

What's With these Middle Schoolers?

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Abstract

For various reasons urban middle school students in particular seem to have developed repugnance for school. This is not to imply that students detest learning. Public education has failed these students by failing to make instruction relevant to the students' learning. The educating that takes place in schools of today is carefully controlled through teacher education institutions, text book companies, courses of study, and special mandates issued by local, state, and federal authorities. For some students, schooling can represent the pivotal experience that sets the stage for the rest of their lives.

The ultimate test of what schools are for is what they do. However, what they actually do may bear little relationship to what they are officially asked to do. By fixating on problems, the public schools have done little effective service to construct a quality learning environment that is pertinent and consequential, to the student.

The reality of high unemployment in certain areas of the country reminds us society's problems and needs are perceived as an educational gap. In order to show the public success in the educational setting, educators must show the community that quality learning is taking place. To demonstrate success in education, educators and administrators need to show increased results in order to exhibit to the public that education is on the rise.

## **Introduction**

In the early days of one educator's teaching career, a young man was asked the usual question, "What do you teach?" Before he had a chance to answer, his wife spoke up and replied, "He teaches children!" The focus of our career choice ought to be directed toward the children. When that focus is turned to other peripheral elements of education, children inevitably suffer the consequences. For some students schooling can represent the pivotal experience that sets the stage for the rest of their lives (Goodlad, 1979; Messick & Reynolds, 1992). Historically speaking, when districts have placed an excessive amount of attention focused on standardized test results, the primary focus of student learning became second place. Educators have, in effect, taught students to hate school through overly emphasized performance on test results instead of teaching students a love of learning.

The educating that goes on in schools is vigilantly managed through teacher education programs, materials and resources of instruction, courses of study for the learner, and special mandates issued by local authorities. When quality educators focus on children and look to what has been documented as being effective, or what is termed as best practices, that focus will allow the students in their charge to excel to the limits of their learning abilities.

## **Brief History of the Problem**

The problem, as we understand and have witnessed, is that in spite of all that the 21<sup>st</sup> century has offered students in education, kids don't like school. John Dewey's thesis, written in 1900, stated, "The primary waste [in education] is that of human life, the life of the children while they are at school, and afterward because of inadequate and

perverted preparation” (Dewey, 1990, p. 64). Over one hundred years later, Dewey’s statement still rings with truth. Education today demonstrates inadequate and perverted preparation through excess concentration on state standardized testing, and not on what is helping students become successful participants of society.

For various reasons students seemed to have developed an extreme dislike for school. This is not to imply that students have become disgusted with learning. The educational community has failed the very students we have tried to educate through failure to create meaningful and relevant instruction in order to stimulate quality student learning.

The ultimate test of why schools exist is what they are expected to do. What they actually do may bear little relationship to what they are officially asked to do. By fixating on peripheral, external or community problems, the current educational center of attention has done little effective service to make instructional learning applicable and germane to the student. It would appear that educators are focused on a child’s achievement on standardized tests rather than the big picture of what potential the child could offer society. The educational community has an obligation to wrap learning around the needs and the concerns of present day real life as the student knows and understands events.

Meaningful instruction can take place effectively by the classroom teacher when s/he focuses on what meaningful instruction looks like through the eyes of the student. When instruction is not relevant and meaningful to students, we see effects such as a lack of initiative with regard to learning, poor test scores, or even increased drop-out rates

(Goodlad, 1979; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Ludwig, Ladd & Duncan, 2000). Stevenson (2002) lists five points to consider when focusing on the educational needs of the student.

1. Every child wants to believe in him or herself as a successful person.
2. Every child wants to be liked and respected.
3. Every child wants to do and learn things that are worthwhile.
4. Every child wants physical exercise and freedom to move
5. Every child wants justice for themselves and others

Lezotte describes a problem twenty-five years ago in education stating that in public schools of that time, the delivery of instruction appears to be the major focus for instructors (Lezotte, 1992) With a look at today, the concern for improved test scores and pressures from No Child Left Behind to show improvement, it would appear that the educational community hasn't progressed very much from the time period of Lezotte's writings.

