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FIRST PERSON

Restoring Humanity to Teaching, and Delight to Our Classrooms

By Justin Minkel

In education, tough talk is the coin of the realm for politicians, reformers, and administrators.

"Accountability" plays well. "No excuses" is a trusty mantra.

Yet the great educators I know—those who consistently elicit the dramatic academic growth these tough talkers claim to want—tend to talk very differently about the children in their care.

They speak unashamedly of patience, kindness, and giving children second, third, and fourth chances. They speak without embarrassment or irony about compassion, joy, and hope.

Rich Ogilbene, the 2008 New York Teacher of the Year, gave a talk this year at the annual conference of the National Network of State Teachers of the Year called "Keeping the Humanity in Our Profession." He stated:

"Teaching, at its core, is still a very human interaction. It must nourish the mind but it must also nourish the soul. Intellectual rigor must be accompanied by community building and social justice and unconditional love."

He went on to ask:

"How do we resist the urge to spend so much time teaching to the test that we exclude love, laughter, art, music, play, and other lessons that are essential to human development? How do we keep the humanity in our profession?"

Dyon T. Rozier, an assistant principal who grew up in the same high-poverty neighborhood in the Bronx where his school is located, came up to me after Ogilbene's presentation and said, "I'm excited, man! All this affective, social-emotional stuff is exactly what I believe in. But lately, I kept feeling like I was the only one."

Dyon's compassion for his students came through clearly, and he showed us photo after photo of young African-American men at his school with their arms slung around his shoulders, grinning with joy and confidence.

How could this impassioned, talented educator have come to feel he was the only administrator in his professional sphere who values students as human beings?

Changing the Mission

I don't know any capable teacher who argues that quantifiable student achievement doesn't matter. If you lavish love and affection on your students but they don't learn to read, you have failed them.

But tough-talking policymakers seem to be missing the fundamental link between a child's humanity and her academic growth.

Shortly before his resignation in 2013, Principal George Wood reflected on the national shift in the educational climate in a final letter to his staff at the Stewart, Ohio, high school he had led for more than twenty years.

What has changed is that it is harder for us to be nice to kids. With 'zero tolerance' laws and other Draconian rules, the mistakes some children make can no longer be forgiven. There is no benefit to this toughness. Turning a deaf ear to the needs of kids, to moments when we could be kind rather than just follow the rules, does not help kids learn anything.

In systems that are punitive and authoritarian, with a myopic focus on standardized tests as a substitute for true student achievement, children will.

In systems that value children for who they are, where test data is simply one tool among many to help students become better thinkers, children thrive. In these places, tests and rules are a means to a greater end, not the end in themselves.

Last year our school changed its mission statement from a blandly worded line about student achievement to words that better reflect our true purpose: "To help students live the lives they dream."

Words matter. That simple revision keeps us focused on the ultimate destination rather than the tests our kids will take along the way.

Pernille Ripp, a Wisconsin teacher, author, and founder of the Global Read Aloud Project, describes her transformation as a teacher who started by shaping her classroom to adult priorities and then chose instead to shape it to children's needs.

Pernille admits that in her first few years as a teacher, she talked too much in class, made too many of the decisions, and wielded grades, tests, and threats like blunt weapons. She confesses, "The nine-year old me would have hated me as a teacher."

She also explains why and how she changed: "I reached a point where it became scarier to follow the rules than to break them."

George Wood writes:

How can we, as teacher leaders and mentors, help with this effort?
Why is it essential that we do so?

"School should be a place for all sorts of kindnesses. Students should leave us knowing that for this time in their lives they were in the company of people who genuinely liked them and worked in their best interests."

Pernille's classroom became a place built around student ideas and student needs, because she did three simple things: "Ask the students. Then listen. Then do."

A Gentler Approach

There is a jarring dissonance between the approach taken by world-class educators like Rich, Dyon, George Wood, and Pernille, and the approach inflicted on schools by architects of NCLB-era fear and punishment who still, after a 14-year failed experiment, beat the same weary drum.

Any proposed policy that impacts children's experience of school should be able to answer two fundamental questions.

1. *Will it make students' lives better?* Looking ahead to college, a career, and the lives they will lead, will students be happier, more thoughtful and capable human beings because of what they learned during their time in school?

2. *Does it work?* Not just on paper, not as a set of talking points, but in real classrooms with real kids?

Plenty of tough-talking reform efforts fail that test.

What actually works is a lot gentler. It doesn't roar or bluster. It leads to miraculous results, but they are gradual miracles. They take years.

Listening to children. Finding out what lies beneath their surface behavior. Helping them figure out who they want to become.

Paying attention to who is in our classes, not just what the standards say they should learn. Treating our students with dignity, patience, and kindness whenever possible, even when it makes our jobs harder.

And remembering a simple truth: *School is for children.*

It's not for legislators, administrators, philanthropists, business leaders, or even teachers.

Children spend more waking hours in school during the week than they spend with their own families. We need to design classrooms, policies, and school systems with their needs—not the needs of adults—in mind.

The Courage to Change Schools

I believe we all need to be a little braver about challenging policies that fall children. We also need to have the courage to become the kinds of teachers our students need us to be.

When school or district priorities weight test scores more heavily than truly meeting children's needs, we need to speak up. When our students perform well on tests but take no joy in learning, we need to ask where we have gone wrong.

It can be scary to speak truth to power, but it's sometimes even harder to speak truth to yourself. Writing a blistering blog post about failed policies put forth by powerful leaders, or standing up at a public meeting to give a legislator an earful about flaws in a new teacher-evaluation system, takes some measure of courage.

But realizing that our deepest beliefs about teaching may be out of alignment with our daily decisions can be terrifying. The admission is wrenching because there is no one to blame

But that's also the reason why self-reflection can be so powerful. It always lies within our power to change the teacher we have become, not in some vague and distant future, but tomorrow and next week.

We ask a tremendous amount of our students. Constant focus. Patience with annoying classmates. Speaking in front of the class even if their English is shaky or they struggle to make sense of numbers.

So we can't ask less courage of ourselves. Witnessing teachers who have made that leap, even when they were the only ones leaping, has left me with a simple resolution: to do a better job of shaping my classroom to the individual kids who walk through the door, instead of shaping those kids to my systems

I have begun to take more risks, as 2010 National Teacher of the Year Sarah Brown Wessling challenges everyone in our profession to do with a simple insight about her own journey as a teacher leader: "I have reached a point where I am more afraid of mediocrity than I am of making mistakes."

I have resolved to put less self worth into my students' test scores, and more into the degree of excitement and curiosity I see in their faces each day.

I have made time to find out what my students like about our class, what they don't, and why. One of the simplest ways to do this is the "Stoplight" activity, where students write one thing they want you to keep doing, one thing they want you to stop doing, and one thing they want you to start doing.

As a result, I took down the behavior chart this year. I have found ways to teach my students to work hard and be kind to one another without resorting to punishments or prizes. Being a teacher is harder now, but it's better, too.

I love Phillip Pullman's line that "Responsibility and delight can co-exist." In a time when some 1st graders can tell you their MAP score but can't tell you what they want to be when they grow up, the pendulum has swung far enough toward responsibility. Our job now is to restore the delight.

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