



The Responsive Classroom

THE IMPORTANCE OF TENDING TO OUR STUDENTS' EMOTIONAL HEALTH

A DISCUSSION WITH: MIMI BASSO, HEAD OF SCHOOL; GELSEY STEINBRECHER, HEAD TEACHER, 4E; MELISSA FREEMAN, ASSOCIATE HEAD OF SCHOOL; AND DONNA LONGDON, HEAD TEACHER, 4W

For the past four years WSMS has invited Lesley Koplow and her team to be visiting scholars at our school*. In addition to being a best-selling author and an esteemed educator and psychotherapist, Lesley is Director of the Center of Emotionally Responsive Practice (CERP) at Bank Street College of Education, and it is in this capacity that she has been teaching our faculty how to apply core principles of emotional responsiveness in the classroom. *Great Beginnings* editor (and Director of School Advancement) Patricia Luciani sat down with Mimi Basso, Melissa Freeman, Donna Longdon, and Gelsey Steinbrecher to discuss the impact that their CERP training has had on their daily routines, their interactions with students, and their teaching.

GREAT BEGINNINGS: *Mimi, you stand by the stairs each morning and greet children and parents as they arrive, while teachers wait to welcome them again at the classroom doors. Why have you made these routines a WSMS tradition?*

MIMI: A warm and focused welcome from me, echoed by teachers at the classroom door, signals that we are both delighted and prepared to help each of our young learners have a productive day of growth and discovery. Children bring their experiences with them as they move from the family circle to school. We are eager to discern a child's mood as he enters the classroom so that we can be responsive to and supportive of his needs.

Given that children this young do not have the language to analyze and understand the impact of their experiences, our job is to invite them to share their joys as well as their concerns in the safety of a warm and accepting community. Who hasn't seen an ebullient child arriving at school, thrilled with a new pet or scooter? On the other hand, who hasn't seen a child arrive at school who is anxious about his grandpa being ill, or sad about the death of a pet, or ambivalent about the arrival of a new sibling? Both the joyful child and the sad child need to be encouraged to describe their feelings. A responsive community is one in which individual emotions and reactions can be expressed freely and discussed in a safe and productive classroom atmosphere. This kind of open communication helps each child to feel known and accepted, and enables her classmates to learn from her experience, to empathize, and to respond with kindness and support.

GREAT BEGINNINGS: *What prompted you to invite Lesley Koplow and her team to become visiting scholars at WSMS?*

MIMI: Traditionally, early childhood Montessori teachers are trained to focus primarily on encouraging independence while helping children build pre-literacy and pre-math skills. Certainly, early childhood Montessori teachers-in-training are taught to be on the lookout for the emotional expressions of children, and to encourage parents to tell them about any events

*The WSMS Visiting Scholar Program brings cutting-edge early childhood research and practice on-site to ensure that we are providing the best professional development for our faculty and an unparalleled early childhood education for our students.

at home that might affect the child in the classroom. That said, the Montessori approach does not provide explicit strategies to effectively address and elicit social and emotional connections in the classroom.

I was in a classroom late one afternoon, and one of the children asked if I would help him put on his coat. This was an “aha!” moment for me. He knew how to put on his coat. I knew he could do it, and his teacher knew he could do it too. The teacher, focused on encouraging his independence, reminded him that he should do it himself. And yet this little guy wanted me to connect with him. So I helped him put on his coat, even though that was not our usual practice. He smiled, thanked me, and was on his way. This experience stayed with me. I realized that although our goal is to help children develop independence, it is equally important to connect with children and be responsive to their immediate needs. These are not “little adults”; these are children who are trying to make sense of the world around them, and sometimes they need to know that the adults in their lives are there for them.

Inspired by this experience, I began to look for ways to augment faculty skills and knowledge in the areas of social and emotional development in the classroom. My efforts were bolstered by studies in the field of neuroscience that identify a direct link between emotional well-being and success in academic learning. I knew that WSMS needed to give faculty the opportunity to learn about and tap into this emerging area of social and emotional development in early childhood education. And I knew that it had to be a school-wide effort.

