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Working Papers

## FILLING THE EMPATHY DEFICIT

— MARY ANNE MC DANIEL DE GARCÍA —



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# **FILLING THE EMPATHY DEFICIT**

**-TEACHERS TEACH MORE THAN SUBJECTS-**

**Mary Anne Mc Danel de García**

Institución Universitaria Colombo Americana ÚNICA

Facultad de Educación  
Programa de Licenciatura en Bilingüismo con Énfasis en Español e Inglés  
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Dirección de Investigaciones

Calle 19 No. 2ª-49, Piso 3

Centro Colombo Americano

Teléfono: 2811777 Ext. 1291

[dir.investigaciones@unica.edu.co](mailto:dir.investigaciones@unica.edu.co)

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This document is dedicated to the incredible teachers, counselors, teachers in formation, and students who shared their experience and their concerns and made this study possible. They are examples of teachers who have touched the lives of thousands of children, many of whom were suffering from adverse situations. The children and the parents who benefited from their heartfelt empathy and selfless attention will always be grateful. It is an honor to have worked with them.

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### **The members of the Focus Group of Experienced Counselors:**

Maria de Lugo (B.A. Education with Emphasis in English, 41 years in education, Coordinator of Personal Social Education grades 8 and 9).

Maria Victoria Palacios (B.A. Anthropology with Emphasis in Linguistics, Department Coordinator of Personal Social Education in Bachillerato)

Maria Claudia Arboleda (Licenciada en Lenguas Modernas, 28 years in education, Pastoral and Behavior Manager for middle school, grades 5 – 9)

Elizabeth de Acosta (M.A. Literatura, 35 years in Education, Coordinator of Personal Social Education, grades 10 and 11)

### **Teachers and Counselors consulted:**

Susan L. García Mc Danel (M.A. Bilingual Special Education, 22 years in education and Special Education)

Terry Finnin (M.A. Education and Counseling, Colegio Nueva Granada, 46 years in education, 26 in guidance and college counseling)

Dora Bonnet de Salgado (M.A. Education, 40 years of experience in education, professor at the Institución Universitaria Colombo Americana)

Camilo Mendez Romero (10<sup>th</sup> semester student teacher)

Jordan Aguilar Montilla (10<sup>th</sup> semester student teacher)

Mauricio Rodriguez Martin (Licensed in Bilingual Education with Emphasis in Spanish and English)

Lizeth Milena Casallas (Licensed in Bilingual Education with Emphasis in Spanish and English)

### **Students consulted:**

The eighth semester students of the Institución Universitaria Colombo Americana, ÚNICA; semesters 2016-II and 2017-I.

## FOREWORD

Education is much more than teaching a discipline. It is about encountering a human being. Coming face to face with any number of individuals in a class requires that a teacher acknowledges that there are as many lives with different circumstances as there are students. In my 35 years of teaching secondary school, I have found that all children bring to class their own story that affects their learning process, in a positive or negative way. At first, it was not easy for me to understand them, since I had not received training on how to read children's emotions and behavior. The ability to read the signs that tell a child's story, and understand them, requires empathy and experience. These skills are not usually taught at university. Fortunately, I worked with great and experienced teachers who were willing to guide and teach me about empathy. This book will be a guide to future teachers and to those already practicing, and will bring them up close to real life experiences that will help them learn to encounter their students in an empathetic manner, and promote success or alleviate pain in a child's story.

Maria Clara Janer  
Deputy Head of Secondary School  
I.B. Coordinator  
Colegio Anglo Colombiano, Bogotá

*“Humans aren’t as good as we should be in our capacity to empathize with feelings and thoughts of others, be they humans or other animals on Earth. So maybe part of our formal education should be training in empathy.”* Neil de Grasse Tyson

## **ABSTRACT**

Students often confide personal dilemmas to a teacher they trust. It is a fact that teachers are usually the first to notice a problem, often even before the child’s parents, and must be prepared to intervene without breaking the student’s confidence or taking on the role of counselor. However, teachers are not psychologists or trained counselors, and often find themselves feeling uncomfortable when they observe conduct which indicates that the child is stressed or demonstrating significant changes. The following qualitative study was carried out in the Institución Universitaria Colombo Americana with a group of 24 students, 4 young teachers, 5 experienced teachers, and 5 experienced teachers/counselors. The indication is that neither teachers in formation nor teachers in the work field feel well prepared for this reality. This paper discusses why teachers enter the profession, why they don’t feel comfortable addressing these problems, and the need for teachers to be better prepared to identify and interact with students in a caring professional manner, while using common sense to guide the child to the support he/she needs without becoming excessively involved. Practical advice for dealing with these circumstances is included.

## **KEY WORDS**

Adverse childhood experiences, trauma, counselor, student-teacher relationships, teacher training programs





*Artistic interpretation adapted from google images by Sergio Esteban Rodriguez Gonzalez*

## **INTRODUCTION**

*“One looks back with appreciation at the brilliant teachers, but with gratitude with those who touched our human sentiments.” Carl Jung*

*“According to Mc Connico, one in every four students currently sitting in American classrooms have experienced a traumatic event, and the number is even greater for those living in impoverished communities.” Lahey, (2014, p.3)*

Although this quote from McConnico, as cited by Lahey (2014), refers to schools in the United States, we can presume, from the experience of those who contributed to this study, that the situation here in Colombia is very similar, and in the more vulnerable populations, perhaps worse. Frightening? You bet, especially for teachers who are concerned with a student who suddenly displays disinterest and gets low grades, and much more when the teachers have had no training in how to conduct themselves in these situations. How likely is it that a teacher will encounter a student who needs some understanding attention? Alarmingly, it is not likely - it is inevitable.

The causes usually stem from what has been termed Adverse Childhood Experiences. Sacks, Murphey, and Moore (2014) define ACEs, Adverse Childhood Experiences as *“potentially traumatic events that can have negative, lasting effects on health and well-being. These experiences range from physical, emotional, or sexual abuse to parental divorce or the*

*incarceration of a parent or guardian.*” They point out that slightly less than half of the children in the United States have experienced at least one ACE. (p.1) The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study conducted by the Massachusetts Advocates for Children and Harvard Law School (2016), involving some 17,000 adults, indicated that more than 50% had experienced some type of childhood adversity, including physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, parent’s divorce, violence, substance abuse, medical procedures, bullying, death of someone close to them, etc. They go on to clarify:

*Experts explain that trauma is not an event itself, but rather a response to one or more overwhelmingly stressful events where one’s ability to cope is dramatically undermined. These experiences in childhood can lead to a cascade of social, emotional and academic difficulties. As students get older, exposure to traumatic experiences can also lead to the adoption of self-medicating behaviors such as substance abuse, smoking, and overeating. These responses to traumatic events can interfere with a child’s ability to learn at school.*  
(p.1)

How many teachers are aware of how to identify a child dealing with an adverse childhood experience or trauma and what to do if they encounter these children in their classrooms? The fact is that most of them can tell something is wrong but have no idea of what to do and sadly, in some cases, not much interest in doing anything other than teach their subject. In these cases, children are often labeled as lazy, distracted, disruptive, uninterested, or simply incapable of learning. This leads to unjust punishment which in turn undermines the child’s self-esteem.

Mismanagement in these cases often results in isolation, rebellion and eventually the child failing or dropping out of school. Unfortunately, referring to why children drop out of school, Doll et al. (2013) in a report by the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network at Clemson University, *Why Students Drop Out*, state, “Watt and Roessingh (1994) added a third factor called *apathetic or even disillusioned with school completion. It is not necessarily an active decision, but rather a “side-effect” of insufficient personal and educational support*”. (p.293) This would lead us to believe that teachers and school support staff could be doing a lot more.

*“(in the case of the United States),) for the 25 percent of American children who experience trauma at home, school may be their only harbor from that tempest, and teachers represent so much more than purveyors of facts and figures. ---“ (Lahey 2014 p.5)*

Teacher training programs, almost universally, have become increasingly focused on getting better results in learning, or more exactly on standardized test results. Teachers in formation are trained in their chosen disciplinary expertise and pedagogical theory, lesson planning, using technology in the classroom, assessment, feedback, classroom management, adapting content to the needs of the students, and so forth. You would think that that covers it, right? I mean, that is what it is all about, is it not? Indeed, it is. However, there is an empathy aspect in teaching and it is overlooked more often than we would like to admit.

This leads us to consider several questions that should be worrying the teaching profession regarding its impact on society. Why do teachers choose the teaching profession? Why should teachers be prepared to assume the role of helping students suffering from adverse childhood experiences? Why do teachers find it difficult to intervene? Should practicing teachers be provided with professional development in identifying and guiding students suffering from ACE? Should undergraduate programs in teacher education provide more preparation in managing Adverse Childhood Experiences without presuming to take on the role of counselor or psychologist?

Research was carried out at the Institución Universitaria Colombo Americana, ÚNICA from January 2016 to June 2017, with the intention of clarifying doubts about whether the preparation of teachers currently practicing, as well as that of those preparing to enter the field, provides sufficient orientation in this area. For this purpose, I consulted a focus group of 5 highly experienced teachers, counselors, and colleagues from my years as a teacher and counselor to gather the perceptions of individuals who have accumulated vast experience in guidance. Five other very experienced professionals collaborated by answering a questionnaire and through an interview in which they shared their experiences and opinions. Their opinions were from the point of view of teachers rather than counselors. I was also interested in getting the perspective of younger teachers as well, and applied the questionnaire to 4 who had just finished their teaching practice or had graduated recently. As for teachers in formation, I consulted 28 students from my eighth semester Administration in Education class. I applied the questionnaire during 2 semesters. I also referred to my own field observations and reflection from both recent and past experience.

Although most of the documents consulted in this research originate in the United States, other documents upon which I relied heavily, originate in Greece and Australia. The data collection was carried out entirely in Bogotá with students and graduates of the Institucion Universitaria Colombo Americana, ÚNICA, and teachers and counselors from 3 prestigious private schools.

## I

**INTERPRETIVE FRAMEWORK IN GUIDANCE**

In ancient civilizations giving advice and counsel were carried out by the chieftains, elders, medicine men, druids, warlocks or representatives of the gods. The Greeks were concerned with stimulating and guiding the individual for his/her own benefit and that of the community. Gibson and Mitchel (1990) point out that Plato organized this into a system for counseling which is illustrated in Aristotle's study of how people interact with others and with their environment. They go on to cite Belkin (1975):

*"But it is not the questions themselves that prove important to the counselors, but, rather the method that Plato used to deal with these questions, a method which, more than any other in the history of human thought, sets the way for the counseling relationship. It is a dramatic method, in which profound questions are dealt with through the dynamics of very real human interactions, a method in which the characters are as important as the things they say." (p.5)*

Religious principles furthered the theories of humanistic ideals, such as empathy, which became central to caring and counseling. By the 1930s, as the science of psychology and counselling developed, the importance of the teacher in the mental health and wellbeing of the children became more and more apparent. (p.2,3,7) This coincides with the concept of the self-contained classroom in elementary education, where one teacher is responsible for most of the subjects and provides guidance and caring for his/her group. This practice is the common denominator of elementary and early childhood education in most schools. Gibson and Mitchell cite Carl R. Rogers (1942) who set forth several concepts which would later become the key components for effective practice for teachers and professional counselors. He promoted the idea of allowing the student to have more responsibility in solving his/her own problem. This resulted in client-centered counseling which allowed the individual to grow and strengthen his/her capacity to digest and cope realistically with problems. The client or subject is treated as an equal and a positive view of the person's potential is fostered. (p. 11)

Counseling continued to evolve as a specific expertise in schools and the apparent need for teachers to be involved in helping children experiencing adverse circumstances began to fade as highly qualified professional psychologists and counselors were employed in the school context. Teachers began to be considered unprepared to handle these circumstances, whereas at the same time more demands were being placed upon them to produce higher standardized test scores and their roles became geared to address only the academic requirements.

Nonetheless we recall the introductory statements concerning the teacher's role in school counselling program of Gibson and Mitchell (1990) in *Introduction to Counseling and Guidance*. Teachers work as team members in the integral formation of each child and counsellors rely

heavily on their personal knowledge of each individual to find the roots of a child's particular distress.

*Although it seems heresy to the counseling profession, it has been and could continue to be possible for schools to exist without the benefit of counselors. – It is also possible for schools to exist without the presence of an even more prominent member—the school principal. --Schools without teachers, however, cease to be schools. They become, instead, detention centers, social clubs, or temporary shelters, but they are not schools, and any learning that takes place would be both incidental and accidental. It therefore becomes obvious, and has been since the beginning of schooling, that the teacher is the key and most important professional in the school setting. Teacher support and participation are crucial to any program that involves students. The school counseling program is no exception. (p 68)*

The role of the teacher in counseling goes far beyond simply talking to a child in distress. Hansen, James C., Stevic, Richard R., Warner, Jr, Richard W. (1978) explain that the main objective of counseling is to take away any feelings of anxiety that the person may be experiencing. In this document the “client” referred to is the child who is being counseled.

*“During this time the counselor strives to establish a relationship in which the client (student) feels that the counselor likes him and is not judging him, while the client (student) is giving the counselor all the information possible about his childhood, family, school experience, vocational plans, and anything else which may relate to who he is at present. This information is helpful to the counselor as he attempts to understand the client(student) in his present state; however, it is essential that a great deal of the past be brought into the counseling situation.” (p.180)*

Gibson and Mitchell (1990) proceed to comment upon the many ways that the teacher takes part in the orientation process of students, among which they list *Listener-Advisor; Referral and Receiving Agent, Human Potential Discoverer; Career Educator, Human Relations Facilitator, and Counseling Program Supporter*. All of these are of course important. In the role of Listener-Advisor the authors underline what is self-evident for any teacher, that they are the first to notice a distressed child and intervene by referring him/her to the counselor (if they are fortunate enough to have access to one).

*“Most classroom teachers see their pupils every day, five days a week, for at least 45 minutes per day on the average of 180 school days per year, often for several years, all of which represents a staggering amount of contact time exceeded by no other adults except parents, and that exception does not always hold true. The inevitable result is that the teacher, more than any other professional in the school setting, is in the position to know the students best, to communicate with them on an almost daily basis, and to establish a relationship based on mutual trust and respect. (p. 68)*

This does not mean that the teacher presumes to take on the role of counselor, but rather becomes an agent of referral to the school counselor. He/she may find it necessary to inform the counselor of the child's situation and provide him/her with vital information necessary to help the child.

*The teacher thus becomes the first line of contact between the student and the school counseling program; a contact in which the teacher will frequently be called upon to serve in a listening advising capacity. Nor does the teacher's responsibility necessarily end when the student has entered a counseling relationship. (p,68)*

The teacher will continue to play an important role in the recovery process of the child, by encouraging and guiding him/her in returning to normality in his/her academic and social environment.

