

Failing While Making All “A’s”

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Good grades and high-test scores are universally held to be valid indicators of student success. Ironically, our obsession with earning high grades and scores has little to do with whether students are being well educated, while in fact our focus on competitive forms of assessment are contributing factors to the lack of personal meaningful learning taking place in our schools. Schools are not serving students well when they merely prepare students to make good grades and earn degrees. We should be alarmed that our schools are not adequately preparing students in perilous matters that are connected to solving real present day and future personal and global issues, grooming serious thinkers, and creating better communities for all people. Continuing to fail our students is not merely a curriculum or institutional issue, it is an ethical, moral, and spiritual issue that calls us to respond from the very best we have to offer.

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INTRODUCTION

When a student receives a good grade, the parents and educators feel as though the child has been well served by the school; even the child may feel this way, when in fact many children who go through our schools are not adequately prepared to live fulfilling lives. This not-so-hidden crisis reveals itself too often when students who have earned good grades are not prepared to deal with many of the challenges they must face in life and struggle in order to learn the lessons overlooked during their time in school. In short, the children’s best interests are not being served when the primary focus in our schools is on test preparation and working to earn good grades. The payoff for all their hard labor is to be found in the form of transcripts, resumes and diplomas. This strong focus on earning good grades and performing well on high-stakes testing are the result of educational policies that are flawed and are doing our children and country a great disservice.

Ironically, our obsession with earning high grades and scores has little to do with whether students are being well educated, while in fact our focus on competitive forms of assessment are contributing factors to the lack of personal meaningful learning taking place in our schools. Schools’ focus on producing students to be competitive test takers has created classroom coulterers that produce far too much fear, anxiety, and alienation among students, teachers, and what students learn.

How do we know if our schools are doing well especially when it comes to serving our children basic needs to live fulfilling and purposeful lives? It is not easy to get a clear answer. The 2021 U.S. Department

of Education report states, “Today, the United States has one of the highest high school dropout rates in the world. Among students who do complete high school and go on to college, nearly half require remedial courses, and nearly half never graduate.” Further, the report state that our students are not being prepared for tomorrow’s economy where three-quarters of the fastest-growing occupations require an education beyond the high school diploma.

We see the decline in U.S. educational system in the Department of Education Report on the State of American Schools to congress on the *Condition of Education 2018*. That report states that high school students in the United States are consistently outperformed by those from Asian and some European countries on international assessments of mathematics and science (NCES, 2018). The report goes on to say that fourth graders, by comparison, score as well or better than most of their international peers, although their counterparts in other countries are increasing exponentially and gaining momentum (NCES, 2020). While most policies focus on the success of schools by how well they compete on standardized tests, little attention is given to the quest that concerns all students to discern the meaning and purpose for their lives. Furthermore, little attention is given to a large group of young people who simply give up because they find schools unable to offer them the possibility of discovering and developing their gifts, answering their questions, and understanding how to live fulfilling lives.

Public approval of schools, according to Phi Delta Kappa’s 2021 Annual Gallup Poll, are doing a great job. Public ratings of local schools remain remarkably stable with a two-third approval rating despite the challenges of the pandemic, Seventy-six percent of the public gave grades of “A” or “B” to those schools in their local schools while only nineteen percent would assign a grade of “A” or “B” to the nation’s public schools. This assessment may sound a little vague or confusing, but the public appears to lack confidence that our nation’s schools are meeting the needs of our children and country; all the while, they are statistically satisfied with their local public schools. This assessment may sound a little vague or confusing, but the public appears to lack confidence that our nation’s schools are meeting the needs of our children and country.

The disturbing findings of the 1983 report “A Nation at Risk” called American education “eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity” (Gardner, D. P., 1983). Thirty-eight years later we heard similar cries for improving our schools in Obama’s Race to the Top. M. Spelling, from the US Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics, addresses the increasing drop-out rates in our high schools as among the highest they have ever been (2006). Additionally, the latest 2019 International Mathematics and Science Study-Report reported that the United States scored about average among the 42 competing nations whose eighth graders took the tests, ranking only 15th in mathematics and 8th in science with Singapore being the world leader. In 2019, the United States saw large score gaps between the top performing and lower performing students in both TIMSS subjects and grades. In 8th-grade mathematics, only 1 of the 45 education systems (Turkey) had a larger score gap between the top-performing (90th percentile) and bottom-performing (10th percentile) students than the United States. This is seen as a real threat and indictment to American Public-School Education.

