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Success Not $uccess

What separates ordinary teachers, those who are merely occupying a role and are fulfilling the requirements deemed by the Board of Education, from extraordinary teachers who have a passion for making a difference in today’s youth? Teachers can offer insight and life experience to their students while providing them an education, or the acquisition of knowledge, such as in Mike Rose’s essay “I Just Wanna Be Average.” Rose, a professor in the UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, began life in the south side of Los Angeles, attending Vocational Education, with no real aspirations for his life after high school other than getting a night job and attending a local community college. This changed when he met his English teacher, Jack MacFarland, who renewed his perspective on education. Erin Gruwell, is a dedicated teacher from the motion picture *Freedom Writers,* directed by Richard LaGravenese. Her success, defined as ‘the accomplishment of an aim or purpose,’ created closeness amongst her students in the face of aggression and shows just how alike the students really are. This enabled her students to become proactive with their education. Being ‘schooled’ and being successful are not the same thing, as described by John Taylor Gatto, in his essay, “Against School*.”* Gatto, who taught in New York public schools for more than 20 years, gives examples of presidents such as George Washington and Abraham Lincoln who were rich in the education they received without having to succumb to the structure of the public school system. Extraordinary teachers are passionately involved with their student’s education, prepared to ask questions, and actively engage their students with critical thinking. These teachers succeed not only in their roles, but because of their work, their students become architects of their own success. Conversely, ordinary teachers care only about collecting a paycheck and allow their students to fall prey to a corrupt system.

The ability to retain information as students receive an education is important since students who are unable to learn what they are taught consequently have their grades deteriorate. Asking questions is an effective way to confirm whether information is also being assimilated and can captivate a student’s focus. Rose provides an example of this when describing MacFarland stating: “He asked questions often, raised everything from Zeno’s paradox to the repeated last line of Frost’s ‘Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening’. He slowly and carefully built up our knowledge of Western intellectual history – with facts, with connections, with speculations” (Rose 131). Teachers who don’t ask questions can’t verify if they have the students’ attention and whether the information can or cannot be taught based on the experience of the schoolroom. A second example of the effectiveness of classroom discussion is illustrated as Mrs. Gruwell converses with the class and asks whether or not her students are informed of tragic events in history, such as the Holocaust. Having identified her students’ current threshold, she then discusses with her students whether they had ever heard about the events related to the Holocaust. In the film, the students begin to participate in classroom discussions, and connect how the tragic events and oppression experienced by Anne Frank related back to each student in some way. The more questions Mrs. Gruwell’s students asked, the further their knowledge expanded. This example of an extraordinary teacher contrasts with Rose’s teacher, Mr. Mitropetros, as he talks about the celebrities he encounters with his students. When describing the student’s response to Mr. Mitropetros Rose states, “We’d ask questions and glance knowingly and snicker, and all that fueled the poor guy to brag some more” (Rose 125). Mr. Mitropetros is an ordinary teacher. Instead of learning about ’Julius Caesar’ and being actively involved, his students learn more about their teacher’s night life, which fails to broaden their current knowledge, thus setting his students up for failure. Learning about Mr. Mitropetros’s nightlife does not challenge the students, nor does it create an environment within the classroom that welcomes critical thinking. It can be assumed that Mr. Mitropetro does not care about his job and instead of the teacher being penalized for his actions, the students’ education suffers instead. Due to Mr. Mitropetro’s selfishness, the potential for the students in his classroom to perform well, if not excel, within the confines of the school diminishes.

Teachers involved with their students, and the unique situations they are in, have a better understanding and can identify potential barriers to student learning. In the movie *Freedom Writers,* Mrs. Gruwell who is ecstatic for the first day of her teaching career, quickly encounters resistance, not in the form of an individual, but hatred, anger, and a cultural differences within her students. The students are not at all interested in a teacher who doesn’t understand the struggles that her students face outside the school yard. Mrs. Gruwell understands that she cannot reach her students due to the presence of external barriers. This knowledge sparks a transition from providing them an education to first getting to know them individually through the use of journals. As she identifies the walls of segregation surrounding her students, she begins to realize that they are not so different and works to increase their awareness that they have a lot more in common than they realize. Her students begin to affiliate with one another, and one can clearly see the dismissal of obstacles as the class begins to become more involved with their education. Having brought her class together, Mrs. Gruwell is fulfilled with a sense of accomplishment, thus succeeding in her role to provide an education. The bond shared between student and teacher is a powerful experience and also relates back to Rose and his experience with Mr. McFarland. When describing his relationship with Mr. McFarland Rose states, “I could go to the Cinema and see events through the lenses of European directors; and, most of all, I could share an evening, talk that talk, with Jack MacFarland, the man I most admired at the time” (Rose 134). Both texts illustrate that teachers are mentors and should be able to not only provide an education, but also wisdom, life experience, and care to their students as if they were their own family. While watching *Freedom Writers*, I remember back in the fifth-grade my home classroom teacher had us write a journal entry to her each day. She was involved not because she was told to be, but because she cared and had a desire to connect with her students. As teachers become more involved inside classrooms, students are more likely to not only develop a sense of ownership for the work they deliver, but gain a sense of accomplishment and “succeed” in the process.

Actively engaging students and challenging them to think critically can help prevent boredom. Critical thinking is defined by Gary Colombo, in his essay, “Thinking Critically, Challenging Cultural Myths” as “the ability to imagine and value points of view different from [our] own - -then strengthens, refines, enlarges, or reshapes [our] ideas in light of those other perspectives” (Colombo 2). Teachers who aid their students in valuing different points of view can ultimately strengthen and reinforce their students’ perspectives, and even more importantly, stop boredom in the classrooms. Boredom that is persistent in classrooms can inhibit opportunities for critical thinking. Boredom affects schoolteachers as well and deprives them of their passion in the roles they carry. For example, Gatto states: “Boredom is the common condition of schoolteachers, and anyone who has spent time in a teachers’ lounge can vouch for the low energy, the whining, the dispirited attitudes, to be found there” (Gatto 114). Extraordinary teachers that use critical thinking and actively engage with their students can replace boredom with a desire to learn and allow students the potential to succeed when receiving an education. Students deprived of critical thinking because of interactions with ordinary teachers wouldn’t have the ability to form social-comparisons, and evaluate and compare ideas with their peers. Instead, they would become stagnant. If students become stagnant, they lose the ability and desire to receive an education, and fail to realize their potential. Failing to earn a proper education limits the opportunities available for students later in life. Finding a good-paying job becomes much harder for students as the pool of opportunities become narrow due to a deficiency of education.

Teachers who are involved, prepared to ask questions, and actively engage their students with critical thinking have more to look forward to than just a paycheck when graduation arrives. In classrooms where MacFarland or Gruwell teach their students, people would find students being educated. Receiving an education is important because it allows future opportunities for students to become successful and this starts at the front of the classroom. What really separates ordinary teachers from the extraordinary, influencing the lives of every day students and shaping those experiences for their respected futures, are the individuals that are not persuaded by the almighty dollar. These teachers are unbound by the dogmatic views imposed upon them by a repetitive and vicious cycle known as the public-school system.

Works Cited

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