*The teacher may still be involved, if only in the role of supporting the student's continuation with the counseling process. Teachers may also anticipate a role as a receiving agent not only for those students they have referred but for others in their classes as well. In such situations, the teacher in a sense "receives" the counseled student back into the classroom environment and, it is hoped, supports and reinforces the outcome of the counseling. The importance of this reinforce role cannot be overemphasized." (p. 69)*

Regarding the role of *Referral and Receiving Agent*, Gibson and Mitchell recognize teachers as the major source of student referrals and that without their intervention many students with counseling needs would go unnoticed and thus would not receive the attention of the counselor due to the limited personal contact that counselors have with students. The teacher is also the person who identifies the talents and abilities that each student has and facilitates and encourages the development of these. Teachers are responsible as well for incorporating some orientation in career education through the development of positive attitudes as well as respect toward honest work and preparing for making decisions related to skills, values and preferences for future planning. The climate and environment that the teacher maintains in the classroom through modeling and developing positive human relations is of extreme importance. The teacher acts as a human relations facilitator and through example provides a role model and guide for each student to practice and experience positive human relations. Finally, the teacher is a key figure and indispensable element in the counselling program in the role of supporter. Sometimes teachers feel hesitant to contact the counselor because of their own lack of belief in the counselor's role, or they simply don't want to get involved. (p.68-71)

Research has repeatedly indicated that teachers play a key role in helping students at risk and those experiencing difficulties, and that teachers should be provided with guidance and support by professional counselors, because they often find themselves having to cope with an increasing number of demanding or unsupportive parents who lack the skills needed to support their child. Elliott and Place, (2012) and Kourkoutas (2012) point out that theorists and specialists have affirmed that the educator plays an important role in their interaction with children undergoing

serious adverse childhood experiences. Kourkoutas and Giovazolias (2015) go on to say, *“Overall, it seems that these students highly benefit from social-emotional programs and interventions in which their teachers are involved, both at academic and interpersonal level.”*(p.4) They also mention that Kauffman & Landrum (2013) have indicated that, although teachers are not trained specifically in psychological difficulties or interventions, their strong personal and professional relationships with their students and the significant amount of time they spend with their pupils allow them to have important information about their behavior and the causes thereof which is vital for adequate intervention by the counselors. Other researchers have expressed the importance of teachers in helping children adjust and manage difficult situations. Noddings (1995), for example, stresses the point that teachers should be allowed to spend time with students and cultivate the trust that children require to be able to confide their concerns to a caring adult. *“Teachers can be very special people in the lives of children, and it should be legitimate for them to spend time developing relations of trust, talking with students about problems that are central to their lives, and guiding them toward greater sensitivity and competence across all the domains of care.”*, p.5)

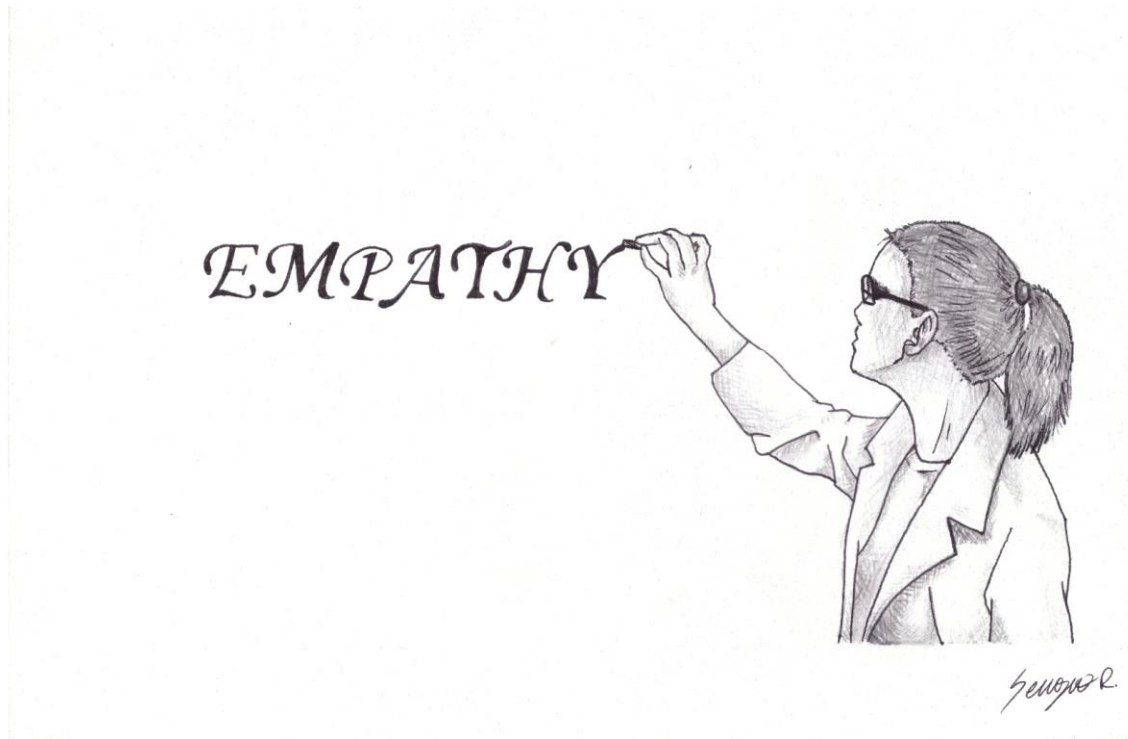
Linda Darling-Hammond (2010) is very perceptive about this and strongly supportive of “Advisory Systems”, in which the teachers stay with the same students for more than one year and work closely with both students and family to provide both personal support and academic support to a group of, ideally, no more than twenty-five students. This corresponds to the “home room teacher” or “group director” with which many of us are familiar. They call home if the students are withdrawn, failing, or seem to be having a hard time, and are available to talk to the family about the student’s problems or any family problems that may be affecting the child. According to Darling-Hammond, *“Students don’t have to fall between the cracks to get needed assistance.”* (p.247) It is a matter of making this advisory system function in the school. Sadly, many schools do not support the teachers in this area and they have no idea of the length to which they should go to help.

It is safe to conclude, and most experienced teachers will agree, that teachers play a vital role in identifying children who are experiencing adverse circumstances. If teachers do not respond to the signs that children demonstrate and help direct them to the help they need, many children will suffer greatly and perhaps never fully recover. It becomes a matter of conscience for a teacher to choose to ignore the obvious signs manifested by a child whose behavior and achievement indicate that he/she is suffering from adverse circumstances.

It is usually not easy for the teacher, or a counselor for that matter, to initiate a delicate conversation with a seemingly unwilling child. Yet, the relationship that is established during that first contact is imperative to the success of what follows. Hansen, Stevic & Warner Jr. (1978) cite Taylor (1969, p.63), *“The initial interview is the hardest part of our task—the part that demands from us the most intensive concentration. Each person constitutes for us a new adventure in understanding. Each initial interview renews our appreciation of the challenge and the fascination of the counseling task.”* They go on to say, *“The principal task in the first interview is to establish*

*a good relationship so the client (student) feels comfortable enough to present and work on his problem (p.299) This relationship, when well established, can become the basis on which healing begins.*

## WHY TEACHERS CHOOSE THE PROFESSION?



*Original drawing by Sergio Esteban Rodriguez Gonzalez (2018)*

This leads us to ask what is it that teachers, both beginners and veterans, find most satisfying about practicing the profession. Despite the decline in their intervention in counseling activity, teachers still highly regard making a valuable contribution to the lives of their students. Referring to this, the Center on Education Policy at George Washington University (2016), United States, found some interesting facts in a national survey of public school teachers, K-12, in all subjects in the winter of 2015-2016. The teachers surveyed could choose up to three responses. The survey indicated that 68% of the teachers in their study felt that making a difference in a student's life was the most rewarding aspect of being a teacher, 24% found that making a difference in the larger community was rewarding. (p.15)

Fortunately, this data clearly does not indicate a lack of empathy on the part of classroom teachers. Nonetheless a quote from President Barack Obama's Xavier University Commencement speech on August 11, 2006 gives us something to think about. Of course, he is referring to a national phenomenon in the United States, but perhaps the modern obsession with production






and money is somehow being carried over to the teaching profession worldwide, that historically has been concerned with the development of strong positive contributors to society.

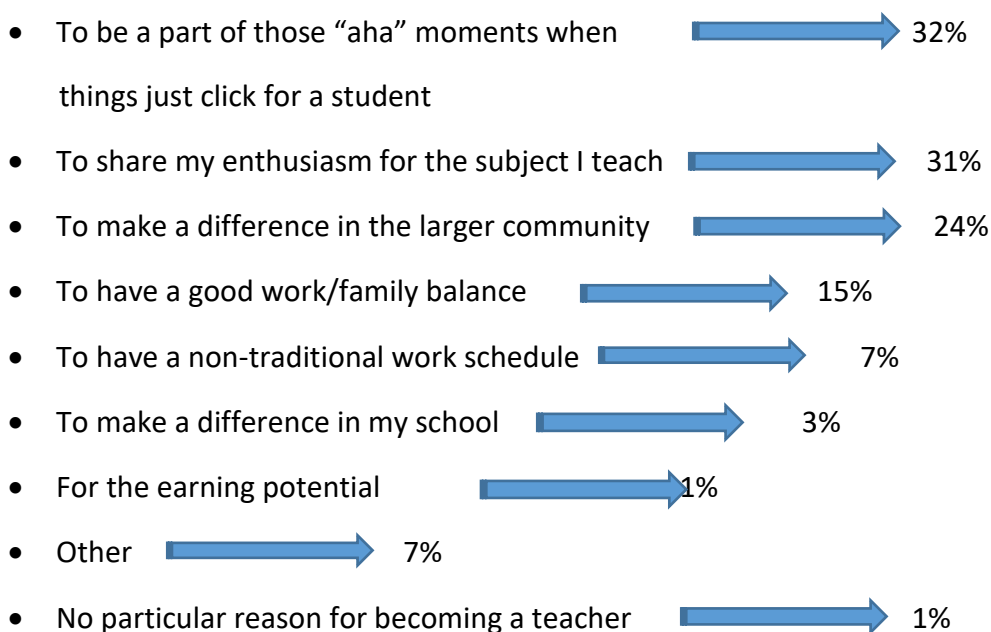
*“You know...there’s a lot of talk in this country about the Federal deficit. But I think we should talk more about the empathy deficit- the ability to put ourselves in someone else’s shoes; to see the world through the eyes of those who are different from us. When you choose to broaden your ambit of concern and empathize with the plight of others, whether they are close friends or distant strangers- it becomes harder not to act; harder not to help.”*

Thankfully, the “empathy deficit” in teaching is not terribly great because most teachers like kids and generally would like to be of assistance. There are some incredible humanitarians in the profession. In her study, Barber (2002) found that, *“Both male and female teachers generally expressed pleasure in caring for students; for instance, describing their satisfaction in helping students to “achieve” and progress, and giving instances of recalcitrant students becoming cooperative in response to support and interest from teachers.”* (p.390) However, we cannot deny that some teachers hesitate to show their concern for children with problems. If they would take action, it would serve to build their own confidence to help and, at the same time, encourage others to do the same. They would provide a good example for younger inexperienced teachers and of course help the children gain the courage to tell someone about their problems. This would lead to teachers getting the whole picture about a child before dismissing him/her as lazy, uninterested, or not capable. To quote Joseph Joubert, in *Pensées*, (1842) cited by Myers (2010), *“Children need models more than they need critics.”* (p.318)

As previously mentioned, most teachers are quite concerned about the kids they teach, and the following findings taken from “Teachers Views and Voices”, Center on Education Policy, (May 2016), a study carried out in the United States, verify this. Their conclusions were: *“- The most rewarding aspects of teaching involve helping students. Large majorities of the nation’s teachers said that making a difference in student’s lives (82%) and seeing students succeed academically (69%) are among the most rewarding aspects of teaching.”* They concluded that *“Teachers enter the profession for altruistic reasons. – 45% said they wanted to help students reach full potential.”* (pp. 12,13,14) When teachers were asked to give the reasons for entering the profession, altruistic reasons are those most often cited. These include making a difference in the community, seeing a child suddenly understand the concept being taught, and helping children develop their potential. The most frequently indicated was making a difference in a child’s life. Their report is as follows:

Figure 1-A. Most significant reasons why teachers joined the profession

- To make a difference in students’ lives  68%
- To help students reach their full potential  45%
- A teacher inspired me when I was young  37%



(Figure 1-A, titled *Most significant reasons why teachers joined the profession*; p.14)

They go on to reveal that 42% of disadvantaged children living in poverty in the United States suffer from emotional challenges, and about 40% from academic challenges. Another important factor was proven to be the social challenges, which accounted for about 18%. Yet most school programs tend to worry most about addressing the academic needs without realizing that the emotional and social needs are probably causing the academic ones. The emotional challenges and the social challenges combined are 60% of the total, but the pressure in schools and on teachers is to prioritize solving the academic deficiencies. (p.18) These figures are probably more dramatic in other countries.

Elliott, and Place, (2012) as cited by Kourkoutas and Giovazolias (2015) mention that, *"Despite the fact that many teachers tend to easily identify a specific behavior as pathological, many others tend to suffer from what Elliott and Place have termed "selective myopia"; namely the teacher inability to appropriately estimate the severity of less disruptive cases of children or understand the internal conflicts or struggle with depressive tendencies that some children are experiencing"* (p.20)

This observation, in all fairness, is a bit harsh. The empathy a teacher might feel is not put into question, nonetheless it does seem that teachers develop a type of "immunity" when they are under so much pressure to get academic results that are used to judge their professional ability and effort. This leads them to search for a scapegoat, and the ones on hand are the students. In his document, Gregory (2008) infers that it is easier to blame the kids. *"If more professors would pat themselves less and start looking in a hard-headed, clear-eyed, empirical manner at their students' needs, they might see that they are the ones starting off on the wrong mark, not their students."* Unless teachers modify their self-defense in the light of poor student results, *"All problems with teaching will always be the fault of unprepared students."* (p. 5) Sometimes it

simply isn't a priority for teachers, or especially their supervisors, to think beyond the academic results and consider the children's welfare. They continue pursuing improvement in academic results, which, for practical purposes, ultimately reflects upon the efficiency of the school and its directives. One is led to believe that most teachers have not been prepared during their studies or oriented by their employers to give importance to anything but the academic part of their jobs.

The policy of schools to engage school based professionals, psychologists and or counselors, also foments the idea that teachers have no place in the guidance process. It then becomes necessary for the academic administrators to promote teamwork between the support professionals and the teachers, and this does not often happen. Phillippo & Stone (2013) in their investigation found that expectations for teachers are not made specific. *"Not surprisingly, given the often-narrow scope of teacher roles in the U.S., expectations for teachers to support their students in times of academic or personal distress have not always been fully specified."* (p. 362) They go on to state:

*"Although most teachers do not receive significant training that prepares them for building and maintaining supportive relationships with students, many teachers do this work anyway (e.g. García, Arias, Murri & Serna, 2010; Hoffman, 1996; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Phillippo, 2010; Valenzuela, 1999) and often with great skill, but in a manner, that Ingersoll (2003) describes as "pro-bono": at the teacher's discretion and unsupported."* (p.362)

They are also concerned that there is little importance given to preparing teachers for this function, and that the understanding of how the teacher's role is defined does not emphasize the responsibility of mentoring but rather considers it as something extra:

*Professional learning opportunities that prepare teachers for effective student-teacher relationships remain in their early stages (e.g., Hamre et al., 2012) and do not yet occupy an established position within teacher certification programs. Considering what research literature suggests about how teacher's roles have been traditionally defined and supported, one can easily see how changes to teacher roles like the advisor role, in which teachers take on responsibility for mentoring and supporting an assigned group of students, represent an expansion of the teacher role as it is commonly understood."* (p.363)

In the research carried out for this study, we have confirmed that it is the same in Bogotá.

