

Voices for Educational Equity

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“Educator Wellness”



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Educator wellness has emerged as a significant issue as schools have assumed, willingly and unwillingly, an expanding list of responsibilities in our fast-paced digital society. In part the need to pay attention to wellness reflects a larger concern for employee well-being that corporations, nonprofits, and governments have been forced to respond to in a pandemic environment in which all employers are scrambling to recruit and retain skilled employees. But, as well, the need to address educator wellness reflects inattention to the needs of teachers and other school employees at a time when educators are leaving the profession in record numbers. As a result schools and school districts find themselves in dire straits made more difficult because adequate investments have not been made to enable the new educator pipeline to respond adequately to demand. The lack of sufficient educator numbers to fill teacher vacancies has become, perhaps, the leading issue jeopardizing the future of American preK-12 education, as teacher shortages extend beyond urban and rural schools to also affect affluent suburban areas.

Various factors have contributed to the need for attention to educator wellness. Not only do nearly all parents work, but the growing number of single-parent families has strained the ability of many parents to work closely with schools in the education of their children. A steady increase in the past several decades in the percentage of students with learning disabilities, due to a variety of causes, along with society's ever-growing academic and social expectations and frustrations with

public schools—reflected in the rise of charter schools and increases in home schooling— have added pressures on educators, as attested to in federal and state measures of school accountability. School safety concerns have increased, witness the explosion of gun violence in schools, and the impacts of the Covid 19 pandemic on learning have made this accumulation of pressures almost unbearable. Through it all, educator salaries remain low on the whole and the educator profession continues to suffer from a lack of public respect commensurate with educators’ critical role in society.

The cumulative effects of stressors on educator health are increasingly alarming. A Learning Policy Institute national survey prior to the pandemic found that one in six teachers had left their jobs each year in recent years. A Rand Corporation survey prior to the 2020-21 school year found that one in four teachers said they were likely to leave. Among African American teachers the proportion was almost half leaving their jobs each year. Indeed, the definition of the audience for social and emotional learning, once reserved as a feature of learning focused on students, must be enlarged to include the health and wellness needs of teachers, as well, to avoid catastrophic consequences for the nation’s schools. Moreover, teacher education programs are largely unable to prepare new teachers in adequate numbers to fill the void. In many parts of the country teacher salaries have failed to keep up. A variety of old and new approaches are being considered, e.g., alternative certification, school district certification programs bypassing college teacher preparation altogether, and career-changer incentives, to refresh the educator pipeline.

Contributors to this issue of *Voices for Educational Equity* were invited to consider questions such as these in preparing submissions:

1. How might educator wellness be identified and addressed as an important factor contributing to educator well being and school effectiveness?
2. What diagnostic methods, treatments, and supports show promise of alleviating stress and other conditions that adversely affect educator wellness?
3. Do programs exist that show promise of serving as best practices in supporting educator wellness? Are teacher education programs preparing candidates adequately for the rigors and challenges teachers are facing at the present time?
4. What steps are being taken in other sectors of society, such as in the corporate and nonprofit worlds, that might help improve educator wellness. What innovations internationally might also be helpful in the American educational setting?

Voices for Educational Equity is the online scholarly journal of the Center for Success in High-Need Schools posted on the Center website <http://www.center4success.com>. *Voices* articles, opinion columns, and book and media reviews reflect contemporary educational priorities, including growing societal concerns about impacts of inequity. *Voices* highlights scholarly research and innovative educator ideas and practices regarding emerging as well as persistent

longtime issues and invites the perspectives of all stakeholders to promote a productive dialogue. Unsolicited scholarly articles will be reviewed by scholar referees in the article subject field.

Articles, columns, and reviews for publication in *Voices for Educational Equity* should be submitted as **Microsoft Word documents in Times New Roman 12 point font, 1.15 line spacing, 1 inch margins, and with footnotes and references in APA format** email attachments to Jerry Berberet, Ph.D., editor-in-chief (wgberberet@aol.com). Case studies addressing equity concerns are especially welcomed. Articles and case studies should be approximately 2,500-5,000 words and include a short author bio, an abstract of 100-200 words, a brief review of relevant research literature bearing on the article subject, a discussion of findings and results, a conclusion, and a reference bibliography. Columns are opinion pieces, ordinarily of 500-1,000 words, reflecting the views of the author. Book and media reviews should be 500-750 words in length. Authors are invited to email Jerry Berberet or call him (850-766-2656) to discuss a potential submission, request referee protocols, or to ask questions. Current and past issues of the Journal can be accessed on our website: www.center4success.com.