Of course, there are many other voices who would say that there is something wrong with our conceptions of education and our underlying educational policies. These voices find much that needs improvement. Voices of concern are heard from the likes of Michael Apple (1998), Paulo Friere (1970), Henry Giroux (1988), David Purpel (1989), Tobin Hart (2001), Parker Palmer (1998), John Garner (1996), Svi Shapiro (2006), Nel Noddings (1992), Maurice Holt (2002) Larry Cuban (2004), and Neil Postman (1996) to name just a few.

While students and schools are deemed successful based on quantifiable scoring systems, there are many who think that American schools are flawed and in fact are neglecting to equip all students in ways that are fundamental to their living fulfilled lives. Further, teachers are rewarded for managing their classes well and seeing students compete well on tests (;) while at the same time they may fail to provide important knowledgeable skills, and insights that are a critical foundation to their living meaningful, successful lives. While making “A’s” signifies that a student has competed and performed at a superior level in our one-dimensional world of educational accounting, it is important that we take a broader view of our educational policies and examine how educators are pressured to subordinate much of what is important to their students

living fuller and more purposeful lives. Maurice Holt (2002) likens our approach to education to that of the production of fast foods. We pay dearly, he says, for our drill, drill approach to learning and with giving rewards to those who compete well on simple yes/no, true/false, and multiple-choice standardized bubble sheets. He says that it is time for what he calls “slow schools” that would provide the opportunity for discovery and a response to our changing world. Our narrow view of education leads to what Svi Shapiro (2006) terms the “de-meaning” of education—where school is “steadily removed from the quest for wisdom, meaning, or the capacity to think, question, and challenge” (p. 13). John Goodlad (1997) warned us of just such a crisis, “Education is so ubiquitous that we fail to comprehend its power and see the consequences of its denial, misuse, and abuse until we are on the verge and in crisis” (p. 5).

This ubiquitous nature of education becomes apparent when one understands the pressures that both teachers and students experience daily to increasingly assess performance and improve test scores; which is also a concern of parents, politicians, and business leaders. This buildup of pressure can also be seen in student’s apathy to schooling and their resistance to engage knowledge as a way to live more discerning and virtuous lives. By saying that we are “failing students,” I am referring to students who successfully pass through our schools with good grades and high-test scores but have not been served well in some areas of their education that are vital to them being well educated.

EDUCATION SYSTEMS ARE FAILING STUDENTS

When my sons were much younger, I used to ask them how they were doing in school. The conversations went something like this: “Well, how was school today?” “It was fine” was the usual answer. Not quite satisfied with that answer, I would press a bit further with, “so what did you learn today—did you do anything exciting?” After all, they were spending seven hours a day in a school where I was the principal, and I was hoping that something exciting in their day might have caught their attention or was important to their lives or at least aroused their curiosity. Too often their answers were “nothing.” Not that they made all “A’s,” but they would often follow up with a remark that was meant to satisfy dad if not to keep him from asking anymore probing questions, that they had made an “A” on a test. Not wanting to dispel their smiling countenances, I ceased asking any more questions about their day at school. As I write these words down, I cannot help but remember saying those same words to my father when he asked me about my school day. Sadder still, most of my graduate students remember saying almost the exact words to their parents and more recently to their children, and so the cycle continues. One must wonder what will break this cycle of apathy and lack of educational energy.

Sadly, my years of schooling taught me that the most important thing about education was to bring home a report card with good grades. Test scores and (final) grades were what mattered most to my teachers and especially my parents. Learning or performing for a grade was all that really mattered. What they failed to do was help me discover and develop my gifts, prepare me for the “real” world, and most regrettably they taught me to silence my voice. I had to learn and “unlearn” so much later in life to find meaning and fulfillment.

