

WE NEED COMPASSION MORE THAN STANDARDS

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21 November 2014

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In the American Buddhist classic, *Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness* (1995), Sharon Salzberg introduced the idea of metta meditation. In this style of meditation, the meditator practices extending loving and compassionate intentions to all beings. The traditional practice involves four intentions. The meditator wishes that all beings might be free from danger; that they might have mental happiness; that they might have physical happiness; and that they may have ease of wellbeing. That all might be safe, happy, in good health, and experience a pleasant life: these are wonderful thoughts and intentions offered to all.

Don't we want the same for our children? We want them to be safe, happy, healthy, and well. This is the task of parenting. This is the task of education. Yet, we know that things don't always work out the best for children. Families can be dysfunctional and education may falter. Many have noted that our education system is failing many of its young charges. Many have called for action to be taken.

Two points of view often emerge regarding the problems associated with schooling and student achievement. One is that standards are lacking and that teachers need to have their feet held to the fire to improve things. The other view sees the problem with education as an indictment of larger societal conditions. In

an earlier article, I have dealt with three large areas of concern that might be having a profound impact on schools and children: technology, families in crisis, and poverty (Alexander, 2013). It was suggested that societal factors have more of an impact on student achievement than a lack of standards and accountability. Elsewhere (Alexander, 2011), I have attempted to demonstrate that the notion that education will be saved by standards and accountability is basically flawed.

The objective here is to examine one part of the puzzle of achievement in schools: poverty. Twenty-two percent of elementary students attend high poverty schools (Center for Public Education). The Poverty and Race Research Action Council states, “[T]here is no question that school poverty concentration has a detrimental impact on student achievement.” The *Washington Post* leaves no doubt: 85 % of low-income students attending high-poverty schools don’t read proficiently by the time they begin fourth grade, and 83 % of children from low-income families *in high or low poverty schools* can’t read proficiently by the time they begin fourth grade (Strauss).

Leachman (2014) reports that at least 35 states are providing less per pupil funding than they did before the beginning of the recession (2008). In adjusted dollars, 14 of these states have reduced funding by at least 10%. Even where funding has increased, it does not offset cuts from previous years. As a case in point, New Mexico increased per pupil school funding by \$72 for the 2013/14 school year, but that does not begin to offset the previous cuts over the previous five years, totaling \$946 per-pupil.

Garon (2011) describes the “real life” effect of budget cuts at an inner city New York high school. Garon writes: “[Budget cuts have meant] everything from the loss of school aides -- adults who help with security, equipment distribution, contacting parents, mediating fights, etc. ... to the cancellation of our fledgling AP program, to the rationing of paper....” Though this is devastating to inner city high schools attempting to fulfill the mandate of making sure every student is college or career ready, it is perhaps funding at the other end of the public education spectrum that is of even greater concern. Lu (2013) reports that in 2013 funding for Head Start was cut by 400 million dollars, denying access to the program to about 60,000 students. This cut represents the largest hit in funding since the program began in 1965.

This is concerning for many reasons. The “educational” benefits of Head Start are well documented. The National Head Start Association documents how Head Start is an equalizer, bringing the educational attainment level of participants in a range similar to other children. There are also gains in terms of health and economic benefits. There are even benefits when it comes to reducing criminality in society. Children who participate in Head Start are less likely to have been charged with a crime than their siblings who were not enrolled in Head Start.

There are other, less directly, “school related” impacts of poverty that affect the educational attainment of children. Poverty has a direct impact on academic achievement. This is likely due to the availability of fewer resources available for student success. Numerous studies have indicated that low student

achievement is closely correlated with lack of resources, and, more directly, many studies have indicated the close correlation between low socioeconomic status and low achievement (Lancour and Tissington, 2011). In 2013, there were over 45 million Americans living in poverty. Nearly 20% of children under the age of 18 were living in poverty (Census Bureau). The majority of these children come from working families. Disproportionately they are Black and Latino. These children not only have less family income, they are less healthy, fall behind in intellectual and emotional and development, are less likely to finish high school, and often go on to become the poor parents themselves (Children's Defense Fund).

Yet, even though the effects of poverty on children and the impact that has on educational attainment are well documented, monies from the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, the block grant program given to states by the federal government to replace Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), has declined 30% in real value since 1996 (Schott, 2012). This, combined with reduced funding for k-12 education and compensatory programs such as Head Start has had a devastating impact on addressing educational attainment issues in low-income families and communities and in the larger society. It is well known that poor communities tend to have schools that perform less well than those from affluent communities. It seems that little is being done to address these inequalities.

There are many aspects of poverty that are more attitudinal/dispositional in nature. Ruby Payne (2005) has described many of these in detail in her book,

A Framework for Understanding Poverty. Many of these factors can be seen as they are reflected in the environment of those living in poverty. Some of these aspects are less apparent on the surface of things. A few of these features of poverty include little room for academics; a generally negative orientation—the orientation in stories and outlook is generally negative; and, a lack of future orientation. In general, there appears to be an attitude of despair with few expectations of an improvement in conditions. This, indeed, may lie at the root of poverty effects in school—a type of learned helplessness.

Yet, funding continues for the creation of more ambitious standards and higher teacher accountability. To me it seems that the governmental and corporate establishment is seeking for a scapegoat on which to pin the blame for the failure of society to take care of the poorest among us. Much more than new standards and value added schemes to force “these lazy teachers” to do their jobs, what is needed is a massive influx of compassion. This needs to equate to dollars. We seem to have our values backwards. We need compassion more than standards. Funding needs to go to healthcare, homelessness, food insecurity, substandard housing, reducing crime in blighted neighborhoods, and, most important, lending hope to the hopeless.

Indeed. may our children be free from danger; may they have mental happiness, may they have physical happiness, and may they have ease of wellbeing. Isn't that what all folks want? Isn't that what all folks need? Isn't acting to give these things to our children the very deed that makes us all truly human?

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