Addressing Restraint and Seclusion in Schools with Resiliency, Empathy, Gratitude

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Restraint and Seclusion

Restraint and seclusion in schools remain highly controversial topics. With careful review, it is obvious to observe the difficulty separating the emotional element involved in this issue. On a visceral level, restraint and seclusion can be difficult to reconcile with a safe, caring school environment. For example, Butler (2015) claimed that many states "lack protective measures" for students regarding restraint and seclusion (p.1). However, Butler's viewpoint that "children are not protected" expresses concern that these practices are allowed to any degree (p.1). There are two probable causes of the concerns creating and fueling the restraint controversy. First, cases in which unsafe use of these practices have resulted in student injury and, in rare and extreme cases, death. However, more dissonance is caused by the lack of experience working with extreme behavior. For example, Butler states that proactive and preventive strategies can prevent the need for restraint and seclusion. This is partially true. However, even in a school with an experienced staff consistently using strategies meant to prevent behavior issues, students have exhibited physical aggression to both staff and peers. Thus, while it is hard to refute the emotional reaction and the accompanying idealism behind much of the criticism directed at restraint, it remains a complex issue.

Despite the need for careful, deliberate review of the subject, federal and state legislature is rapidly moving forward in an effort to "solve" the perceived problem. Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA) has introduced legislation entitled "Keeping All Students Safe Act" that would prohibit the use of seclusion and severely limit physical restraint (Klein, 2015). On March 16, 2015, Virginia Governor Terry McAuliffe signed a bill that directed the Virginia Department of Education to write regulations to meet standards (Klein, 2015). Because government mandates rarely address all aspects of any given issue, schools must be prepared for this legislation by addressing aspects of student behavior and elements of student interactions that could potentially reduce the use of restraint and seclusion. While it can argued that there is a wide array of important traits and behavior that influence behavior and relationship, three components have emerged that hold the promise of impacting and improving relationships in schools.

Resiliency

Resiliency is generally defined as the ability to overcome given obstacles or hardships (Arastaman & Balci, 2013). As Werner and Smith (1992) have pointed out, these obstacles can be isolated or transcend multiple areas of an individual life. Levels of resiliency impacts school attendance, academic achievement, and peer relationships. Logically, certain factors influence student resiliency including autonomy, empathy, task orientation, peer relationships, positive attitude and problem solving skills (Arastaman, 2013). Other definitions of resiliency focus on different components of the concept including emotional resiliency, academic resiliency, etc.

Borman and Rachumba (2001) explored internal and external factors contributing to resiliency. Internal factors include an individual's own unique characteristics, locus of control, self-respect, self-efficacy, and problems solving, while external factors include school, family and community. The relevance of these factors to schools is to identify and foster these traits in students in terms of resiliency awareness. While special education students are a unique population, research has shown the potential for schools to develop and improve resiliency in these students (Benard, 1995). First, teachers and schools develop resiliency through focusing on positive qualities of students. However, it is important that when recognizing students, the praise is both authentic

and process-orientated (Henderson & Milstein, 2003). This is critical because if students lose trust in teacher feedback, then resiliency building is harmed (Henderson & Milstein, 2013). Specific to resiliency in special education, two factors have been found to be critical; students need to have an awareness of the severity of their disability as well as strategies for alternative thinking (Krovetz, 1999). Because the school is looking for replacement behavior, the research focusing on alternative thinking is particularly important. This issue should be explored extensively at the school level. Research indicates teachers do not actively consider resiliency building in their practice, and when they do, they underestimate the role they play in students perceptions of themselves (Benard, 1995).

Resiliency Awareness

In one study, special education students and teachers were asked what factors created a "tough life". Students reported that learning difficulties and academic struggles create a "tough life", while teachers reported that home life and lack of resiliency were the key components creating a "tough life" (Russo & Boman, 2007). This research indicates discrepancies in perceptions of student struggles. It also reveals that teacher training and professional development were critical components in making teachers aware of resiliency, and the active part they play in fostering it (Russo & Boman, 2007). In order to facilitate teacher and student awareness of the importance of resiliency, active implementation of academic paradigms should be considered. For example, Dweck (2010) has framed the issue in terms of mindsets; those with a growth mindset are not only more willing to accept academic challenges and engage in learning as a process, but most promising to the context in question, better able to engage relationships that accept disagreement, forgiveness and disappoint as accepted interactions without resorting to conflict (Dweck, 2010).

