



Putting the Oxygen Masks on Ourselves First

We've all heard the familiar mantra of the airline flight attendants during their pre-flight instructions, "...make sure to put the oxygen mask on yourself first before attempting to help someone else put on theirs." Our featured guest article for May comes from author and educator, Linda Lantieri. Linda highlights the importance of strengthening our own social, emotional and inner life skills before we can effectively encourage others.

Putting the Oxygen Masks on Ourselves First

By Linda Lantieri

I have been in the field of education for the past four decades in a variety of capacities – classroom teacher, school administrator, college instructor, and director of a nonprofit organization. In each of these roles I have realized that to be the effective change agent I wish to be, I need to heed the familiar words most of us have experienced on an airplane ride – “make sure to put the oxygen mask on yourself first before attempting to help someone else put on theirs”. Since September 11, 2001, when I was asked by the New York City Schools and several foundations to help the schools in and around Ground Zero heal and recover from this tragedy, I have had a much deeper respect for how important it is to work with ourselves first before we expect to “be the change we wish to see in the world” as Gandhi reminds us. We need to help strengthen our own social, emotional and inner life skills before we can encourage others to make these ways of being integral to what we do with young people. Many of us who work with youth know that research tells us that direct, sequential instruction of social and emotional learning skills to young people using a researched based curriculum that is developmentally appropriate and culturally sensitive is important. However, we also need to remember that what ultimately has the most impact in our classrooms, homes and residential treatment facilities is the quality of interaction between the adult who is interacting with the young person and the young person who is experiencing that interaction.

So, I have a renewed sense that we can't sacrifice developing our own self awareness and self management skills because we feel that it is more important for the young people we serve to become skillful in these ways of being. We need to first build our own reservoir of inner resilience – the place in us that gives our work meaning and purpose. Adults need to experience being part of a living community of learning with our peers in which we are engaged and first grow ourselves in the very things we want to be giving our children.

Every time we help a group of adults get in touch with their own inner source of reflection, it becomes easier to align our inner guidance with our outer reality. And it is when this kind of reflection happens within the context of a community of learners, that there is the potential of allowing personal insights to be a source of social change in our classrooms, schools and communities. The kind of reflection and self awareness work I am talking about is when we are able to create a community of adult learners who are able to take the time to be introspective but never lose the sense that they are connected to each other. This kind of community needs to have, as Parker Palmer calls it, “unconditional regard for one another”. Then there is the possibility of mutual inspiration.

When we pay enough attention to growing and cultivating our own self-awareness and management of our emotions first, we find that it often puts us in what Sir Ken Robinson calls a “meta-state” in which our intuition is sharper, ideas come more quickly and we become in the flow. For a teacher, teaching becomes more relaxed and the teacher becomes the instrument of their own expression of teaching. I think we all know when we feel “in the zone” – this feeling of course is the opposite of feeling burned out. It is as if we have more energy than we even need.

When we innovate in education, we often think about curriculum and assessment. There’s nothing wrong with this, except if we don’t pay attention to the process part – the quality of the interaction between adult and young person – I would have to say that we are in trouble because it is still by far the best way to improve education. It also is important of course to equip young people with solid skills in social and emotional learning. And young people need these skills for a whole lot more than preparing them for the world of work. We need to be about preparing young people to live healthy, engaged lives as active citizens in a democracy which honors diversity and helps them have the kinds of skills to tackle the tough questions of life with deep meaning and purpose. What we teach has got to be relevant to young people. Remember we are competing with nearly 45 hours per week a child in the US spends with some form of media – mostly television and screen-based media - to about 30 hours a week in school.

We know that solid instruction in social and emotional learning (SEL) involves applying skills to the real world, but we have to go even further than that. Often when we teach SEL skills, we connect them to the part of the real world that is predictable. However, the world that our young people are inheriting is as much unpredictable as it is predictable. And often kids don’t know what to do when they are faced with applying these skills in an unexpected situation. What we teach and how we teach it has got to have depth so that these competencies stand up in the wide contexts in which young people will need to use them.

For example, we could talk about teaching young people the kinds of decision-making skills that would be the specific proficiency acceptable to the business world or we could teach them the kind of decision-making skills that would allow them to ask the kinds of questions that would encourage them to actively engage in issues around equity and social justice. And remember, there are so many changes happening at this very moment – particularly in our advances in technology – that we can only guess what the future will be like and what competencies young people will need to be successful. My guess would be that SEL skills will be, without a doubt, the ones that remain on the list.

Our job as those who are working to make our schools, homes and communities places that cultivate all of what young people need to succeed requires that each of us hold on to our vision in the midst of the paradox of what the reality is. It is believing that we can make the impossible possible and the exception the norm. We are not alone in this vision and we need to keep up each other's hope and faith that it can be done. One of the ways I keep up my hope and faith is to be part of the Black Hill Seminars in June every year. It will be my 14th year that I will be attending this amazing 4 days in the sacred Black Hills of South Dakota. I can think of no better way to replenish my spirit and prepare me to be the change I wish to see in the world.

About the Author:

Linda Lantieri, MA is a Fulbright Scholar, keynote speaker, and internationally known expert in social and emotional learning and conflict resolution. Currently she serves as the Director of The Inner Resilience Program which equips school personnel with the skills and strategies to strengthen their inner lives in order to model these skills for the young people in their care. In 1985, she co-founded the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (RCCP) which is now one of the largest and longest running evidenced-based school (K-8) programs in social and emotional learning in United States. Linda is also one of the founding board members of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL).

She has 40 years of experience in education as a former teacher and director of a middle school in East Harlem, and faculty member at Hunter College in New York City. She is the coauthor of *Waging Peace in Our Schools* (Beacon Press, 1996) editor of *Schools with Spirit: Nurturing the Inner Lives of Children and Teachers* (Beacon Press, 2001), and author of *Building Emotional Intelligence: Techniques to Cultivate Inner Strength in Children* (Sounds True, 2008).

Check out Linda's latest title [Building Emotional Intelligence](http://www.reclaimingbooks.com), available at www.reclaimingbooks.com!

