



RE-IMAGINING the 3 R's of Education

Take a deep breath. Hold it. Now exhale. Last year is behind you, a distant memory full of unforgettable scenes. The future dangles the promise of a new beginning with another school year commencing. As one of my colleagues told me, “This year it’s onward and upward, Jane.” With this in mind, I am urging my staff to re-imagine the 3 R’s of education. We are moving beyond the traditional dimensions of ‘reading, writing and arithmetic’. Instead, we are re-directing our efforts on ‘**relationships, regulation and resiliency**’. As stated by Heather Forbes in her book *Help for Billy* (2012) “We must broaden the traditional academics only focus that has dominated our classrooms for far too long.”

The context of teaching has changed due to the demands imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. We need to put on a new pair of glasses through which we view our world and the world of our students. We must ask ourselves, “What matters? What is important? What do our students need?” as we plan learning activities that focus upon relationships, regulation and resiliency. These three concepts form the necessary building blocks upon which learning takes place for our students as they continue to face the reality of living in a COVID-19 world.

Teaching is a social endeavour so **‘Relationships’** are important between students and their teachers, particularly those learners who are experiencing adversity. The desire to connect with a compassionate adult is a basic relationship need for students. “All students need a safe person who understands them and is willing to build a connection with them: a champion. This person is an unconditional partner whose sole purpose is to be in their corner, supporting, guiding and helping as needed.” (Souers and Hall, 2019).

Academic success for students can be influenced by the nature of the relationship between students and staff. Think about your favourite teacher when you were in school or college. The traits this teacher displayed likely influenced your motivation to learn and your desire to work. In other words, relationships can drive academic achievement. This notion must be reinforced in our classrooms, so everyone feels they have an advocate who is present as an active listener and cheerleader. If students misbehave, then the questions we need to ask ourselves are “What is driving this behaviour? What does this student need?” before the adults respond.

In today’s schools, educators should be experts in the academics they teach and also be well-informed about the students who enter their classrooms each day. How many of the following questions can you answer about your students: What are their hobbies? What makes them laugh? Who are their friends? What do they want to be when they grow up? What is their family like? What are the behavioural signs that they are becoming upset or dysregulated? When you spend quality time together with students in a

safe and caring environment, the answers to these questions will be disclosed. The information can help guide staff as they support students throughout the school year.

When building affirming connections with students, the power of a smile can never be underestimated. Smiling releases chemicals in the brain that help calm a person’s nervous system. Welcoming students into a room also has a profound influence. Standing at the door to greet students by using their names can be interpreted as a gesture of caring. These two actions of smiling and greeting students do not involve any specialized equipment or training, but they do require attentiveness and authenticity.



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If relationships are the new foundation for an educator’s workplace, then **‘Regulation’** has become the new framework for the learning process. Regulation is the ability to cope with stress, calm one’s nervous system, sustain one’s focus and maintain one’s emotional balance or be calm (Forbes, 2020). Research about the human brain has indicated that the optimal roadmap for learning resides in the neocortex or rational ‘upstairs thinking’ brain. Spatial reasoning,

imagination, logic, planning, higher order thinking, problem solving, language, and abstract thought all reside in the neocortex. This 'sweet spot' becomes disturbed whenever threats, stress, anxiety, or trauma are perceived, thereby inhibiting the effectiveness of the neocortex and instead activating the 'downstairs reptilian' brain and limbic system so that memory, attention span, and mood now become compromised. A person is regulated when they can identify and manage their emotions to be in a balanced, relaxed state with the neocortex in charge and, likewise, dysregulated when the limbic system takes over.

Learning to regulate oneself is a valuable skill that educators need to master so they can model and teach regulation to their students and thereby improve the conditions for learning in the classroom. Equally important is an educator's ability to recognize the signs of their own dysregulation or the 'triggers' in themselves and their students so that appropriate interventions can happen to get the brain back on track for learning. Consider for a moment how your body



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alerts you to the fact that dysregulation is happening, and your 'downstairs brain' is taking over: increased heart rate, tense muscles, dizziness, rapid breathing, dry mouth, tightness in the chest area, stomach discomfort, a headache, and noise sensitivity. Furthermore, think about the visible clues that are associated with dysregulation: a flushed face, dilated pupils, pacing, fidgeting, tapping, rocking, clenched fists, sweating, verbal, and physical aggression (Place 2021).

