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Dreams, Interests, Aspirations

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Aspirations have been part of American educational rhetoric for over 300 years. People here sought learning to give them courage, to help their children adhere to the old ways, to pave a road to collective and personal betterment.

The prepositional phrases are important: aspirations for others and aspirations for oneself. The established order aspired to a new generation that valued the same things as it did. Youth were to be schooled to honor conventional ways and means of living, or at least what the political and religious authorities felt the desired ways should be. Typically, the existing order feared disorder (the 17th century called it "barbarism"), the worship of false gods and what they (until recently) simply called vice, and they designed schools to counteract youth's drift toward these tendencies. Equally typically that youth paid little heed to all this, usually by avoiding formal schools altogether.

Individual aspiration—the dreams from within—rarely have been a formal goal for education. Kids needn't *aspire. We* old folks know better than they do. We will then tell them what is the true and what is the beautiful. Dreamers are to be feared. Indeed, "stop that dreaming" is a familiar phrase in classrooms. Dreaming is not paying attention.

Russell Quaglia and Casey Cobb (1996), on the other hand, take the individual's side. "Aspirations can be defined," they write, "as a student's ability to identify and set goals for the future, while being inspired in the present to work toward these goals" (p. 130). Have a dream. Work toward it.

There is respect here. The student, and her ability to sort out where she might be headed, is to be honored. There is realism here as well. The power of a school to lure any adolescent into its definition of "future" is limited, save in a crass instrumental sense. Schools can influence, can arrange things for the pursuit of what it believes to be worthy aspirations (say, to become a veterinarian), and create roadblocks for what it believes to be counterproductive (making a lot of money selling illegal drugs). Pounding the youngster precisely into its definition of what is worthy of aspiration is exceedingly difficult: we humans are stubborn, even the younger ones among us. The task is even more difficult for policymakers. "Mandates alone have very little relationship or effectiveness in fostering and maintaining the conditions which lead to raised aspirations," Eva Kampits writes (1996, p. 174).

And so what are educators to do? Let the kids aspire to whatever they desire? Or try to influence that aspiration, with doses of inspiration, of realism, and of respect?

Inspiration is fueled by models, those things that (usually older) people do which appear noble or persuasive or fascinating. Effective schools are thus likely to be populated by *interesting* adults, people who are about things that are, by contemporary lights, worthy.

We all have a legion of examples of these. A science teacher in a regional high school who maintains a protected aviary for wild birds recovering from accidents (usually broken wings, mended by local veterinarians). A fistful of kids help him with this work, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. The teacher who runs for the Board of Selectman. The adult who writes poetry, or who lovingly and very visibly raises a large family, or who always has a "book going" and who talks about each with gusto. The teacher who seems to have the knack of truth-telling without scarring, the one to whom the kid in real trouble (perhaps paradoxically) turns. The teacher who figures out how to stoke a student's little fire.

I remember an art teacher, confronted by two fourteen-year-old boys who had the idea (whacky, to some) of staging Mozart's *Don Giovanni* with puppets, got them into puppetry (hardly the teacher's metier), who encouraged and encouraged and encouraged, and who made sure that this unusual project got the protection it deserved. At the time, the boys had little sense of this protection; they only dimly knew that their passion was neither macho nor hip. They pulled the opera off, their peers were stunned and appreciative, and their "aspirations" soared. (One of the two, an internationally acclaimed artist, remains the youngest MacArthur Genius Award winner ever.)

Arthur Powell, a researcher at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, is putting the matter of aspiration in somewhat different words. For Powell, it is *interests* that count; and a good school (perhaps) is about helping each student find a powerful, worthy interest. Being interested in something means engaging with it fully, trying to master it, practicing at it stubbornly and joyfully, gaining the profound human experience of knowing something and mastering something at a high level of quality. One need not strive after something as unusual as the staging of an

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opera in a puppet theater; the matter can be as familiar as an interest in hockey, or poetry, or cooking, or some aspect of community service. The apparently mundane can be the fuel for a child's aspiration.

The experience of mastery teaches: I can do this. I can do it as well as I am able, and I am able (because of my hard work) to meet a higher standard than any of us thought possible. I feel some people's approbation of that mastery, and the warmth that it provides. I thus have "learned" the merit of doing something exceedingly well.

Such interests/aspirations must come from inside each youngster. Aspiring is not a part of the curriculum. It is a habit born of the curriculum—"curriculum" defined as all those influences that accompany that child's growing up. If the young person grows up in a community of despair or selfishness where there is little encouragement for his or her dreams, the possibilities are bleak. It is there particularly that the public school, and the adults within it, have a special role.

The implications for schooling are obvious. Attract staff who are "interesting" people, who have worthy—and where possible visible—"aspirations" of their own. Keep the schools small, allowing there to be more than casual interaction between their members. That is, break large schools into smaller units—and value small schools—so that the adults and young people can get to "know" one another well, the necessary precondition to effective modeling. Arrange the school's schedules so that there is time for students' interests to be pursued. Provide "models" from outside—the "aspirers" in the community. Above all, be flexible. Expect every youngster to have a worthy passion of some sort. Work at it, make it a priority, speak about it, make exceptions for it. Keep pigeonholing to a minimum ("This kid can't cut it . . .") and aspirations for each child at a maximum. Work with parents and siblings to support a student's hopes. Treat each student as an individual worthy of respect.

It all sounds so easy.

Unfortunately, many of the traditions of schooling run against such ideas, however persuasive. Students are to be categorized, rated, classified, ranked—not treated as the more complicated human beings which they are. The reward system—scores on tests written far away from any particular group of kids—reinforces conformity and anonymity. Traditions of teaching often reflect the metaphor of "delivery of instructional services" rather than the root of definition of the word education, "to draw out."

Fortunately for many rural schools, conditions for "aspiration" are often present. The schools are small enough so that teachers can be well enough known to serve as models. There often is a tradition of collective work within families; many children see how their parents and older siblings work. The potentials are there . . . if the communities, the schools, and the families choose to seize them.

References

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