Strategies

Strategies for improved resiliency focus on awareness of disability and how it impacts academic achievement and behavior (Grant, 2010). This entails a focused school initiative involving

teachers as well as counseling staff. It will have a direct impact on Individualized Educational Plans (IEP) goals to align them with resiliency goals. Additionally, classroom activities will specifically focus on increasing progressive stamina. Further research into resiliency growth is indicated. Preliminary research indicates that teaching students "school ways" when establishing expectations, rules and schedules, rather than on "right or wrongs", can contribute to resiliency (Grant, 2010). It is particularly important for teachers to recognize and build upon at-risk, special education and English Language Learner (ELL) student's strengths to address rigor. Often these students have poor academic resiliency but powerful social resiliency (survival skills). Further research and practice should focus on teacher awareness of this discrepancy to avoid the common contention that these students are "lazy" and "just don't care." The collective goal will be to create new levels of resiliency and stamina transfer through students recognizing how these traits manifest themselves in their lives. This should result in both teachers and students reframing academic expectations. Teachers will focus on the same goals through improved interactions and instructional strategies.

Empathy

The second quality that will be the focus of a tiered intervention program will be empathy. Grounded theory will seek to demonstrate the hypothesis that increased empathy will decrease teacher-student as well as student-student conflict. The first challenge to this research is whether empathy can be identified in a quantifiable way, and if so, can it be improved. According to the Center for Research and Compassion (2015), the answer to these questions is "yes", despite the fact that the study and science of empathy is still in its infancy. For example, scientists theorize that two regions of the brain, the anterior insular cortex and the anterior cingulated cortex, play important roles in creating awareness of one's own emotional state and the feelings of others (*SECC Research*, 2015). The significance of these types of discoveries is that empathy can be quantified, and that there is potential for effective strategies that can improve

empathy. The center differentiates 3 distinct types of empathy;

- **Experience sharing** (affective empathy) involves vicariously sharing targets' internal states ("feeling *with*"), but knowing that the target is the source of the emotional state in the self.

- **Mentalizing** (cognitive empathy) involves explicitly considering targets' states and their sources, without necessarily sharing another's state.

- **Prosocial concern** (compassion) characterized by a feeling of concern for a target's suffering ("feeling *for*") that induces a motivation to alleviate that suffering (2015).

Scientists have also learned that regions of the brain can be "trained" to increase or decrease empathetic response. One hypothesis is that individual differences in levels of empathy and compassion are due to "variability in the degree to which brain systems are engaged in processing experience sharing, mentalizing, and prosocial concern" (*SECC Research*, 2015). The Center further proposes that since "these component processes can be measured in the laboratory and observed in the real world" they then can "link the variation in these processes to individual differences in self-reported compassion and empathy and to develop a neural systems model predicting individual variability in multi-level assessments of compassion and empathy" (*SECC Research*, 2015). The Stanford School of Medicine has launched The Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education to address the reality that while "science has made great strides in treating pathologies of the human mind, far less research exists to date on positive qualities of the human mind including compassion, altruism and empathy. However, "these prosocial traits are innate to us and lie at the very centerpiece of our common humanity" (*SECC Research*, 2015). Berger and Zimbardo (2012) have explored the role of empathy in various studies. For example, empathy can help break cycles of violence and conflict, and is being utilized to help create dialogue with rival gang members as well as

Jewish-Arab combatants. The findings of these studies could have enormous implications for students placed in alternative settings for compulsive violent behavior. It also further emphasizes that qualities like empathy can be qualified, identified and be a part of a systematic growth plan. To that end, empathy has theorized as being multidimensional, including both an emotional and intellectual component (Davis, 1994). Empathic concerns (EC) is similar to sympathy and is represented by "tender responses" to other's difficulties or suffering (Davis, 1994). Perspective taking (PT) is an attempt to "adopt or acquire another person's point of view" and is seeing others' lives through the social, cultural, political and historical frames that shape his or her lived reality" (Davis, 1994). Perspective taking, then, represents "the core of empathy in social relationships" (Davis, 1994). Obviously, then PT has enormous significance for development and growth in both students and teachers.

Empathy Synthesized

There is a common understanding of empathy as "trying to understand someone else's feelings." However, the concept is more complex and meaningful. It can also include the recognition that, at times, empathy means the understanding that one *cannot* possible understand another's feelings or thoughts. Further, empathy should not be mistaken for a "touchy-feely" aspect of relationships. Rather, it can be qualified as distinct quality. Thus, in conflictual situations and interactions, identifying and focusing on empathy can contribute to improved communications.

