Teach Our Kids to Think

Now, more than ever, we must remember what it means to teach for thinking – not because it’s going to be too late otherwise, or the end might be near, or we’re staring a possible apocalypse in the face . . . but because it IS too late. We bear witness to the dismantling of public education, and we’ve been complicit in its demise.

What might be different now, had we taught a generation of learners to use their minds well?

And, why didn’t we? We – educated and compassionate teachers and school leaders -- abandoned what we knew and how we knew it. We lost faith in ourselves, and we learned to distrust that which lies fundamentally at our core. We lost our way, and we did that with a LOT of help.

For much of the past two decades, public school educators have been barraged by laws and policies, initiatives and mandates designed and imposed upon us by individuals, like the soon-to-be U.S. Secretary of Education, who had absolutely NO experience in public schools -- they’d spent not even one minute of their lives in a public school classroom.

And we – educated and compassionate teachers and school leaders -- being the good doobies that we are, complied with their edicts. We collected our data as we vowed to narrow the achievement gap without considering the racism inherent in that phrase; we dutifully sat through mind-numbing “professional development;” we compiled portfolios that demonstrated “evidence” of our teaching proficiency to those who didn’t visit our classrooms, and wouldn’t have recognized the brilliance of our practice, even if they had.

We constructed a myth that black and brown children must become compliant and complacent in schools before they can learn: we marched them around in uniforms and made them chant multiplication tables; we dispensed demerits, and imposed silent lunches. We decided they needed more grit. We co-opted, then bastardized, the dispositions of growth mindset, the habit of mindfulness, and the dignity in restorative justice for a perverse purpose -- to punish students whose minds we failed to actively engage.

We added more seat time and provided less think time. We adopted scripted curriculum and pacing guides, distributed hundreds of thousands of worksheets, taught children how to be good at “doing” school, and supported the flawed idea that our most struggling students benefit from skill-drill-and-kill. Really.

We bought into the incredibly ridiculous notion that high school students need to read four times as much informational text as literature, even though it is through literature that we develop our understanding of what it means to be human. We saved our libraries for the privileged, and recycled whitewashed textbooks for students who would most benefit from closely examining the current narrative. We took pens out of the hands of children, dismissing research that connects ballpoint and brain, writing and cognition.

Why did we participate in these things we’re not proud of? We’d been assailed by policies and initiatives so ludicrous that we thought surely they would wither and die in due time; but each, in the company of others, grew stronger, until together, they formed a wave, a great tsunami bearing down upon us. It’s
understandable, then, but not forgivable, that we grew weary enduring the long hard battle for the minds of children. We grew fearful, too: we might be closed down; we could lose our jobs (and some of us did). We could no longer “prove” that what we were doing and how we were doing it worked, because the metrics weren’t designed to measure what we knew to be school success. Thinking was not valued. Teaching students to use their minds well became a suspect endeavor.

Little by little, then, we conformed and complied – in small ways, at first. We figured out how to feed state and federal agencies just enough to keep them out of our schools and away from our students, as we tried to maintain intellectual and moral integrity: How could we get around this mandate, implement just part of this initiative? But after years of compromise, pretending, and increased external scrutiny, we no longer recognize ourselves. We couldn’t separate ourselves from our dis-ease. In only a couple of decades, we had become co-conspirators in the war against intellectualism.

So, where do we find ourselves now, now that we’ve co-created a citizenry incapable of holding the complexity of disparate ideas, lacking intellectual heft sufficient to think beyond itself? We watch in horror -- we wonder what we have done and what we will do -- as our world no longer makes sense to us. We are in deep trouble, and we must learn to re-invent ourselves as good thinkers engaged in our collective best thinking about developing good thinkers, if we have any chance of getting out from under our morass.

Indeed, there is no more time left, and we have nothing left to lose.

So, hide your textbooks. Shred your worksheets. Lose your data. Fuck the testing. Disconnect the bell in your classroom. Open the doors and windows and let the light shine in. Be with your children and provide refuge for their hearts and minds, and from oppression. Love them up, ask them tough questions, listen more, talk less. Assume students bring experience and meaning to every situation, and that they know enough. Give them real things and real problems to play with, and validate their every idea. Support them to be in conversation with each other; teach them to respectfully disagree. Nurture empathy and compassion. Go outside and play.

Trust what you know and how you know it. Teach our kids to think.

--Beth I. Graham
Coalition of Essential Schools Fall Forum 2016: The Last One
“Learning to Teach for Learning: The Imperative for Constructivism”