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Humanities

9 October 2022

A Recipe for School

My mom's dumpling recipe, as per family tradition, is not a recipe; instead, it calls on the cook to figure things out from the way the dough feels and the filling tastes. Similarly, we have no formula for a perfect school, though we can work to improve our classrooms by identifying areas for improvement and prioritization. While the current school system aims to provide education and opportunity for all, and succeeds in addressing general needs, it fails to acknowledge the unique circumstances and capabilities of individuals, an oversight that ultimately undermines its ability to help students reach their full potential. Thus, focusing on the needs and growth of students can improve aspects of schools from student wellness to overall curriculum.

Schools need to acknowledge the diverse abilities of students, especially regarding assessments. Our standard school system appears competent. It has, after all, guided generations of Americans through their formative years and into successful careers. Its time-tested, carefully formulated structure enables all students to attend the same classes, for the same hours, with the same curriculum. If students pay attention in class and study diligently, they should be able to succeed—in theory. In reality, not all students learn the same. Even the same student, as TheodoreSizer—a former professor and leader in the American school reform movement—observed, will “respond in different ways to different situations or when studying different disciplines” (219-220). Everyone has unique strengths, interests, and ways of thinking. Naturally, children's differences extend to how they learn. Many factors impact a student's performance, from the subject to the teacher's presentation of the lesson. However, to do well in school, each individual must satisfy the

expectations and grading standards of teachers. Some adapt well, while others struggle in certain learning environments. Schools recognize this inherent individuality in their students, though most respond simply by dividing the population into class levels based on performance. Admittedly, their method has its benefits. In the real world, students will not have a personalized curriculum, either. The different classrooms and teachers, as well as working under pressure, thus prepares them to adapt to nonoptimal working environments. Though a few tests may not be representative of students' capabilities, the pattern of their performance might: if a student consistently performs well in various classes throughout their career, they are likely to continue the trend. The resulting test grade provides feedback on the student's performance. For example, number grades are easily interpreted, quantified feedback, while comments teachers make on tests help students understand why points were deducted and where they might improve. However, though quizzes can indicate a student's grasp of the material, they do not embody it. Not all students excel at test taking, memorization, or regurgitating information. A school system so fixated on assessments creates stress over test grades and an unnecessarily competitive environment. Fortunately, I have noticed many teachers putting less emphasis on tests, whether through reducing their weight in the final grade or recognizing effort and homework as well. In recent years, some schools canceled midterms; mine gave teachers the option to distribute them. As a result, instead of midterms, my biology teacher used the longer class period to conduct a lab we would not have had the time to do otherwise. It was fun, stress-free, and educational. I recognize the benefit of midterms, as they provide an incentive for students to retain information, but I do not believe one test should have such an influence on the semester's— and thus the school year's— grade. The purpose of the midterm is to test what students know, yet their high-risk, high-stress environments are more likely to garner mental breakdowns than effective demonstrations of knowledge. Therefore, while contemporary testing has

its benefits and should not be eliminated in its entirety, teachers should also consider the unique learning methods of students when assessing performance.

In both assessments and coursework, teachers should provide more support and flexibility to students, especially in earlier grades. Currently, all elementary school students take the same classes. Such a system works, as it provides children with the same foundations to build on. Only, what about children with unavoidable challenges such as learning disabilities? An acquaintance of mine, Ms. G, has a son who struggled to spell words due to a learning disability, yet was expected to write them, like the rest of his class, on tests. Ms. G constantly met with his teachers and his school to discuss accommodations, but they always reached a standstill. Meanwhile, her son felt frustrated in school, faced with a task he struggled with yet that the rest of his class could perform with relative ease. In the end, Ms. G transferred her son to another school, one where his needs were not ignored. She should not have needed to, nor should she have needed to confront her son's school in the first place. The whole struggle caused Ms. G and her family unnecessary stress and pain, and similar stories have undoubtedly played out across the country. Though it seems ideal for teachers to assess children by the same standard, we must keep in mind that equality does not equate to fairness. Children have different abilities, and, even if they dedicate great effort to their goals, they may still need customized support to succeed. Older students learn to contact teachers for help on their own, but such support should also be available to younger children, who may need the teacher to reach out first. Such support will help the student succeed, as well as improve the teacher's understanding of their student's needs. Additionally, in upper grades, teachers sometimes provide additional time for assessments and coursework, and students often have the option to discuss additional accommodations. In younger grades, such meetings would benefit the student's communication skills, relationship with their teacher, and performance on tests. Moreover, it would improve the student's confidence and school experience, as low test scores in an environment that emphasizes

grades lowers self-esteem and augments stress, frustration, and other negative associations with learning. Therefore, understanding and addressing the academic needs of individuals should become a priority in schools, even more so because of its effect on the mental and physical health of students.

