

07/18/2005

**A Culture for Teaching**

**William Raspberry**

One way I know I've heard a keen insight into a difficult problem is when I find myself thinking: *I knew that all along* .

The phrase almost always pops into my head whenever I talk to James P. Comer, the Yale professor of psychiatry and the mind behind the Comer School Development Program, a highly successful model for transforming urban schools.

Comer's insight this time: Curriculum reform, new governance models, stiffer tests for students and teachers may be fine, but there's no magic in them. The magic is in a culture that supports child and adolescent development, and that can happen only through relationships.

If that sounds too complicated, try this: "Think of your own experience and the people you interacted with and their advice to you about what it takes to make it in the world," Comer suggests. "Think of the people who cared about you and who taught you how to elicit positive responses from people who can make your life better or worse. These are the people who point you toward success."

You knew that all along, of course. But lots of people don't. There are parents who are adept at teaching children how to minimize the hurts of life (by being prepared to respond forcefully and physically to any slight, or by avoiding situations -- including academic competition -- that might make them look bad). But many of these same parents don't have much to teach their children about "how to elicit positive responses" from teachers, coaches, police officers or employers. Indeed, they may regard it as a sign of personal wimpishness even to try.

Unlike the people Comer urges you to recall from your own upbringing, some adults teach behaviors that render children nearly immune to success.

Such adults are not cruel. They teach what *they* teach for the same reasons your role models taught what they taught: not to make their own lives easier but because they care about the children in their charge and want them to make it. But making it may mean different things for people whose focus is on survival than for those who have experienced academic or career success. It is the latter who harp on the importance of being on time, of following through on commitments, of being reliable and trustworthy -- all things successful adults consider self-evident.

But they aren't always self-evident. Comer says they are the result of physical, social and psycho-emotional development. Instead of creating institutions that encourage such development, he says, we try to approach educational reform as if the important thing is to get the mechanics right.

Getting the mechanics right is necessary. Comer's new book, "Leave No Child Behind," goes into detail about how the Comer schools require new structures, new procedures, new curriculums and new responsibilities. But these new arrangements are installed primarily to facilitate new relationships between children and the adults responsible for them.

"Many improved practices that have been developed over the past two decades have been less successful than they might have been because they have focused primarily on curriculum, instruction, assessment, and modes of service delivery," Comer says in the June issue of the Phi Delta Kappan.

"Insufficient attention has been paid to child and adolescent development. When these matters are addressed at all, the focus is often on the student -- on a problem behavior -- and not on how to create a school culture that promotes good growth along the critical developmental pathways."

Not that creating such a culture is easy. Many youngsters grow up in environments that place no particular premium on academic success -- and in the care of loved ones who themselves lack the attributes that produce academic success. Moreover, Comer says, most teachers and school administrators haven't acquired (because they haven't been taught in teachers' colleges) the skills to create learning communities.

That, he says, has to change. And his Comer School Development Program aims to change it by retraining teachers, administrators -- and parents.

"Teachers and parents need to understand from the beginning that you don't yell at Johnny for doing something wrong, but teach him how to do it right," he said. "We have to focus on how to help children function, not on how they sometimes embarrass us or threaten our power. A lot of the bad behavior of children is calculated to reduce the disparity of power between them and us.

"But when you develop relationships so that they see you as their ally, they have less reason to battle with you."

Of course. I knew that all along.

*William Raspberry can be reached at [willrasp@washpost.com](mailto:willrasp@washpost.com)*