

A Tale of Two Schools

Limitation vs. Liberation

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How do we know if our children are getting the kind of education that is worthy of the special gifts with which each child comes into the world? Let's visit two schools. One I'll call Edgewood Elementary - a neighborhood public school in a typical suburban community. Let's call the other Greenfields Community School, a K-8th grade public, suburban school started under the inspiration of parents who wanted a different kind of education for their children.

While these names are imaginary, the programs accurately portray the kinds of diverse educational choices you will find in many American communities. It'll be obvious that these schools are very different; however, it's easy to see the externals and miss completely the deeper meaning of those differences.

Differences begin to mount

At Edgewood we would see the usual well-equipped building for 400+ students in grades K-5, complete with a technology lab, a large library, an indoor gym, one classroom after another off of several long corridors that crisscross the building, and large playing fields outside for soccer and baseball. We might feel at home here because Edgewood looks and feels like the kind of school many Americans are used to. We might be happy with the many amenities we Americans have fallen in love with.

Alternative schools like Greenfields may not look all that impressive in terms of facilities. Classes might be in portables, or a renovated older

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wooden school building or a house. There would probably be a modest library kept up mostly by volunteer moms, a few computers in the classrooms, and a small play field—perhaps with trails going off into the woods.

Walk inside each school and watch a class in progress and the differences begin to mount. Chairs in the typical Edgewood classroom combine seat and writing surface, and are in rows facing the front where the teacher has a desk, can project videos, and write on a blackboard. A combination of student art, world maps, the school

honor code and enlarged photos of notable people – like M.L. King, Gandhi, Cesar Chavez and John Kennedy – neatly line the walls.

“No Child Left Behind”

Greenfields looks casual by comparison and perhaps even a bit disorderly to some. Individual chairs are grouped around small tables, and you'll see different centers or areas where kids can congregate for various activities – like group reading, science projects, and so forth. The ceiling might be draped in a huge paper depicting the Milky Way galaxy, and there could be an 8x12 raised platform which children could access by a small ladder if they want to go and hide out or just be quiet. Perhaps children of different ages and grade levels attend many of the same classes.





If you used your watch you might notice that the Edgewood teacher spent 75%+ of each 55-minute period talking to the class in order to convey the content mandated by the school district and state. In fact, one of the things teachers at this school might stress over is how much “coverage” of all the curriculums they need to achieve to make sure their school passes “annual yearly progress” or the year-to-year gains in “student achievement” which the states, under federal law “No Child Left Behind,” are looking for. Typically, the teacher would go from one subject to another in successive periods.

Greenfields might start the morning with children sitting in a circle on the floor sharing something special to them, and they might do a ritual of going around the circle greeting their neighbors by name. The teacher may have had one of the students prepare the agenda for the morning’s activities on a flip chart – covering contemporary news items, the theme for today, and inviting students to pick their work buddy for the morning with whom they will share a project. Kids might then open up their portfolios and choose a series of learnings they will do that day from a pre-arranged list of choices. After that, the class could engage in simulations of social interactions, learning to model through role-playing healthy attitudes and behaviors.

Hidden assumptions

Some kids might not feel like being in class for a time, so the teachers might have a small area in the building where children can go and be quiet, doing their own thing. You would feel the relaxed family atmosphere and little sense of pressure that “we’ve got to get somewhere.”

Aside from the written mission statements, the Edgewoods and Greenfields of America operate on profoundly different sets of largely unspoken assumptions about human nature, how children learn best,

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what’s important to learn and why. In “education talk” these unspoken assumptions are called “the hidden curriculum.” In short, how a school is run communicates silently and powerfully to children about who they are or ought to be.

Don’t we need an ordered society?

The Edgewood type school is an institutional culture where kids learn that authority and what is valuable to know in the world is outside of them. Achievement, measured by doing well on tests and in prescribed class activities, is prized and reinforced through verbal and other rewards. Order, uniformity, and obedience are praised as means to assure that students get to where they are supposed to be in order to move on to the next level. Here the hidden message is “you’re worth what you achieve.” Achieving gets defined as “being and doing good” according to schools’ expectations.

Now, a lot of folks may think that this type of institutional approach is not so bad. After all, they might say, “Don’t we need an ordered society and responsible people who learn to work hard and get ahead to build strong communities and a strong America?” Well, this is one viewpoint held in varying degrees by many Americans – whether they’ve fully unpacked their thinking or not. But what are the costs to your child in this kind of environment?

I would say that you have to work hard as a parent in the Edgewood schools to rescue your child’s authentic sense of self from the distortions that go on in these environments, where the inclinations, unique needs, and subtle feelings of children do not have a home. When kids are mostly *talked to* – and not so much *listened to*, they learn not to listen and connect with their own deeper knowing. Child or adult – we all want to fit in, be accepted and liked, so kids will do their best to rise to the occasion and play the “success game,” which dominates the modern world and its schools. Without realizing it, children can lose themselves and that deep connection to heart and spirit with which we are all born.

Lose their authentic selves

You see the aftermath of this kind of education in the many youth who look like wilted flowers by the time middle and high school come around. Or perhaps, they are the over-achievers who have learned to play the game well – and they make the institutional schools look better than they really are. In the race to success, everyone is at risk of becoming some kind of loser. Kids feel less confident about themselves when they are doing less well in school. Students who succeed risk losing their authentic selves without even knowing that it is happening, because the culture shapes them into achievers and away from their own core personhood.

When I look at things like environmental devastation, people unhappy with their work, the spiritual and social ravages of materialism, the loss of community and meaning, I can’t help but think about the institutional classroom and its role in this messy world we live in today. After all, one could not design a better way to separate children from their authentic selves than the modern schoolhouse and the state-run systems that make this possible in all developed countries around the world.

Connecting young people with who they really are

And when you are not connected to who you are deep down, how can you really be connected to others in a compassionate and sensitive way? Or to the Earth which is our home? Or to the subtle callings of spirit? As I explain in my book, *Educating for Humanity: Rethinking the Purposes of Education*, if we want a peaceful, sustainable and just world, we need to start in the world's classrooms by connecting young people with who they are, and then building on that by making connections to others near and far, to the Earth, and to spirit, and how we make meaning in life.

Goals like this go beyond national agendas, and define the kind of education we will need for the world we want. The good news is that the schools we want are available right here and now in

the Greenfields model. We know how to educate human beings more effectively—we simply need to wake up and gain the wisdom that a truly child-centered, personalized education is good for the individual and the broader society. One need not sacrifice one for the other.

Learning to trust and honor what is inside

In the Greenfields type of schools, children learn to trust and honor what is inside of them. They learn that the most important questions have no single right answer, and that curiosity – as messy as it may get sometimes – is fun and good. They learn about cooperation and the value of kindness by experiencing it – not just by being told to do it. Making their own educational choices lets students know that they are competent and worthy of making their own decisions, so they learn

to grow in knowledge and wisdom at the same time. With less material “stuff” at school, Greenfields-bred students may become more resourceful and less inclined to get hung up on the latest gadgets and technology. They may perhaps learn the value of simpler things as well. Similarly, they're more likely to follow their own hearts and paths and less likely to get sucked into the maelstrom of success.

In the end, it's a question of *being* more as opposed to *having* more. If we truly believe that our children have a unique and special calling in life, then one of our greatest responsibilities and joys as parents is to see that “who they are” is honored in their school experience.

As parents, we can advocate with our community leaders for more child-centered schools. This trend is happening all over the USA. Join the movement. As Gandhi said “Be the change you want to see in the world.” ■



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