

What Matters Most

CONSIDERING THE ISSUES AND THE CONVERSATIONS WE NEED TO HAVE

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In *How: Why How We Do Anything Means Everything* (2007), Dov Seidman explained that there “is a difference between doing something *so as to* succeed and doing something *and* achieving success” (p. xxxvi).

I agree.

In *Drive* (2009), Daniel Pink explained that “when the profit motive becomes unhinged from the purpose motive, bad things happen” (p. 302).

Again, I agree.

And I think those two statements, especially when considered together, explain some of the frustrations we face in education today. For most of us, the purpose of teaching, that ultimate grand purpose, is to help each child reach his or her potential. That’s the purpose motive and that’s what gets us out of bed in the mornings to head off to our schools. That’s a pretty good purpose, one worth facing a gridlocked rush hour for. When that’s your purpose, then you face each day with excitement because that’s a worthy challenge, a worthy goal.

And for most of us, for a long time, most of us in education didn’t think about a profit motive. Profits focus



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on numbers, and teachers focus on kids. In fact, when I started teaching, there was no talk about a profit motive. I began at a time when the “high-stakes test” was a test called the ITBS. Some of you won’t have any idea what that was. You are the same ones who don’t know the words to “Tie a Yellow Ribbon ’Round the Old Oak Tree.” But for those who do know the test (and the song), you’ll remember that this test took a few days out of the school year, no days for preparation, and the results were sent home in the report card that parents perhaps remembered to review. For better or worse (and in some classrooms it was better and in some it was worse), assessment happened in the classroom. What’s frustrating for us now is that the whole issue of assessment has really left the classroom and moved to Washington, DC. Well, actually, it hasn’t moved to where the policymakers reside; it’s moved to where Pearson is or wherever the next big test maker that gains control has its headquarters.

I think that in far too many places the profit is now the score on the test. You can call it making AYP or call it showing growth, but at the end of the day, it’s about what a child does on a single test. It’s about “racing to the top” while “leaving no one behind” and “proving value added.” It’s about tying school ratings and teachers’ salaries to student achievement on a high-stakes test. To repeat Pink, “when the profit motive becomes unhinged from the purpose motive, bad things happen.”

The Unintended Consequences

All of us can point to bad things such as administrators and teachers accused of cheating on state tests by giving answers to students or changing answers on answer sheets. We can point to bad things such as students worrying so much that they get sick during the test or sit crying through them. We can point to bad things such as children now being labeled “pushables and slipables” by principals who see that with a little *push* this group can make a 3 on the state test instead of a 2 or that this other group might *slip* from the coveted 3 to the terrible 2; bad things such as conference rooms turned into “data rooms” or “war rooms” so test scores of each child can be tracked; bad things such as “Days to the Test” countdown banners going up on the first day of school, sending students the not-so-subtle message about what the school values as most important.

But the worst bad thing is that by fourth grade—and in some places even earlier—students are, well, bored. I see it everywhere. Kids might be polite (or not); they might do the work (or not); their heads might be up off the desks (or not); they might do well on the state test (or not). But underneath all that, there’s a restlessness, a sigh, an apathy. And that boredom isn’t felt only by students; it’s there for teachers, too. Teachers who came into this profession thinking their purpose was to nurture curiosity, inspire genius, value risk taking, and share their passion for their subject have discovered that their job is to make sure the whiteboard holds the day’s objective and that particular standards are met.

Yes, there’s a deep disappointment in students and in teachers because school, in too many places, just isn’t delivering. School might be teaching students how to pass a test, but it’s not creating lifelong learners who are passionate about reading and writing, about science and math; who love the arts; who ache to know about the world, about our history, about our geography. In too many places, when the focus is on passing a single test, we don’t seem to be creating kids who are critical and creative thinkers; who are contributors and collaborators; who are problem solvers and change leaders. We seem to be encouraging hesitancy, for teachers are afraid to try new

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strategies in case they don’t provide the pass-the-test results that are needed, and students are hesitant to take a risk because they’ve internalized that risk taking might mean a lower grade and school is all about the grade. School is, as one student told me, “Where you hang out with your friends and that’s really great, but the rest of it is just stuff for passing the TAKS [Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills]. That’s all they care about.”

I suspect that no matter the degree to which your school has taken up the chant “pass the test,” you still hold on to that bigger, grander purpose of school. I can say that, because if it weren’t true, you wouldn’t be holding this journal in your hands. Instead, you would be reading *Ten Researched, Standards-Aligned, Internationally Benchmarked, and Rigorous Ways to Make Sure Your Students Pass the Newest High Stakes Test They Must Pass* or some other such tome. If you are like me, you want students to be able to pass all tests, any test, but you want that to happen because of all they learned in richer, more rewarding contexts. Remember what Seidman said, that there “is a difference between doing something *so as to* succeed and doing something *and* achieving success.” Too many lessons in too many classrooms have been reduced to teaching *so as to* make sure kids pass a test. Passing the test has become the profit, and we see that profit in dollar signs: Race to the Top money, bonuses for district and building-level administrators, salaries for teachers.