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Emotional Intelligence: Critical to Educator Wellness

by Madeline Falcone

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Abstract

The wellness crisis educators face today demonstrates that social and emotional learning (SEL) may be as important for teachers and other educators as for their students in the classroom. Findings in neuroscience underscore that educators must possess emotional intelligence (EI) in order to relate effectively and compassionately with their diverse students, to address the broad spectrum of student learning issues, especially since the recent pandemic, and to manage the heightened potential for violence in today's classrooms. These conditions require that educators be taught how to develop and implement the emotional self-regulation and resiliency skills necessary to manage the heightened stressors causing many educators to leave the teaching profession.

Revolutionizing the Teacher Education System

I am proposing an expanded view of teacher wellness, which includes all educators, that encapsulates the didactic knowledge and somatic experience of emotional intelligence (EI). The perpetuation of the current teacher educational program philosophy and methodologies will not bring needed changes in the educational system infrastructure. We continue to place band aids on a system that requires surgical expertise. Our current teacher education programs do not emotionally equip teachers with the required skills to disseminate content knowledge while modulating their own emotions and those of their students. Today's classroom teachers are not only subjected to increased diversity, curriculum mandates, and parental rights, they also must contend with potential violence, electronic distractions, and artificial intelligence (AI), to name a few issues that impact wellness. These new problems, some resulting from the effects of social media on student behaviors, adversely affect students' sustained attention and language and communication development. Such stressors contribute to a growing shortage of educators nationally, a crisis that affects nearly every school in America. Many teachers, especially those beginning their careers, are not prepared for such emotionally impactful experiences. I am proposing that teacher education programs include the findings of neuroscience in order to prepare

educators more adequately with the emotional intelligence necessary to maintain resilience in the classroom.

Revolutionizing the teacher educational system requires a philosophical and pragmatic shift from viewing learning as an “outside in” process to an “inside out” process. Neuroscience has verified since the 1990’s (Pert, 1997) that we are fundamentally emotional beings whose perceptions are filtered through the knowledge gained from our prior experiences and learning. Our perceived external world is based on our previously internalized emotional experiences (Clark 2023). Teacher education programs foster the learning of didactic content, which is knowledge disseminated from the outside to the inside. This approach detaches the teacher from their personal emotional experiences, perspectives, and awareness in their learning processes that directly influence their content knowledge dissemination. This approach incorrectly assumes that the teacher’s overall approach is as a “pass through vessel” only, instructing students on what the teacher has learned in their discipline study and teacher preparation classes. A revolution in teacher wellness can only occur when the teacher learning process—the educational system for all educators—is understood first to be an “inside out” process. Our internal emotional processing system is primary and precedes our thought, self-awareness, and self-regulation. Teacher education programs need to view teacher preparation initially from the inside out (EI) and then from the outside in (didactic) perspective.

Educators As Human Beings

It is scientifically established that emotions precede thought: “When emotions run high, they change the way our brains function...diminishing our cognitive abilities, decision-making powers, and even interpersonal skills. Understanding and managing our emotions (and the emotions of others) helps us to be more successful in both our personal and professional lives.” (<https://www.ihhp.com/meaning-of-emotional-intelligence/>) The person who chooses teaching as a profession is first a human being in the classroom and then a person with the professional label “teacher.” Generally teaching as a profession emphasizes didactic content or subject knowledge and expertise, rather than emphasizing the teacher’s emotional quotient, sensitivity, or personal awareness. The human being who chooses teaching as their profession may or may not have developed the emotional management, self-awareness and/or other tools that equip them with the resilience, stamina, and self-perspective to remain engaged with their students as diverse individual human beings in a community of co-learners. Teaching requires the ability of the educator to consistently self-regulate emotionally when managing the classroom environment and while teaching students the learning skills and content stipulated by school standards.

