

POLITICS ASIDE:

OUR CHILDREN
AND THEIR TEACHERS
IN SCORE-DRIVEN TIMES

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Politics Aside:
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Dedication

To the teachers and parents who protect the young child's right to a joyful and meaningful education and stay true to the developmental needs of children.

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The Broken Mirror in the Early Grade Classroom

Young children come to school to discover themselves as learners. They know something about themselves as sons or daughters, brothers or sisters; neighbors and grandchildren. For many kids, school is the first place where they come to know themselves as community members, friends, and students. When a child looks in the mirror on the first day of school and sees himself wearing his new backpack with lunchbox in hand, a new image of himself is reflected back.

During the last half of the 20th century, our tradition of offering young children pre-school, kindergarten and early grade classrooms that support the child's developing self-image was rooted in the study of child development. Young learners needed to develop their social, emotional, and physical abilities before they were expected to focus on academic material. Little by little, children in early childhood and early grade programs were given the tools of symbol and metaphor to facilitate their learning. They were encouraged to play, build, draw, and eventually read and write to make sense of the experiences that they had already had in their young lives, so that they were free to take in new ideas.

The early grade classroom with a warm and attuned teacher acted as a "good mirror" for the children who spent hours each day

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within its walls. Children could see themselves in the stories that the teacher read to them. They found new parts of themselves in their collaborative fantasy play. Without feeling pressured to produce, children felt empowered by their early attempts at writing invented words and proudly making numbers that they had seen in their environment. “Look at me! Look what I made!” Teachers and parents were pleased and proud and children saw that their inventions were valued. Children who hadn’t had prior opportunities to be seen in a positive way by the adults in their lives, had another chance within the teacher-child relationship. When the teacher who interacted with a child every day saw him in a positive light, the child began to see himself in a positive light as well, and learning potential was enhanced. Indeed, research shows that warmth in the teacher-child relationship during the kindergarten year predicts positive school adjustment and academic success through the eighth grade (Hamre and Pianta, 2001).

Paradoxically, in the 21st century when we know more than we have ever known about the ways that young children’s brains develop, and social, emotional, and cognitive learning unfold, we are not free to use our expanding knowledge base to inform early childhood and early grades practice. Instead of informing our practice with the outcomes of brain research, years of clinical study and decades of early childhood educator expertise, we are forced to tolerate a form of regressive practice born of politically motivated, score-driven “reform.” While educators, school social workers, and psychologists are seeing children across the socioeconomic spectrum coming into school with high stress levels, public schools are pressured to enter these stressed children in a “race,” enrolling them in high stress, score-driven classrooms. This political agenda for score-driven school reform has resulted in a form of early childhood practice that is producing more stressful, less personal, and significantly less active learning environments for our youngest learners.

Often, early grade teachers feel that they have “no time” to connect with individual children in their classrooms, or to work on supporting the social climate or emotional well-being of the classroom community. Teachers can’t afford to give priority to developing children’s play skills, learning through active discovery, socialization and emotional expression when the school’s survival depends on preparing children to “win the race” by producing the highest scores on tests that will come on the cusp of the upper elementary grades. According to this regressive political agenda, only constant formal assessment can let early grade teachers know if their children are moving toward the goal at an acceptable pace. Those children who are able to keep up are “proving” that the politicians who “take on” education are strong and capable and that the corporate model of competition can make schools successful. Those children who can’t be rushed, trip and fall, cry and kick, or are afraid to enter the classroom each morning do not concern the political crusaders. In order to ensure that these children do not reflect poorly on the politicians or on their educational agendas, these children’s failure to adjust to developmentally *inappropriate* expectations is attributed to ineffective teaching. If young children can’t measure up to politically motivated expectations, their teachers must be at fault.

Certainly, we have abandoned young children and their teachers by surrendering to score-driven practice. When children enter their early childhood and early grade classrooms and cannot find anything in the room that reflects their developmental agendas, the classroom “mirror” is cracked. When the actual experience of being a young child in school, the parent of a young child in school, or an early grade teacher does not match the rhetoric describing the school’s child centered vision, philosophy, values and methods, the “mirror” is broken and child’s image of himself as a student becomes distorted. When the look in a kindergarten teacher’s eyes reflects anxiety about a child’s level of academic performance instead of communicating confidence, appreciation and affection, the “mirror” is shattered.

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Broken fragments of this shattered mirror scatter throughout our school systems unattended, endangering everyone.

Politics Aside: Our Children and Their Teachers in Score -Driven Times, will bring the reader back to the reality of what young children bring into the classroom and what they need from their teachers in order to emerge from the classrooms as confident, empowered learners.