## THE NEED FOR EMPATHY



Artistic representation adapted from <http://www.theeducate.org/9-challenges-students-face-school-today-part-ii-child-abuse-neglect/> by Sergio Esteban Rodriguez Gonzalez (2018)

No one can deny that a vast number of children do not get the required attention from the school counsellors and psychologists. Kourkoutas, and Giovazolias (2015) refer to Adelman & Taylor (2010) by pointing out that *“A high percentage of students in difficulty, even in countries such as the US, where many mental health programs operate in schools, remain unsupported and without specialized assistance by competent professionals or teachers.”*(p.4) The majority of schools around the world do not count with sufficient qualified personnel to cover all of the needs, and, for example, may have only one psychologist who must attend up to a thousand individuals. Therefore, many children who need to be listened to do not receive needed support from home or from school. With divorce rates soaring and single parent homes on the rise, and in the best of circumstances finances require both parents to work, children often must fend for themselves no matter how badly they need support.

At the same time teachers are increasingly under pressure and are required to produce higher and higher levels of learning which is measured by obligatory standardized external testing. O’Conner (2008) refers to other studies in her research; *“Jeffrey (2002.p.535) notes that the humanist discourse in education has been challenged by a policy culture which emphasizes ability and creates hierarchical and depersonalized relationships. Thus, the market-driven managerial*

*discourses that led to the introduction of teacher standards have created a performative culture which emphasizes accountability and the public demonstration of professional attributes above teacher's ethical and emotional qualities (Forrester, 2005; Jeffery, 2002."* (p. 119) The message is that their professional obligation is to increase the school's prestige by producing increasingly higher test scores to be published by school boards and local politicians. Private schools use these scores to draw potential community, and teachers know that their work contracts depend on how their students perform. According to the Center on Educational Policy at George Washington University, Graduate School of Education and Human Development (2016), *"Among the teachers who received performance evaluation in 2014-15, 54% said student test scores were among the evaluation criteria."*(p. 62) This has led teachers to believe that teaching a subject is the sole purpose of teaching students.

Sadly, in most higher education programs for future teachers there is nearly no emphasis placed upon the guidance aspect of teaching. Teachers in formation can easily become mechanical, if not robotic, due to their concentration on state of the art class delivery. They will foster collaborative learning, TICs in the classroom, multi task classrooms, project based learning, ecological awareness, flip teaching and all the other "in" concepts. They will fill out formats, write descriptors, make lesson plans, continually revise curriculum, and give parents a precise numerical assessment of the child's academic performance, while keeping up with their own professional development. Often this emphasis forces them to disregard other less mechanical aspects that affect a child's performance in favor of their teacher effectiveness rating. In their introductory statement Phillippo and Stone (2013) point out that students' academic growth and performance have increasingly become the most important factors in measuring teacher effectiveness. They refer to controversial debates and the 2012 Chicago Teachers Union's strike over the emphasis placed upon student's test scores in carrying out processes of teacher evaluation. *"A view of teachers' impact on student outcomes as strictly or simply academic in nature, however, misses the opportunity to understand different, and sometimes indirect, routs of influence that teachers have on student learning and development."* (p.359) We ask what happens to a child who has lost a loved one (even if it is a dog or a goldfish), whose parents are divorcing, who is being bullied, got robbed or lost his cellphone, feels unable to cope with learning the multiplication tables, broke up with the boyfriend or girlfriend, had a fight with a classmate, is being persuaded to do something he/she doesn't want to do and knows it is wrong, is living a family financial crisis, thinks their personal appearance is not good enough, is home alone, etc., etc., and so forth? Not all of this goes to the counselor or the psychologist, but it certainly affects the child's state of mind and is manifested in a decline in their power of concentration, self-esteem, academic achievement, and social and emotional stability.

Butler University's Dr. Marshall Gregory (2008), in his article published in the ADE bulletin #141-142, titled, *"Do we teach disciplines or do we teach students? What Difference Does It Make?"* has expressed his concern. He goes on to say, that most everyone tries to equate good teaching with extensive knowledge of a particular discipline.

*“... the confused notion that most of teaching is wrapped up in how well one knows one’s material is a pernicious influence on undergraduate education, and new teachers need to become unconfused about it before they can become effective. ----- Teachers teach students, not disciplines, and the difference to a teacher, not to mention the difference to the student, of describing his or her function in either of these ways is the difference between two entirely different orientations toward teaching.” (p. 34-35)*

Just what is the difference? Dr. Gregory (2008) explains several differences, but for our purpose we will only comment on two of his points. First, teachers who teach disciplines assume the absolute truth that all the problems that they might encounter are the fault of the unprepared students. Students are never at the level required to comprehend the teacher’s vast and impressive wealth of knowledge. Teachers who teach students, however, will be willing to meet their students “where they are.” For instance, a teacher might be called upon to question the reasons why a student is not producing at the expected “grade level”, or why a good student suddenly gets poor grades. Sometimes they will discover that the reasons go far beyond their wildest imaginings and may have nothing to do with learning the subject. Often, these students are dismissed as lazy, having a bad attitude, or unable (not smart enough). Lahey cites McConnico (2014) *“These children are the children I worry about the most, the ones who sneak under the radar and don’t get the help they need.” (P.3)* In these cases it is the teacher who first notices the child and it depends on him/her to provide the support and stability the child needs. If we are “to meet students where they are”, we must consider the following quote from Gregory, which, for the purpose of this study, is the most important:

*“A second difference it makes when teachers think of themselves as teaching students first is that they become much more receptive to the crucial fact that the most important cluster of variables affecting student’s learning in the classroom are ethical and social variables, not intellectual or professional variables. Teaching is a lot of activities that most teachers focus on diligently, such as description, exposition, explanation, time management, use of technology, testing, evaluation, and so on. But there is an additional cluster of variables more important than any of these that many teachers hardly think about at all. (p.36)*

Gregory is emphatic in his insistence that teachers must be attuned to students’ needs beyond the academic, and if they are not their effectiveness as a teacher is diminished.

*“Whatever else teaching is, it is also an ethical and social relationship, and if teachers do not know how to tend to the social and ethical dimensions of teaching, they can, sadly undermine their own best intentions and efforts.” (p.36)*

This requires the teacher to go beyond pedagogical tactics and knowledge of the subject, and be open to the possibility that a student may be subjected to some external or internal impediment linked to stress, trauma, or simply a vacuum in prior educational processes that is inhibiting her/him from responding to academic, ethical, or social standards. Ireland (2007) says, *“A teacher is not a counsellor. However, it is argued that teachers can incorporate counselling theory and*

*skills into their teaching practice without blurring role boundaries, to enhance student-teacher relationships and student's engagement in a holistic education.” (p.1)*

We must ask ourselves if university faculties of Education should be more attuned to the factors of empathy and care when preparing teachers in formation? After 35 years in teaching, coordinating Personal and Social Education, career counseling, school administration, and now teaching teachers, I can testify from experience that the list of adverse childhood experiences that students may suffer is extensive and can lead to depression, self-harm, drugs and alcohol, unwanted pregnancy, sexual abuse, low self-esteem, gang membership, medical conditions, and nutritional disorders. Generally, the children affected do not tend to seek support or in any way confide their anguish to anyone else. This should be enough to justify the need for teachers to have a component in their training to make them aware and provide them with guidelines for getting the child the help required. Research has indicated the importance of the role of the teacher.

*Student-teacher relationships also promote student resiliency. Longitudinal studies (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Masten et al, 2005; Masten & Tellegen, 2012; Sameroff & Rosenblum, 2006; Werner & Smith, 1982, 1992, 2001) show that most young people who encounter adverse life circumstances—including chronic poverty, family disruption, and parent mental health problems—respond with resilience, or coping and adaptation that contributes to social, academic, and vocational competence over the life span. These same studies reveal that protective factors, including support from adults outside of their families, such as teachers, contribute substantially to young people's resilience. (Phillippo & Stone, 2013, p.360)*

The support of the teacher is also a main contributor to the academic success of a student, allowing him/her to achieve despite the difficulties encountered in his/her home or neighborhood.

*Teacher support—often conceptualized as students' perception of teacher caring, fairness, interest, willingness to help, encouragement, listening, and efforts to be close to students—has been found to help buffer students' academic achievement from the negative effects of neighborhood and school violence (Wooley & Bowen, 2007), depression (Reddy, Rhodes & Mulhall, 2003), limited parent support (Gregory & Weinstein, 2004) and family poverty (Crosnoe et al., 2010; Erickson et al., 2009; Muller, 2001; Olsson, 2009).(Phillippo & Stone, 2013, p.360)*

When teachers say, “It's not my job”, it is the wrong answer. However, when they say, “I can intervene and solve the problem”, it is also the wrong answer. So, what is the right answer? How about, “I can tell when a student is upset about something, I can make the child feel like someone cares. I can listen attentively and respond prudently. I can help the child obtain the support he/she needs from qualified personnel.” For most young teachers, and quite a few older ones, this is not as easy as it sounds.

## SHOULD TEACHERS BE MORE PREPARED? - SOME SHARED EXPERIENCE



Artistic representation adapted from <http://www.theeducate.org/9-challenges-students-face-school-today-part-II-child-abuse-neglect/> by Sergio Esteban Rodriguez Gonzalez (2018)

Five experienced teachers were asked if they would like to share some concrete examples of cases they had managed. Dora, a teacher with forty years of experience, but who is not a counselor, believes that all teachers need to know and should be taught about when they should, can, or must intervene, maintain secrecy, and/or report the issue. She felt that school management needs to have clear guidelines for their teachers, not only to help the children but to avoid legal issues. *“Because each case is so different, it is important that staff members become sensitive to the different issues and understand when to refer the students to other instances. They need to know how compassion, caring, and even humor can be good or harmful in some cases.”* (interview, March 2017, Bogotá) This teacher had no professional development during her career that was related to listening to or in any way helping a distressed child in a school context.

The experienced teachers who were consulted for this study recalled several instances that had been difficult for them. They remembered the case of a girl who was isolated by her classmates for being from a different ethnic background and whose parents encouraged her not to associate with classmates. Her teacher had been greatly concerned about the situation and had spoken to the parents, but they insisted in keeping the girl isolated from her peers. Another case involved a colleague’s son who was involved with drugs. It had taken the teacher some time to build the courage to say something to her colleague, who, rather than accepting, told her to mind her own business.



There was also a case of home violence where the father physically abused the child's mother. The child was an emotional wreck. Several cases of child neglect by parents from a high social-economic status were mentioned. One child was involved in a severe disciplinary problem that required suspension, and the school was unable to locate either of the parents because one was on a business trip and the other was visiting relatives in another country at the time. This boy's house maid had to come to school to represent his parents. Several children had alcoholic parents and were subjected to drunken verbal abuse. There was a child who came from a different social status and found it difficult to understand the values of her classmates. She did not have the means to dress with the same brand names and buy the things that the others took for granted. She ended up being bullied and isolated. These teachers cited many situations they had seen over the years. They had identified children with eating disorders, children with severe depression and suicidal tendencies, and children who were emotionally, physically, and sexually abused. (personal observations and questionnaires, June 2016)

These examples clearly indicate the need for teacher intervention in cases where the teacher is the first responsible adult to notice an upset child and to whom the child confides his/her situation. None of the teachers consulted had been prepared for handling these cases during their careers. Orientation is not usually given for practicing professionals who are on the front line in these cases. A very few of the most privileged schools actually provide professional development for their staff on how to proceed when facing a situation like those mentioned. One private school here in Bogotá carries out an orientation session provided by counselors each school year, during which staff members are made familiar with the steps to take when encountering and managing these situations and how to refer the child to the professional counselors. School teachers are given a pamphlet illustrating steps to take. Terry, that school's college counselor, offered her opinion, *"School's should have protocols and every teacher should receive periodic training in different ways to support their students not only academically but emotionally as well."* (interview June 2016) Unfortunately, Phillippo and Stone (2013) confirm that this is not a common practice in the United States. *"Efforts to build teachers' efficacy about their work supporting students, however, would not be highly consistent with the current state of teacher education or school organization."* They found that there was a considerable deficit in learning opportunities, averaging less than three courses or professional development sessions in competencies related to student support. (p.372) The deficit is probably even greater in countries where counseling services for students are less common.

Jordan, a first-year teacher, made an interesting comment concerning the practice of some veteran teachers he had encountered during his internship in the USA. He was realizing that being a teacher was challenging and overwhelming. He was hesitant to judge veteran teachers on their practice because he was aware that he had little experience. Nonetheless he felt that some of the *"old fashioned"* teachers were not empathetic with troublemakers in their classes. He felt that teachers would benefit from having had a subject at university designed to address the management of these troublesome students, or some professional development or workshops provided by their schools. The suggestion of this young teacher is supported by Fleming et al.

(2013); Kourkoutas, Hart, & Langer, 2011; Urquhart, 2009 as cited by Kourkoutas & Giovaqolias,(2015); *Teachers need to be valued in their work with difficult students and employ techniques and strategies that are meaningful for them and are appropriate for the specific educational context they operate.*” They also refer to Goldstein & Brooks, 2007; Dettmer, Thurston, & Dyck, (2005), *“Furthermore, it has been stressed that counselors should focus their efforts on enabling teachers to develop their own skills for intervention and build on their gained knowledge and experience in order to adequately respond to their students’ needs.* (p. 9)

Maria Victoria, one of the counselors from the focus group, who was the coordinator of Personal Social Education in a large prestigious school in Bogotá for many years, mentioned this when asked if she would like to have had more preparation before beginning her career, *“Yes, I believe it would have been helpful to get some training on detecting such problems as depression, abuse and bullying.”* She felt that, for veteran practicing teachers, a conference and workshop on empathy and preliminary counseling technique in the form of professional development in their school settings would be of great utility in awakening their dormant impulses of empathy and offer them security in stepping up to help a child in need of some adult understanding and support. There had been no such training during her career. (focus group, May 2016)

Two graduates and two last semester students with experience who had just returned from a year internship in the USA, where they had worked in schools as Spanish teachers, were consulted about their experience as beginning teachers. Their perception was unanimous regarding their recent studies at university. (questionnaire, June 2016) Camilo concluded that he had been taught many ways and techniques on how to teach English, but often wondered about what to do about students who were having a rough time for no apparent reason. He felt that it would have been useful to have had some instruction on how to approach a student in these conditions. Jordan commented the following, *“If covered at all, it was in spontaneous discussions. There was no subject or topic being taught during the semesters or any instruction coming from the proscribed curriculum.”* (questionnaire, June 2016) While the two young teachers referred to having seen some related cases in their Professional Ethics classes, they were never instructed on how a person processes an adverse situation or how to interact with that person, and much less the fundamentals of psychology, such as the Kubler chart of emotional reactions. Camilo, mentioned that he had not been well prepared for dealing with students suffering adverse childhood experiences, *“Not with a strong emphasis because I mostly studied techniques for how to teach for understanding, not on how to teach if a student feels bad or is in a bad situation or does something.”* (questionnaire, June 2016)

The young teachers were anxious to share some of their experiences which serve to illustrate some typical occurrences in schools. It was both disturbing and satisfying to observe both the emotion and the frustration that were evident in their testimonies. The light of true vocation illuminated their conversations. These were young professionals who loved to teach and who really wanted their students to prosper as individuals in their social, emotional and intellectual contexts. They wanted them to enjoy wellness in all aspects of their lives including their learning

process, and they wanted to help. These teachers were anxious to share and anxious to learn some basic steps to take. It was evident that they had identified the signs of adverse childhood experience that were interfering with the progress of some children, and they were concerned. Camilo shared this experience, *“I had three special students. One was always distracted and depressed. The other one was really mean and manipulative with classmates and the other one was sad and told weird stories every day. I did not know what to do so I asked the other teachers. They didn’t know so they sent them to the psychologist.”* (questionnaire, June 2016) It is easy to see the frustration this young teacher felt when he got no help from more experienced teachers. Sadly, this is quite common. The result eventually will be that the young teacher will probably begin to lose the urge to act and sooner or later just try to stop worrying about these children.

