

Why Transform Education?

"I go all over the country offering workshops on all sorts of topics but the cry is always the same...they have no discipline, they couldn't care less, they aren't motivated, they're very violent, they feel no shame, they're so rude, they won't take on any responsibility, they can't keep a promise, they show no respect or even self-respect and so on in an endless string of criticism from the teacher directed at the student as though the student lived in a bubble.

"My answer is always the same: WE have to change, WE have to set the climate, WE have to realize life is not the same as it used to be, WE have to find ways to create the climate, to educate, to teach cooperation and harmony, to model what we expect and to have high expectations of the educated person."

~Susan Hillyard, co-author of Global Issues

I often wonder what would happen if news media would agree to spend one day each week covering only the good things that happen around the world. But as a radio reporter once told me when I asked him to cover a community project undertaken by students in my high school, "People aren't interested in that kind of stuff!"

Unfortunately, there's some truth to his belief. One need only look at the most popular news blurbs on the Internet or the most popular search terms to realize that there are many people who enjoy wallowing in other people's misery or living vicariously through the morally questionable antics of some "celebrity." However, I do believe that the media's choices of what (and what not) to report and how to report it play a much larger role in shaping our perceptions of the world than they want us to believe.

The negative focus adds to the sense of helplessness and powerlessness that many young people experience. Rebelling against authority in an attempt to define one's own identity is a normal part of growing up. But where that rebellion once took the form of missing a curfew, or sneaking a cigarette or a beer

behind the garage, young people today see that more and more violent and counter-cultural behavior is required to get the attention of a society desensitized to violence.

In the quote at the beginning of this article, Susan Hillyard, Secondary Headmistress of the Wellspring School in Buenos Aires, Argentina was explaining her reason for sponsoring an international forum on Teaching for Peace. Around the world, there are many examples of students who are involved in and excited about their learning. But the growing complaints of teachers about students and their behaviors are based on real incidents that have increased in number over the years.

Even if they are in the minority, the increasingly destructive actions of a growing segment of our young people can't be ignored without grave consequences.



- ☑ In 2003, U.S. students ages 12-18 were victims of about 740,000 violent crimes and 1.2 million crimes of theft at school. 29 percent of students in grades 9-12 reported that drugs were made available to them on school property, and 9 percent of students were threatened or injured with a weapon on school property.¹
- ☑ The Okinawa Ministry of Education and Science announced the results of a survey on violence by public school students during 2001. The survey showed that the total number of violent cases in the vicinity of schools counted just over 40,000, marking a 10.4 percent increase from the previous year. The survey also found that violence against teachers is increasing. Rather than breaking things or using violence against other students, teachers are often targeted. In the same year, there were 411 cases of violence among junior high school students fighting students from other schools.
- ☑ Depending on the survey, between 30% and 70% of youth in the United States are estimated to be involved in bullying as either a bully, a target of bullying, or both.²
- ☑ In Western Australia, statistics show that about 5% of students were suspended from school over an 18 months period. Suspensions were given for such behaviors as verbal abuse, damage to property, violation of school rules, and for more serious offenses such as selling drugs and physical assault.
- ☑ More than two-thirds of academically talented eighth-graders say they have been bullied at school and nearly one-

third harbored violent thoughts as a result, according to a study published in *Gifted Child Quarterly*.³ Four times as many mainstreamed, special-needs children have been targets of bullying, compared to their “normal” classmates.⁴

- ☑ In Bangkok, Thailand, students from rival technical schools are attacking one another with guns, knives, and hand grenades! Suggested reasons for the violence range from Western influence to teenage “tribalism” to violent computer games! It’s interesting that many of the proposed solutions begin with “They should...”

It’s hardly necessary to add to this laundry list of examples of student violence and alienation. And it’s critical that we not lay these issues solely at the feet of schools and teachers. But it is also critical that educators accept that they can and do play a role in, not just the intellectual development of students, but their social, emotional, and psychological development.

After a school killing spree in another state, the then-governor of Oregon commented, “All of us should look at how we have failed as a society and how this could happen [anywhere].” ...and then what? Putting the blame on “society” is one of those linguistic tricks that has everyone’s head bobbing like a bobble head doll in a car window...either nodding in agreement, or shaking in disgust. Although such a statement evokes emotion, it rarely produces any action. In fact, it tends to relieve people from taking any personal responsibility for action. After all, what can ‘little old me’ do in the face of this huge entity called SOCIETY?



Even when people are moved to take the next step, it generally involves casting around looking for a less nebulous group or institution to blame. We feed the “Someone ought to...” fires

without ever getting specific about who that “someone” is and what each of us might personally do.

