



Schools: Diminishing expectations, returns

By Mary Grabar

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According to the education experts, I never should have graduated from high school, much less a Ph.D. program. My parents didn't speak English, both worked in blue-collar jobs, and suffered what we would call "dysfunctionalism." We had no car, I had no exposure to cultural activities, and I didn't have the benefit of pre-school programs, or even books in the apartment, other than one my sister and I shared.

It was one of those dime store books called "Hiawatha and Little Bear," and when he was laid off from the railroad my father tried to read it to us. Alas, all he could do was make up a story based on the pictures in our native Slovenian. But he would not have been able to even read a book much advanced beyond that in his native tongue, for he had had only a third-grade education.

According to the education experts I should have suffered because of my unfamiliarity with the alphabet and numbers, and materials one is usually exposed to in kindergarten. I did for my first report card and earned D's and C's.

At the first of only a few parent nights I convinced my parents to attend, I should have been so crushed by their scolding in front of the teacher that I should have needed emotional counseling, tutoring and home visits by special "coaches" to restore my self-esteem. But by the next report card I was earning A's and B's and was ahead of most of the students in reading. Yet, our education experts today blame student failure on family dysfunction, poverty, parents who don't read to them or take children to museums. The experts insist that teachers need to be trained to deal with students' emotional problems and in techniques for nurturing creativity. For this they need all kinds of classes in pedagogy, where they learn about different "learning styles," "constructivist" forms of learning, group work, "critical thinking," multimedia projects, and the latest razzle-dazzle technology.

Future teachers are taught that it is important for them to teach children how to learn, how to find information and collaborate, how to discuss feelings, and how to promote "social justice." Teachers see their roles as going far beyond imparting a certain body of knowledge and set of skills. They see themselves alleviating the suffering children bring with them, shaping children into global citizens for a world free of conflict and hardship.

As a result, the most needy children today lack what I was the beneficiary of in the 1960s. They lack the challenge of clear expectations without regard to home life. They thus never learn how to leave problems behind for the task at hand.

They lack the order of a classroom of desks in straight rows. They lack the sense of responsibility that comes from being given chores, and assignments that carry the threat of failure. They lack the sense of accomplishment that comes from memorization, or writing a grammatically correct, logically argued essay. They lack the pleasure of reading and thinking on their own.

Instead, they wallow around in each other's problems in "social and emotional learning" sessions, or in lessons that harp on "oppression."

They work in noisy groups with expensive materials for "projects." They sprawl out on the carpeted floors of their classrooms to "journal." They are presented predigested math lessons in flashy programs that dazzle the eye, but ask little concentration.

Instead of teachers, they have "guides on the side" who have no clear answers and want to make the day "fun." Instead of having the security of knowing that there is an adult in the front of the classroom who has knowledge and authority, they have someone who acts as entertainer, facilitator and emotional confidante.

Their parents have suffered in the form of higher taxes. Over the past 40 years, public school employment has risen 10 times faster than enrollment. Student population has risen by 9 percent, but we have twice as many school employees.

The cost of educating a student tripled between 1960 and 2000 (in inflation adjusted dollars). Then education spending grew by 32 percent between 1999 and 2009. Yet, we continue to slip farther and farther behind other nations in achievement. What our students are cheated of by our education system is initiative — initiative stolen by adults who see themselves as curers of social ills, rather than as people who have specific job descriptions.

This country was built on the initiative of those like Benjamin Franklin and Frederick Douglass, men who strove to learn and overcome. Our current educational philosophy takes that away from students and impoverishes them far beyond the ways in which their circumstances do.

Mary Grabar is a writer and college instructor who lives in DeKalb.

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