A Legacy of Blind Compassion

posted in: Briefings & Reports |

An Occasional Paper by J. E. Stone
October 15, 2004

Briefing

Government mandated measures such as the No Child Left Behind Act and New York City's program to retain failing third graders would be unnecessary if the grades contained in student report cards were accurate indicators of student progress. In practice, however, objective tests and remedial programs are needed because many teachers worry more about discouraging their pupils than providing an accurate report. They are motivated by a "blind compassion" that relieves immediate adversity but often at the expense of harmful long-term consequences. Inflated grades are like a false medical diagnosis. They can permit a treatable problem to become fatal condition. Blind compassion is responsible for a wide range of educational and social policy failures. For decades, it has played a central role in public conversations about social, cultural, and political issues. The key to its popularity is the satisfaction it affords the benefactor, not the benefit to the recipient. To the socially concerned, blind compassion provides instant gratification and a sense of moral elevation. Parents and policymakers want a clear-eyed compassion–one that produces long-term results.

Since the early 20th century, American educators have idealized a style of schooling that tries to optimize learning by means that are, first and foremost, well received by the student. Its aim has been to shield students from the stresses and pressures associated with rigorous curricula in favor of "student-friendly" experiences that seek to capture attention and boost self-esteem.

Student-friendly schooling is an expression of a "blind compassion"–a kindhearted idealism that fails to reckon with the consequences of its acts. It has both spawned educational fads and profoundly shaped the public debate about social issues–including ones at stake in the current presidential election.

Public schools and the colleges that train teachers rose to prominence during the progressive era of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The progressive movement was a humanitarian response to the excesses of the industrial revolution. Spurred by public concern for workers' lives, it aimed to better the human condition. Universal public schooling was one of its important reforms, and the student-friendly schooling favored by progressive educators was a welcome alternative to "the rule of the hickory stick."

Blind compassion is a specious rendering of the progressive/humanitarian ideal. It purports to improve the human condition but ignores the risks and costs of its actions. It seeks to relieve distress but excuses the opposite results as well-intentioned. It promises betterment but frequently produces disappointment.

Blind compassion has turned the attention of the public schools away from readiness for college or the job market and toward student enjoyment. It has turned public conversations about human problems away from solutions and toward the simple alleviation of discomfort.

"Feel-good" grades

A legacy of student-friendly schooling is the phenomenon of grade inflation, i.e., grades that overestimate student progress. *If it were not for rampant grade inflation, measures such as the No Child Left Behind Act and New York City's program to retain thousands of failing students would be unnecessary.* Report cards would let parents know how well their children were performing, and schools would know about achievement problems as soon as they emerged.

Parents, students, and the general public assume that the letter grades recorded on report cards have some established, generally accepted meaning. In truth, they represent a teacher's assessment of student performance and may bear little relationship to any fixed or historical standards. An "A" may not reflect readiness for college or a "C" or "D" may not reflect preparedness for the next grade. Satisfactory or even impressive grades may mean only that the teacher was exercising blind compassion.

Grade inflation is a "feel good" solution to the challenges and disappointments of the school experience. Higher-than-deserved grades avoid immediate disappointment and discomfort at the cost of far more harmful consequences. Like false medical diagnoses, they permit treatable problems to grow into fatal conditions.

Inflated grades can be regarded as compassionate only if their foreseeable outcomes are ignored.

The labor market is swamped with high school graduates who have passing grades but who can't fill out a job application. They have no chance. One-third of today's entering college students confront the reality of having to take remedial college courses despite satisfactory or even superior high school grades. Many experience shock, disappointment, and embarrassment at this prospect.

Plainly, compassion that surrenders children to such a fate is a false compassion.

Instead of practicing the "tough love" that may be necessary to success, grade inflating educators delay honest feedback and let the child's best opportunities for learning slip away. Instead of teaching that "no pain, no gain" applies to both study and athletics, they reward

insufficient effort, encourage complacency, and promote a dependence on the sympathy of others–all responses that are counterproductive in the real world. Instead of helping children overcome adversity, they postpone and compound it.

Beyond inflated grades

Examples of blind compassion dot the human services landscape. Because education's outcomes are much delayed and easily ignored, it is especially susceptible to schemes that promise more than they produce. Many educators not only inflate grades, they seek to protect students from stress and pressure by resisting curricular standards, testing, and other devices that are used to gauge educational progress. Instead, they favor narrative reports, student portfolios, and other indicators of achievement that are more amenable to compassionate interpretation.

Blind compassion is similarly evident in education's choice of teaching practices. The "student-centered" teaching methodology that educators refer to as "best practice" lets student interests and enthusiasms guide decisions about what, when, and how much to study. Despite its poor record of bringing about the knowledge and skills essential to college and the workplace, many educators consider it the epitome of good teaching.

The same preference strongly influences teacher decisions about the use of systematic instruction in teaching basic skills. Despite their proven effectiveness, highly scripted methods of instruction are stereotyped as onerous and boring, and thus are rarely used to teach reading, writing, and arithmetic. Teachers are taught to create engaging and joyful activities and to avoid anything that smacks of drill, practice, or memorization. Unfortunately, their creations are typically untested and often ineffective.

