The Art of Schooling:
Places of Authentic Learning and Caring

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In the spring of the school year, the high school and first-grade students came together for a collaborative, multi-age tile mosaic art project. Three times a week students from two first-grade classes would travel to the high school to work with a high school mentor in creating tile mosaic pieces. Those pieces would be brought together on the wall of the elementary school at the end of the year. Watching those students come together in the shared art experience served to remind me of the real treasure that teaching and learning can be. When school communities risk constructing learning that is outside the traditional organizational pattern, then they "risk" having a place where learning is authentic and caring for each other becomes real. It takes courage on the part of the student, the teacher, and the principal to risk this type of experience.

In watching the students and teacher work together, one trait emerged as essential to a caring and authentic school: empathy. Empathy is that interpersonal quality that allows one to know the feelings of another (Kelehear, 2001; 2002). As students worked with each other, as teachers worked with the students, and as the principal assisted the teacher, the level of empathy present was the critical element for a qualitative relationship. And at the same time, the participants cultivated a sense of caring in the relationship as they began to understand the commitment in working together toward a shared goal. In as much as caring became part of the school climate, the relationships became more substantive and paying attention to each other became the order of the day.

How does such a school community, one that emphasizes authenticity and caring, celebrate the student, the teacher, the principal, and the curriculum? Based on the observations from this multi-age experience, I share a vision for such a place.

Student as Performer

It would be difficult to imagine how the tile mosaic project might be assessed with a pencil and paper test alone. But the inability to conduct such an assessment does not reduce a project's academic worth. In fact, one might argue that those things that are not easily measured are most valuable. When asked what really matters, I recognize that the sine qua non in schooling is academic achievement. The difference for me, however, lies in the understanding of what constitutes achievement, about what really matters beyond the grades and testing.

In his book Schools Without Failure William Glasser (1969) emphasizes that allowing grades to create an incentive for learning has, in fact, a contracting effect on what is learned. The more that grades, and by extension standardized tests, are emphasized the more that students want to know what is exactly on the test, and only those items on the test. Students come to believe that any other information can become an obstacle or a distraction to getting the grade, and thus should be ignored (p. 65). I believe that there is a role for grades and standardized testing. Indeed, they can help provide accountability for learning certain bits of information. But to rely only on grades and traditional assessments is painfully shortsighted.

I would argue that students should be encouraged to do what Ted Sizer (1992) in his book Horace's School calls exhibitions. This type of assessment helps encourage students to bring together facts and basic learnings to create a new understanding—what Mortimer Adler (p. 29) called maieutic expression. A word of Greek origin, maieutic is loosely translated as "giving birth." Just as an artist might be able to take the elements and principles of art to paint a still life, it is the artist's use of those "skills" and the simultaneous interpretation of that object through experience and feelings that can give birth to a new perspective, a new understanding, and a deeper cognition (Eisner, September 2001). Similarly, other aspects of the curriculum could have the same consequence.

I recognize that students must first come to command facts and information, the kind of information that is readily assessed through pencil and paper tests and standardized assessments. Quickly, however, students begin to use the newly acquired information in applications of the concepts through repeated practice and coaching, just as the artist begins to command the elements and principles of art. Although many very good teachers might guide students to this level of mastery, this is not enough. Through demonstrations, exhibitions, or other public forums, teachers should encourage students to create a new deeper understanding, a maieutic expression. The student's knowledge and understanding takes on what Eisner (1994) calls "a social dimension in human experience" (p. 39). And, I would suggest that schooling begins to be about deeper understanding of the human condition, about higher levels of cognition, about what really matters.
Teacher as Conductor

The teacher in the story above held a lesson plan for the tile project. The plan had a list of objectives, materials needed, activities, and assessments. That lesson plan might have met the standards of some teacher assessment instruments. But this teacher’s project was so much more than a five-step lesson plan. This art teacher assumed multiple roles as she conducted the project. With each of her roles, however, she communicated to her students in word and action that what they did, how they treated each other, really mattered.

Understanding the teacher’s role in developing the type of student understanding described above is obviously critical. The traditional view that the teacher is the conveyer of knowledge and truth is only partially correct. Just as Dewey asserts, I believe that teaching is more about providing educative experiences for students than the passive, spectator model where students come, watch, and learn. Students have many, many experiences every day. Indeed, having experiences is really no problem. Providing quality experiences, ones that create such a cognitive dissonance that students are forced to intellectually engage them, is the challenge for teachers.

In my view, teachers, among other responsibilities, serve to instruct, guide, redirect, support and challenge students. Teachers also should model what they teach. The history teacher reads and writes history. The art teacher is an artist. The English teacher writes poetry or narrative. When students are able to view the teacher as the embodiment of the idea, or the ideal, then teachers begin to instruct the students, not by words alone, but in practice. The curriculum takes on life as it moves from the text to the teacher. The teacher breathes life into the structure that is the curriculum. In a word, the teacher becomes midwife to the emergence of ideas.

