



Listen first, then teach

Laying a foundation of respect in classrooms will enable teachers to learn from students even as the students learn from teachers.

By Julian Weissglass



My father liked to ask riddles. One of them had a significant consequence for my professional career. In the early 1970s, the University of California funded graduate students in mathematics to teach in underprivileged schools using a guided discovery approach. The basic principle is that when asked to explain a wrong answer, students would discover their mistakes and by working together as a group develop understanding (Henkin, 1995). My department chair asked me to supervise this program — I was an assistant professor — and I agreed upon the condition that I could teach in it.

I had one day of professional development in the discovery approach before going into a 4th-grade classroom. I started by asking students to close their eyes, to picture a box and then to count the number of sides on their box. I still remember their excitement as they told me their different answers — three, four, five, six, eight, 10, and 12. I asked the boy who said “10” to explain his answer. I couldn’t understand what he was saying

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very well — or follow his logic. When I asked him to explain for the fourth time, he became frustrated, so I asked some other students to explain their answers. All the time I was wondering, “How did he get 10?”



Anyone concerned about young people’s well-being, their learning, or the future of humanity would do well to reflect deeply on what it means to respect young people’s thinking.

A remark by another student made me think of a riddle my father used to ask: “How many sides does an orange have?” People usually said, “None. It is round.” My father would laugh and say, “It has two, an inside and outside.” So, I turned to the first boy and said, “Did you have a box without a top and you counted the insides and the outsides?” I will never forget the expression on his face — a blend of pleasure at being understood and incredulity that it had taken me so long to understand him. It turned out that all of the students had logical explanations for their answers! The variety of answers was a result of different definitions, different assumptions, or — literally — different perspectives.

I left the classroom that day humbled. How easy it would have been for me to invalidate his thinking. Even more troubling was that although I was looking for the one (or possibly two) correct answer(s), all of the students’ thinking had been excellent and mathematically valid. During the next few years, I encountered many young people with brilliant mathematical minds who were labeled ‘slow learners’. Most of them were females or students of color. I was very troubled at what I found and decided to educate myself about teaching and learning. More importantly, I decided to fully respect a young person’s thinking — to assume that their thinking is correct and that if their answer to a question or their way of thinking about a situation is different than mine, it is most

likely because of a difference in definitions or assumptions. There is, of course, the exception when a student because of his or her distress or need for attention decides to deliberately give a wrong answer or because of fear guesses. But overall it’s been a good working hypothesis. It leads to more interesting results than assuming that my thinking is the only correct way.

What does respect mean?

My working definition of respecting children’s thinking is to take them seriously, thoughtfully interact with them, nurture, engage and honor them — and don’t humiliate, ridicule or stifle them. Respect means more than telling young people that they’re smart. Respect is more than encouragement and praise. It’s different than good grades, gold stars, and rewards. Youngsters’ ability to think and to express their thinking is nurtured through dynamic and beneficial interaction with adults and other youngsters in a social situation. Young people know that their thinking is respected and valued when adults listen to their thinking and think with them — and when teachers give them time to explore and express their thinking. Most adults give lip service to the importance of thinking, but young people need more than lip service to believe that their thinking is respected.

Although adults help and support young people in many ways — providing love, guidance, instruction, protection, and role modeling — they also undermine young people’s self-confidence through ridicule and humiliation, by regarding them as less important or inferior to adults, and by not considering their input when making decisions. Young people commonly hear phrases such as “don’t be so childish,” “go to your room,” “don’t talk to your parents like that,” and “you are not old enough to do that.” They’re criticized, yelled at, insulted, and intimidated in ways that adults aren’t. In school, young people are expected to listen to adults, but rarely do adults take seriously young people’s concerns or thinking. For the most part, adults tell students what and when to study and for how long. In short, their lives are filled with repeated incidents of lack of respect.

Young people without exception always deserve complete respect. They would deserve complete respect even if there were no societal benefits. However, there are benefits to society. If people are respected as thinkers when they’re young, they’ll think well as adults. Therefore, as a group, human beings will be more effective in meeting the many challenges we face. Anyone concerned about young people’s well-being, their learning, or the future of humanity would do well to reflect deeply on what it means to respect young people’s thinking and how we can improve our capacity in this area.