Tests, Standards, and Rigor

In a nutshell, that’s my greatest concern about education today: The profit motive (passing the test) and the purpose motive (helping each child achieve his or her potential) have become unhinged. Now, we have some new tests lurking on the horizon, one being developed by the Smarter Balanced coalition and the other by the PARCC coalition. Both will probably do some things poorly and some things well. But neither will matter if parents are left believing that what a test score shows is the full measure of their student’s knowledge, the measure of a teacher’s value, the measure of a school’s worth. I’m a parent, and I promise I recognize that test scores show us something; I simply refuse to believe that they show us everything.

Furthermore, these new tests are designed to test students’ knowledge of the new standards, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). I’ll admit up-front that I don’t know enough about mathematics

to know if the CCSS for math should be lauded or not. But I do know a lot about English/language arts and I do know that the philosophical base for the reading standards, which is New Criticism (dominant in roughly the 1950s and 1960s), seems limited and exclusionary. Who is excluded? The student.

The New Critics argued that too much time had been spent focusing on the historical period in which a text had been written, or on the author's life, or on other matters outside the text, and consequently students were not learning to analyze the text itself. So, if the poem was by Edgar Allan Poe, the daisy in line 3 had to represent death in some way because Poe the man was obsessed with death, not because evidence in the poem pointed to that connection. The New Critics ("new" because the "old" critics relied on history and biography) said that what really mattered was what was in the text and only in the text. Meaning, for a New Critic, resides in the text (not in the author's life or the historical era), and the reader's job is to hunt down that meaning, uncover it, and make sense of it.

This was the prevalent philosophy that guided much of the literature instruction in the last decades of the 20th century. Guided by this critical theory, teachers would help students uncover meaning by asking a series of well-crafted questions leading the students (at least the ones who were listening) to the approved interpretation. In that process, we created several generations of students who came to rely on the teacher—or if not the teacher, then on Cliffs Notes—for their understanding of texts.

It was in 1938 that Louise Rosenblatt wrote what is now recognized as a landmark text in literary theory: *Literature as Exploration*. But it really wasn't until the 1980s that Rosenblatt's work began to influence instruction in schools. In her book, she argued that meaning doesn't reside solely in the text and that the words are merely "inkspots on a page" until readers transact with them, until we *create* our understandings of the page. She never suggested that the text should be discounted; in fact, she esteemed it highly. But she reminded us that the text has to have a reader. In *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* (1978), Rosenblatt explained that there are "two criteria for the validity of interpretation: that no interpretation can be valid (1) if it has no verbal basis in the text or (2) if it can clearly be refuted by the text" (p. 68). She also, however, always valued the reader in the construction of meaning. In her final publication, *Making Meaning with Texts* (2005), she wrote, "Meaning—whether

scientific or aesthetic, whether a poem or a scientific report—happens during the interplay between particular signs and a particular reader at a particular time and place" (p. x).

The CCSS reading standards discount that interplay and ask us to have students focus only on what resides within the "four corners" of a text (Coleman and Pimental, 2012). At a time when we need, more than ever, for education to be relevant to students, the CCSS make the reader's perceptions irrelevant. We are told to encourage close reading—a parsing of a text by reading it repeatedly, looking at it more closely each time, each rereading guided by carefully constructed questions that force the student to provide text-based answers. But if this approach ignores the reader's experiences, then we will have distanced the reader from the text. In *Notice and Note: Strategies for Close Reading* (2012), my colleague and coauthor, Bob Probst, reminds us all that close reading should be about bringing the reader and the text close together. "Rigor does not reside in the text," he writes, "it resides in the energy and attention we bring to the text" (p. 21). And we are more likely to offer more attention when our perceptions matter.

When our perceptions, our thoughts, our understandings no longer matter, then *The Diary of Anne Frank* is simply a diary and not a way we can begin to understand what it means to be persecuted, to wonder what we might do if persecuted, to speculate how we might help others, to be for a moment a Jewish girl. The meaning of that text is diminished if it resides only in the four corners of that diary. And if the close reading we want students to do is defined by the tightly structured questions we ask, we might find in the not-too-distant future that we have created a nation of students who can answer text-dependent questions, but in doing that they will have become teacher-dependent students, students who have to wait for the teacher to ask them questions before they can think about what it is that the text means.

