



20/21 REFLECTIONS

Chapter 21 - Reopening Schools the SHHS Way

Did you know research is now highlighting the science and importance of storytelling as it allows us to spark our own “neuroplasticity” by expanding our worldview, increasing compassion and empathy, and expanding our personal growth? So, I want to take this opportunity to tell you a story. My hope is that it will help prepare you for the historic task of transitioning students back to on-campus learning.

It's a story about triangles. It's also a story about how trauma cuts to the core of our worldview. Most importantly, it's a story about looking deeper.

It happened about 30 years ago, when I was a social worker at one of our School Mental Health Clinics. One day, I received a referral to evaluate a student. The school's referral indicated that he appeared “emotionally disturbed” and potentially required a special education placement.

I sat down with the student and began my psychosocial assessment. At first, the student presented nothing out of the ordinary. His behavior was withdrawn, he was easily triggered, and he had difficulties in the classroom...but I had seen all that before. Then I came across something I hadn't seen before (and haven't seen again since), and I knew this student's story went deeper.

I consulted with two child psychiatrists and showed them what I had seen. One of those psychiatrists, Dr. Nidorf, was a man renowned for his wisdom and dedication to youth; today there is a juvenile hall named after him. Dr. Nidorf studied carefully what I had brought him, and slowly, piece by piece, helped me construct the puzzle.

What I had shown Dr. Nidorf was a stack of drawings this student had made. The unique thing about these drawings was that every image in them had the shape of a triangle. The people in the drawings? Triangles. The rooms? Triangles. The furniture in those rooms? More triangles.

Dr. Nidorf carefully studied the student's background and helped me find the critical connection. Dr. Nidorf highlighted the fact that the student had been medically fragile since birth. As a result, this student had spent nearly his entire life lying down in a bed: he was bedridden at home, bedridden when he was taken to the hospital, bedridden when he returned home, and so on.

Always in bed. Always lying down. And always looking up—diagonally—at the rest of the world.

This had constrained the student's worldview in profound ways. Not only had it deprived him of the traditional social interactions that kids get to have (which would leave a hollow wound in anyone), but it had, quite literally, shaped the way he saw the people and things around him.

By looking deeper, Dr. Nidorf and I were able to uncover the underlying traumas that were manifesting, on the surface, as "emotional disturbance." We began to see the world as the student saw it. And thus, we were able to target our interventions at the root of the student's trauma. In the end, the student made great progress, both academically and social-emotionally...without being placed in special education.

I share this story today for two reasons.

The first is to remind us that the COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped our students' worldviews. They may not be seeing triangles specifically, but make no mistake, they are all seeing the world differently than they did 390 days ago, before

unprecedented isolation, anxiety, loss of learning, and rising death tolls became a daily fact of life.

The second reason I am sharing this story is to remind us that in order to uncover the new worldviews our students hold—to begin seeing the world as they see it—we need to remain endlessly inquisitive, open, and patient. Yes, we will provide space for the returning children to play, laugh, cry, and—well—be *kids* again, together at last after so many months. But, when the moment calls for it, we will also remember to look deeper, to ask questions, and to find out what realities the students now hold in their hearts, so that we can support students in a way that nourishes them at the root.

That is the SHHS way.

I know that looking deeper is something you all do every day. That is one of the many reasons I am in awe of you. Truly, I cannot thank you enough for everything you have done for families over this past year, everything you will do in April when students return, and everything you will do in the months and years ahead as we slowly recover from this pandemic.

I will be sending additional reflections in the coming weeks related to my time at schools. I encourage you all to send me your reflections as well about students' return to campus, so we can have a collective experience of this profound moment.

Thank you all again, and I look forward to receiving your reflections.

Sincerely,
Pia

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