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TEACHING THE WHOLE CHILD



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TEACHING THE WHOLE CHILD

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To successfully educate the whole child we need to believe that social/emotional development is just as important as cognitive development. That it's just as important for a child to learn how to communicate needs, work in a team, and develop meaningful relationships with their peers as it is to read, to name the capitals of every state, and to find the common denominator. We have to be willing to stop a science lesson mid experiment to help students sharpen their language as they learn to respectfully disagree with one another. We have to be willing to call a parent in for a meeting because their child is struggling to show empathy, even when the child exceeds academic expectations. How do we, as administrators, educators and parents, shift the notion that academic growth takes priority over social/emotional growth, or that giving students room to fail, or try something more than once will take too much time out of our curriculum? We need to be brave enough to say that a positive and supportive school culture makes for a stronger academic environment with more room for productive failure leading to greater growth.

A great classroom is one where a teacher facilitates learning opportunities for students. Students are given the space to explore material independently, to develop their own theories, to try and fail, and to try again. It takes a great deal of trust on the part of the teacher to give students independence, choice and ownership over their own learning. And it takes a great deal of skill. How do we design materials for students that meet our skill and content goals but also give students room to be creative, to think critically, and to fail? How do we articulate to students what it is we are trying to achieve and help them feel responsible for getting themselves there? How do we help students understand that success is about pride and confidence, not praise and approval? We have to actually believe that students are capable of solving the problem on their own, of communicating their needs, of figuring out the solution. And we have to be patient, because it won't

happen on their first try.

How do we teach self-advocacy and dialogue? How do students recognize what they need and then ask for it? What are we doing to help them in that two-part process? And how do we help students learn to speak to one another? How do we help them see how they show up in a conversation? Can they present their viewpoint in a way that opens the space for others to speak? When they respond are they threatening or communicating? How do they ask really hard questions in respectful ways? And how do we help them learn to listen? What exercises are we doing with them to help them practice listening or to notice what else is going on in their own mind when someone else is speaking to them? These are all skills that need to be taught and are best integrated into authentic moments of challenging classroom discussions about upcoming elections or a difficult piece of Talmud.

And what happens when students get stuck? How quickly do they turn to the teacher to ask for help? What are the routines and systems that we put in place in our classrooms to guide students through these moments? "Tell me, what you did before you came to ask me for help." "What resources do you have that you can use?" "Did you ask a friend? Did you look it up?" Our attitude towards collaboration and independent problem solving sets the tone for our students. If we encourage them to work together, to seek out opportunities to find their own answers rather than coming directly to us, we are giving them the gift of resourcefulness.

Educating the whole child is scary. It requires us to trust our students, to take the time to give them the skills and tools they need to be successful people and learners. And sometimes to take time away from content and curriculum. To do it well, we need to integrate the whole child approach into the curriculum. To plan our lessons for independence and to make room for failure. To curricularize respectful dialogue and self-advocacy, and to teach resourcefulness. In the end, it is worth it.

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