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I have been a Science and Technology teacher in the Toronto District School Board for over 30 years. With my ear to the science field, the urgency of the climate crisis is a piercing shriek and is a reality that has to be communicated to the students, not only as part of the curriculum but also so they are prepared for the future they will face. However, how does one do this when a) the predicted future they will face is dire and b) the situation is not of their making and c) the adults around them show very little concern for the situation? One is very aware that the



emotional stress on young teens and barely-teens is going to be overwhelming, no matter how carefully one communicates, once they understand the climate future ahead of us.

Taking time to analyze the stress helped me develop ways to ease it without ignoring reality. Stress seemed to come from **the sense of helplessness** generated by the situation and **the sense of disjointed reality** (home acts as if nothing is wrong while the country declares a climate emergency and the teacher speaks of dire consequences if the evidence is ignored). If I could reduce these, I could reduce their stress. And, I could reduce these by enabling them to act for change and engage their communities in change.

The first solution to alleviating stress in students, came from giving students a passion project, where they could design an action to apply knowledge they learned in science or social studies/history/geography.... Passion projects became not only something I ran in my classes, but something that other teachers picked did as well. A key element to create stress-free passion projects is to structure the how of them for students but not the why or what - making them very open-ended and encouraging students to network projects over time and not worry about fully making change or reaching stated goals (talking about them as 'life-long' projects), and allowing them to change direction as situations changed. This reduced their feelings of helplessness. I used to tell students that their initial presentation mark was only based on their passion for their project - nothing about how well they presented or prepared. Students made direct contact with the leaders of car companies globally, made biodiverse areas in their backyards, convinced developer fathers to commit to leaving one corner of every property they developed as 'wild', convincing business mothers to put up posters throughout their building about the importance of climate action, and made bird feeders. The projects were varied and messy and some didn't work, but the students were very engaged and excited and felt powerful.

However, there was the disjointed reality issue. So we began planning and hosting a community networking event. This provided them with an audience to share their passions and gave them skills in communication, creativity, collaboration, leadership, global citizenship, critical thinking

and problem solving. These are all global competencies in the TDSB's Vision for Learning to "enable all students to reach high levels of achievement and to acquire the knowledge, skills, and values they need to become responsible members of a democratic society". There was no problem selling the idea to administration and the School Council helped run and promote the event. Parent volunteers were easily found and community members offered frequent and glowing accolades. Following such a meeting, students not only felt empowered, they encountered the adults around them who were concerned and active in the very issues they were afraid were not being addressed and they felt that they were moving people further into action and placing the problem where it belonged, with the generations preceding them. It also gave them access to their leaders and to learn about civic engagement and responsibility. Stress was not apparent - they were engaged and excited about the opportunities ahead. Students who had otherwise participated meagerly in schoolwork were excited and passionate. One student, who had been mostly out-of-touch, realized about 3 weeks into our planning that the event was actually going to happen and startled the class by exclaiming something along the line of, "Wait, we are really doing this??" Whereupon he became much more active in the process.

When people outside of Ontario noticed our event. and when interest was shown in using the model to promote other such opportunities in other wards in Toronto, then they really began to feel that there was hope, that this might actually make a difference, that other cities could become engaged through similar actions in other schools.

Organizing and running a community event as a teacher, full-time, needing to cover curriculum -- how is that possible? But, researching and writing and developing ideas - this is all part of the language curriculum. Students reported on what they did - writing a feasibility report. Part of their writing was used to report to the wider community - again giving them voice. They designed emails to be sent to political leaders and wrote detailed planning documents to address the area they were in charge of (crowd-control, promotion, editing and revising presentations, virtual pre- and post-visual aids, ...). We used language periods to work on the project. The science and geography curriculums all carry expectations about applying knowledge and can be linked to the task - we used those subject times to work. Focus was put on parts of the curriculum often neglected and yes, some other parts were not addressed as deeply - but overall the expectations were addressed and could be reported on.

It is possible to teach reality and empower rather than stress the students you teach. And engaged students pose far fewer management problems!

For more information about Esther's class's community climate networking events in 2021, see the links below:

Link to the agenda, presentation, etc.