In recent years, along with the No Child Left Behind initiatives, there has been a steady increase in the importance for our students to make good grades, and even more pressure is exerted on them to score high marks on “High Stakes Tests” like the CRCT, EOCT, or GHSGT here in Georgia. The pressure for students to “do well” could be more aptly interpreted to mean “look good.” The perception of “looking good” is of more importance to most governors, boards, administrators, teachers, and even parents and students. Laying aside for the moment what is at stake for students, administrators, politicians and real estate developers with policies that promote “high-stakes testing,” lost in all this discourse is what our students are really learning and not learning that is vital to developing healthy lives and communities. By vital, I mean knowledge and understanding are important to improving not only the quality of their lives but also the community and world in which they live.

The pressures experienced by students, teachers, parents and administrators due to high-stakes testing has so changed the culture of schools that it is critical that we examine the role it plays in our failure to fully educate our young. So, what is the obvious but hidden message that students are receiving from teachers

and administrators that is vital to their “success” in school? Describing how teachers expect their students to perform and how “de-meaning” the process has become, critical theorist Svi Shapiro (2006) draws attention to the pervasiveness of this “high-stakes game,”

For students, educational chatter about knowledge and understanding is just “sweet talk” little related to the daily grind of schooling and the preoccupation with winning, getting ahead, or just surviving. Education becomes increasingly a high-stakes game in which success is defined almost entirely by one’s ability to test well through whatever means necessary. For educators, the extraordinary extent and pervasiveness of standardized tests in American schools put a chokehold on all other educational goals and purposes. In this process, as we have seen education becomes the intellectually thin process of memorization and regurgitation of predigested information. Classroom instruction is more and more given over to “test prep.” In this context, schools offer little that can be taken as a source of personal meaning, as a stimulus to critical thought, or as a catalyst for imaginative interpretation of human experience. Grades and test scores do much more than what they purport to do in measuring how well or poorly we are doing (p.10).

THE TESTING CULTURE AND WHAT SCHOOLS ARE REALLY TEACHING OUR STUDENTS

It is obvious to most that current educational policies induce unhealthy pressure to perform well on standardized tests, have limited personal value and fail miserably to effectively measure or promote student creativity, imagination, curiosity, conceptual thinking, judgment, ethical reflection or many other valuable dispositions and attributes. What they can measure are isolated specific facts, skills, and functions which are the least important aspects of learning and often the least interesting. While multiple choice tests do not tell us what students know, understand, or if students are prepared for life, they do serve two important roles for schools. Numbers and percentiles provide a method to compare scores within a group and groups at large. Their primary function is to differentiate scores which in turn is used to separate students into groups (Spring, 1989). Describing how conventional grading and testing policies instead of fostering cooperative learning communities solving global issues, Allan Hanson (1993), Tobin Hart (2001), Alfie Kohn (1993), Ron Miller (1993), Nel Noddings (1992), Parker Palmer (1998), David Purpel (1989), Svi Shapiro (2006) explain how conventional testing actually inhibits students from developing a deep connection with knowledge even though that knowledge may be of interest to them. What students often learn about their courses is that they see them as something to be feared or conquered rather than something that offers meaning to their lives.

The *first* role of testing in schools is to use test as a means of sorting large groups of students with diverse learning abilities as *human capital* (Spring, 2001) into economic categories for the good of maintaining social order and national defense. Test scores are also used for assigning labels to all children: this one performed well, this one performed fair, and this one—well, and there is room for improvement. One can suppose that grades are useful in comparing our students’ scores with other students’ scores, with other classrooms’ scores, with other schools’ scores, with other states’ scores and with other countries’ scores. You see the point. In all of our testing, the betterment of the student is not the focus. The interests of the student are not being fostered. The student is a performer with electronic or papered records to show how students, groups, and clusters did on certain assessments. *Tests do not a better student make.*

Allan Hanson (1993), in researching the social consequences of testing, found that scores play a tragic and decisive role in the destiny of students because grades and test scores affect the way they were treated and regarded by other students and teachers. Further, Hanson says that they not only affect the way students see themselves but that the test, in a very real sense, invents us.

