

Childhood: Our Children's Voices

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Voices, voices, everywhere, raised in alarm, anger, fear, concern, making judgments about what schools must, should, can, cannot do. From the White House to the schoolhouse, it appears as if everyone has an opinion, a solution, a voice. And yet in the midst of this clamor, there are voices not heard; voices that can help center our focus and expand our understanding of the reality which surrounds us (Reed, 1998). Voices which, if we listen with sincerity, may encourage us to seek solutions to the problems of schooling and life with unity and clarity. I speak of the voices of the children: those whom we claim to serve, care about, and love.

Over the past few years, I have had numerous opportunities to meet with large groups of adults from diverse ethnic and social backgrounds. I have asked them to reflect upon the word, "childhood" and to share the first word that comes to their mind. The most common responses are "fun, innocence, laughter, play." But when I have listened to the voices of our children, I have gotten a much different picture.

Seeking to Understand

As our school embarked upon the development of a school improvement plan, we discussed how to enhance our relationships with families and how we might provide support for them and our children. As part of this effort we decided to conduct an anonymous survey of our students at grades three, five, eight, ten, and eleven to gain a deeper understanding of the issues families and children faced. We posed six questions:

- ◆ What are you most concerned about right now?
- ◆ What is your greatest cause of stress right now?
- ◆ If you have a serious problem, to whom do you usually go to talk?
- ◆ If you could change one thing about your life, what would it be?

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THE COMMUNITY OF THE SCHOOL

- ◆ What do you think is the most difficult thing facing families of today?
- ◆ When you have a family of your own, what would be your greatest wish for that family?

A content analysis of the 300 student responses received was conducted at and across the grade levels. I shall never forget my initial reaction when I began to read our students' responses. When I shared them with our faculty they were stunned. It may be importance to mention the demographics of our school. The population is 70% Caucasian, 22% Afro-American, and 8% other minorities. About 12% of the children are on free or reduced lunch programs.

Hearing the Response

The students' three greatest concerns were divorce, money and finances, and family discord and violence. Third graders had a particular concern about family health problems, and fifth graders worried about societal and community problems such as community violence, homelessness, and drug and alcohol abuse. Students in grades eight, ten, and eleven also identified grades as a major source of concern. Among the most poignant remarks regarding their concerns were:

- "my parents and their bad tempers."
- "about my uncle being in jail because of me."
- "losing jobs and not getting another one."
- "surviving adolescence."
- "I hardly see my mom because she is working."

When responding to the sources of pressure in their lives, most student's responses centered around life in general, what the future holds, and dealing with peer pressure. One tenth grader said that, "just about everything" was a cause of pressure on him. A third grader stated, "When my mother goes away, and she often does, I have dreams that she dies during it." A fifth grader replied, "Getting to places, and we are always rushed." Another fifth grader remarked, "Sometimes I can't go to sleep because my dad yells at my mom and throws things at her. An eighth grader replied, "whether to do it or not (sex)."

If they have serious problems, younger children said they talked to family members. Older students said they turned to school personnel and friends. Some children indicated they had no one to talk to, and a number of children wrote, "I pray."

If they could change one thing in their lives, most children would improve family relationships. Other often-mentioned improvements were:

1) changing their own physical attributes, 2) getting better grades, 3) having more money, and (4) getting along with others more successfully. One tenth grader wished that, "she did not worry so much about everything." Another said he would "change the way he dealt with stress in his life." One rather whimsical child responded, "to have fewer freckles and curly hair."

Children seem to have some keen perceptions about the problems facing families. They listed divorce, financial needs, drug and alcohol abuse, and community violence as the major problems families have to cope with. When asked about their hopes for the families they could create in the future, they wanted good communication, loving relationships, good health, happiness, and financial security. Some of the more touching responses were:

"to be happy"

"they won't do drugs"

"a nice loving family that does not argue, that is open to talk, and is not afraid"

"to have a trusting relationship and that they have a better life than I have"

"I don't want to have a family."

It appears from the voices of our children that they live "at risk." Too often we use that term to denote material poverty. Perhaps we must broaden it and reevaluate our visions of the childhood in which our children live. It is not the childhood of "fun, innocence, laughter, and play." Instead our children are being subjected to personal and social pressures that cause stress and make it difficult for them to deal with daily living. This creates problems for them at home and at school as they seek to deal with situations beyond their control.

Responding to the Voices

The sobering reality of these comments caused us to reflect upon our words, our actions, and our plans for our children and our school. Listening to the voices of our children sensitized us to them in a way that somehow created a bond between us. This bond enabled us to refocus our thinking, our planning, and ourselves. Soon afterwards we initiated the development of a schoolwide program to change the culture of our school so that it operated as a family. We expanded our family outreach endeavors, and we began efforts at community development.

This experience led me to believe that it is imperative that we find ways to transmit the world of childhood to a broader audience. Statistics surround us, but the reality of the world seen and reported through the eyes and

words of children has a power of its own. Perhaps these voices could help us to stop blaming teachers, parents, and children for the problems of schools and instead recognize that the world in which our children live is impacting upon their capacity to dream, to learn, to survive. It is time for us to stop pointing fingers, and start joining hands. It is time to hear the voices of our children and to respond by taking actions to strengthen the family, recreate the community, and nurture and love our children. I am haunted by these voices. They have touched my heart and soul. I wish everyone could hear them.

References

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