our students – stress, fear, change, and loss – also take a toll on educators. The key for both educators and students is the ability to cultivate and improve one’s own resilience. In the book *Onward: Cultivating Emotional Resilience in Educators* (2018), Aguilar wrote that resilience is cultivated between the moment something happens and the response. She states, “Simply put, resilience is how we weather the storms in our lives and rebound after something difficult” (p. 2). The events occurring over the last 18 months and continuing into the next year constitute a major storm. In her 10 elements of the Resilience Manifesto, Aguilar (2018) states that sixth element is, “To help children build their emotional intelligence and resilience, we must simultaneously tend to our own emotional intelligence and resilience” (p. 19). This very powerful book provides a one-year sequence of multiple ideas and activities to do each month that can be started at any time. At Winthrop University, many education professors participated in a book club format for this book and found it very helpful, myself included.

Many of the concepts and activities in the Aguilar book can translate directly into the classroom. However, this last section will provide other resources and tips on how to help students with their own emotional strength and resilience. Dore and McMurtrie (2021) in their book *Our Diverse Middle School Students: A Guide for Equitable and Responsive Teaching* state that the student’s self-esteem and self-concept are tied directly to their emotional health. And one of the biggest causes of health issues is in fact stress. Jensen (2009) says that chronic stress “generates a weaker signal, handles less blood flow, processes less oxygen, and extends fewer branches to nearby cells” (p. 25). Jensen asserts that stress shrinks neurons in the frontal lobe which is the area that is responsible for judgement, planning and impulsivity (p. 25). Dore and McMurtrie (2021) state, “Middle-level students today, because of conditions not of their own making, find themselves dealing with stress not even considered by their age group a few years ago” (p. 71).

A second book study at the Winthrop College of Education was a book by Dianne Maroney (2018) called the *Imagine Project: Empowering Kids to Rise Above Drama, Trauma, and Stress* and it based upon developing emotional strength and resilience through therapeutic writing using the prompt “imagine”. We found the book and the process to be very empowering and the professors will be sharing this resource with our teacher education candidates.

Another skill for helping students manage their own social and emotional skills are the techniques of self-monitoring, self-evaluation and self-management. Weinstein (2015) says “the goal of self-management is to help students to learn to regulate their own behavior” (p. 317). The IRIS Center (2021), a project of the Peabody College at Vanderbilt, is an amazing resource for many topics but in their module called *SOS: Helping Students Become Independent Learners* there is

information on how students can become more independent through self-monitoring, self-instruction, self-reinforcement, and goal setting.

Many teachers are already using social-emotional strategies. One middle school teacher in South Carolina has a chart by the door asking students how they want to be greeted. Do they want a high-five, an elbow bump, a secret handshake, or just a smile? Many teachers have students indicate how they are doing using the reactions settings if they are on-line. And many teachers have taken this strategy to the in-person classroom. Other teachers will have students use hand signs using a number system on how they are feeling with one finger being not so good to five fingers representing that they are great. Perhaps when we take a pause to assess our students' health, we should also take the time to share good ideas like these with colleagues. It is something that must be planned.

Conclusion

The importance of helping students with their social-emotional well-being was recognized before COVID-19 interrupted our school year(s). Now it is crucial. In many ways the educational world was getting prepared and even had a head start. One of the many skills listed for social emotional health is mindfulness and one of the best ways to achieve this is to take a moment to just be quiet; in other words, to take a pause. So while schools might want to literally take a pause to provide for the health and safety of our schools, we should also take a pause to help ourselves.

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About the Author



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