They play an important role in determining what opportunities are offered to or withheld from us, they mold the expectations and evaluations that others form of us (and we form

of them), and they heavily influence our assessments of our own abilities and worth. Therefore,...tests to a significant degree *produce* the personal characteristics they purport to measure. The social person in contemporary society is not so much described or evaluated by tests as constructed by them. In addition to constructing social persons, tests function to control and dominate them (p. 3-4).

A *second* role high stakes testing will play is power. Tests are used by teachers to not only motivate students to learn but what to learn, how to learn, when to learn, and in what modes, blocks, and time frames. My desire is not to do away with *power*, but to use it toward better ends. While it is hard for me to find value in placing so much time and energy into curriculums and policies that are increasingly designed to improve student test performance, we must take a hard look to see what our students are learning about themselves and the world in which they live. My apprehension is that we, by these high stakes testing practices, are producing what I call *hollow* students, students that may be able to perform on a test but cannot relate the information or material to their own environment and lives.

By the time graduate students have reached my classroom they have been exposed to 17 or more years in classrooms that pretty much had focused on helping them learn skills and pass tests. All have had a lot of experience with teachers whose focus was on training students to learn skills, to absorb content, obey classroom management, and grasp the downloading of information. Today, most graduate students I meet perceive themselves as a teacher playing those same roles. One teacher recently remarked that she had become the teacher that she did not like while she was a student in school. As a way to get a clearer picture of what students are really learning in school, I asked these graduate students to reflect on what they learned over these many years as classroom students about the world around them and about themselves.

They learned that *learning* meant getting the right answers and a good grade. Right answers were to be found primarily through what the teachers *said*, teachers' handouts, and textbooks. There was always a right answer to be found for everything. The answers were to be learned as *true* or *false* words or statements, multiple choice answers, matching statements or words, or short essays. In effect, students were to regurgitate answers back to the teacher on tests, quizzes, papers, assignments, projects, and the like. They learned that "right" answers were what the students perceived the teacher considered as correct. Their job was to figure out what the teacher thought were the correct answers. What the teacher took to be the correct answer was all that really mattered.

Remembering information that will need to be recalled later for a quiz or test is a form of schooling that encourages students to become passive learners who seldom engage the subject for deeper meaning. This form of schooling fails students when it does not encourage them to seek questions of personal meaning in hopes of developing a clearer picture of the subject and feed their innate curiosity to learn. Students are actually thwarted from real learning, detached from themselves and others around them, and secluded on a barren island of rote answers to a page. Teachers relish in the idea that their students are learning, when in fact, they are doing nothing of the sort—they are merely performing for the paper at hand, the test *du jour*, the grade to get by another project or class. This traditional and deforming view of classroom learning can be described as a process of disconnecting students from their intrinsic motivation and interest to understand their perceived world. It portrays the world as *something out there*, distant, and disconnected from them. The world is not seen as something that vibrates with life to which one can relate or have feelings. Learning about the world only as *information* or *data* creates a distorted view of how a student relates to the *real* world in which he/she can seldom find answers to life so simple, so clear, and so final. Much of how we relate to each other and the world is in what I would call *grey areas*—areas for which there is not a clear *yes* or *no*, *right* or *wrong* answer.

The methodical practice of disconnecting students from each other, the subject, and the teacher turns schooling into my second point, a *game*. The *game* begins the first day of school and each student is to figure out the teacher—figure out what that teacher thinks is important, what kinds of questions he/she will ask, and what the teacher would like to see in the way of answers. The student's perception is skewed, and he/she thinks the purpose for learning becomes figuring out how to get a grade for the class instead of learning the subject for personal meaning. When I hand out my syllabi at the beginning of a semester,

inevitably the first thing most students want to know is what they must do to get an “A” for the class. This becomes one of the most difficult concepts to override in their thinking about their education. To help my students discover (rediscover) a way to learn that is more natural to their own natures, on the first day of class I will ask them if they want to continue “playing the game” or if they desire to engage in deep learning. They seem eager but somewhat apprehensive of entering a covenant with me that will replace the “game” with meaningful (to them) learning experiences. After some thought the students agree to receive a grade of “A” for coming to each class prepared and complete writing assignments. That’s it. The students are relieved although some are skeptical and convinced that I may have some trick up my sleeve. Slowly, meaningful dialogue emerges as each class member begins to critically examine his/her own life in relation to teaching and learning. It is truly exciting and rewarding to witness transformations taking place in the lives of my students.

