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Anxiety and depression in school



Last month the Assisting the Special Child (ASC) Committee, a League sub-committee, hosted two evenings during which a panel of experts presented information about the sobering topic of childhood anxiety and depression. Attendees listened as statistics were shared: 1 in 10 children struggle with diagnosable anxiety which may lead to depression, a number that has been increasing decade over decade. I was able to attend the meeting that took place in Grassie, ON, and left with a positive impression of the care and compassion displayed by both the panelists and the audience.

The awareness that **10% of children are affected by diagnosable anxiety** has implications for how our schools work with students. It allows us to be open with those who experience these emotions so that they know they are neither alone or outside of the ordinary. It is also allows us to realize that if 10% suffer from anxiety, 90% of the school population may have a difficult time really understanding what 'suffering from anxiety and/or depression' means.

Perhaps educating the 90% should be pursued in our school communities. Understanding the reality of the disorders is difficult when they are not the challenge the Lord has placed on your road. Depression is, "a mood disorder that causes a persistent feeling of sadness and loss of interest." Anxiety, is defined as, "intense, excessive and persistent worry and fear about everyday situations." These words succinctly articulate the meaning of the terms, but at the same time, it seems they lack the emotional depth that anxiety disorders and clinical depression may have in the life of a child. Definitions are sometimes easier to find than they are to understand and they provide no indication of how to help those who are struggling.

In light of that, one thing struck me as especially important to remember: there is no simple solution.

Neither childhood anxiety nor depression is cured simply because a word has been read or an act has been taken, a fact stressed by all three panelists in their presentations. When many of us are sad or afraid, we have our 'go to' scripture passages and the Lord uses these to lift us up. It might be Psalm 23, where David declares his comfort in the Lord as we walks through deaths dark valleys. Perhaps we read Matthew 6, where Jesus assures us that we need not worry about tomorrow. **Simply being able to recite scripture will not erase the brokenness that causes anxiety or depression.** For children suffering from anxiety and depression understanding God's care is an important part of their journey to a healthier life. It takes time and modeling for each of us to understand what God's word truly means in relation to the broken parts of our lives. Imagine then, what it is like when one's mind is full of fear and uncertainty. Getting out from under this burden is a long, difficult process.

In terms of the help educators can give, an important aspect is providing a quality listening ear for both parents and students. According to one panelist, a quality listening ear includes being quick to listen, but slow to speak; this includes being careful with both scripture reading and prayer. Those listening with a view to helping should realize that someone who is anxious or depressed may hear the words of our prayers and/or scripture passages differently, finding them pat, or even judgmental.

During the meeting the panelists also discussed whose task it is to help, because teachers are not counselors. In our triangle of care, between church, home and school, who shoulders the greatest load? For this too, there is no simple answer. Educators are a part of a child's life, and because of this we need to work to do our part, even if it is just a little one. Educators also need to remember that they are but one place where help may be sought.

The ASC Committee organized an important and thought provoking evening. I pray that the Lord will use also this work as a blessing in our schools.

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Government update: Kindergarten



Just over a month ago, the Ministry of Education released “**Growing Success: The Kindergarten Addendum**”. This document integrates the teaching and learning that is taking place in kindergarten classrooms with the educational assessment philosophy proposed in an educational document called, *Growing Success*.

Very briefly, **Growing Success outlines what effective assessment should look like in Ontario public school classrooms**. It states that student assessment should have three basic parts. The first is *assessment for learning*, which means that educators tailor lesson content and assessment to suit the needs of the students that they have in front of them. The second part is called *assessment as learning*. This part of assessment has the teacher walking alongside the learner, giving specific feedback and working with student self-assessment. This is meant to foster both a student engagement with the subject content, as well as developing a better awareness of who the child is as a learner. The third assessment section is *assessment of learning*. This culminates in the report parents receive at the end of a term. It is meant to describe the information that has been gathered for reporting purposes, i.e. tests and projects.

Growing Success has influence in League schools. League secondary schools have to show how they implemented the recommendations found in the document as part of their biannual inspections. League elementary school principals have also reviewed the document, and, while perhaps not adopting every element, many have found useful recommendations to help make assessment more effective at their schools.

As it relates to Kindergarten, the growth-minded assessment style supported by *Growing Success* is worked out through, what the Ministry calls, *four frames of learning*. These four frames form the structure around which the teaching and learning in kindergarten take place. The first of these frames is known as **Belonging and Contributing**. This frame looks at planning activities, and assessing the learning that takes place around how children work with others. **Self-regulation and Well-being**, is the title of the second frame. Here, the Kindergarten teacher is called to plan

activities with a view to increasing a student's ability to regulate their actions and emotions in a way that promotes learning. The third frame is **Demonstrating Literacy and Mathematical Behaviours**. This topic looks, not at teaching Kindergarten children to read, write and work math independently, but rather bring them to an emergent understanding of the topics so they will have a foundation upon which to build future school orientated learning tasks. The last frame is **Problem Solving and Innovation**. Here Kindergarten teachers are called to plan for opportunities across the curriculum that allow their charges to engage natural curiosity and explore learning in a fashion that looks a lot like play - play that the teacher makes purposeful.

It is purposeful in that there is assessment *for*, as and of learning as the teacher interacts with the activities the children are engaged in. In *Growing Success* it is called 'noticing and naming the learning'. It describes the process through which a child's play is turned into a learning opportunity. Let's say that a student is playing with blocks. The teacher comes over and speaks to the child about what he or she has done. It might sound like this, "I see you've put down two blue blocks and one green block, then two blue ones and one green one again. We call that a *pattern*." The learning has been noticed, named, and is now ready to be used as a base from which to expand the knowledge of both the child and the class.

Without a doubt **there are critical observations one should make when reading through the new document**. One is how parents are assumed to have a helping role in education, as opposed to the school assisting the parents. Another is the school taking over free play- an area of a child's learning that has traditionally been done at home. In terms of program development, however, there may be valuable lessons to be learned- especially as the League works toward a common report card.



The Pension Committee

In 1975 the League of Canadian Reformed School Societies established a Pension Committee with the following mandate: **The Pension Committee is mandated to review and audit the pension plan obtained through the League for the benefit of staff of member associations, and to report annually its findings and recommendations.** In fulfilling their mandate, the members of this committee have established a group RRSP for LCRSS members.

There are a number of things that the committee has been able to establish for staff of LCRSS members. The first was a stable fund into which staff could invest. To help this, most school boards are matching staff contributions to the fund by up to 5% of their earnings. Also, through working with the investment group, the service fees charged for managing the fund remain very low- especially, when compared to rates charged by many investors who manage individual portfolios.

The Pension Committee has set things up in such a way that members of the group are automatically enrolled in a balanced risk program. However, individual members are free to move their funds around to suit a risk level that they understand is appropriate for their age and retirement goals.

The Pension Committee is also focused on helping schools meet their obligations as they relate to the new Ontario Retirement Pension Plan. School boards and plan members will be receiving an

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update in the near future that will contain details about the impact of these changes.

The Lord has caused the work of this committee to be of benefit to LCRSS members. More information and/or presentations are available by request.

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