In the following testimony, Lizeth, who recently graduated and is now working in a local school, remembers her dilemma:

*“Before I began my practice teaching experience I was aware of the several processes that one should manage in order to foster education but I never imagined as a practitioner I would have to deal with such pupil’s life dilemmas. For sure I had several situations in which I was amazed and did not know exactly how to react. Once, I remember that one of my fifth graders arrived to the class with a knife...not a knife...a big huge knife! I also remember that my fifth graders talked several times about drinking alcohol and going out to parties ...”* (questionnaire, July 2016)

Lizeth shared an experience in which she expressed her insecurity in trying to manage these situations. Through her comments, she indicates a certain loss of confidence when faced with reality.

*One of my high school students was smoking marihuana and drinking. I wondered...what can a teacher do? I said to myself: what should I say, “go home”, or “stay in the office”, or maybe just say, “please copy this and get to work!” What about student’s emotions and feelings? To be honest I was not as prepared for these situations as I thought I would have been. These experiences are something simple to put on paper but exaggeratedly complex to deal with.”* (questionnaire, July 2016)

Jordan, who spent a year in the United States in the Amity program, offered this experience in which his empathy for a child and his eventual frustration are evident:

*“I had one trouble maker who was always interrupting the class, not following instructions, and bothering other students. I talked to the principal of the school and found out that her family was going through a divorce and the child was too little to understand it. She was only seven years old. After that I knew I needed to guide her, talk to her, but at the end there was so little that I could do. It has been interesting for me to have discovered that being an English teacher is not just to teach grammar but that there is a lot more to it.”* (questionnaire, June 2016)

And finally, Mauricio, a graduate of the Institucion Universitaria Colombo Americana, said that he was aware that there would be difficult situations in school. He was not prepared to manage these, but was more concerned that older teachers didn't seem to give these situations much importance.

*"Well, in my case I knew that I would find difficult situations at school. However, I did not know how to handle all of them. I would say it was kind of frustrating because sometimes I did not know how to react or what to do. But even more frustrating was the fact that senior teachers considered most of those situations part of the routine and usually they did nothing to make a difference."*(questionnaire, June 2016)

As one listens to the testimonies of these young teachers, and observes their concern, their desire to do something, and their disappointment in observing veteran teachers do nothing, it becomes evident that young teachers are anxious to be able to make a difference in their student's lives.

We have already mentioned that research indicates that a majority of teachers enter the profession for altruistic reasons. Yet, when 22 participants in this study were consulted about whether they had been aware that they would be required to counsel students suffering adverse experiences, 4 answered that they had been a little aware, 4 said they were aware due to experience during high school, and 1 was aware because she had studied Psychology before becoming a teacher. The remaining 13 said they had not realized it could happen.

Table #1

Question: Before you began your studies, were you aware that there would be situations in which you would be required to counsel students with personal adverse circumstances?

<u>CATEGORY</u>	<u>YES</u>	<u>A LITTLE</u>	<u>NO</u>
Eighth semester Students	4		4
First year teachers		2	2
Experienced teachers	1	1	3
<u>Experienced Counselors</u>		<u>1</u>	<u>4</u>
Total	5	4	13

Data taken from the triangulation of methods applied during the study.

## WHY DO TEACHERS FIND IT DIFFICULT TO INTERVENE?

At the beginning of each school year, part of the job of a principal is to assign a group director or home room teacher to each of the groups in each grade level. On many occasions, when asking the different teachers if they would take the job, which usually includes an extra (if small) stipend, I would be surprised to hear the teacher say that they were not comfortable talking to kids about “sex and drugs.” They felt that there was nothing they could do if a child told them about a problem, and that they would not know what to do or say. Some teachers just don’t feel capable. It is practice at most schools to interview the teachers before assigning them a home room, and there are always a few teachers who decline and say that they would rather just teach their subject. Having said that, they also exclude the possibility of doing anything about a child who demonstrates stress or behavior that is unusual, unless of course the behavior is disruptive to his/her class, and then the child gets reprimanded. In the words of an eighth semester female student here at the Institución Universitaria Colombo Americana, “*We are being trained to be, specifically, teachers. We are being taught methodologies, teaching strategies, assessment, language, pedagogical theory, etc., but I consider there is an enormous gap about helping students with problems, and this is in fact a paramount aspect in our profession.*” (questionnaire, June 2016)

Why is it that some teachers are not willing to assume the care giving role that goes with the profession? Noddings (1995) says, “*At present, neither liberal arts departments nor schools of education pay much attention to connecting academic subjects with themes of care.*” (p. 5) There is considerable information on line for teachers that offers solid advice concerning their role in guidance. One of these sites, ESE425 Classroom Management of Exceptional Children (2016), reminds us that Plato records that Socrates often was engaged with students and followers in situations of counseling, and it offers the following reasons why teachers are so hesitant to assume the role:

*Figure 2 It has been difficult for many teachers to assume the role of counselor There is little training given the subject.*

- *Many teachers feel that subject matter and cognitive learning is the total focus of educators*
- *Some teachers feel a sense of mystification about counseling*
- *The role suggests a deeper commitment than many teachers have wanted*
- *Counseling is a profession and some schools believe they fill the need by filling the role with trained personnel*
- *Receiving counseling has a negative history in our society, rather than a portrayal of wholeness and wellness so many community members devalue it as a role*
- *Some teachers feel put upon already and resent additional responsibility*
- *The role is considered to be an adjunct, something to be done last if there is time*

- *The philosophy in American Education has developed focus on subject, and limited any infringement on that sole pursuit*
- *Time for meaningful interaction is limited*
- *Privacy is frequently desirable and not available in most school settings*

*ESE425 Classroom management of Exceptional Children (2016, p.1)*

Kourkoutas (2015) considers that some other reasons for teachers not being able to respond effectively to “challenging students” include fear of being criticized. The teacher may have had a previous negative experience with school psychologists; a strong conflicting relationship with the parents of the child, and sometimes conflict arises because the teachers’ experience is not valued. (p.23) Phillippo (2013) notes the following, citing McDonald, Bowman & Brayco (2013):

*Not surprisingly, given the often-narrow scope of teacher roles in the U.S., expectations for teachers to support their students in times of academic or personal distress have not always been fully specified. Grossman and associates (2007) found that teacher education lags behind other helping professions’ preparation programs (e.g., clergy and psychologists) with regard to relational practices, or skills for building and maintaining professional relationships with students, although promising work is emerging in this area. (p.362)*

On one questionnaire, eighth semester teachers in formation, five women and three men, gave the following answers to these questions: How would you feel if as a teacher you encountered a student with a difficult situation? Would you be confident in trying to help this person? Four students from eighth semester felt that they would help with no restraint. One young man from the eighth semester class said, *“Yes, I consider that we are more than teachers. We need to be psychologists, friends and counselors. I am pretty sure I would help them out.”* Two of the other students felt they would help in some circumstances. One said, *“I would say that depending on the type of difficult situation, if it is related to academic problems or self-esteem matters, I think I could help.”* One of the girls said she would sometimes try to help or send the child to a professional, *“Although teachers, once in a while, have to help our students with their personal issues, sometimes we are not capable to guide them or to give them professional support. Then we still have to refer them to a professional.”* Two agreed that they would not feel confident. One young lady said, *“Not really. There might be some tough situations in which I feel I wouldn’t know what to do.”* (Questionnaire applied in class, eighth semester, October 27, 2016)

The same question was asked to the 4 young teachers who had completed their first year in schools either as teachers or student teachers, and, with some surprise, we observe that some actual teaching experience seems to have shaken their confidence rather than fortified it. All of them expressed concern for the students involved but questioned actual intervention, and found little or no help from other teachers. Some of their answers illustrate this. Mauricio, licensed in Bilingual Education with Emphasis in Spanish and English, commented, *“Many of my partners were super stressed and hopeless because they did not know what to do and usually they did not*

*find any immediate support in the schools.” Lizeth, also licensed, answered, “I consider that initially I felt devastated since those are situations that we never imagined we could encounter; but I trusted myself in order to help my kids. However, I doubted once, and twice, and a thousand times due to never knowing what the best choice was.”* The following came from Jordan, who had participated in the Amity program, *“No, I didn’t feel confident, but it is part of our empathy as a teacher.”* And finally, and perhaps the most emphatic answer, Camilo, who also taught in the United States for a year, said, *“I did not feel confident at all. Neither were the teachers who most of the time scolded the kids because teachers thought it was just drama or they sent them to the office where the psychologist was available on certain days of the week.”* These teachers manifest that after a year of teaching they find it *“frustrating”, “stressing”, “hopeless”, and “devastating”* to observe the reactions of other more experienced teachers. Sadly, one wonders if this is one of the major reasons that young teachers lose their concern for the students’ wellbeing and eventually take on the attitude of not wanting to get involved. (Questionnaire, November 2016)

Likewise, 5 experienced teachers, two of whom are also psychologists, answered the following on a questionnaire, and they indicate, surprisingly, that confidence does not seem to increase with experience and higher education. One of these, Terry, who holds a Master’s Degree in Counseling, has 46 years of experience in education and 26 years of experience in counseling states that her confidence is fortified by the possibility of consulting with the school psychologists. Fortunately, in her highly prestigious work place a complete team of specialists are employed. Another participant, who holds a BA in Psychology and a Master’s in Special Education and over 10 years of experience as a teacher and Special Education expert, also expresses some insecurity. Susy affirms that, *“When working as a teacher it is hard to determine how involved you should become in this type of situation.”* Finally, Dora, a teacher with a Master’s Degree and over 40 years of experience in teaching both in schools and universities answered, *“At the beginning, I felt really secure because I thought I was in control of the situations, but as I had more experience, I understood how little I knew about how to deal with those cases.”* (Questionnaire, September 2016)

A similar question was discussed in a focus group, consisting of 5 very experienced teachers who also have served many years as counselors in a prestigious school in Bogotá, Colombia. All five agreed that they were not at all confident when they first identified children in their classes who were suffering adverse childhood experiences. Maria, a counselor with over 35 years of experience as a teacher and 15 years of experience as a counselor, and who had no formal training in counseling commented, *“There were cases that were difficult. I didn’t always think I had the right words or answers for them.”* Maria Victoria, with 15 years of experience as Personal Social Education Coordinator, added, *“I didn’t know what to say or how to help a distressed child. When you acquire the knowledge, you are ready to quit.”* They all agreed that they had been guided by their own values and intuition. Elizabeth, with 15 years of experience as Personal Social Education Coordinator for grades 10 and 11, commented, *“Parents and children seemed to trust my common sense. That is frightening!!”* (Focus group carried out in Bogotá, May 6, 2016)

I would like to share the following based upon my own 34 years of experience in teaching, administration, and counseling in prestigious schools here in Bogotá. I think there are always doubts. I remember the first case I encountered as a grade three home room teacher in my first year of teaching. A little girl's family was experiencing economic problems and they were forced to sell their home. The child told me all about it and cried and cried. I had no idea of what to do or say, and there was only one psychologist for 750 students. All I knew was that I wanted to help that child, but had no idea how. I have seen a lot of cases since then, some easier than others. Today I am Academic Director and university professor preparing future English teachers, and I recently encountered another case. I noticed a sudden change in a student who had always been a top achiever and productive member of the class. I hesitated almost a week before I mustered up the courage to ask if there was something wrong. This was an adult and it seemed harder than approaching a child. Finally, after class I asked, "You're not yourself lately, would you like to talk?", and of course this person answered that there was no problem. As it turned out the student approached me a couple of days later and we talked. This person was relieved to just let someone know what the problem was and became able to face an adverse situation, work through it, and reach a positive outcome. So, I guess I still hesitate to intervene for fear I will make things worse. Maybe confidence will always be lacking, but we must make the effort. Sometimes it is sufficient for the person just to see that someone cares enough to ask.

Another of the counselors, Maria Claudia who has 28 years of experience, agreed with this opinion, especially in cases where the student might be in a situation where a disciplinary procedure is in order, *"It is not clear how far you should involve others knowing that this could get the student into deeper trouble, even though you think they don't deserve the punishment."* (Focus group carried out in Bogotá, May 6, 2016)

When asked about their level of confidence, 14 teachers and 8 students of eighth semester answered in the following way:

Table 2

Are you confident about trying to help when you identify a situation in which a child is experiencing an adverse situation?

<u>CATEGORY</u>	<u>YES</u>	<u>NO</u>	<u>IT DEPENDS</u>
Eighth semester students	4	3	1
First year teachers	1	3	
Experienced teachers	1	4	
<u>Experienced counselors</u>		5	
Total	6	15	1

*Data taken from the triangulation of methods applied during the study.*



Most answered that they were not confident. The most interesting factor indicated by these answers is that it seems that the more experience the person acquires, the less confident they feel. The pre-service teachers, who have not yet encountered these situations are more confident than the experienced professionals. It might be that this is due to the large variety of possible situations and the varying degree of seriousness that the more experienced teachers and counselors have encountered.

### **SHOULD PRACTICING TEACHERS BE PROVIDED WITH PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN GUIDANCE?**

We have seen from the testimonies of first year teachers that they had observed that some of the more seasoned teachers “ignored” the situations of students in distress. At best, they referred the child to the psychologist. This is the example that many veterans are giving young teachers. Also, as pointed out by ESE (2016, p.1), we have seen that most teachers are motivated by altruistic reasons.

