

# Maslow's Child

Al Proffit

## Abstract

This work is a reflection upon the first time I connected theory to practice as an educator. The theory was Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1954, 1970). I believe that there are factors that impact standardized test scores that are beyond a school's ability to control. Politicians continue to insist that our nation is at risk because of the condition of American's public schools (Bennett, 2003). Phrases such as A Nation At Risk (1983), Goals 2000 (1994) and No Child Left Behind (2001) become well established societal buzz phrases that are often synonymous with the idea that our public schools are failing.

Long ago, and far away, I graduated from an excellent teacher education preparation program. I was taught many wonderful things by caring professors. Even as marvelous as the instruction was, it took the students I would encounter over the following years to make the theory I was taught relevant. While I saw many theories come to life as a public school teacher, none were more immediately relevant than the work of Abraham Maslow (1954, 1970). Allow me this opportunity to introduce to you a young man (Steve) that I now refer to as Maslow's child. Steve was a sixth grader and his life illustrated the basic premise of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

Maslow (1954,1970) offered the proposition that all individuals have specific needs that may be placed in hierarchical order. Different writers explain the particulars of Maslow's work in different ways, but the basic components of his theory are that all individuals have specific needs that are sequential (Hoyle, English, & Steffy, 1998); lower level needs must be at least partially met before the individual may begin to satisfy the needs at higher levels (Daresh, 2001); people may assign differing degrees of importance to their needs (Slavin, 1994); and all humans have differing needs that tend to shape behavior (Hoy and Miskel, 2001).

During my first year teaching, Steve was in my homeroom and first period World History class. Let us face the fact that this is not exactly the kind of subject matter that makes the adolescent heart beat fast with anticipation under the best of conditions. It excited Steve less than most.

One morning I noticed that Steve, who had been in the cafeteria for breakfast, was no longer in sight. Upon closer inspection I found that Steve was indeed still in class but was asleep in the back of the room. To give the reader a more accurate description of what I found, it can be noted that Steve did not simply lay his head down on his desk and subsequently drift off to sleep.

He had actually created a make shift bed by positioning two desks side-by-side and perpendicular to a bookshelf. He had his head in the shelf and was using a couple books and his jacket as a pillow. He was not just napping, he had reached the rapid eye movement stage of sleep.

Nonetheless, as an energetic, enthusiastic, and engaging first year teacher, I was rather taken aback that someone could be so unresponsive to my teaching. So, in true new teacher form I felt that it would be a fine lesson to let Steve sleep until his class left. He would be further behind, have to get the notes, and make up the work he had slept through. Pay me now, or pay me latter I reasoned. I was sure he would come from this incident remorseful, or at least uncomfortable. He would be horrified when he awoke to find that his classmates had moved onto second period.

When it came time to change classes I asked my students to be quiet and not wake Steve. I told them that I was going to teach him a lesson about sleeping in school. I asked the students to tell the next period teacher what I was doing. As my new class came into the room I made sure they did not wake Steve. It was sometime early in fourth period when Steve finally begin to stir. I saw him slowly sit up, yawn, and look about the room. I remembered thinking that it was a good thing that Steve was up and moving. It would have been hard to explain to the superintendent how I let Steve die in the back of my classroom with his head stuffed in a bookshelf.

Given that the class I was now teaching was eighth grade, I was sure that once Steve returned from the Land of Nod he would be frantic to rejoin his class. Rather, undaunted, Steve slowly looked around, raised his hand, and asked what period this was. I, being assured that my teaching strategy was working, announced in a stern teacher voice "Fourth period, Steve." Steve simply replied, "Good, only got to take one book." He got up, grabbed the book, yawned again, and proceeded to leave the room and shuffle down the hall in search of his classmates. I was so surprised by his response that I didn't say anything, knowing that he would be returning to my room for noon hour. We would certainly take this matter up then.

