

The Expectations Gap

Parents and educators have different goals for their students.

By Richard Mitchell

Public education is an enterprise that regularly blames its clients for its failures. Education cannot, after all, be expected to deal with barbarous and sometimes even homicidal students who hate schools and everything in them except, perhaps, for smaller kids with loose lunch money.

If the students are dull and hostile, we mustn't blame the schools. We must blame the parents for their neglect and their bad examples. If the parents are ignorant and depraved, then we must blame society.

The theme of the educators' exculpation, in its most common terms, goes something like this: We educators are being blamed for the corporate failures of a whole society. The public expects us to cure all these ills, but that's impossible. Besides, we're not getting enough money to do the job.

Well, it is a terrible thing to be held accountable for the sins of the world, and even worse that such a fate should be visited on such a noble and self-sacrificing bunch. We'd all feel much better surely, if we could only pin all the pains and disorders of the human condition on some institution better suited to take the rap – General Motors, perhaps, or the Mafia.

Our educators said they would teach love and the brotherhood of mankind as well as the importance of brushing after meals. They promised to teach social consciousness and environmental awareness, creativity, ethnic pride, tolerance, sensitivity, and the skills of self-expression, provided, of course, that such skills didn't involve irrelevant details like spelling and the agreement of subjects and verbs.

General Motors did not presume to promise us those things. Even the Mafia, perhaps the only enterprise in the country that could actually achieve such results in its own peculiar fashion, refrained from making such offers. Unlike public education, General Motors and the Mafia are modest,

medium-sized enterprises fully aware of their limitations.

Very few people will recall asking the educators to pursue these goals. It was the educators themselves who decided that such an enterprise belonged properly in the public schools.

It is possible, though, that we wouldn't now be blaming educators for not doing them if they hadn't assured us that they could and would do them. We hold no grudge against the crackpot next door who is working on a perpetual-motion machine unless he has told us that he could make one and separated us from lots of our money to buy custom-made magnets and extra-large rubber bands.

Most of us will recall that somewhere in the past, maybe it was back in Egerton Ryerson's time, we *did* ask the schools to teach everybody to read and write and cipher. Somehow, as hard as it may be to teach those things, it does seem a more modest undertaking than teaching love and tolerance and the brotherhood of all mankind.

We may have expressed a few other desires – that the children should learn something of history, their own history especially, and of the literature and art that have not solved the ills of the human condition at all, but have made them clear and concrete and all too human. We did hope that the children would learn something of science and its methodology, by which we can understand and work at least some of the things in the world.

Those few things that we do seem to have asked of public education are remarkably possible to teach. It is faddish nonsense to say that we don't know how, for instance, to teach reading and writing to the ignorant and must spend lots of money on studies and experiments before we can begin.

It does require exactitude and discipline, and somewhat more of those things in the teacher than in the learners. It requires drill and recitation

and memorization and practice, but these things can be made to happen.

In one way, it is easy to teach reading and writing and arithmetic because it's possible to achieve concrete and measurable results through regular and practicable methods. In that respect, it is very difficult to teach the brotherhood of all mankind because we don't know exactly what that is or how we would measure it

If you'd like to be a teacher but you don't want to work too hard, by all means set up as a teacher of the brotherhood of mankind rather than as a teacher of reading and writing and arithmetic. Such a career has the further advantage that no one knows how to decide whether you have actually taught anyone anything, whereas teachers of reading and writing and arithmetic are always being embarrassed when their students are shown not to have learned those things.

So. We have traded skill in language and numbers for ethical behavior, personal philosophy, moral commitment, creativity, and emotional health. Not at all a bad deal. But wait. How is it that Earth is not yet fair and all men glad and wise? How is it that creativity and emotional health lead to the beating of teachers and the destruction of file cabinets?

Children are much smarter than we think. They know when they are being deceived and defrauded. Unless they can utter what they know, however, they know it only in part and imperfectly. If we do not give them the language and thought in which they might genuinely clarify some values, they will do their clarifying with sledgehammers.

None of the lofty goals named above can be approached without the skillful practice of language and thought, and to emphasize those areas in the absence of that practice is to promulgate thought control rather than the control of thought.

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