Schools and parents take the bulk of the criticism about the unhealthy behaviors of children. They in turn, blame the lack of social programs to deal with poverty and the psychological and nutritional needs of young people. Yet many teachers and schools are reluctant to work in any meaningful way with parents or social service agencies.



Schools, social service agencies, parents, communities, and other segments of society each define the “problems” in their own image and generate “answers” based on the conventional wisdom or historical methodology of their own “field.”

When we say that “society” must take responsibility for the healthy development of its young people, we are using a figure of speech called a metonymy. “Society” can’t take responsibility for anything because it doesn’t exist as a single entity. Society is the combined thinking and actions of individuals and groups. If those groups work at cross-purposes, or if they fail to see the “big picture” in terms of the influences on our young people, fragmentation occurs.

In education alone, we’ve seen that fragmentation in reform efforts focusing on standards, content, methodology, teacher

preparation, school structuring, class size, discipline, assessment...the list is endless. Each of these efforts focuses on a single facet of education in the mechanistic belief that by fixing the parts, the whole will function properly.

Education...any social institution that deals with individual human beings...doesn’t yield to mechanistic analysis or easy fixes. Yet politicians and policy makers continue to promote programs based on one-size-fits-all mentality. They continue to devise simplistic answers for extremely complex problems. And then they condemn and punish schools and teachers for their “failure” to achieve unrealistic goals.

One of the most detrimental effects of these programs is that they focus on knowledge rather than the development of the whole child. Perhaps I’m just old-fashioned, but I still have a difficult time understanding why amassing X number of facts by test day is infinitely more important than discussions of real issues that may well last through students’ lives. And why collecting information about what’s “out there” is infinitely more important than exploring what’s “in here” (the mind of the individual.)

Perhaps someone can explain to me why it’s O.K. to let a racial slur go by because there’s so much math to “cover” before Friday’s test. Or why bullying is ignored because addressing it would mean that the class wouldn’t “cover” all the information in that day’s lesson plan.

Oh, that’s right. Schools need to be accountable, don’t they? And the way we make them accountable is by filling teachers’ and students’ time with the dissemination and acquisition of “hard facts” that can be assessed through simple multiple choice

questions. There has to be plenty of “hard data” on which to judge whether a school passes or fails. Passes or fails what? To paraphrase a Biblical verse, “What does it profit a society if its children gain the knowledge of the world without the wisdom or heart to use it wisely?”

The present focus of education directs more and more of educators’ time and energy to meeting the demands of government mandates...and away from the students those mandates claim to serve. As so often happens when governments step in to “improve” society, simplistic rules take the place of reasoned decisions appropriate to individual situations. Although the stated goals are to provide equal opportunity for all students, here is what is actually happening.

- ☑ In Arkansas, teachers were being pulled from their classes and sent to workshops “on building questions so our third graders can score higher on national exams and make the district look better on paper”.
- ☑ One principal of a downstate Illinois high school is sacrificing a semester of social studies to prep his 11th graders for their state math exam.
- ☑ A grade school in Brookfield, Illinois is teaching kindergartners how to color in ovals and encouraging them to color pictures of themselves “doing their very best on test day.”⁵
- ☑ An increasing number of states have lowered the requirement for passing the tests. Others have used technicalities, such as attendance, to drop thousands of poor test scores. Students who are likely to lower the test scores are secretly encouraged to drop out of school

and dropout numbers have been hidden.⁶

And this helps disadvantaged students and gives equal opportunities to all students how?

Preparation for the Future?

Traditionally, schools have been perceived as places to “prepare students for the future.” And aren’t we doing a bang-up job of it? There was a time when students would ask “Why do I have to learn this?” and a teacher would make an effort to show the student how the information might one day benefit them intellectually, emotionally, psychologically, or financially. Now the answer is, “So you can get a high score on the test and get into a good college.” (If they were honest, they would say, “So you can get a high score on the test to make the school look good!”)

What are those kindergarten students who are filling in bubbles learning that will help them in the future? What are the students who miss a semester of social studies or science in order to study for a math test learning? As they focus on the lowest forms of cognitive processes—being able to state, identify, recognize, etc. because those are what will be tested, how are their needs being served? How are their minds being developed? What lessons are they learning about the role that they are expected to play in society?

And while purporting to “prepare students for the future,” what of today? What is the fallout in terms of the psychological well-being of young people?

Certainly it is important for our young people to be helped and encouraged to acquire the skills and knowledge they will need for the future. But given the pace at which the world is changing, those skills and that

knowledge are unlikely to be the thousands of “Students shall...” benchmarks that we find in state and national standards documents.

