

The First Week of School: Creating Connections and Emotional Safety

Last night my children couldn't sleep. Today was their first day of school and their bodies and minds were not quite ready for the transition. As my husband and I turned out our light, I heard my 9 year daughter's little voice call out... "I'll never get to sleep!" and then my 13 year old son reiterated, "Me neither. I'm going to be up until 3 in the morning!" After reassurances from us, sleep finally came. Earlier that evening however, they both expressed having a mix of excitement and anxiety about the first day of school. With the unknown comes apprehension. On many children's and teen's minds are questions such as: Will I like my teacher? Will I be able to do the work? Will my friends be in my class? Will I succeed this year? For older students it may be: Will I find my classes, will I make new friends, will I fit in?

This morning, as I drove to the school where I teach one day a week, I listened to the radio. They were interviewing a principal from one of the local high schools about what the first day of school was like for the grade 8's. In Vancouver, Canada, where I live, most high schools host grades 8 to 12 so for a student entering grade 8, it is a whole new world. I was very impressed how this school was handling the transition for the young teens. The principal acknowledged that it can be scary for many grade 8 students and the staff worked hard to devise a plan that would help ease them into their new school experience.

Instead of the grade 8's arriving to look for their name on a list and having to find their own classes, the staff had the grade 9 to 12 students arrive in the morning and had the grade 8's arrive in the afternoon so that they wouldn't feel overwhelmed amongst a sea of older peers. The counsellors had worked with a group of grade 11 and 12 students last year to get them ready to be the "link" for the new students this year. The older 'link' students met the grade 8's in the gym and they formed into small groups where the older teens did some team building exercises with the younger. Then, when the group felt ready, the older students would accompany the grade 8's in their group to their homerooms and they would stay with them for the remainder of the time that day. The principal said by putting these kinds of practices into place where the students are supported to feel safe and welcomed, the rate of vandalism and absenteeism has decreased over time. He also felt that they contributed to students doing better academically in school. When students feel good about coming to school and have a sense of belonging, they naturally do better.

This intuitive principal and staff understood that in order for kids to learn and grow, they first must feel secure and well taken care of. As developmental psychologist, Dr. Gordon Neufeld states, "*All growth emanates from a place of rest.*" Research in neuroscience shows us that stress can impeded

learning, in animals and in humans. I think we all know how it feels not to be able to think straight or perform as well when we are alarmed. Master teachers understand this well and work hard to put their students at ease, winning their loyalty and hearts so that these teachers create a context in which they can impart their wisdom.

The principal at this Vancouver high school also added that some parents are reluctant to leave their young teens on the first day, given the newness and stress of the situation. He said, instead of shooing them away, they welcome parents to stay in the gym, until the parents feel satisfied that their child is fine and safe. Again, I was impressed with the way the school handled “the passing of the attachment baton”, as Dr. Neufeld calls it. When children and teens experience separation from their parents or other adults they are attached to, it can produce alarm. When new teachers and older students welcome them and work to create a safe atmosphere where the new teens can depend on them, it creates a positive experience for all. It also brings out wonderful caring instincts in the older students who are working hard to create the safe environment for their younger peers. As we draw out the hierarchy between younger and older, it benefits everyone. Many elementary schools do this with great success by matching older “buddy classes” with younger ones.

When educators and teaching staff step up to orient students, provide a compass point and invite students to depend on them when they need help, it creates attachments that are so vital for student-teacher relationships. We would do well in all our schools to make this our first order of business – to create contexts of connections between staff and parents, staff and students, and older students and younger ones. Children and youth who feel well taken care of become very caring students. First we must take care of the emotional needs of our students. Then in the wake of emotional and psychological rest, we have a better chance of cultivating an education system that fosters caring, independent, passionate learners.

Colleen Drobot, September, 2011