When dysregulation is noticed or experienced, then it is important to take the necessary actions to bring regulation to the forefront as soon as possible. Deep breathing can calm the nervous system, especially when practiced with a caring adult. Movement can also help, so going for a walk, sitting in a rocking chair, or doing simple body stretches can release the tension in one's muscles. Being in the company of a regulated adult can also help others become regulated. This contagious ripple effect of calmness is known as the co-regulation model, and stresses the importance of adults in a school arriving to work as regulated as possible so they can be role models of regulation for their students and colleagues. According to Heather Forbes "When teachers can model their regulatory state in front of students by acknowledging how they are feeling and explaining what they are doing to get regulated, it becomes a powerful example to students." (Forbes 2020, page 114). We do not need to be perfect. We are human beings inclined to make mistakes. What we need is to be aware of our body's state of regulation or dysregulation and recognize when we need to change our behaviour.

With relationships cultivated and regulation optimized, '**Resiliency**', the third R of education, now takes its place on the centre stage. In her TED Talk, Lucy Hone (2019) emphasized the notion that adversity does not discriminate. We all experience tough times. The key is being resilient by thinking and acting in certain ways to be able to bounce back from hardship. As we all know, teaching has difficult tasks that must be completed on a daily basis. According to Julie Causton and Kate Macleod (2020) "As educators, we can often be overwhelmed by the emotional aspect of teaching and working with students who have

challenging behaviour... Taking care of your own emotional and mental health is paramount to your life, well-being, and work to effectively support your students". Educators can then provide the conditions for their students to develop resiliency by creating routines and a nurturing classroom that stresses safety and predictability.

Resilient people are proficient at carefully choosing where to direct their attention by accepting what they cannot change and focusing instead on what they can change. Resilient people tune into the 'good' and acknowledge on a daily basis what they are grateful for in their lives. This intentional ongoing effort to hunt for the 'positive' is a trait of resilient people and an asset for educators.

According to Kathryn Meisner we can all learn to become resilient. At the end of each day, take time to reflect by thinking about one thing you handled well; list ways you showed support to your students; say one positive remark to yourself about the day; or commit to doing something kind for yourself during the week. Resiliency is not a skill acquired or developed overnight; it takes time and intentional effort to become resilient, but the end reward is worth the effort.

According to Michele Lew (2018), educators can help students build their resilience and self-awareness by teaching students how to identify their stressors when they feel sad, upset, or frazzled and then assist students with brainstorming alternate ways to cope with stress. Kenneth Ginsberg (2020) highlights seven aspects of resilience for children and teens and offers practical advice that adults can follow to help foster resilience in youth. The guidelines listed below can become the compass points by which educators steer their behaviour as they build resilience in their students:

- Reminding children to focus on their strengths
- Recognizing when children have done well
- Providing a safe environment for youth
- Helping children to see themselves as caring individuals



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- Stressing the importance of serving others by modelling generosity
- Demonstrating positive coping strategies on a consistent basis
- Ensuring that children know there are adults in their lives who believe in them

With relationships, regulation, and resiliency prominently placed in your 'backpack' for work, you are now better equipped to effectively support and coach your students. You can become a better version of yourself ready to face the ongoing demands of being a teacher, and navigating the challenges of living and thriving in a COVID-19 world. As Julie Causton and Kate MacLeod (2020) state in their Morning Promise: "Today is a fresh start. I will remember these are someone's children. They want to be successful. They communicate with their behaviour. They need my patience. I will welcome them into my classroom space. I will forgive any past mistakes. I will continue to figure out what they need. I will watch for and remember their successes."



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