Re-Conceptualizing Education Interventions: Fruit to Root and Silos to Systems

Dr. Yvonne I. Larrier

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Ubiquitous Scenario

Can you help our school district/corporation increase student achievement and student attendance and decrease suspensions? Too many of our K-12 grade students are coming to school having lived through, and still living through, traumatic challenges at home and in their communities. For many, trauma is visited upon them early and is a frequent daily occurrence. These traumatic student experiences show up in the classroom in a variety of ways, such as aggression toward peers and adults, self-harm, inattentiveness, drug and alcohol use, failing grades, etc. As a result, these non-productive behaviors impede learning for the students and can cause our educators to feel ill equipped and ineffective as they teach students who exhibit them.

From my vantage point, many of the behaviors in today's classrooms are more acute than when I first started in education years ago. As I talk to other educators and school leaders, there is a common theme of feeling overwhelmed and beaten down as we face the modern-day challenges of educating and preparing children and youth to live, learn, love, and work in a diverse global society.

So many of the homes and surrounding communities from which our students come to school are experiencing chaos, lack of healthy parent-child relationships, absent parent(s), drug and alcohol use and abuse, an incarcerated parent or family members, a lack of community cohesion, unemployment, violence, and distrust of their leaders.

Nationwide, there is a teacher shortage (Aragon, 2016), and in school districts with the above mentioned risks factors along with many others, the impact of the shortage is even more striking. In addition to a teacher shortage, we are also under-resourced, so that new books, technology, funding, parent involvement, adequate facilities, mentors, and the like are in scarce supply or altogether lacking.

We have tried numerous programs, interventions, and strategies, but these don't seem to be making any significant or sustained difference. Our attendance rates are still low, as are our graduation rates, but our suspension rates keep climbing.

This ubiquitous scenario may or may not describe your school district. If it does, keep reading and if it doesn't, still keep reading because, as we know, all systems are interconnected and any change in one system creates disequilibrium in other systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Many educators and school leaders have found themselves dealing with this scenario to some extent, and have had to engage researcher-practitioner consultants in the solution-seeking process.

Proposed Solutions

Here are two solution-focused perspectives that I offer for your consideration. 1) Shift the focus of interventions from the elimination of problem behaviors to address the causes of the problem behaviors. A change of this nature requires an examination of one's philosophy, perspective, and practice. It requires a paradigm shift in that the leadership becomes patient with a process that is slow but sustained, and where the desired positive behaviors will be an organic outgrowth of the process. 2) For students to succeed in school and life, and for them to achieve wholeness, all systems must be fully engaged. No longer can we continue to operate in silos when dealing with human behavior and relationships.

As humans, our very psychology, physiology, and sociology screams of interconnectedness and multi-systemic functioning. Therefore, as we examine the barriers to, and facilitators of, student access and success, it behooves us to engage a similar philosophy, practice, and paradigm.

Philosophy, Perspective, Paradigm, and Practice Shift

I like to use an agricultural metaphor to illustrate this concept of "Root to Fruit" in the education (school) system. It is my belief that if we try to eliminate the conditions (roots) that cause undesirable behaviors, which I like to refer to as the fruits, the tree would stop bearing "unfavorable fruits." I see people as trees and the soil as the environment or the social

determinants of a person's life course. The social determinants are the places where individuals are born, live, love, work, learn, and play. In this metaphor, the education system is analogous to a farm or a plantation that has trees at all different stages of development, bearing a variety of fruits and serving different purposes. The quality and characteristics of fruits that are harvested are dependent on the location of the trees on the farm, the soil, and the essential growth elements that are available, accessible, and utilized.

The sowers, the adults (educators, school leaders, counselors, etc.) planting and taking care of these trees (students), can have two mindsets or beliefs that will impact the process of tree planting and harvesting. 1) If you discard poor quality or unfavorable fruits, the trees will stop producing such fruits; or 2) the poor quality or unfavorableness of the fruits is solely a result of factors innate to the trees.

One of my fundamental beliefs is that "beliefs influence behaviors," and, as such, the mindset or belief held by the sowers impacts both the sowers' experience and the trees during and after the process of planting and harvesting. In other words, the mindset held by educators about students influences how educators experience the teaching and learning process as well as how students experience the learning process (Dweck, 2006; Kassin, Fein & Markus, 2014; Trouilloud, Sarrazin, Martinek, & Guillet, 2002)

What do I mean? If the educator believes that the students' behaviors are solely formed innately, then that mindset will be reflected in their expectations and behaviors. For example, this

educator's mindset is one that can be described as fixed. A fixed mindset assumes that a student's character, intelligence, talent, and creative ability can't change in any meaningful way (Dweck, 2006; Gerstein, 2014).

