

An Overture

Respect: What You Give is What You Get

“Few people show enough respect for the young.” Those words of an editorial staff member reverberated in my mind long after that conversation had ended. We had been discussing the problems our own children were experiencing, but the lack of respect shown young people does not stop with our offspring. It extends to millions of students in thousands of classrooms at every educational level. Of course, it is not limited to educational settings, but those are the settings that should concern us.

Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary gives the following pertinent meanings of respect: (1) consider worthy of high regard; and (2) refrain from interfering with (as one’s privacy). Many of the examples I will cite seem trivial taken individually, but taken as they accumulate over the years individuals spend in school, they contribute to students’ lack of respect for others and diminished respect for themselves.

As individuals, we have subtle, sometimes subconscious, ways to display less than full respect for our students. Some of us behave toward our students in ways we would never behave toward our colleagues—like Ms. A, who looks over her glasses and down her nose; Mr. B, who herds his students around by blowing a whistle rather than speaking to them; or Dr. C. who writes stinging barbs of sarcasm and ridicule on the margins of students’ papers.

Sometimes we show more respect for bright students than for dull ones, for well-groomed students than for untidy ones; and for members of majorities than for members of minorities. We even show biases with respect to the sex of our students—as Ms. D did when she exhibited to me the work of the tidy little girls, and shoved aside that of the messy little boys; or Mr. E, a mathematics teacher I once had who never expected a woman to perform as well as a man.

We can, with a little effort, control these insensitive displays of disrespect. I find it helpful to measure my actions against what I would do if I were dealing with someone I respect highly. Anything I would not do toward that person, I should not do toward a student—even that dumb, messy one that sits in the back corner.

In some schools, raucous bells dispatch students from one class to the next. Official passes are required for a student to walk through the hall except when he or she is dispatched by those bells. Separate restrooms are designated for students and staff, with less privacy provided for the students. Privacy is virtually non-existent for students showering after physical education classes. Students’ lockers may be searched without the knowledge or consent of the users. And, teachers may go up the “down” staircase, but students may not.

Some of these practices may be justified in the cases of students who have abused their freedom by acting irresponsibly, but to subject all students to such indignities is, to say the least, disrespectful.

Some privileges should be afforded staff members to the extent that their responsibilities differ from those of the students, but separate standards in matters involving personal rights are never justifiable.

As staff members carrying out school policies, we may be called upon to indulge in or at least condone various actions that interfere with the personal rights and privacy of students. If we have enough authority, we may be able to enforce these policies without subjecting ourselves to the same indignities.

We pay a terrible price when we use the power of a position of authority to treat our students with disrespect, even though this power may succeed in suppressing any overt, immediate objections. We degrade the dignity of our positions; we lose the respect of those we have intimidated; and, worst of all, we destroy a little of our own humanity.

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