

The Blame Game

Most educators tend to see students (or their parents) as the source of their own problems.

By Pamela Darr Wright

(Ms. Wright is a licensed clinical social worker in Virginia.)

A fascinating study by Dr. Galen Alessi, professor of psychology at Western Michigan University, helps to explain why so many parents have problems dealing with schools.¹ Dr. Alessi was interested in finding out the opinions of school psychologists as to the origins of their students' learning problems.

When a child has trouble learning and/or behaving in school, according to Dr. Alessi, the source of the child's problem can usually be traced to one or more of five causes.

1. The child may be misplaced in the curriculum, or the curriculum may include faulty teaching routines.
2. The teacher may not be implementing effective teaching and/or behavioural management practices.
3. The principal and/or other school administrators may not be implementing effective school management practices.
4. The parents may not be providing the home-based support necessary for effective learning.
5. The child may have physical and/or psychological problems that contribute to learning problems.

Fifty school psychologists from different areas of the country were interviewed and asked to complete an informal survey. First, each school psychologist was asked if he agreed that the five factors listed above play a "primary role in a given school learning or behaviour problem." And all the psychologists duly agreed that these factors, alone or together, played a significant role in children's learning problems.

But when they were asked how many of their approximately 5,000 evaluations had actually stated that a child's learning problem was mainly due to any of the first three factors, the psychologists said they had identified almost no students' problems as being the result of things like faulty teaching or poor curriculum.

When asked about the fourth factor (parent and home), they responded that it figured in 10% to 20% of their reports. And for the fifth factor (defects located within the child), the psychologists testified that they had identified this source in 100% of their reports.

In other words, all 5000 students were responsible for their own learning problems, and nearly every curriculum, teacher and principal was ideal.

As a result of his study, Dr. Alessi expressed serious concern. If school psychologists always define children's learning problems as existing solely within the child, he wrote, "it is equally unclear how school psychologists can help resolve this kind of problem."

School psychologists are not the only educators who see the children as the problem. Many people who work in schools share a belief that students' difficulties have little or nothing to do with the curriculum, teaching staff, or school administrators.

They believe that the child's problems are caused by the child himself (to the extent that they are not caused by the child's parents). Educators learn this when they receive their education and training and, because educators associate with other educators, they are not exposed to different perspectives.

If the school staff believe that the children (and in some cases their parents) are responsible for the children's problems, how can parents best protect their children's interests?

The view of the 'child-as-the-problem' exists and persists because it serves a purpose. And there is no way that parents can force educators to abandon their beliefs. Instead, parents should concentrate on trying to get changes to their child's programming.

Parents who have run into a brick wall when they tried to bring about changes in their child's education program need to obtain accurate information about their child's progress. But they are unlikely to obtain this from local school board officials.

Because school psychologists and other school district experts are members of the local educational team, they are inclined to endorse current practices. And because they are paid by the same school board, they are predisposed to recommend only the special services that the district wants to provide.

In my practice, I see many cases in which an independent educational evaluator recommends that a child receive more or different special education services than the district wants to provide. After making such 'pro-child' recommendations, however, these diagnosticians tend to be dropped from the school district's approved list of evaluators.

It is necessary to get comprehensive evaluations from experts who are truly independent. As a result, parents who want to get unbiased information will have to pay for it. But without good quality private sector diagnostic evaluations, parents won't be able to envisage an appropriate educational program for their child.

Children can do without many things, but they cannot do without an appropriate education. The most meaningful gift parents can make to their children is the gift of a good education. This gift will pay dividends for the rest of the child's life.

(Adapted with permission from an article at www.wrightslaw.com)

¹ "Diagnosis Diagnosed: A Systemic Reaction," *Professional School Psychology*, 3(2), 145-151