

# Psychological Interventions for Better Physical and Mental Health of School Children

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## Abstract

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*Urbanisation and advancement in technology has put new demands on the education system. Personal and social development are vital for children to grow into well-adjusted adults, apart from academic success. This research view focuses on the psychological interventions for shaping physical and mental health of school children. The idea of the school is seen as a learning community, where learning is constructed as a fundamentally social process. Relationships between teachers and students are associated with positive outcomes like increased motivation, achievement, feelings of belonging and affects in school. Family influences including parent-child relationships have been vastly investigated to assess their association with social, emotional and learning outcomes. The joint efforts of educational personnel, healthcare practitioners and mental health providers to successfully tackle the physical and mental health needs of children and even their families is felt strongly.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The present educational system is passive in nature. Students are taught that the key to success is memorisation. Also, parents are not very involved in education of their children. The focus is on examination rather than acquisition of knowledge.

Emphasis on individual differences is not given. The education system is still chained with ingrained practices, including policy, and decades old methods.

Truancy is seen as unexcused absences from school or classes. Negative consequences associated

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with it extend beyond the classroom into multiple domains of a youth's health and development. Physical and mental health issues contribute to school absenteeism. Adolescents with poor school engagement have a target to participate in risky behaviours that compromise their health. Blum, Beuhring and Rinchart (2000) reported a relationship between school problems and health risks in a nationally representative sample of over 10,000 youth (comprehensive school-based study in the United States). Health risks encompass alcohol, cigarettes, unprotected sexual activity, and weapons related violence and suicide attempts. The study also mentioned that school engagement must be considered a health and educational crisis.

Research says that absenteeism identifies health problems as the root cause underlying truancy. Truancy coexists with student and family, mental health problems and can be an indicator of an existing or emerging mental health disorder, like post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety or substance abuse. In a study of truancy in Chicago schools, a critical gap was identified in recognising the mental health problems underlying truancy, especially for youth in urban environments where poverty and violence may contribute to family stress, disruption and loss (Roderick et al., 1997). Truancy is also associated with factors within the school climate. Characteristics

of school environment that inhibit truancy are— attending to individual student needs, establishing incentives for attendance, engaging students in supportive relationships, promptly addressing student absenteeism, minimising punitive responses and forming relationships with health and human services to address the problems of students and their families (Roderick et al., 1997). It can be mentioned that trusting teachers as mentors from within the student's school would impact the school culture and help in forming positive attitudes and truancy intervention skills within them. A project was implemented in an urban high school and it encompassed two innovative methods— student enrolment in a school-based health center for comprehensive health centers, and recruitment of teachers from within the student's school to engage in mentored relationships (DeSocio et al., 2007). In the project, efforts were made to encourage each student's special interests as a way of linking school attendance to personal aspirations. Small grants from the school were used to create opportunities to promote student's special interests. Example—one student was given a grant to pay for individual art lessons after school, due to the exceptional ability in art. Mentors provided assistance with homework and encouraged positive peer relationships. They also helped in enhancing positive study habits. Students showing chronic

patterns of truancy usually manifest frustration and lowered expectations from teachers and staff which ultimately leads to a growing sense of alienation between students and teachers. Mentor advocacy within the school helped in interrupting this negative cycle and thus, this was a vital part of the given intervention. Group meetings were held between students, mentors and members of the project team which helped in dealing with the highs and lows of working with youth who had critical academic and attendance problems. This encouragement and a relationship based connection within the school significantly influenced the ability to keep these students in school. Thus, the advocacy and encouragement of adult mentors within their school helped in creating connections which counteracted social discentives and feelings of hopelessness and kept them engaged in school (DeSocio et al., 2007). It's been stated in research that without intervention, truancy becomes a habitual pattern that increases with time (Roderick et al., 1997).

A student's overall experience of school is moulded by various factors like individual differences as well as the characteristics of their family, immediate social networks, the societal and cultural context in which they live and learn, and also the social and political agendas of the day that frame school policies, programme and practices. All these factors operate interdependently within the context of the school community and their

combined impact contributes to how students perceive the quality of their social, emotional and academic life at school.

