

Who Honors the Children?

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We expect children to be attentive in class, respectful of their teachers and each other, and to devote themselves to the intense effort it takes to be prepared for life in our rapidly changing world. When these expectations are not met, our response is to crack down on schools with a growing list of requirements designed to bring students into submission as learners. Perhaps we are looking at the challenge incorrectly. Perhaps we need to examine our growing failure to give children the respect that human beings deserve.

For example:

- On September 11, 2001, after hearing about the attack on the World Trade Center, every sophomore in Indianapolis, Indiana sat down for day one of Indiana's high stakes standardized test.
- A few months ago, California school teachers were given explicit instructions on how to handle high-stakes test booklets on which children have vomited.
- On April 30, 2002, girls attending a school dance at Rancho Bernardo school near San Diego had their skirts pulled up by the vice principal in front of boys and men to see if they were wearing thong underwear. At least one girl also had her top pulled down by a school official in public to see if she was wearing a bra.

While these are (thankfully) isolated incidents, there are numerous smaller insults directed toward children at schools throughout the country. Children are being denied the dignity we would afford to complete strangers, and yet we expect them to be attentive in class and respect their educators and their school. How can we command respect when it is not afforded to the people put into our care?

For years I've pointed out that schools, prisons, and mental hospitals are the only places where, if you don't go, someone comes to get you. Of course, the rise of home schooling and other alternatives to the little red schoolhouse are changing this picture a bit, but many educators and administrators feel that their allegiance is to the institution, not to those it was designed to serve. The children are expected to show up, and the teachers present their content under increasingly constrained conditions driven (at least in their minds) by our blind rush toward high-stakes testing that is supposed to provide "accountability" through norm-referenced tests. Schools are paid by the number of seats occupied, not by their capacity to engage learners in a way that would have them clamoring for education even if it were not required.

While it is hard to fault the educator for "teaching to the test" when his or her job is on the line, our affection for these flawed instruments are one more example of how we treat children as suspect entities to be probed and tested as if they were

artifacts from another planet. The fact that the examinations so warmly embraced by politicians of all colors (who have consistently refused to take the very tests they endorse!) are kept secret from the public, even after they are given, lends credence to those who claim that our children are being reduced to pure labels on which their capacity as humans is encoded as a number.

Not only are we attacking the human dignity of our youth, we have put a mean edge on our attacks. Is it any wonder that students detach themselves from the classroom? Is it any wonder that some students feel so pushed to the edge that they cross over into violent acts themselves? They are being abused by the very institution designed to prepare them for their future as independent thinking human beings.

It seems to me that one possible solution to this problem is to start with a deep look at our language to see what it says about our approach to teaching. For example, we talk about educating our students, testing our students, assessing their progress. In other words, we talk about the whole spectrum of the educational process as if it were something we did to students, not something that they accomplished with our facilitation. By taking this view that students are acted upon by educators and governments, we dehumanize them. Once we think of our children as less than human, the behavior displayed in Indianapolis and near San Diego can be understood. Understood, but not accepted.

Let me give an example from another domain. If you talk to musicians, you'll find that they don't "play" their instruments. They see their role as one in which their job is to let the instrument speak with its own voice. I was first introduced to this concept by a brilliant piano teacher, and have had it reinforced in my experiences as a guitarist. I recently purchased an incredibly sweet jazz guitar that just sings when I coax bossa nova progressions from it. Because I also play the blues (and have several guitars that are blues instruments) I decided to try playing blues on this new instrument. At first the guitar fought me every step of the way. It was only after hours of exploration that I was able to find the way to elicit a deep blues soul from this instrument, and now it plays both jazz and blues quite nicely. I've found that every instrument I've ever played has its own personality, and that one of my jobs was to find how best to allow the spirit of the instrument generate the tones that could be shared with others.

If this all sounds too mystical for you, talk with any violinist or other musician – you'll hear similar stories.

Well, if this is true for something made from a few pounds of wood, it most certainly is true of our children. We can't "teach" our children anything unless they are active participants in the process. We need their permission to teach them. We need to join them in a commitment for learning that works both ways. For just as our children can learn from us, so we can learn from them.

The folklore of the blues tells of the crossroads where the budding musician goes at midnight to make a pact with the devil, in exchange for becoming a blues player. This popular story, repeated so much it has taken the form of fact, is a

misreading of the legend. The musician goes to the crossroads to choose a path, not to make a pact with the devil. The blues player's life is hard, and it takes total commitment. There are many paths we can take in life (represented by the crossroads); which one do we choose? And, once we've chosen a path, are we willing to completely dedicate ourselves to being the very best we can be? I've heard guitarists who lack mechanical skill, but whose licks come straight from the heart. They are authentic, and this authenticity breeds respect for their artistry.

The same is true for us as educators. Consider the first day of school. The bustle and excitement of the day leaves something unsaid and untested. Imagine an opening class where the teachers go to their own crossroads to see if they are willing to dedicate themselves to helping students learn to the best of their abilities. Imagine the students formally dedicating themselves to doing what it will take to become volitional learners -- active participants in their own learning. In other words, imagine we took the time to connect our minds, hearts and bodies to the sacred process of education before class starts. In this world the atrocities of Indianapolis, San Diego, and elsewhere would be unimaginable. In this world, students and teachers would be learners who celebrated the process every day of their lives.

Do schools like this exist? Of course they do. Many schools throughout the country have teachers who treat children and each other with dignity and respect. Teachers who, like the lonely blues guitarist, have made their trip to the crossroads and have dedicated themselves to service in support of the next generation of leaders. Teachers who understand that human dignity and caring are more important than any score on a standardized test.

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