If the teacher asks for students to write a paper, the first thing students want to know is how long a paper (or how many pages or words) does the teacher expect. One student remarked to me that they had worked 5% too hard in order to get an “A” for a class. He had scored a 97% and needed only a 92 to get an “A” for a class. For students who approach school as a game to be won while expending minimal effort, learning then becomes a matter of competing and memorizing information or data that they think the teacher might use on a quiz or test. Classrooms that employ the *game* as the method for learning produce a distorted image of learning (as in learning is memorizing facts) and rob their students of the opportunity to become passionate lifelong learners. They, in fact, teach students to distance themselves from forming a relationship with the subject (Palmer 1998). When repeated over the years, the *game* becomes a negative influence on the way students will relate to learning at all levels and areas.

When the *grade* becomes the focus of student learning, data or information becomes the commodity for *earning grades*. No longer are students concerned with understanding or what meaning it may have to life. Here is where learning a subject changes from something students may enjoy and want to explore more deeply to something students must learn in order to get a reward from the teacher, a grade. How astounding that this shift in how students relate to a subject has not only a profound effect on how and why they learn but will affect the way they see learning throughout the rest of their lives. Learning reduced to information only or more data has a most deforming characteristic—it disconnects the student from knowing something personally. Students learn quickly that they can make it through most classes without having to think or even imagine how the subject material might be useful in their everyday lives. Ironically, the “real world” connections addressed in state standards will never be met unless students are able to make personal connections. If the only way students learn about a subject is by way of objectifying it—seeing it as data, they quickly abandon the use of their emotions. When they abandon the use of feelings in learning, the subject becomes something cold and distant, something the teacher knows that they must remember. They learn quickly that the most advantageous way for them to get through is by concentrating on handing in assignments on time and learning what they think the teacher might ask on a test. Some may even resort to asking questions of the teacher, which that teacher misperceives as interest or motivation, when, in fact, the student is merely trying to figure out what to study for a test.

Lastly, students are quickly taught to *fear*. Students are not taught to engage the subject as a friend but learn quickly to see the material or subject as an adversary desiring to keep them from enjoying learning and life. With words that are meant to motivate students like homework, hard work, pop-quizzes, tests, grades, and competition, teachers convey to students an image of leaning that does not engage the subject on friendly terms, but one that often strikes *fear* into the heart of any student who might just be listening in class. Learning to fear the subject keeps students disempowered and restricts them from asking probing questions that originate from the heart. Instead, students have learned to ask questions that will be of help to them should they be asked later to remember those answers for a test—not life interests or understandings, but a test or pop-quiz or some reporting assessment that may or may not be of real importance becomes the issue.

In the interest of motivating students to listen, teachers often invite or demand students to “pay attention” to what they think is important, but too often they find what teachers have to offer them not worth their attention or best efforts. By asking them to “pay,” should not students expect to receive something

meaningful to their lives to compensate them for their efforts? Remembering those days when I was a young learner, I found it was not always easy to give my teacher or preacher my best attention when what he/she had to offer was of little value, unless he/she explicitly said it would appear later on a test or some sort of assessment or social event of accountability. It was the fear of coming unprepared for the test or event that often motivated me to pay attention. The use of rewards is also used extensively by teachers to motivate students to “pay attention.” “Rewards usually improve performance only at extremely simple—indeed, mindless—tasks, and even then, they improve only quantitative performance” (p. 10), writes Alfie Kohn (1993). When students must perform at higher thinking levels, teachers are doing their students a great injustice by giving them rewards for memorization.

WHAT STUDENTS ARE NOT LEARNING

What students *have learned* about their world and their place in it has led in part to both teachers and students being unfulfilled and unhappy in their educational journey. We will now look at what they are not learning that has a huge impact on their failing to comprehend a clearer picture of learning.

