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# A REPORT FROM THE FIELD: Two Damaging Myths in Public Educational Discourse

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Public education has been a hot political topic for over two decades in the U.S. Unfortunately, within this discourse, several myths have been perpetuated upon our citizenry, and in particular, upon our teachers. One of the most counter-productive efforts to improve the education of our children is the idea that teachers are responsible for the learning of their students. This idea began back in the early 1980s with the government report, *A Nation at Risk*, and has increased in popularity over the years so that now several states have passed laws tying student test scores to teachers' pay and employment. These laws are misguided for many reasons, but certainly not least of all, because there are many factors that go into a child's success at mastering basic skills beyond the pedagogy of a particular instructor. First, the tests are invalid because they fail to actually measure any given child's progress on these tests. In no state that I'm aware of do children get tested at the beginning and end of the school year. Instead, children of one teacher are tested one year, and then a completely different group of this teachers' students are tested the following year. If the second group doesn't test as well as the first, then the teacher is blamed. Anyone who has taken basic statistics can easily see that this type of testing is invalid.

Ironically, teachers are asked to be responsible for children's learning but are discouraged from having the responsibility for making substantive decisions regarding curriculum, assessment, and even pedagogy in these days of "scripted curriculum," in which teachers are expected to follow a pre-determined way of teaching preordained curriculum content to their pupils. Rather than encouraging teachers to be thoughtful decision makers, many of today's politicians seem to want teachers to be little more than classroom managers who are expected to follow a pre-set curriculum, administer pre-fabricated lessons, give standardized, pre-determined tests, and make sure the student "gets through" the curriculum on time and in an orderly fashion. The result is often an education filled with boredom and that lacks authenticity.


However, what is even more problematic is that teachers are misled by pressuring them to assume responsibility for a child's learning. Great teachers assume responsibility for many aspects of children's education including: creating an intellectually engaging curriculum, establishing a safe and comfortable atmosphere in their classrooms, learning what individual students know and ways they learn best, communicating with the students' significant others, making relevant connections between what they are learning and their students' lives, helping students make meaning from their education, and perhaps most importantly, helping students take responsibility for their own learning. The idea that a teacher can be responsible for their student's learning is impossible. It's similar to the old saying, "You can lead a horse to water, but cannot force it to drink." One can do many things (e.g., make sure the water is clear and sweet, make sure it is accessible, make sure the path to it is free of obstacles, exercise the horse) to encourage a horse to drink, but only the horse can make the final decision. The same is true for educating children. Teachers have the responsibility to encourage their students,

but if they try and “force” their students to learn, as implied in many of these state laws, the result will often be student resistance rather than a desire to learn. Teachers need to understand what exactly they should and should not be responsible for when teaching, and today’s public discourse only makes these important distinctions more difficult to ascertain. As previously mentioned, the most beneficial gift a teacher can give his/her students is helping them take responsibility for their own learning. Once a child takes on this responsibility, their success and joy is life is greatly increased.

A second myth that is taken for granted by many both in and outside of education is that the purpose of schooling should be to prepare children for their future adult employment. We live only in the present, and teaching only for the future ignores a fundamental responsibility of education, namely, to help children live meaningful lives. As John Dewey stated long ago when addressing this issue:

The ideal of using the present simply to get ready for the future contradicts itself. It omits, and even shuts out, the very conditions by which a person can be prepared for his future. We always live at the time we live and not at some other time, and only by extracting at each present time the full meaning of each present experience are we prepared for doing the same thing in the future. This is the only preparation which in the long run amounts to anything.

Dewey noted, the best preparation for a child’s future is to provide them with opportunities to live meaningful lives in the present. This rather existential purpose for schooling is crucial in a society that claims to be democratic, and yet, it is almost completely ignored in our public discourse on education today. It seems that more and more, children are being viewed merely as future employees rather than complex beings that must negotiate their way through what is often difficult life experiences. How ironic, that living a purposeful and rich life isn’t a topic of conversation when discussing the education of our children.

Want to help your students live more meaningful lives? Use the curriculum (in the humanities, sciences, and social studies in particular) as a catalyst for asking students to speculate on what the curriculum says about the “human condition” rather than just having them memorize information. 

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