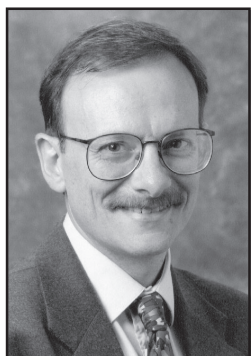


Laws of Life: A literacy-based intervention for social-emotional and character development and resilience

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Abstract

Laws of Life is a literacy-based intervention that allows students to identify and articulate the principles by which they live their lives. In the urban context, such an intervention is vital for reclaiming children's interest in writing and helping them to more intentionally guide their lives and their futures according to positive core values. The principles of Laws of Life are presented through the example of an eight-year project in Plainfield, New Jersey, a highly disadvantaged urban community in the United States. The importance of such interventions in helping children find resilience despite unrelenting stressors is discussed.

Many children in elementary, middle, and high school wake up and look at the world each day with a sense of pessimism. Their lives are difficult and they see newspapers and hear media stories that suggest their lives are not going to improve to any great extent. Yet, beneath their pessimism, many children carry reservoirs of hope. For educators, the challenge is to tap those reservoirs of hope before they run dry. Make no mistake about it – these reservoirs exist but cannot be expected to last forever without nurturance and replenishment.

When children come to school with pessimism, it is difficult for them to learn. In fact, it is unreasonable to expect them to sit quietly, attentively, and inquisitively when their view of the future is either bleak or blank. Even well-crafted academic curricula and highly motivated teachers have a difficult time breaking through because there is little to which nuggets of knowledge attach themselves. Of course, when educators are under pressure to lift students' performance, such circumstances create tremendous difficulty. Jonathan Kozol (2005) and Martin Haberman (2002) refer to the way in which pedagogy becomes prescriptive and restrictive, discipline becomes harsh and punitive, and educators begin to devalue and denigrate the most valuable resource in the school and their main *raison d'etre*, their students. These processes are sadly familiar to those who work in urban schools, but they are no less absent from other schools where hope has been driven out by despair and frustration.

Yet, when one examines other aspects of these students' lives, things are not necessarily as uniformly bleak. Many of these students enjoy stories, especially those they can actually

read. They enjoy television, movies, DVDs, comics, and stories in as many forms as can be provided. The message in this was not lost on John Templeton, financier and philanthropist who saw that students in rural, poor sections of the United States that many had given up or had not given up on themselves. They were activated and animated by stories – and so, John Templeton wondered, what would happen if they focused on their own personal stories? What if they were led into their reservoir of hope by stories, and encouraged to bring up geysers of resilience for all to see, including themselves? Would this make a difference in their lives?

Many years later, the answer is clearly yes and the reasons are being increasingly well understood. John Templeton anticipated what we now know through an increasing convergence of research from different populations: young people develop *Laws of Life*, strong values and principles that guide them in everyday decisions and actions (www.LawsofLife.org). Even at relatively young ages, children absorb these life lessons from their experiences and those around them. They use their Laws of Life as beacons in a fog, as airplanes use navigation systems in heavy rains and clouds, and boats use a gyrocompass when seas are in turmoil. It is certainly true that some children do not develop clear Laws of Life, and others develop Laws of Life fuelled by hatred and revenge. However this does not happen as often as one would expect, and this amply justified by the growing literature on resilience and the role and power of hope and optimism in human development.

What John Templeton also realised is that writing about one's Laws of Life and discussing them with classmates, family, and community members could be highly liberating, affirming, and encouraging. It would appeal to the better part of our natures, as Pennebaker (1997) and others have found occurs when trauma victims write about their tragic difficulties. Why is this the case? Psychologist Jerome Bruner believes stories are the way we organise our understanding of our lives and those of others. McAdams (2006) believes that "Human beings are storytellers by nature. In a multitude of guises, as folktale, legend, myth, fairy tale, history, epic, opera, motion picture, television situation comedy, novel, biography, joke, and personal anecdote, the story appears in every known human culture" (76).

