

Emotional Disconnect in the Education Field

by Sean Daley

Most people remember all of the terrible teachers they've had. They remember all the times they came to school on a bad day and their teachers didn't notice; they remember the classes where their teachers didn't *want* to help their students, but do you think they remember what they were *supposed* to learn from these teachers? I imagine your answer to that question is no, but you're not alone. According to a study reported by ["Education Week"](#), nearly four in five high schoolers say that they don't remember emotionally connecting to a single teacher. In fact, I would say it's harder for most people to remember a teacher with whom they actually had a genuine emotional connection with, yet those connections can completely change students' lives and their lasting opinions on the field of education.

How Do Disconnected Teachers Affect Learning?

In the world of educational philosophy, many look to Stephen Krashen and his Affective Filter Hypothesis when considering how students' emotions impact their learning. Although Krashen's original hypothesis referred to second language acquisition, many of the same principles apply to education as a whole. Krashen believes that when negative feelings like fear, anxiety, or stress are present in a student, it raises their "affective filter". You can imagine the affective filter as a drawbridge that blocks out any possibility of learning; only when this drawbridge is lowered, by a student feeling safe, seen, and supported, will a student be able to absorb new content.

When teachers don't emotionally connect to their students or coursework, then there is little chance of students lowering their affective filter, which practically removes any chances of learning.

Why do Students Disconnect?

Students who have had numerous negative experiences with teachers and not nearly enough positive ones can become discouraged with education in general. This is when you see students lose all attempts at engaging in coursework and stop buying into the education process. I mean, can you blame them? The prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for emotional regulation,

doesn't completely develop until your mid-twenties to early thirties. When your brain is mainly driven by emotion, how can you take in information when, for example, your grandmother died last night, or your parents are getting divorced, or one of your parents just lost their job? This can especially be worsened when teachers fail to make students feel seen. Even in less dramatic instances, it is easier to connect with material that has examples rooted in one's life than just abstract concepts. That's why in early childhood education, teachers use real-world objects, like shirts or apples, to demonstrate addition.

This is why it is *so* important for teachers to be able to ground themselves in their students' lives. All it takes is one compliment, one allusion to pop culture, or even offering a student a snack to make a student feel supported and for them to lower their "drawbridges" and open up to learning.

The Profession Isn't Seen as Professional

If we assume most teachers go into the profession because they have a genuine passion for education and helping students, then why do they grow disconnected from students and seemingly lose their passion to provide the best education possible?

It comes back to teachers not being respected as the professionals of their field. Over the past two decades, the teaching profession has become the topic of many political debates. As teaching has moved to be more culturally responsive and focus on socio-emotional learning, many parents, along with their politicians, have thought that they know better than the professionals; however, would these critics march into a surgery and exclaim that the doctor had no clue what they were doing? Probably not, yet many people, who are not professionals in the education field, believe that they know better than the teachers, educational philosophers, and educational policymakers.

Those who criticize education are often not informed about the years of research that have gone into educational decisions. For example, some do not understand how learning about the perspectives of people of color, women, immigrants, and LGBTQ+ people can benefit their children's brain development. Even if children have different perspectives on what they are learning about, learning how to discuss their opinions constructively creates critical thinking skills.

Instead of respecting these educational decisions, politicians and administrators in school districts across the country are more concerned about the opinions of angry parents than the expertise of teachers in their profession. This concern with appearance over genuine learning can make educators feel unsupported, if not attacked.

That is when teachers begin to draw back from providing the best learning environment for their students. That's when teachers begin to disconnect from what they are teaching because they have to walk on eggshells, and can't talk about topics that are a part of every student's day-to-day life, thus preventing students from being able to lower their affective filters. However, if teachers felt that they were actually able to teach how they were trained to, without having to worry about the opinions of people who have never studied pedagogy, then they would be able to connect with their students and create an environment that gives the students the best chances to learn.

How Can Teachers Be Treated as Professionals?

A teacher *should not* be a political talking point. Teachers should be free to make professional choices because they are the ones who know what would benefit their students' learning. People who can't name one educational philosophy shouldn't be able to dictate how and what teachers should teach. Like noted before, individuals who do not work in the medical field usually do not question the practice of medical professionals; so why is the same level of respect not extended to educators? Teachers are the professionals of their field and should be respected as such.

Not only should teachers be respected as professionals by society, administrators should also be expected to support their teachers. Administrators should be ready to defend the professional choices of their teachers to parents, within good reason. If the teacher is effective and students are learning what they're supposed to, then teachers should not be subjected to needless challenges without administrative support.

It's likely most teachers want to be remembered fondly versus infamously as the "worst teacher ever". However, they need to be supported and respected in order to feel safe engaging fully with their profession. Only then, can teachers create emotional connections that give students the best learning environment.

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