Within the classroom, more emphasis needs to be instituted in quality applicable teaching tied to student learning rather than on simply covering required material established by the local district. Covering material could be stressing the coverage of state standards in reading and math, to the limitation of other core subjects like science or social studies, or district mandates for outcomes driven education, to the limitation of other "less important" parts of a district's core curriculum. Neither of these scenarios draws attention to the learning of the students; they simply address aforementioned peripheral concerns in children's learning.

### **Breaking down the Barriers**

Urban students have had a unique struggle in their educational endeavors. There are three key barriers that relate specifically to urban students' learning. The first barrier that should be looked at is (1) students carry much baggage from the external world into their studies than their peers in the suburban setting, (2) Urban students come into the classroom with limited prior knowledge because of a limited understanding of their world—not to be mistaken for their environment (Lounsbury & Vars, 2003; Messick & Reynolds, 1992). (3) The urban students' environment is one of survival, while the suburban student has generally already been exposed to a large amount of printed and visual media before they even enter school (Pellino, 2004; Williams, 1996; Winters, 1993). The suburban student generally has adult figures in their lives that not only are interested in the education of their child's learning; they know how to go about helping their child learn through exposure to the real world around their children. (4) Urban parents have much less resources at their disposal to help with their children's learning. There is little doubt in the public's eye concerning high academic standards and student performance, as measured by standardized testing, within the suburban setting. Unfortunately, the urban students seem to have been written off as some sort of lost cause (Clinchy, 1999; Foster, Von Brook & Siegel, 1990; Goodlad, 1979).

But, when teachers scaffold upon the limited knowledge of the student lacking the enriched foundations in a given subject matter, the teachers will, in effect be making the lessons meaningful and therefore applicable, and will allow students to explore and understand why the concept being taught is of value or useful to the student. Without an understanding of background knowledge there would be little to no foundation for

learning to take place, hence there is no relevance for the student (Lounsbury & Vars, 2003; Messick & Reynolds, 1992).

The veracity of higher unemployment in urban areas reminds us that society's problems and needs are also perceived as a kind of an educational gap between the have's and the have not's. Since education is connected with schooling, then schools are caught in the confusion of social problems. In order to demonstrate student accomplishment in the educational setting, teachers must show excellence in learning is taking place. To show this type of success, educators and administrators must show improved results on tests thereby showing that first class learning is on the increase. "Schools that are highly effective produce results that almost entirely overcome the effects of student background" (Marzano, 2003, p. 7). In order for the student to succeed on standardized testing measurements, the presentation of the concepts being learned need to have importance, relevant, and be valued by the learner.

To accomplish the task of producing effective results, the local schools must have critical learning taking place in the classroom. For the student to feel that school is important, first and foremost, students need to feel valued as human beings.

If teachers make it clear that what each [student] knows or learns is of value to everyone, then they make it safe for everyone to share whatever they know, and thus to value their own understanding, no matter how meager. 'None of us is as smart as all of us' (Gunter, Estes & Schwab, 2003, p. 350).

When teachers demonstrate and model the belief that students are valued, students will begin to respect school, also.



Another consideration concerning districts showing student improvement in learning is that educators need to demonstrate that quality learning is taking place in the classroom. To exemplify this success, the major measurement has been increased results on standardized testing through the guidelines and stipulations of the No Child Left Behind law. Standardized testing has been used in order to show the public that classroom instruction and student learning are getting better. Before a school can claim success through improved test outcomes, students must succeed in their studies. In order for students to succeed in their studies, there must be motivation on the students' part to learn. And, in order for the student to learn, there needs to be meaning to the information being learned. "If one starts with the proposition that [every child] can learn, then we are duty bound to extend that proposition to the adults who work in schools as well" (Lezotte, 1992, p.10). Dewey (1990) extended those thoughts when he stated:

Attention [of the student] is always for the sake of 'learning,' i.e., *memorizing ready-made answers to possible questions to be put by another*. True, reflective attention, on the other hand, always involves judging, reasoning, deliberation; it means that the child has a *question of his own* and is actively engaged in seeking and selecting relevant material with which to answer it, considering the bearings and relations of this material—the kind of solution it calls for. The problem is one's own (pp.148-149, Emphasis in original).