Findings from Neuroscience

Karol K. Truman, in *Feelings Buried Alive Never Die* (1991) asserted, “We come into the world with LOVE-based feelings/emotions or FEAR based feelings/emotions....every thought, every feeling and every emotion we experience sends a message to each cell in our body. Some messages are more intense and more deeply seeded than others (unconscious), but each cell is nonetheless affected, either adversely or conversely (negatively or positively)” (p29) A few years later, Candice Pert, a neuroscientist at the National Institutes for Health, published *Molecules of Emotion* (1997), groundbreaking research substantiating that all emotions originate as molecules within our cells which stimulate the opiate receptors in our brain. Actually the energy within our body is expressed as an emotion that we either deny (repress) or acknowledge (give conceptual meaning to). When we develop emotional intelligence, we learn how to give conceptual meaning to our emotions. Conceptualizing our emotions allows us to develop awareness and accountability for our actions that foster growth and resiliency. When we deny and ignore our feelings, they do not go away. Rather, they remain unresolved within our body as energy stored within us. These stored, unresolved energetic vibrations are alive energies, frequently causing us to respond with rigidity to stressful situations.

Thomas R Verny, a clinical psychiatrist, in *The Embodied Mind, Understanding the Mysteries of Cellular Memory, Consciousness and our Bodies* (2021), brilliantly weaves recent finding from neuroscience and quantum biology that explain the integrated and intricate connections throughout our mind and body—down to the cellular level. His findings show how intelligence and consciousness, often associated with the brain alone, are manifested throughout our entire being. Verny’s understanding that the mind and body function as a wholistic organism underscores the critical role of emotional intelligence in promoting educator wellness.

Thus, teaching and learning are activities that begin with emotions, i.e., teaching is an emotional activity. As Sabina N. Valiant, Abilio A. Lourenco ,and Sergio Dominguez-Lara argue in, “*Teachers in the 21st Century: Emotional Intelligence Skills Make the Difference*” (2022), “Neuroscience defends that the essential element for learning is emotion, as without emotion there is no curiosity, no attention, no learning and no memory.“ Teachers with skilled EI are attuned to who they are and how they are feeling and are optimal in the moment about their awareness of self that fosters their ability to regulate/modulate their personal stress throughout the day. Consequently, they have greater emotional bandwidth which increases their ability and availability to create and maintain individualized healthy relationships with their students and themselves. Teachers with increased EI awareness are in a position more frequently to respond creatively in setting boundaries that are compassionate and flexible. Such compassionately aware responses reduce or redirect student frustrations and unhelpful behaviors, without totally depleting the teacher’s personal emotional reservoir. (Valiant *et al*, 2022)

Neuroscientific research supports the contentions of Shawn A Ginwright (2022) that foster EI development from the individual's inside out, i.e. the teacher becomes aware of and accountable for their internal predictive predispositions and biases. Through their own emotional expansion, teachers' as human beings become emotionally aware, sensitized and reflective individuals with the capacity emotionally and cognitively to connect with their students. Teachers demonstrate their vulnerability as persons who also learn from their students, just as students demonstrate their vulnerability in learning from their teachers. The classroom environment exhibits emotional awareness, connection, and problem-solving and becomes a productive learning environment, demonstrated as a flow between teacher and student. As a consequence of this enhanced EI, there is less stress in the classroom between teacher and students leading to greater teacher professional satisfaction and increased student learning.

Need for Teacher Education Reform

We as a teaching and learning community must expand our current teacher education paradigms and preparation programs to include emotional Intelligence (EI) experiential learning that will strengthen teachers' personal and professional resiliency. Educational institutions offering teacher training programs must recognize that teaching is an emotional profession that requires healthy responses from conscientious teachers who demonstrate as aware emotional learners in order to connect with their students. The person in the classroom labeled teacher wears two specific hats: one as a disseminator of content, the other as a listener learning from their students in order to be a more effective teacher. The teacher's work requires a high level of awareness of their own and their students' emotional state. Both attributes require the teacher to demonstrate emotional intelligence and cognitive resiliency when interacting with students, as the teachers' emotional responses have significant consequences for their students' emotional development and learning abilities (Valente, *et al*, 2022). The EI teacher is more aware of their own emotional state and is, therefore, more skilled in establishing and maintaining rapport and in executing appropriate actions when confronted with unexpected classroom disruptions.