Finding Lesley Koplow was the easy part: all my research pointed to her. She is a pioneer in the area of emotionally responsive practice. She is also a wonderful educator who is not only warm and caring but at the top of her game.

GREAT BEGINNINGS: *Melissa, you were a head teacher at WSMS for 10 years before you took on the Associate Head role, in which you support and mentor faculty.*

What has been your experience helping teachers learn about the principles of creating an emotionally responsive classroom?

MELISSA: First, we had to learn the concepts and the language. It was important for all WSMS faculty to be involved, because we wanted teachers to have a common language and a shared understanding of this need, and we wanted to ensure that all children would benefit from this new knowledge.

Lesley Koplow began with a review of child development milestones from birth to age five. We were already familiar with these milestones, but Lesley helped us see them through a new lens. She explained how children enact the social and emotional tasks inherent in each milestone. She also helped us understand our role in helping children achieve these milestones in partnership with their parents. When a milestone is not achieved within a normal developmental time frame, the child can remain “stuck” in the earlier stage. We talked about the cues that would tell us where a child is developmentally, and about what teachers could do to help a child move to the next stage.

For example, between the ages of three and four, children typically move from parallel play (playing next to another child) to cooperative and dramatic play (engaging with one other child). By age five they see themselves as part of a peer group and are able to relate to a classroom of children. If a child of five continues to be engaged in parallel play, or can only play with her “best friend,” the teacher needs to help the child move forward. The teacher can join the child’s play and model an optimum experience of playing with another child.

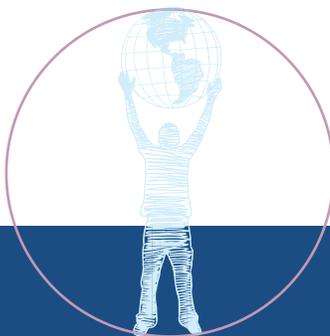
In this situation the child perceives the teacher as a reliable source of emotional support, and is helped to focus on and practice cooperative behaviors in a safe way. The teacher can then encourage the child to try out these new behaviors with a classmate, while the teacher keeps a watchful eye on the interaction and joins in the play if more support is required.

GREAT BEGINNINGS: *How did you help faculty apply these core principles in the classroom?*

MELISSA: Once we had a deeper understanding, we began to incorporate them into our daily routine. Teachers felt safe and secure in trying out new strategies because Felice Wegman, CSW, a key member of CERP, was in classrooms to model, to observe, and to provide support. Felice focused primarily on recognizing the behavioral clues that might indicate the existence of emotional stress in children. Upon identifying a stress indicator, she would model a strategy to address it. Here is one example:

A little boy was building in the block area. He seemed distressed, and began to abruptly dismantle his creation. Felice approached the child and asked him what he was building. The child said, “I’m building a fortress, but it’s not strong enough.” Felice asked him what was going to be inside the fortress. The child answered, “My bed and my toys.” “Tell me about that,” said Felice, and out came the child’s story: “I need to have my bed in a fortress every night because there is a monster in my closet. He wakes me up every night and I’m scared. Mommy comes to my bed, and she tells me it’s all right. But then she leaves.” This





child had recently become a big brother, and the new baby's bassinet was in his parents' room. The child was also dealing with his feelings of powerlessness. Felice helped him build a really strong fortress. The next day he constructed a bed and drew pictures of his favorite toys to put inside his fortress. Upon Felice's suggestion, the teacher read him the book *Go Away, Big Green Monster!*, by Ed Emberley. In reading this book, the reader creates a monster, page by page: big yellow eyes, sharp teeth, etc. Once the monster is fully developed, the reader shows the monster "who's in charge" by causing it to disappear, page by page. This child read the book over and over and, eventually, with great pride, read it aloud to his class.