But if close reading can mean reading the text closely enough that we learn to analyze what in the text has caused our responses so that we know why we respond the way we do, then we will have created smarter readers. If close reading can mean giving students the tools so that they know, on their own, how to question a text, then we will have encouraged independent reading. If we can remember, as Bob Probst suggested, that rigor does not reside in a text but in the energy and attention that readers bring to the text, then we will have encouraged engagement. And

perhaps, at the end of the day, success with students is all about engagement. When kids are engaged, deeply engaged, in what Czikszentmihalyi (2008) calls “flow,” then we have the potential of having inspired learning.

Becoming an Intellectual Community

Back to Dov Seidman. In *How*, he wrote, “There are only three ways to generate human connection and conduct: You can coerce, motivate, or inspire” (p. xxv). Let’s place those three concepts against the backdrop of education. First, consider coercion. This is an external method of shaping conduct, and it rarely works in the long haul. In a school, coercion is internalized like this: Get your students’ test scores up or you’ll be fired; or to the student: Pass or you will not receive a diploma. If nothing else, teachers move on to find another school in which to teach (or occupation in which to work) where the coercion is less stinging, and the students who cannot stomach this coercion drop out, at worst literally, or at best figuratively.

Another external means of shaping conduct is motivation. We motivate others by providing external measures that propel action. This means constantly looking for bigger rewards. In a school, we “motivate” by telling teachers that if your students’ test scores go up, you’ll prove your added value and so you’ll get a bonus or (now) get to keep your job. And to the student, the motivation to pass the test is that you’ll get your diploma, get to go to the next grade, get to go to the swim party, or get to laugh when the principal shows up in a silly wig or funny dress. There is plenty of information and research on why external motivation *might* give a useful jump-start in *some* situations but eventually ceases to be effective.

Inspiration—that internal motivation, something that comes from within, often because another person has shown how much he believes in you—is what’s left. The most effective principals don’t use carrots (motivators) and sticks (coercion). They *inspire* us to want to do better. And we do. The most

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effective teachers do the same. They inspire kids to want to learn more, work harder, reach further. And almost always this is because the kid in the classroom believes he matters, believes his teacher sees something valuable in him, believes his opinions are relevant, believes school isn’t a place where information is simply transmitted from the expert to the novice but that the novice, working in tandem with the expert, constructs knowledge. An inspirational teacher is what each of us wants for our own kids; it’s what each of us should aspire to be. Inspirational teachers help us do something *and* pass the test, rather than focusing primarily on doing something *so as to* pass the test.

Inspired teaching exists in schools throughout this nation. I see it every day. But in too many places it exists in spite of current conditions, not because of the conditions. I want inspired teaching to happen everywhere, in every classroom, but that can’t happen, I fear, when the stakes for not passing a test are so very high. And it can’t happen when schools see themselves as places where the purpose is to ensure that kids do pass the test.

But what would happen if, instead, schools were seen as intellectual communities. In *Notice and Note*, Bob Probst and I wrote about schools as intellectual communities, places where “engagement is high and rigor results from students wanting to know more; where work is challenging because the attempt—the challenge—won’t penalize you with a low test score; where work is relevant and so attendance goes up, discipline problems decline, and as a result of all that, test scores climb” (p. 25). Too many teachers and administrators, though, look at us with blank stares when we ask if their schools are intellectual communities. “What’s that?” a group of associate superintendents in a large district in Florida asked us in 2011 in response to our question.

If we all knew what that looked like, if we all recognized how schools would be different if being an intellectual community was each school’s purpose, then I suspect the tests we must give would still be a nuisance, something that interrupted the critical work of learning, discovering, wondering, and becoming something more, but they wouldn’t be the goal, the end point. But we cannot get there if we do not know what intellectual communities look like, if we haven’t decided as a school community that this is what we want.

So, I’ll end this commentary with a series of discussion questions that Bob and I presented in *Notice*

and Note (p. 26). These questions, and the conversations I hope they might lead to, are, of course, just suggestions. But the best questions, the ones that you'll explore with the most energy and commitment, are going to be your own questions. Whether using these prompts or creating your own, the conversations you have in the coming months about intellectual communities, about rigor, about close reading, about what it means to inspire, about reclaiming the grand purpose of education, about recognizing all the bad things that happen when the profit motive and the purpose motive become unhinged are well worth your time. These conversations might lead us to understand what matters most.

Talking With Your Colleagues About Becoming an Intellectual Community

- Do you think of your *school* as an intellectual community?
- Do you think of your *classroom* that way?
- Do your students see their classrooms as intellectual communities?
- What happens if the answers to these questions are *yes*? More important, what happens when our answers are *no*? Most important, what happens when students fail to see their classrooms this way?

- What could you and your colleagues do to help parents, students, and any visitor to your school realize—almost upon entering the front doors but certainly when walking into classrooms—that this place is different, that it is a community where people come together to think, explore, question, try, and create?

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