The health and well-being of students are just as important as their grades. To improve the wellness of students, schools should, first and foremost, be safe, supportive learning environments. Less pressure from tests and more understanding from teachers would contribute in the classroom, but the impacts of school extend beyond the building, for example to students' sleep schedules. According to the CDC, "children aged 6–12 years" should get at least nine hours of sleep per night and teenagers should get at least 8 hours. Unfortunately, over half of middle schoolers and almost three-quarters of high schoolers surveyed did not report getting enough sleep on school nights (CDC). Sleep impacts everything from cognitive ability to physical health; prolonged deprivation has been proven to increase the risk of various diseases and mental health issues. Though we can not expect teachers to manage their students' sleep schedules, there are small actions they can take to mitigate the need for students to stay up late. In my experience, most students defer sleep to finish homework, especially the day before a major assignment is due. Though their late hours are, in many cases, the fault of the students for procrastinating, some just have too many other commitments or assignments. I have found it helpful when teachers allow students to work on homework in class, even if only for a few minutes after the day's lesson concludes. Working in class has benefits beyond allowing students to finish that day's work— it also facilitates collaboration between students and furthers student-teacher communication. As a result, students improve their understanding of the curriculum and teachers gain insight into the grasp their students have of material. In class, teachers, primed with knowledge of what their students struggle with, know where to focus their explanations to further clarify the curriculum. At home, students have less work to do and a better grasp of the

lesson, so they no longer have to shave hours off their sleep poring over confusing questions. Moreover, they feel more confident in class when they understand the material covered and know they can rely on their teacher for support. Overall, completing work in class decreases stress while improving student-teacher relationships and comprehension. With less work and less stress, students' well-being and health improve.

To further address the mental health of students, schools should maintain a balance between community and competition. In America, children are "made as competitive as possible" from a young age: they constantly face the pressure to excel above their peers, whether in sports or academics (Sizer 222). After all, grades, medals, and an Ivy League college are among the most commonly cited, and pursued, paths to success. Of course, in many cases, challenges and rivalries do benefit children. For example, friendly competition with peers motivates them to challenge and improve themselves, whether for bragging rights, a sense of achievement, or a shiny medal. Whatever the initial motivation may be, through constantly striving and struggling to improve, students will develop character, an arsenal of skills, and a resilient mindset with which to face the adversity they inevitably confront later in life. While excessively competitive environments can put pressure on students and damage mental health, competition with moderation is greatly beneficial and part of what makes America's students into leaders, innovators, and challengers. We must ensure, however, that students do not view one another as obstacles to success. Collaboration can help a student just as much as challenging them, or even more so, as they can learn from and form positive relationships with peers. As with most factors of education, a fine balance must be struck between an overly competitive system where students tear each other down and one where they encourage each other to improve, where each contributes unique skills and learns from those of others.

To further encourage growth, schools should become environments that cultivate independent, inquisitive, and creative mindsets in students. In the past, such an education was widely unavailable. Our 28th president and the former president of Princeton University, Woodrow Wilson, once expressed that his goal was only for the educational system to provide “one class” with a “liberal education”; the other, “very much larger class” would “forgo the privileges of a liberal education, and fit themselves to perform specific difficult manual tasks” (Gatto, 2009). Considering America’s historical class divide, Wilson likely intended for the best education to go to white, property-owning males and for everyone else in America to carry out less specialized work, for example the jobs needed in factory assembly lines. In modern times, technology automates many of our less specialized jobs, so more people must take on the once exclusive “liberal education” and explore different job avenues. In standard schools, most classes cover the same information, but the curriculum could be changed to allow room for exploration, which would help students find a career path of interest. Early introduction to various fields would both engage students in their work, as the variety would inspire excitement and curiosity, and help them specialize earlier in preparation for the increasingly specialized workforce. Moreover, children learn better when they have genuine interest in the information they learn. Their investment in their own learning improves their attention and efforts in class, which corresponds to not only improved grades but also a student who enjoys school.