### **IMPORTANCE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERVENTIONS IN EDUCATION SYSTEM**

Psychological interventions help in bringing a significant change in academic settings. Universal promotion of mental health programmes helps in emphasising on concepts like social and emotional skills, positive behaviours, social inclusion, effective problem solving, and good citizenry (Wells, Barlow, and Stewart-Brown, 2003). A meta-analysis focused on the academic benefits of mental health promotion in schools because schools with social emotional learning programmes had an average increase of 11–17 percentile points on standardised tests compared with scores from non-intervention schools (Durlak, et al. 2011). Thus, researchers and others involved in the education system need to be dedicated to ensure appropriate delivery of the intervention. Academic mindset interventions target students' core beliefs about school and learning, like 'can I learn and grow my intelligence' (growth-mindset beliefs) and 'why should I learn?' (sense of purpose beliefs). In doing so, changes occur in the way they interpret and respond to challenges in school, increase students' resilience and set in motion positive recursive cycles that increase

success over time. A study was done where testing of two mindset interventions were conducted—growth mindset intelligence and sense of purpose. This study is focused on effects among poorly performing students mindsets matter most when students encounter challenges in school. Results indicated that each intervention increased students' semester grade point average in core academic courses (Paunesku et al., 2015).

Some interventions have been discussed which would guide the students to be shaped holistically in schools.

### **RELATIONSHIPS**

Relationships are an essential feature of the instructional interactions that frame communications between teachers and their students. Teacher's capacity to absorb productive values about school work, to motivate engagement in learning and to encourage persistence and reduce anxiety during challenging tasks; to listen, respect and genuinely approach their students, all these depend on the effectiveness of student-teacher relationships. A research was conducted by Murray-Harvey (2010) to assess the relationship between students' social and emotional adjustment, academic achievement and motivation, the influence of teachers. It was seen that the students perceived their relationships with family, peers and teachers as sources of stress or support at school, their

psychological health, feelings about their sense of belonging to school and their academic performance. The evidence is supported by the fact that when schools give attention to the non-academic (social and emotional) dimensions of well-being in order to create safe, inclusive and respectful environments, they are simultaneously optimising opportunities for academic success. Of particular relevance for this research was that supportive relationships show a positive direct influence on social and emotional adjustment and a very strong indirect association with academic performance. Thus, interventions should be programmed to enhance the quality of student's lives at school in two manners—to counter the effects of stressful relationships in students' lives and help them in provision of supportive relationships that they would view as vital for their well-being. An important point to remember for teachers and others working with students in school is to place emphasis on relationships that form social and emotional competence. These should be seen both as adding value to the quality of students' lives at school and as important aspect for achievement of successful academic outcomes. Thus, representing schools as 'communities of learners' provides a positive progress as it supports the view that school must play a role in building healthy relationships as well as decreasing stressful relationships for meeting the learners' needs.

### **THE ROLE OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT, SELF-EFFICACY, INTRINSIC MOTIVATION AND GOAL-ORIENTATION**

Parental involvement is generally referred to as parents' participation in their children's education with the purpose of promoting their academic and social success (Fishel and Ramirez, 2005). Research in the fields of education and psychology has mentioned that parents have significant impact on students' learning and developmental processes. Although, it has been suggested that parents have positive influence on their children's educational outcomes, more specific information is required to understand which parental activities and behaviours contribute to promotion and shaping the development of the educational needs of the wards.

Parental involvement in a child's education is one of the main methods through which children are socialised. There are various dimensions of parental involvement and Epstein (2010) gave six specific types of involvement that promote positive academic experiences for children—parenting, communication, volunteering, learning at home, decision making and connections with the community.

To this date, parental involvement in research with regard to student achievement motivation has been measured through aspects of dimensions like school-to-home

communication, parental values and parental involvement in school functions, as well as surveillance of home work and reactions towards grades. Parental involvement has positively impacted students' math proficiency and achievement, reading performance, as well as performance in standardised tests and academic assessments, also fewer behaviour problems in school, better attendance and class preparation, better course completion and lower dropout rates (Simon, 2001). Attending conferences and parent organisation meetings, volunteering and checking homework were positively related to students' academic achievement (Domina, 2005).

