

Roundtable News

Making Sure All Youth Are Known, Valued, and Safe



Although he never said it in so many words, the import of Benjamin Houlberg's Zoom presentation to the Roundtable early in December was that much of the school reform movement may have missed the boat.

Houlberg, formerly a school counselor and academic with Purdue University, Florida

Theological Seminary, and the University of Southern California, is a licensed family therapist and president and CEO of the Search Institute, which has in recent years focused on a developmental relationships framework.

He asked Roundtable members to think of someone in their lives who had supported them as children and invited us to share the words that came to mind.

Responses such as feeling important, centered, happy, compassionate, and at peace were offered. "These are all things that I hear when talking about relationships," agreed Houlberg. They reflect what the Institute has discovered in survey data involving more than 20,000 students over the years. They reflect "two core questions" everyone has: "Am I worthy and valued. And am I safe?"

Wired for Relationships

"We are wired for relationships," declared Houlberg. "When we feel connected, so many things improve." The fundamentals require us to understand, he said, that "all children and youth are entitled to being seen, heard, and valued, feeling safe and protected, and having their basic needs met." Unfortunately, he noted that the Institute surveys indicate that only two out of 10 youths feel strongly that they are really known and valued. Until schools and communities begin to address these two core questions, was the message, we will continue to misdiagnose the challenges and, hence, potential solutions. Equally troubling, many students are getting messages that "violate" these two fundamental principles

and many find that "life isn't predictable and safe, which begins to shape how they function in the world."

Challenges of ACEs

Of course, he acknowledged, most of us in education are "aware of research on [adverse childhood experiences](#) (ACEs)." This work at the Centers for Disease Control, indicated that the conditions many students experience growing up—such as poverty, family dysfunction, community violence, incarceration, homelessness, maternal depression, physical and emotional neglect, substance, emotional, and sexual abuse—can have a tremendous impact on school performance, youth development, and lifelong health and opportunity. And many of these experiences directly undermine the two core questions: Am I valued? And, am I safe? They have physiological and psychological implications as well, noted Houlberg. They "get under the skin" by undermining brain development and stimulating stress hormones and attention to threat. Imagine, he suggested, students hyper-alert to the possibility of violence in their communities, reacting to being bumped suddenly in a school corridor. Inappropriate responses in a school setting may well be seen as perfectly sensible precautions in the larger community.

Resilience

But, he warned, we should not abandon hope that young people can, with essential supports, prevail, often in the most difficult circumstances. Citing an experience during his counseling years of a remarkable young man who moved forward optimistically with his music despite appalling challenges in his personal life, "This kid's light was so bright that I could see it," he exclaimed. He argued for an emphasis on promoting resilience that would "create spaces and supporting structures for resilience and for protective factors. We need to help young people not only overcome difficulties but thrive." The great tragedy, he suggested, "is to see a kid with so much potential that never has the opportunity to live up to that potential." And that's where the Search Institute's 30 years of research involving some six million young people on [40 internal and external assets comes into play](#).

“When it comes to resilience, we have to recognize that it’s not a mindset, it’s not dependent solely on teachers, it’s a community intent on sparking kids’ interests, their values, and aligning what they care about with opportunity... Whatever you do, my wife warns me, don’t tell teachers that they need to do more! It’s a community task.”

Developmental Relationships

So, how do we go about building that resilience? Houlberg emphasized a framework to create developmental relationships in five parts, with 20 action steps. As laid out in the graphic to the right, the parts include expressing care—show that I matter to you; challenging growth—pushing students to do better; providing support—helping students complete tasks and achieve goals; sharing power—treating students with respect and offering them agency in how they approach their work; and expanding possibilities—connecting students with possibilities. “We’re talking about close connections to help young people form their sense of identity and who they are in the world. You have to keep showing up for these kids. That’s what providing support is: ‘I know it’s hard. I know you can do hard things. I’m not going to do it for you.’” Everyone can be involved: teachers, administrators, bus drivers, and cafeteria workers, and, of course, community agencies.

Building a Relational Climate

This is hard work, acknowledged Houlberg. It requires building a relational climate that is intentional, inclusive, and equitable. Unfortunately, he stressed, an enormous gap exists between what staff report providing in terms of developmental relationships and students report receiving. Fully 93% of staff report expressing care; 42% of students agree. 87% of staff believe they challenge growth, 61% of students agree. Providing support? A gap of 91-55%. Sharing power—82%-49%. In the area of expanding possibilities, just 49% of students agree with the 82% of staff who believe they are on top of this.

To address these gaps, he said, will require revamping support systems within the schools, rethinking mission, vision and values, recognizing and rewarding staff for this work, using data to set goals and inform plans to strengthen relationships, providing staff with the time they need along with professional development, and recruiting and hiring staff and volunteers based on relationship-building skills.

This work becomes all the more important, Houlberg believes, in light of significant declines from 2016-2022 in youth’s sense of positive identity. Undoubtedly the disruption of the COVID years contributed to these

declines. In terms of young people’s sense of personal power, self-esteem, sense of agency, and belief in their future, positive responses—not terribly high to begin with—have declined by about 10% across the board.

The bottom line? If educators and policymakers want to be serious about helping young people realize their full potential, they need to spend at least as much time worrying about building relationships as they do about student test scores.



EXPRESS CARE

Show me that I matter to you.

Be dependable
Be someone I can trust

Be warm
Show me you enjoy being with me

Listen
Really pay attention when we are together

Encourage
Praise me for my efforts and achievements

Believe in me
Make me feel known and valued



CHALLENGE GROWTH

Push me to keep getting better.

Expect my best
Expect me to live up to my potential

Hold me accountable
Insist I take responsibility for my actions

Stretch
Push me to go further

Reflect on failures
Help me learn from mistakes and setbacks



PROVIDE SUPPORT

Help me complete tasks and achieve goals.

Navigate
Guide me through hard situations and systems

Advocate
Stand up for me when I need it

Empower
Build my confidence to take charge of my life

Set boundaries
Put limits in place that keep me on track



SHARE POWER

Treat me with respect and give me a say.

Respect me
Take me seriously and treat me fairly

Collaborate
Work with me to solve problems and reach goals

Include me
Involve me in decisions that affect me

Let me lead
Create opportunities for me to take action and lead



EXPAND POSSIBILITIES

Connect me with people and places that broaden my world.

Inspire
Inspire me to see possibilities for my future

Connect
Introduce me to people who can help me grow

Broaden horizons
Expose me to new ideas, experiences, and places