When the focus group members were asked if they would have liked to have had more orientation regarding how to intervene they unanimously agreed that their preparation was deficient. They also observed that many others suffered the same lack of knowledge of some basic steps to follow. When asked if they had had any preparation during their studies, the most direct answer shared by the group was simply, “None!!” The group coincided in that they had generally had to work on their intuition and base their intervention on their own values. Maria Victoria, who coordinated Personal Social Education in secondary school, manifested that she would like to have had some training before taking on the challenge of counseling, *“Of course! I would have benefited from having learned listening skills, how to interpret a child’s version, how and when to involve others, and general procedures to follow.”* (Focus group carried out in Bogotá, May 6, 2016)

Of the 5 veteran teachers questioned, Dora learned from her 40 years as a teacher that even though her degree should have prepared her to handle counseling, she had the same opinion as the members of the focus group, *“At the beginning I felt really well because I thought I was in control of the situation, but as I had more experience, I understood how little I knew about how to deal with those cases.”* Dora went on to say that she would have liked to have had much more orientation:

*Yes, initially, in ethical considerations, as in my first case, I talked about the case with other teachers and it turned out a disaster. I should have known that when students confide in the teacher it should be kept private unless it is a situation where there might be some kind of danger. I would have liked to have known more about what creates wellness for a student in psychological, social, and cognitive terms; about how to deal with*

*future trends (unexpected issues) such as bullying, drug use, etc. which were unknown in my times.”* (Interview, April 2017 in Bogotá)

According to the questionnaires two other teachers confirmed this. Terry, who has 46 years in teaching, a master’s degree in counseling and 26 years of practicing counseling, said, *“Yes, times and situations change. Schools should have workshops about this regularly for all teachers.”* Susy, teacher and psychologist and MA in bilingual special education, agreed, *“Absolutely, schools should have protocols and every teacher should receive periodic training in different ways to support their students, not only academically but emotionally as well.”* (questionnaire October 2016) Maria, a member of the focus group and with 15 years in counseling, was more specific, *“Of course! Listening skills, interpretation, procedures to follow, how and when to involve others etc. Teachers should continue receiving instructions through workshops.”* (focus group May 2016)

This brings us to an issue concerning veteran teachers. It is never too late to incorporate a little professional development into their schedules and give them some orientation in managing these cases. As the last statements cited clearly express, times change and what was unheard of a few years back is now becoming common practice. As examples, we can consider cyber bullying, the high divorce rate, recreational drug use, relaxation in sexual practices, working mothers, the geographical absence of any other family members such as grandparents, aunts and uncles, older brothers and sisters who used to be available for confidential sharing. These issues were not so prominent when many of our seasoned teaching professionals began their careers. However today children understand their reality and are usually more informed than the teacher about the problems of classmates. Children can be either very empathetic with a classmate in a tough situation or they can be very cruel. Susy, psychologist and special education expert, pointed out that the whole little community (of classmates) suffers when member is dealing with an adverse experience. (questionnaire October 2016)

Of the 5 members of the focus group only two were aware that they would have to manage situations of pastoral care and guidance during their careers before they actually began to teach. Maria indicated that she had developed some skill through her experience as a form tutor before being named coordinator of Personal and Social Education for grades 8 and 9. She went on to say that there had been no components covered in her teaching preparation at university for helping a distressed child, and she had basically had to learn on her own. The skill she deemed most important is listening. *“You need listening skills and understanding even if the person tells you lies. Listen between the lines.”* The remaining three had not been aware that they would encounter situations requiring them to provide guidance. (focus group, May 2016) Such is the case of most the teachers now practicing. This has been noticed in other research:

*“—there is evidence that few general education classroom teachers are adequately assisted in helping and “including” students with social, emotional disorders or behavioral problems, or are trained in effective methods and strategies for engaging with these students in an efficient way.”* (Simpson and Mundschenk (2012) as cited in Kourkoutas and Giovazolias (2015, p.79).

The 5 counselors, 4 first-year teachers and 5 experienced teachers were asked if teachers who are working in their profession should be given professional development in basic guidance techniques. The results are unanimous in favor.

Table 3

Do you feel that practicing teachers should be given professional development in guidance and counseling?

<u>CATEGORY</u>	<u>YES</u>	<u>NO</u>
Experienced teachers	5	
Experienced counselors	5	
First year teachers	4	
Total	14	

*Data taken from the triangulation of methods applied during the study.*

In their research, Phillippo and Stone (2013) confirmed this need:

*“Efforts to broaden teachers’ roles into the realm of social-emotional support would require substantial effort to implement effectively. However, our results suggest that such efforts may pay off with regard to students’ subsequent experiences of teacher support that could in turn contribute to increased student achievement. (p.372)*

They went on to explain their reasons for blanket training for all teachers in a school, indicating that an effort should be made to have a standard procedure in place to guarantee that each case is handled in a similar way.

*“If, by contrast, teachers are left on their own to define their roles related to student support, both their practice and their efficacy will vary according to individual skill and inclination. Such variation would result in continued unequal distribution of support opportunities for students.” (p.372)*

Logic leads us to conclude that professional development in this area is recommendable for practicing teachers in all school settings. Kourkoutas and Giovazolias (2015) remark on their experience with preparing teachers and affirm that the goal is to promote insight about the emotional, family, social, and interpersonal situations of children and how the problematic affects them. (p.17) This might be carried out by the school counselors and psychologists who are on staff, or by experts who offer workshops. The information should be given to teachers in written form so they have it for future consultation.

## **SHOULD UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAMS IN TEACHER EDUCATION PROVIDE MORE ORIENTATION IN GUIDANCE?**

The Institucion Universitaria Colombo Americana, ÚNICA, in Bogotá adheres to the philosophy of liberal arts in preparing licensed bilingual teachers. All universities do not include this in their faculties in education. Liberal arts are focused on the personal and the cultural as well as the processes needed. We adhere to this philosophy but we cannot claim to adequately prepare young teachers to manage children in stressful situations. Our teachers in formation have excellent professors and role models and something inevitably rubs off, but we don't really teach this in our program of study. Noddings (1995) gives us a gentle reminder, *"A liberal education that neglects matters that are central to a fully human life hardly warrants the name, and a professional education that confines itself to technique does nothing to close the gaps in liberal education."* (p.5) This stimulated reflection.

My own experience as a teacher and school directive for so many years has made me sensitive in detecting children suffering from adverse circumstances. I have seen some heartbreaking circumstances and I have helped some kids, but I could not remember if, in my thirty some credits in education at a Catholic University in the U.S. many years ago, I had ever been taught how to be helpful in assisting a pupil experiencing an adverse situation. I dug out the course descriptions from my university that the Colombian accreditation entity, ICFES, had required to validate my degree. I found nothing. Perhaps the professor had taught me something by osmosis in Psychology 101 and Human Growth and Development (the two related courses I took), or simply the Franciscan philosophy of the university offered orientation. Although I made some blunders, for the most part I could empathize with the students, parents, and, yes, even colleagues, over the years and get them to the help they required. That does not mean that I always felt comfortable doing it, or that I was always successful.

There was a point on which all the 14 teachers with experience agreed. Today's world is far more challenging for children than it was in the past. When I began to teach, 34 years ago, in a prestigious school here in Bogotá, and before technology overtook everything including education, families were generally stable, parents were usually supportive of the teachers, people kept their jobs for most of their lives, bullying was not unknown but it was not the common occurrence it is today with the cyber factor included. Except for a death in the family, an occasional case of divorce or abuse, or a financial disaster, most kids in that school got through the formative years pretty much unharmed. Nowadays, as stated at the beginning of this document, about 1 out of every 4 kids is suffering for one reason or another. As I sat there reminiscing and going over the results of this research, my concern grew.

I began to revise each course syllabus in the university's ten-semester study plan. I found nothing that seemed to indicate that any of the professors were touching upon this subject. While the circumstances for kids growing up have become more and more adverse, the preparation for teachers to help has not improved at all. I know teachers in formation learn the latest theories and techniques in delivering their subject and they are aware that they and their students must

produce competitive test results on external exams. They are bilingual. They know the latest on collaborative learning, flipped classrooms, multiple intelligences, constructivism, critical thinking, and they are technologically literate. They are drilled with lesson planning, curriculum and assessment, administration in education, autonomous learning, literature studies in English, and in Spanish, History, and Mathematics. They learn how to use TICs in the classroom. They can manage classroom behavior. They know how to investigate and how to write a thesis and defend it in a second language. They are committed to continue their learning forever, and they are versed in professional ethics. Yet we are still missing the element of empathy.

As professor of an eighth semester Administration in Education class, 2 semesters ago, I decided to include a small unit (about 4 hours) on guidance in the syllabus. Toward the end of the two semesters, I applied a questionnaire and ask if they had received any orientation in how to handle children dealing with adverse circumstances during their training, and if they felt it was necessary. The first group of 8 students answered in October, 2016 and the second group of 16 students answered in June, 2016. In total, I questioned 24 students, 6 young men and 18 young ladies between the ages of 21 and 28 years old. The answers varied. Some of the 16 students of the second application, mentioned that they had talked about the subject in Administration II, but the consensus was that it was not enough. One girl said, *"Not at all. Some teachers talked a little bit about situations in class but it's not enough. That topic was never mentioned except in Admin II."* Another young lady from the same group mentioned, *"In some pedagogy classes and Administration II we discussed some situations or problems that might come up in class."* Another responded, *"Sure, In Administration II we learnt how we can handle those difficult situations by using restorative practices and other methodologies."* A young man agreed, *"Up to the moment, the only class that has focused on how to handle these issues is Administration II."* These were the answers of 4 of the 16 students, the other 12 seemed to think they had not seen the topic at all. (Questionnaire applied in June 2016) Needless to say, this did not boost my teacher's ego.

I was reminded of what Gregory (2008) said about how much students remember of what we teach, *"They probably learn no more than ten percent of the disciplinary knowledge that I introduce to them in my classes, and if you think they remember ten percent of that ten percent you are the kind of person that buys ten lottery tickets every single day on the grounds that someone has to win."* (p.2) I had confirmed my suspicions. The topic had not been covered during their studies and these students were about to begin their year of practice teaching. A topic like this should be mentioned more than once throughout the program or nothing will be remembered by the time they start teaching. Ideally it should be transdisciplinary and certainly not limited to a couple of hours of discussion.

The next question was more specific. The same group was asked if they felt it was necessary to have more preparation in managing situations of guidance or counseling before beginning their teaching experience. One of the girls commented: *"We absolutely need more. If there is no elective or subject, the university could have some lectures, workshops or something like that in order to inform the future teachers more about these situations."* Another student agreed, *"I think*

*it should be fully covered while studying, not only in a theoretical manner, but also in a way that the student teacher can practice, observe, and deal with it in real life.” (Questionnaire June 2016)*

One of the young ladies from eighth semester also felt that she had not seen much during her studies, *“We just covered the main aspects. I totally agree, we must be trained and prepared for eventual situations with students who need to be heard, and also with special students with special needs.” (Questionnaire, November 2016)*

We recall that, with the exception of the two psychologists, the experienced teachers, the experienced counsellors from the focus group, as well as the first-year teachers and the eighth semester students expressed that they had had no or very little preparation for managing children suffering from adverse childhood experiences. The two psychologists also felt that their preparation had not specifically addressed the needs of children undergoing these experiences. Everyone felt that teachers in formation should have some specific training.

The participants in this study were unanimous in recommending that teacher education programs include basic instruction in guidance and counseling practices. All of the young first year teachers, 1 woman and 3 men, questioned agreed. Lizeth answered, *“Absolutely. I would have liked to have more preparation.”* Jordan said, *“I feel that it is paramount, because sometimes we forget that we are going to deal with humans. I think it’s not only how to teach a lesson, but also what human aspects can be going on during the lesson.”* *“Absolutely”,* replied Camilo. (Questionnaire, November 2016)

As for the focus group of counselors, (June 2017) all agreed that it was absolutely necessary for teachers in formation to have some training, but they also said that all teachers should have professional development periodically in this area because times and situations change. They concluded that young aspiring teachers should be aware that teaching is a vocation and a good degree of empathy is required. They urged faculties of Education to screen applicants during the admission processes to identify if the candidates are adequate for the teaching profession, because not all have the profile required.

The experienced teachers shared this opinion. Dora, with 40 years of teaching experience, was very precise with her recommendation:

*“I believe it is more important to help them (teachers in formation) become sensitive to the different issues and understand how much compassion, caring, or even humor can be good and how much can become harmful. I believe it is more teaching future teachers when they should, can and must intervene, maintain secrecy, or report the issue.” (Questionnaire, October 2016)*

Without exception, all consulted agreed that undergraduate studies should include basic orientation for teachers in formation in the skills required to help children experiencing adverse experiences.

Table 4

Should undergraduate programs in teacher education provide more orientation in this area?

<u>CATEGORY</u>	<u>YES</u>	<u>NO</u>
Experienced counselors	5	
Experienced teachers	5	
First year teachers	4	
<u>Eighth semester students</u>	<u>24</u>	
Total	38	

*Data taken from the triangulation of methods applied during the study.*

The investigation carried out during this project has given clear indication that more attention should be given to the counseling aspects of the teaching profession. All of those consulted agreed upon the following concepts.

### **Conclusions**

The study carried out gives evidence for several conclusions based upon the questions discussed by the focus group of experienced counselors, and the questionnaires answered by experienced teachers, first year teachers, and eighth semester teachers in formation along with personal experience:

- According to Teachers Views and Voices, Center on Education Policy (May 2016), most teachers enter the profession with a desire to make a difference in the lives of their students. All the participants consulted in this study feel empathy for distressed children. Those consulted in this investigation agreed that the same can be said for nearly all the teachers they have worked with during their careers.
- Generally, teachers in formation are not aware that they will be required to help students suffering from adverse childhood experiences. However, they felt that they would try if the occasion arose.
- Confidence in one's ability to offer guidance to students suffering from adverse childhood experience does not seem to improve with experience, in fact it seems to decrease. This is probably because the teacher/counselor has learned through experience that one never

knows when a situation will arise, or how serious it could be, and there are always feelings of apprehension that something could go wrong if handled in the wrong way.

- The consensus is that it is very important for teachers to have more preparation in managing situations of guidance before beginning their teaching careers.
- Practicing teachers should be provided periodically with formal workshops in identification of children suffering adverse experiences, and basic steps in managing these as part of their professional development.
- All of those consulted felt there should be a component in how to manage situations where a child is undergoing an adverse childhood experience included in the undergraduate preparation of teachers.
- The altruistic inclinations of teachers are often stifled by the system itself, by the attitude of senior teachers, and by academic demands being placed upon teachers for their students to obtain high scores on required external exams. These scores often form part of their teacher evaluations upon which their jobs depend.
- Bureaucratic requirements and a fear of interfering in a delicate situation make teachers hesitate to intervene when they notice that a child is not responding or performing as usual.

The probability that, during their practice, teachers will encounter a significant number of children who are suffering adverse childhood experiences is unquestionable. Traumatic events in families and society are more numerous than ever before and are physical, emotional and psychological in nature. Any significant loss, financial disaster, lack of parental involvement, illness, divorce, physical and emotional bullying, cyber-bullying, exposure to drugs and violence, and peer pressure, to name a few, are the causes of adverse childhood experience. Any one of these can impede a child's capacity to learn and interact academically and socially, as well as process adversity on a personal level. Given the extended amount of time that teachers spend with students they are generally the first to identify a child in distress.

Consultation with experienced teachers and counselors, first-year teachers, and eighth semester students was carried out through questionnaires, a focus group and field observation. Thirty-eight people were consulted. From this investigation, we can conclude that there is a need for teachers to receive a better preparation in managing cases where children are experiencing adverse circumstances. Practicing teachers are usually not provided with professional development in identifying and giving guidance to children suffering from these. It is recommendable that all members of the profession be trained, supported, and encouraged to identify and take steps to ensure that these children are conducted to adequate support. This should include instruction in



how to listen and respond in a responsible professional manner, how to build trust and reduce the feelings of anxiety while building the confidence of the child, and how to determine when an individual should be conducted to seek professional guidance from qualified professionals. Schools should take the responsibility of providing this preparation for their staff, and carry out workshops in the form of professional development.

Schools transmit to teachers their fear of legal procedures that might result from intervention. The increasing emphasis on having children attended only by the school psychologist or a trained counselor dissuades teachers from taking any action at all. This does not help teachers create consciousness of the adverse childhood experiences that 25% of the pupils in any given classroom are likely to be dealing with. Most certainly it does not help to build their confidence to act. In fact, this study indicated that teachers, even counselors experience a decrease in their confidence as they gain more and more experience. Also, it is unfortunate that many schools do not count with professional counselors and psychologists to adequately cover their needs. Consequently, children do not receive the support they need.

