

## Behind Every Silver Lining

Wade A. Carpenter

### The Other Side of Student Opinion

One day a few years ago my wife and I were at the Palace of Versailles, and though it was not the first visit for either of us, we were still awestruck at one of the most dazzling structures ever built, the high point of the *ancien regime*. But right smack in the middle of the Hall of Mirrors, the clear and unmistakable voice of an American teenager cut through the reverent mumble of the hundreds: “Borrrring!” A moment of shocked silence fell over the Hall, followed by a wave of old-world dismissive shrugs, new-world mortification, and distinctively Gallic expressions of contempt. Sure, the kid was wrong, but it was her honest opinion, and the glory of the new regime is freedom of speech, even for the clueless. The point of this is that for all their insights, kids do have their “other side,” and can be just as wrong as adults can. It is as foolish to over-romanticize them as it is to undervalue them. But we *can* learn from them, and perhaps the most important thing they can teach us is that something is missing even in our best efforts. And at this they are almost always right.

I thought about that young lady when reviewing the student submissions for this issue. As expected, the submissions were a mixed bag. After reading the second batch I wrote the editors:

*Much better than the first. More thoughtful, more honest, more troubling. The fact that they're mostly wrong is beside the point: If those are their honest perceptions of school, the wrongs that have been done to them outweigh their anger. . . . In this case, truth is more important than accuracy, I reckon.*

A few jewels stood out for me that I think I can at least begin to answer.

We might as well start with the really tough one, which I'm afraid will require a really tough answer if we are to honor his point. What the young man meant is valuable, but one unfortunate word-choice bothers me.

*One of the main reasons for these shootings is that schools are a big popularity contest and the people that are outcasts want to show the more popular people that they are not going to take the teasing and taunting anymore.*

The use of the word “reasons” here is unsustainable, because what he is describing is not a reason; it is just an excuse. Millions upon millions of kids have been bullied, teased, taunted, and otherwise abused throughout the history of schooling, but only a tiny handful have resorted to mass murder. To call their motives “reasons” may unintentionally seem to legitimate them, and they don't deserve that. Their “reasoning” isn't even as respectable as the suicide attempter's “They'll be sorry when I'm gone,” but is really more like the dark broodings of a Timothy McVeigh or a Jeffrey Dahmer. Kids entertaining such thoughts should understand that when people like that go, many are glad they're gone. They should understand that there's a price to be paid for wrongdoing, that for this particular wrongdoing the lightest possible outcome is to be busted and sentenced to life in prison, where our lonely youths will make a lot of friends . . . intimate friends.

The verbal miscue notwithstanding, what the student says is compelling and must be addressed.

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The usual weasel-words and pop-psychology just won't do. He's right; although the crime rate in schools is down dramatically since the early 1990s, the new lethality is historically unusual, perhaps unprecedented. What are we doing wrong? Are the schools nowadays making kids pay the price for misbehavior, and pay a steep

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price for violence? If not, with whom does the fault lie? The parents? The teachers? The administrators? The courts?

Courts should be called upon to consider the argument that *education* may be a right, but *school* is a privilege, and the seriously disturbed and the psychopathic don't belong in schools. Administrators are finally realizing that the safety of the kids overrides political considerations, and the courts should follow suit. How about the teachers? Do they have the inclination, preparation, time, and wisdom to give kids the more kindly attention that *must* accompany the tough measures? Do they protect the bullied? Counsel the troubled? Comfort the sad? At the very least, do they teach the difference between a reason and excuse?

Here, some of the other student contributions come up.

*Nobody should have to walk through life feeling that no one wants them or likes them . . . bearing the snickers and everyone laughing. . . .*

The snobbishness and prejudice described here have no place in our lives. Selectivity, however, *does* have a place. There is a difference between snobbishness and a kindly but intelligent choice of friends. Do schools teach good judgment, or do they teach a vapid tolerance of people's choices and behavior bizarrely combined with an arrogant skepticism toward their ideas and ideals? Furthermore, schools have never been very good at socialization, so why should we be so dependent on them for it? There is a

strong argument that schools should concentrate on what they can do well—the academic stuff—and if they do that right the kids won't have all that much time to be vicious to one another—even during cooperative learning sessions.

Although this is not the right venue for an analysis of cooperative learning, one question should not go unasked: Are groups wisely chosen, *by the teacher*? When kids are allowed to choose up sides, at least two kids *will* get their feelings hurt unnecessarily. And the "countoff" method is not helpful if the class has major personality conflicts in it. While it is sometimes useful for belligerents to be forced to cooperate, they *must* be closely monitored. (And don't get me started about parents; I'm trying to keep it clean.)

Several students complained about standardized tests: the inordinate time demands, the threats to use the scores punitively, and the questions of validity, reliability, and racial disparity. On the other hand, while multiple choice doesn't show what kids know, it can show what they *don't* know, and that too has value. My sense is that the public is willing to pay more for better schools, but not willing to pay more for mediocrity, so if raising the test scores will restore confidence enough that we can start fixing so many of the deficiencies the students discuss, we may just have to put up with them . . . for a while.

One contributor, Lisa Beirn, brought up trick questions, a topic that bears investigation. I'm not familiar with the tests her state requires, so I have to tread cautiously here. But I can say that difficult or subtle questions are okay, but ambiguous or misleading questions are just contemptible, and not compatible with anything I would care to call "education."

Finally, a number of students mention uncaring teachers. But then one essayist wisely points out that some teachers are too involved; that sometimes a kid needs space. Before frustrated readers bewail what seems to be a "damned if you do, damned if you don't" situation, let's consider that both may be right. While many students need highly involved teachers, others don't, and surely many of our kindest teachers sometimes "kill with kindness." Gauging the appropriate level of support is one of the most delicate aspects of our art. To do the job well requires something beyond teacher training for pedagogical skill. It calls for teacher education for wisdom.