I am not minimizing or ignoring the importance of didactic content in teaching and learning. What I am proposing is to heighten the awareness and importance that we urgently need for all teacher education programs to emphasize as equally important, teacher emotional intelligence awareness and resilience training. Such programs would provide didactic information and somatic awareness methods that enable teachers to become aware of their body, mind and spirit, all of which influence their perceptions of their students' learning needs and contributions, as well as the teachers own sense of wellness.

Teachers are human beings first, then teachers in the classroom. Each teacher enters the classroom with their own internal personal experiences, perceptual interpretations, and expectations. Andy

Clark Professor of Cognitive Science and Philosophy, observes in *The Experience Machine: How Our Minds Predict and Shape Reality* (2023), “According to the new theory (called predictive processing) reality as we experience it is built from our own predictions” (p. xii). Clark goes on to say, “nothing we do or experience... is untouched by our own expectations. ...there is a constant give-and-take...what we experience reflects not just what the world is currently telling us, but what we consciously or unconsciously were expecting it to be telling us” (p xiii). Therefore, those educators unaware of their own emotional predispositions and biases may be unprepared to understand that they might unintentionally exacerbate situations that arise in diverse school environments.

In *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*, Postman & Weingartner (1969) presciently noted nearly six decades ago, “There can be no significant innovation in education that does not have at its center the attitudes of teachers.” (p33). The teacher determines the quality of life within the classroom. Yet, the teacher is not immunized in the classroom from the students’ readily available information about world and personal events. Teachers are not immunized from media comments and opinions. Teachers are immersed in this readily available, easily accessed information that frequently creates an unconscious and pervasive classroom ambiance of shared anxiety. Anxiety-ridden or fear-based environments are unhealthy and unproductive for both teacher and students.

Teachers desire to maintain emotional resilience and cognitive flexibility throughout their day and support their ability to maintain such a state. SEL programs are based on the principle that a healthy student learning environment requires both content learning and social emotional skill development. SEL, however, does not account for the teacher’s need, as a fellow human being in the learning environment, for a similar development of emotional intelligence. The teacher must be both a learner about people (their students) and teacher in the classroom consistently demonstrating content knowledge and social emotional skills while interacting with students.

There are many important ramifications related to Clark’s neuro-scientific findings. For me the most important factor is embracing the understanding that teachers are human beings who are in a profession of service that requires consistent emotional interaction and awareness with every individual encountered throughout their day. Based on current neuroscience, it is imperative that educator preparation programs reflect recognition that the teacher’s personal experiences, background, beliefs, expectations, and purposes directly influence how the teacher emotionally perceives their classroom and emotionally relates to students. It is the teacher’s internal conscious and unconscious worlds that directly influence their emotional perceptions and cognitive reactions, not the teacher’s content knowledge. Our brains are basically predictive machines that evolve through shifting and guessing how things in the world, including our bodies, are most likely to be, based on what has been learned from previous encounters. All human beings are predictive processors, which further underscores the imperative for teacher’s EI development (Clark, 2023).

The teacher's EI enhances awareness and understanding, thus increasing their self-regulation, cognitive content bias, ability to respond to diverse backgrounds and the needs of their students, and their ability to manage crisis moments in their classroom. Teaching teachers emotional self-awareness skills that become internally self-generative and support their ability to perceive, respond to and foster work-related situations with a shifted mindset and a less stressful manner.

When teachers as human beings function with less stress and reactivity, they frequently exhibit increased resiliency, less rigid boundaries and an increased capacity for self-regulation. With such an internal locus of control and awareness, teachers approach themselves and students with increased adaptability and understanding of the immediate social context. With such awareness teachers and students are better able to communicate clearly and are more likely to respond most appropriately. As a consequence, the classroom ambiance is more joyous, trusting, and conducive to learning for the teacher and the students.

Emotional Intelligence and Teacher Preparation Curriculum

Teacher education programs generally focus on curriculum related to educational instruction and classroom behavioral management. A teacher education curriculum that incorporates EI would specifically focus on teacher didactic instruction and experiential personal somatic understanding and awareness. Teacher education programs that include developing the teacher's emotional intelligence might feature an integrated curriculum consisting of cognitive and experiential learning. Given that emotions precede thought, the program would emphasize the neuropsychology of emotions which is the foundation for learning. The experiential component of such an integrative curriculum might consist of a practicum to develop situational teacher recognition, understanding and management of their own emotions and their ability to recognize, understand and influence the emotions of their students.

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