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Apryl Taylor & Donna Neary

EMBRACING THE WHOLE CHILD: EXTENDING THE "WELCOME MAT"

Building a System for Joy

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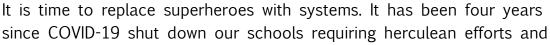## Building a System for Joy

Apryl Taylor, Social Studies Program Specialist Orange County, Public Schools, Orlando, Florida & Donna Neary, English as New Language (ENL) Specialist for Ooltewah Middle School, Chattanooga,Tennessee.

It is time to replace superheroes with systems. It has been four years since COVID-19 shut down our schools requiring herculean efforts and extreme approaches to keeping the learning going. As we shift away from crisis-mode we have new opportunities to move beyond the superhero narrative about administrators and teachers and build a system of collaboration that plans for students to regularly experience joy in their learning communities.

Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of need informs the Whole Child framework (ASCD) requiring educators to identify and acknowledge the totality of the children we serve. We believe that by anchoring the Whole Child Framework with evidence-based structures schools can identify which of the tenets - Healthy, Safe, Engaged, Supported and Challenged - need attention. By personalizing and implementing worthwhile tasks tied to standards, skills and dispositions administrators and educators collaborate to bring the system back into balance. In this way, schools can build responsive, personalized and accessible systems for joyful learning.

The Whole Child Framework with intentional structures is helping us build a system where students find joy in learning and educators call upon a predictable system to address common concerns. Joy is not elusive or mysterious; it simply needs to be prioritized. Assessing the barriers to joy in a learning community is specific, and is something each school will need to do on their own. However, once that barrier is recognized and the tenet that is out of balance is identified, we can begin designing and implementing solutions in the form of structures.

Healthy

Healthy kids have energy to learn, ask lots of questions, and come to school. The Whole Child framework connects a child's physical and mental health with how they interact with their learning environment, just as administrators, educators, counselors and social workers assess and address overall and individual wellness issues and factors. For some students who lack confidence and may lack a sense of agency, building structures to empower them to follow their passions ignites their confidence and encourages student voice.

So when Immigrant-origin English learners in Louisville, Kentucky expressed sadness to their teacher at the feelings of isolation in their new community they found an opportunity to combat it by participating in the Aspen Challenge. The competition provided the structure for exploring their problem and designing a solution taking actions that highlighted the issues, and provided agency for themselves and other students in the District. Their proactive, agentic, self-help solution of creating a teen forum to share and problem-solve with peers and community leaders earned them the Best Collaborators prize.

"These transformations shift our mindsets from a sense that we are supporting struggling students to the knowledge that we are growing striving learners and encouraging development of the Whole Child."

Safe

Planning partnerships with community organizations are structures that can serve to strengthen a sense of safety and belonging for students. A grant from The American Battlefield Trust funded a visit to the Abraham Lincoln Birthplace National Park for urban high schoolers following study of the American Civil War. They were invited to present their projects on Abraham Lincoln in the auditorium.

All immigrant-origin, many refugees, and all English language learners, their original work being presented in English showed how much they believed they belonged there as a part of the story of this country. Their reflections following the field trip also reinforced how it felt to be trusted to tell the story of a President and included as historians of our collective past and experienced the joy that results from belonging in an academic setting (Re-imagining Migration, 2024).

Engaged

When standardized test scores indicated that English learners in a suburban Tennessee middle school needed writing support, a structure for daily writing was implemented. Our structure centered on ever-changing visual prompts using symbols (Story Dice, n.d.) giving opportunities to be funny, unexpected and creative in their written responses.

Shifting to less predictable and more reactive writing prompts combined with read-alouds brought fun and surprise into the classroom. Their resilience to master the strategy resulted in tangible short and long-term benefits. The majority increased their language proficiency (WIDA ACCESS, 2024) and 30% of the students met criteria to exit ESL accommodations.

Supported

Once a student can engage with the learning, they have the opportunity for positive momentum and a growth mindset. This is where data comes into play. Data can further humanize students by being a tool for nurturing. When considering data in the context of joy, it is not enough to be engaged in the classroom. When formative data is not being met with ongoing teacher support, the learning is stagnant and the classroom environment is apathetic. How do you create a system to bridge the gap between stagnant and momentous, between apathy and joy?

"LPE days" are opportunities for students to Learn, Practice, or Explore content based on data indicators. Students whose data indicate large gaps in knowledge will take on a tutorial "Learn" task, those whose data was inconsistent will be with the teacher at the "Practice" station where their misconceptions can be addressed, and students who consistently demonstrated proficient in their data will "Explore" through an enrichment task. Thus, scaffolds and differentiation are not elements of a journey that end with a formative assessment. Those strategies must also be used to support students after data has indicated their progress with the learning. When persistence leads to accomplishment, "joy in learning is the norm, not the exception." (Ricci, 2013)

Challenged

When picturing joy in the classroom, the memories that first pop up are those of the "aha moments." When leading professional development sessions, from time to time there is a teacher who focuses on the deficiencies of students. Students "cannot" read, they "will not" try, and they "are not" going to pass. When the teacher carries that mentality into the classroom, students miss out on "aha" opportunities. How can we create systems to challenge our students and enhance their joy in the classroom?

Productive struggle is involved when students are problem solving and thinking critically. Consider providing students with twenty vocabulary terms and prompting them to sort the terms into three categories. Do not provide the categories to them - instead prompt them to consider what potential categories could exist as they sort through the terms. Alternatively, prompt students to explain a concept in exactly seventeen words. By either removing parameters or placing in new guidelines, students must take their initial understanding and apply it within a new context. Nottingham (2017) explains that students become resilient when they "embrace the challenge and experience the joy of emerging from the [learning] pit." When students feel the success from applying their learning and exceeding their own expectations, their pride and joy is contagious.

Conclusion

Anchored in the Whole Child framework, this systemic thinking shifts mindsets from solely supporting struggling students to the realization that we are growing striving learners by encouraging the development of lifelong skills and knowledge. The joy educators feel when we know that our schools promote effective and accessible systems with students' collective needs at the center supports sustainability of the system.

The structures above help us build a system where students find joy in learning and where educators can call upon a predictable system to address common concerns. Joy is not elusive or mysterious. It simply is not prioritized. Locating the barrier to joy is something each school will need to do on their own. However, once that barrier is identified, we can call upon each other to share structures that address the gap in joy and shift the culture of the campus. When an individual structure is implemented successfully, it can increase joy in all areas of the system.

These transformations shift our mindsets from a sense that we are supporting struggling students to the knowledge that we are growing striving learners and encouraging development of the Whole Child. That's the "teacher joy" that we feel. As we move forward in our work with joy, we ought to consider that joy is subjective and temporary. Consider, how do we measure and sustain joy?

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The American Battlefield Trust Field Trip Grant

Apryl Taylor is a dedicated Social Studies Program Specialist for Orange County, Florida Public Schools, known for empowering educators and combating burnout through practical skills and data-driven decision-making. She champions turning frustration into purpose and elevates her staff and students in a highly charged political climate. Currently, Apryl is promoting the "Embracing the Whole Child" framework, which focuses on helping all students be healthy, safe, engaged, supported, challenged, and successful.

Donna Neary is a passionate educator with extensive experience in public history and K-12 public education, dedicated to supporting immigrant-origin and multilingual students. Her work focuses on creating equitable learning opportunities for at-risk students, particularly in Title I schools, by integrating inquiry, critical thinking, and community engagement. Recognized by history and education organizations, she has successfully collaborated with historic sites and museums, leading students to produce award-winning projects.