Steve returned to my room at lunchtime. However, he didn't share my need to discuss his rather deep state of unconsciousness in my class. He was not belligerent and was willing to

accept the consequences, but he was not remorseful. When I asked him why he had gone to sleep in my class he replied, "Cause I was sleepy." There is nothing like an honest answer from an adolescent

I was troubled by Steve's nonchalant attitude, as well as the seemingly indifferent attitude of his classmates. I took the matter up with a senior colleague who also taught Steve. I told her I didn't think Steve was lazy, but he always seemed tired and sleepy in my class. Her face became very serious as she told me that before I made any specific judgments on Steve's classroom behavior, or, in this case, lack of it, I needed to see where Steve lived. I made arrangements to make my first home visit. I had not been in Steve's home long before a transformation in my basic teaching philosophy began. Steve, and his family, introduced me to Abraham Maslow.

Steve lived in a small house without running water, and as the oldest of six children, he had been relegated to sleeping on the couch. I later learned that in warm weather he slept in an abandoned car. Given that it was January, Steve had been sleeping in the house on the couch where his dad often watched television until the early morning hours. I felt that this was very insensitive of his father. I asked him why he didn't just go to bed and let Steve sleep. He told me that he had been injured and his pain did not allow him to sleep well. He watched television during those nights that his pain kept him awake.

Understanding that such matters must be taken up with Social Services, I discussed the matter with my principal. He told me that the school had asked the Department of Social Services to look into Steve's situation a couple of years ago. After a hearing, the children had been taken from the parents and placed in individual foster homes. Within six months they all were reunited with their parents because the children were clearly miserable. The children were not unloved, only poor.

As a result of this visit, I begin to ask myself some fundamental questions. Was I meeting Steve's best interest by making him stay awake in World History, or possibly let him sleep so he would be somewhat rested for the Math and Language Arts classes that immediately followed my class? I understand the argument that letting Steve sleep could promote undesirable

behavior. However, the truth of the matter is there were times Steve's need for food and sleep outweighed everything else. Maslow 101.

I can also understand the argument that providing Steve with a place to sleep was not my responsibility. Regardless of the fact this was not in my job description, it was a part of my teaching reality. My decision to let Steve sleep during a good many of my classes forced me to compromise what I had been taught in college. It also potentially compromised my image as a classroom teacher. Thankfully that did not happen and I survived to relate Steve's story and how it demonstrates one of the basic assumptions of Maslow's work.

When we consider Maslow's theory we can expect that behavior may often be driven by needs. It is important to consider that needs are relative and a matter of individual perspective. From Steve's perspective my classroom was a perfect place to sleep. It was warm, safe, and available immediately following breakfast. From my perspective as an educator I reasoned that Steve's morning nap in my class could provide a boost that would allow him an optimal learning situation for the aforementioned Math and the Language Arts classes. In no way do I intend to diminish the importance of the social sciences.

The first step in my attempting to help Steve was to establish some rules. We agreed that he would sleep at night when he could and only use my room to catch up on sleep when he really needed it. He also agreed to not sleep in any other classes and would try harder in all classes, including mine. Finally, in the event that he needed to sleep during my class he would meet with me during our noon break to get the highlights of what he missed earlier in the day. I reasoned that this would be an appropriate motivator as I encouraged Steve to sleep at night when he could.

In the meanwhile, the Department of Social Services agreed to seek solutions to this new slant to an old concern. To this day I do not know what all occurred, or how, but it seems that a television line was run into Steve's Mom and Dad's bedroom. A small television and second recliner was donated from private sources. While I never learned the identity of the sources, I suspect the television came from one of my colleagues.

With time I saw Steve awake during the entire day. I felt a private sense of intrinsic satisfaction. As the year proceeded, I learned the value of working as part of a team attempting

to secure needed services and material goods for families like Steve's. I also came to the understanding that faculty members had long been doing this. They taught with their hearts and minds. They helped me to understand that when you experience poverty such as Steve's, things like a full belly and a smile are as important as understanding the economic ramifications of the ancient fertile crescent. They helped me to understand Maslow.

During my career I have I learned that Maslow's work is applicable to all children in our public schools. From an educator's perspective it is at times overwhelming to consider the responsibilities that our public schools face as they attempt to equally educate every child. Their needs are as critical and essential as they are diverse and complex. Their situations are complicated in legal and personal terms. Their lives, at times, may hang in the balance of an educator's action, or inaction.