Undergraduate teaching programs are focused on a solid knowledge of their subject, quality teaching techniques, and classroom management and usually do not include the guidance aspect of the profession. If covered at all it is mentioned only superficially. Basic formal instruction in identifying and managing situations of adverse childhood experiences should be included in the study program for all teaching license programs, regardless of their specific focus (early childhood, primary, middle, high school). The professors of the pedagogy courses should be consulted and encouraged to fortify this aspect in their courses. Basic principles of Psychology would be beneficial.

This study in no way pretends that teachers take on the role of counselor nor does their involvement rest importance from the unquestionable value and need for psychologists and guidance counselors in all facets of education. It simply indicates that there is a growing need for the practice of empathy in the teaching profession, and this does not interfere with good teaching. On the contrary, it enhances it. Teachers spend the most time with students daily and should be a source for identifying children in distressful circumstances, as well as the main referral agent for the counselors and psychologists. They should be able and willing to liaise with professionals and parents or caretakers, and provide continued support for the child throughout his/her process of recuperation, thus helping the student to overcome difficulties, adapt socially and emotionally and obtain better academic results. To do this, they must be aware of the problems children may be facing and be prepared to provide the child with the support of a caring adult, and ally for parents, counselors and psychologists in providing follow-up and support for the child's healing process.

For the wellbeing of all future societies, the "empathy deficit" must not be allowed to establish itself as status quo in the teaching profession.

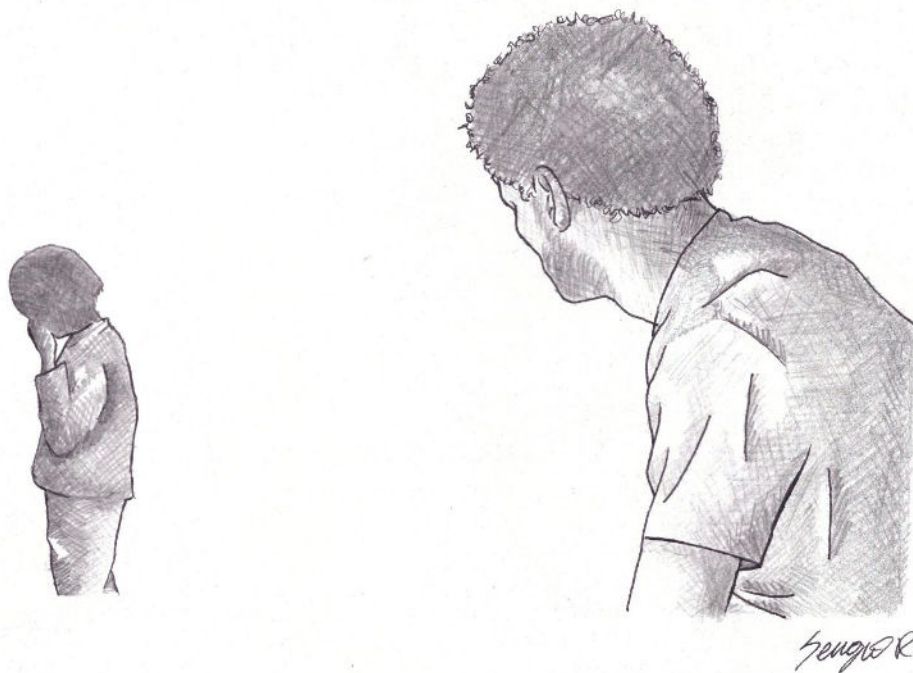
## II

### SOME PRACTICAL ADVICE

We understand teachers are not generally qualified or in any way prepared to take on the role of counselor. The good news is that we don't have to solve the problems. Yet there is a great deal that we can do to ease the anxiety and suffering of a child. "*We are not expected to make troubles go away, but we can facilitate how they are managed.*" Nelson (2007, p.1) It is comforting to know that we are not responsible for solving the child's problems, nor should we try to take on that responsibility. The solutions are not generally in the hands of the teacher unless the circumstances are occurring in his/her classroom and involve other students, such as might be a case of bullying or peer pressure. In these cases, it is the responsibility of the teacher to step in and solve the situation for the benefit of the entire group, as this involves a learning situation for the entire class and probably a disciplinary procedure for the offenders. It is a matter of deciding to step forward when we notice any of the symptoms that reveal a possible situation in need of attention. In these cases, the climate in the classroom is in the hands of the teacher, and if not restored it will negatively affect the comfort and learning of the entire group.

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, (2008) offers common-sense suggestions for intervention, as do Lehey (2004), Nelson (2007), the American Psychological Association (2016), Hopkins (2005), and ESE425 Classroom Management of Exceptional Children (2011) and others. These are easily available on line. The following entails a compilation of the main ideas, taken from all the above and organized with the intention of helping to guide teachers in the process of supporting a distressed child. The following steps to follow will be considered: recognize; prioritize relationships; make time and find the right place; listen; explore, understand, refer; support, self-awareness.

Also included will be the heartfelt advice from a teenager who shares her experience and her feelings about what worked for her. (Mielke, 2017) Other real-life situations are based upon the author's personal experience.



Original drawing by Sergio Esteban Rodriguez Gonzalez

## RECOGNIZE

The initial phase, of course, is to recognize the symptoms associated with possible adverse childhood experiences. These symptoms are usually detected first by the classroom teacher, whose ample contact time with the students allows him/her to observe any distinguishable changes in attitude, academic production, social interaction, and/or self-esteem. Neena McConnico is quoted by Lahey (2014) who mentions that *“McConnico further explained that children who witness violence often have trouble in the classroom because their post-traumatic stress can manifest itself as inattention, sleep dysfunction, distractibility, hyperactivity, aggression, and angry outbursts. Alternately, these children may withdraw and appear to be unfazed by their trauma.”* (p. 3) These symptoms and others mentioned below, as well as most of the case histories, were identified by a focus group of 5 very experienced teacher/counselors, whose extensive careers include an average of 15 years in counseling. Each has served as coordinator of specific year groups for Personal and Social Education in a large prestigious school in Bogotá. (focus group, Bogotá, 2016) This list of symptoms, which also contains observations from personal experience, coincides perfectly with what Lahey (2014) reported. (p.3) In the article posted by Mielke (2017), in which a girl shares her experience, she says; *“You cannot know a child is wearing a mask until you speak with them. Without an invitation to talk, students are left to process emotions alone, which often looks like rumination or thinking negatively.”* (p.2)

**Sleep dysfunction:**

Children who fall asleep in class, or lay their heads down on the desk, don't want to go out at recess, or hesitate to play games requiring exercise, don't complete academic tasks, or simple are lethargic and look tired may not be getting the required amount of sleep. This could have more than one reason. They may be worried about something specific or having bad dreams. They may be staying up watching TV or playing video games, which is becoming a major concern because, besides being addictive, it is possible that it indicates an escape mechanism.

**Reduced concentration:**

Sometimes the child will find it difficult to maintain concentration when executing an academic task. They may lose interest and find it difficult to forget what is bothering them, thus their mind wanders from the task at hand and obsesses with the problem that is worrying them. This problem need not always be a huge disaster, but for a child it can be hard to process a loss. One case that I recall was a little girl in grade 2 who had lost interest in her school work. This went on for a couple of weeks until the teacher finally asked her if something was wrong. She began to cry and told the teacher that her parents made her give away her dog because the family moved into a smaller apartment. She was worried that her pet was not being taken care of and her parents would not take her to visit the dog, and she missed him. (personal observation)

**Decline in academic results:**

This is probably the most obvious indicator, and will immediately send up a red flag. The teacher will observe a sudden drop in the level of the child's work. If a student who has been achieving at class level or better loses interest, begins to not turn in homework, fails quizzes or tests, and does not finish class work, it is likely to be a manifestation of adverse childhood experience. One girl I recall had been at the head of her class for several years. Suddenly she began to lose interest, fail exams and not turn in homework. Her Science teacher asked her what was happening, and she revealed that her father was leaving home because he had a new girlfriend. (personal observation)

**Irritability and anger:**

A child who is normally serene and peaceful will begin to demonstrate irritability and open aggression with classmates or rebellion with adults. This can include physical and verbal bullying. A sixth-grade boy, who had a spotless disciplinary record, began to use aggressive language with his classmates. This tendency grew until he engaged in a fistfight on the playground in which he gave a younger student a black eye. When questioned during the disciplinary process, the child said that he hated how his father would insult and hit his mother when he had been drinking. (personal observation)

**Psychosomatic Complaints:**

Children who chronically complain of headache, stomach ache or other physical ailments with no apparent medical explanation may be subjected to stress caused by an adverse situation. This may also affect the child's appetite and initiate eating disorders such as bulimia or anorexia. Many times, it can be connected to problems of self-esteem. The school nurse is often the person who identifies these symptoms, because the child will go to the infirmary frequently. In some cases, the child will show signs of paranoia about what he/she perceives as threatening. In one school, here in Bogotá, the nurses give a monthly report to the head of each section in which they give statistics on causes of student visits and share confidential concerns about specific students. (personal observation)

**Social withdrawal:**

A normally participative child will begin to decline participation in group activities and keep to him/herself more than usual. One girl in third grade, who had always been the first to raise her hand in class, began to participate less and less until she moved to a seat at the back of the room. She stopped going to the playground during recess and barely answered her girlfriends when they tried to talk to her. The teacher asked one of her friends what was going on. The child told her that the girl's mother was in the hospital with a serious disease. (personal observation)

**Projection of violence in writing, drawing and imaginary play:**

One of the most common symptoms can be demonstrated when the child is allowed to express him/herself in ways that allow the imagination to roam. Aggression is projected through creating violent imaginary characters, harming others or destroying things. This is evident in stories, drawings or when the child plays alone. I recall the case of an artistically talented boy in grade 10, who was constantly drawing extremely violent pictures. His parents were divorced and he had little control or guidance at home. He was aggressive and disrespectful with his teachers. He was found to be a member of a gang that required him to perform in this way, and one weekend he was arrested for physical assault in a gang fight. (personal observation)

**Self-harm:**

If children are placed in the middle of a dispute (for example a divorce) and hear arguments in which they are frequently mentioned, they may imagine that they personally are the cause of the problem. In severe cases, children may intentionally harm themselves. Also, when the child's self-esteem is destroyed by verbal abuse, be it by family or peers, it may result in self-infliction of harm. In the most severe cases it may even result in suicidal tendency. A Physical Education teacher noticed cigarette burns on the arms of a student when he was changing for gym class. He questioned the boy, who broke down crying and told the teacher that he was worthless and had no purpose in life, and that his parents constantly fought because his father wanted him to take some football classes and his mother knew that he didn't like playing football. He was sure he could not play well enough to gain his father's approval. (personal observation)

### **Substance abuse:**

Particularly with older children (although there are certainly cases of elementary school children) the temptation to try drugs and alcohol can be very great, as it provides an escape from worries. The opportunities to obtain these may be as close as the living room of their own home. This brings to mind the case of an eighth-grade boy who was alcoholic. His parents were divorced and he lived with his father. He would arrive home after school to an empty house and free access to the bar. A teacher discovered the problem when the boy tried to take several bottles of liquor on a class field trip. When called in and informed of the situation, the father was totally unaware that the boy drank. He had not even missed the liquor from the bar. He said that his son was usually asleep before he got home at night. The father, a lawyer, threatened to sue the school if the boy was punished. (personal observation)

### **PRIORITIZE RELATIONSHIPS:**

The next step, and undoubtedly one of the most important, is to show that you care. We have seen that most teachers do care. Nonetheless, caring and showing it are two different things. Most of us feel empathy for the suffering of others and often manifest this. But, do we take the steps to help? We have seen that even the most experienced counselors feel hesitant when embarking on an intervention, and, as we have mentioned before, there are many valid reasons why teachers do not get involved. Yet the experts tell us that just knowing that there is a caring adult who will listen is often the determining factor for a child. Noddings (1995) says, *“Personal manifestations of care are probably more important in the children’s lives than any particular curriculum or pattern of pedagogy.”* (p.3) Taking this into account, seeking professional advice from counselors or the school psychologist can help us build our own self confidence.

### **Build trust:**

We must consider how to demonstrate that we care. For this, trust must be built, and, for this to happen, we must be in contact psychologically. Hopkins (2005) consigned some advice in his article titled *School Counselors Reflect on What Makes Them Effective*, based upon information gathered from counselors and professors. They pointed out the importance of building trusting relationships. The adjectives used by one of the counselors, Beckie Meyer, are *“approachable, inviting, trustworthy, and just plain fun at times.”* She went on to say that first you must break the ice. Another, Julie Kruck, added, *“Students can tell if we are warm and inviting and whether or not they can entrust us with their stories.”* Finally, Andrea Meyer said, *“You have to be able to develop rapport and you must be genuine.....If you don’t have a caring relationship of trust and understanding, nothing else is going to happen with children or adults.”* (p. 5) Lehey (2014), referring to McConnico stressed the importance of prioritizing relationships. An *“honest”, “dependable”, “reliable”* teacher is often the only person a child may have who can offer stability, because they may not have many other positive relationships with adults. (p.3) If a child is upset about a situation over which he/she has no control they may have serious questions that need to be faced. They need answers, even if those answers are not what they want to hear. The best

possible attitude is to answer in an honest fashion without trying to mitigate the seriousness of the matter. The National Child Traumatic Stress network (2008) offers the following, *“Give simple and realistic answers to the child’s questions about traumatic events. Clarify distortions and misconceptions. If it isn’t an appropriate time, be sure to give the child a time and place to talk and ask questions.”* (p.1)

### **Be respectful:**

Respect will often require perceiving the problem from the other person’s point of view, or as Clausen, (2016) puts it, *“Stand in the shoes of our students and see our class through their eyes.”* She also gives a gentle nudge for us to evaluate ourselves, and reflect on our actions and be willing to make some changes to improve where necessary. (p.11) Hansen, Stevic, and Warner Jr. (1977) referred to “unconditional positive regard”. In this light, the counselor does not judge, but remains nonevaluative. *“He does not judge one behavior as being positive and another negative; rather, he accepts the individual for what he is regardless of his behaviors. ---When this condition is provided for the client, he comes to believe that he is a person of worth, a person capable of growth.”* (p. 127) Here it is important to remember that a person’s feelings are not something to be disregarded or censured. We are not responsible for what we feel, and these sentiments, in many cases, arise without a great deal of logic.

The best approach for the teacher, in these cases, is to allow the other to express his/her feelings without restraint even if they are being disrespectful. When they exhaust their energy after having a good rant, we can step in. It is good to express your understanding that the person is upset or angry, without being judgmental. For the individual, it is of vital importance to be heard. Even if the person’s actions cannot be condoned, this allows the individual to leave a session with his/her dignity remaining intact.