Conversely, I believe that the notion of teacher-proof curricula is a cancer to the heart of teaching. Just as students might come to a new understanding, a maieutic experience, teachers can also have a gestalt experience when, through the course of working with the students, they understand learning and teaching in a whole new way. To offer a prescription, or a script, for the teaching act flies in the face of the teaching art (Steinbeck, 1955). Color by numbers? Sometimes, but not always. Then why should we always teach by prescription and script?

Leadership as Orchestration

But, for teachers to encourage expression from students, for teachers themselves to experiment with what works for different types of students, there will need to be a special type of leadership. I believe that the role of the principal is to protect the learning environment, to guard the classroom as a safe place where teachers and students may take risks, and to promote an atmosphere of openness and authentic communication. Embedded throughout this vision for leadership is the pivotal role of trust (Kelehear, 2001).

Through open communication, shared decision-making, and mutual respect, the school will model the characteristics of a pluralistic, democratic society. There will be many teaching styles; ideally, as many as there are different learning needs. The leadership will celebrate those differences while maintaining high expectations for students’ learning. Allowing teachers to utilize different techniques does not free them from responsibility for student learning. In fact, the opposite is true. As much as the principal allows for teachers to choose strategies for student learning, the principal can hold those teachers responsible for what happens in the classroom. The question to the teacher will not be, “did you teach well today?” but rather, “did the students learn today?” As Sizer (1984; 1992) reminds us, if the answer to the second question is “yes,” then the answer to the first question is “yes.” Said differently, one cannot have taught well in the absence of student learning!

I would also envision a leadership where the teachers and principal work together to form a school culture that is focused on student achievement and engaged citizenship. The teachers and principal would be clear about student achievement and teaching excellence as essential core values. They would attend only to those activities that support and foster student and, as an extension, teacher successes (Patterson, 1993, pp. 37-52).

The nature of leadership would be such that it too is not a prescription. Rather, leadership in the school I envision would celebrate children’s uniqueness and the art of teaching. Similarly, teachers and principal alike would understand that leadership is in itself an artwork under construction. And, just as the principal celebrates and promotes the uniqueness of teachers, the teachers would likewise support and challenge the principal to be open, authentic, and a risk-taker in making decisions that support the core values of the school.

The Arts as a Curriculum Standard

The school system in which the tile project occurred aggressively supported the arts. There were programs for theater, band, and the visual arts throughout the different ages and schools. The arts were an integral part of the budget planning as well as the curriculum scope and sequence.
To design a curriculum in which the arts are either not offered at all or offered in small and sporadic amounts is to design a school curriculum that is nothing less than shortsighted, one without vision. Burton, Horowitz and Abeles (1999) remind us: “Learning in arts-rich schools is complex and that it is most successful when supported by a rich, continuous, and sequenced curriculum. We also have clear empirical evidence that children, in what we have called low-arts schools, are less able to extend their thinking” (p. 44). Arts-rich schools that offer aesthetic programs in several art forms such as dance, theater, visual arts and music over the whole of a student’s schooling allow children to experiment with forms of representation that no other subject can equally achieve. Using the arts to guide the core of the curriculum instead of keeping it on the periphery would enhance all other disciplines. For me, “education in our schools should look more like the arts, rather than the arts looking more like our schools” (Eisner, September, 2001, p. 9).

Conclusion

If we can imagine, if we can have the courage, we can have the type of schools that are worthy of our children in the 21st century. The final assessment of our schools might be as Eliot Eisner states, “It’s what students do with what they learn when they can do what they want to do that is the real measure of educational achievement” (Kappan, January 2001, p. 370). If our students do not continue after school the things about which we talk in school, then we may have failed them.

But really good schools, like really good teachers, are not often welcomed in our communities for they must necessarily work outside the norms of traditional school culture to which many of us have grown accustomed. We suspect that things in school ought to be different but we are unwilling to allow for anything much to change. The philosopher Jose Ortega y Gasset speaks to this tension well: “The mass crushes beneath it everything that is different, excellent, individual, qualified, and select. Anybody who is not like everybody runs the risk of being eliminated” (1932, p. 18). It is no wonder we are unwilling to try anything even remotely out of the ordinary.

In the final analysis, we are confronted with the harsh reality that effective teaching involves experiment, reflection, and refinement. That sort of ambiguity can make us most uncomfortable. But educating our children is too important to be frightened by uncertainty. We must allow our teachers to recognize their own humanity and that of their students. Both teachers and students ought to be allowed to fail and we must provide for them support in their mistakes. We must acknowledge that out of the diversity of ideas, great wonders can emerge. Indeed, Steinbeck (1955, p. 7) reminds us, “teaching might even be the greatest of the arts since the medium is the human mind and spirit.” May we have the strength of will and the commitment to doing what matters most: attending to the needs of our children. And the best way to attend to the needs of our children is to allow for the art that is teaching where authentic learning and caring for each other carry the day.

References


