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Want A Better Future? Teach Evidence And Empathy!

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“Support our troops,” read a leaflet my children brought home from school in their backpacks in January 1991. It was message prepared by the American Legion as a call to participate in a rally they were sponsoring. We had just moved to Baldwin, NY and First Gulf War had just begun. We were aghast at the leaflet distribution, not because we opposed supporting US soldiers put in harm’s way, but because it represented our public school system’s uncritical endorsement of a particular political position. There were no accompanying discussions in their classrooms about the pitched controversies about the Bush administration’s decision to intervene in the conflicts in Iraq, Iran, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia or the public opposition. There was no analysis of

issues. Without such discussion, children learn passivity. That is bad for democracy and bad for the future.

We wrote letters of protest to the district superintendent and school board, but to no avail. They defended their decision. In our view, the leaflet and lack of discussion taught students an historically-dangerous lesson: *Accept what my government decides to do without question.*

Like most parents, I used to ask my children, who are now are in their thirties, “What did you learn in school today?” Or sometimes, “What did you do in school today?” Parents still ask those questions, right? I know most of us hope for far more than learning how to do well on tests. I know many of us hope for more than learning to obey or to give blind loyalty based on positional authority, as President Trump expects from everyone from his cabinet members to the press to the Boy Scouts. I know most parents hope that their children will not emulate the President’s disregard for truth and evidence, apparent empathy not for humanity, but instead for hatred.

When children are asked what they learned in school, what answer should we hope for today? What do they need to learn? In particular, what should they learn about how to make sense of government decisions, about their responsibility as citizens, and the role of political protests in shaping American history? What should they learn about how to regard people who are different from them? What should they learn about how we decide to develop and use scientific and engineering knowledge? What do they need to learn to succeed in life and work– in a world will likely be dramatically different when they reach adulthood?

As a life-long science educator with bachelor and masters degrees in history, I have a bias. I believe students should learn that evidence– scientific and historical– is essential to make sense of the world. I hope children learn to tell the truth. I don't just mean not to lie and to know the difference between their truth telling and lying. I also mean the intellectual capacity and inclination to discern veracity in statements they encounter in life. I mean learning to value the truth.

Learning science and history is necessary, but insufficient. My wife is an artist. She believes, and I agree, that engagement in the arts and literature help us make sense of the human condition, which in turn, enables something our nation is in desperate need of– empathy. Similarly, students need guided experiences about how to manage conflict peacefully and respectfully, particularly when a resolution may be mediated by attitudes and beliefs about race, class, national origin, and gender.

My children's K-12 school years coincided with presidencies of Reagan and the elder Bush. Those were years in which the United States took a sharply meaner turn away from government as a vehicle to help people and away from the civil rights victories of the previous decades. In contrast, we hoped they would learn about how to make a difference in the world, how to be agents rather than victims of change and to treat people with decency and respect. They grew up with those values and dispositions– sometimes because of school and too often in spite of it.

The reasons for children to develop and employ a critical perspective are timeless. Empathy should be a universal value that is reinforced in school. Students' need to understand and question the world around them is even more compelling today than it was twenty-five years ago.

The global challenges that face humanity– peace; climate change; environmental degradation; economic, social and political inequality; sustainable development; health and food security– will get answered one way or another. What and how children learn in school will influence whether they contribute to solutions or become the hapless victims of the decisions of others.

What children learn in school will influence whether future personal and societal solutions are guided by evidence and empathy or by ignorance and selfishness. To be clear, to teach students to have a critical perspective does not mean to indoctrinate them to criticize their government. Rather, it means supporting students to develop the dispositions, knowledge and intellectual tools to ask and investigate vital and timely questions. It means that early on– no matter how challenging it may be for parents and teachers– that around issues that do not affect their safety and well being, we should want them to ask, “How do you know that?” And not accept, “Because I said so,” or “Believe me,” as sufficient answers.

In school, students should ask and investigate:

How do people who claim expertise in any field develop, verify, and revise what they think they know?

How do values influence how and for what purpose knowledge is used?

How have and how can conflicts in values be resolved in personal and public decisions making?

How can I find out how the ways in which people live together today developed?

How have people organized to change social, political and economic arrangements in which they lived?

These are questions at the intersection of ideas and values. The Trump administration and its supporters present a uniquely dangerous challenge. Their ideological message is, “Trust the authority of your betters, distrust expertise.” Their moral message is, “Lookout for yourself. Empathy is a sign of weakness.” That is, Trump has filled critical high-level positions with people who lack job-related expertise, but claim authority because they have amassed wealth. Their raison d’être is to enhance the wealth and power of the wealthy at the expense of the rest of us. Evidence and empathy are not part of their mental or moral compasses.

Let’s make school about learning to tell the truth and learning to understand, care about and get along with others. These traditional subjects can either serve or detract from that goal. That’s our choice.

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