

“Like a Young Carrot”

Spoken messages that we hear in Meeting for Worship often linger in our minds and surface unexpectedly. I recall a message that I heard at the morning meeting at Pendle Hill several years ago. A man rose and spoke about his relationship with his father. He said that his father was somewhat distant except when he turned his attention to his son and examined him to see how and what he was doing. “I felt like a young carrot, yanked out of the ground by the gardener from time to time to see how the root was getting on, and then pushed back in the ground to keep growing.” A sad image, indeed!

I have connected this message with the current educational trend of frequent standardized tests to examine the progress of students across the nation. To prepare for these tests, the curriculum is closely aligned with the tested material, classroom instructional time is spent preparing for the tests, and there seems to be no time for subjects that won’t be “on the test.” Another sad state of affairs.

Another approach is possible. Teachers and the school can create a curriculum that is relevant and meaningful to students through its connection with their lived experiences. Through dialogue and cross-grade collaboration, teachers can ensure that such a curriculum is comprehensive, cohesive, and sequential. Through professional growth and development, teachers can design and implement a variety of instructional approaches to connect with a wide range of learning styles and aptitudes. They must have high expectations for all of their students and frequently assess student learning both through observation and more formal assessments, even including standardized testing.

A book that has influenced our faculty is Mel Levine’s *A Mind at a Time* (2002). Levine has developed the theory that children learn differently and that there are eight neurodevelopmental systems that work together to influence learning: attention, memory, language, spatial ordering, sequential ordering, motor, higher thinking, and social thinking. Standardized testing imperfectly assesses only a fraction of the ways children learn and think.

Friends School Haverford has a tremendous advantage in this work. Two aspects stand out: small class size and the knowledge of each student that teachers possess. These features of Friends School Haverford were mentioned repeatedly – and with appreciation – by parents during the recent strategic planning input sessions. As a school that takes a developmental approach to education, we know that the relationships forged between teachers and students are one of the conditions most conducive to learning.

Before Spring Break, students and teachers gathered in the gym for the Second Annual Talent Show. We delighted in the accomplishments of our students, from first graders to sixth graders, as they played piano and violin, performed magic tricks, sang and danced, and contorted their bodies in amazing gymnastics and karate moves. We laughed and cheered together, and in the process, got to know our students in ways that traditional tests or periodic inspection could never achieve.

Friends School Haverford is a place where children and their families can put down deep taproots – there's the carrot again! – confident that their growth and development will occur in fertile soil, in rich and appreciative relationships, and in an atmosphere of joy and delight.

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April 2004