The process of writing Laws of Life essays

The ideas of John Templeton were put to a challenging test in Plainfield, New Jersey, an urban district with a student population almost entirely African-American or Latino and at extreme economic disadvantage. It has many well-documented social and health-related problems, and serious and persistent concerns about the lagging academic achievement of its students. These deep concerns fuelled the district's willingness to try to reverse the fortunes of their students by having them write Laws of Life essays as part of their academic curriculum. Laws of Life was originally designed for high school students, but Plainfield chose to extend the idea to 5th and 8th graders so that they could begin this important reflective process prior to the often-destabilising transition to secondary schools.

Therefore Laws of Life essays were written during the language arts/literacy block and linked to specific writing standards that students were required to meet in Grades 5, 8, and 11. Once written and revised, essays were shared with classmates and family members, to broaden the community conversation about Laws of Life. Beyond their immediate use in the context of the curriculum, the essays themselves became the focus of Laws of Life celebrations held in each of ten elementary schools and district-wide in order to share the best essays with others. High school students and community members were enlisted to help screen and judge the essays according to rubrics established by the district's Laws of Life committee. Every child writing an essay received acknowledgment; some received extra recognition for the excellence of their work, donated by local businesses, alumni, or community organisations or residents. Teams of staff, parents, and students from individual schools arranged celebratory banquets

for participants, honouring authors of each school's best essays. A similar team planned a district-wide banquet attended by representatives of the school board, clergy, community and parents' groups, sponsors, guests such as the Commissioner of Education and Mayor, and, of course, many students and their families. The banquets have been extraordinary community-building events.

Children's Laws of Life address such themes as Love, Responsibility, Respect, Relationships, Perseverance, Self-Discipline, Courage, Honesty, and Kindness, sometimes in combination. One student, writing about how he and his siblings were about to be removed from their home by child protective services following the arrest of their mother, describe how their mother's friend, whom they had never met, fought for legal custody of them when no other family member appeared. His Law of Life was the importance of giving love even to people he did not know. Another student wrote, "*Laws of Life* are rules that I live my life by. I think loving others is the most important of them. A person must have love in his or her life. Love makes a person feel important." Here is an excerpt from an eighth grader's essay on Perseverance:

Every day begins with a new struggle, whether it is a crisis at home, or the work of overcoming fear of failure at school. Some people are the victims of bullying; others have to deal with peer pressure. Sometimes you have to be courageous, other times you must be able to love. I believe every being on earth faces problems and every one of them lives by different laws of life to solve them. The key to success in my life is perseverance. My purpose is to continue to reach my goals, despite difficulties that I may face.

I live in an urban community, one that has many drawbacks, there is a huge amount of drug activity and gang violence. The people in my community have greatly influenced me to strive harder because I don't want to end up like some of them. The people that persevere in life are some of the many that influence my decisions. My great grandmother was a person who struggled to make sure her family would be successful. Born in 1902, she was a maid who worked extremely hard just to make ends meet. She walked miles to get to work because she didn't have money for transportation; after working in someone's kitchen all day, she came home to take in laundry. Her driving desire to make life better for her children and theirs motivated her to persevere in a time when being black meant you were considered less than nothing.

The impact of Laws of Life essays

Laws of Life essays are best understood, not as limited writing assignments, but as dynamic processes set forth in schools through literacy. As a result of the various ways in which Laws of Life essays are shared, new dialogues among diverse groups of people are fostered. Through the collaboration and support of businesses and civic leaders at various points in the Laws of Life conversation and celebration process, barriers between school and community are broken down and new relationships forged.