GREAT BEGINNINGS: *How would you describe the benefits of this program for WSMS faculty and students?*

MELISSA: Learning from Lesley and Felice has provided all WSMS faculty with an invaluable additional layer of understanding about our students. And our students learn to be good community members. They learn to express empathy and respect for others—which in turn helps them learn to respect themselves and better understand and manage their own feelings. Thanks to CERP, our teachers have an even greater ability to make the classroom a safe place in which our students can be themselves and can authentically convey their joyous, sad, and mad feelings without fear. Their free expression comes from the security of knowing that the adults in the room can support them if needed.

GREAT BEGINNINGS: *Gelsey, you came to WSMS only four years ago from a public school environment. This was the same year that Lesley and Felice began with us. How has this program helped you as a teacher?*

GELSEY: Personally, I have felt empowered by the information and strategies that I have learned from Lesley and Felice. I can now comfortably address issues in the classroom that I might have been uncomfortable in dealing with earlier. I've also become more aware of the many different ways in which children work through developmental milestones. For example, children between the ages of four and five are dealing with feelings of "power versus powerlessness." It's all about superheroes and princesses: who's taller, who's bigger, who's stronger. Before, I might have perceived a child who wants to control not only what can be built in the block area but who can participate as being "mean" or "pushy." Now, I recognize that this child is working to understand his sense of power and control. I can intervene and hold a discussion, or read a relevant book such as *Whistle for Willie*, by Ezra Jack Keats, to help the children better understand the tensions that they are feeling, and help them resolve those tensions and develop a stronger sense of well-being.

I also love the shorthand language that helps us keep the classroom atmosphere pleasant and productive while keeping track of individual children's feelings. We have all learned to "check in" with each other—to make sure that everything is okay with an individual child, a group of children, or even a teacher.



This very simple technique enables us to acknowledge and productively address the interpersonal stresses and strains that inevitably occur in every healthy learning community. Referring to each other as “friend” is another useful practice that we’ve all learned. We might say to a child: “Come here, my friend, and tell me a little about the sad face that I see.” A person who is addressed in that way is more likely to feel invited to share his feelings rather than feel put on the spot.

Finally, all of the teachers in my classroom are completely “tuned in” to identifying stress indicators. For example, on the day after Halloween we noticed an unusually high level of energy among our students at the start of the day. Clearly we needed to address the energy and find a way to channel it productively. We invited the children to talk about what they had done the night before. Many children shared that they had gone trick-or-treating. As we talked, more in the group began to talk about the strange and scary things that they had seen. “I saw a real zombie.” “I saw a man without a head.” “I saw a lady with the face of a pig. Is she really a monster?” The class discussed these scary things, examining what was real and what was pretend. As the discussion continued, the class became calmer, and we were able to transition to the work of the day.

GREAT BEGINNINGS: *Donna, you are a seasoned teacher who has taught more than 440 students over the past 20 years. How has this program helped you?*

DONNA: As Melissa mentions, learning the theory and innovative techniques has helped me become more sensitive to the complex inner life of children. Moreover, I now employ new practices that enable me to connect issues of student self-esteem and emotional health directly to their academic accomplishments, thereby developing the whole child—heart, mind, and body.

As a result of working with CERP I have instituted the idea of “social storytelling” in my classroom. I created a Classroom Journal and began to populate it with children’s stories and illustrations. The idea caught on with the children, and it has become a focal point for sharing.

I began by being on the lookout for the stress signals that children send out. And, since I know from experience as well as from the research that a child in stress has a much harder time focusing on work and relating to others in a constructive way, I want to respond quickly to those signals and channel them into constructive activity. Here are just two of many examples: A child was sad about his grandfather’s death. I asked the child to write (or dictate) and illustrate a story about his grandfather. We found out that the grandfather flew fighter jets, and the child loved describing and illustrating the stories that his grandfather had told him. When this child read the story aloud to the class, you could see his sense of pride and relief. Another child was dealing with her best friend’s very

serious illness. Her friend was hospitalized and could not come back to school. This little girl wrote about her best friend, describing what she liked about her and their friendship in lovely detail. She ended her story with this sentence: “I wish that WSMS was a hospital so that my best friend could come to school and get her medicine here.”