Why the struggle?

In a perfect world, everyone would agree on what it means to respect children's thinking, and it would be natural to do so. But we don't live in a perfect world. Almost 100 years ago, John Dewey wrote, "Perhaps the most difficult thing to get is intellectual sympathy and intellectual insight that will enable one to provide the conditions for another person's thinking and yet allow that other person to do his thinking in his own way and not according to some scheme which we have prepared in advance [...] At present, we often think that a child has no right to solve a problem or do a sum at all unless he goes through a certain form" (1913/1979).

Misconceptions, biased attitudes, and incorrect beliefs about young people and how they learn continue to exist and don't change easily. There is a tendency for adults to think they are experts about young people, rather than to open their minds to new information about learning and thinking. Adults who have attained some prominence or power in this society will be especially likely to misunderstand or deny that there is a connection between societal problems — poverty, pollution, global warming, and student alienation, for example — and young people's thinking not being respected.

The causes of disrespectful practices in educational institutions are complex. Among them are:

A false assumption that young people won't learn without pressure, rewards, and punishment.

This contradicts the research. "A large body of primarily experimental studies demonstrates that emphasis on rewards and other extrinsic reasons for engaging in an activity can undermine intrinsic interest in the activity" (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2004). This is not a new discovery. Aristotle wrote, "All men by nature desire to know." Nevertheless, people who claim to be committed to "research-based" education often ignore the conclusions of research that contradict their beliefs.

Adult fear of challenges presented by young people's thinking.

Growing up, when I disagreed with adults about social issues — race and class, for example — I often heard such condescending remarks as, "when you get older, you'll understand," or "this is just a phase you're going through." I now understand that they were afraid of my ideas.

Confusion about young people's abilities and intelligence.

Adults mistake lack of information, skills, and capabilities for lack of intelligence. This confusion causes adults to require performance rather than to nurture young people's inherent curiosity and intelligence.

Pressure from societal institutions to preserve the status quo in the society.

As a result, education's mission gets narrowed to prepare people for filling roles and jobs in society.

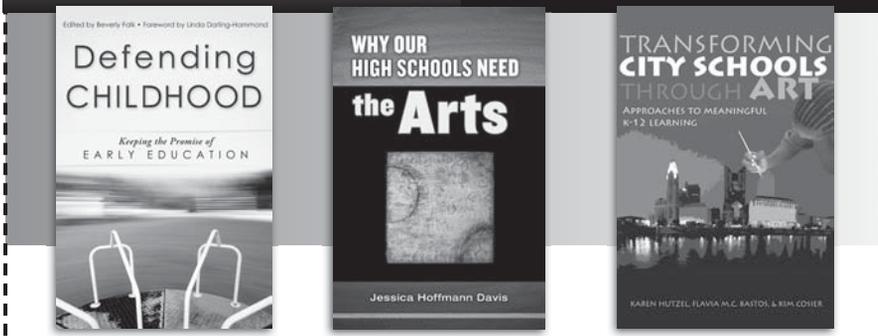
Working conditions for teachers.

Teachers often have large numbers of students and inadequate resources. They experience heavy pressure to have students perform well on standardized tests. They're often told to use curriculum that bores students and to meet developmentally inappropriate standards. In comparison to other professionals, they receive little support — intellectual or emotional — for their work.

In spite of the obstacles and challenges, there has been progress. Because educators care about young people and love learning, they do many good things for young people. Many adults have told me about an educator whose thoughtfulness, caring, passion for a particular subject, or individual support made a big difference in their lives.

We can, however, do better.

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Toward a strategy for respecting young people's thinking

This is not the place to describe, nor am I capable of describing, a complete strategy for transforming schools so that they respect young people's thinking. But I do have six principles that could form the foundation of a strategy.

Completely respect young people as emotional and intellectual human beings.