What are they learning and not learning that is vital to their gaining a clear picture of the world and how they can successfully live in this ever challenging and changing world? Let us look at what students may not be learning. While students are taught that education is like a game or a series of hoops to jump through on their way to getting their degree; there are important things about subjects we teach that they are not learning. Due to the pressures on teachers to teach subjects in formats that emphasize questions and answers from textbooks and what students need to know to become successful test takers, teachers are pressured to abandon important areas in a child’s education. Svi Shapiro (2006) in his book *Losing Heart*, describes the “miseducation” of America’s children by examining some of what is missing from their education. “Schooling is steadily removed from the quest for wisdom, meaning, or the capacity to think, question, and challenge” (p. 13). He further describes this impoverished nature as seen in students’

“...minimum knowledge of events in the world, lack of the ability to question or challenge ideas, incapacity at voicing contrary ideas in the classroom, incredulity that education should have something to do with democracy and critical examination of our culture, surprise at the application of education to the quest for meaning and purpose in our lives, and astonishment at the idea of education as a vehicle for affirming a position of moral responsibility toward the world in which we live” (p. 13, 14).

Abraham Heschel (1983) describes how we have neglected to teach our students something vital to living fulfilling and meaningful lives, “We fail to teach to revere, how to sense wonder and awe. . . the sense of the sublime, [and] the sign of the inward greatness of the human soul” (p. 36). Students are not being taught that the subject is dynamic and alive. They learn that most subjects are taught as if they are static and old as opposed to changing forces that are relevant to their lives. Students are not learning that the world is pulsating with mysteries and serious problems that threaten their very existence as a free society. They are not taught that there are enormous problems linked to human suffering that begs for our brightest and most enlightened minds to find solutions. They are not taught that education comes alive when both student and teacher continuously engage the subject together in dialogue. “All real living is meeting” (p. 11), said Martin Buber (1929), and teaching and learning are one endless meeting.

Children entering formal education are eager to relate to subject matter, but they learn early that engaging the subject is not necessary when preparing for tests, and besides, there is far too much material to be covered in such a short amount of time for them to remember everything. Teachers feel pressured to revert to teaching what will be tested. Questions directed to students or heard from students are the guides into the soul to find out what is meaningful and worth remembering. Students truly form a distorted view of teaching and learning when they are discouraged from engaging the subject in dialogue with the teacher.

Students are not taught that the subject has its own voice. Students all too quickly learn to see the subject as lifeless and just something to be “conquered” in order to earn a grade. The subject has been

stripped of its authentic voice by teachers who were also taught that the subject is just a thing to be mastered. The subject loses its ability to enrich the lives of students when teachers and students do not listen attentively to the subject. Teachers understandably fail students when they prevent or hinder them from engaging the subject on an intimate level unencumbered by analysis, interpretation, or the fear of assessment. Instead of listening, teachers move quickly to explain what they think the subject means, or they may ask the students to analyze the meaning of something in the subject material. Seldom are students afforded the opportunity to listen in silence to the *voice* of the subject and then to allow the students to express what they heard the subject saying to them. Helping students form a personal connection with the subject opens a student's heart to hearing the *voice* of the subject. Most teachers find it difficult to be silent and open space for the subject to be deeply embraced by the students and the teacher. When students are unable to hear the *voice* of the subject, they are not able to develop a true picture of how to relate to the world in that subject. In essence the "voice of the subject" has lost its voice!

Throughout Judeo-Christian Scriptures, there is an interesting link between *knowing* and *loving*. Palmer (1993) notes that the Hebrew Bible uses the word "know" when speaking of intimate relations of husband and wife and for a way of knowing God. The same can be said of the word "know" in the New Testament. Here it reflects the deepest qualities of personal relationship and intimacy, mainly lovemaking. This image of lovemaking reflects a personal involvement and connection that would bring the students, teachers, and subject into more intimate expressions of relationship. The *voice* of the subject would be just one voice along with the teachers and students.