Of no less importance is the impact on students. They develop renewed enthusiasm for writing and a deeper understanding of the long-term implications of their everyday decisions and actions. As they begin to look at their own lives and put their varied experiences into narrative form, children also start to speculate on their future. Through biographies, documentaries, and history, they reflect on others' Laws of Life and the many and varied life paths that individuals have travelled. This leads them to constructively speculate on their own future. South African emotional intelligence expert Jacobus Maree (2007), a leader in narrative career counselling, advocates that to shape students' thinking about their vocational paths they broaden their sense of possibilities. Laws of Life essay-writing helps students realise that their stories do not have to end as they began. They can find the good in their own actions as

well as those of supportive people in their lives, and can therefore create a hopeful story, even an empowering one. Of course, when adults see and hear children's stories, they, too, get a chance to revise their view of the narrative direction of the children's lives. They begin to see different story lines, less obviously stereotyped, or "typecast."

During 2002-2003, interviews were conducted with over 300 middle-school 6th graders in Plainfield about their Laws of Life essay writing experience from the previous year, when they were in elementary school. Their responses are summarised in Textbox 1. A series of questions also asked students if they would like to express their Laws of Life in ways other than essay writing; the vast majority of students approved. They mentioned such modalities as photography, music, art, and videography as their main preferences. This gave impetus to the Laws of Life in the Arts project at Plainfield High School, in which students successfully used other modalities, such as choreography, song writing, photojournalism, and graphic arts (Elias *et al.*, 2006), to articulate and share their Laws of Life.

Textbox 1: Responses of students to follow-up survey after writing Laws of Life essays

- Over half (57%) thought the Laws of Life contest was "very" or "extremely" fun.
- The majority (55%) found it "not at all" or "a little" difficult to figure out their Law of Life, however almost a quarter (24%) found it "very" or "extremely" difficult, with the rest (21%) finding it "somewhat" difficult to figure out their Law of Life.
- When asked about writing the Laws of Life essay most students (54%) said it was "a little" or "somewhat" difficult to write, with 29% stating it was very or extremely difficult, and 18% found it "not at all" difficult to write.
- 43% felt it was easy to explain their Laws of Life in an essay, whereas 24% found it only somewhat easy, and 33% felt it was not easy at all.
- 83% said it is very or extremely important to them to live out their Law of Life.
- 77% think about their Law of Life "sometimes", "often", or "all the time" when in a tough situation.
- 83% find it somewhat, very, or extremely helpful to think about their Law of Life when in tough situations.
- 58% disclosed that it is "a little" or "somewhat" difficult to live their Law of Life in tough situations, with 33% admitting it is "very" or "extremely" difficult for them.
- 86% of the students were "very" or "extremely" proud of their Law of Life essay.
- 92% stated they live their Law of Life "sometimes", "often", or "all the time", but thought only 66% of other students did the same.

The experience of over eight years in Plainfield to illustrate that urban youth, so often the object of remediation, programmatic interventions, and subjected to the pedagogy of poverty, learn the way others do, via hope and inspiration. Furthermore, despite their life circumstances and intense challenges, their capacities for progress and accomplishment should not be underestimated. Of course, the road ahead for these children continues to navigate through far too much disadvantage. Yet, in the vast majority of cases, their moral compass is not only intact but perhaps and partially as a result of writing these essays and having the conversations that flowed from them in their classrooms, homes, and community, better focused on life principles than many others of their same age. This can be seen clearly in a volume on Laws of Life, including essays by students, reflections by community judges on the process, and a guide for teachers who would like to implement Laws of Life essays in their elementary, middle, or high school classrooms and schools (Elias, Ogburn-Thompson, Lewis, & Neft, 2008).

Conclusion

Those entrusted with the care and nurturance of children should ask whether what is often a myopic focus on academic scores is really in the best interests of children, or whether it is

driven by adults' concerns with accountability and success. To "leave no child behind" is not an adequate goal; there is limited satisfaction in being brought to the back of the pack. Rather, we should aim to relentlessly seek the advancement of all children. In so doing, we affirm our commitment to prepare them for the tests of life, and not for a life of academic tests.

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