A person's emotional state significantly affects her or his ability to think and learn. Someone who is distressed won't be able to think or learn as well as when his brain is not occupied with those emotions. Certain physiological processes — crying, shaking, laughing, having a tantrum, for example — help humans recover from distress (Weissglass, 1990). An eloquent expression of the connection between intelligence and crying is in the poem written by the Persian Sufi poet Rumi:

*The cloud weeps, and then the garden sprouts.
The baby cries, and the mother's milk flows.
The nurse of creation has said, let them cry a lot.
This rain-weeping and sun-burning twine together
to make us grow.
Keep your intelligence white-hot and your grief
glistening, so your life will stay fresh.
Cry easily like a little child. (Rumi, 1955)*

Promote young people's creative endeavors and incorporate play into learning activities.

The importance of play in developing intelligence

has long been recognized. Plato, for example, wrote in *The Republic*, "There should be no element of slavery in learning. Enforced exercise does no harm to the body, but enforced learning will not stay in the mind. So avoid compulsion and let your children's lesson take the form of play" (trans. 1941).

More recently, the psychologists Jean Piaget and Valerie Polakow Suransky have emphasized the importance of play. Piaget wrote, "Play is a particularly powerful form of activity that fosters the social life and constructive activity of the child" (Puckett & Diffily, 2004, p. 257) and Suransky, "Play is the mode through which the child realizes herself. It is through play that the child restructures, invents, makes history, and transforms her given reality . . . the child becomes herself through play" (Suransky, 1982).

The increasing emphasis in U.S. schools on improving test scores, while being disrespectful of student thinking in its own right, has decreased opportunities for students to pursue creative endeavors and play. Emphasizing language and mathematics to the exclusion of other disciplines does a grave disservice to our brains, which are capable of thinking in many different areas.

Encourage communication and cooperation.

Young people communicate their thoughts and understandings in many ways — verbally, physically, by manipulating objects, and by using pictures and symbols. Communication helps students construct and express meanings. It clarifies their thinking, empowers them as learners, reduces anxiety and alienation, and establishes common understandings. Furthermore, listening to student communication helps the teacher think about the child as a learner (Weissglass, Mumme, & Cronin, 1990).

Engage and support learners in pursuing their own interests, distinguishing between respect and permissiveness, and connect curriculum to students' culture whenever possible.

Human beings are inherently curious, and it's disrespectful of students' thinking to not let them pursue their own interests. There may be tension between what society deems important for everyone to know and a student's interest, but there is time for both. At the present time, however, schools for the most part dictate how students spend their time. I am not advocating permissiveness. It is possible to respond to students' interests, to respect their thinking, and for them to develop the skills and understanding important for functioning in society.

Strengthen all students' first language, while supporting all students' fluency in a second language.

Strengthening a student's first language is a cru-

cial part of respecting their thinking. When thinking becomes verbal, the words are in the language that the young person has been hearing. Not respecting that language is disrespectful of the individual's thinking and interferes with her or his learning. As early as 1983, there was research indicating that first language competence is an important factor in a young person's ability to reason in mathematics when English was not the first language (Dawe, 1983). Many state and school district policies have ignored this research. Similarly, they have mostly ignored the recent research about reading, which has found that, "learning to read in the home language promotes reading achievement in the second" (Goldenberg, 2008, p. 15).

Decrease the role of standardized testing in evaluating student progress.

There is a lot of pressure on educators from elected representatives and policy makers to increase student achievement. The evidence they seek is increased test scores. This puts pressure on educators to raise scores rather than focus on developing students' thinking and understanding. Most tests, especially standardized tests, won't provide reliable evidence of students' ability to think. Educators who value students' thinking have the challenge of educating politicians and policy makers about the negative effects of testing.

Conclusion

An individual's struggle to gain understanding, to think more clearly, and to act in more human ways often reflects a wider struggle in society. The gains of each individual assist the progress in society, and progress in society assists each individual. For ex-

ample, the societal movements in the past century for ending racism, sexism, and the oppression of gays and lesbians have influenced and been influenced by changes of behavior, attitudes, and understanding at the individual level. Similarly, the struggle to respect young people's thinking is not merely an individual struggle. It requires changes in policy and institutional practices. In the meantime, remember that schools and society do not require conformity. They require only the appearance of conformity. Educators get to make choices about what happens in their classrooms and their schools. I hope you'll choose to have your classrooms and schools nurture and respect young people's thinking. **K**

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