Students are not taught to listen to their own voice. Parker Palmer (2000) has stated numerous times ". . . we are taught to listen to everything and everyone but ourselves, to take all our clues about living from the people and powers around us" (p. 5). Soon after children enter formal education, they are taught to pay attention to what the teacher is saying and suppress their own inquiring *voice*. Children are born with the DNA in place to want to learn about the world they inhabit, but they are taught to ignore and suppress these desires. One graduate student shared how her daughter in kindergarten the previous year had received an award for having a "good imagination." The next year her new teacher called the mother in for a conference and expressed concern that her daughter had too vivid an imagination. The teacher then calmly said that she should not worry because her daughter had had the same problem and she was "able to get rid of it."

Many teachers see their job as one of shaping children into model students who sit in their assigned seats in neatly aligned rows and passively learn their lessons to do well on exams. And, of course, the school system supports this approach because it aligns with the view that students are there to behave, listen attentively, respond when asked, do not question authority as to whose interest were in mind when decisions are made, and perform well on tests. Few teachers see it as their calling to help students rediscover their inner voices and discover the gifts with which they were born. Students are given a view of the world in which it is their job to "fit in." What they are not given is a clear picture of who they are and how they can make this world a better place to live for everyone. Unable to connect schooling to the meaningful life of students, schools continue to ignore the importance of connecting schools to solving some of the world's pressing needs such as: unnecessary suffering (Purpel 1989), poverty, hunger, racism, and social injustice (Kozol 1991) to mention a few.

Lamentably, we are not teaching our students the importance of *awe*, *wonder*, and *reverence*. The beginning of knowing the world we inhabit and who we are in it is to see how incredibly awesomely and wonderfully made is to stand in awe our world and see just how each of us is birthed with unique gifts and abilities that can be used to develop healthy, caring, nurturing communities for not just the privileged but especially for those who are disenfranchised. Our students are not being taught the path to wisdom which begins with *awe*. Abraham Heschel (1983) concludes that the path towards wisdom comes from *awe*.

Awe enables us to perceive in the world intimations of the divine, to sense in small things the beginning of infinite significance, to sense the ultimate in the common and the simple; to feel the rush of the passing of the stillness of the eternal. . . The beginning of awe is wonder, and the beginning of wisdom is awe (p.55).

When we fail to help our students develop a clear picture of self and how to relate to the world in meaningful and fulfilling ways, we have truly failed our students. Heschel teaches us that,

Mankind will not perish from want of information; but only for want of appreciation. The beginning of our happiness lies in the understanding that life without wonder is not worth living. What we lack is not a will to believe but a will to wonder (p. 74, 45).

CREATING HEALING LEARNING COMMUNITIES

How did we get to this place where schools are failing our students by ignoring or neglecting the educating of vital aspects of our humanity, yet congratulating themselves when their students score better on standardized tests than their neighboring schools or the teacher next door? At no time in U.S. history has the performance of students been so prized nor has there been a time that teachers are being held more accountable for student success or failure than now. So, how can we respond to this crisis in education? A real healing of the system and/or its participants must occur for educators and students alike to recognize afresh the goodness of education. Educators must return to ideas of creating hope and inspiring students (Hook, 2003)

It is very apparent that schools are indeed failing our students in matters that are of ultimate concern to teachers, students, parents, and our country—matters that are connected to personal meaning and creating better communities for all people. Teachers and students are pressured from many sides to conform to agendas that foster fearful environments that discourage collaboration, creativity, and caring. We must act responsibly and introduce our students into new patterns of learning that give them a clearer picture of themselves and the world.

How can teachers currently teaching in environments that are failing to help students get clear pictures of themselves and the world in which they live and create better learning communities? Let us examine several learning patterns that can help teachers develop a classroom that focuses on truly helping students succeed at life.

