

System Labels Students 'Stupid'

Education: The War on Intelligence

by B. Kamperman

There are some issues and controversies in the field of education today that affect everybody. These issues have to do with mental health, your concept of self-worth, personal fulfillment, the achievement of personal pride and competence and emotional health, not gaseous clouds of academic gas. The purpose of this article and others to come is to make people aware of these vigorous, new, humanistic concepts that are shaping

the education of the near future. So what? Why bother? Well isn't it obvious that you as a student who has spent most of his or her life in academic study has been subliminally and/or overly shaped by the environment, goals, practices and psychology of associated with academic study? By understanding our environment and its expectations, past and present, we come to understand ourselves better and can seek better means of reconstructing our environment to our benefit.

Can you remember the date of the Treaty of Utrecht? Can you remember how many iambic

pentameters there are in the Rime of the Ancient Mariner? How about the genus, species, phylum, class, etc as nauseum of the common bed bug? You do? Well, what does it matter? (When was the last time you cut up a bed bug into iambic pentameters?) Finally educators are confessing that most North American high school curriculums are composed of such irrelevant hogwash. Traditionally curriculums have been and are demanding, boring, repetitive, and trivial. Not only that but they do in fact act as stumbling blocks to the development of logical patterns, personal competence, independence, creativity, and discourage and try to thirst for knowledge that is innately born with us. The results are neuroses, cynicism, alienation, competitiveness and failure. The concept of failure is especially damaging.

To fully understand the basis of these damning charges we must take a look at grade school first. Now children are insatiably curious and indefatigable in their efforts to come to grips with and conquer a new problem. Did you ever give a tightly sealed bottle to a young child and watch him or her try to open it? They never give up! Their tenacity is astounding. I have seen children open up tightly sealed bottles that adults have given up on. Oh sure they may give up if they tire out or get bored but give them a moment's rest and they're back at it again. What tremendous potential that could be harnessed and loosed upon the problems of mankind. What happens to that insatiable tenacity? Where does it go? Well, suppose that you were to take that baby and slap or punish him every time he did not open that bottle within a set time? What would happen? He would become discouraged. He might well become frustrated. Much the same thing happens in primary and grade school. This is really not a far fetched idea at all. For example, Johnny has to learn the first ten letters of the alphabet. Think about that. It may be hard to realize how difficult a task it is for a five year old to perform this exercise in abstraction with strange meaningless symbols he is unfamiliar with. So he eagerly sets off. He puts his hand up in the competitive classroom. Someone else is called upon, succeeds and is lauded as a "good" boy or girl. What does that make those who didn't have the answer? Stupid? "Stupidity" carries heavy moral condemnation for young children. Going through the early grades, right answers, good grades, stars and marks become important. In short, performance becomes the measure of self-worth. To fail is to be stupid, stupid is to be bad or inferior. Because of your personality, your I.Q., environment and personal

problems, it may take you six weeks to learn long division say while most of the other kids take four weeks or less. Does that make you stupid or bad or a failure? Many young students from primary to grade seven and up think so. Why? Because we set arbitrary standards of performance that demand that so much done in X time. Perhaps you question the connection between marks and esteem. Think back how even in high school the "stupid" students were streamed (labelled) into different courses with the understanding that little could be expected from them and that they would be headed for work and vocational schools instead of college. Rosenthal relates in his startling book, **Pygmalion in the Classroom**, how he exchanged the academic records of high school students and encouraged their teachers to review their new students' records. They did. He discovered that after some time that those students labeled as brilliant, intelligent and promising, scored notable improvements in their marks. Those who were labeled as lazy or slow or stupid, scored lower than their previous mark levels. Teacher feedback and encouragement goes to those who are bright and intelligent. They are encouraged to express their ideas and develop them by the teacher through indirect verbal, facial and postural clues and direct encouragement. As a result, they rise to the expectations of their newly assigned (or present) status. Greater injustices bordering on the inhumane (if not directly in it) are carried out in the name of special education. Special education is designed to help those with learning disabilities. "Learning disabilities has been used indiscriminately to rubber stamp people from their earliest years onwards as special inferiors. The deaf, the chronically disabled (physically), the blind, retards, and semi-retards, and even the very shy have been condemned with the shameful and humiliating label of "educatively disabled". They are the niggers of the niggers. They are never fully treated as human beings. Little money is "wasted" on their education. They are usually always segregated physically from the other students and usually they are found assigned to the shabbiest, most remote part of the school building, if they are indeed in the building at all. The field of learning disabilities is too be covered here; but, here labelling has been carried to its grisliest, logical extreme. It is interesting to note in passing that it is usually the children of the poor and the blacks who end up in special education classes. You see a couple of stiff law suits have made special educational "experts" wary of rubber stamping

the progeny of the rich. The poor and the powerless are somehow less fortunate.

Many educators are now starting to talk about the student as "nigger". Students have no power. Student government is a farce. Attendance is compulsory. Passivity is encouraged. Labels of being an inferior can become internalized. The parallel is extreme but largely true to varying degrees. Labelling damages people and sets up boundaries and the stigma of those boundaries.

The student throughout his school experience meets with repetitive failure. The concept of failure is the one thing that every student learns well - too well. To avoid the childhood shame and stigma of failure, many become competitive. These use cramming, cheating, and memorization and drive, to reach their goals. These are the people who get ahead and "make it" into universities, professional schools and careers. They have been so geared to achieving that their emotional health and development has suffered, not to mention their physical health and characters. The pressures on them are rigorous and straining. No great wonder that neuroses, nervous breakdowns, alcoholism, ulcers, and heart attacks plague executives and professional classes. True, there are exceptions to such generalizations and the results of competitive pressure varies in degrees with the individual. Nonetheless, despite all efforts to ridicule and dismiss these observations they still do witness to the damaging effects of the competitive ethic that school drives into us. Nor do you have to wait until after university to see the damaging affects of competition. Alienation, inferiority complexes, indifference, hostility, withdrawal, escapism, and "trips" of different sorts can readily be seen in student populations. These things stem from failure - the concept of failure that was taught to us by the standards of the school system. What happened to us the insatiably curious and indefatigably tenacious children of yesterday will happen to our own sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, nephews, and nieces, if we let it.

New ways of educating students have been found and are being tried that do not stifle the curiosity of young minds nor demand that certain tasks be done in a certain time. Value judgements on students' performances are not made. Encouragement is given to all. Everyone goes at his own pace in acquiring new skills and concepts - as long as it takes him or her to do it. Students are not labelled by streaming or special classes. Co-operation not competition is promoted. Brighter students are used as tutors to the slower ones

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