Self-efficacy refers to individuals' beliefs in their ability to produce desired results as well as to learn and perform (Bandura, 1997). Individuals' perception of self-efficacy influence many aspects of their lives including their goals, the decisions they make, the amount of effort that is put in accomplishing goals, the types of tasks they choose, the level of perseverance when faced with challenges, the level of stress experienced in demanding situations, the positivity or negativity of thought patterns and their level of vulnerability to depression (Bandura, 1997). In short, levels of efficacy influence how people behave, think, feel and self-motivate. Self-efficacy consistently predicts academic achievement due to its effects on effort and persistence, as students who demonstrate greater

senses of self-efficacy are more likely to put forth the necessary effort and persist longer when facing academic challenges (Schunk and Zimmerman, 2006). Empirical research has shown that children perceived a greater sense of competence when their parents were more involved in their education and school activities.

Intrinsic motivation exists within and drives the spontaneous behaviours of individuals and it has been seen that it is very important for adolescents' cognitive development. Those who have this kind of motivation engages in academic roles due to the enjoyment of the tasks and the desire to learn. Studies have shown that this motivation has a strong relationship with children's achievement, persistence and effort, self-efficacy and achievement motivation (Ryan and Deci, 2000).

There are two sides of parental involvement on intrinsic motivation. According to cognitive evaluation theory, parental involvement can be informational or controlling. The informative part enhances students' intrinsic motivation, for example, children's intrinsic motivation increased when parents received weekly information regarding their children's progress and how to help them at home, and when parents gave encouragement and positive remarks and reactions to the grades their wards received (Ginsburg and Bronstein, 1993).

Goal orientation refers to one's inclination to set goals and make

plans for oneself. There exists a strong relationship between self-efficacy and goal orientation. Individuals who perceive themselves to have good self-efficacy, set more challenging goals for themselves and maintain higher levels of commitment to these goals. As the goals are achieved, self-efficacy also increases. On the other hand, perception of inefficacy may impede motivation. Low self-efficacy is often accompanied by fear of failure. Fear of failure means the motivation to avoid failure because of the possibility of experiencing shame or embarrassment. People who have doubt on their abilities, experience high levels of fear of failure and thus, they are less likely to set and work towards their goals. Hence, they have less opportunities to increase their self-efficacy. A study was done by Caraway, Tucker, Reinke and Hall (2003) to assess the relationship between self-efficacy, goal orientation and fear of failure with school engagement for high school students. Results showed that the more confident adolescents are about their general level of competence, the more likely they are to get better grades in school and to be more engaged in various aspects of school. Students who fear failure have a tendency to demonstrate less engagement in school-related tasks.

A school environment that is open, trusting and inviting is conducive in building healthy relationships among children. Building partnerships and fostering effective communication

and interaction between the home and school settings increase the likelihood for academic achievement and promote continuity across settings (Miedel and Reynolds, 1999).

The more confident adolescents are about their general level of competence, the more they are likely to receive better results in school and they are more engaged in various aspects of school—this is vital information. Hence, there should be intervention programmes for enhancing self-efficacy and school engagement. Feedback plays a good role here. The goal of effective feedback, within and beyond education, is to improve performance. Feedback should be both negative and positive. Positive feedback relays information to indicate that a behavior should continue and negative feedback indicates that a behaviour or task was not performed correctly, thus indicating that a change of behaviour is needed to demonstrate successive behaviours toward a goal. One important example of positive feedback is goal-directed feedback (effectively focuses on what went well and what can be done differently in the future to improve without placing a positive or negative value on it). It has been suggested that goal-directed feedback is a powerful way to motivate students to learn skills and behaviours (Hattie and Timperley, 2007). Another notable example of positive feedback is dialogue feedback. Feedback as dialogue means that the student will not only get written

feedback information but also has the opportunity to have discussion about that feedback afterwards.

Often schools lack resources for providing the individualised attention to students. Many parents who are both working, cannot spend much time with their children. Hence, it is crucial for parents and families, teachers and school administrators, counselors and mental health professionals and the community at large to work together for facilitating the academic success and psychological well-being of children and adolescents.