Today's students come to school possessed of more information than most of us over 50 would have dreamed of acquiring in our lifetime. What they don't have is the wisdom to use that information in ways that will benefit themselves and their world. What they don't have is the sense of how that information can be combined, manipulated, enhanced, and creatively used to make a difference in their lives and the lives of others. And what they don't have is knowledge of their place in shaping the future. Yet decision makers in education are obsessed with cramming in even more information...a task which more and more teachers see as counterproductive.

A Case in Point

About 67% of the students who arrive at one school on a Montana Indian reservation live in poverty. They arrive in kindergarten considerably behind their peers nationwide. By the time they graduate, that are on par with other Montana kids (who score above the national average.)

In math alone, by the time they reach 8th grade, these students have mastered ratios, unit conversions, and geometry. They've learned precise measurement, budgeting, and planning. Perhaps of greater importance, *they understand why these math skills are necessary.*

They learn these things by building their own house! In groups of three, they randomly receive a checkbook containing between \$100,000 and \$200,000. They



search real estate guides, “purchase” a piece of land, estimate and pay for installation of water, sewer, electric, and telephone lines. Using cardboard, they construct a scale model of their home. They estimate building costs, measuring for carpet, wallpaper, siding, roofing, and paint. And when they finish, they write a paper reflecting on what they have learned and what they would do differently.

Wow! Would that every school could achieve these results with “disadvantaged” students, right? Well, not exactly. First of all, most of the teachers in this school don't meet national requirements for “highly qualified.” Worse, the school is probably going to have to cut this type of project-based real-world learning because the “canned” tests—the only ones the government will pay for—don't test what the students have learned!

Stories like this appear on teacher forums every day. So why haven't these same teachers risen up in rebellion and taken back the classroom? One of the big answers is money.

How do we explain to students that they are less important than their test scores because good test scores mean more money for the school? What lessons do we teach when we tell students that there isn't time for them to learn about history or art or music...that there isn't time for them to ask questions...because they won't be tested on those things?

Oh, that's right...we don't have to explain. They understand that the end justifies the means by watching us and the choices we make. So why are we surprised when they cheat on tests or when they don't demonstrate caring or concern for others? They've learned their lessons well.

There is a glimmer of hope. More and more schools, particularly rural schools, which suffer the most from government mandates and threats of withholding funding, are seriously considering turning their backs on government funding so that they can return to teaching in ways that are effective for their communities and their students.

Teaching for the Unknowable Future

In the Dec 2003/Jan 2004 issue of *Educational Leadership*, Eliot Eisner points out that “The unknowable future is not a sound basis on which to plan curriculum.” Eisner suggests that schools should focus on basic aims such as the development of judgment—ways of dealing with problems that have complex answers rather than memorizing answers to simplistic questions.

Other goals should include the development of critical thinking and the ability to explore alternative ideas. Meaningful literacy would include the ability to encode and decode meaning in multiple symbolic forms including language, mathematics, art, and music. These symbolic processes “evoke, develop, and refine the modes of thinking that contribute to the cultivation of what is broadly called *mind*.”

Collaboration, rather than competition, would give students the opportunity to recognize their own strengths and the strengths of others while appreciating that goals are more easily achieved when people cooperate. And last, but certainly not least, a fifth goal of schools would be to foster a spirit of service in which “students can make a contribution to the larger community.”

If students do not engage in those practices in school, why would we expect them to do so in the future? Of what benefit will the

thousands of facts they’ve memorized be without the ability to use them for anything more than a game of Trivial Pursuit? And why would we expect those students to dream of changing the world for the better when they’ve been taught, both consciously and unconsciously, that their ideas are much less important than the accumulated “wisdom” of the ages. At least those parts that be easily assessed on a multiple choice test!

Encouraging students to engage in open discussion of issues and express themselves and their opinions, giving them choices, and involving them with one another and with the larger culture can go a long way toward giving students a sense of purpose and self-efficacy. If we don’t encourage and foster dreams in our young people, how are we “preparing them for a future” that is any better than the present? How are we teaching them to care if we don’t?

Attempting to influence human behavior through laws and programs that ignore individual circumstances is an exercise in futility. The present effort of governments to “standardize” education distracts us from the task that caring teachers know must be faced—helping every child grow and develop.

Difficult, but Essential

In her article, “Deciding to Teach Them All” in the October 2003 issue of *Educational Leadership*, Carol Ann Tomlinson says, “To teach each student from his or her point of entry into the curriculum and perspective as a learner is more than difficult. It is a goal beyond the grasp of even the most expert teacher. The outcome for students who are outliers, however, is likely to be vastly different when a teacher pursues that elusive goal than when the teacher—by intent or default—abandons it.”

Tomlinson poses the question, "Do I intend to teach each individual child?" And she suggests that,

"Although there seems to be only one answer to the question, the reality is more complex. The circumstances of teaching make it far more likely that we respond by saying, 'I intend to teach the curriculum in as reasonable a way as I know how, and I hope that most of the students will respond.'"