Strategies

Using this research, researcher Warren and Lessner (2014) have explored the role of empathy in student-teacher interactions and created the Family Business (FB) protocol. This practice involves "creating a living room within the class" (p. x). FB utilizes a daily routine and contributes to empathy by improving listening skills, "creating an atmosphere of patience and personal sharing without judgment" (p. x). Students share activities

and feelings in an open environment that allows for individual and cultural expressions. This type of activity allows for safe, constructive recognition and resolution of Perspective Divergence (PD), "the disparity in interpretation between individuals around a specific issue, condition, situation, behavior or value" (p. x). This is one of, if not *the* key issues with emotional disabled and autistic students' behavioral struggles. While the authors recognize FB and similar strategies are not a panacea for academic success, the empathy created by the practice creates an environment that allows for learning. These activities are particularly important in increasing diverse classrooms.

Bullying

The significance of empathy in reducing bullying cannot be understated. Craig and Pepler (2003) have found that 75-80% of students are uninvolved in bullying. They suggest focusing empathy training with these students to encourage consistent, non-violent reactions. Their empathy building program demonstrated not only an increased awareness of the different manifestations of bullying, but appropriate reactions to bullying. This is significant to the school's mission because many of its students have been both victims and perpetuators of bullying. These students are often angry and fearful when attending school. This is supported by the research by Friedman and Kutash (1986) which found that students diagnosed with Emotional Disability were found to have significant disengagement from teachers and schools and thus vulnerable to academic failure, behavioral incidents and ultimately drop-out of school. For secondary special education the risk are high; these classrooms, particularly in alternative settings, can be opportunities for greater individual attention and ability to build healthy, nonthreatening relationships. Conversely, they can confirm student's perceptions of schools as threatening, hostile environments, as well as their own self-perception of an outcast (Friedman & Kutash, 1986).

Gratitude

The third trait that is hypothesized to have an impact on student behavior that will reduce both the amount and intensity of behaviors requiring out-

of-classroom referrals, restraint and seclusion is gratitude. Students diagnosed with Emotional Disability struggle with maintaining the relationship context within which conflict takes place. While a teacher-student relationship may be marked by kindness, altruism and a sincere demonstration of caring and giving, these students can approach issues of disagreement, or the PD that Davis (1994) refers to, as significant challenges or attacks. This can result in intense verbal and physical responses. The goal of any program to increase gratitude will be first to make gratitude awareness a priority, then to create a gratitude that transcends an immediate gratification. In other words, a great deal is done for our students in order to create a caring environment. The long term purpose is for students to conceptualize this caring into how they interact with teachers and schools in particular, and society in general. An important caveat is the recognition that the pathology of Emotional Disturbance is complex, and that no one strategy can alleviate these very real manifestations of disability. However, it is imperative we attempt to increase pro-social behaviors for reasons stated as well as the implications for at-risk students and vulnerability for both school and societal behavior.

There is a recognized belief that gratitude, as an emotion or sentiment, is a spontaneous reaction. However, as Caeser (2011) points out, as the "mother of virtues", it is the structure on which all meaningful social interactions are built. While Caeser discounts a calculative model of gratitude, it nonetheless has significant implications for both the school and society. This model postulates that there is a level of self-interest in demonstrating gratitude. Caeser's objections rest on ethical and philosophical grounds; gratitude should be clearly given with no self-interest involved. Putting these issues aside, the importance of gratitude is clear, and despite Caeser's objections notwithstanding, rational self-interest can and should play a part in increasing levels of gratitude for our students. Research has tended to focus on the personal importance of gratitude and its impact on happiness, health, etc. For example, Eammons and McCulloch (2003) found that gratitude increased optimism and attention to personal needs. This research will be important for context; happy, healthy students

should axiomatically be our goal as a school. However, we will focus on gratitude as a component of social cohesion and interactions. For example, research from the University of Pennsylvania indicates that exercises focused on increasing gratitude may improve job focus and performance (Sansone, 2010). While it can be argued this was due to personal benefits of gratitude, the result was growth in external factors.