High schools currently encourage critical thinking skills by providing challenging problems and texts. Analysis and critical thinking skills serve students well, for example by encouraging them to form and support original opinions. Elementary schools, meanwhile, deliver information as facts for students to soak up without question. In classes like Social Studies, a straightforward narrative helps students grasp novel concepts and improves their retention of important events. In my case, due to my elementary school education, I still clearly recall information about pilgrims and the first

Thanksgiving meal. Unfortunately, as a result of the school's focus on turning history into a simple, black-and-white story, I was not educated on the many issues our country faced in its past, issues it still faces today. Elementary schools often depict slavery and racial discrimination as blotches on America's otherwise pristine past. Sadly, we have yet to, and probably never will, banish discrimination. Predictably, my rose-tinted view of America was shattered in later grades, then rebuilt into one more reflective of its true nature— discrimination, corruption, uncertainty, and all.

Considering the complexity of history, we should not teach children from one perspective, or as if the past is a perfectly documented story, as it is not. Later grades must spend time correcting and rebuilding their understanding of the world from scratch, which necessitates the curriculum to start, once again, from the too-often reiterated colonization of America. Children should be taught the truth— of course, not the extremely gory details— but at least that America, that history, is not perfect. High schools value independent thought, so we can prepare even younger students to think for themselves instead of relying on information handed to them. Such students who grow up in an environment that facilitates questioning and novel ideas will develop creativity, resourcefulness, and the confidence to express and stand by their thoughts. As for the repeated curriculum in high school, if elementary schools provide a proper foundation, one which exposes students to the various interpretations, uncertainty, and nuance in life, high school courses can build on it to cover more information. However, we must carefully deliberate the content of high school history classes to take advantage of the additional curriculum.

If, on top of adjusting the elementary school curriculum, we build a more cohesive and exploratory high school history course across public schools, classes will be able to cover even more. Currently, topics are heavily biased toward Eurocentric education. America, meanwhile, is a country of people from around the whole world— not just Europe. Thus, to reflect the society in America and encourage cultural appreciation, education, and diversity, schools should spend more time

discussing places other than the United States and Europe. Perhaps a more cohesive education in various parts of the world will inspire greater sympathy and less polarization among the people of America. Along the lines of tolerance, history classes should also cover current issues, for example the attacks on Asian and Pacific Islander Americans that spiked during Covid. It was one of the first times I'd heard of hate against the AAPI community in the news, though harmful stereotypes and discrimination have always existed. I was fortunate to have a history teacher who encouraged us to stay up to date on news, even dedicating class time to reading recent news articles. Unfortunately, most history classes do not build current news into lesson plans, even though it would provide the opportunity to connect with the world and understand the issues we face. Furthermore, history often discusses discrimination in the context of slavery and the years immediately following its abolition, as something of the past. As frequently demonstrated by the news, however, discrimination remains ingrained in American society. Indeed, Maya Angelou, a black author, still recalls a terrible experience with discrimination during her middle school graduation, when a white guest speaker essentially declared his plans to provide white students with the resources to "become Galileos and Madame Curies and Edisons and Guagins" and make African American "boys (the girls weren't even in on it) into Jesse Owens and Joe Louisies" (228). The white children were expected to do great things: they would go to college, change the world, and receive world-renowned honors. Black children were reduced to their physical capabilities, with no consideration for their intellect. Angelo graduated middle school when schools were still segregated due to outrage at the mere thought of integration. Angelo graduated middle school when black students had to be protected by the National Guard after an ordered integration of Little Rock's Central High School (228). Angelo graduated middle school less than a century ago. The tumultuous events of the time can still be remembered by many alive today, and it impacts even more. Connections to the past extend into the present, so we should not separate the two in schools. Education on different cultures and global

issues has the potential to develop our society into one more aware and accepting of the characteristic diversity of America.

There are many factors to take into consideration to improve the American school system. In the end, though, it all centers on what works for the students, as each change depends on their needs and abilities. Like a good dumpling, a good school has no formula; its administrators must instead make adjustments to make the filling, the students, shine.

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