### **CONNECTION WITH SCHOOL**

School bonding, school climate, teacher support, student engagement—researchers have used these terms over the years to address the concept of school connectedness. School connectedness means the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included and supported by others in the school social environment (Goodenow, 1993). This is seen to be strongly associated with school retention, physical and emotional health, wellbeing and negatively associated with adolescent's involvement in risk-taking behaviour (Bond et al., 2007). Risk-taking behaviour is seen as any action which includes choice, uncertain outcomes and the potential for negative consequences, like alcohol and substance use, and delinquent and violent behaviours like carrying

weapons, damaging property and gang membership. Research has shown a relation between school connectedness and a number of adolescent outcomes like positive association with academic motivation and achievement. Importantly, longitudinal research has shown that students' connectedness is related to reduced risk taking later in adolescence: delayed initiation of cigarette smoking, alcohol and marijuana use, delinquency and violent behaviour (Dornbusch et al., 2001). Factors like enforcement of tolerant disciplinary policies, effective classroom management and supportive and positive student-adult relationships within the school helps with school connectedness. According to social learning theory, positive behaviour results in feelings of self-worth and when there are school programs teaching adolescents which behaviours are positive and the teachers reinforce these positive behaviours, bonding is enhanced and positive actions are continued. Internalisation of pro-social school values like those against violence and substance abuse, can lead to behaviour consistent with such beliefs.

Lack of school engagement among children and adolescents have negative consequences like risk for increased school dropout, substance use, teenage pregnancy and criminal activity (Lochner and Moretti, 2004). School engagement is made of behavioural, affective and

cognitive components that influence commitment to learning and successful academic performance. Behaviours like regular class attendance, study behaviours and participation in class discussions are positive aspects of school engagement. Ambient emotions like boredom, anxiety, fear or enthusiasm reflect a student's level of affective engagement in a school-related task.

There are many factors which can enhance engagement in school. One of the most prominent ones is a student's perceived social context (like family support, school environment, neighborhood characteristics) that directly influences the self-system (perceived autonomy, relatedness and competence) which in turn leads to student action.

Programs aimed at achieving better mental and emotional well being and development of students, need active support from the school's administration, as well an integration of all the features of such programs with the school's stated academic goals, for widespread and positive change. Maintaining a climate of increased school connectedness maybe difficult in the context of teacher and administration mobility. Intervention developers have to find homeostasis between the comprehensiveness required for a program to be effective, as well as the likelihood of school and staff acceptance of that program.

**Resilience**

All students face adversity, if not academic then something else. They can face a range of stressors and anxieties like bullying (Cross et al., 2009). Masten, Best, and Garmezy (1990) stated resilience as the “the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances”. Thus, it is vital for parents and others in the education system to prepare them to be resilient in such situations. Research has shown that if students can be guided to see intellectual ability as something that can be developed with time and effort, good strategies and guidance from others, then they will be more resilient when they encounter the rigorous learning opportunities that are given to them (Yeager and Dweck, 2012).

There are some ways in which resilience can be taught in classroom context. A teacher can use learner-centered practices, which emphasise individual choice and autonomy. Thus, the teacher becomes a facilitator of student learning rather than the source of all knowledge. A sense of purpose for the students can also be implemented, which is important for students who are at risk for having no vision for the future. They should be given learning activities that are challenging but flexible so that each student can discover ways of participation in meaningful manner which enhances their optimal level of challenge. There

is also the opportunity for increasing a student’s personal qualities like problem-solving skills and intrinsic motivation. Like, teachers can support and enhance intrinsic motivation by rewarding effort and co-operation and by emphasising on natural interest aspects. Teachers can also combine social and emotional education in classroom activities. Focus is given on enhancing students’ self-awareness of their feelings and thoughts as well as increasing social awareness by helping them understand what others are thinking and feeling. Also, classroom activities can incorporate activities which will guide the students in developing relationship skills by learning to co-operate, resisting negative peer pressure and negotiating conflicts (Weissberg and O’Brien, 2004). Thus, creating a positive classroom climate can provide opportunities for the students to produce social skills, respect for individual differences and teamwork when they work in co-operative groups on academic activities that are built with mutual goals and equal status participation for all members of the group.