So, as politicians carry the time worn banner of school reform, I will offer from experience that there are many children living in situations that negatively impact their education. Often these are situations are beyond the public schools ability, or responsibility, to control. There can be no question that these societal problems have tremendous impact upon our nation's public schools. Simply put, schools are not designed to meet, on a sustained basis, the most basic of human needs. The reality is that schools cannot possibly provide their students with the kind of care that an immediate family can provide. In most every case, a child in a hostile or non-nurturing family situation will experience some form of difficulty in school. Schools will also experience difficulties as they interact with, and attempt to meet the needs of, these students.

Today schools present "a challenge undreamed of in previous generations of educators" (Intrator, 2003, p. 187). It seems that judging a school's worth by a single set of statistical data collected once a year falls short of fully understanding what our schools actually do on a daily basis. In many cases, student achievement and school success are not fully reflected in standardized "end of year" or "end of course" test scores.

Troy (2003) reports that 14.4 million students of the public school system live in abject poverty; 7.2 million come to school hungry each day; 6.2 million have limited English proficiency, and 2 million speak no English at all; 6 million have disabilities for which public schools must compensate; 2 million are latchkey children; 2 million are abused and neglected at home; 1

million suffer from the effects of lead poisoning; 500,000 are from foster homes and institutionalized care; and 400,000 are crack babies.

These statistics don't even take into account the millions of children who are in desperate need of medical, dental, or optical assistance; those who watch their mothers beaten regularly; those who struggle with issues of addiction; those who are trying to cope with life after rape; those who are pregnant and do not know which way to turn; those who are abandoned by one or both parents; those who are obese; and those who are rejected by society for various reasons.

I think that Maslow's work suggests that Troy's (2003) statistics represent situations that will in all likelihood negatively impact standardized test scores. From my experience I have found that the economic status of children is seemingly directly correlated to test scores. The acquisition of knowledge is difficult for children who struggle daily in an attempt to satisfy their most basic physiological needs.

In a sense of double jeopardy, it may be argued that if standardized test scores become the only significant judge of student achievement, the same children who are struggling to satisfy the most basic of human needs will receive the message that they are just not smart enough to master schoolwork. They may begin to lose the desire to even try. Once this mindset of learned helplessness is in place these students may begin to feel that they have nothing left to lose, including an education. As a result, undesirable behaviors and activities may result, thus creating more problems for the child and the school.

In making this argument I acknowledge that there exist isolated examples that run counter to my basic premise. Some children living in abject poverty do rise above their personal situations. However, I see no evidence that causes me to rethink my belief that these examples are exceptions, and not the norm. I strongly feel that caution must be exercised when basing general assumptions and expectations upon exceptionalities and outlier statistics.

When I was a beginning teacher, Steve helped me to realize that there are many children crying for help in our nation's public schools. Their cries come in many forms. These cries demand considerably more attention than proclaiming from a podium that we will leave none of them behind.

If we are serious about leaving no child behind, we need to do the same for our schools. I strongly advocate that we need to establish and maintain high expectations for our schools. It is good to establish rigorous standards and to hold our schools responsible for meeting these standards. However, I am suggesting that we, as a society, must accept our responsibility of giving all of our nation's schools what they need in terms of support and resources to get this job done.

Often times our school facilities are inadequate, teachers salaries are too low, supplies are limited, technology lags behind the work world, and schools are often forced to cut curriculum in times of economic downturn. These problems are magnified for schools located within areas of widespread poverty. If we as a society are intending to hold all schools accountable for educating Maslow's children, we need to do a better job of supplying them with the funds they need. In the end, all of Maslow's children are our own. Educators have long realized this, and have never wanted to leave any child behind. I am glad that our nation's politicians now finally seem to agree.

## Epilogue

The last I heard, Steve had earned enough money cutting grass to buy a truck by the time he was sixteen. He used this truck to expand his lawn business. I do not know if this is what he now does for a living, and if it is, I am not sure just how much I helped him, unless of course, he dreamed it up during first period.

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