Every year, huge numbers of children are unnecessarily put at risk of educational failure because teachers in primary grades use "edutainment" instead of proven practices.

Blind compassion is reflected in the education community's policy statements. For example, the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) requires teacher-training programs to stress equity, diversity, and social justice. The use of proven teaching methods, however, is not mentioned. In other words, NCATE worries more about whether teachers make students feel welcome in the classroom than they do about whether teachers know how to bring about learning.

A classroom environment that welcomes students regardless of their racial, ethnic, and religious differences is wholly necessary and commendable. But what about the differences in study habits, classroom conduct, language usage, etc. that are correlated with the students' backgrounds?

In truth, teachers who have been taught that their first responsibility is to embrace diversity are unlikely to correct poor study habits, bad conduct, faulty English, etc.–and understandably so.

Parents, policymakers, and taxpayers want schools that guide students toward a successful future. Instead, schools congratulate themselves for "compassionately" permitting students to follow a path of least resistance.

Blind compassion's rewards

Blind compassion may not serve the best interests of its intended beneficiaries, but it is satisfying to those who practice it.

Teachers who inflate grades are liked by almost everyone. Unless there are glaring discrepancies between reported grades and student performance, students and parents assume that high grades represent good progress by the student and effective teaching by the teacher. So do principals and other school officials.

Not incidentally, generous grades permit schools to sidestep the substantial increase in cost and workload that may be incurred if grade reports indicate a need for more or better teaching. Clearly, lenient grading is more rewarding than the opposite.

The same kind of intangible satisfactions that derive from blind compassion in the school setting have made it an important force for social change in the public arena. Social activists concerned with war, poverty, homelessness, hunger, and the like are admired and often celebrated for their compassion. Exponents of socialism, for example, are thought of as more humane than free-market capitalists because socialism is more concerned with the immediate satisfaction of economic needs than with effective incentives and long-term self-sufficiency.

Recognition of blind compassion's satisfactions and rewards is key to understanding the popularity of "liberal" proposals in realm of public affairs. Blind compassion not only pleases those whose burdens are lessened, it is applauded by the many who admire its good intentions and resonate with its sentiments. It affords the socially concerned a sense of self-satisfaction and an occasional measure of celebrity and influence.

In essence, blind compassion is popular because it pays. So long as its long-term consequences are ignored, it offers what seems to be a socially beneficial means of attaining spiritual satisfaction and prestige. It is, at once, well-intentioned and self-serving.

In addition to its social and spiritual benefits, blind compassion has an appealing moral clarity. The notion that the alleviation of suffering comes before all else puts social issues into sharp contrast. Anything that makes someone feel bad is bad–no matter what the justification. Disagreements are seen as clashes between good and evil, and reform initiatives are easily framed as crusades against apathy, selfishness, greed, intolerance, and mean-spiritedness.

Everyone is either “part of the solution or part of the problem.” One is either among the righteous or not.

Moral certitude is empowering even if self-appropriated. It can engender a dismissive contempt for one’s moral inferiors. With issues cast in terms of “the good guys” versus “the bad guys,” it is not surprising that social causes so often find themselves associated with exaggeration, dishonesty, propaganda, and ad hominem argumentation. *From their seemingly incontestable moral vantage, the blindly compassionate have little difficulty in summoning outrage against those whom they see as insensitive, mean-spirited, bigoted, and hateful.*

Finally, the practice of blind compassion is a highly egalitarian pursuit. Like religious faith, belief is its main requirement. The blindly compassionate need no specialized knowledge or ability to connect the dots between present actions and distant consequences. They need only to empathize with the victim and favor alleviation of their discomfort. For example, anti-war activists may have strong convictions on national and international issues where few facts are publicly available. To fellow activists, however, their views are credible simply because they place the prevention and alleviation of suffering above all other considerations.

The growth of skepticism and “compassion fatigue”

Despite blind compassion’s undeniable appeal, the public policies founded on it are increasingly the subject of skepticism. In part, the cause may be demographics. Baby boomers have now lived long enough to see the results of their handiwork. The human cost of idealism in education alone is staggering, and its financial cost continues to grow. Many boomers worry about the educational achievement of their children and grandchildren, and about the financial burden that they will inherit.

Another reason for skepticism’s growth is the public’s vastly greater access to information via the Internet and a diversified media. The failure of blind compassion to solve social and educational problems despite billions spent is visible to anyone who is willing to look. Apologists may rant and die-hards may cling to their views; but outcomes that once were hidden and opinions that were formerly dismissed are today far more easily accessed. As a result, a growing segment of the population is succumbing to compassion fatigue.

Younger generations are increasingly resistant to the blindly compassionate worldview. Many were raised by their now-chastened parents to value accomplishment over social consciousness. Also, most have attended student-friendly schools and have witnessed their shortcomings.

In the arena of public affairs, a growing majority of Americans want a clear-eyed compassion, not a blind one. They want public schooling that is safe and effective, not just a pleasant

experience. They want public policy based on realistic estimates of risk and cost, not just a desire to feel everyone's pain.

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