**Physical Education**

Most schools have reduced the time allotted for physical education. But, there is a relationship between physical fitness and academic achievement. Children who are fit perform better on attentional tasks that require greater amounts of cognitive control like planning,

abstract problem-solving, working memory, motor control and inhibitory control. Physical activities can help school children to develop social skills, improve mental health and reduce risk-taking behaviors. Physical education is also important for mood state, memory, learning and concentration. A study was done to assess the relationship between physical fitness and academic achievement in middle school students (Bass, Laurson and Coleman, 2013). Results stated that aerobic capacity and muscular endurance had a strong relation with academic achievement. Thus, policy makers must take into notice the importance of physical fitness.

### **Mindfulness**

Interest in the benefits of mindfulness practice has grown rapidly. From its initial applications in medicine, mindfulness training has spread into the fields of psychology, healthcare, neuroscience, business, the military and education. The need for such practice in education is happening due to shifts in education and awareness of students with high test anxiety, increase in behavioural and mental health problems in student. This enhances the goals of education in the present. Students need to learn to stop their mind wandering and regulate attention and emotions, to deal with feelings of frustration and to self-motivate. Also, students gain prosocial dispositions such as empathy and compassion, self-

representations, ethical sensitivity, creativity and problem solving skills which would guide them to deal with future challenges of the rapidly changing world, ideally becoming smart, caring and committed citizens (Shapiro et al., 2007).

### **Mental Health in Schools**

Mental health in schools require framing new directions and encouraging a visionary and proactive approach. Teachers would like to facilitate their students' healthy social, cognitive and emotional development and try including parents also. Yet, despite urgent need for relevant programs, they continue to be a supplementary item on a school's agenda. Schools play a critical role to help in the mental health of children. School experiences are important for children's psychological as well as intellectual development. Therefore, education system should concern themselves with children's self-esteem and their social experiences with academic performance.

There are of course legal mandates requiring mental health services for the students diagnosed with special-education needs.

Unmet mental health needs and physical health problems are important barriers to school learning for children and adolescents. Thus, school is an ideal point of entry for delivering universal and preventive services that address a variety of factors affecting children's physical and mental health. Nearly,

18 per cent of school-age children have one or more chronic health conditions and 7% of those have significant functional limitations as a result (Farmer, Clark and Marien, 2003). The main causes of mortality and morbidity such as tobacco use, unhealthy dietary behaviours and inadequate physical activity are often established during childhood and adolescence. School-based health centers represent an important interdisciplinary approach for providing comprehensive physical and mental health care for children and adolescents. Such services have preventive routine, acute care services for students with reproductive health services. They are also involved with prevention-oriented programs, including initiatives that address nutrition, HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases, alcohol and other drugs, violence and conflict resolution (Brown and Bolen, 2008). Routine psychosocial screening is the most critical aspect. Crisis intervention, case management, comprehensive evaluation and treatment with substance abuse treatment services are available. There is also provision of peer support groups, grief counseling, and assistance with classroom behaviour modification. The impact of the services given by school-based health centers can be mentioned in the following (Geierstanger and Amaral, 2005)—

- Reduces obstacles to learning process

- Reduces absenteeism
- Helps students concentrate and maintain healthy relationships with peers, teaches and family
- Improves health and prevents or minimises problems
- Increases student connection with their school
- Enhances students leadership and problem-solving skills and hence, improves the overall school climate
- Helps school meet curricular goals

### **NON-COGNITIVE FACTORS**

Education is the 'organised and sustained instruction designed to communicate a combination of knowledge, skills and understanding valuable for all activities of life' (Jarvis, 2004). That means, an individual is equipped with traits and skills like critical thinking, social skills, problem-solving skills, creativity, persistence and self-control which provide them the platform to contribute significant to the society and succeed in their social and personal lives. These traits are often called, generically, non-cognitive skills.

But, despite the role of non-cognitive skills in our education and overall quality of lives, education analysis and policy tend to overlook their importance. There is a need for thoughtful and holistic attention and effort from researchers, policymakers and practitioners.