Lambert and Fincham (2011) have studied the impact of gratitude on relationships, focusing on "maintenance." Their study indicated that participants who expressed gratitude had "higher comfort levels voicing concerns and more positive partner perceptions" (2011). This research is important because the nature of the teacher-student relationship inherently involves risk of conflict through assignment of tasks, re-direction and consequences. The relationship maintenance aspect of Lambert and Fincham's model, then, is imperative for our school. As they point out, one critical element of relationship maintenance is to voice concerns so that adjustments can be made. In healthy relationships, this communication can work as a regulatory guide, much like the sailing of a ship, continually making adjustments to "get back on course" (p. x). However, in unhealthy relationships, this steering mechanism is "broken." In these unhealthy relationships, voicing concerns is perceived as criticisms or attacks. This perpetuates consistent conflict marked by periods of calm where concerns are suppressed or ignored by one or both partners to avoid or delay conflict. The conceptual model of Lambert and Fincham (2011) uses the expression of gratitude to create healthy pathways of communication and voicing concerns. This model has three pathways; gratitude expression, positive perception of partners and a cost/benefit analysis of the specific interaction as well as the relationship in its totality. Algoe, Haidt, and Gable (2008) provides a study that provides evidence that gratitude is strongly associated with social functioning through a "detection-and response system that helps find, bind and remind ourselves to be attentive to others. Relationships with others who are responsive to our whole self-our likes and dislikes, our needs and preferences-can help us get through difficult times and flourish in good times."

The goal of promoting gratitude in schools, other than its inherent importance as a human virtue, is to increase general pro-social behaviors. However, as both Tsang (2006) and Wangwan (2014) have found, the perception of potential benefactors, or those from whom we expect gratitude is critical. As Wangwan (2014) stressed, "for both high school and college students, a path from feelings of appreciativeness to prosocial motivation becomes significant. Nevertheless, the path from feelings of indebtedness to prosocial motivation were *not s*ignificant (p. x). It is important, then, that the actions and behaviors for which we expect gratitude take place within consistently positive actions or behaviors. In other words, relationships are everything.

Watkins (2006) has demonstrated it is possible to dissociate gratitude from indebtedness, and that they can be viewed as distinct emotional states. This is important as teachers will sometimes become hurt, frustrated and angry when they do not receive the expected level of gratitude from students. When the exchange aspects of a relationship are established and emphasized by the benefactor, (within the school context, the teacher), the beneficiary (student) is less likely to express gratitude (Watkins, 2006). In other words, while Watkins does not completely discount reciprocity as an important element, he does stress the importance that when returning a favor motivated by gratitude, "the actor does not consider their behavior as some kind of exchange for past favors" (Watkins, 2006). Additionally, indebtedness can lead to resentment, anger and conflict (Watkins, 2006). These finding are critical for teachers who view gratitude as an expected, "normal" reaction. This may be due to the fact that gratitude is "one of the most neglected emotions and one of the most underestimated of the virtues" (Watkins, 2006).

Strategies

Emmons and McCullough (2003) have done extensive work developing strategies and activities that promote gratitude. For example, in one study students wrote letters to others for whom they were grateful. Participants demonstrated improved views toward altruistic behavior and the importance of expressing gratitude. Additionally, they have found

the use of gratitude journals an effective tool (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Further, having a gratitude partner to consistently discuss and process the concept of gratitude can produce positive effects on prosocial behavior (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Algoe (2008) has promoted community service to increase gratitude. Watkins (2010) suggests presenting vignettes for students and teachers to discuss and analyze. Most important, research makes clear explicitly and implicitly the need for professional development for school personnel. This training would focus on the emerging science of gratitude as well as recognizing gratitude as one of the critical elements of positive relationships, and motivator of other prosocial behaviors. Teachers will also refocus on their own expressions of gratitude toward students, and how these exchanges might be more complex than they previously believed. For example, teachers should be aware of the ways in which students will expect gratitude. Too often positive behavior or effort is discounted as what "they should be doing". However, for students with behavior problems demonstrating goal orientated or prosocial actions, teacher recognition, including gratitude, is critical. Moreover, when teachers express sincere gratitude they reinforce a collective approach to growth and progress.

Conclusion

The renewed national focus on restraint and seclusion has enormous implications for schools in general and special education in particular. Several states have already implemented legislation restricting these practices, and Virginia will soon be faced with increased state oversight regarding restraint and seclusion. Students who require physical intervention should not be expected to respond to these events. In other words, students with Emotional Disability are vulnerable to struggle with impulse control and aggressive behavior. Therefore, it is imperative that schools respond in a contemplative yet efficient manner. Focusing on qualities that improve communication, interactions and reduce conflict will be mandates for schools faced with reducing or eliminating restraint and seclusion. Resiliency, empathy and gratitude have been identified as critical factors in establishing

positive interactions, and most importantly in this context, reducing the intensity of conflict. These three factors have received significant research attention that supports their role as critical components in human relations. If schools are to reduce restraint and seclusion safely, there must be a corresponding increase in positive interactions. Study, reflection and implementation of increased resiliency, empathy and gratitude are necessary for both improved school environments and school safety.

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