On a practical level, this can be translated into educators with this fixed mindset experiencing higher levels of frustration and stress in their quest to transform and change outcomes for students (Rattan, Good & Dweck, 2012). Furthermore, the educator will most likely continue to see students' problem behaviors recurring, because, in spite of the fact that the poor quality or unfavorable fruit is discarded, more of the same will continue to be produced as long as the conditions of the environment are not altered.

On the other hand, an educator with a growth mindset believes that personal and professional character traits, intelligence, creativity, and talent can be learned, developed and cultivated (Dweck, 2006; Gerstein, 2014). As such, an educator with this belief (mindset) will find it easy to support the paradigm, philosophy, and practice that posits that in order to change students' behaviors (fruit), one has to shift the intervention focus from the fruit onto the root, soil, essential growth elements, and health of the seeds; then, and only then, will the fruit stand a chance to become a healthier, better quality fruit.

Therefore, the educator has to be equipped and ready to examine the influences of the social determinants (soil/environment) in which students are born, live, learn, work, and play (Rattan, Good & Dweck, 2012). Even though subscribing to this belief lends itself to a slower and more

arduous transformation process, the sower's frustration level may prove to be lower and the student outcomes more sustained and active.

As the educator examines the factors that influence a student's home, school, and community life, he or she would begin to realize that these social determinants play an integral role in the students' TIME™ (Thoughts, Interactions, Mindsets, and Emotions). A student's TIME™ is analogous to the condition of, and processes occurring at, the root of a tree, such as the soil, essential growth elements, the sowers (including parents/guardians), and the type and condition of the seeds planted. These are all contributors to the kind of fruit that the tree bears.

Similarly, with students (K-12) and education systems locally and globally, to remove barriers to academic, career, and social-emotional success, educators (teachers, counselors, administrators, social workers, nurses, coaches, etc.) must shift the focus of their intervention strategies. A change must take place that concentrates on the root instead of the fruit. Additionally, a shift must occur in the mindsets of educators as it relates to the social determinants of all students.

Multi-Systemic Stakeholder Engagement

I believe that for individual, institutional, and community wholeness to take place, all stakeholders must be fully engaged (Larrier, 2015). Stakeholders from multiple systems must become a part of facilitating the root to fruit transformation of students.

Just as in agriculture, the sower would test the soil, collaborate with surveyors, evaluate what

works and what doesn't work, and decide where certain things work and others don't. This paradigm and practice should be adopted by educators if they are to experience success as they work to transform their own lives and the lives of their students.

Employing a multi-systemic approach in education takes its lead from Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979). This theory purports that humans develop within their contexts and are embedded in multiple contexts or systems simultaneously. Each individual, while actively influencing and being influenced by various systems, is interconnected either proximally or distally. Therefore, when one part of the system changes or malfunctions, no matter how small that change is, other parts of the system also shift or change.

What is happening in schools and education globally as it relates to student achievement, access, and success, is a reflection of the activities occurring in and around the five ecological systems developed by Bronfenbrenner (micro, meso, macro, exo, and chrono systems) in our various societies (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). As we know, the school is considered to be a microcosm of society (The School and Society, Wikipedia); therefore, students and educators come to the schoolhouse bringing with them their TIME™ (Thoughts, Interactions, Mindsets, and Emotions) (Larrier & Allen 2016, under review) that may create, extend, and support either intra- and interpersonal imbalance or balance. Both students and educators are actively, even though maybe at times unconsciously, engaged in creating the classroom and school climate, opportunities for learning and engagement, and opportunities for building healthy relationships with adults and

peers.

Therefore, in order for students to be successful in school and life, stakeholders from each of Bronfenbrenner's five ecosystems must fully engage in the process of shifting the perspective, philosophy, paradigm, and practice from focusing on the fruit, or student behaviors, to focusing on the root of student behaviors, such as the social determinants of their life courses.

Concurrently, stakeholders from all five ecosystems must be fully engaged; educators must be able to recognize, understand, manage, express, and reflect on their TIME™ so that students can have a fighting chance of being prepared and ready to relate effectively and successfully navigate the diverse terrains of the 21st-century global economy.

These two perspectives that I have presented for your consideration may be counterintuitive to a core societal *modus operandi*, which is to "hurry up and take your time." These perspectives require reaching back, engaging all stakeholders, digging deep, and dispelling the "quick fix" paradigm. It is not popular, and initially, it may not get you the "school leader of the year" award. However, it will transform lives, both of students and educators, and create safer communities in the long term.

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