Non-cognitive skills have been broadly defined as representing the

“patterns of thought, feelings and behaviour” (Borghans et al., 2008) of individuals that may continue to develop throughout their lives. Gutman and Schoon have identified eight factors as potential most essential non-cognitive skills of children and young people (Gutman and Schoon, 2013):

- Self-perceptions (an individual’s own beliefs about whether or not they can accomplish a task)
- Motivation (the study of why individuals think and behave as they do)
- Perseverance (steadfastness on mastering a skill or completing a task)
- Self-control (the ability to resist short-term impulses in order to prioritise longer-term goals)
- Metacognitive strategies (Strategies are goal-oriented efforts to influence one’s own learning behaviors and processes by focusing awareness on thinking and selecting, monitoring and learning methods that are most conducive to learning)
- Social competencies (leadership and social skills)
- Resilience (persistence despite minor setbacks), and coping (wide set of skills which are responses to stress)
- Creativity (production of novel ideas)

Some recommendations have been suggested for the importance of non-cognitive factors in education. These are:

- Accountability practices and policies should be broadened in a

manner that incentivises school’s and teacher’s contribution to the development of non-cognitive skills. Focusing on the holistic development of children should be the main aim of the education policy and this can be implemented by changes in curriculum, teacher preparation and support with other aspects of school’s functioning and evaluation systems.

- Student-teacher relationships strongly influence students’ academic and psychosocial functioning. Lowered student-teacher ratios are linked with increase of student achievement and competence. Interventions within the school context can influence student-teacher contact and quality through restructuring of time and scheduling, allocation of space and teaching resources, placement policies and work-related to cultural issues, school values and staff support and involvement in decision-making.

## CONCLUSION

Academic achievement, social and emotional competence and physical and mental health are fundamentally connected. Hence, schools are not only there for providing formal education, but also provide a medium for preventing disorders and fostering personal development and well-being in children. Thus, such needs should make the educators, teachers and psychologists cultivate innovative methods to enhance school-based

learning and the social experience connected with it.

Academic socialisation encompasses the variety of parental beliefs and behaviours that influence children's school related development. Parents are considered to be the primary agents of child socialisation. The process by which parents shape a child's behaviour, attitude and social skills as a member of society is known as socialisation. Because success in school setting is valued by society and is viewed as a primary determinant of adult dependence and success, understanding the ways in which parents socialise their children about school requires special emphasis for research.

Family intervention strategies like multiple session parenting workshops on behaviour management and academic support skills, student intervention strategies like after school tutoring and study clubs with development of interpersonal problem solving skills, teacher and staff development on proactive classroom management, interactive teaching and cooperative learning— all these can be designed and developed for the constructive development of a student.

Recently, importance has started increasing in measuring and changing attributes, apart from cognitive ability. These are known as “non-cognitive” qualities which are diverse and collectively facilitate goal-directed effort (like self-growth, grit, etc), healthy social relationships (like emotional intelligence) and sound judgment and decision

making (example open-mindedness) and these qualities strongly influence psychological, physical, social, economic and academic aspects (Naemi et al., 2012). Reliable and valid performance tasks that assess academic aptitude (the capacity to acquire new academic skills and knowledge) and academic achievement (previously acquired skills and knowledge) have been present for a long time. These have had significantly shaped the educational policies and practices. Still, measures for non-cognitive abilities are scarce in number. But, these abilities are essential for achievement, both inside and outside classroom. Binet and Simon, the creators of the first valid IQ test “admits of other things than intelligence; to succeed in his studies; one must have qualities which depend especially on attention, will and character” (Binet and Simon, 1916). Many educational programs, aim to cultivate self-growth, grit, emotional intelligence and other personal qualities.

Many teachers lack awareness of children's mental health issues. They lack the necessary knowledge, understanding and skills for addressing the needs of children with mental health problems. Thus, with increased knowledge, training and experience, teachers can improve children's mental health.

School policy makers and practitioners recognise that social, emotional and physical health barriers to learning must be addressed if schools are to function

satisfactorily and children are to perform effectively. The Mental Health Foundation (1999) refers to schools which promote children's and young people's mental well-being as having the key characteristics of a committed senior management team that focuses on creating a climate based on trust, integrity, democracy, equality of opportunity, within which each child is valued, regardless of ability, a culture that values teachers, no-teaching staff and all those involved in the care

and supervision of pupils and whole-school policies for important issues such as behaviour and bullying.

Representing the ways in which learning and instruction occur in a school setting to view students and teachers in relationship within a learning community may help in deflecting attention from only asking the question "who is the problem?" (Which focuses only on student deficit or pathology), to discovering answers to "what is the problem?" (which includes consideration of systematic issues).

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