### **Be honest:**

One difficult aspect of the teacher-student relationship in situations of counseling is how to maintain an honest approach to the adverse circumstances. I read a quote from Thomas Friedman (n.d.), *“There is no question that a great teacher can make a huge difference in student’s achievement and we need to recruit, train, and reward more such teachers. But here’s what some new studies are also showing: We need better parents. Parents more focused on their children’s education can also make a huge difference in a student’s achievement.”* (Brainy Quotes, 2017) As in the case which I will mention now, being honest with the parents and making them realize the damage they were causing without being judgmental can be a challenge. None the less the situation required complete honesty about how they were affecting their son. It was necessary to understand their point of view as well. As the American Psychological Association (2016) points out, *“Because every child reacts to traumatic events in his or her own way, it is important to listen and try to understand children’s unique perspectives and concerns, as well as those of the family.”* (p. 5)

Their son, a 6<sup>th</sup> grade boy, was failing the year for the second time. With the boy's teacher and the school psychologist I called in the parents for a conference to inform them. The result was a disaster. It was customary to have the child present in these meetings because we felt it was disrespectful to keep him unaware of what was being said about him. In this case the parents were recently divorced and they began to scream at each other. The mother accused the father of dumping the boy at his parent's house on the weekends when he had custody so he could be alone with his new partner. The father retorted with an accusation that the mother didn't care about where the child spent his nights because she would send him to her parents whenever her work required her to travel. He complained that he had to give the child lunch money because she wouldn't bother to pack him a lunch, and the boy didn't like the cafeteria food that they paid for at school. The worst part was the child never knew for sure where he was going to sleep. After about ten minutes the child burst into tears and ran out of the room. He was found crouching under a staircase on the second floor. He perceived that it was his fault that his parents divorced, and said that maybe if he weren't around they wouldn't fight so much. Something had to be done. We asked the homeroom teacher to take the boy to her office and comfort him, and we were left to face the parents.

Remaining respectful with these parents who were causing the boy so much suffering was difficult. We interrupted the argument, and politely told them that the child was being destroyed by their inability to manage their situation without involving him and that he was in danger of severe psychological and possibly physical harm. We assured them that we were certain that they had not intended that their differences be harmful for him. We brought them some water and sent each one to a separate place to think about what happened. After a while they were called back and the atmosphere changed. They managed to talk things through without further offending each other. They realized what was occurring with their son and came to an agreement to look at their situation through his eyes. They promised to make a stay-over schedule for the child, organize where he would be sleeping and stick to it. They agreed to try not to fight in front of him anymore, and to assure him that he was not guilty of their disagreements and divorce.

In this case, we could help the parents restore a base of normality for the child. As the American Psychological Association (2016) mentions, *"Helping children, families, and communities reestablish routines and roles can help return normalcy to a child's life, providing reassurance and a sense of safety."* (p.5)

Sometimes a child can become obsessed with a problem and imagine it out of proportion, out of reality, and far more threatening than it really is. In these cases, rediscovering reality becomes a priority. On other occasions, a child may not see the dimension of the situation and needs to be gently guided into reality and acceptance. *"This might not be what your client wants to hear, but it will be in his best interest, and in the best interest of your relationship with him, to be totally honest at all times."*, according to Girard and Paxton. (without date). They also mention, *"Be honest with your client and do not make promises you might not be able to keep, it is tempting to*



*want to make your client feel better, but only offer to do as much as you know you can achieve.*  
(p.10)

### **Control the urge to judge:**

Hopkins (2005) quotes Julie A. Kruk, a high school counselor, *"Our students need to sense that they have professional caregivers among the adults that they can turn to and will be there for them in non-judgmental fashion."* Sutherland (2013) says, *"One of the biggest emotional hurdles I hear about when it comes to starting counselling is the fear of being judged by the counselor. -- Let's face it. We live in a judgmental society where people have strong opinions about all sorts of topics. We might even confide in good friends only to be met with unwanted advice, or even criticism."* This certainly goes for teachers as well. She goes on to remind us that we should try to practice Carl Rodger's concept of *"unconditional positive regard"*, meaning that we accept whatever the client says without judging. This is not easy. When a person approaches and has trouble initiating, they will often say things like: *"This is so embarrassing"*, or *"I don't know how to say this."* A good response which I have used on many occasions, and which Sutherland (2013) also recommends, is to tell them that nothing surprises you because you have probably heard worse before. However, we know that teachers will judge. It is human nature. None the less we should try to avoid our judgmental feelings, or at least try not to express them. Gerard and Paston encourage us *"to take an honest inventory of any personal reactions and biases that arise"*. (p.10) We must know ourselves, and if we find these feelings arising to the point that they are difficult to control, we must refer the person to someone with professional preparation. (pp.1-3)

For a child to feel comfortable enough to approach someone for help, it requires courage and self-determination that is built up with time. This is particularly true if a child feels afraid of being found guilty of the situation and fears the consequences. This also occurs if the child feels embarrassed about what is bothering him/her. This is often the case with children being bullied by peers or abused by someone at home. One of the most difficult cases I recall was a tenth-grade girl who was being sexually abused by an uncle who lived with them. She had resisted telling anyone for over a year for fear of how her parents would react. (personal observation) Sutherland (2013) also indicates that compulsive behaviors, poverty, sexuality, self-harming behaviors etc., can cause this type of anxiety. (p.2)

### **Communicate safety:**

An open embracing attitude toward the person needing to be heard is fundamental. The last thing a child in distress needs is to encounter another situation where he/she feels threatened. This has a lot to do with being welcoming. A smile, a gesture to come in and sit down, a question about how you can help, offer a piece of candy, all provide a safe secure climate of nurture. Hopkins (2005) shared this comment from Ned W. Toms, *"After 30 years of counseling, I think the most important attribute is a consistent, everyday smile. I notice how students respond to my smile. Although many might not think of it as a skill in the traditional sense, it is very important."*  
(p.9)

Dorado and Zakrewske (2013) offer some helpful hints on how to recognize when a child is going into survival mode while trying to communicate with you. The individual will get an almost paralyzed look on his/her face and remain quiet, breathing may become agitated, the face may flush and the fists clench, they may begin to move, or bust into tears or become congested with the effort to not cry. They also mention that not all fearful children will show signs. However, whether they do or don't, when a child realizes that you care and understand, they will gain control and overcome their fear enough to tell you what is wrong or simply ask for help. (p.3) One comment for you to make might be *"I see you're having trouble with something, can I help you in any way?"* Elsworth (2001), speaking of the teacher's *"referent power"*, which refers to the *"attractiveness"* the teacher has as perceived by the students, says that this power can be fortified: *"Build rapport with students. Increase a sense of charisma. Show students you are consistent. Establish and maintain a sense of trust. Share a sense of security by showing care for them and their problems. Maintain maturity rather than peership."*(p.5)

This last statement is interesting. Children, adolescents, and adults do not need a buddy when searching for someone to hear their problems. If the person is too close, they may not want that person to know, judge, or give opinions on their situation. There is always the possibility that the person consulted will make things worse, especially if they are too close to the person in distress. The person consulted should maintain empathy and show care, but not dive into the problem or try to solve it. This is usually not possible when a relationship becomes too close.

### **Maintain confidentiality:**

Every teacher has heard extremely confidential information about students being discussed in staffrooms and teacher's meetings. Rumors tend to run like torrent rivers, even if the people talking don't know the child. There is usually no malignant intent on the part of the people speaking, however the damage for the person involved can be enormous. One of the first things a person who is about to divulge a situation will say is, *"Please don't tell anyone."* In the case of school children, this usually means their parents, or the person managing discipline. The last thing they want is for it to become the latest rumor in the community.

I recall one case that stands out. It concerned a tenth-grade girl. A doctor from a local hospital, whose son was in the school, called one Monday morning to inform the school that the girl had been treated for dis-intoxication for the third time in the last four months. She had been taken to the emergency room by friends after a party early Sunday morning and they had not informed her parents, who traveled frequently on business. Her younger brother thought she had gone home with a friend to stay overnight. If it had not been for the concerned doctor who got in touch with the school, nothing would have been done for her, because her friends had no intention of telling anyone about the problem. She was called into the principal's office and informed of the doctor's call. She begged and pleaded not to call her parents. Since the child was obviously in danger. She was told that there was no choice but to inform them and that the school psychologist would work with her to give her the support she needed. The parents were dumbfounded when they found out what was happening, and had to deal with feelings of guilt for having to travel so

much. Another main concern for them was that the whole school would know about their daughter. This was controlled because the case was managed by the psychologist and no one else was informed. Luckily the girl and her parents received the professional help needed. (personal observation)

If a child fears that the person he/she confides in may tell someone else, this alone will inhibit him/her from seeking support, even if he/she desperately needs it and is resolved to find it. Once a child confides a situation, the teacher is bound by common decency to maintain confidentiality, unless, of course, the situation demands that parents must know and/or referral to a professional or higher authority is required. In that case, only the parents, the professional or the authority should be told, and the child should be clearly informed of who will be told and why prior to action being taken.

When a teacher reports a situation to the psychologist or a higher authority, many times they will feel ignored or left out because they are not informed of the outcome, or the details of what took place after their referral. This is because confidentiality must be kept in order to protect the person and sometimes the institution. Teachers must understand this. Their collaboration will be solicited later to help follow up on the person's progress in the classroom, and in helping the individual resume normality.

## **MAKE TIME AND FIND THE RIGHT PLACE**

No one likes to have a meltdown in public! The NCTSN (2008) Says, *"Provide a safe place for the child to talk about what happened. Set aside a designated time and place for sharing to help the child know it is okay to talk about what happened."* (p.1)

### **Nonpublic venue:**

Most schools are like a shopping mall before Christmas, with children and people everywhere, all shouting and hurrying to get somewhere. Also, children often choose to seek help after class or at recess when everyone is out and about. There can be no sense of privacy, trust, or safety if the place is teeming with noise and people. Not only that, you are fenced into the school grounds and there is no escape. Suggest that you find a place that is quiet. This will reassure the individual to speak openly and feel safe. If possible, find a place where you can close the door and avoid intrusions or being overheard. This might be the staff room during class time, or perhaps there is a small room dedicated to private meetings. If this is not possible, then take a walk to the far corners of the campus.

### **No interruptions:**

Make yourself unavailable to others for a while. Say you will be right with them, to give you a few minutes. Turn off your cell phone, unless you are expecting a life or death call, and ask the person to shut down his or hers. It is a total lack of respect to answer a call, read a text, or text a message

when someone is pouring his/her heart out. This will break the moment and make it more difficult for the person to confide in you. It conveys that you are not really interested in them or their problems. Immediate response to the cell phone has become an addiction for the majority nowadays. Please- please- please, let it rest for a few minutes. You can deal with WhatsApp later.

### **Take your time:**

Under no circumstances should the person be rushed. Make sure you have enough time to attend the conversation properly. Having to end the conversation or rush it tells the person that you are too busy to listen. This will only frustrate the attempt to find help and cause the person to hesitate before trying again. If you really don't have the time right then, and it is quite possible that you won't during the school day, tell the person you will expect them at a time and place later on. Make sure that you communicate your concern and that you really want to hear them. If you notice extreme urgency, arrange to give the child immediate attention. For instance, if you have class, you might give them some work and ask a colleague to take over for a while.

### **LISTEN: (This is the big one.)**



Artistic representation adapted from <http://www.betaniajuvenil.org/med-1/lo-que-realmente-importa> by Sergio Esteban Rodriguez Gonzalez

What almost everyone needs the most when suffering a traumatic situation is to be heard. However enhanced emotional response on the part of the person sometimes makes it difficult to listen to him/her and make sense of the situation. Hopkins (2005) cites Carol Turner, *“Our children might not always say out loud what they are feeling, and school counselors need the ability to listen—to words, body language, unspoken words, and attitudes.”* Here we recall what was previously cited and so wisely put by Maria, the experienced counselor and teacher from the focus group, *“You need listening skills, and listen, even if the person tells you lies. Listen between the lines”* (focus group, May 2017) Nelson (2007) recommends several steps from the Skilled Helper that Egan calls SOLER:

**Open posture:**

This suggests that you sit right in front (*squarely*) of the individual, keeping an (*open*) posture, leaning a bit toward the person, and keeping eye contact and projecting relaxation. (p.2) Ask the person to make themselves comfortable. You might offer something to drink or a piece of candy. This will help them calm down a bit if they are really upset.

**Listen to every word and movement:**

Be an active listener. It means that you are concentrating on the entirety of the person’s communication, both verbal, which includes how the person is relating his/her experience and how they are behaving while doing so, and non-verbal communication, which includes body language, facial expressions, and reactions to what he/she is communicating. Guiffrida and McCarty (without date) tell us, *“When in doubt, focus on feelings.”* (p.5)

**Keep the person on track:**

It is also important that you do not allow the individual to get off the subject, and to focus on the most relevant. The NCTSN (2008) stresses the importance of maintaining the person in contact with reality concerning their trauma, and tells us to, *“Clarify distortions and misconceptions.”* (p.1)

**Non-judgmental:**

Nelson (2007) urges that an empathetic and non-judgmental attitude be maintained. As has been discussed earlier in this document, it is not always easy. Remember, this does not necessarily mean to be sympathetic. Some situations will be censurable. All situations require interaction and understanding of the person’s point of view and feelings. (p.3)

**Challenge destructive patterns:**

Nelson (2007) points out that it may be necessary to challenge some *“harmful or irrational statements or destructive patterns”* that may arise. However, rapport and empathy must be maintained. (p.3) If the child is out of control or obsessed to the point of losing reality, it will be necessary to guide him/her back to stability

The main factor continues to be that the individual is comfortable and able to communicate his/her situation. For that, we must insist that listening and empathy go together and neither is effective without the other. Human warmth, comfort, and safety are the key factors.

## **EXPLORE**

Once you have recognized that a child has demonstrated unexplained changes in conduct or academic performance you may find that the child does not come forward easily and may even deny that anything is bothering him/her. To fully understand the situation of a child who is suffering an adverse experience one must know the whole story, and it may be necessary to help the child clarify and relate the situation, keep focused, or, in some cases, simply begin to speak. We cannot help without knowing what is the matter. To achieve this, first the relationship mentioned before must be established. Once this is secured, we can proceed to probe the child for the information that is fundamental to understanding and providing eventual support.

In the process of exploring, a child may manifest unfounded feelings of guilt. From my first year of teaching, I recall one little boy in the third grade. He stayed in the classroom at break time one day and began to cry. When he finally calmed down enough to talk, he told me that his parents had no money and that it was because he and his little brother were in a school that was too expensive. He did not want to leave his school and friends, but his father told him that they would not have enough money to eat if he didn't. The child felt guilty for his family's financial situation, yet couldn't really comprehend why he and his brother should be at fault. I remember him saying that he felt that it was unfair because they could have put him in a less expensive school because they were the ones who chose that school when he began his studies. (personal observation)

Adult frustrations often surface by saying the wrong things to their children. I recall the sixth-grade girl with a learning disability whose mother told her that her breast cancer was caused by worrying about the girl's poor academic results. In this case, the Math teacher was the one who the girl finally talked to after the teacher asked her what was wrong. (personal observation)

Once a physical education teacher came to my office and told me that he had noticed that one of the boys from grade eight frequently had black and blue marks on his back and arms. The young man had told the teacher that he fell off his bicycle a lot, but the teacher said it did not look like that kind of a bruise to him. The teacher suspected that someone was beating him. After talking to the him alone after the class, the boy admitted that his father got angry when he had a lot to drink and when this happened he would tell the boy that he drank because he had to pay for the child's braces and football training. The family was called in for counseling, and things calmed down for a while, but the parents finally ended in divorce. Fortunately, the boy realized that he was not responsible for the situation. The boy was not injured again, thanks to an observant and concerned PE teacher. (personal observation)

These cases lead us to realize the importance of completely understanding the circumstances.

