



Extra School

by Steve Peisch

In my experience as a teacher, I've collected memories that illustrate for me what needs to be improved in middle school education. My thesis? Schools filled with students from poorer families (LSE) need to do more to engage their students intellectually.

One such illustrative memory is of a brilliant African-American economics major from Harvard, who was invited to our private high school to talk about his efforts to get inner city adolescents to read. He created a program that paid them for each book they finished.

At the time I fumed at this idea, as did many of my colleagues. "Once the money dries up," we thought, "so would his students' interest!" How would this program improve their attitude about reading?

The man who ran this program thought it would. First of all, *without* this program, he knew there was *no chance* that these kids would ever read a book. Second, there was at least some chance that some of these students might learn to enjoy reading and continue doing it. And how else, he reasoned, might they discover this? In his opinion, there were *no other forces in these students' lives that pointed them in this direction.*

Much more recently, I was an assistant home room teacher in a 5th grade homeroom at an urban, LSE school. One boy stood out as an impeccable student when most of the other boys were in the process of becoming more resistant and less engaged. Whenever this particular boy brought home a perfect record card, his parents would buy him something he really wanted in the \$25 range. They also took him to "extra school" after school where he did extra work in mathematics, and they rewarded him for this work, too. When his friends made fun of him for being so obedient and hard-working, he could point to the rewards he received, and they left him alone *because what he was doing made sense to them.*

While this boy's parents might have had a little more than some of the other parents, they were far from rich. What was important was their appreciation they showed their son and the concrete rewards they gave him for working hard.

Similarly, the inner city adolescents getting paid for reading books could offer the same rationale to their peers, who would have questioned and criticized their doing extra school work.

Many students from poorer families have not developed sufficient motivation to take full advantage of school. I have seen many schools and many teachers try to solve this problem by offering students concrete and attractive rewards—movies, ice cream parties, extra recess—which is precisely what the economist offered the students in his program and what the 5th grade parents offered their child.

Shouldn't we also fume at these very common practices of elementary and middle school teachers so desperate to motivate their students? Why do so many students need these types of rewards? *Because many of them have lost interest in school.* In my opinion, the light begins to go out in the eyes of 5th graders as they are marched around to more than four different teachers and four different classrooms, instead of being asked what interests them, helped to investigate these topics in different ways, developing versatile and measurable intellectual skills in the process, and helping them discover that school doesn't have to be boring and that reading and writing and thinking and creating are all enjoyable activities. Preparing them for standardized tests misses the point completely.

Recently I spoke with a young teacher who was quitting after one year in LSE community in upper state New York. "These kids just aren't interested in anything! I used to *love* school!" he exclaimed, unaware that his appreciation was bred into him by his all-white, well-to-do family and his all-white, all-rich private schools. How can we foster this same appreciation for learning in students from LES families?

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