If the significant adults in the education of students taught their subject matter in a relevant method to their students, the students would succeed in learning because

there would be a basis of value to the learning on the part of the student. When the value of learning has been removed, the desire to learn is diminished, also.

### **Best Practices**

Giving consideration to data collected and information available, parents and home life are still primary influences on a student's learning, along with significant influence by classroom teachers (Goodlad, 1979). "Academic standards provide the link between excellence and equity [in student learning and performance] by setting consistently high, public expectations for *every* student" (Jackson and Davis, 2000, p. 32). (Emphasis in the original)

For students to succeed with any amount of meaningful learning, the current curriculum needs to be dealt with. "An important concept in any human-development rationalized curriculum...is the idea of developmentally appropriate learning materials" (Wiles and Bondi, 2001, p. 163). Lezotte (1992) explains that for developmentally appropriate learning, or learning that takes into account the physical, emotional, and social growth of the student, to take place teachers must show proficiency in instruction. "Teacher competence is defined as the extent to which the teacher has the relevant subject matter and pedagogical expertise needed to teach the intended curriculum effectively (Lezotte, 1992, p.31). In order for teachers to be effective, application to how the student learns is a key ingredient. To be an expert in one's field is not to imply one is an expert in teaching students. "One of the critical questions that a quality effective school must constantly monitor is the extent to which the curriculum as delivered to the students in the instructional program is perceived as relevant to those students" (Lezotte, 1992, pp. 35-36). There is no question that a teacher must know his or her subject matter,

but just as important is the ability to teach the subject matter in a significant manner to students, in order for the students to value their learning and perceive that learning as important.

Effective teachers motivate their students through instruction that is meaningful. When asked to list reasons for a lack of motivation for excitement in classrooms, in general, the learners surveyed had only three things to say, although they said them in many different ways...

- I'd like teachers to stick to the point.
- I'd like a classroom in which kids didn't get away with fooling around.
- I'd like to know that whatever I'm to be tested on, I have been taught. (Gunter, Estes & Schwab, 2003, p. 342).

With these student admonitions in mind, the educational community, needs to stick to the point, manage classrooms in a manner conducive to learning, and test what is taught in order to make learning consequential to the student.

### **Conclusion**

Stevenson, in 2002 stated, "You've gotta see the game to see the game" (p. 123). The educational community for many years has rallied under the banner in one form or another stating *all students can learn*. But, in reality, what is practiced has demonstrated the belief that the word *all* really implies *most*. Recently the term *every student can learn* eliminates any possible exceptions that are thought of when the descriptor *all* students. It does not matter which term is being used. When the focus is placed on student learning in a significant manner, students become eager to learn because we and they have placed value on what is being instructed (Stevenson, 2002).

The notion that all children can learn and come to school motivated to do so is a relatively new, and not widely accepted, educational paradigm.

Nevertheless, until schools see the educational success of every child as their primary responsibility, they will not come to terms with ...

organizational and procedural changes ... On the other hand, once schools accept as their mission the educational success of all children, schools will quickly realize that they can only be successful when some of their basic school structures change (Lezotte, 1992, p. 57).

Schurr, Thomason & Thompson (1996, p.35) summed up the elements of effective, relevant learning when they stated how teachers could create an environment that supports adolescents and provides the foundation for their educational development by teachers:

1. Knowing thyself. Students need teachers who are secure, dependable, and stable.
2. Accepting responsibility for developing relationships. Students need teachers who are particularly responsive to them and who care about them as people.
3. Creating mutual trust. Students are quick to sense any breach of trust from either their peers or their teachers. They need to know that adults are trustworthy and reliable.
4. Protecting fragile egos. At this vulnerable emotional stage, young adolescents are supersensitive to any real or imagined insult. They are

quick to feel hurt and slow to recover and forgive. They need teachers who are aware of the pain a careless or sarcastic remark can cause.

5. Having high but reasonable expectations. Generally students are far more capable than adults think, although less able than some adults want to believe.
6. Recognizing the uniqueness of young adolescents. They are neither elementary nor secondary students. They are unique unto themselves—and all the more interesting because of it

When teachers implement appropriate instruction and developmentally appropriate learning within their classrooms, not just covering the material, effective results should follow.

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