**Use open ended questions:**

Nelson (2007) advises the use of open ended questions. These require the person to engage in a process of reflection and provide a personal response, generally resulting in a truthful evaluation of the situation. If the child becomes silent, it is probably best to stay quiet for a short time as well, until he/she feels able to continue. (p.3)

**Paraphrase and reflect:**

Due to the emotional intensity, it is possible that the child becomes confused or uncertain. In this case the teacher might paraphrase what the child has mentioned and reflect on the meaning and the feelings that have been communicated, thus helping the child recover the essence of the situation. This will help to structure the information in a meaningful fashion and recover a sense of reality. Nelson (2007, p.3)

**Summarize:**

When the session is nearing the end, it is advisable to summarize the main facts for the child so that he/she can identify a clear and more realistic appreciation of the problem. Nelson (2007, p.3) This process will lead to the child to having a better understanding of the situation and his/her position within it. We must remember that very frequently a young person may blame him/herself for something that did not initiate with him/her at all. Sadly, sometimes this is brought on by the child's parents or siblings. It is vital that information be summarized and clarified for the child to ensure correct understanding.

**UNDERSTAND**

Again, it is Nelson (2007) referring to Egan's Skilled Helper that offers suggestions for leading the individual to a more profound and objective understanding of his/her circumstances.

**Identify reality:**

Before identifying plans of action, the person must be led to fully understand what he/she really wants and needs, and to separate the real problem from his/her fears and exaggerated perceptions. The sense of reality as well as the mental process can become blocked by anguish and inhibit the person from recognizing reality and taking rational decisions and informed action. (p.4)

**Brainstorm and strike a balance:**

Once the problem is clearly identified and data is complete, you can help the person to consider several courses of action. You might even want to make a list. One good way is to guide the individual to engage in a process of balancing the pros and cons before electing a course of action, thus eliminating choices that will not be productive and allow for working around impediments.

This permits the person to realize that there are courses of action to be taken and leads to making rational objective decisions about the circumstances. (p.4)

### **Allow them to reach their own conclusions:**

Once the person has clarity about the situation, they can be led to reach their own conclusions. Nelson (2007, p.5) When this happens, the person will usually be open to seek and accept further support from a professional counselor. They will also be willing to involve parents or any other person or persons who they had previously begged not to inform. ESE25 Classroom Management of Exceptional Children (2001) states that, *"Helpers clarify who is responsible for change and how to facilitate change."* They also state, *"Since we recognize limitations of time and role, we frequently help with an immediate crisis or problem and then get appropriate assistance for long term, chronic or deeply involved issues."* (p. 3)

## **REFER**

Understanding that we are not psychologists or trained counselors, we also know that we do not have the most informed capacity to advise and lead the person in distress to solve their problems, especially those of a serious nature. This is where the case must be referred to a professional counselor or the school psychologist. They, in turn, will take over the process and, if necessary, will no doubt refer to a list of even more qualified professionals for external consultation. They will also counsel the adults involved to seek support. In severe cases, liaison with the professional that the family chooses will guarantee that the child is being helped. At this point, the teacher will probably not be told more than that the child is receiving the required support. Teachers will, however, be involved as a receiving agent, and helping the child when he/she is in the classroom.

### **Orient the person to the need for referral:**

Report severe cases to the psychologist, counselor or line manager. Don't try to handle things on your own. The responsibility will be yours if something goes wrong and you have not referred the child. In many cases the biggest obstacle to this will be the opposition of the child, who is afraid of letting parents or authority know about the problem. Here you must encourage and give orientation to the child to seek the support of these professionals. Make them understand that this is necessary to find a solution. Nelson (2007) tells us that this is a transition experience, *"This process is designed to help the client move from the current situation to one that they would prefer. Transition experiences may make the client feel vulnerable therefore the process may often be built upon by the taking of small comfortable steps as the client grows in confidence (but this must be based upon the needs of the client-." (p.5)*

To illustrate this point, I remember the case of a 16-year-old girl, which had to do with an unexpected pregnancy. This eleventh-grade girl was in the dilemma of what to do when she found



herself pregnant after casual sex due to peer pressure. She knew that she was about to begin to show the situation and it would become inevitable to let someone know. She divulged the secret to a teacher who had noticed a change in her behavior and academic production. The teacher knew that she had the obligation to let the psychologist know, and brought the girl to the office. The girl wanted the baby but had been considering a high-risk abortion at a clandestine clinic because she feared that her parents would disown her, and the father of the child would deny his responsibility. However, she had not managed to accumulate the money needed for the intervention. The girl knew that the reaction of her parents would be violent, and begged us not to tell them. The psychologist told the girl that she would be with her in the encounter and would support her through it. She finally conceded and the parents were called in. It was not easy for anyone. At first the father was furious and mistreated the girl verbally, but the mother intervened and, overcoming her tears, calmed him down. They were left alone for a short time for a family conference. They decided that they wanted to keep the baby but they were withdrawing the girl from school. The school officials persuaded the family that it would not be necessary to take her from school. They made clear that the school would support her through the pregnancy and her teachers would support her as well. She finished the school year, had her baby, and graduated. If the teacher had not referred the case immediately, it could have resulted in a disaster or even death in an illegal abortion clinic.

#### **When to refer:**

Guiffrida & McCarty (n.d.), in their short pdf called *Counseling Skills for Faculty, Staff, and Administration* offer a list of the most frequent situations that require the support of more qualified personnel. In these cases, the teacher should contact the counselor or psychologist of the school and allow them to take over the intervention. If there is no psychologist or counselor, the teacher should try to persuade the family to find private consult, and should not try to advise on decisions to be taken. In severe cases, the psychologist or counselor should have a list of specialists that he/she can recommend for external support.

The group of counselors consulted (focus group, Bogotá, May,2016) agreed with the list of situations which probably require the support of more specialized professionals, and are what Guiffrida & McCarty (n.d.) call “*Red Flags*”. These are:

*“Suicidal thoughts and hopelessness; homicidal thoughts; extreme mood shifts, irrational behavior or lack of judgment; self-harm—cutting, odd behavior and speech patterns; poor personal hygiene; extreme changes in sleeping, appetite, and weight; decreased concentration, motivation and interest; excessive substance use, internet use, or gambling; family issues; social isolation; loss; relationship issues; consistent poor academic functioning”* (p. 9)

Referral might also be required if the individual is requiring a lot more of your time and interrupting you when you are busy, in class, in a meeting, or talking to another teacher. It may be a sign that they are becoming dependent upon you. They may show signs of not wanting to

end a meeting with you or manifest that they do not know what is causing their distress. This is probably a good time to take the next step and refer the child to a more qualified member of staff. Guiffrida & McCarty (no date) advise us to be aware of these signs and to make the person understand your role as a teacher rather than a counselor, responding to their situation with empathy but firmness. (p.8)

When in doubt, go ahead and refer the child. Let the trained professionals decide about the seriousness of the situation. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2008) reminds us, "*As Severity can be difficult to determine—with some children becoming avoidant or appearing to be fine (e.g., a child who performs well academically no matter what)—don't feel you have to be certain before making a referral.*" (p. 2) Guiffrida and McCarty (n. d.) say, "*Leave the assessment to clinicians.*" (p.11)

### **How to refer:**

The need to refer may result in a setback in the individual's level of confidence because it involves another person or persons who will be informed of the situation. It is likely the child may be frightened of the reaction of these new contacts and feel vulnerable. This will require you to be cautious in how you suggest the referral. Try to explain why the parents, psychologist, and/or counselor are the only ones who can help find concrete solutions. Don't speculate as to what will happen, but try to inspire confidence and security. Make it very clear that you are only interested in the best possible outcome and that you will be there for him/her during the entire process.

It is advisable to inform the specialist privately about the child's situation prior to referral. Mention the signs that you have observed and what the child has confided to you. Alert them as to the child's emotions and fears, and answer questions to the best of your ability. Don't insist upon what you think the child needs, even though you probably have a good idea. The specialist will handle that. Make yourself available for follow up and to take any action that is recommended, such as liaising with them or the parents, particularly after an action plan is in place.

Assist the child in finding an appointment with the counselor or psychologist. It is probably a good idea to accompany the child to the first meeting even if you don't stay. This will help the individual feel that you are not abandoning him/her. Let the child know that you will be there and ask him/her to let you know how things are going. Tell the person how much you trust the professional you are referring him/her to and that you know that the situation will be well managed. Thank the child for sharing the situation with you. (focus group, Bogotá, October 6, 2017)

## SUPPORT



Original drawing by Sergio Esteban Rodriguez Gonzalez

This is the good news. The American Psychological Association (2016) tells us.

*“The majority of children and adolescents manifest resilience in the aftermath of traumatic experiences. This is especially true of single-incident exposure. Youths who have been exposed to multiple traumas, have a past history of anxiety problems, or have experienced family adversity are likely to be at higher risk of showing symptoms of posttraumatic stress. Despite exposure to traumatic events and experiencing short-term distress, most children and adolescents return to their previous levels of functioning after several weeks or months and resume a normal developmental course. This resilience typically results in a reduction in both psychological distress and physiological arousal.”*  
(p.3)

Having this encouraging information in mind, there are several things that teachers should do after referring the subject, and during the time that the individual is receiving the intervention of a professional.

### **Supporting the child:**

The role of the teacher now becomes that of being supportive in the classroom. The teacher will be vital in the process of helping the child reestablish his/her normal functioning within the social

context of classmates. The affected child may again be apprehensive about what classmates are thinking and judging and become reluctant to integrate again. The NCTSN (2008) makes several suggestions that may be helpful.

If the child is slow or uncertain the teacher could allow additional time for the child to complete classwork or turn in homework assignments. Assignments could also be a bit shorter. If the child is having trouble organizing work or remembering what is required, the teachers can help by reminding the child of deadlines or help them organize tasks in order of importance or time limits. Be sure to observe when the child appears in need of some time out, and allow the child to go to the nurse, bathroom etc. If summoned by the psychologist or counselor, the teacher should never refuse permission to go to the designated adult. Be sure to check with that person to see if the child kept the appointment. (p. 2)

*“Be aware of other children’s reactions to the traumatized child and to the information they share. Protect the traumatized child from peer’s curiosity and protect classmates from the details of a child’s trauma.”* (p.1) Attention should be given to making sure that the child is included in activities. Pair up the child with others who will help integrate him/her in group work. It is important to make sure the child has opportunities for success. When attention is given to how well he/she is doing, the child feels valued, and will be encouraged to continue in a positive manner. According to Lahey (2014) a child suffering an adverse experience needs *“clear timelines, expectations, and consequences”* to feel safe, therefore a well-established routine is favorable. (p.4) Kusz (2009) says:

*“There are many opportunities for teachers and counselors to help students learn how to deal with their stress in non-counseling situations. Allowing time for students to receive adequate exercise, time for relaxation, journaling, and giving structure-free time are just a few ways to help lessen the stress for children. Encouraging a stressed or anxious child to find a physical activity that they enjoy is an easy and effective coping strategy for teachers and counselors to implement.”* (p. 18)

What you do to follow-up on the child’s process will be a major factor in achieving recovery. Sometimes a little rest is recommended. *“Some downtime, where the child can relax and rest from academic activity and emotional stress can be very positive.”* (p. 4)

### **Liaison with parents and professionals:**

After intervention, liaison with the counselor, psychologist, and especially the parents is very important. You will be asked for feedback on how the child is reacting in class and in recess. Your information is the most important indicator of the child’s resilience, and effectiveness of the support received. It will inform the professionals and guide them in taking further action. This has been recognized by Kourkoutas & Giovazolias (2015), who indicate that teachers must be involved actively in the follow-up in cases they have referred. *“To achieve a working partnership with educational staff, it is essential to make teachers feel part of the interdisciplinary team and give*

*them responsibility.*” They go on to emphasize the need for teachers to be informed of all procedures in the child’s intervention.

*“Many teachers feel puzzled and confused if they are not consulted and given access to clinical conclusions and evaluations but are simply asked to follow specific guidelines or tips; in this sense, teachers should be made aware of the conclusion of any assessment and evaluation process relating to a child and his or her family. ---The rationale for every suggested strategy should be adequately communicated; decisions about interventions should take into account the teacher’s knowledge about the specific case.” (p. 22)*

## **SELF AWARENESS**

Finally, we must be aware that helping children in adverse circumstances can be very stressful. Our empathy and concern can be great consumers of our energy. The NCTSN (2008, p.2), The American Psychological Association (2016, p. 6), Dorado & Zakrzewski (2013, p.4), and Hopkins (2005, p.8) all coincide in telling teachers and counselors to take care of themselves. It is far too easy to get too wrapped up in the problems of others. Try not to allow yourself to reach an unnecessary state of stress and worry, which may end up affecting your health and your capacity to fulfil your other obligations. If you feel that this may be occurring it is time to consider referring the subject of your concern to another level of support.

As is explained by Hansen, Stevic and Warner Jr. (1977), the main goal of the process is to provide the necessary conditions for meaningful change and personal growth. They caution that the relationship between the person suffering adverse circumstances and the person intervening must establish that the answers must come from the individual and that the teacher is there to help the person find his/her own solutions. The responsibility for success must depend upon the person him/herself.

The second important factor is time. There must be a limit placed on the amount of time spent in the sessions and a limit to the number of sessions as well. These factors will ensure that the relationship does not become either a dependency on the part of the child or a suffocating emotional burden for the teacher.

A third aspect mentioned is that the emphasis in the relationship be centered upon the individual and not on the problem. When distressed, most people tend to dwell upon the problem until it takes on enormous proportions, often leading to obsession, which does not allow the individual to think of anything else and much less rationalize in search of realistic solutions. After all, the concerns of the child will be resolved in some way, but more importantly, we must seek the control and growth which leads to the required conditions to bring about change. (pp.130,131)

This emotional drain on the teacher is great because trying to make the individual aware of the facts and giving an intellectual explanation of the real situation will often be blocked by the

emotional response of the child. Thus, the focus must be on the emotional aspects. It is important that the person can articulate how he/she feels. He/she must develop insight and self-understanding before seeking solutions to problems that have no solution within his/her power. (pp.132, 133) It is difficult indeed to remain detached and in control in the presence of such suffering. In these circumstances, it is important for the teacher to disconnect enough to keep a healthy position and be able to help.

## CONCLUSION

Your role as caregiver is important, possibly vital, in facilitating a child, family, or another adult to gain the resilience to overcome a traumatic situation. Remind yourself that, *“Teachers may not be able to protect their students from the evils of this world, but we can serve as allies, mentors, and role models through our relationships with them as they grow, recover, and begin to heal.”* (Lahey, 2014, p.5)

Hopefully this small focus on the teacher’s role in caregiving will help teachers gain the confidence to identify, hear, and in some way guide others through difficult experiences. Although making time while attending the pressures of daily class preparation, delivery and evaluation; level, subject and general meetings; the pressure of required academic results; extracurricular events; as well as personal matters, often dissuade us from getting involved, the teacher may be the only person who can make a difference. The wellbeing and future of a child may be in jeopardy. Noddings (1995) is very emphatic, *“I am arguing here that it is morally irresponsible to simply ignore existential questions and themes of care; we must attend to them.”* (p. 4)

Don’t back away from intervening in these situations. It sometimes takes courage to do this, but what you do for a child may change his/her life forever. It may be the difference between a drop-out gang member who dies violently in the street and a successful positive citizen who develops his/her potential and contributes to society. You may not do everything right. You may feel insecure and hesitant. You may want to just ignore and get on with your class. You may not have the time to dedicate. But remember what could happen if you don’t bother. Make the effort to help fill the empathy deficit from which modern society suffers. Teach concern for others by your example. Be the factor that makes a difference in the lives of students and their families. Help them seek the solutions to problems that seem to have none. Conduct them to the more professional help that they may need. Support them in their healing process. Your students will remember and thank you for it.

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