The need to transform—to shift our attention from information to students—is close to the "tipping point." More and more people in education are writing about it, talking about it, trying to figure out how it might be accomplished. But because it is so difficult, we must keep up the pressure.

Similar arguments for transformation have been put forth for decades. Consider this quote:

"In our schools, what to teach, how to teach, how to manage—all of these in essence perpetuate themselves largely by social tradition. Unless otherwise especially taught, teachers are likely to teach as they were taught, especially so in the advanced classes. Parents, in spite of lip service to "progress," hold the schools largely to the traditional conception of what they count the "essentials."

"The thesis here maintained is that these traditional 'essentials' are in large measure mistaken... and that the mistake is strategically located in the static and outworn meanings given to such school terms as 'learn,' 'study,' 'curriculum.' [M]any of the institutional aspects of our school management have mistakenly been

built [on these inadequate meanings], and on the same false basis much of the modern 'measurement movement' has too largely founded itself. So that now too often do inadequate meaning, mistaken management, and 'scientific measurement' each support the other against more adequate views."

Although it could have been written today, the quote was actually written in 1930 by William H. Kilpatrick. *Teachers College Record* has recently done a retrospective of Kilpatrick's writings. The articles⁷ make fascinating reading.

Educators know that change must occur at a fundamental level...yet they pacify themselves with cosmetic changes. The belief that education is about knowledge, rather than people, is so pervasive that to some, fundamental change is literally "unthinkable."

Not only is Newtonian/mechanistic thinking at the heart of many of education's ills, but public education is a marvelous example of Newton's First Law. A body in motion stays in motion unless acted upon by an outside force. The larger the body, the more force is required to change its state of motion. But regardless of the difficulty, how can we, in good conscience, fail to make the attempt!

"The great enemy of the truth is very often not the lie—deliberate, contrived, and dishonest—but the myth—persistent, persuasive, and unrealistic."

~John Fitzgerald Kennedy

The alienation of a generation of students is a disaster in the making. When a disaster happens...be it a nuclear incident, the crash of the Space Shuttle, terrorist attacks, deaths and injuries due to flawed automobile or air-

plane parts, or unexpected reactions to “approved” drugs, the search for someone to blame begins. How or why did this happen? Who knew about potential problems? Why didn't they say or do something?

The answers, of course, are myriad. Each person must evaluate his or her own behavior. But for how long can we continue to block our ears to the sounds of our own consciences, to shut our eyes to the growing alienation of students, and to keep silent as students are sacrificed at the altar of business and government interest?



Lest those of us in the United States think we have a monopoly on government interference in the educational process, here's a quote from Bruce Hammonds of New Zealand, in his newsletter *Leading and Learning*.⁸

“We all know, as our fragmented social system crumbles around us, that the 'Emperor has no clothes'. We need to break down this dependency on others and trust that 'ordinary' people, given a chance, know what is required for their schools and children.”

“As we visit schools we are appalled at the mountain of folders and paperwork that have diverted schools from focusing on teaching and learning. It is all a bit depressing. Principals have been turned into managers continually responding to the latest Ministry edict.

“We believe it is time to start a conversation with our communities about what they want for their children. How can we all help students to develop their talents to live in a future so different from our past? How can we all contribute to creating a better community? Let's insist that the politicians and their advisers respond to our needs for a change.”

Do we have to transform? Of course not. We can continue to go on griping and complaining...waiting for “someone” to do something. In the words of Dr. W. Edwards Deming,

“It is not necessary to change. Survival is not mandatory.”

Transforming Questions

In her article, “Deciding to Teach Them All” in the October 2003 issue of *Educational Leadership*, Carol Ann Tomlinson described how a colleague shaped her own thinking to enable her to confront the task of “teaching them all.”

- ☑ In place of “What labels do my students have?” she asked, “What are their particular interests and needs?”
- ☑ In place of “What are my students' deficits?” she asked, “What are their strengths?” thus changing the tone of the classroom from negative to positive and from “can't” to “can.”
- ☑ In place of “How do I remediate students?” she asked, “What can I do to ensure that each student works at the highest level of thought and production possible?”

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| <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> In place of “How can I motivate these students?” she asked, “What releases the motivation born in all humans?”</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> In place of “What do I do if a student cannot accomplish my agenda?” she asked, “How might I adapt the agenda to work for the student?”</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> And in place of “Where should we put this student?” she asked, “What cir-</p> | <p>cumstances will be the most effective catalyst for this student's development?”</p> <p>Notice that these questions shift the area of concern from the external to the internal and from the teacher to the student. The teacher is using questions to focus her attention on those factors that have the greatest chance of facilitating learning—for all students.</p> |
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