
Learning Requires More than Play

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For years educational experts have held that the only good way to engage students in schoolwork is by making it exciting, engaging, and fun. Students have been expected to study and learn but only if the subject wasn't boring. The public has been told that school facilities must be attractive, books colorful, and, above all, studies must be "intrinsically" interesting. Teachers have been expected to be stimulating but not obtrusive, challenging but not demanding of overexertion. They have been told that if their teaching is truly enthusiastic, innovative, and creative, students will learn spontaneously, if not effortlessly.

Laurence Steinberg's *Beyond the Classroom, Why School Reform Has Failed and What Parents Need to Do* (Simon & Schuster, 1996) takes a decidedly different view of why successful students pay attention, complete their assignments, and succeed. Distilling the results of studies carried out over ten years, Steinberg concludes that high-achieving students treat their studies as work, not fun and games. Although the central point of Steinberg's research pertains to parent and peer influences, his broader message is that successful students approach school as an important opportunity and they work hard to make the most of it. A growing number of experts agree with his observation.

Dr. Tommy Tomlinson, the researcher who was instrumental in producing the "Nation at Risk" report, similarly identified student effort as the inescapable essential for school improvement:

After 25 years of trying to fix things, it is time to face a few facts of human nature: Setting higher standards and expectations is one thing, persuading students to try harder is another. Students who study too little, learn too little; and educational reforms that do not change the study habits of students are unlikely to improve achievement.

In fact, what Steinberg, Tomlinson, and so many other experts are finding reflects an often disagreeable truth about learning: Learning takes study and study takes time and effort. Today's students are immersed in a world of competing attractions; and no matter how teachers go about making learning attractive, students responding only to "edutainment" are unlikely to make the kind of effort that quality learning requires.

The idea that learning should be motivated solely by interest and enthusiasm not only ignores the role of work, it also skews the focus of education. Despite the fact that learning requires a concerted effort by the student, teachers and parents frequently find themselves doing most of the work. They may arrange stimulating lessons and dutifully help with homework but little is accomplished if the student makes no more than a token effort to learn. So long as the student is expected to make an effort only when he or she feels genuinely inspired, study is merely an option, not a responsibility.

A Student Work-Ethic is Indispensable

As an educational psychologist, I have no disagreement with learning that is exciting, engaging, and thoroughly enjoyable. What I find unrealistic, however, is the pedagogical orthodoxy that worthwhile learning occurs only when studies are exciting and fun. In truth, many valuable lessons in both school and daily life are not fun at all.

Students who study because they feel obliged to do so (i.e., who study even when they do not feel especially interested or enthused), learn both the easy lessons and the difficult ones; and they learn something important about life as well. They learn that real achievement usually requires a real effort.

If parents, teachers, and, indeed, the larger society want children to benefit fully from school, they must insist that students study and make an effort to learn whether they feel like it or not. Although increased effort will not somehow ensure academic excellence for all, it will ensure improved achievement for virtually all. Granted, even with their best effort, some students will not achieve within expected time frames. Yet a level of effort commensurate with timely achievement is a reasonable expectation.

American expenditures on schooling are some of the highest in the world; yet attendance, not study, is compulsory. The result is cost-ineffectiveness on a grand scale. Taxpayers are providing educational opportunities and students are wasting them. Many teachers find student attentiveness and diligence so lacking that many no longer expect them. Longer school days and school years are required to overcome the resulting inefficiencies. Progressively smaller pupil teacher ratios are needed to accommodate the resulting differences in achievement and rates of progress. Progressively greater curricular overlap from grade to grade is needed to accommodate increasingly varied levels of entry-level skills. All of the above require the hiring of more teachers and other school personnel.

In general, more of that which the average student used to learn in elementary school is now learned in high school, and more of that which was formerly learned in high school is now learned in college. Colleges divert ever greater resources into remedial studies. Taken together, these trends are resulting in increasing expenditures that produce little net change in academic achievement. Given that education is already the greatest single element of governmental expenditure, the efficiency with which students make use of publicly funded educational opportunities has a significant bearing on taxes. If schools continue to ignore this relationship, they are on a collision course with reality.

A Work Ethic Can Be Learned

In my view, one of the greatest improvements that could be made in education would be to convince parents, teachers, students, and the public that “no pain, no gain” applies to learning just as it does to athletics and other worthwhile endeavors. This message must be understood not just by parents, teachers, and students, but by those in positions of visibility and public leadership. For the most part, individuals who have distinguished themselves know that meaningful accomplishment in any endeavor takes hard work because they have worked hard themselves. Of course, there are individuals whose unusual talents or fortunate circumstances afforded them success with little effort or sacrifice but they are the exceptions. Permitting or encouraging young people to believe that they too “can have it all” without a determined effort is a disservice to them and to their communities.

Parents, teachers, and all others who work with young people can make a huge contribution to both their educational success and their lifelong habits by teaching them to put school work before pleasure. This principle is an American essential, and it is the essence of responsible behavior. The ability to delay gratification by putting work before pleasure practically defines self-discipline and maturity. It is a habit, however, that is acquired gradually and progressively. Children do not naturally recognize that long-term satisfaction often requires one to forego immediate pleasures. The alternative of permitting young people to be irresponsible in matters such as schoolwork and then expecting them to become self-disciplined adults is utterly unrealistic.

Study is a Matter of Civic Responsibility

Making an effort to study and learn should be treated as a matter of civic responsibility. All citizens are expected to contribute to the common good, thus it is entirely fitting that students be asked to do their part in school.

In my opinion, we have undermined the ability of young Americans to play a responsible role in society by placing too great an emphasis on their disadvantages and disabilities and not enough emphasis on their strengths. Without question students are sometimes impaired by social and economic conditions, but educational improvement cannot wait until all of these conditions are corrected. In spite of sometime adverse life circumstances, young Americans have opportunities and advantages only dreamed of by students elsewhere in the world. In any case, we cannot expect them to heed the message that they are the parties who must work much harder in school if we continue to talk like everyone else is to blame for their lack of achievement. In truth, America can afford to waste neither educational opportunities nor the talents of another generation.

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