First, we must listen to our inner voice to help discover our own gifts and desires. It is critical that we spend time in solitude, meditating to gain a clearer picture of our gifts and be able to use these gifts freely in the classroom because for better or worse we teach who we are. When our teaching emerges from our gifts rather than learned strategies, the subject begins to come alive for students. When we can fully comprehend that we do not teach subjects, but we teach who we are as we relate to subjects, we will begin to reflect on how we relate to the subject and to the students we are attempting to teach. Is my relationship with the subject fear driven or is it motivated through an intimate connection with the subject? Students can “size up” a teacher rather quickly, and they will know if the teacher is for real or merely setting them up for a game. So, it is rather important that we, as teachers, can be authentic and true to ourselves. Students see teachers every day who come to school, put on a mask, and live as Parker Palmer (2000) describes a “divided life” in which the deeply held beliefs of the teacher are explained away when pressured by administrators or challenged by disempowered students. These kinds of teachers leave students longing for authentic classroom communities that seek to *know* and to be *known*. Only after we find the courage to teach from the heart will we be able to create an environment that opens space that invites students to define themselves. This journey will help students define their world while helping them find their inner voice and name their “giftedness’s.”

Second, we must no longer see students as adversaries to be controlled but relate to them as unique individuals (as *spirit*) with personal histories that hold the clues to who they are along with their God-given gifts. When we understand our students as *spirit* a whole array of opportunities to build community unfold.... The desire to manage, mold and manipulate them falls away to a more compassionate and communal way of being and caring for each other. We must be willing to suspend our own agendas to control, correct, and change students. We do not have to assume responsibility for making sure students have an answer for every question or solve every problem. We must be aware that education is more than

writing papers and passing tests. We can assume responsibility for giving ourselves over to helping students develop a clearer picture of themselves and how their gifts can be used to address some great need or issue.

Third, education becomes a healing place when we can welcome *ambiguity* while attempting to balance our quest for certainty with our need to leave room for awe and wonder. Students suffer when we strip awe, wonder, and mystery from the subject. When we take mystery (which comes from “my story”) out of history, the subject becomes boring and meaningless. Putting mystery/my story back into my history creates an inviting place from which students can find joy and meaning.

Lastly, we must respond to the greatest complaint of students in schools. Comer (1988) found that the greatest complaint of students was that “*teachers don’t care.*” Nell Noddings (1992) found that students

. . . feel alienated from their schoolwork, separated from the adults who try to teach them, and adrift in a world perceived as baffling and hostile. At the same time, most teachers work very hard and express deep concern for their students. In an important sense, teachers do care, but they are unable to make the connections that would complete caring relations with their students (p. 2).

A graduate student (2014) described areas about which teachers feel pressure from the system to *care* and other areas in which they personally have concern.

Most teachers do care, but they care about the wrong things. They do not care for students, they care about covering materials, meeting standards, completing paperwork, keeping a clean file, getting things done so they can get home on time, and a host of things that are, in and of themselves, important. But, the overriding concern of every teacher should be the care given over to the student and his/her need for interaction, connectedness, and real life meaning. Creating a caring environment means teachers care about their students, but also that they treat the subject with great care and awe. Many students will be open to learning when they feel that the teacher cares about them, truthfully, personally, and deeply.

I hear my mentor, David Purpel, still admonishes me to be faithful to my spiritual calling of bringing healing to those who are needlessly suffering. Yes, needless suffering is tragically evident in far too many classrooms. As one high school teacher put it, “It is real suffering too for students to attend classes day in and day out knowing or thinking that teachers do not care, the system is watching the test scores, personal opinion means little, there is no room for community, and boredom reigns supreme above all else.” Everyday millions of teachers and students go to school and suffer needlessly because they lack meaning and a clear vision of their calling. Purpel (1999) would admonish us,

. . . to seek other sources for the energy, wisdom, and courage to sustain the struggle for meaning. . . we may have to give up some of our precious programs and pet solutions, or at least be more modest about their possibilities. . . We must be committed to our culture’s highest aspirations and most cherished dreams. The struggle for creating a community of peace, love, and joy, and justice must go on in every sphere, including, of course and perhaps especially in educational institutions (p. 203-204).

When our highest aspirations are spoken and lived out in our classrooms, when we find the courage to live “undivided lives,” our schools will become havens where our young enter not because they must or because they will be rewarded by well-intentioned mentors, but to meet their soul’s desire to know and be connected. Continuing to fail our students is not merely a curriculum or institutional issue, it is an ethical, moral, and spiritual issue that calls us to respond from the very best we have to offer—our hearts.

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